Strike a Pose, Forever: The Legacy of Vogue and its Re-contextualization in Contemporary Camp Performances

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11771
DOI: 10.4000/ejas.11771
ISSN: 1991-9336

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

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We don’t have to play victim anymore. Our story has far surpassed *Paris is Burning*. We’re here and we’re here to stay.
—Jamel Prodigy

To be legendary, as stressed in Jennie Livingston’s esteemed documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), is recapitulative of the ballroom scene. Born to stand out, the ballroom subculture emerged as the paradigmatic anti-heteronormative indictment against ills and flaws sustained by the dominant American lifestyle. Within its contours, the sexual pariahs, initially originating from African American and Latino social groups, developed the practicing of vogue, an intricate dance act inspired by the poses featured on the covers of the eponymous fashion magazine. The essence of voguing can ironically, sarcastically, even hauntingly be summarized into one word: stylization. Voguers would come to the balls imitating superstars of the showbiz world, as a mockery against, but, simultaneously, a glorification of standardized—typically Western—ideals of beauty, sexuality, and class. What is indicative of the scene is its symbiosis with camp dynamism, a relationship sealed with subversive theatrics and discursive potential. Camp’s politics of excess vitalizes the aesthetic language of voguing by fortifying the performances with parody and gender-bending qualities, two distinctly queer devices renowned for their deconstructive efficacy against hegemonic constructs of gender and race. Progressively, though, this power from the—urban—margins, just like camp *per se*, has been questioned due to its wide entanglement with consumerist-oriented agencies. By being popularized, initially with Madonna’s extensively promoted music video of “Vogue” (1990) and even with Livingston’s documentary, voguing and the ballroom lifestyle became epitomical for
queer groups not only in America, but also internationally. When it comes to the epitomical, attention is instantly turned to what is considered to be original both in terms of authenticity as well as longevity, and how this originality is upheld and diffused among the abovementioned groups.

Taking the impact of Madonna’s song and video into account, vogue was cemented as a culturally iconic performance for future generations of the LGBT community to emulate. Correspondingly, *Paris Is Burning* spawned debates in the academic world and further invigorated dialogues, especially among gender and queer theorists, who sought to identify what the ballroom’s drag politics was and to what extent it was subversive against the (hetero)dominant culture. Seeing that both Madonna’s and Livingston’s works are cultural products closely connected to wider audience consumption and largely entailing issues of appropriation and authorship, it becomes quite arduous and complex a task to approach vogue’s seeming radicalism by simply highlighting its gender destabilization politics. Undoubtedly, these two projects shed light on the then-underground subculture of Manhattan. Almost thirty years after this initial impact, though, the ballroom lifestyle and, specifically, vogue’s diffusion in major American urban centers, such as Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, as well as its crossing over to global metropoles, including Paris, Berlin, and Tokyo, raise questions that inevitably lie under every culturally nuanced—here, African American-, Latino-, and gay-inflected—mode that deviates from the margins and attains a broader, more visible, and, importantly, global/ized status.

With regard to that, it is important to situate this movement within a postmodern economic and cultural context. In his work *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Jack/Judith Halberstam argues that “mainstream culture within postmodernism should be defined as the process by which subcultures are both recognized and absorbed, mostly for the profit of large media conglomerates” (156, italics in text), and that “most of the interest directed by the mainstream media at subcultures is voyeuristic and predatory” (157). Prior to Halberstam’s work, extensive accounts on subcultural practices and lives have been pursued within the cultural studies project of the Birmingham School. In particular, Dick Hebdige’s seminal work on *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) was one of the earliest (along with the works of Stuart Hall) to undertake an analysis of the relationship of subcultures within what Halberstam would define as the “flexible economy of postmodern culture” (22). In “Subcultures,” however, Hebdige argues that:

As soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen.’ Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become *codified*, made *comprehensible*, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. (357, my italics)

Rather inflexibly, Hebdige describes the lapse of subcultures to fixity, once they become commodities. It is the *codification* and *comprehensibility*, though, that provides subcultures with an alternative mode of existence outside of what the critic rigidly envisions as a cultural stalemate. Halberstam’s approach is better explanatory of the relationship between subcultures and the mainstream industries and it is, in fact, the both/and nature of his argument that allows us to see this paradoxical existence of subcultures as both visible and inevitably lodged within a market economy. The subcultures’ permafrost
state, as imagined by Hebdige, certainly drives any counter-hegemonic force that may derive from the liminal margins into conformism as part of an assimilative process that diffuses the said force into a larger—mainstream, if you like—site of reference. But the subcultural residue left—e.g. the punk aesthetics and style discussed in “Subcultures” or, in our case, the queer language of vogue—becomes a time-resisting mark that is and will be acknowledged for what it is, acquiring the referential status as an era-traversing signifier. In fact, if there is anything political about the meaning of style(s) lies exactly in their ability to evade and resist a total cultural annihilation.

