

Fashion, Dressing, and Identities in Ballroom Subculture

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Abstract

The Ballroom scene is an underground subculture created by African Americans and Latinos and gives emphasize in issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation within the heterogeneous society. The members of this subculture live in an organized social structure based on the acceptance and the celebration of sexual and gender expression. Balls are competitions where transgender people are involved, performing different kinds of dances. Balls provide to the queer community a cozy place to build their sense of self in their hidden world without the limitations imposed by society on gender and sexual expression. Balls are a combination of fashion, competition, and dance. "Voguing" is the characteristic dance of Balls and it is an extremely stylized dance form. Vogue magazine's model poses to inspire it, and it uses the arms and legs with dramatic, rapid and feminine edgy ways. "Voguing" includes catwalk, dance, spins and other risky styles of movement. The "Voguing" has the major role in Ballrooms that contain fashion catwalk and competitions, where African and Latinos gays and transgender participate in a competition, imitating fashion models in the catwalk with gestures and poses to win an award. The panel of the critics, in a Ball, judges them from the movements of their dance, attitudes, costumes and the ingenuity in all of these areas. Today there are three basic types of Voguing: a) the Old Way, b) The New Way and, c) The Vogue Femme.

Keywords: fashion, identities, ballroom, subculture

1. Introduction

A ballroom is an interesting and underground subculture of African-American and Latino transgender. The members of this subculture live in an organized social structure based on the acceptance and the celebration of sexual and gender expression (Bailey, 2011). These members spend most of their free time in dance clubs, but the major social events that hold together this subculture/community are the Balls. Balls are a combination of a fashion catwalk, dance and competition and they are full of competitive energy and creative art. During the Balls, the Ballroom subculture creates and breaks its rules. This paradoxical and transformative co-critical practice combines fashion, gender, and sexuality within the Ballroom subculture. Such kinds of practices

create at members of the subculture a cultural memory, different from the memory created by mainstream fashion. The creative inventiveness, of subculture's members, becomes a major factor of cultural and physical survival (Susman, 2000). "Voguing" the characteristic dance of Balls, is a combination of many forms of dance. "Voguing" is a highly stylized type of dance. In 1920 is its first appearance in Harlem's LGBTQ communities. In 1985 "Voguing" became a very expressive dance movement linked to New York's explosive music scene. "Voguing" has taken its name from the poses of supermodels in Vogue Magazine. Its dancer uses his/her arms and legs in dramatic, rapid and feminine angular modes in a constant high energy rate. "Voguing" includes catwalk, dancing, spins, dives and other risky styles of dance and poses that all aim to deliver vitality, femininity, and freshness. "Voguing" dance at the Balls and includes fashion and posse competitions where African Americans and Latino, gay or transgender dancers "walk" in competition, to earn one or more of the judges' awards. There are a lot of categories and themes if somebody wants to compete and the participants are judged by the movements of their dance, their attitude, their costumes and their ingenuity to them. "Voguing" has always been and is a welcoming place for LGBTQ dancers (Chatterjee, 2018).

All the types of "Voguing" are improvised by a wide range of moves, and always the main aim is ingenuity. Dance is constantly evolving, and re-emergence and adaptability are strategies that depict how life should be. The need for an optimistic prospect of life imposes humor and commentary to be incorporated into Ball's process. Participants have to figure out how, when and where they should make every move and decisions are taken fast and not always consciously (Susman, 2000). The first name of "Voguing" was a presentation and then it was renamed to performance. Eventually, it returned to the name of his original inspiration "Vogue in". Dancers are inspired by the poses of the supermodels in Vogue magazine, and they try to mimic them on their catwalk through their poses and gestures (The Standard, 2015).

2. The Construction of the Identity

In the social interactions of everyday life, people often manage their identity to achieve their desired goals. They manage the aspects of their appearance, such as the choice of their clothes (how they wear them and combine them with accessories), their expressions, gestures, attitude, voice (tone and intensity) and vocabulary, body movements, depending on the condition. For almost all the people, this is a realistic presentation of them, and they manage the way they "present" a particular self, depending on the purpose and the target audience (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013). The concept of self (the identity structure) is attributed to the symbolic interaction as a multidimensional construct consisting of "many selves" (Mead, 1934). According to the

symbolic interaction, the formation of unique and identifiable identities is a continuous and dynamic process, produced through social interaction, social comparison and feedback from others, through analytical assessments (Goffman, 1959). People improvise and assume different roles in creative and interpretive ways, consciously designed to fit the current situation, into a dramatic approach (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013).

