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Maikel de Almeida Bonato

Phenomenal Woman: Construction of gender, identity, and spaces of resistance in
the documentary *KIKI* (2016) by Sara Jordenö

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*Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them,
They say they still can't see.
I say,
It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me
(ANGELOU, 1995, p.2)*

ABSTRACT

The ballroom scene is a cultural movement in which queer people have been used to express themselves with their *uniqueness* (BAILEY, 2009). In the balls or kiki balls, the contestants battle against each other in categories to win cash prizes and trophies. Thus, the ballroom scene is a part of the historical resistance movement within the LGBTQIA+ community because it provided a space with different kinds of needed support for its members to survive. The documentary *KIKI* (2016), directed by the filmmaker Sara Jordanö, exemplifies how this ramification of the ballroom scene, the kiki scene, has also been a political space for queer people to fight for rights as well as to find support to survive in the capitalist world. In this thesis, I analyzed the documentary, from the perspective of gender studies and the concept of performance (BUTLER, 1993), cultural and race studies (hooks,1992), and the concept of space (MASSEY, 2005). Thus, I investigated how the documentary depicts the notions of gender, identity, and the constructions of spaces of resistance within the kiki scene by comparing *KIKI* (2016) with the bible of the ballroom: *Paris is Burning* (1990), directed by Jennie Livingston. In my introduction, I provide an overview of the ballroom scene and the kiki scene. In the second chapter, I emphasized the narrative of Gia, one of the main characters of the film, to argue how performance can be seen as a political act, and in the third chapter I analyze and compare *KIKI* (2016) and *Paris is Burning* (1990) focusing on the representations of BIPOC people and their occupation of spaces as a resistance act. The findings of this thesis indicate that the kiki scene, as well as the ballroom scene, remains a relevant and symbolic political space for queer people to fight for their rights and to build strong connections within the scene. The analysis also indicates that *KIKI* (2016) portrays a resignification in relation to the representation of BIPOC people in documentary film productions. One of the ways this destigmatization can be seen is through the diversity of BIPOC people occupying spaces of power, decision-making, and discussions. Hence, this thesis provided evidence that the kiki scene is a platform to resist the hegemonic norms of society such as gender and to resist the oppressive system that capitalism perpetuates within the categories of class, gender, and race.

Keywords: ballroom scene; kiki scene; gender and cultural studies; racial studies; film critics;

RESUMO

A cena ballroom é um movimento cultural em que pessoas LGBTQIA+ podem se expressar com sua *uniqueness* (BAILEY, 2009). Nos *balls* ou *kiki balls*, os competidores batalham entre si, em diferentes categorias, para ganhar prêmios em dinheiro e troféus. Assim, a cena *ballroom* faz parte do movimento histórico de resistência dentro da comunidade LGBTQIA+ por fornecer um espaço com diferentes tipos de apoio necessários para seus membros sobreviverem. O documentário *KIKI* (2016), dirigido pela cineasta Sara Jordanö, exemplifica como essa ramificação da cena *ballroom*, a cena *kiki*, também pode ser compreendida como um espaço político para pessoas queer lutarem por direitos e encontrarem apoio para sobreviver no mundo capitalista. Nesta dissertação, analiso o documentário, sob a perspectiva dos estudos de gênero e do conceito de performance, (BUTLER, 1993), dos estudos culturais e raciais (hooks, 1992) e da perspectiva do espaço (MASSEY, 2005). Assim, investiguei como o documentário retrata as noções de gênero, identidade e construções de espaços de resistência dentro da cena *kiki*, comparando *KIKI* (2016) com a "bíblia" da cena *ballroom*: *Paris is Burning* (1990), dirigido por Jennie Livingston. Na minha introdução, apresento uma visão geral da cena *ballroom* e da cena *kiki*. No primeiro capítulo, destaquei a narrativa de Gia, uma das personagens principais do filme, para argumentar como a performance (BUTLER, 1992), dentro da cena *kiki*, pode ser entendida como um ato político e uma estratégia de resistência e no terceiro capítulo analiso e comparo *KIKI* (2016) e *Paris is Burning* (1990) enfocando as representações de negros e latinos e sua ocupação de espaços como ato de resistência. Os resultados desta dissertação indicaram que a cena *kiki*, assim como a cena *ballroom*, são espaços relevantes e simbólicos, e políticos para pessoas queer lutarem por seus direitos e construir conexões fortes dentro da cena. A análise também indicou que *KIKI* (2016) retrata uma ressignificação em relação à representação de pessoas negras e latinas em produções cinematográficas. Uma das formas que foram utilizadas para essa desestigmatização é vista pela diversidade de pessoas negras e latinas ocupando espaços de poder, tomada de decisões e discussões. Assim sendo, essa dissertação encontrou evidências de que a cena *kiki* é uma plataforma de resistência às normas hegemônicas da sociedade, como gênero, e para resistir ao sistema opressivo que o capitalismo perpetua nas categorias de classe, gênero e raça.

Palavras-chave: cena *kiki*; cena *ballroom*; estudos culturais e de gênero; estudos raciais; crítica Fílmica

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1 INTRODUCTION

Watching RuPaul's Drag Race (2008) helped me develop my queer identity as a gay and non-binary individual, while also providing an overview of drag culture and its historical significance for the queer community as a political and subversive, and revolutionary cultural act. It was after watching that show that I first came across the documentary film *Paris is Burning* (1990), directed by Jenny Levingston. After watching the documentary, I felt a deep connection to the topic. I could see myself in the film, seeing all the femme queen gays doing vogue¹ with extravagant looks. Since then, I have argued that the ballroom community is a space for LGBTQIA+ people who want to live, survive, resist, and express their lives in the way they desire. In this sense, in my thesis, I investigate this cultural movement that has changed and still changes many lives. I invite you to walk into a world of subversion, resistance, and acceptance, the cultural world of ballroom culture.

In my introductory chapter, I provide a journey through the world of ballroom and the kiki² scene, presenting the context of the main topic of this thesis as well as my justification for this academic research.

1.1 Let's have a kiki ball

My motivation for choosing the documentary *KIKI* (2016) for the present research is connected directly to the historical and cultural relevance that the kiki and the ballroom scenes within the North American queer community represent. The ballroom culture enables the emancipation of individuals so they can exercise their citizenship in a free and critical way, allowing them to live in a space that can be more inclusive and humanized. As the State fails to protect BIPOC queer people due to the lack of public policies that guarantee access to basic human rights such as healthcare, education, food, and employment opportunities, these groups are being forced to find ways to survive. Due to the need to develop a space that supported the

¹The word "vogue" comes from the French and is the name of one of the most popular fashion magazines. In the context of ballroom, vogue became an inspiration on the balls while people were walking in the categories (PARIS IS BURNING, 1990). By emulating the poses of the models' covers, the contestants created a new form of expression, using hand and body movements. Leyomi Maldonado (2019), known as the wonder woman of vogue, and judge in the series *Legendary* (2020) claims that vogue is composed of five elements: hands performance, catwalk, duckwalk, spins, and dips, and floor performance.

²Henceforth, for a better understanding, when I write "kiki" without capital letters I refer to the kiki as "the cultural scene" and *KIKI* with capital letters refers to the film documentary.

Black and Queer community, the ballroom and kiki scenes arose, providing spaces that fostered social, financial, and health support for people (BAILEY, 2009).

This research addresses the discussion of gender, performativity, and resistance in the chosen documentary film, *'KIKI'* (2016), directed by Sara Jordenö³. As we watch the film, we are introduced to a cultural scene that showcases how queer people resist the cultural hegemony dominant in society through gender performance, cultural expression, and occupation of spaces. Judith Butler (2006, p.8) argues that “gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits gender as a multiple interpretation of sex”. Butler (2006) discusses the relationship between sex and gender and challenges the notion that gender follows directly from sex in a predetermined way. The author points out that if we understand gender as the cultural meanings attributed to the sexed body, we cannot assume that a specific gender will correspond exclusively to a particular sex. Butler (2006) challenges the idea that gender should be limited to only two categories. There is no inherent reason to assume that genders must remain as binary as the sex categories they are commonly associated with. By recognizing a binary gender system, one implicitly maintains the belief that gender mimics or reflects sex, and is therefore restricted by it (BUTLER, 2006). In *KIKI* (2016), we can see how Butler’s affirmation is illustrated due to the possibilities of experiencing gender that the ballroom scene provides to their participants. Thus, The kiki scene provides a space for these people to experience their gender in forms that goes beyond the binarism of men and women, allowing the contestants to explore these notions as well as to play with them in the way they want to. In addition to that, Butler (2006) emphasizes that there is a direct correlation between gender norms and the presentation of ourselves in public spaces.

how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, and how that distinction is instrumentalized in the service of sexual politics; who will be criminalized on the basis of public appearance; who will fail to be protected by the law or, more specifically, the police, on the street, or on the job, or in the home. Who will be stigmatized; who will be the object of fascination and consumer pleasure? Who will have medical benefits before the law? Whose

³Sara Jordenö is an Assistant Professor of Film & Video at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) who also works as a filmmaker, visual artist, and researcher.

intimate and kinship relations will, in fact, be recognized before the law? We know these questions from transgender activism, from feminism, from queer kinship politics, and also from the gay marriage movement and the issues raised by sex workers for public safety and economic enfranchisement (BUTLER, 2009, p.2)

Butler's (2009) perspective suggests that gender is not merely an "instance of power", but is also the mechanism that power operates within society. Furthermore, in the case of the ballroom scene, *KIKI* (2016) depicts a real-life example of how gender norms and identities can be challenged and negotiated within a specific culture. Moreover, it shows how this mechanism of power can be subverted to be used as a resistance tool to fight the oppression caused by this structure of power. In this sense, *KIKI* (2016) provides evidence that supports Butler's reflections regarding the access of LGBTQIA+ to public and private spaces, the possibility of playing with gender norms, the criminalization and lack of protection experienced by marginalized individuals, stigmatization, desire, and the recognition of intimate and kinship relations.

Furthermore, *KIKI* (2016) builds a bridge with Jenny Livingston's landmark documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990). The latter film presents the ballroom culture from the late 1980s, and it provides the viewer with relevant concepts that relate to this culture, such as "the categories," "the shade," "the reading," and "the ball houses." As highlighted by Bruzzi (2006, p. 189), "Livingston's technique is to juxtapose images of the balls with commentary and interviews with drag queen 'walkers' (those who participate in the balls)". In these interviews, we are invited to meet some of the most successful ballroom walkers. They were not only able to pass into the ball categories as well as to make their name in the ballroom community as relevant and legendary houses⁴, such as the well known house of LaBeija⁵.

Paris is Burning (1990) is considered one of the most important works regarding the ballroom scene because it showcases most of the general concepts of the ballroom scene as well as presents several people who have managed to consolidated and become legendary⁶. As Butler (p. 137, 1993) argues, "the film attests to the painful pleasures of eroticizing and miming the very norms that wield their power by foreclosing the very reverse occupations that the children

⁴House is the name given by the groups that compete in the ball categories. The concept is further explored in the first chapter of this thesis.

⁵ The house of Labeija is the first known ball house, founded by Crystal Labeija.

⁶ To become legendary is to become a legend in the scene. It is to be known for something that you did or have your name remembered by the community after winning a huge number of walks.

nevertheless perform”. Butler's quotation highlights the complex dynamics within the ballroom scene, emphasizing the bittersweet nature of eroticizing and mimicking societal norms that simultaneously exclude and constrain its participants. Thus, Butler (1993) refers to the profound impact of the ballroom scene, where individuals navigate and subvert these norms through their performances.

Becoming “legendary” is a significant aspiration for participants in the balls. The ball scene thrives on the recognition and respect earned by individuals who excel in various categories, such as voguing, runway, and performance. Those who consistently showcase exceptional skills, style, and artistry can achieve legendary status within the ballroom community. The legendary people often become role models, mentors, and sources of inspiration for future generations. Their contributions help shape and define the ballroom scene, creating a rich cultural legacy that is passed down and built upon over time. Their achievements contribute to the consolidation of the scene as a vibrant and influential subculture, showcasing the talent, creativity, and resilience of BIPOC individuals who have historically been marginalized and excluded from mainstream spaces. In the following subsection, “She done already done had herses”, I provide the basic information about the documentary *KIKI* (2016).

1.2 She done already done had herses⁷

While I was doing my research to find the object of this thesis, I watched many films and documentaries to find something that could relate to my history. I watched films such as *Disclosure* (2020), *Do I Sound Gay?* (2014), and *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), and after rewatching *Paris is Burning* (1990), my perspective on the film changed. Perhaps due to the critical thinking that I could develop during my graduation, such as being aware of my subject position in society

⁷ Famous exclamatory jargon said by the queen of drag, RuPaul. As she explained in an interview, she heard the sentence for the first time after she was coming to a club, and stopped in a burger restaurant and someone comes to pick up a bag, but the bag actually did not belong to that person, and she says that this girl behind the counter says “no no no, she done already done had herses” and she took that to her vocabulary as well as her TV show. In addition to that, Rupaul always uses the jargon as an exclamation point, when she announces the challenges to the RuGirls (competitors in the TV show) at the beginning of the episodes, which is one of the most characteristic moments in the show, thus, when the message appears, all the queens scream with excitement because Ru is appearing. I chose the expression to reflect this exciting and exclamatory introductory moment, to become related to me. In addition, by bringing such expressions in the titles, I intend to invite the reader to meet my world and my references, in order to make whoever reads this text familiar with the language henceforth used by my community.

as a gay and non-binary gender person, I felt deeply related to the topic of ballroom and started to look for similar movies and then I found *KIKI*. When I first watched the documentary *KIKI* (2016)⁸, I felt a sense of belonging, of recognition of my identity in the content that I was watching. I recognized myself in the subject's narratives portrayed in the film as if they were similar to my story. Then after discussing it with my supervisor, we decided that I was going to analyze it as well as compare it with *Paris is Burning* (1991) because the film is considered one of the most relevant works about the ballroom scene in the media.

Derived from the drag balls in Harlem, that took place in the 1930s and 1940s until today, the ballroom scene is a space for queer youths from different genders and identities to embrace their uniqueness as well as to express themselves in an artistic live performance in the balls. Uniqueness, or “to be unique” is to be one of a kind. The website *Dictionary* (2023) defines uniqueness as “the quality of being unlike anything else of its kind or of being solitary in type or characteristics and the quality of being unequaled, incomparable, or unusual”. Recently, in her new album, inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, *Renaissance* (2022), Beyoncé wrote a song called “*Alien Superstars*”, where she evokes the meaning of the word on it. In the lyric, Beyoncé (2022) says “I'm one of one, I'm number one, I'm the only one” referring to this sense of being incomparable. Moreover, the word is the union between the word “unique” and the suffix “ness” where the latter, in grammar, “is usually used to describe a state or condition or quality” (The Britannica Dictionary, 2023). In the context of balls, *uniqueness*, thus, plays a significant role when people are judged in runway competitions because it is one of the main criteria evaluated by the panel in fashion categories. The balls are the space where these competitions happen, based on runway walks, where “houses” (a group of contestants that can compete in the balls) walk in categories related to dance, body performance, fashion, and vogue. Throughout the competition, the people are judged by their correspondence to the category, through their fashion or dance movements, as well as subjective criteria such as their *uniqueness* in the category.