5 Voguing has indeed maintained its signifiers of queerness and its ability to embody and be embodied in the praxis of gender and race. A historical account that traces this praxis, though, is in order. First of all, it has to be made clear that voguing has become a mode of expression that addresses completely different needs (if any) to those established by the first Harlem ball goers. Although the origins of the ballroom scene are to be found in the first drag balls held in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, when the nascent black gay culture was emerging vibrant in cafeterias and speakeasies (Chauncey 228), our first closer, if investigating, look at the life of voguers was through Livingston’s lens. What was presented was a creative community of misfits who paraded down the runway in all their drag glory. Interspersed with the ball glamour were the personal narratives of each voguer in their daily life through accounts that, more often than not, addressed the audience’s empathy (e.g. the death of Venus Xtravaganza). The personae emulated by voguers typically alluded to gendered representations of white femininity and masculinity, and, although it is implied in the documentary that through voguing these essentialist notions were parodied, one cannot miss noticing that the ball performers longed to partake in the modus Vivendi of the dominant American culture—the one that drove them to their liminal position and interpellated them as subcultural subjects in the first place. In his essay on “‘The Subversive Edge:’ Paris Is Burning, Social Critique, and the Limits of Subjective Agency,” Philip Brian Harper, comparing voguers who appear in Livingston’s film with those from the 1960s scene, concludes that the former progressively embraced America’s greed for material accumulation in juxtaposition to the latter who expressed themselves within the spectrum of the perhaps mythologized post-movements spirit of equality and freedom (97-98). This strikes as no surprise since most of the participants in Paris Is Burning desired to attain stardom and spread both the glamour of the ballroom scene and their personal notoriety to the world. “I wanna take it to the real Paris and make the real Paris burn,” said iconic voguer Willi Ninja in the documentary. Twenty years later, VICE’s documentary entitled Fringe: Proletarian French Voguers (2014) attests to Ninja’s aspiration by presenting the contemporary French ball scene where Lasseindra, a member of the House of Ninja, the collective originally created by Ninja himself in New York City, helped to diffuse the vogue movement in France and, by extension, establish the Parisian scene.

6 In the post-millennial timeframe, voguing and the ball contests are enjoyed throughout the world, but the context within which they are enacted always has to be examined idiosyncratically. In the U.S., for instance, the area-specific enclaves still exist and usually house working-class African American and Latino LGBT groups. In his ethnographic study on Detroit’s ballroom scene conducted from 2000 to 2007 and then on to 2012, Marlon M. Bailey identifies the voguers he acquainted with as “Black LGBT
people... who are poor or working class and must struggle against the odds to find and make meaning in their lives” (4). For these groups, who often congregate in black and/or gay ghettos, voguing and the balls are still regarded as a streetwise performing art which is inextricably linked with the counter-normative angst permeating a contemporary, fast-paced, and homophobic urban milieu. Furthermore, the function of the Houses maintains its initial role. Houses arose as collectives formed by ball contestants and were usually named after famous fashion houses, such as the House of Prada or the House of St. Laurent. “Houses are family-like structures that are configured socially rather than biologically,” Bailey notes (5), and their parental structure—i.e. the Mothers and Fathers—provides guidance to new-coming protégés who couldn’t or wouldn’t identify with their biological homes, or to those who simply want to join the ballroom scene under specific nomenclature. Houses encourage a sense of belonging among members, especially through the competitive process of the balls, during which contestants are called to represent and honor the House they are affiliated with. Additionally, due to the fact that most of the young LGBT members joining the Houses come from a working-class environment, it is not uncommon for the Houses to provide members with financial support by offering accommodation or job opportunities.

Nevertheless, the community of the Houses does not always consist of struggling poor or working-class strata. There are Houses that have entered the business world—mainly the entertainment industry—with entrepreneurial moves established through strong networking and kinship. In my interview with Derek August, also known as the legendary Jamel Prodigy, an original member of the House of Prodigy, what is made known is that not only Houses retain strong bonds, but also some of them are keen to propel their members onto various mainstream industries. Prodigy states: “Houses are extremely tight... There’s a camaraderie [sic] and kinship... There are parental roles, parental figures; there is a brotherhood. You know, a lot of us are performers or creative artists or make-up artists, directors, producers, hair-stylists, culinary artists, chefs etc.” (Prodigy). The artist also stressed: “Now, because the scene is becoming so much more commercialized and appreciated in mainstream media, you have some Houses that are being developed strictly as production companies” (Prodigy). In this light, Houses promote their members’ creativity practically by enabling capital communication with a broader market or even among members themselves, who may collaborate on independent projects. The function of the Houses as production companies, though, is a phenomenon that would have been unthought-of for the first House generations, especially in the 1980s when the status of the members as independent artists and entrepreneurs was limited within regional circuits. As voguing and the ball scene attained a more central, or, to be accurate, less invisible status in broader urban circuits by being welcomed in the showbiz industry, Houses were able to renegotiate and affirm their position in the mainstream market. Houses dominant within their local scenes could either shun entering the marketplace, a repudiation resulting from the blatant commercial exploitation and appropriation of the scene—the voyeuristic and predatory interest of the industries, as Halberstam noted—or, rather, they would use the marketplace as a vehicle that would drive them out of social and cultural oblivion.