During the last decades, the “functional” nature of the self exists. In this “factional” nature, identity is structured by the accumulation of multiple and changing identities or “selves” (Cantor and Kihlstrom, 1987). These individual identities are usually used due to the requirements of an experience or event. The person and his/her identities are usually activated by the others, where self – presentation reflects his/her present, relatively instantaneous self, and therefore involves the self – variability. The most powerful identities create the required stability for information processing and behavioral events, while weak identities appear in self – presentations in current situations (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013).

The members of a small group (in the USA) that has multiple risk factors for oppression (such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and low socio-economic status) called House/Ball or Ballroom subculture. They are dramatically engaged in identity management, within their cultural system, that governed by constantly evolving rules. The members of Ballroom subculture offer an interesting example of the liquidity of the identity’s concepts and the self – presentation of the members in the daily life of the House/Ball community, as they present a variety of identities and relative self – representations, but the dominant identity is one of the “houses” they belong to. This identity was created and identified through the social interaction with the members from other “homes” and their expectations (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013).

3. The History of Ballroom Subculture

The Ballroom Culture is underground and is therefore unknown to the general public. It appeared in New York in the 1920s and 1930s, during the “Renaissance of Harlem”, in the nightlife and the culture of Latinos and African – American men. These men dressed in feminine clothes and vice versa, in luxurious dances that women and heterosexual men came to watch as part of Harlem’s exotic nightlife (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013). In 1923, with the increasing popularity of Balls, the state of New York criminalized the “homosexual adjuration”, reacting to the sexual relations between men. In March 1953, more than 3.000 contestants and viewers gathered at Rockland Palace in Harlem to watch the men’s catwalk with women’s clothing, in front of judges, in the most unusual fashion show in the world. By the 1960s, the Ballroom subculture had begun to disintegrate racially. The Balls start to attract a balanced mix of participants, as in

Rockland Palace, but African American queens had a very limited chance of winning. This has as a result to organize their Balls. The exaggeration and glamour in dresses rose to new levels. These dresses embodied the most baroque fantasies of the queens and all of them were made in sewing machines, in tiny apartments (Lawrence, 2011).

In 1972, the first “House” was founded when Lottie, a drag queen of Harlem, asked Crystal LaBeija to co-organize a Ball. Lottie and Crystal made the team and created the “House of LaBeija” and Crystal as the “mother” of the “House”. After this, a lot of other African American and Latinos queens started to create their “Houses” of their “Families”. Their “mothers” or “fathers” help their members to socialize, assisted each other and prepared for the Balls they organized or for those who would participate. The start of the organization of African American and Latinos Balls coincided with the culmination of the civil rights movement, while the creation of the “Houses” followed the growing influence of the gay liberation movement (Lawrence, 2011). Also, the “Houses” began to function as orphanages for discarded children. Children’s activities between the Balls allowed them to integrate, even if they did not care about dressing, but they wanted to escape of the misery, entertain and enjoy the warmth of the extended community, while some of them helped other members of the “House” to be prepared for the Ball (Roberts, 2007). As the “Houses” grew, the Balls were multiplied, because each house aspired to organize a ball, and in the 1980s it was organized one Ball every month. The preparation of the Ball was a huge challenge for both participants and organizers. Finally, the “Houses” became more and more competitive, and many of them accepted as new members only the persons who had walked into a Ball and they have won a prize (Lawrence, 2011).

Until the 1960s, the Ballroom subculture was in full force. At the same time, there were also organized Balls in Chicago. In the 1960s, Ball’s dominant look was shaped from cabaret style to high fashion. Later in the 1960s and 1970s, the Ballroom scene focused more on colorful men and transgender. The conservative values of the society have forced the gay and lesbian culture to develop underground, and the Balls were one of the few opportunities for the members of this oppressed society to come together (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013).

The “Voguing” started in a nightclub where Paris Dupree had a Vogue magazine in her bag, and while she was dancing, she pulled it out, opened it on a page where a model posed and then stopped at the same pose with the rhythm of the music. Then she turned to the next page and stopped with the new pose, again at the rhythm. The challenge was answered immediately. Another Queen came and made another pose in front of Paris, and then Paris went in front of her and made a new pose at the rhythm of the music. This was called “throwing shade” as each one of them was trying to make a more beautiful and powerful pose from the other, and soon it passes on to the Balls. Its name at the beginning was “Pose” and then it renamed in “Voguing” from the Vogue

magazine. African art and the Egyptian hieroglyphics inspires a lot of the "Voguing" poses. Later, Queens incorporated the aesthetics of kung fu in it and the "Voguing" developed into a broken, crazy dashed dance. "Voguers" (participants of the "Voguing") must have competitive instinct and athletic ability (Lawrence, 2011).