In the documentary “*KIKI*” (2016), Gia Marie Love declares “in a heteronormative society, everyone's the same, that's what they promote. The kiki scene is a space for youth development. Everyone is *unique* and a kiki scene is a

⁸ *KIKI* (2016) is directed by Sara Jordanö and produced by Story and Hardworking Movies, in co-production with Sveriges Television & Film Väst. It was released in 2016, at Sundance Festival.

place for young people to explore that *uniqueness*". Concerning the kiki ball, Soto (2022, p.9) mentions that

Is the initial phase of the ballroom contestants. A less competitive subsidiary of the ballroom scene is catered to youth and health outreach. Many kiki balls are sponsored by or held at organizations dedicated to drug prevention, housing assistance, health outreach, and other social services. The scene is considered the training grounds of the ballroom and most of its members are teenagers and young adults (SOTO, 2022, p.9).

Therefore, the kiki scene was established as a space for these aspiring performers to develop their uniqueness, and thus, to provide them with better opportunities in life, such as a job, healthcare, access to education, food, protection, and most importantly, affection and recognition. Furthermore, Gia's definition of the kiki scene as well as Soto's (2022), accurately captures the essence of the kiki scene portrayed in the documentary *KIKI* (2016), highlighting its emergence as a response to the need for a safe and inclusive space where individuals living outside societal norms can freely express their *uniqueness* in the way they want to.

1.3 Trans protagonism in the scene: a tribute for the ancestors

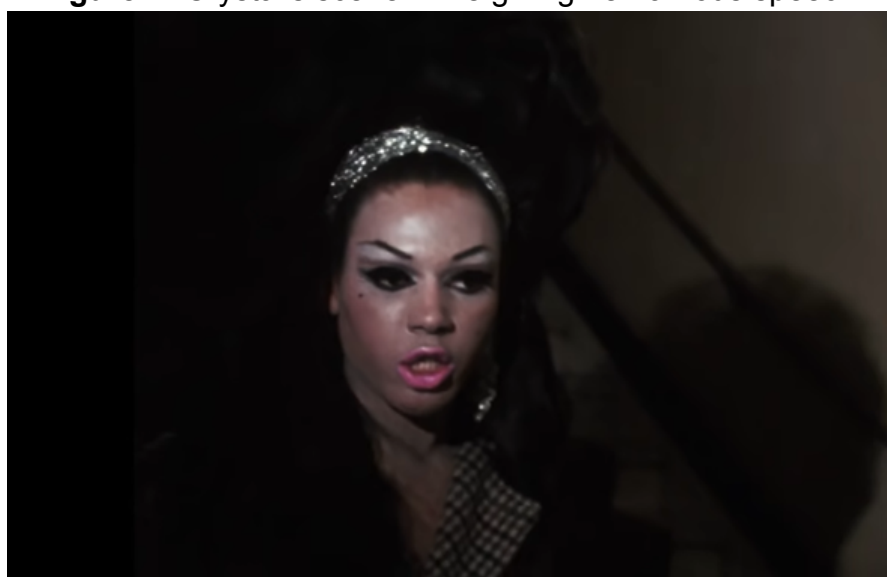
Retelling women's stories is a way of keeping their memory and importance alive and reiterating their social and historical significance to the community to which they belong. According to Calado (2006), cisgender women's stories were hidden for centuries, as they were historically prohibited from participating in political and academic spaces for a long time. In this sense, she argues that it is pertinent to tell stories about people who have been forgotten and silenced in order to give them a right to have a story and raise their silenced voices. In her utopian book *Les Cité des Dames* (1405), Christine de Pizan, a cisgender woman, retold the stories of strong female figures throughout history in fictional tales. In the same way, in this introduction, I intend to retell stories from trans people who were and still are relevant to the ballroom scene, and how impactful they were to the scene.

Trans protagonism is not something recent in the political history of the LGBTQIA+ community. In fact, in the early 50's it can be seen through the lenses of the documentary "*The Queen*" (1968)⁹, directed by Frank Simon. The film portrayed

⁹ The Queen is a 1968 documentary film directed by Frank Simon that explores the world of drag queens in New York City during the 1967 Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant. The film focuses on the pageant and its contestants, providing a behind-the-scenes look at their lives and the challenges they face as performers and members of the LGBTQIA+ community in a society that is often hostile towards them.

the narratives as well as footage from behind the scenes of the contestants of the Miss All-America Camp Beauty Contest, held in New York City in 1967. The documentary presents to us the legendary Crystal Labeija, the founder of the house of Labeija, who became notorious after criticizing the contest by pointing out the structural racism within the trans community that was happening in the contest. Her famous sentence, “I have the right to show my color, darling. I am beautiful and I KNOW I’M”, highlights her criticism of the racism within the pageant. The following image (Figure 1) shows her just before her now notorious line:

Figure 1: Crystal’s scene while giving her famous speech.



Source: *The Queen* (1968)

Crystal’s speech became a political act reverberating until today in the ballroom scene. As the founder of the House of Labeija¹⁰ and a legendary trans woman (also a drag queen) in the circuit of the pageant and drag scene of New York, she used her platform to advocate for the rights of trans individuals, particularly trans women of color, who faced marginalization and discrimination in all areas of society, calling attention to the racism within the trans culture as well. Furthermore, after the beauty contest, and the founding of the house of LaBeija, she and Pepper Labeija¹¹ promoted the first ballroom only for BIPOC people. In this sense, Crystal can be considered one of the founders of the ballroom scene as we know it today, with the houses and the competitions focusing on the BIPOC community.

¹⁰ In the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), Pepper Labeija says “I am Pepper Labeija, the legendary mother of the house of Labeija, not the founder, Crystal was the founder, I just rule it now.

¹¹ Pepper Labeija ruled the house of Labeija for two decades, and won “more prizes than all the rest” (LBEIJA, in *Paris is Burning*, 1990)

Crystal's organization of balls served as a refuge for young trans women, offering them the support, mentorship, and guidance they lacked in their familial and societal contexts. By participating in the ball categories, these individuals could break free from the constraints imposed upon them and embrace their true selves, finding empowerment and validation within the ballroom scene. In this sense, Crystal's political importance cannot be overstated. As a trans woman of color, she faced multiple forms of oppression, including racism and transphobia, and she worked hard to fight against these intersecting systems of oppression. Her activism helped open the ways for future generations of trans activists and advocates, and her legacy continues to inspire trans individuals to this day.

The relationship between the trans community and the ballroom scene extends beyond the categories and walks of the balls, encompassing the history and structure of the contemporary ballroom scene. The ballroom scene, under the direction of Crystal, has emerged as a forefront movement of resistance and spatial appropriation. As Crystal points out (1967), during the 1960s, there was a significant appropriation of drag ball spaces by white gay individuals. Consequently, even the winner of the competition was a white person. In this context, Crystal started organizing balls specifically for the BIPOC communities to reclaim these spaces for her own BIPOC queer people. Through the appropriation of public and private spaces to promote events for the community such as the balls, Crystal made it possible for individuals in her community to participate in a fair competition, giving place for representation for those who had historically built the competitive ballroom scene, the BIPOC community.

The relevance of trans women in the ballroom scene can be seen in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1991). In the film, we meet Venus Xtravaganza, daughter of Angie Xtravaganza, the former founder of the house of the Xtravaganza, Octavia St. Laurent, and Dorian Corey. Venus is a transgender woman and sex worker, and her story reflects the intersecting oppressions faced by many members of the ballroom community. Despite several challenges, Venus is known for her bright personality and fierceness¹². One of Venus' signature categories is "realness," which involves presenting as convincingly as possible as a member of a particular social

¹² Refers to the quality of showing strong feelings and involving a lot of activity or determination. Examples: the fierceness of the competition (OXFORD Dictionary, 2023)

class or gender. She was famously known for her trans passability¹³ and often competed in categories specifically for trans women. Venus was also a talented dancer and frequently performed in the ballroom scene. Unfortunately, she was found dead and strangled in a motel room. In the documentary, her mother Angie tells us what happened to her, remembering Venus' aspirations and dreams. In the following image (figure 2), we can see Venus in a frame extracted from the documentary.

Figure 2: Venus sitting on the Pier smoking a cigarette.



Source: Paris is Burning (1991)

As the film shows, Venus has her life cut short by a tragic crime, and because of what happened to her, she becomes a symbol of resistance. Venus became notable for a scene in *Paris is Burning* (2016), in which she exemplifies how “reading” works, by reading a person next to her at the Pier:

“So you want to talk about reading? Let’s talk about reading darlin... What is wrong with you Pedro? Are you going through some psychological change in your life? ‘oh you went back to be a man... Touch this skin, darling! Touch this skin, honey! Touch all of this skin! Okay? You just can’t take it! You’re just an overgrown orangutan!” (Paris is Burning, 1990).

Her reading is an iconic historical moment of the ball scene and in the queer scene. Hence, her cruel death highlights the urgent necessity of public policies to protect trans people. As Butler argues out: “her death thus testifies to a tragic misreading of the social map of power, a misreading orchestrated by that very map according to which the sites for a phantasmatic self-overcoming are constantly resolved into disappointment” (1993, p.131). Venus lived on the margins of society

¹³ Passability refers to an individual's ability to be perceived or 'pass' as belonging to a specific gender, often aligning with the social norms and expectations of that gender (Stone, 2006). Venus always had success on walking into categories that involved the ability of passing, as depicted in *Paris is Burning* (1990)

and was forced to live under threatening situations to survive. Due to the lack of public policies that could protect her, she became another victim of the genocide against LGBTQIA+ people. Venus should be remembered as someone who faced the system with all her fierceness. Her confrontation of gender roles, her reading power, and her unique performance in the balls make her a historical symbol in the ball scene that must always be highlighted. Venus Xtravaganza was and still is a legend, a recognized phenomenal woman, she represents the embodiment of what the system wants to eradicate.

Another *unique* trans performer who became legendary in the documentary "*Paris is Burning*" as well as after it was Dorian Corey. She was one of the principal subjects of the film and was featured in most of the shots. Dorian was a drag queen performer who worked as a designer and costume dressmaker (CONLON, 1995). The following figure (figure 3) was extracted from the documentary *Paris is Burning*, showing Dorian in what seems to be her house.

Figure 3: Dorian Corey talking about the ball elements



Source: Paris is Burning (1990)

In Figure 3, Dorian gorgeously appears wearing makeup in a sequin dress with two trophies behind her. Dorian Corey is a legend: she helped shape the ballroom scene, as well as the kiki scene, by providing many essential definitions of the main elements of the ballroom scene such as vogue, as well as by introducing the category of "*Old Way Voguing*" (CONLON, 1995, p.8). This style of voguing focused on precise, rigid movements inspired by the poses of models in high fashion magazines, which quickly became a staple of ballroom competitions at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s. Moreover, as a fashion designer, her dresses were always appreciated in the balls by the judges, as Conlon (1995, p. 9) points out:

“Dorian Corey studied at the Parsons School of Design, and had a successful business as a dressmaker and customer, selling to both the ball world and the local community. In this way, her contribution regarding the concepts of the ball scene in Jennie Livingston’s film, as well as her successful design career, points to her status as a notorious legend¹⁴.

The Netflix series *Pose* (2018) has recently put trans women in the spotlight, as protagonists on the screen. The TV series portrays the ballroom scene of the 80s, fictionalizing the lives of the subjects such as the ones shown in the documentaries mentioned above. Throughout the story, we are introduced to several mothers of houses, who are trans women in the series, played by trans women in real life. Here is relevant to point out the issue of transface. It is such an important activism to end transface and *Pose* is an example, as well as Janet Mock’s participation as a producer and then became a director. “Transface” refers to the practice of cisgender actors and actresses, portraying transgender characters in film or television, such as in the case of the “The danish girl” (2015). These representations often perpetuate stereotypes and inaccuracies about transgender experiences. In this current scenario, *Pose* (2016) stands out as a significant example of combating transface by bringing an entire cast of LGBTQIA+ people and many trans women as protagonists, playing trans women. Furthermore, the involvement of Janet Mock, a prominent transgender writer, producer, and director, is evidence of the importance of transgender voices in the industry. Her contributions to the series have helped ensure that the series remains a powerful and accurate portrayal of the transgender community. The first one we meet is Elektra Abundance. She is a very polished and wealthy woman wearing only expensive brand clothes and pieces of jewelry that seem to be worth more than a house. Elektra is the mother of the House of

¹⁴ An interesting fact about Dorian’s life is about the mummified man found in her closet after her passing. According to Conlon (1995), three months after her death, in October of 1993, two men visited Dorian’s apartment hoping to find a Halloween costume and while they were searching, they were led by a friend of the deceased to a large closet space the size of a small bedroom. Unable to find what they were looking for among the dresses and costumes, they became intrigued by a large, musty garment bag. After receiving permission to open it, they discovered the mummified body of a man wrapped in plastic with a bullet hole in his head, and folded into the fetal position (CONLON, 1995). The story became so famous that it was used as an inspirational background for the character of Elektra Abundance (interpreted by Dominique Jackson) in the Netflix series “*Pose*” (2018), directed by Ryan Murphy. In Elektra’s story, the man passed away while the two engaged in a BDSM session. Without knowing what to do, she placed the body inside of a trunk and placed him in her closet. Thus, the story about the dead man and its dramatization in the series *Pose* has made Dorian a transcendent queer symbol over time. The trans women mentioned here left a legacy in ballroom history throughout the times.

Abundance, and over the years she has become a legend in the ballroom scene within the series, making everyone respect and idolize her as a perfect mother. Another mother played by a trans woman is Blanca Evangelista, Elektra's daughter. Blanca leaves her mother's house to find her own house, the House of Evangelista, and then competes in the balls against her mother's house. However, beyond the fights and wars of the balls, they maintain a relationship like any other family, with fights and discussions, love and sadness, good times and bad times. By portraying such family relations surrounding the different houses, the show suggests new forms of interpreting the very concept of family. Furthermore, many of the characters of the drama are interpreted by queer and trans people, which helps them not only be recognized but showing their talent to the world.

This trans protagonism within the families of ballroom houses was not put there by chance, as can be observed in *Paris is Burning* (1990), *The Queen* (1968), and *KIKI* (2016) as well. According to the films, trans women have occupied and still occupy a central space within families and houses of ballrooms, especially regarding the roles of the father and the mother. They have not only founded some of the main houses of the scene but also left their legacies immortalized in the rituals of the ballroom, either by reading, by shade, by creating a new category, or even just by participating in the media products produced from the scene.

The purpose of this introduction was to immerse ourselves in the history of trans women who built and formed the ballroom scene as it exists today as well as their protagonist's participation within the scene. Their contributions continue to resonate today, as their legacy lives on within contemporary ballroom houses. In the following subsection, I provide a brief overview of other media productions that brought the topic of the ballroom scene or incorporated some of the elements within it.

1.4 The ballroom culture in the scene: media productions

The ballroom culture can be seen incorporated into different media productions. An example that has gained mass space in the media with different versions and seasons in several countries is the drag queen competition *RuPaul Drag Race* (2009)¹⁵. Presented by RuPaul Charles, it debuted on TV in 2009 and has

¹⁵ In 2018 Gia Marie Love gave an interview where she mentions that "drag race is not the ballroom scene".

already had 15 seasons just in the United States. The franchise also has seasons recorded in Thailand, Netherlands, France, Spain, Germany, Australia and New Zealand, Canada, Philippines, Mexico and Brazil. The competition mixes challenges with acting, singing, improvisation, comedy, fashion design, lipsync, and catwalk performances. It is inspired by *Paris is Burning* traditions, and each show brings a different category per week. The best contestants win prizes during the program, and the winner takes home a cash prize, an employment contract, and one year of free make-up from different brands, according to each country. Thus, the reality show brings many different narratives of queer people, from all parts of the world, who saw drag performances as an opportunity to change their lives economically, artistically, and critically, and express their different identities through drag art.