Madonna’s case stands paradigmatic here. The performer’s stage has always displayed a sense of cultural carnivalesque, having race, ethnicity and gender as a stable creative axis around which her persona revolves. Her history with urban sub/cultures is
constantly under debate wherein appropriation and borrowing are the notions most contested within Madonna readership (Paglia; hooks; Robertson; Fouz-Hernández and Jarman-Ivens). Having established long-term affiliations with the Hispanic culture, the black culture, and the gay culture, her stage cites trends and hyps favored by these communities and found within their urban environments. Voguing and the ball scene could not be an exception. Not only did Madonna draw from the scene to produce the song and the video of “Vogue,” but, notably, she hired prominent ballroom figures, such as Jose and Luis Xtravaganza, to choreograph and assist her in her 1990 Blond Ambition World Tour as evidenced in the Truth or Dare documentary (Keshishian). Attention started being directed onto the scene and voguers were becoming noticed by industries; some of them were gradually absorbed in the fashion industry—Ninja’s model training career is noteworthy here—the music industry, and the entertainment industry, in general. Naturally, vogue’s movement from the marginal contours of the subcultural Houses to a commercialized space of spectacle could not possibly leave the scene unchanged. Apart from the subject matter of spectacle here that I will address shortly, I would like to underline that the popularization of vogue and its deterritorialization from the margins set the basis for a cultural tradition, one that is camp-inflected and manifestly queer.

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The reason why Madonna holds a key position in the development of the scene is not only because she brought vogue in the limelight, at least outside the U.S., but mainly because critics envisioned Madonna’s oeuvre as the embodiment of commercialization and cultural exploitation. Arguably, through her engagement with sub/cultural practices and scenes, Madonna came to epitomize the Jamesonian logic of late capitalism while her position in relation to those scenes was always fixed as one of uncreative plagiarism. It is possible, though, that Madonna’s cross-cultural liaisons may offer a fresh look on the current being of the vogue scene. Since the era of “Vogue” and the Blond Ambition Tour, Madonna’s engagement with voguing led to her imprinting her personal mark upon the scene. The performer has time and again employed vogue’s gender-bending arsenal by fusing it with various styles and scenes when onstage. For instance, in the performance for her Sticky & Sweet Tour (2008-2009), she stages “Vogue” in the Pimp section of the tour as a runway show stylized in black ghetto-cum-gangster-cum-art deco fashions; whereas for her MDNA Tour (2012) she appropriately places the song in the Masculine/Feminine segment, where she revisits her own 1990 video, wearing suit and tie combined with the infamous Jean Paul Gaultier cone bra towards an iconic genderfuck effect. Madonna’s initial dealing with voguing raised eyebrows due to her relentless drawing from, if not pilfering of, a Latino and black-branded scene and due to her incorporation of ethnic and racial styles as performance art/acts in her stage routines. Yet, her multicultural stage places equal emphasis on the cultural roots of vogue in parallel with her artistic engaging with it. Almost two decades later, the appropriation/borrowing binary debate seems to be outdated and unproductively imprisoning. Moving beyond, without, of course, forsaking the politics and economics of the entertainment industry when it comes to its transactions with cultures, popular culture critique of Madonna’s V/vogue should take into consideration the degree to which the artist’s dealing with the scene has in turn shaped the scene itself.