4. The Social Structure of the Ballroom Subculture

The "Houses" are social structures that offer family ties and functions as their members usually lack them, as they have been cut off their biological families (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013). A "House", usually, consists of a group of gay young people who are usually despised by ethnic communities and their biological families and found themselves on the road. "Houses" are a creative response to poverty, unemployment, and discrimination, providing support and a particular culture to their members (Susman, 2000). These "Houses" became necessary when the African Americans or Latino gay Queens of the working class had to cut off by their biological families. Their families could not accept their sexual choices, and they were forced out of their homes. Those who did not form their gangs organized their "Houses". "Houses" became more important with the growing range of AIDS in the early 1980s (Thomas, 2012).

"Houses" provide a safe place and a family structure for the young homeless children who were rejected by their biological families. During a Ball, the "Houses" function as sports teams. Although competition is the basis of a Ball, the animation of the dance floor culture is the creative community experience. For the children who are a hate target in the outside world, the catwalk if the Balls are a safe place to express their creativity and talent, to feel wonderful and those they belong somewhere (The Standard, 2015). "Houses" provide social and material support to their members, and especially the sense of participation. "Houses" can be real places where members live together, but they conventionally suggest the existence of a group. Each "House" is assigned family roles to its members, such as mother, father, children, etc., regardless of the biological sex and the level of masculinity. The "mothers" of the house usually provide care to the members, and the "fathers" usually have a role in guiding the members of "their" families, the responsibility for preserving the values and defending the reputation of the "House" (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013). "Children" can change homes and some of them often do it. There are no conditions for joining a "House" except for the approval of the "mother" and the "father". A "House" can accept a "child" who is fond of its members or the members of the "House" think that he/she can win trophies. The name of the "House" is chosen by its "mother" and reflects the values the community appreciates, particularly fashion and its achievements. Some "Houses" names are Armani, Aphrodite, Armani, Chanel, Divine, Ebony, Escada, Genesis, Infiniti, Karan, Milan, Mizrahi, Prestige, Tuscany, Ultra-Omni and Xtravaganza. Inside the

Ballroom Subculture, the “children” take the name of their home as their surname (Susman, 2000).

“Houses” are traditionally taking their names from the name of famous fashion designers such as “House of Chanel” or “House of Manolo-Blahnik”, or they named by legendary dance clubs such as “House of LaBeija” or “House of Xtravaganza”. As a social unit, the Ballroom subculture is considered as a community of interest and sharing. This community is characterized by face to face relationships, mutual interest and self - help, and as a place where people can share experiences and identities. The number of members of the Ballroom subculture in the USA is not known because of its underground nature and the way it evolves and differs in different cities. It is estimated that in urban centers, 2% to 10% of gay belong to it, such as in New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Charlotte, Miami, and Houston (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013).

A Ball is a complicate social event where members compete in the catwalk by categories, trophies, cash prizes and the most important, the right to boast for the victory. Balls offered to the most marginalized members of the society a space to escape the preconceptions of heterologous culture and let them participate in the illusion of being a superstar. Balls are organized in large venues such as music halls, hotel dance halls, and conference centers or low – cost places such as a car park, basketball courts and other large open spaces (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013). A Ball is like a fashion show, with a long T shaped corridor (catwalk) in the center of the room. This catwalk is usually a delineated area of the floor, although it sometimes is elevated. Tables and chairs are on the sides of the catwalk, and there is a long table for the judges. The participants who are usually “walk” as members and representatives of “House”, enter the catwalk from the audience and move towards the judges. The judges decide according to individual preference but must follow the common aesthetic ideas of the subculture and impose the exact requirement of each category. Within the particular subdivision of his/her gender identity, a person can participate in categories for the most beautiful face, the sexiest body, the most skillful “Voguing”, and various types of walking on the catwalk (Susman, 2000). For the creation of a Ball, commentators and a DJ are also needed. An impromptu verbal duel between the DJ and the commentator gives cheer and optimism to Ball, and it sets the tone for each category. The commentator is a skillful “orator” who announces each category and commends the appearance of each contestant to keep high the public’s energy. The DJ carefully watches the commentator, and he/she stop and start the music according to his/her advice. The music in a Ball is chosen according to the themes of the catwalk contest categories. Some of the songs were written specifically for the Balls, in the appropriate slang (Susman, 2000). One of the best – known songs is “Masters at Work”, which has been redesigned and played hundreds of times by a thousand DJs. The

dancers/participants usually use every fourth stroke in the song to perform the “suicide fall” on the floor, a specialized (and dangerous) movement where the dancers fall back on the floor resting on one foot (Chatterjee, 2018).