Most recently, the TV series *Legendary* (2020) featured ballroom competitions with many different houses from the ballroom scene. The TV show had three seasons, and it was released on the HBO+ platform from 2020 to 2022, when HBO canceled it. The TV show was hosted by Deshaun Wesley and judged by Jameela Jamil, Leiomy Maldonado, Megan Thee Stallion, Keke Palmer, and Law Roach. The houses competed with each other in different categories such as voguing, dancing, style and make-up, harmony of the group, and others. The winners of the competition won a prize of \$100,000 (one hundred thousand dollars) as well as a big trophy for the title of the legendary house. The first season was won by the House of the Balmain, the second by the House of Miyake-Mugler, and the third by the kiki House of Juicy Couture.

The incorporation of ballroom culture can also be seen in the world of music. Released in 2022 by Beyonce, the album *Renaissance* (2022) made many references to the ballroom community, such as the houses, the walks, and the "uniqueness" feeling of being a part of the ballroom as well as invited several music producers from the scene to mix the songs. For instance, the song *PURE/HONEY* does not directly reference the ballroom community, but it portrays a message of embracing people's *uniqueness*. The emphasis on self-confidence and the lyrics that encourage listeners to "take it all off or just a little if you like" and "dance all night" align with the spirit of self-expression and freedom celebrated in ballroom culture. Moreover, the song featured many samples from 90's house music, such as Moi Renee, Kevin Aviance, and DJ MikeQ, one of the music producers of the documentary *KIKI* and *Legendary*.

Thus, these media productions demonstrate a growing interest in and appreciation for the ballroom scene, elevating its visibility and allowing diverse narratives and identities within the community to be represented.

2 CATEGORY IS: BALLS AS A SPACE OF RESISTANCE

Keeping in mind all the aforementioned presentations regarding the kiki scene, transfeminine protagonism within the scene, and media productions about ballroom culture, the first chapter of this thesis provides an overview of the history of this culture and its main elements. Additionally, I explore the significance of ballroom culture in establishing spaces of resistance for the BIPOC queer community in the United States.

2.1 The ballroom culture: resisting through the scene

The idea of a ball as a gathering of people to celebrate is not only present in ballroom culture. The appropriation of the "ball" culture might be connected with its definition throughout history. In this sense, in order to understand what a ball is as well as some of its histories and how they were symbolically constructed, I selected three most common balls that are present in society: the princess ball, the prom ball, and the masquerade ball.

In fairy tales, the ball can be the setting for the plot development as well as to perpetuate social moral norms. The princess ball, present in many fairy tales, is usually to promote the choice of a wife for some prince of a kingdom. For instance, the Cinderella ball, represented several times in literature or film productions, is the first ball that Cinderella participates in her life. After some help from her fairy godmother with the dress and the carriage, she lives her dream night at the prince's ball. Due to her beauty and elegance, the prince ends up falling in love with her. In her story, the prince's ball is the space that allowed Cinderella to experience a night in an upscale society without judgment and prejudice because nobody knew who she was. The ball is no longer just a setting but adds a purpose for that character and the plot. The princess fairy tale and the idea of Cinderella's princess ball have been used by the media to instigate girls to dream about it. As Matrix (2009, p.15) emphasizes, "the fairy tale princess narrative is a mainstay of prom industry advertising, and it is a popular rhetoric tool for girls to describe their vision of the prom experience". Because of its distance from reality and proximity to royalty, the Cinderella ball has

become an object of desire for younger teenagers that dream of living the princess dream night. The princess's dream night turned into a space where her dreams come true, and they can feel part of royal society that probably would never accept her. Concerning this relation between reality-royalty, Matrix (2009, p. 15) mentions that

Cinderella's story operates brilliantly in mass media advertising, as Jack Zipes explains because it is a fantastic liberatory tale that depicts a utopian world far more interesting and satisfying than the conditions of our everyday existence. The Cinderella imperative is tweaked from land so that it has a touch of superstar, pop star, or pop-idol status. In a majority of the photographs used to sell gowns to teens, models sport visual cues of both royal people and celebrities (MATRIX, 2009, p. 15).

The Cinderella ball is, thus, one of the celebrations that will resonate as well with the meaning of the word ball in the ballroom scene. The "princess dream night" as an anachronism of these royal parties will symbolize the feeling of being part of royalty and will be mimicked as well in the ball scene.

The prom ball, in its turn, can mark the transition from teenage life to adult life, usually taking place when high school students graduate. The idea of prom has been represented by many movies, as the central theme or as part of the plot. As argued by Matrix (2003, p.10), "the prom is hyped to such an extent in teen girl mass media that it might be more accurate to describe this cultural phenomenon as the prom mystique". The ritual begins with the invitation, where each boy or girl must invite someone to the ball. When the person has not received an invitation from a peer to the prom night, chances are they will probably not be going. Furthermore, most of the representations of these balls in cinema productions emphasize white cisgender and straight relationships, without any diversity in their casts. Concerning this tendency, Matrix, (2003, p.12) points out that

Separated from the realities of the lived event itself, the mystique of the prom is incredibly resilient. This is because the ideologies embedded in what Michel Foucault might call the discursive formation of prom land reflect long-established Western cultural values (or rules of formation) about individuality, transformation, heterosexual romance, and the pursuit of happiness (MATRIX, 2003, p.12).

Therefore, the prom ball can be an exclusionary cultural event that can cause trauma as well as can affect people in other, diverse ways (exclusion and shame, for example). for those who are, willingly or unwillingly, not a part of this heteronormative ritual. However, even though prom balls resonate with many misogynistic values and heteronormative views condensed in the structure of our society, it is still a significant part of a number of contexts because it is seen as a rite of passage in life that

everyone should and has the right to celebrate. At a kiki ball, a category called “she goes to prom” will mimic this feeling, providing the emotion needed at the moment, giving those who walk in that category the opportunity to live their princess ball fantasy as they imagined. Thus, the way ballroom culture resignified the concept of prom balls exemplifies the power that the ballroom community carries in its hands.

Another known characteristic form of a ball is the masquerade ball. They have been present in society for centuries, and are often a space for secrets, desires, and mysteries. By making guests wear masks and costumes to participate, this type of event opens up all the different possibilities for understanding what a ball can involve. Because of the absence of identity, the masquerade ball provides those who attend a chance to experience a night as they wish, being whomever they want to be. When using the mask at a ball, the subject's identity is unknown, and by preventing his identity from being revealed, all the social expectations contemplated in the individual behind the mask are emptied, giving rise to a new being with a new subjectivity, which will feature with the others (LANZARIN, 2000). Costumes, on the other hand, derive from the complex relationship between the real and the fictional and can mirror that individual's deepest desires, bringing them a sense of social satisfaction, regardless of whether it is real or not (LANZARIN, 2000). In this sense, masquerade balls have a strong relationship in demarcating social class, since the only guests at these events, for many centuries, have been royalty members. In addition, if the guests do not dress properly, they will not be allowed to enter the ball.

That said, the masquerade ball, with its particularities, still shares similarities with other types of balls existing in our history. Even though they are different in their conceptions (their form of organization), the balls still share similar values, such as bringing people together for a celebration, enjoying themselves, dancing with others, and so on. Therefore, when trying to understand the polysemy of the word ball, it can be added that, by appropriating this nomenclature, the ballroom movement resignified the meaning of the word. For many centuries, these balls were only for the upper class and the nobility, and using this name can configure a strategy of resistance because people can experience the feeling the ball provides, whether they want it or not. Building upon the discussion of masquerade balls and the shared values they have with other historical forms of gatherings, it is evident that the term "ball" has undergone a significant transformation within ballroom culture. Historically,

balls were exclusive events primarily attended by the upper class and nobility, reinforcing societal divisions and exclusivity. However, within the context of ballroom culture, the term "ball" has been repurposed to serve as a symbol of resistance and inclusivity. This transformation is significant in the context of discussions about capitalism as a primary source of societal issues. Capitalism, with its focus on profit, consumption, and economic disparities, has often exacerbated societal divisions. The exclusive nature of traditional balls, which were part of the capitalist elite's leisure activities, reflects these disparities. Ballroom culture, as a counter and subcultural movement, challenges this exclusivity by reclaiming the term "ball" and making it accessible to individuals who may have been excluded from such events historically. By appropriating this nomenclature, the ballroom movement redefines the meaning of the word "ball" and subverts the traditional exclusivity of these gatherings. It offers a space where people from diverse backgrounds can come together, celebrate, enjoy themselves, and express their identities freely. In doing so, ballroom culture serves as a critical response to the exclusivity and divisions perpetuated by capitalism. In summary, the transformation of the term "ball" within ballroom culture is emblematic of its resistance to the exclusivity perpetuated by capitalism. By providing an inclusive and celebratory space for a diverse range of individuals, ballroom culture challenges the traditional notions of balls and offers a counter-narrative that stands in opposition to the societal issues associated with capitalism. Thus, Sara Jordanö's as well as Jennie Livingston's documentaries offers us a broad overview of how the word "ball" has been used in the context of the ballroom community.

Taking into consideration the discussion on the ball's polysemy and recognizing the ballroom as a space of resistance, we must understand how the Harlem Renaissance movement influenced the ballroom culture, and how this cultural movement led the ball scene from what it was to what we have today. By the end of the 19th century, an African and Latin American underground culture began to take shape on the streets of New York's Harlem, a cultural movement that would originate what we know today as *ballroom culture*. At the end of the 1880s, drag balls were held primarily to entertain heteronormative audiences (SEE, 2009). Moreover, during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, the racial pride movement reframed the way of producing art, literature, and music, to promote an egalitarian racial policy. In this sense, the Harlem Renaissance is considered a rebirth of African-American arts, because during that period, all people were encouraged to consume art made

by Black people. Meanwhile, many cultural movements began to arise with it such as the ballroom culture and drag balls.

Ballroom culture has its beginnings in the drag balls of the Harlem Renaissance and it can be described as an artistic movement that encompasses dance, arts, performance, theater, music, and fashion. Bailey (2009, p. 254) emphasizes that “ballroom culture, sometimes called house ball culture, is a relatively clandestine community consisting of BIPOC LGBTQIA+ people”. Regarding the Harlem Renaissance, Fabre and Feith (2001) argue that:

The Renaissance was a time of intense theatricality when performances stormed the stage: on Broadway, but also on backstages, in cabarets, and music halls. The Renaissance itself was born in a sort of dramatic effervescence—with its grand gatherings, dinners, soirees, and clubs, its literary contests, and prize-giving ceremonies. It occurred at a time of spectacular street performances and entry into the public sphere: silent protest marchers, war regiments celebrating their return with visual and musical military displays, or Garveyites parading with great pomp and ceremony (FABRE AND FEITH, 2001, p. 19).

As the authors argue, the movement is considered a historical mark, as a rebirth of African-American arts that broke with the hegemonic white art from that period. As highlighted by Bernard (2007, p. 28), “the Harlem Renaissance was a moment when blackness was celebrated, but to be in vogue is to be in fashion”. In this way, Harlem, during the period of its renaissance, became the stage of a political and ideological dispute which made it possible to give a voice to the black community that was historically erased and silenced.

Therefore, the ballroom scene is built by people on the margins of society and it became a space to express and live themselves artistically and politically. The margin I am referring to is related to the concept formulated by hooks (1995), in which she mentions that the margin is a political space that can produce meanings. Kilomba (2008, p.46), interpreting hook’s concept, argues that the margin is a space of oppression and resistance, where oppression forms resistance. In this way, the ballroom scene provides a space where these people can reimagine their reality in a way that makes it bearable. By reimagining their reality and questioning what has been taken for granted throughout life, this space allows them to understand the world critically. Freire (2018) emphasizes that critical thinking is an essential aid in the social emancipation of the subject because it allows people to understand their social reality to seek ways to change it, which then allows them to achieve social emancipation. In addition, as hooks states,

All marginal groups in this society who suffer grave injustices, who are victimized by institutionalized systems of domination (race, class, gender, etc.), are faced with the peculiar dilemma of developing strategies that draw attention to one's plight in such a way that will merit regard and consideration without reinscribing a paradigm of victimization (hooks, 1995, p. 58).

By producing spaces such as the balls, they can reimagine and re-signify their subjective meanings, promoting and giving voice to a community that is constantly silenced.

The occupation of spaces by marginalized people, whether public or private, can be seen as an act of resistance. Massey (2005, p. 9) argues that spaces are “the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately”. The spaces are built upon people, and they may encompass the multiplicity and diversity of it. As the author argues, we must understand space

as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity no space. If Space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive. (Massey, 2005, p.9)

As a result of the process of these interrelations, the space is never fully constructed, instead, it is always changing and reinventing itself according to the context. Therefore, if the spaces are constructed by people and are always changing, their symbolism and meaning will also change along with the individuals who inhabit them.

The ballroom scene can be seen as a space of resistance because it can be used to oppose the dominant cultural values of capitalism. For many decades, different groups of people had their right to basic access denied only based on their race or social class, but other aspects such as job distribution, housing, lack of social welfare policies, and wealth accumulation. Capitalism played a central role in the unequal access to suitable housing, as market forces often favored the interests of the wealthy, leaving marginalized communities in segregated neighborhoods with limited opportunities for growth and prosperity. This capitalist-driven segregation deepened economic disparities and exacerbated social inequalities. The influence of capitalism on social welfare policies further compounded the challenges faced by marginalized groups. As capitalist ideals of self-reliance and limited government

intervention prevailed, access to social safety nets and welfare programs was constrained, leaving individuals and families without vital support and magnifying disparities in accessing basic rights. Furthermore, capitalism's influence on the accumulation of wealth was undeniable, with historically disadvantaged communities often denied the means to build and pass down intergenerational wealth. The system's inherent disparities in financial resources and opportunities created enduring gaps in economic stability and access to education and career prospects. The enduring impact of these injustices is a stark reminder of the pressing need for structural change, advocating for policies and initiatives aimed at addressing historical injustices and transforming a system that, left unchecked, perpetuates inequalities. Recognizing capitalism's role in the denial of basic access for marginalized communities is a crucial step toward dismantling the pervasive legacies of discrimination and working to create a more just and inclusive society for all.

In the United States of America, racial segregation caused several effects on the black population, making them the target of the gentrification and oppression policies of politics for a long period. In analyzing the effects of these policies, Manalansan (2005, p.141) argues that they “have redrawn boundaries, neighborhoods, and lives and given rise to insidious forms of surveillance of and violence in communities of color”. This new configuration of spaces resulted in a more segregated way of living, especially for the Black and Queer community of the ballroom scene. However, these “new” forms of policies are not so new in the sense that the necessity of the development of a safe space for queer people became long decades ago.

Since the 1920s and 1930s, balls have been a space of resistance for BIPOC queers, where the drag balls provided a safer space for queer people to survive a very dangerous time, as highlighted by Chauncey (1994, apud SEE, 2009, p. 799):

The drag balls of the 1920s and 1930s were the safest and most visible spaces in which queers could affirm the nonnormative "Nature" that Lind describes, and they enhanced the solidarity of the gay world and symbolized the continuing centrality of gender inversion to gay culture (CHAUNCEY (1994, apud. SEE, 2009, p. 799).

Therefore, as the ballroom is being built by people who resist daily in their lives, whether because of their gender, their skin color, their social class, or even their political claims, they have reimagined and re-signified the meaning of space,

promoting and giving voice to a community that is constantly silenced, becoming a political space. By doing this opposition against the oppression structures such as gender and race, whether by the subversion and by the occupation of spaces, the subjects fought, and still fight for better conditions of health, wealth, education, and housing access. Having discussed the importance of the occupation of spaces by the ballroom community and how this occupation can be seen as a resistance act, we have to understand how this process of subversion happens between the scene and the elements that compose it. In the following section, I explore and analyze how the elements of the ballroom scene can build this resistance within the occupation of the spaces.