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If anything, the artist has contributed into making the culture of vogue widely known to an ever-increasing global and intergenerational audience. Despite the inevitably commercial character of the spectacle, Madonna’s contemporary performances
of “Vogue” attest to the fact that the incorporation of the vogue culture into her oeuvre did not actually stripped voguing off of its cultural markers. Instead, Madonna managed to fit herself along its development, creating a legacy of vogue that has been mutually foddered by its initial creators and “Madonna,” the icon. As evidenced in the aforementioned performances, the conspicuous genderfuck effects as well as the camp politics of parody cannot simply be erased from vogue’s dialectics either. In analyses of voguing, focus is logically placed upon gender performativity which is always dealt with in the Butlerian sense. However, it is not the point here to stress whether and in what way this gender play is subversive or effective in discursively transgressing gendered polarities, especially when one leaves the context of performance. Upon undertaking the ever-contested debate on drag’s subversion of gender—thoroughly discussed in queer theory (Butler; hooks) and in the literature of camp (Newton; Meyer)—we might soon find ourselves not only before drag’s uncritical understanding and reproduction of the traditional gender binary, but also before the dichotomy that separates the reality of spectacle and the social one. As Harper accurately indicates about the Paris Is Burning stars and extends to the ball world in general, “when Realness queens exit the ball milieu, which constitutes a type of imaginary realm, they must—to all appearances, at least—conform to the norms of the larger social context that effectively constitutes the symbolic order” (97). In this sense, the basic premise of subversion serves little if we are to restrict analysis within the argument of performativity in (drag) performance and performativity in a broader social environment. Attention should be turned to vogue’s gender-bending as queer history—with all the components and parameters this argument entails—rather than focusing on its effectiveness of gender-bending per se. In this light, vogue has to be examined as a durable camp—that is gay (male)—tradition which bears instantly recognizable queer markers.

Baptized as gay sensibility, aesthetics, style and code(d) language (Dyer; Core; Cleto), camp has been sanctioned as a form of critique against heterodominant structures of gender and sexuality because of its ability to dramatize and parody its social surroundings. At the same time, however, its subject matter has raised numerous questions with regard to its a/political theatrics and its tautological existence with mainstream pop culture. Although it has crossed over to wider (straight) audiences as an aesthetic form, camp is usually monopolized as gay male cultural production that surfaced in a white American middle-class urban milieu (Flinn). Camp’s association with effeminacy, superficiality, as well as its outrageously essentialist dealing with cultural representations—often ranging from borderline racism to explicit misogyny—have often been criticized as inciting a politics of disempowerment, especially when one comes to think of the gay culture as parasitizing the heterodominant one (Halperin) or, worse, camp’s hysterical treatment of female subjectivity (Robertson). Nevertheless, camp not only permeates contemporary gay culture, but is a distinct gay-marked feature whose audience can extract its critical potential from the polysemy of its pop surface. Arguing in favor of a possible camp rhetorics of resistance and empowerment in their work Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture, Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner in part acknowledge that “contemporary sensibilities are configured in such a way in contemporary media fare as to camouflage their ultimately hegemonic function,” but, nonetheless, support that “even if contemporary media content has appropriated unstable, dynamic, and potentially resistive sensibilities (camp included), which are defined after all by multiplicity, parody, irony, and inconsistency, may in turn permit
entrée for certain resistive texts, or at least moments, under that rubric” (10, my parenthesis). Camp as a device of resistance always utilized the tools of dominant culture in the (re)construction of its histrionic reality. By doing so, it simultaneously appropriates and challenges (through parody) traditional understandings of identity, image, and sexuality. In this light, camp’s subversive potential with regard to gender parody will always be a contested ground. It can safely be argued, though, that camp is eventually a resilient sensibility: its radical potential is its everlasting ability to play with normative corpora and galvanize them with queer energy, whether such energy can be deemed subversive or not.

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To envision, therefore, vogue as a camp tradition within pop contexts allows us to underscore its resilience rather than its obscure drag politics. Drag, after all, as Daniel Contreras accurately notes in his work on Unrequited Love and Gay Latino Culture: What Have You Done to my Heart?, “can be liberatory in its derailing of gender assumptions but it often partakes in oppressive narratives of gender, race, and class” (92), especially if one comes to consider camp’s troublingmania over white glamorous femininities. Aligning the discourse of vogue with camp instills into the latter a critical nonwhite porousness that helps project a racial and ethnic subject within its, more often than not, white discourse. In the now large literature of camp, rarely are racial and ethnic discourses of camp highlighted.2 Vogue’s African American roots, for that matter, aid towards reimagining camp not as mere discourse—as many critics of camp monolithically conceived based on the Butlerian understanding of discursive gender—but, importantly, as an embodied practice with corporeal politics. In what he counter-proposes to (white) queer studies as “quare” studies in his essay “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother,” E. Patrick Johnson argues that “bodies are sites of discursive effects, but they are sites of social ones as well” (141). Prior to arriving at this conclusion, Johnson highlights the union of African American body and vernacular as vital within “quare” traditions and suggests that “performance practices such as vogueing, snapping, ‘throwing shade,’ and ‘reading’ attest to the ways in which black gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people demonstrate the ways of devising technologies of self-assertion and summoning the agency to resist” (140). In what we can call racial or, to be precise here, black camp, Johnson’s “quare” critique allows us to illuminate aspects of camp usually concealed under—or, one would suspect, carefully erased by—a white gay male perspective. What is problematic, however, in Johnson’s account is that in the effort to highlight the politics of black vernacular it goes rather unexamined how aspects of black camp—RuPaul’s drag extravaganza, for instance—were and still are co-opted by popular industries. Revitalizing as it is to expand the potential of camp agency, it is of equal importance to remember how its politics co-exist with the mainstream pop sensibility.