Viewers can be part of a Ball (except the participants). In the Ballroom subculture the most of the participants at a Ball are members of a “House”, but not everyone, as some viewers would also like to involve, excited by the competition and the celebration of the expression of identity. Participants usually walk on the catwalk one by one in their category. The participants who get a “ten”, they wait to “fight”; otherwise they are “cut off” and they deleted from that category for the night. When all the participants have been rated, then the one with the highest scores “fight” each other. The level of success of a participant (member of a “House”) depends on his/her long term performance (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013). A Ballroom participant can become a “legend” when he/she has won many trophies for a long time. It is a great honor to have the word “legend” before the name of a member, as “legends” are models for the younger members of the “House” and shape the story of the subculture. Through the mane, the members have a strong desire to increase the reputation of their “Houses”. Some famous “houses” are now closed, such as the “House of Dior”, while new ones are constantly opened, such as the “House of Tsunami”. The nature of the participants and the collective groups is quite fluid: people change their self – representations hourly and daily as they select to participate in different categories through a Ball. The participants should not wear the same costume more than one time, as it is considered, unfortunately (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013).

5. Fashion in the Ballroom Subculture

Fashion plays a dominant role in Ball, as it is a fashion event where different codes play and deal simultaneously. Creativity through imitation and recombination becomes self – sufficiency for the participants. Of course, in a Ball, a lot of emphases is put on women’s clothes, although half of the fashion categories are dedicated to men’s clothing. The practice of this subculture supports the theory that “adopts” many fashion designers: designers create styles that are desirable from the masses that people mimic them and wear them. The names of “Houses” show that fashion designers are considered people with fabulous gifts. The expensive clothing by recognized fashion designers (fashion labels) is valuable and is held in surprisingly large quantities in Balls, relative to the low financial situation of the most “children” (Susman, 2000). The fashion designer labels participants worn on the Balls are obtained through theft, credit card fraud, temporary purchase (clothes are returned the next day), borrowing from others and, sometimes, direct purchase. “Children” learn how to be fashionable from one another and the massive marketing of elite fashion, and still they create remarkable fashion innovations.

“Children” watch fashion shows on TV, get updated on new designs from fashion magazines and examine the clothes in fashion boutiques. A lot of the “Houses” have their fashion designer. The “Houses” that have not can borrow them from other “Houses” to create individual and group “costumes”. The clothes made by “House” designers mention the trends of the dominant fashion and usually is a reinterpretation of them. Design and creativity reach at high levels during the carnival, so in the “Bizarre” category many costumes are pieces of art as they are sculptures with moving parts. “Bizarre” category demands of the participant to transform into a fantastic being through clothes and fashion practice becomes the practice of magic. Clothes in this category often tend to be similar to the one of science fiction or comic book heroes, but with a particular interpretation (Susman, 2000).

Low and middle classes create and adopt remarkable and imaginative ways of dressing. These “new” ways increasingly affect the prevailing fashion trends for all men. Those who mimic high fashion, become imitations of high fashion as well (Hollander, 1993). Within a hostile social context, this subculture confirms both individual and group identity, following the aesthetics, ethics and politics trends. Some of these identities directly trigger the hegemonic ideas about power and status (Susman, 2000).