2.2 Learning is fundamental: the ballroom elements

Different elements compose the ballroom scene such as its own gender system configuration, the walking categories, and the ballroom houses. According to Bailey (2009, p. 254), “three inextricable dimensions constitute the social world of ballroom culture: the gender system, the kinship structure (houses), and the ball events (where ritualized performances are enacted)”. Thus, the ball events refer to the balls themselves, as a party in which people have the chance to perform the walk in a category and possibly gain a prize.

In the ballroom gender system, gender is experienced and performed by playing with the “rules”, whether by mixing, deconstructing or reproducing. In this sense, conceptualizing gender is not easy because its comprehension could vary concerning the context. According to Lowy and Rouch (2003), gender is a way to comprehend society’s structure as well as its function in our relations of power. Furthermore, we live in a society with assumed gender roles, which are usually assigned to each human being, arbitrarily, according to our human reproductive system (BUTLER, 2009). For instance, if you are born with the masculine reproductive system, you will be expected to fit into the expectations of the male role. Thus, even though gender roles can be different in each culture, generally there is no room for different gender expressions that do not fit into a binary gender system. For the system to work, your gender must coincide with the sex assigned at birth (cisgender), and your desire is expected to be heterosexual. Regarding this mechanisms of power under the performance of gender, Butler (2009) argues that:

Power relies on a mechanism of reproduction that can and does go awry, undo the strategies of animating power, and produce new and even subversive effects. The paradox or quandary that emerges from this situation is one that we find in politics all the time: if the terms of power layout “who” can be a subject, who qualifies as a subject of recognition, in politics, or before the law, then the subject is not a precondition of politics, but a differential effect or power. (BUTLER, 2009, p.3)

Therefore, Butler (2009) highlights the need to challenge and disrupt the dominant norms and discourses that exclude certain individuals. It is important to create spaces for those who are marginalized and recognize their experiences and identities, even if they do not conform to the established criteria for subjecthood. Thus, such rules might apply to the ballroom scene as well, even though balls as well as kiki balls have their own gender organization.

Not everyone feels comfortable with their birth-assigned gender. The binary system of gender roles excludes many people who do not fit into those categories. The exclusion happens because there is a common idea that both gender and sex are ontological, and you cannot confront it. Analyzing gender and its constructiveness, Butler (2006, p.10), in *Gender Trouble*, defends that

Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts (BUTLER, 2006, p. 10).

Thus, gender can be perceived as a naturalized aspect of the subject's identity, as something that is discursively constructed to appear, ironically, as prediscursive. This aspect will influence how these individuals will be able to function and the perception of them by society. As mentioned by Butler (2006), gender is reproduced through a series of repetitions, norms, and natural conventions that reiterate the binary characteristic of the body. For instance, drag queens imitate social norms of femininity that parody these binarisms, “by re-enacting those aspects of the gendered experience that are falsely viewed as a natural unity based on the regulatory fiction of gender-related to a fixed biological sex”. According to the author, by imitating these constructs of gender, drag exposes the arbitrariness of gender performativity in the form of criticizing it, or even satirizing it, showing that gender can be adapted to a performance that bodies can make to survive as well as adapt into society. Thus, balls have been a space where the notions of gender do not follow the binarisms, as female and male, relying instead on their gender system (Bailey, 2009).

In analyzing the gender system in balls, Bailey (2009) argues that

The ballroom gender system includes more identity categories and articulations than are available to members and legible to people outside of the ballroom. There are three overarching dimensions to the gender system in ballroom culture: sex, gender, and sexuality. Members of the ballroom community expand all three. Unlike in the dominant, heteronormative US society, ballroom communities view and adopt categories of identity as malleable and mutable. In this community, when it comes to sex, gender, and sexuality, most things are open, negotiable, and alterable. These aspects of the gender system are salient revisions of traditional gender and sexual norms. ballroom members conceive of three categories of sex: 1. Female (a person born with female sex characteristics) 2. Male (a person born with male sex characteristics) 3. Intersex (a person born with male and female or indeterminate genitalia (2009, p.34).

Taking the above citation into consideration, as the walkers perform on balls, we also perform during our lives. These performances can happen by both the way we express our personality in social life as well as the way we relate with society, such as gender performances. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2006) questions these hegemonic as well as binary gender systems by understanding them as structures of power that act within the subject. According to her performativity perspective, we perform into a gender role since the moment we are born, either by using clothes that fit the designated gender or by people's physical characteristics such as hair, beard and body hair, and voice, or even through a myriad of other involuntary or voluntary reiterations of gender norms. Furthermore, gender performances can change according to the context in which we are inserted. In this sense, they are subject to certain social agreements that we make when living in society (BUTLER, 2006). Hence, even if it seems that there is no option for us to choose how we can or cannot perform, we can affirm that there is space to subvert these social impositions and one of these spaces is the ballroom and the kiki scene.

Therefore, the ballroom scene leaves room for different performances of gender to develop, abandoning the heteronormative gender roles that society expects from everyone and giving voice to new forms of expressing and living their gender. Thus, the ballroom culture opposes the existing hegemonic and Eurocentric dominant culture; by using art as a form of resistance, and proposing a space that allows its community to receive financial, social, healthcare, and food support, this space becomes essential for the maintenance of people in the community in which it is concentrated. Da Costa (2014, p. 50) argues that "resistance occurs through a commitment made between those who are part of that group and decide to put into practice transformative actions and, in the process, submission is replaced by motivation and creativity". Considering this definition of resistance, there is no doubt

that ballroom culture has played a role in providing a safe and political space for resistance, not only for the queer community but also for the community in which the balls take place, which is the BIPOC American community as well as taking part of the symbolic and social relevance in the history of LGBTQIA+ resistance movements.

Balls are the space where this commitment made between the community is materialized. Within the balls, the competition is the stage where these gender norms as well as class norms can be played to compete and win prizes in the categories. In this sense, we may analyze how these competitions happen, and how they build new meanings upon their categories as well as their evaluation criteria. In the runaway balls, the performers or walkers must walk into the different categories of the night to win the prize as well as to become remarkable in the scene. In the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), we are introduced to the concept of category, given by relevant people in the ball scene from the 1980s and 1990s such as Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija. The documentary is a pioneer film on ball culture because it contextualizes many elements of the scene, such as these categories, the evaluation criteria, the pass, and the read with shade.

Even if each category has its organization as well as different evaluation criteria, there is a criterion that perpetuates through all categories, which is the ability *to pass*. To *pass* into a category, the walkers must sell the category as best they can, trying to convince the judges that if they were living in a real situation within the context of that category, they would be able to pass, which means they would be able to appear as though they actually fit into that social space and inherent norms. To be “real” or to “pass” is to be recognizable of realness. Realness is one of the main elements that enable performances to pass, as Campbell argues that (2015, p. 157) “*Realness* is an etymological riff on the real/reality; its character is that it is only like the real, approximate, near, but not quite”. In *Paris is Burning* (1990), Dorian Corey argues that the main aspect in evaluating *realness* is the ability to “blend” and to “pass the untrained eye, or even the trained eye”. However, her definition is contradicted when she points out that:

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 because of the social standing of life.... 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 - 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. (Dorian Corey, 1990).

Dorian Corey contradicts her own definition of realness because she initially emphasizes the importance of blending and passing as a criterion for evaluating realness. However, she later acknowledges that marginalized individuals, particularly BIPOC people, face barriers and limited opportunities for advancement, particularly in real-life situations. Thus, Campbell (2015, p. 158) emphasizes that “realness contains within it the critique of normative power structures, as realness is performed by those who are systematically denied access to the boardroom, the clubhouse, and such places that confer cultural or economic capital”. For Butler (1993, p. 129), Realness is a “standard” that must be achieved in the performance while walking into a category:

"Realness" is not exactly a category in which one competes; it is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories. And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates (1993, p. 129).

Although it seems that the concept is potentially problematic, since it could reiterate the oppression within the norms, it is the opposite of what happens.

In Paris is Burning (1990), while the definition of the categories is being given, many scenes exemplify how the concept of realness must fit into each category. Some of the categories filmed by Livingston (1990) were Schoolboy Realness, Town and Country, Luscious Body, Executive Realness, High Fashion Parisian, Banjee Boy/Girl, Butch Queen First Time in Drags at a Ball. If the competitor walks into a “*realness*” category, they will have to sell richness, good taste, luxury, and opulence through their performance, clothes, and movements. The judges must feel the realness as if the walker were in a hotel hall, they would pass as guests, as if they were actually rich and belonged to that place. The performance will be graded by a team of judges who can give grades from zero to ten. If the walker succeeds and *passes*, they receive good grades, and if they get a “ten” from all of the judges, they hear a famous jargon from the ball, “TEN, TEN, TEN ACROSS THE BOARD”, and probably win the cash prize.

Those who have the ability to pass and win several times become legendary. The concept of legendary is to become recognizable in the scene, it is to be known by the children as someone who embodies realness, not only in balls but in life. In the ballroom scene, as well as to be remembered, to be legendary people is to gain a history, a recognition of their achievements in the scene, and the respect of their community. In this way, the word legendary remains a symbolic and historic element of ballroom culture, helping to diffuse the knowledge and history of the scene among its members. However, if you do not pass, and receive lower grades, you can *be read* by the judges. The reading consists of mocking criticism of the walkers. The mocking or the *shade*, as they call it, could be based on the walker's choice of fashion as well as their acting performance. Moreover, the shade can be incorporated into other categories such as those that involve *voguing*. By using different poses from the magazines as well as movements that portray irony and mockery in the battle, voguing is a form of battle, using shade without words. Therefore, the elements that constitute the categories of the ballroom scene encompass aspects that directly reflect a political and resistant character. Both the breaking of norms and the performance of realness demonstrate how the ballroom scene, even in its smallest elements, carries a historical symbolism that resists various forms of social oppression.

The familiar configuration of the ballroom can also be seen as an embodiment of strategies of resistance. The youngsters in the ballroom come from houses that belong to the local community. According to Bailey (2009), the kinship structure or (houses) refers to a family reorganization that has an unconventional or non-nuclear family, led by a mother or a father, the representative figure of the family. Revising the concept of family, Fernandez (2019, p.165) indicates that

Even though the traditional family structure and its values have proven to be a crucial part of both political and private spheres, it is undeniable that the definition of family has been changing rapidly during recent years. The kind of family that we find in the ballroom community houses is not a typical, nor traditional, nuclear family (FERNANDEZ, 2019, p. 165).

However, even if these families are not nuclear, they still use terms known as father and mother, since that environment can be understood as a family like any other, and in addition, a chosen family. The houses did not only appear to parade in the categories of dances, they arose from the need to provide a familiar environment to young people and adolescents who are abandoned by their natural relatives once

they find out that the sexuality and/or gender identity of these adolescents differ from the imposed heteronormativity. These young people are thrown out of their birth families, and forced to live on the streets, in a situation of extreme social vulnerability.

In *Paris is Burning* (1990), Dorian Corey, a legendary member of the house of Corey, when asked about the ball houses, states that “they’re families. You can say that, they’re families for a lot of children who don’t have families. But this is a new meaning of family” (FERNANDEZ, 2019, p. 165). Dorian’s claim is relatable with Fernandez’s affirmation because it supports the evidence that these houses are families even if they do not correspond to the normative nuclear family. After all, they have real values such as love, support, and acceptance for those who constantly face society’s disclaimer.

The ball houses are usually named after fashion designers as well as fashion brands such as the House of Balenciaga and the House of Mugler. This relation with fashion is not by chance. One of the possible reasons is because most famous fashion designer brands use the name “house” such as House of Gucci, House of Versace, or House of Prada. These brands are called houses because they produce *haute couture* clothes and started in designer families, such as the House of Versace and the House of Gucci. To be an *haute couture* house, the brand must have an atelier in Paris, in one of the most famous triangle streets, the so-called golden triangle on Montaigne Avenue. Moreover, most of these brands are not accessible to the masses. With clothes and accessories that go for more than ten to twenty thousand dollars, these fashion items become an object of desire in our society. In this regard, Bailey (2013, p.91) argues that:

Because of the class position that most ballroom members occupy, the items that these fashion houses produce usually exceed the economic and social reach of most ballroom houses. Nonetheless, when a house dubs itself with a designer name such as The House of Prada, it has performed an act that is more symbolic than indicative of real purchasing power on the part of house members (BAILEY, 2013, p.91).

The incorporation of famous brand names within ballroom houses serves as a multifaceted act of resistance, challenging capitalist expectations and societal norms through several compelling dimensions. First and foremost, it defies capitalist expectations by contesting the prevailing notion that material success and the display of well-known brands epitomize affluence. Ballroom culture’s embrace of these brand names offers an alternative perspective, emphasizing that success and prestige can

be redefined on its own terms, independent of mainstream consumerism. This act of resistance staunchly rejects the idea that one's success should be signified through the purchase of particular products, presenting a fresh and independent perspective that challenges the status quo. Furthermore, the use of famous brand names fosters a space of empowerment within the ballroom community. It nurtures a profound sense of belonging and unity, enabling participants to gather, celebrate their achievements, and express their creativity. This empowerment extends beyond the confines of capitalism's expectations, serving as a resilient form of resistance against societal pressures that frequently marginalize and stigmatize marginalized groups. Within the ballroom culture, individuals discover a platform to express themselves authentically, thereby affirming their identities and challenging the structures that seek to suppress them. Moreover, the incorporation of brand names within the ballroom houses serves as a powerful means to challenge stereotypes and stigmas commonly associated with LGBTQIA+ communities and people of color. It showcases the multifaceted talents and creativity prevalent within these communities, dispelling the negative stereotypes imposed upon them by society. By defying these stereotypes and prevailing misconceptions, the ballroom culture effectively resists societal prejudices and underscores the complex and vibrant diversity of its participants. In summary, the utilization of famous brand names within the ballroom culture represents a complex act of resistance. It challenges capitalist expectations, creating a space of empowerment that transcends societal isolation, and confronts stereotypes and stigmas associated with marginalized communities. Through these acts of resistance, the ballroom culture champions a vision of empowerment, unity, and self-expression that actively counters the expectations and biases ingrained in our society.

Therefore, as can be evidenced in this chapter, the occupation of spaces within the ballroom scene, as well as the elements that build its culture can be seen as a political act of resistance. As I discussed earlier, the occupation of spaces made by the ballroom scene helped shape the culture in the way it is today, as well as helped disseminate the legacy of the ballroom culture into the world. Thus, the scene helped many people become known, providing a space for them to share their stories with their community. In addition to this, it can be observed how elements, as well as certain aspects of the ballroom scene, carry within their symbolism a political resistance, such as in the case of the gender system. By allowing competitors to play

with gender categories, a discursive act occurs that directly questions the foundations of that ideology and oppression. Concerning this appropriation of normative values within the ballroom elements, Butler (1993. p. 131) argues that

This is not an appropriation of dominant culture in order to remain subordinated by its terms, but an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake—and sometimes succeeds (1993. p. 131).

As the author argues, it is precisely through this attempt to reproduce normative concepts that resistance will take place. Therefore, the ballroom scene can be understood as a political space where LGBTQIA+ individuals can utilize as a platform for survival as well as to advocate for their rights in the oppressive society in which we live.