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Taking all the above into consideration, I would like now to return to Madonna and see how revisiting her vogue as camp tradition attests to the fact that mainstream pop has indeed nurtured the said tradition. In February 2016, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras paid a video tribute to Madonna which featured two hundred dancers in a classic “Vogue” routine. According to Attitude’s Ben Kelly, “the Mardi Gras organisers say it is ‘a heartfelt tribute in recognition and respect of Madonna’s support for our LGBTQI communities throughout her career’” (Kelly). For the performance, “the dancers were accompanied by a Madonna impersonator dressed in one of the MDNA Tour outfits... Also
featured in the video are some drag queens performing ‘Express Yourself’ and a group of children who recreated the ‘Material Girl’ video (Kelly). Regarding the vogue culture, instances like the said tribute are the perfect demonstration of how pop culture has come to shape marginal art forms and experiences into mainstream glorification of iconicity. Suffice it to say that Madonna’s staging of vogue is reflective both of her relationship with gay fandom and of her trade on gay (urban) practices. Significantly, she stands on a par with the ballroom participants as the medium through which the queer language of vogue is diffused by and through the gay culture. Being one of her signature songs, the performances of “Vogue” verify a long-lasting camp appeal that is generated both from vogue’s queer roots and Madonna’s icon, while, as the Mardi Gras tribute shows, the celebration of “Vogue” and even that of Madonna herself through the drag practices reveals the centrality that camp still has in today’s gay culture.

Mutually fostered is also the relationship of gay (male) spectatorship with other pop divas who pay homage to vogue as camp tradition. First and foremost, Australian popstar Kylie Minogue, whose chief audience consists of European and Australian gay men, frequently incorporates camp-inflected themes in her extravaganzas, drawing mainly from the disco scene, the S/M culture, and the burlesque stage. Voguing is not uncommon a sight in a Kylie show. She first performed a mash-up of Madonna’s “Vogue” and her own “Burning Up” in a burlesque-inspired act for her Showgirl: The Homecoming Tour (2006-07)—interestingly, Madonna’s Sticky & Sweet rendition of “Vogue” was an onstage nod to Kylie’s tribute; the exact same mash-up was also performed for her For You, For Me tour (2009), her first headlined North American tour. Madonna aside, Minogue delved deeper into the voguing scene, thereby consolidating her affiliation with her gay fandom. The music video and the choreography for her song “Get Outta My Way” (2010) was inspired by Paris Is Burning itself (Minogue, My Year), while her performance of “Cupid Boy” during her Aphrodite: Les Folies Tour the same year featured semi-nude men executing a vogue routine. Most recently, she staged the performance of “Get Outta My Way” as a voguing group battle for her Kiss Me Once Tour (2015). Kylie’s global stage, similarly to most of today’s pop artists’ one, is always host to an array of stylized ethnic and racial elements. However, the consistency of vogue showcases inside these shows has indeed rendered the dance a dominant form within female-led shows. Other cases, to name just a few, include Lady Gaga’s vogue performance of “Black Jesus + Amen Fashion” for her Born This Way Ball Tour (2011-13) as well as the structural formation of her production company, called the Haus of Gaga; Katy Perry’s Cats-inspired cover of Madonna’s version for her Prismatic World Tour (2015); Rihanna’s vogue choreography for the house music-based segment of her Anti World Tour (2016); Jennifer Lopez’s ball contest-inspired song “Tens” and its vogue showcase for the Jennifer Lopez: All I Have residency shows (2016-17) at the AXIS, Las Vegas; and, finally, the avant-pop performances of FKA Twigs which entail extensive vogue routines—her Congregata shows (2015) at New York City’s Brooklyn Hangar featured a vogue co-showcase with prominent voguers of the contemporary scene, such as Benjamin Milan, Jamel Prodigy, and Leiomy Maldonado. As a form that is essentially gay, vogue, just like drag or camp, has become a performed gay tradition that currently owes as much of its existence to the ballroom culture as it does to performers like Minogue, Gaga or Twigs, who have preserved its legacy.
Apart from popstars’ shows with international coverage, vogue festivals and even workshops are now prevalent globally, thereby establishing and maintaining interaction among Houses and old and young performers. *Berlin Voguing Out* has become an annual international meeting point for voguers in Germany since 2012, while the *Voguing Festival* runs in Barcelona, Spain, for at least four years. As far as workshops are concerned, voguing is now professionally taught as a form of dance. Workshops may range from simply teaching voguing techniques to creating dance groups and cliques or even to forming Houses anew. For instance, the House of Drama is a local enclave in Thessaloniki, Greece, which came into formation after a series of vogue workshops led by choreographer Marios “Bimboy” Miltiadou and his dance crews, originally known as Bimboy’s Drama Unicorns, an exclusively gay male crew, and Bimboy’s Drama Queens, an all-female crew. When I asked Prodigy about the scene’s development from the 1980s up until now, he replied:

