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Work Bitch: The labour of redefining kinship within
Ballroom culture.

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Abstract

Ballroom culture (created by queer, transgender, black and latinx communities in America) has gained popularity throughout Europe in past decades. These photographs depict the community currently growing ballroom culture in Scotland. This queer community destabilises gender and kinship norms, before redefining gender and kinship as collective processes requiring labour. The formation of kinship bonds through labour 'queers' notions of family and enables the Scottish community to feel they are maintaining ballroom culture in an appropriate way. Their commitment to 'authentically' growing the ballroom scene provides insight into the use of 'culture' by marginalised people as a socio-political tool, suggesting its potency out with anthropological discourse.

Keywords: ballroom culture, liminality, queer, cultural appropriation, kinship



"You have to imagine you are a praying mantis. You stare the judges down and you come out thinking 'I am going to f*ck you and then I am going to eat you' "



By collectively performing 'hyper-femininity', Ballroom members draw attention to the relational aspect of gender, thus incorporating kinship into gender performativity. By adopting kinship terminology to define the relationships between community members, they subvert notions of pre-existing kinship by demonstrating that relations are formed through endurance and labour. Ultimately, essentialist assumptions of gender and kinship are challenged by the ballroom community, thus exposing both categories as unstable.



Throughout ballroom performances, gestures are enacted in a purposeful, exaggerated way: what I describe as ‘hyper’-femininity’. Hands were often used as a tool to guide the audience’s gaze and demonstrate hyper-femininity. The extract below describes Faya demonstrating hyper-femininity through Vogue Femme:

During her hand performance, Faya gently brushes her pubic area and accentuates her breasts. She sculpts the shape of her chest with elegant hands before changing tempo and suddenly pushing them inwards. Her style is about teasing and playing. She directs the viewers eyes with her hands, inviting them to observe her body. Through her visual storytelling, she accentuates her body for display. The gestures are fairly quick and fluid so as only to hint at certain body parts. She is flirting with her audience, never quick focusing at length on one area. Her pace maintains intrigue and excitement.

- Fieldnote (10.06.18)



“Having that ethics of care amongst your ballroom family is really important because you can get quite discouraged. Like anything, if you put it out and people don’t respond to it, it’s like shit. It’s really, really, hard. You can get really impatient as well because you’re like, ‘why am I not growing fast?’ You really need people to care for you and guide you through the scene or else it’s quite a difficult road”



The gestures and actions performed by the ballroom community are based on norms of femininity that are assumed to be 'natural'. By exaggerating these movements through hyper-feminine performance, they demonstrate that gender is made through its production. It is the "doing" of gender that creates understandings of being a man or a woman (Butler 2004, p.1 emphasis added). To destabilise gender as biological, they perform an exaggerated, constructed femininity, not an exaggerated 'natural' femininity. It is this crucial distinction which demonstrates how the ballroom community denaturalise gender.

References

Butler, J., 2004, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York and London