As a result of the cultural movement's growth, the ballroom scene has developed ramifications over the years, such as the kiki scene. The kiki scene has served as a space for young individuals within the ballroom scene to prepare themselves for competition in categories, as well as to precede their preparation for competing in major balls. Thus, the documentary *KIKI* (2016) sheds light on the kiki community as well as presents the narratives of relevant people from the scene.

3. CATEGORY IS: SHE IS A PHENOMENAL WOMEN

Throughout this chapter, I analyze segments of the documentary featuring Gia, selecting specific moments that highlight her phenomenality in the kiki scene. My objective is to analyze the ways in which Gia Marie Love is an embodiment of what the capitalist system often seeks to eradicate and the depiction of her resistance to these processes of eradication.

3.1 Born to be a Phenomenal Woman: Gia's Phenomenality in the kiki scene

The expression "Phenomenal woman" comes from the poem "Phenomenal Woman" written by Maya Angelou (1978) and it is an inspiration for this chapter and the overall project of this thesis. The poem introduces the image of a confident and empowered woman who is unapologetic and unashamed of her uniqueness as can be seen in the following stanzas.

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size

But when I start to tell them,
 They think I'm telling lies.
 I say,
 It's in the reach of my arms,
 The span of my hips,
 The stride of my step,
 The curl of my lips.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

I walk into a room
 Just as cool as you please,
 And to a man,
 The fellows stand or
 Fall down on their knees.
 Then they swarm around me,
 A hive of honey bees.
 I say,
 It's the fire in my eyes,
 And the flash of my teeth,
 The swing in my waist,
 And the joy in my feet.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
 What they see in me.
 They try so much
 But they can't touch
 My inner mystery.
 When I try to show them,
 They say they still can't see.
 I say,
 It's in the arch of my back,
 The sun of my smile,
 The ride of my breasts,
 The grace of my style.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

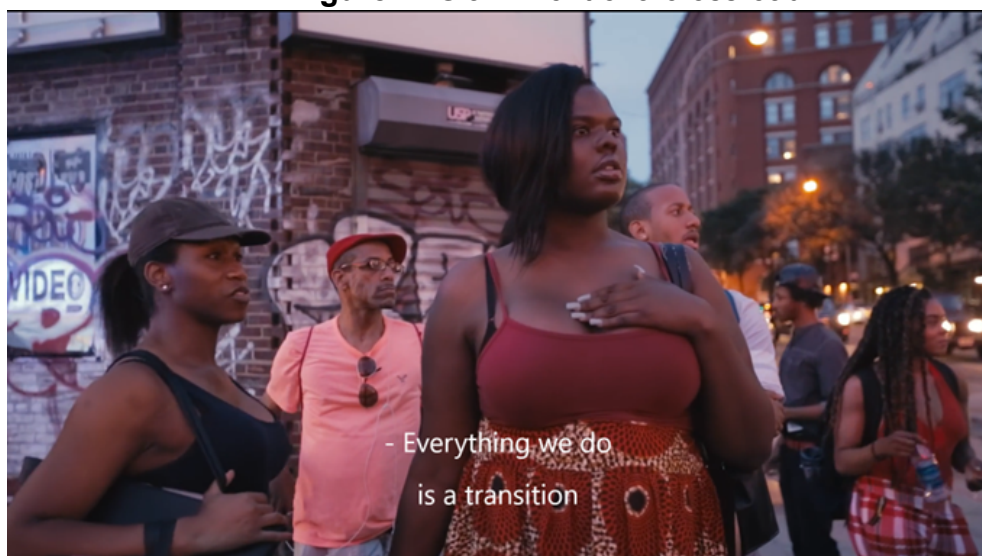
Now you understand
 Just why my head's not bowed.
 I don't shout or jump about
 Or have to talk real loud.
 When you see me passing,
 It ought to make you proud.
 I say,
 It's in the click of my heels,
 The bend of my hair,
 the palm of my hand,
 The need for my care.
 'Cause I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,
That's me. (Maya Angelou, 1978)

The speaker in Angelou's poem encourages women in the poem to embrace themselves and celebrate their differences. This concept of a phenomenal woman can be observed in *KIKI* (2016) through the character Gia Marie Love, one of the main subjects in the film. Angelou's (1978) definition of a phenomenal woman reinforces the idea that women are diverse and that their differences are what make them special. It is precisely through the various subjective experiences that individuals are able to transgress the line of what is imposed on their bodies and do what they want with them. The phenomenal woman embodies all of these contradictions. In *KIKI* (2016), we can see many trans women who are part of the scene, not only as mothers but as participants in the balls and in the houses. Gia Marie Love is a Black trans woman who resides in New York, and she is a member of the kiki scene, as well as a representative of the kiki community in the kiki coalition.

The reasons why Gia Marie Love is considered a phenomenal woman can be seen throughout the lens of the film *KIKI* (2016). In this thesis, I list and analyze some extracted scenes, where Gia's actions as well as her performance resonate with the idea of the phenomenal woman described above. "Everything we do is a transition" is the first sentence said by Gia when she appears in the scene. She shows up in front of a crossroad, waiting for the traffic light to close so she can pass, as shown in the following image (Figure 4):

Figure 4: Gia in front of a crossroad.



Source: *KIKI* (2016)

As the camera follows her, she arrives at the Pier, one of the most emblematic spaces of the ballroom community and the American queer community. When Gia Marie Love states that everything is a transition, she is evoking the idea that our lives are marked by changes and that everything changes. She is at the Pier, where many young people are gathered for a kiki rehearsal. The Pier is a space of political dispute for the queer community. In the TV series *Pose* (2018) and the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), the Pier is portrayed as a space where trans women work as sex workers to sustain themselves. Now, in the documentary *KIKI* (2016), and after more than three decades since the period portrayed in both media productions, the same space is being portrayed as a safe space for the kiki community. The word 'transition' is defined by the Oxford Language Dictionary (2023) as 'the process or period of changing from one state or condition to another'. In this sense, when Gia says that everything is a transition, she is not only referring to herself as a trans woman who just transitioned, but also talking about all the transitions that happened before her, paying tribute to those who walked before her, their ancestors, and their heritage.

Gia's statement, combined with the image of the Pier with the kiki scene contestants, foreshadows that the ballroom scene is transitioning as well. As she arrives at the Pier, Gia is welcomed with applause from her friends and begins to perform some vogue steps, while a guy chants her name: "Give me give me Gia, give me give me Gia, Gia". At this moment, it is possible to observe how the relationship between the space of the Pier and the kiki community and its participants occur. The Pier becomes a space for political resistance and territorial dispute, in which those who occupy it stake their position, and proclaim that they are not going to hide anymore. With her performance, Gia, as a member of the ballroom community, states that not only is the scene changing, but also the spaces and society. She sends a clear message that she will be present in every space, public or private. After all, she has the right to do so because everything is changing. With this beginning, Gia introduces the definition of the kiki scene, and again Gia seems to refer to the past, by doing what Dorian, Pepper, and Venus did in *Paris is Burning* (1990): she provides a definition of what the kiki scene is, which is the main focus of the film. By defining the scene, she assumes the protagonism within the narrative, she then places herself in the same space as legends that have participated in ballroom documentaries of the past and have become famous in the community.

During the movie, Gia is portrayed as resilient, strong, and engaged. “I’m known as a very strong person”, she declares. In the next scene, Gia appears in the middle of a medium-long shot, she is wearing a military jacket with a hood and pants, and she looks at the camera smiling, as shown in the following image (figure 5):

Figure 5: Gia walking in the street.



Source: KIKI (2016)

The scene continues with her walking alongside a friend on a public street in New York. Gia begins to talk about her journey as a trans woman and the challenges she faced throughout her life because of the violent society we live in. Gia mentions her childhood, and how difficult it was to handle bullying, and as a consequence, as she mentions, she developed a “defense mechanism” and became a very serious and no-nonsense person. However, while she walks, three uninvited boys appear in the scene and the first one screams “fuck her right in the pussy”, and the other one asks Gia about what they are doing. Bothered, Gia says that they are celebrities and they answer to her “pussy”. She keeps walking, and after another boy starts to make sexual movements with a ball to the camera, Gia stops walking and as the camera changes the focus to the floor, she goes after the boys and says “do not play with me, do not play with me”. After that moment, Gia is shown in front of a bus stop with her friend, irritated, triggered, and expressing that she is not feeling well, and then, the director Sara Jordanö asks her if she is ok, Gia answers that she is “not ok”.

Two main issues can be observed in the scene described above. First, Gia had to defend herself during her entire life, and it shows by her testimony that she was bullied only because she was perceived as different from the others, as she says “when you are one of a kind, you get targeted”. In this sense, she knows her story,

and how strong and resilient she had to be since an early age. However, that does not imply that society will embrace her uniqueness in the way she does, and unfortunately, that is shown in the documentary when Gia is attacked by the boys. Second, even though Gia is a fierce woman who developed her self-defense mechanism against the daily acts of violence, she is not immune to the violence against her body, such as the transphobic harassment and objectification that happened in the scene by the three boys in the street. In addition to that, the situation raises awareness of the violence that trans people have been suffering due to the lack of policies that can protect them. The violence endured by Gia brings attention to the structural and historical violence experienced by BIPOC transgender women, such as Marsha P. Johnson and Venus Xtravaganza. Marsha and Venus were transgender women who had their lives taken away simply for being who they were, transgender women. This violence, documented in both the documentary *"The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson"* (2017) and *"Paris is Burning,"* (1990) highlights the fact that these women had to fight solely to survive, yet they were unable to defy the statistical life expectancy of transgender women, which hovers around 35 years. Therefore, even though the violence suffered by Gia was only verbal (which also harms her as well), as a Black transgender woman, she remains susceptible to experiencing other forms of violence throughout her life. Nevertheless, we must also be attentive to the legislative initiatives that aim to stigmatize and stereotype transgender individuals, such as bills prohibiting them from using restrooms according to their gender identity or hindering their basic rights, such as access to accurate identification documents.

Additionally, the scene demonstrates the need to break stereotypes and prejudices regarding trans people. The way the boys refer to Gia shows how society still refuses to accept and respect the gender identity of trans people. Gia's response when confronted by the boys shows that she still carries the emotional scars of the bullying and violence she experienced in childhood and adolescence, highlighting the importance of supporting the mental health of trans people and combating the discrimination and violence they face.

The ballroom scene is the space that helps Gia understand her body as well as her gender. "Who was I before the ballroom?", says Gia in a medium-close shot, positioned in the middle of the scene, looking at the camera with a serious and strong facial expression. By her side, there is a woman who is not identified, but it seems to

be Gia's friend or someone who is close to her. In the background, there is a street, with buildings and cars that can be seen in the following image (figure 6):

Figure 6: Gia and her friend in the city.



Source: KIKI (2016)

By asking this question, Gia demonstrates the significance of the ballroom scene in her life, as she begins to talk about her transition. Gia was born phenomenal. Her position in the scene with the dialogue in the second plane demonstrates that she is a protagonist in the film, and she is in control of her history. At the same time, Gia's position in the scene marks a tension between the audience and her, with her confronting the audience with a closed facial expression, not smiling, and looking right through the camera as if she is looking at the eye of the spectator. It is with this gaze that Gia invites us to know her phenomenality. Her serious expression suggests that she is revealing something very personal, with intense emotions, as already seen in the previously mentioned scene with the boys. Thus, the fact that she is looking directly at the camera reinforces the idea that she is trying to convey a message about her life, as can be seen in the following image (figure 7):

Figure 7: Gia looking at her own interview.



Source: KIKI (2016)

In this scene we see Gia in a medium-shot, looking at herself on a computer when she had not transitioned yet. She is sitting in what seems to be a living room. “I’m just, I’m just of trans experience,” says Gia in the second shot, while she looks smiling at her image on the screen. In a medium-long shot, the scene goes on showing Gia before her transition, with short hair, without makeup, positioned in the middle of the frame saying that she did not feel trans. However, it was through the community of the ballroom that she felt able to be herself, to be loved, and celebrated. As the scene goes on Gia says that after recording the interview where she says that she did not feel trans, she “went back trans”. Although Gia did not define herself as a woman, she was already phenomenal. The use of the expression “went back” suggests that Gia perceived herself, in some way, as not a cis person. Hence, by affirming her gender identity now, she indicates that she is giving recognition of what she already was, a phenomenal woman. In the scene where Gia’s mother is talking about her, she mentions that “Gia was a phenomenal, I’mma tell you she was 12 or 13 years old she was the number one debater in the city”. In this sense, Gia’s mother’s speech not only acknowledges her identity but also dismantles a commonly portrayed image where the acceptance of transgender individuals by their birth families is not portrayed. Although the abandonment of queer individuals by their families is a documented fact explored in *Paris is Burning*, it is important to emphasize that we cannot generalize all narratives of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that this acceptance is necessary for the lives of these individuals, as it provides them with the support they need without having to resort to living on the streets.

Biological Families still play an important role in the kiki scene. In the film *Paris is Burning*, most of the interviewed guests show that they do not have a relationship with their birth families. On the contrary, the film shows how the ballroom scene had built a new organization of family, a chosen family, due to the many cases of abandonment that were happening during the 80s and 90s. As a result of these abandonments, the families' houses were for a long time the only space a queer child or young person could go after being kicked out of their homes. Such situations were also portrayed in the TV series *Pose*, where the Pier was also a space where the abandoned and homeless children went to sleep. In *KIKI* (2016), the relationship of the house families is shown as well, however, in regards to Gia, we meet her birth family, as it is shown in the following image (figure 8):

Figure 8: Gia 's family.



Source: KIKI (2016)

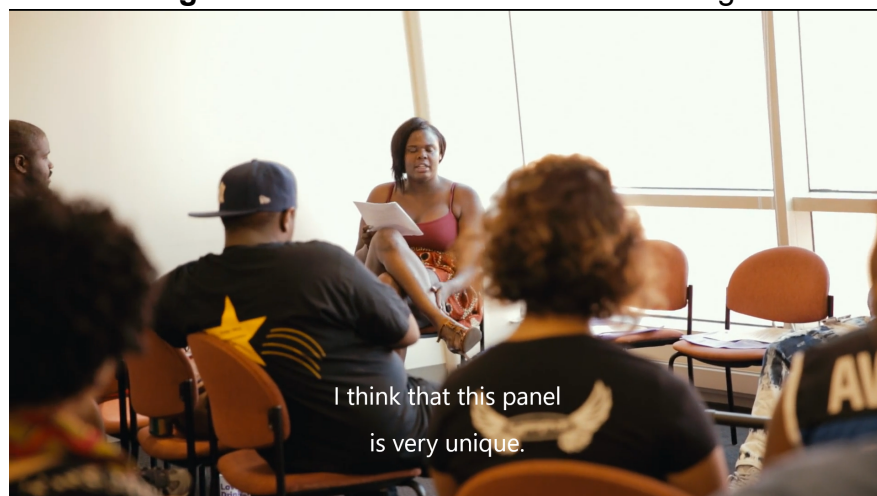
The scene shows Gia's mother, as well as her sister and her brother sitting on a black couch, in a living room. The background shows personal items as well as pink curtains on the windows. Gia's mother starts talking about how Gia revealed to her that she was about to become trans: "She called me three years ago on the phone and said to me, 'ma I made a decision to live my life as a woman'... and I accepted." Her mother compliments her by comparing and praising herself, saying that Gia "is beautiful like me". Gia's brother complements the thought by saying that "Gia is defying the laws of science, she is a very big role model and inspiration to people". Above all, the scene demonstrates how Gia is perceived by her birth family with love and support. Although there is no evidence in the film that she was looking for their approval, the fact that she is recognized by her family in such a loving way

breaks the stereotypical story of trans people who are abandoned by their birth families.