> The scene has definitely evolved. There’s so much... talent in the youth [sic]; and they have so much inspiration now; and they are actually training a lot more than we probably did, because we didn’t have access to studios. You know, back in the days, you didn’t vogue in the studio; you learned how to vogue probably somewhere you weren’t supposed to be. So, now it’s amazing to see that vogue is being taught at Alvin Ailey or Broadway Dancing and there are so many people abroad that are learning from the culture. (Prodigy)

The performer also explains that voguing has even expanded from the LGBT community to heterosexual audiences, who attend or join balls and tend to be more appreciative of and engaged with the House culture (Prodigy). Voguing has indeed made great strides since the first “closeted” balls and, hypothetically, there seems to be no harm in sharing an art form.

Questions, though, arise when vogue’s camp, which is now venerated as a common queer practice among global LGBT communities, is placed within the spectrum of global sharing. This is not to view touring performers like Madonna or local acts, such as competitions and workshops, as solely responsible for the dissemination of the culture or necessarily ominous for its future. Considering vogue’s trajectory from the American ballrooms to the showbiz scene to the social media era, it is quite unlikely that vogue would have stayed within U.S. borders in a time when cultural productions are instantly shared worldwide; a case in point is *The Luna Show* series, a YouTube show documenting the current reality of the ball and the House scene. There really seems to be no harm in a global LGBT world enjoying a dance style and the culture that surrounds it; on the contrary, it appears to be democratic. Vogue’s success worldwide may ultimately originate from its easily understandable sashay and its queer treatment of gender. These qualities, after all, are indeed democratic in their philosophy to promote gender and sexual diversity and embrace a non-normative subjectivity.

However, its mass-appealing language risks flattening out or, worse, erasing class-struggle nuances that originally brought it into formation. As mentioned above, Houses are even created now solely as production companies. What is competent about these House formations can only be detected in networking and evaluated through capital transactions with(in) the dominant culture. Critical power struggle is still concentrated in the interstices of society—as is the case with Bailey’s interviewees’
position in a rather homophobic and racist Detroit—where voguing employs what Johnson would define as “performance as a survival strategy” (140). An array of local communities that have embraced voguing and the ball culture, they have done so, to a large extent, by accommodating it in the form of spectacle or trend, not as a form of potential “quare” antithesis. Specific Houses, such as the aforementioned Haus of Gaga or the House of Drama, are simply hip extensions of the culture and are usually bereft of the political edge found within the racial and ethnic groups that gave birth to it driven by the need to resist their socio-economically imposed liminality.

In this light, vogue’s shared queer politics fails to radically challenge normative structures due to the fact that its critical potential has been reduced to a spectacle. It can be argued that spectacle may be political insofar as its aesthetics stand critical towards the structures that perpetuate dominant ideologies, in particular those functioning within a white supremacist patriarchal and commodity culture, as bell hooks would argue. For instance, the touring megashows of Kylie or Katy Perry cannot effectively promote vogue’s queer polemics since they cannot possibly exist outside the sphere of pop market. In there, vogue exists as a camp homage to its abstract iconic idea which is extracted from the LGBT past and is then projected to all kinds of audiences, including gay audiences themselves, as a form of marketable product. These audiences will indeed recognize voguing as a queer tradition, but certainly as one that is inextricably bound to being an exoticized spectacle, a stance insightfully summarized in Contreras’ words: “To invest in the liberatory power of popular culture is to be continually disappointed by its constant co-option by corporate power, to be dismayed by its reactionary narratives and obsessions, and to be frustrated by its often placidly passive (at best) response to political and historical crisis” (23). Education-wise, the teaching of vogue in workshops or even in the institutionalized environments of privatized performing arts schools does not eschew the ideological imposition of capital transaction—ironically, not very much unlike to the configuration of the showbiz industry—but is, at least, executed within a pedagogic context where the racial, ethnic, and gendered aspects of it are historically underlined and critically approached. Vogue’s spectatorial language, the queer discourse, is widely appealing precisely because it has its basis on the spectacle of gender, and, specifically, the performance of femininity, which has a rather iconic status within the entertainment industry—consider the cabaret or burlesque tradition, or, presently, the pop music scene and the runway industry. The performance of femininity, particularly a glamorous presentation of it, exists widely in the gay culture not only through the practice of drag, but also through its stereotypical framing of and conflation with the campy manifestation of effeminate homosexuality. Vogue’s signifying of queerness, especially in Vogue Femme style showcase, requires from its performers to inhabit an effeminate position which is both counter-normatively political against the essential feminine/masculine binary and inevitably derivative of its system.