A Ball is similar to a fashion show, as there is a catwalk, limitation to the movements, focus on the appearance and rewards for the most creative and fashionable clothes. The term “House” in Ballroom subculture marks a family is borrowed from the fashion world. An interesting relationship that emerged from the contribution of the two worlds (Balls and Fashion) is the evolution of “Voguing” dance. In the 1960s fashion shows in the USA and Europe, the models danced and ran on the catwalks. The so-called “photographic” model began to walk, taking impressive authoritarian poses as if it were for a fashion photo shoot. The model had become the focus of the fashion industry and not just an accessory of it (Craik, 1994). During this period “Voguing” created and an indisputable force of violence has been added on it from the beginning as a substitute for competition. An essential difference between a fashion show and a Ball is that any viewer in a Ball can compete. Fashion has the qualities of a somewhat fuzzy interactive code without rules, so it is not quite clear how the clothes make any sense. In the world of Balls, the major means by which fashion articulates its ambiguous language is the “walking” on the catwalk. The relationship between fashion and “Voguing” is even stronger when fashion serves as an action. Many participants in a Ball walk on the catwalk by combining choice and need: exploring their ability to create, trying to discover new families and reform their bodies. They should take a simple garment, sit on the sewing machine and turn it into a magnificent dress/cloth to be rewarded. All these are crucial for their survival (Susman, 2000). In Ball, the way that the participants chose to wear a set of clothes is important. They combine them to their body movement, to bring the potential for power and the

identity which are embedded in a lifeless fabric. Without the action, the movement and the dance cannot be understood how fashion gives meaning to Ball. A set of clothes should not be separated from the kinesthetic. For example, the attempt to claim an identity cannot be understood without the physical sense of the place that someone creates a “performance”. This “performance” becomes more vital during a Ball. A garment framed with modern complementary accessories and comes into life by the participant who walks “in” it on the catwalk (Susman, 2000).

6. The Different Types of “Voguing”

The technics of “Voguing” change rapidly, like fashion trends. Today there are three basic types of “Voguing”: a) the Old Way, b) the New Way and c) the “Vogue Femme”. “Old Way” and “New Way” developed in different seasons. The “Old Way” is the dance style that uses poses strongly inspired by Vogue Magazine’s, extreme “catwalking”, and was popular during the 1980s. The “New Way” appeared in the 1990s, it is a development of the Old Way, and it requires greater elasticity and contractions of the feet. The type “Voguing” somebody can see on Madonna’s video clip “Vogue” is a combination of the two styles (Chatterjee, 2018). During “Old Way Voguing” the dancer gets impressively poses after another. The “New Way Voguing” as a dance consists of transitions between stops. The dancer can do rapid movements of swirling hands and swoops on the ground with a sleek, sophisticated, unstable move. Dancers’ bodies move in ways that remind Bruce Lee movements, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Nike advertisements, and Kama Sutra positions (Susman, 2000). In a Ball, in addition to the gender-related categories and other competition categories of role renditions evolved. For example, a continuously developing category is the “BQ vogue fem”, which is a development of the “Old Way” techniques combined with the “new way” type.

Since 1995, “Vogue Femme” has evolved into a dramatic, completely feminine “Voguing” style. The “Vogue Femme” is a dance performance that uses the elements of fashion combined to hands movements, and it often tries to narrate a story (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013). This type of “Voguing” consists of a combination of movements, such as the “catwalk” (which is feminine walk where legs are crossed one on another, hips are pushed from side to side and hands move to the opposite direction of the legs) (Maciejowska, 2017) and the “duckwalk” (which is a movement of crouching and foot sliding that requires balancing on the feet balls) (The House of Naphtali, 2005). During “duckwalk”, the dancer walks like a duck, like in the traditional Russian folk dance. At “Vogue Femme” dancers, also, do spins often performed in ballet and dips on the floor known as “suicide dips”, or as “sha-wam”. It is also called “sha-wam” because when a dancer performs a “suicide dip”, the commentator shouts “sha-wam”. The “Vogue Femme” divided into soft and dramatic (Rowan, Long, and Johnson, 2013).

7. Conclusion

The Ballroom subculture describes a part of the underground LGBT subculture in the USA, whose members “walk” and dance for prizes at events known as Balls. During a Ball they compete in categories, trying to attribute a gender identity and a social class. The participants of a Ball are members of a “House”. The “Houses” are LGBT groups established under the “mother” (the most of the times a transgender person) and the “father” of the “House”. Except the support provision that “Houses” give to their members, they compete with others “Houses” in the “Balls”, where their members are judged on dancing skills, costumes, looks, and attitudes. Participants dress up according to the category they compete in. The Balls are inextricably linked with fashion, luxury, and social and economic mobility. It is a tradition that began in the 19th century and continues in the 21st century. “Voguing”, is a type of the dance that became known of Madonna’s video clip for her song “Vogue” (1990). This type of dance was created on the streets of Harlem from the street subcultures during the 80s, and the fanciful hand movements easily recognize it. The dramatic movements of the hands and feet are based on classical ballet, jazz, and modern dance techniques.

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