In 1992, bell hooks criticized the film *Paris is Burning* and the way the ballroom community was portrayed in the film. hooks (1992) mentions that “the film was a graphic documentary portrait of the way in which colonized Black people worship the throne of whiteness” (1991, p.149). According to hooks (1992), the way Black people were portrayed in the film not only failed to challenge whiteness but also reinforced patriarchal concepts that further reproduced the oppressions they faced. She criticizes the portrayal of Black people as desperate, fragile, and helpless. hooks' critique is still relevant when looking at *KIKI* (2016), as the documentary also deals with complex issues facing the Black queer community in the United States. Therefore, by featuring Gia's family in the scene, in which her mother and siblings give a supportive and affirming speech, the film attempts to break away from the typical stereotypes that all children in the ballroom are abandoned and left homeless by their parents, re-signifying the meaning of the word family as well as the representation of it.

Gia's phenomenality is critically political. The following scenes, which are divided into two cuts, depict how Gia is politically inserted in the kiki community as well as showing her acting directly in relevant issues to the community such as trans rights and the way people perceive them. The first cut shows Gia (figure 9) in the kiki coalition¹⁶ meeting (kiki parents and leaders council):

Figure 9: Gia in the kiki coalition meeting



¹⁶ A New York City Coalition of community-based organizations/non-profit agencies that have come together to provide community mobilization for LGBTQ+ youth.

Source: KIKI (2016)

In a big and brightly lit meeting room, Gia appears sitting in a chair, with papers in her hand, in front of many of the kiki house members. Gia begins her lecture by saying that “The kiki scene is composed by the youth, you know a lot of times we target, you know, the most at-risk populations, within the LGBTQ Community, we have homelessness, we have diseases such as HIV, police injustices, sexual exploitation”. The first cut happens and then a guy begins to tell a story about how he felt he had HIV and lived as if he had it for more than three years.

Gia is the embodiment of what the ballroom is. Throughout Gia's speech, she addresses many of the main relevant issues regarding the queer community nowadays. These issues such as HIV pandemics, sexual exploitation within the trans community, and LGBTQIA+ homelessness, show that Gia is critically aware of her community problems and knows what she is talking about. Considering critical awareness, Freire (2022) suggests that in order to socially emancipate the masses, people have to develop critical awareness and perspective about their reality. It is through the process of developing a critical view of the world and themselves that people will be able to act politically by targeting the social problems that affect their reality in order to produce changes. Furthermore, when Gia is posted in the middle of the conversation, as shown in the scene, to give the kiki community a lecture, she is not only positioning herself at the front line of the historical resistance movement that the ballroom is, as already discussed at the beginning of this chapter, but also taking action in order to change the current situation. Gia is a phenomenal woman, she is the representation of the transgression that leads the ballroom scene through here. In this sense, her knowledge should and must be recognized, as well as her critical point of view must be considered in these spaces where the main discussions of the kiki scene happen. The following scene perfectly demonstrates this.

The second cut of the scene starts after a while, and now Gia is listening to the audience's discussion, as can be seen in the following scene (figure 10):

Figure 10: The man talking about his experience.



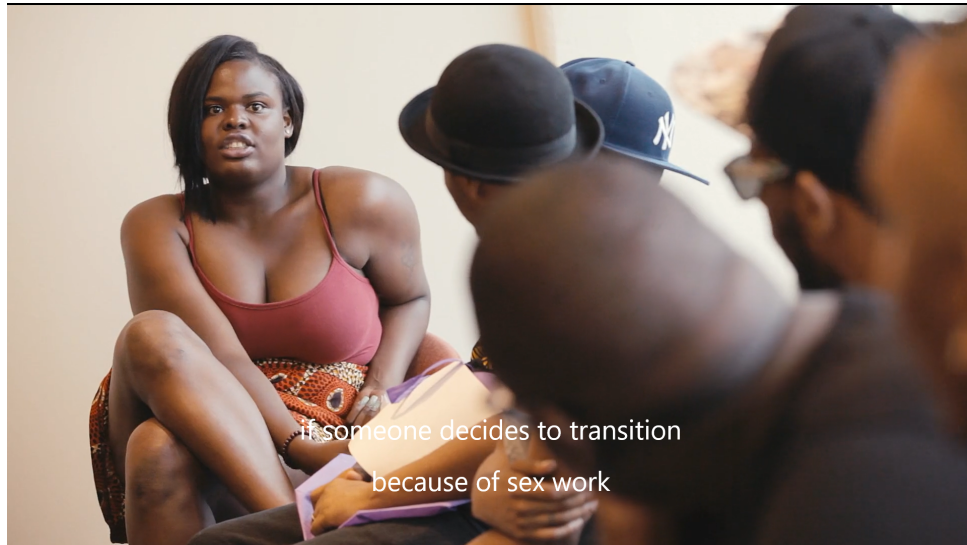
Source: KIKI (2016)

The scene starts by showing the people in the room, and right before there is a man, wearing a blue shirt, and two necklaces, one seems to be adorned with the pendant of a house and the other is a cross with Jesus crucified on it, and he is giving his opinion on the subject. We do not have access to the previous context of the conversation of the situation, or even the name of the man, but here is what he comments:

When I was at a younger age, I was one of these people where I had to turn to escorting just to survive, and to get ahead in life, my father and my family put me out at 17 and I had to survive, I had to do what I had to do, thankfully I'm here and I'm healthy, and I'm alive to speak about it, but not everyone gets that chance, I try to tell people to deviate away from sex work, and a lot of people do it just because, like, 'okay, I'mma go pull this date, so I can get a coin to pay for my wig, or to pay for my affect, or to pay for my bead, and its just like people do it so they can look fab at a ball for a social fame, but it's just like the ramifications that you're setting your body up for, you're setting yourself up, it doesn't add up, it doesn't measure up[...] (transcribed from *KIKI* (2016))

As he continues talking, he finishes by stating that many people would only start their gender transition because they could get more money by working with sex. In the shot, the guy who is sitting next to him is nodding, the camera moves and shows some of the faces in the room, and then Gia's voice appears in the background and finally in the camera (figure 11):

Figure 11: Gia answering the man's provocation



Source: KIKI (2016)

As can be seen in the scene, it is perceptible that Gia's expression now has changed, in comparison to when she was speaking. She answers to his provocative and prejudiced commentary by saying:

If someone decides to transition because of sex work, their transition should still be respected, because, they are still trans, and I think that, oftentimes in ballroom, we don't respect that, those transitions, because we don't deem them worthy, but we have to look at the lifestyle you talk, we already address a lot the issues, that, we have to go through as marginalized people, who have been through so much, and we have to look at our value systems, right? I think that for me, I have no problem with sex work personally, there's no, if you're gonna sex work to get your affect, do it, just do it safely (transcribed from *KIKI* (2016)).

The scene described points to a significant discussion regarding the stigma faced by trans people who are sex workers, and the second is related to the contrasts depicted in the scene while Gia and the man are arguing. In the matter of the first one, the man's speech not only stigmatizes trans people and their narratives, but it generalizes everyone who is a sex worker and belongs to the ballroom scene as well. Furthermore, his speech demonstrates that he does not know the trans history within the ballroom scene and the fact that many trans people have to resort to such jobs as prostitution as a way to survive. In this sense, his argument is contradictory, once he had just assumed that he had to do it because he had to survive. Therefore, Gia's answer to the man is a lesson on how the subject should be perceived and discussed in that kiki community. As Gia is an active member and politically engaged in the kiki scene, she is the one who needs to pay attention and

be listened to, so the community and the fight for LGBTQIA+ does not lose its purpose to the Black community.

The scene also creates tension in the concepts of gender, race, and class, as the man uses arguments related to gender performance when comparing bodies, stating that this performance directly affects their remuneration in sex work, solely based on this aspect. However, being a politicized woman with critical consciousness, Gia manages to construct a path where individuality is not crossed by moral judgment from society. She is didactic and manages to bring the discussion to its essential question, which is the right of individuals to do what they want with their bodies and have their choices respected. As Butler (1993) argues, the subjectivity of the body reproduces the meanings that the subject embodies, and thus, even if their subjectivity is linked to what could be considered normative, as in the case of passing individuals, they continue to produce new subjectivities, and as a result, they are still structurally violated.

Finally, the “questioning of whiteness” pointed out by hooks (1992) can be found throughout Gia’s speech. In the following scene, Gia appears sitting in what seems to be her own living room, looking at her cell phone, and then she begins to talk. As the camera changes, Gia appears on the right side, with unfocused flowers left side of the shot, as can be seen in the next image (figure 12):

Figure 12: Gia in a living room



Source: KIKI (2016)

Gia emphasizes that “if the gay white man didn’t wanna get married, like really badly, it probably wouldn’t have been legalized”. What she is saying here exemplifies the necessity of discussing intersectionality in LGBTQIA+ spaces. By

making this affirmation, Gia refers to the fact that today most of the spaces where these political disputes happen are occupied by white gay men who usually fight only for their rights. Similar to the situation in the kiki coalition meeting, the fact that trans people are not even in the priorities of these men shows that the fights are still necessary because even if cisgender people have the disposition to collaborate and fight for trans rights, their presence is still necessary to not only provide inclusion, but also to put them in these spaces of power. Therefore, Gia's speech points out the role of race privilege regarding social change, especially in the queer community. In this case, the fact that gay white men were able to leverage their social and economic power to push for marriage equality suggests that social change is often driven by those with the most privilege and resources¹⁷.

The final scene of the documentary shows Gia being phenomenal at a kiki ball as can be seen in the next image (figure 13):

Figure 13: Gia being phenomenal in kiki ball

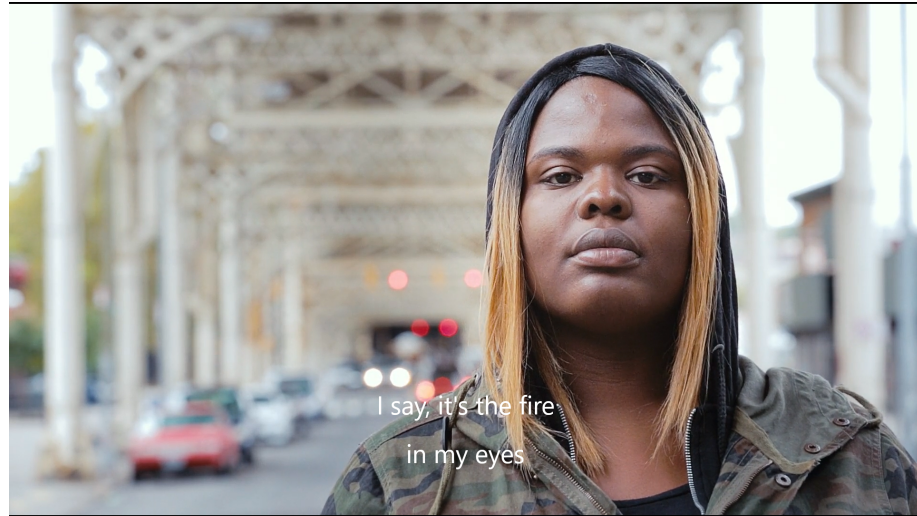


Source: KIKI (2016)

In the scene, we are invited to witness Gia's phenomenality in her space. After she enters the runway she begins to dance vogue. She finishes her performance and while she leaves, her voiceover starts to narrate the poem "*Phenomenal Woman*" by Maya Angelou. The shot ends by showing all the versions of Gia that we met throughout the documentary. Gia is in the middle of the shot, and sometimes on the left side, as shown in the following three images (figure 14, figure 15, and figure 16):

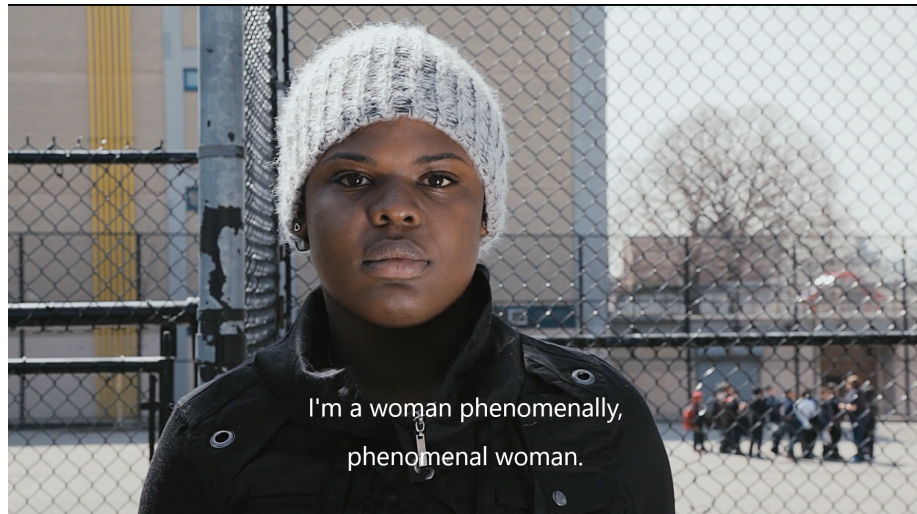
¹⁷I will return to the discussion of race and class within the ballroom scene in the next chapter.

Figure 14: Gia under a highway



Source: KIKI (2016)

Figure 15: Gia in front of a school



Source: KIKI (2016)

Figure 16: Gia in a kiki ball

Source: KIKI (2016)

The scenes above reinforce that Gia is a unique person, strong, resilient, transgressive, and transformative. The use of repetitive shots, showing the multiple faces of Gia emphasizes that she already was phenomenal, even at the beginning of her life. When Gia begins to read Maya Angelou's poem, she embodies the Speaker, by putting herself in the same position as this controversial woman. Moreover, Gia's transgression echoes the resilience of the phenomenal woman, especially when she is debating in favor of sex workers, by fighting the stigma faced by these people, as well as to give them recognition, as well as acceptance in the community. It is through her experience in life that Gia became a phenomenal woman.

In synthesis, this chapter analyzed how Gia is portrayed as a protagonist woman in the kiki scene as well as others who came before her (Crystal, Venus, and Doryan). The chapter focused on analyzing how Gia is depicted as a phenomenal woman as well as analyzed the necessity of trans people like her in spaces of protagonism and power in the ballroom community. By a close analysis of her individual storyline, it was possible to highlight how she embodies the strength, resilience, and defiance that the phenomenal woman in the poem of Angelou evokes. Thus, It was possible to perceive throughout other films such as *The Queen* (1968) and *Paris is Burning* (1990) that trans people have been leading the ballroom scene for a long time, and their presence in the scene is relevant not only in the competitions but in the spaces of decision-making and debates.

As a phenomenal woman, Gia is highly politicized and actively engaged in political activism within the spaces she occupies, specifically within the kiki scene.

Through her occupation of these spaces, Gia offers critical reflections on the need to continue advocating for trans people's rights. Her discourse highlights the necessity of discussions focused on improving working conditions for trans individuals, including the creation of opportunities with fair remuneration to cover the cost of living, such as food, housing, medication, hormones for transition, and other basic rights like access to a name change, bathrooms in public spaces, free education, and healthcare. Therefore, Gia is not perceived as a romanticized superhero whose presence solely fulfills a diversity quota in the space. She represents the voices of those who built and still reside within the kiki scene, advocating for the necessary changes. Her political interpellation towards her demands proves her historical belonging to the space. Thus, Gia Marie's story is a testament to the power and resistance of trans people and other marginalized communities. An inspiration to anyone who seeks to live authentically, fearlessly, and with purpose. Thus, the contest force of Gia, which is also referred to in the phenomenal woman's poem evoked by Angelou (1995), directly reflects the representative political character of the *phenomenal women* in the social environment. Gia's body is a political statement, and under her right of interpellation, every action she takes becomes a political act.