This is better understood if we contextualize vogue’s camp parallel to the contemporary physiognomy of the gay male culture. Although it appears erroneous to speak of one culture, there are consistent assets whose pervasiveness currently impinges on gay communities globally. The diva-worship pattern, for instance, as David Halperin explains in his work How to Be Gay, exists largely within the gay culture. The critic argues that the diva-worshiping and other gay cultural practices “have a consistency and a regularity that gay people as a group do not have. Gay people are different from one
another, whereas gay culture displays a number of persistent, repeated features” (134). Likewise, the notion of masculinity and the typical Western model of the macho male seem to pervade and shape gay and bi men’s perceptions of culturally gendered ideals of beauty. It is not accidental that the image of the naked muscular—usually, white—male body is ubiquitous in gay bars, saunas, gay porn, gay media, and, significantly, online dating platforms, where direct interaction between men is influenced from the attraction to this displayed body. Conversely, camp as denotation of effeminacy exists in sharp antithesis with the aforementioned muscle culture. Its exposition is fantasized, acknowledged, and even celebrated; consider, for example, the centrality the icon of the drag queen has within the gay male culture in juxtaposition with the drag king and their camp performances of masculinity. The glamorous presentation of femininity is indeed overpraised in comparison to a histrionic masculinity, but in terms of erotic desire camp and the campy subject fail to arouse a large portion of today’s gay men, not to mention of their being treated with shame. This is the reason why camp is adored within the diva/showmanship tradition—especially in popular culture—wherein performances of femininity are endorsed and idolized. In this sense, camp and, by extension, vogue have been securely positioned within the sphere of spectacle in order to appeal to a gay male gaze without forcefully disrupting the ever-confining masculine/feminine essentialism.

If we are to investigate the re-contextualization of vogue in contemporary pop performances, we soon realize that its presentation is closely connected to a gay-favored diva and, thus, the dissemination of its legacy is inevitably filtered through her presence. The likes of Madonna, Minogue or Gaga may have aided towards establishing vogue as a cultural tradition, but their aegis is inexorably commodity-oriented and mass-mediated. Speaking about Madonna’s cultural transactions with the African American culture and her seemingly subversive gender politics in the early 1990s, hooks has argued that “Madonna is not breaking with any white supremacist, patriarchal status quo; she is endorsing and perpetuating it” (163, italics in text). The critic has also added that Madonna’s ‘white girl’ profile “is that position of outsider that enables her to colonize and appropriate black experience for her own opportunistic ends even as she attempts to mask her acts of racist aggression as affirmation” (159). The same thing could be argued about Minogue and Gaga, yet commodification is a two-way process that equally concerns producers and receivers of culture. These performers may indeed appropriate or borrow from the gay culture as outsiders, but this process is not something that the consumers of or individuals from the gay culture do not approve. Had it been otherwise, we would not have been talking of celebratory acquiescence, but of unsettling disdain. On the contrary, as the Sydney Mardi Gras tribute indicates, audiences sanction this cultural exchange between the divas and the vogue tradition, simply because the divas are also an inextricable and respected part of the culture. In fact, divas in the gay (male) culture exist on a pedestal, thereby proving that as much as they plunder elements from the gay scenes, themselves are used and consumed, in turn, as spectacles. It thus remains ambiguous whether vogue’s re-contextualization in pop performances ultimately owns the vital force to oppose hegemonic norms.

In order to emphasize its polemics, attention has to shift onto the communal structures that manage to politicize the spectacle through an appreciation of vogue as queer history: that is, to extend the power of the spectacle to a broader social context. Following the terrorist attack in Orlando’s gay club Pulse in June 2016, LGBT communities
globally expressed empathy and paid their respects to the victims in various ways. London’s LGBT community, for that matter, held a vigil in Old Compton Street, Soho, where the forms of tribute included a vogue battle showcase (Frej). The battle was executed by performers inside circles formed by the mourners in the street. In his essay “Improvisation in African American Vernacular Dancing,” Jonathan David Jackson underlines the ritualistic nature of improvisational African American forms of street-style dancing, including vogue battles, and argues that “ritualization refers to the level of movement organization that occurs among performers in the throes of making community—whether in contestation or celebration—at a ritual event” (46). The writer adds that “as different black communities in different geographic locations dance and communicate with each other, the meaning of the improvisational action changes. Yet, the principles, processes and traditions... endure” (42). Extrapolating Jackson’s argument to London’s LGBT community consolidates the significance behind the vigil’s vogue battle and its critical contribution in and manifestation of communal bonding in times of crisis. It is in these moments of performed camp tradition that the spectacle manages to be politically potent by emphasizing inter-communitarian affect, an embodiment of philia.

As Bailey notes, performance has indeed this power to, first of all, aid towards an “individual and communal self-fashioning;” to be used “as the construction of a minoritarian community;” and, finally, to stand “as a critical and creative response” to social predicaments afflicting these communities—the writer underscores the incessant work being done by some Houses in tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic (17). The vigil showcase successfully highlights the critical and emotional power behind vogue’s tradition that helps establish sentimental bridges between LGBT cultures via queer history. As far as maintaining the ethnic and racial aspects of voguing is concerned, performances, such as those of Maldonado and Prodigy, stand out because they can exhibit nuanced ethnic/racial somaesthetics, hence creating visible sites for liminal bodies to emerge. Maldonado’s and Prodigy’s performed legacy and body politics speak on behalf of marginal(ized) identities of the urban American milieu: Puerto Rican and African American heritage, transgendered and homosexual identity, hyperfeminine and effeminate camp ironies, respectively. Finally, there are global communities in formation that experience communal belonging through the power of the spectacle. These groups can be detected as queer micro-organisms within the corpus of nomadic camp extravaganzas touring the globe; the fanbases in a Madonna and Gaga show, or the followers in a Minogue and Beyoncé tour employ camp aesthetics—mainly through the practices of drag and impersonation—as a means of identification with the queer traditions exhibited on stage by their divas. However, audiences’ camp performance is still an area that deserves more theoretical and, undeniably, ethnographic interest, especially if we come to consider that these identifications result from a commercialized, spectatorial stance and derive from a variety of locales.

In conclusion, there are still questions to be addressed with regard to vogue’s analysis as a cultural phenomenon. Early enough, hooks underscored the appropriation of cultures from outsiders as problematic. Yet, within the current context of the global sharing of culture, does one have to be an insider in order to speak about or identify with a culture and its lifestyle? If cultures are to be policed as rigidly as national borders are today, then cultural communications are disrupted. Vogue itself has evolved by offering its gender-fluid language to an array of global communities that adopted and adapted it
to their own cultural needs. Moreover, it would indeed have been a backlash if queer traditions like this one were restricted, curbed or closed for the sake of preserving their authenticity, especially in a time when many minoritarian subjectivities have taken major steps towards social visibility. But, to borrow Rosemary Hennesy’s words from her work on “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture,” “visibility in commodity culture is a limited victory” (32). In order to underline what is critical on the queer tradition of vogue, we have to turn our attention to the communal praxis of kinship and homage that are manifest through power and affect, as in the Soho vigil. What is more important, though, is to let voices be audible, whether these come from outsiders or insiders, which will be the aegis in preserving and expanding intergenerational queer/"quare" memories. With regard to that, Prodigy supports:

I don’t think [vogue’s] losing any power. I think, if anything, we’re becoming a more powerful force…. That’s why I’m telling younger generations to educate themselves, and to study, to go to school…. And, because, again, ballroom is going now, it can easily slip out our hand, when we’re not educated enough…. When we want to talk about appropriation… now is the time. And I don’t think that anything can be appropriated if we make sure that we are part of any projects that’s being done. (Prodigy)

The development of vogue has certainly consolidated bonds among LGBT communities. It is vital, though, that history/-ies and traditions, being public or private, exist and are performed in the spirit of affect. Certainly, as Prodigy explains, vogue is here to stay insofar as its embodied legacy is historicized and its memory is felt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. According to Chauncey, drag balls were common in cities such as New York, New Orleans, Boston, and Berlin. New York’s Harlem scene, though, forms the connection between the then-drag balls and what we currently acknowledge as the ballroom/vogue scene (248-249).

2. Some noteworthy exceptions, which again hardly tilt the balance in favor of nonwhite camp discourses, are: Moe Meyer’s The Politics and Poetics of Camp which makes a reference to the guerilla politics of Queer Nation’s African American drag politcian Joan Jett Blakk; Pamela Robertson’s essay on ‘Mae West’s Maids: Race, ‘Authenticity’, and the Discourse of Camp’ as it appears in Fabio Cleto’s collection on Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader; Contreras’ reference to the camp melodrama of Mexican telenovelas in his Unrequited Love (2005); and, Shugart and Waggoner’s account on Macy Gray’s racial camp as it appears in Making Camp.

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ABSTRACTS

Born from the subcultural nightlife of the 1960s New York, vogue has been in symbiosis with the gay Latino and African American ballroom scene. Due to its popularization in the 1990s, mainly through Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and Madonna’s “Vogue” (1990), the practice of voguing and the scene have moved from the invisible margins to a mainstream site of visibility and have been established as a celebrated tradition in LGBT communities worldwide. By employing a poetics of camp, voguing constantly challenges traditional understandings of gender. In this context, this article examines the re-contextualization of voguing in parallel with vogue’s contemporary gay camp politics.

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**Keywords**: camp, LGBT, performance, popular culture, queer, vogue

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