4. CATEGORY IS: KIKI VERSUS PARIS IS BURNING

Paris is Burning (1990) and *KIKI* (2016) can be considered similar films in the sense that both films discuss ballroom culture. *Paris is Burning* (1990) was filmed at the end of the 80s and it shows the ballroom scene in New York from that period, when the queer community was constantly being oppressed by police forces only based on their appearance or skin color. *KIKI* (2016) was filmed more than three decades after and it portrays the kiki scene within the ballroom scene in a distinct context, where some political changes had happened, such as the legalization of gay marriage. Besides the different contexts, other contrasts can be found when comparing both films, such as the settings of the filmings, and the way the subjects of the film were depicted. In this sense, we can analyze these contrasts in order to comprehend what possible meanings the film is generating. Concerning these meanings, *KIKI* (2016) is bringing a new perspective on the ballroom scene, a reclamation of the spaces that once were prior to the BIPOC queer community. The film depicts a re-signification of some of the elements of the ballroom such as

families and houses, and also demonstrates this reclaiming of agency by queer Black individuals within the ballroom scene. Thus, before we dive into the analysis, I would like to discuss how the incorporation of ballroom culture into the arts has been helping the BIPOC queer community to reclaim and reshape cultural spaces such as the ballroom scene and the kiki scene.

4.1 Reclaiming Blackness: reappropriating and reshaping spaces through ballroom culture

The ballroom culture can be seen incorporated into various forms of art such as music, films, fashion runways, and the streets. For instance, when Madonna released her song “*Vogue*”, inspired by the vogue steps from the balls. After the huge success of the song on the radio (*Vogue* debuted in first place on the Billboard Hot 100, the biggest music chart from the United States), Madonna performed at the 1990 Video Music Awards (VMA), where she brought several people from the ballroom scene to perform with her, creating one of the most iconic performances in pop music history. In Madonna’s song, she mentions several famous white personalities and models, who were seen as role models:

Greta Garbo and Monroe
 Deitrich and DiMaggio
 Marlon Brando, Jimmy Dean
 On the cover of a magazine
 Grace Kelly, Harlow, Jean
 Picture of a beauty queen
 Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire
 Ginger Rodgers, dance on air
 They had style, they had grace
 Rita Hayworth gave good face
 Lauren, Katherine, Lana too
 Bette Davis, we love you
 (MADONNA, 1990)

As it can be seen, the lyrics make reference to models, actors, singers, and other famous people, and most of them cited in the song are white, with Caucasian or European ancestry. Almost 30 years after *Vogue*’s debut, Beyoncé released a remix of her song *Break My Soul (The Queens Remix)* to promote her new album *Renaissance*, released in 2022, using a sample from *Vogue* featuring Madonna as well. During the song, we are introduced to the House of Beyoncé, and as the title of her album suggests, Beyoncé makes the song reborn into a different version, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Rosetta Tharpe, Santigold (Vogue)
 Bessie Smith, Nina Simone (Vogue)
 Betty Davis, Solange Knowles
 Badu, Lizzo, Kelly Rowland (You know you can do it)
 Lauryn Hill, Roberta Flack
 Toni, Janet, Tierra Whack
 (Let your body move to the music)
 Missy, Diana, Grace Jones
 Aretha, Anita, Grace Jones (Hey, hey, hey)
 (BEYONCÉ, 2022)

Beyoncé's lyrics, instead, focus on the names of Black celebrities, which highlights that the vogue belongs to the Black queer community. The rewritten version of Beyoncé's *Vogue* song could be seen as calling for the BIPOC community to reclaim the blackness in the ballroom community. By rewriting such a symbolic song, she raises awareness of the necessity of reclaiming back the ball spaces and representation within it. Moreover, in the context of discussing Madonna's song, it is important to consider one of the main criticisms put forward by hooks in her text "Is Paris Burning?". In her article, one of hooks's reflections is on the fact that the narratives of Black queer people were filmed in a problematic way. hooks (p. 149) argues that

The whiteness celebrated in *Paris is Burning* is not just any old brand of whiteness but rather that brutal imperial ruling-class capitalist patriarchal whiteness that presents itself, its way of life as the only meaningful life there is. What could be more reassuring to a white public fearful that marginalized disenfranchised black folks might rise any day now and make revolutionary black liberation struggle a reality than a documentary affirming that colonized, victimized, exploited, -black folks are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure (hooks, p. 149, 1992)

As the author suggests, the documentary seems to stigmatize Black people who were in vulnerable situations by suggesting that their greatest life aspirations would only be focused on reproducing concepts and logic of the capitalist system such as the status quo or the family system, a logic that caused their oppression in that society to begin with. By directing her criticism towards *Paris is Burning* (1990), hooks (1992) questioned how white and Black people watched and perceived themselves while watching the film. According to hooks (1992), *Paris is burning* spectacularized the poverty of Black queer people in the sense that it did not question the whiteness that appropriated spaces in the ballroom scene. In response to hooks' provocative argument, Butler (1993) provides a counter-perspective by emphasizing the "chiasmic nature of subjectivity". According to Butler (1993), subjectivity is not a pre-existing entity or a self-determining "subject", but rather a

complex interplay of discursive forces and cultural collisions. Butler draws on Gloria Anzaldua's concept of the "crossroads" to illustrate this idea (p. 124, 1993)

There is no subject before its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the "we" cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds and fails to proceed.

It is through this "failure" of challenging and subverting the dominant discourses that, according to the author, the subjects will be able to reorganize, as well as resignify terms such as family and gender. In this sense, the possibility of resistance and transformation lies in the ambiguity and openness within the processes of subjectivation. Furthermore, for hooks (1992), the film shows the poverty of Black queer people in a way that, despite representing this community, it does not question the whiteness that has already appropriated that space.

The intersection of hooks' critique (1992), Butler's counter-perspective (1993), and Beyoncé's rewritten *Vogue*' brings forth a comprehensive examination of *Paris is Burning*'s portrayal of Black queer people and the possibilities for resistance and transformation within cultural spaces. In this convergence of debates, we find a compelling perspective of analyzing the possibilities for resistance, transformation, and agency within cultural spaces such as the ballroom culture. By interpellating these perspectives, we are prompted to critically analyze some of the scenes in both films, *Paris is Burning* (1990) and *KIKI* (2016), as well as the meanings that they can produce. Therefore, in this final chapter, I analyze the similarities and contrasts between both films, emphasizing scenes that focus on (1) the representation of queer blackness in the kiki community, and (2) the occupation of spaces by the kiki community as a political act.

4.1.1 Occupying Spaces, reshaping narratives: BIPOC queer representations

The advancement of inequalities caused by the relations of production in capitalism directly affects the lives of marginalized individuals in society, such as queer BIPOC people. Over the recent years, urban centers, including major global cities such as New York, have witnessed the emergence of liberal and conservative forms of urban governance. Within this context, neoliberal policies have aimed to curtail government intervention and promote privatization as well as the gentrification

of public spaces. These policies have had far-reaching effects, reshaping the occupation of spaces, community dynamics, and individual experiences, while also exacerbating systemic surveillance and violence within marginalized communities of BIPOC¹⁸ queer people (MANALANSAN, 2005). One of the effects of these policies relates to the access to spaces in society, whether they are public or private. Concerning the spaces people can access, Massey (1994, p. 5) argues that we live in a “multiplicity of spaces” and each person will access and experience the spaces in a different way according to their subject position, such as gender, race, and class. Moreover, in relation spaces, Massey (1994) suggests that it can be seen as:

not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'. The fact is, however, that social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic. Thus, even to understand space as a simultaneity is, in these terms, not to evacuate it of all inherent dynamism. (1994, p. 5)

In this sense, space cannot be viewed as an absolute and independent dimension. Instead, it should be understood as something that is constructed through social relations. Throughout Massey's perspective, "the spatial" can be seen as the result of the combination of this diversity of social relations with the historical, political, geographical, and economic context. In this way, spaces can be critically analyzed in order to reflect the constant changes in the relations of power as well as social relations within it.

Moreover, with the increase in poverty, the process of gentrification of public spaces such as squares, parks, streets, as well as public transport stations has become common in big cities, in order to allow the billionaires and the rich to live undisturbed by the problems caused by social inequality and poverty caused by the system they defend, which is capitalism. This process of gentrification happens through the utilization of the police force, whereby individuals are removed from these spaces, coercing them to seek alternative regions or even compelling them to leave the city. This relationship between the police and the black community, particularly the most vulnerable, such as those experiencing homelessness, is not a recent phenomenon in history. The police have always acted as an oppressive agent of the State in their lives, whether through unnecessary approaches that continually demonstrate their power over them or through negligence regarding the safety issues

¹⁸ Abbreviation for black, indigenous and people of color used in the United States.

faced by the Black queer community. In this sense, the occupation of public spaces, whether for balls or simply the right to occupy them, becomes a political act, an act of resistance, once this population has historically been denied access to these spaces.

The spaces occupied by subjects from the BIPOC queer community in the ballroom scene and the kiki scene may differ. In both documentaries, we can observe that the occupation of spaces, whether public or private, varies according to the context of the characters and the need to provide a safe location for filming. In this way, the choices of where *Paris* and *KIKI* are filmed, such as intimate and private settings (bedrooms and living rooms) for interviews, can construct different meanings. Such private setting can be seen in the following image (Figure 17), showing Pepper Labeija in a medium-close shot, in which he is in a room with table lamps and the lights illuminate only his face and body. In the image, we can also see many pieces of art such as paintings, and a statue of a pharaoh.

Figure 17: Pepper Labeija in his room



Source: *Paris is Burning* (1990)

A similar scene composition can be seen when we are introduced to the second interviewee, Freddie Pendavis. In the following scene (Figure 18), Freddie is depicted seated on a light-colored sofa in a living room, with a warm yellow light from a table lamp to his right. How the lamp's light illuminates Freddie is also highly reminiscent of the previous figure, as depicted in the image below.

Figure 18: Freddie Pendavis in a Room



Source: *Paris is Burning* (1990)

This format of intimate interviews can be seen throughout *Paris is Burning* (1990), where the subjects are portrayed in settings that are private and enclosed, such as living rooms and bedrooms, usually without natural light. The choice of setting could be a direct reflection of the context in which the documentary was filmed. *Paris* was filmed in the early 1990s when the LGBTQIA+ community in the United States was experiencing the peak of the HIV pandemic. Additionally, there was a lot of hostility in the treatment of queer people during this time, as there was a discourse primarily advocated by Neo-Pentecostal as well as protestant churches, and even by the Catholic Church, that HIV was a result of people's "sinful" lifestyle. House (2012, p. 236) argues that

During the 1980s and 1990s, HIV and AIDS was defined and framed in public consciousness as a "gay disease" by the media and public health institutions. Consequently, social identity categories of "risk/no risk" and "increased risk/limited risk" groups were used to stigmatize PLWHA.⁴¹⁷ Scholars have put forth that the slow responses of religious leaders in addressing HIV/AIDS was due, first and foremost, to the fact that HIV/AIDS in American was first documented among members of the white, gay community. The virus that carries HIV/AIDS was then sexualized as a "gay disease" and thus was not within the purview of religious concerns as the Black faithful were thought not to be a part of the gay community. (2012, p.236).

This thought, when disseminated and combined with misinformation, led many people to treat the queer community in a hostile and violent manner, forcing LGBTQIA+ individuals to live their lives, and hold parties, with some of them engaging in political organizing hidden from society's eyes and the authorities.

Another reading of the choice of setting for the interviews concerns the presence of two Black queer individuals as subjects and the spaces they occupy. The way these subjects are represented, as well as the location in which they are being recorded, i.e. a closed room, highlights how race and class relations occur in society, particularly regarding access to spaces. Thus, by choosing to interview these individuals in private enclosed spaces, the spectator is led to assume that even when participating in a film, these subjects do not have the right to occupy a public space, for the threat of violence is constantly being forced upon these bodies, be it because of their sexuality, their race, or their gender identity. It is relevant to point out, though, that not all moments in which the interviewees appear in *Paris is Burning* are in enclosed spaces. There are indeed external scenes that involve contact with public spaces such as streets and the Pier, which will be discussed later. However, in most of the moments when the interviewees are speaking about their personal lives, aspirations, dreams, and desires, the setting in which they are situated is similar. This choice may have occurred precisely for the protection and well-being of the individuals who were participating, but it also indicates the impossibility for these subjects to be in all social spaces.

While *KIKI* (2016) adopted a similar interview format in some moments, it diverged in terms of the settings chosen to capture the participants' experiences and narratives within the kiki scene. Throughout the movie, three different kinds of spaces can be seen: 1) internal and privately owned public spaces, where the first one would refer to spaces similar to *Paris* such as the living rooms; 2) outside public spaces, such as a public road, a park; and 3) Privately Owned Public Space, such as restaurant and a shoe store and a barber shop. Although both films use internal and private spaces for their interviews, *KIKI* (2016) brings a different approach, by using internal and private spaces with natural and white lighting, indicating that the recordings could happen in daylight, or with a flash of synthetic lighting. The use of different spaces to film such private and public spaces can demonstrate different meanings. Outside public spaces refer to locations that are accessible to the public, such as streets, parks, or public buildings. These spaces provide a more outward-facing perspective, showcasing interactions between individuals and their surroundings. Filming in outside public spaces can capture the dynamics of public life and community interactions, offering a broader context and a sense of the collective experience. This approach allows for a more observational and documentary-style

approach, as filmmakers can document people's actions and behavior in public settings without direct involvement or intrusion. On the other hand, private spaces encompass locations that are not open to the public, such as homes, workplaces, or intimate settings. Hence, filming in these spaces allows for a more personal and intimate portrayal of individuals and their lives. Thus, the choice between internal and private spaces depends on the objectives and storytelling approach of the documentary. Figures 19, 20, and 21 illustrate three moments where this difference happens:

Figure 19: Gia in a living room



Source: KIKI (2016)

Figure 20: Chichi and her friend in a living room



Source: KIKI (2016)

Figure 21: Divo Pink Lady and his friend



Source: KIKI (2016)

The first image shows Gia in a close-up shot and behind her there is a curtain and a vase of flowers. In the second image, Chichi is with her friend and they are sitting on a couch, behind them there is a window with many trophies in front of it. The third image shows Divo Pink Lady¹⁹ and his friend sitting in front of a table, and behind them, there is a bookcase. As can be seen in all images, the lighting in the image is white, and the color palette, composed of earthy tones, such as brown, black, burnt yellow, gray, and orange, dominates the scene.

Thus, the message conveyed by this color palette, as well as by the natural light, appears to be directly linked to the subject's potential existence in the real world. When comparing the images from both films, it can be perceived that in *KIKI* (2016) a sense of naturalization is being transmitted through the image composition. The earthy tones and sunlight-like lighting evoke images of natural spaces, such as mountains, trees, and sunsets. These invoked images directly relate to a sense of stability, something that has always been present and is now being brought to the forefront, without being silenced or concealed. Regarding the interview settings, it can be observed that even though the spaces may appear private, the conveyed message is that these individuals are occupying and asserting their presence in these spaces. This relationship can be perceived through objects seen in the *mise-en-scène* like the bookshelf, representing the appropriation of knowledge and the understanding of their positions within society. In this sense, the use of natural

¹⁹ In 2022 Divo with the House of Yamamoto competed in the third season of the TV show *Legendary* (2019), and became famously recognized by Leyomi Maldonado for his vogue techniques, after presenting a perfect performance of slips and dips.

light and the colors of the composition of the scene, as well as the objects that build it, may suggest an attempt to naturalize these narratives without a stigma or a stereotype, so that they can be humanized, and consequently, recognized as valuable.

The possibility of existing in public spaces is contrasting in both documentaries. This situation can be evidenced through the scenes of the interviews in external spaces and privately owned public spaces in society and day-to-day life. In one of the *KIKI* (2016) scenes, Twiggy travels to his hometown. After a scene with him and ChiChi talking in the car, he appears in the left side of the image, in a restaurant sitting with his mother and Chi Chi as shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22: Twiggy, and his mother and Chi Chi in a restaurant



Source: KIKI (2016)

The scene begins with a close-up of Twiggy putting lipstick on his mother: “Put it on me. I don’t want, I don’t want the gloss”. As the scene goes on, his mother starts to tell the story of Twiggy coming out as gay:

He told me as a teenager, I think. Right? You were in high school. He was in high school. And at that time I thought it was just a phase. And then later when he went to New York. He says “Mom, no, it’s not. It’s not just a phase. I’m gay. I told him I loved him no matter what. I didn’t accept it at first like I should have. I did not, I’ll be honest with you, but like I said, knowledge is a powerful thing, and as I began to research, um, about the LGBT community and gay I do know and I believe in my heart that children can be born gay”. (*KIKI*, 2016)

Twiggy’s mother’s speech lined up with the setting of the restaurant foreshadowing a message of acceptance and embracement of queer people. By bringing these individuals to public spaces and centering their narratives primarily on

the topic of self-acceptance of their sexuality, the documentary conveys the notion that a space of acceptance and inclusivity is being constructed. These changes are seen as instrumental in fostering a shift, albeit small, in the societal treatment of these marginalized subjects. The act of coming out as gay to one's family is often considered one of life's most complex moments for a queer person. In a number of cases, families do not accept the coming out, which can result in the expulsion of the individual from their home. Consequently, by presenting a scene that addresses this topic and incorporates the figure of a "mother," the documentary challenges stigmatization. Another reading can be derived from the contrast of the spaces they are in, the restaurant, which is a public space owned by a private entity. By being in these spaces, utilizing their services, and engaging in personal discussions, it can be perceived that there is a gain in terms of the occupation of spaces by Black people, considering the long history of racial segregation in the United States. In the series *Pose* (2016), a scene is depicted where Elektra is dining with her daughters in a restaurant filled with white people. In the scene, a remark is made by a woman from another table, stating that their conversation is being disrupted during her dinner and that they are not welcome there because they are "men dressed as women." As the scene progresses, one of Elektra's best readings in the series is delivered to the white woman in front of her:

"God may have blessed you with Barbies, a backyard with a pony in it, a boyfriend named Jake, and an unwanted pregnancy that your father paid to terminate so that you could go to college and major in being a basic b-----none of these things make you a woman! [Pauses to sip from her water glass as she holds a finger up.] Your uniform of ill-fitting J. Crew culottes, fake pearls, and 50-cent scrunchies cannot conceal the fact that you do not know who you are. I know our presence threatens you. We fought for our place at this table, and that has made us stronger than you'll ever be. Now, pick your jaw up off the floor and go back to your clam chowder and shallow conversations. My girlfriends and I aren't going anywhere. Y'all heard that?" —(Elektra, in *Pose*, 2016, Season 2, Episode 9)

This scene from *Pose* (2018) as well as from *KIKI* (2016) exemplifies how white individuals felt entitled to question the presence of Black individuals in the same spaces purely based on racial and gender prejudice. In this sense, by being present in the restaurant, Twiggy and her family exemplify that accessing these spaces can also represent progress in the struggle for recognition of their subjects in society.

Not all interviews in *KIKI* (2016) follow the same format as in *Paris*, with close-ups in front of the camera and the person seated speaking. In *KIKI* (2016), we

have several moments where the characters are being interviewed in open and outdoor spaces, as well as during daily activities such as going to a store to buy shoes and extraordinary activities, like Twiggy's visit to the White House, as it can be seen in the following Figure 23.

Figure 23: Twiggy at a True Colors Fund panel



Source: KIKI (2016)

In the scene mentioned, Twiggy appears in the middle of a long-shot. He was invited by his company, “True Colors Fund”²⁰, to watch a speech from President Barack Obama on the issues of the LGBTQIA+ rights, as well as to talk in the panel of his work company. The recordings inside the White House were made in two moments. The first was with a hidden camera, with its framing occurring as Twiggy walks through the place. The second was with the director's camera. After what appears to be a coffee break, the framing and recording change, and we are shown an image of President Obama with Joe Biden in a medium-close shot. The scene might suggest that bringing a prominent figure like the President of the United States to speak about the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals may represent a significant advance in terms of public policies, and this indeed happened during the period.

In this sense, *KIKI* (2016) resists a stigmatizing approach to the representation of BIPOC LGBTQIA+ individuals, by highlighting the advances in terms of rights achieved by the community in the United States, but also by emphasizing the need to challenge the underlying structure of society to ensure lasting change. Concerning the representation of these subjects in terms of race,

²⁰ True Colors Fund is a non-governmental organization that aims to help and support LGBTQIA+ community, especially the homeless and people in situations of precarity.

specifically focusing on the representation of BIPOC LGBTQIA+ individuals, it can be observed that the documentary presents a less stigmatizing approach to these individuals. Hence, as the narrative unfolds in *KIKI* (2016), it raises awareness to the nuances of the queer community in the United States.

Concerning this issue, a couple of questions can be raised: What message is conveyed through the presence of Twiggy in the same space as the President of the United States in the White House? What does this image represent in political terms? An evident message that is conveyed is that there is indeed a sense of occupying these spaces politically. Butler (1993) calls it a “reprimand” in which “the subject not only receives recognition, but attains as well a certain order of social existence in being transferred from an outer region of indifferent, questionable, or impossible being to the discursive or social domain of the subject”. This displacement of spaces becomes symbolic through performance, allowing the subject to subvert their subject condition. In other words, the act of physically moving or changing one's physical location becomes significant in a symbolic sense. It can be seen as an act of resistance or a means of asserting agency and autonomy. Considering this, it could be interpreted that, by being in the same space as someone who embodies the institution of the State and can act as an agent of recognition for those present, Twiggy can utilize this platform to underscore the necessity for rights specifically geared towards their community. This also underscores the importance of creating inclusive spaces with individuals who comprise that group.

Thus, It is necessary to ensure changes by challenging the underlying structure that guides current societies, the way this structure is organized, and consequently, the relations of production and reproduction within capitalism (Marx, 1848). Although performance is argued by Butler (2009) to be a form of political resistance, this performance is not capable, in and of itself, of promoting the necessary changes in the structure of society, once these changes depend on the instances of power such as the government. In this way, the changes need to occur within the political and educational instances, such as in the legislation as well as in the schools, in order to educate and raise awareness about the importance of LGBTQIA+ rights. Furthermore, we must raise awareness regarding the implications of politicians voted by people as well as their political ideology, because when they get elected, most of these conservative and liberal politicians will merely ensure that their campaign sponsors have their guarantees met in Congress. This necessity of

being politically engaged can be seen in *KIKI* (2016), whether by their presence in political spaces such as the presence of Twiggy in the White House, or by the discussions the kiki scene foments, such as the meetings of the kiki coalition, as demonstrated in chapter two. Therefore, by bringing this political discussion as a subject in the film, *KIKI* (2016) evidences this necessity of putting people from the ballroom scene in spaces that can configure an appropriation of power.

This last discussion leads us to the last space that I analyze in this chapter: the pier. The pier holds legendary significance for the ballroom community, serving as both a refuge for those who are rejected from home and a source of income for the sex workers who depend on it for a living. The pier is located in New York, at Christopher Street, and it is known as “pier queens” or “pier kids”, and apart from being a space for gathering people and a refuge, it was also the place where Martha P. Johnson disappeared. Martha was one of the most prominent figures in the LGBTQIA+ movement. With her friend Sylvia, they resisted over police repression during the Stonewall Riots, in New York.

The significance of the pier can be seen in the opening scenes of the film *Paris* (1991) when Pepper comments on the children of the ballroom and their life situation. Pepper mentions that "they don't have two of nothing, some of them don't even eat, they come to the ball starving, and they sleep in the under-21 or they sleep on the pier, or whatever". In analyzing Pepper's statement, he begins by saying "They don't have two of nothing", implying a profound lack of necessities and resources in their lives. This phrase elucidates the extreme deprivation and poverty experienced by these individuals, highlighting the depth of their struggles in being homeless children. He further emphasizes their dire situation by mentioning that "some of them don't even eat." This information brings attention to the severity of their hunger and the heartbreaking reality that, due to their situation, some of these children are unable to afford regular meals. It underscores the daily struggle they face to meet their most basic needs. Despite their hunger and deprivation, Pepper reveals that these individuals still gather at the ballroom events, stating, "They come to the ball starving." This sentence carries a profound message about the significance of the ballroom scene in their lives. For them, the balls represent a space of solace, self-expression, and community, where they find support and belonging even in the face of adversity. Moreover, Pepper's speech takes a poignant turn when he mentions their sleeping arrangements, stating, "They sleep the under-21 or they

sleep on the pier, or whatever” where “sleeping in the under-21” would refer to seeking shelter or sleeping in space intended for underage individuals, suggesting that they find refuge wherever they can, even in unconventional locations. Thus, the pier can be understood as a space that highlights social class inequality and the destabilizing situation that many queer youth experience in their lives. By becoming a refuge for many, the pier becomes a politically contested space, where the subjects present may face violent repercussions from potential efforts to evict them from occupying these spaces.

The police oppression resulting from the occupation of the pier can be seen when we analyze the scenes of *KIKI* (2016). The following image (Figure 24) shows a medium-close shot with Chichi and Twiggy talking, and in their background, there is a big green lawn, with buildings and several traffic lights, as well as light poles, as well as police siren lights on the right side of the shot.

Figure 24: Chichi and Twiggy talking on the pier



Source: *KIKI* (2016)

Although there is no specific scene depicting the presence of the police themselves, the fact that the lights from a police car's siren appear in the background (Figure 24) of the pier evidences the tension that exists in that location. Moreover, these spaces tension the intersectionality of race and class. Given that the United States has a history of racial segregation, the heavy policing in this region might demonstrate who the State defends, which in this case are wealthy white individuals, and also reveals who they oppress, specifically BIPOC individuals. This draws our

attention to what hooks (1992) points out about how the narratives of these individuals cannot be romanticized. Even though *KIKI* (2016) was filmed a long time after *Paris*, (1991), the presence of the police can still be perceived, whether by the physical appearance in the scenes, or by controlling access to these public spaces. Therefore, it is precisely through the occupation and disobedience of places such as the pier, that this tension will be generated. As a result of this act, this space is resignified, gaining not only a symbolic aspect but also political and social relevance.

Within the kiki community, the pier serves as a significant space for emotional support, facilitating the development of connections and fostering a sense of affection among its members. The following image (Figure 25) shows Twiggy after talking with Chichi, hugging and greeting everyone who is sitting in front of the Pier.

Figure 25: Twiggy greeting the kiki community



Source: *KIKI* (2016)

Twiggy's gesture can be interpreted as an act of community-building and inclusivity within the kiki scene. By embracing and acknowledging each individual present, Twiggy reinforces a sense of belonging and unity, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal connections and support within the marginalized community. His gesture challenges the prevailing societal norms that often marginalize and isolate queer individuals, particularly those who are BIPOC, showing the transformative power of kinship and solidarity in fostering resilience and resistance within the kiki community. In addition to that, Twiggy's hugging and greeting can be seen as a visual symbol of love, acceptance, and camaraderie,

where the physical contact might signify a bond between individuals and communicates a sense of warmth, care, and emotional support. The act of greeting everyone showcases an inclusive attitude, breaking down barriers and creating a welcoming atmosphere. Through these imagetic symbols, the scene conveys a message of community cohesion, emphasizing the significance of interpersonal connections and affirming the value of each individual's presence within the kiki scene.

In conclusion, the analysis of the documentaries "*Paris is Burning*" and "*KIKI*" sheds light on the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality concerning the occupation of spaces by BIPOC queer individuals. The choice of settings for interviews and scenes reflects the historical, political, and social context in which these films were produced, as well as the experiences and challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Paris is Burning (1990) captured the experiences of BIPOC queer individuals in New York City during the early 1990s. The intimate and private settings chosen for interviews, such as living rooms and bedrooms, reflect the need for safety and protection in a society that marginalized and stigmatized LGBTQIA+ individuals. These enclosed spaces also highlight the limited access to public spaces for the subjects, reinforcing the systemic violence and discrimination they faced based on their sexuality, race, and gender identity. In contrast, "*KIKI*" (2016) expands on the representation of BIPOC queer communities by showcasing a wider range of spaces, including public roads, parks, and privately owned public spaces. The use of natural lighting and the inclusion of public settings provide a more outward-facing perspective, capturing the interactions between individuals and their surroundings. This approach emphasizes the collective experience and community dynamics within the kiki scene, while still acknowledging the importance of private and intimate spaces in revealing personal narratives and aspirations. The analysis of space in these documentaries aligns with the arguments of geographer Doreen Massey (2005), who suggests that space is not an independent dimension but rather constructed through social relations. The occupation of public and private spaces becomes a political act and an act of resistance for marginalized communities that historically had their access denied to these spaces.

In conclusion, the exploration of space in "*Paris is Burning*" (1990) and "*KIKI*" (2016) serves as a reliable source through which we can examine the complex

dynamics of power, representation, and social relations. It highlights the need for inclusive and equitable access to spaces for marginalized communities, challenging the systemic inequalities perpetuated by capitalism and neoliberal urban governance. By amplifying the voices and experiences of BIPOC queer individuals, these documentaries contribute to the ongoing struggle for social justice and the recognition of the multifaceted identities within LGBTQIA+ communities.

5 FINAL REMARKS

In my final remarks, I present the overall conclusions of this thesis as well as suggestions for future researchers on the topic.

The kiki scene, like the ballroom scene, is a political space of resistance for the LGBTQIA+ community. As we could evidence through this thesis, the kiki scene is providing a space for youth to advocate and fight against historical oppression of capitalism such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism. One of the devices used to fight these oppressions is the occupation of spaces through performance. The performance in the kiki scene is a political act once it questions as well as interrogates the social norms of society. As *Paris* portrayed, for decades the queer community struggled with safeness and lack of protection. Due to this context, many queer people had to live their lives in the shadows to survive. Although *KIKI* (2016) does not focus on the issue of safety and protection, specifically in public spaces, it depicts a different scenario, where this population has access to enter as well as to use these spaces, by producing kiki balls to create relations, affection and intimacy within its members. Thus, as a political space, the kiki scene holds symbolic and historical relevance within queer history and the ballroom scene.

The kiki scene resignifies the concepts as well as the historical spaces of the ballroom scene. As we could perceive in this thesis, by building upon the foundations laid by the ballroom culture, the kiki community portrayed in *KIKI* (2016) brings new perspectives from those established in *Paris is Burning* (1990). One of the concepts resignified is family. Throughout the documentary, we are presented with different compositions of family, such as birth families and chosen families. The incorporation of different family organizations adds to the concept of the ball families, which can differ according to each house, as well as each context of the contestant. By exposing a different variety of families, we are invited to reflect that, in society, many

families can be built in a different configuration, and the families of the kiki scene do not run for that diversity.

The Pier, which is a symbolic space for the queer community and the kiki community as well, is one of the most political spaces within the ball scene. In most of the times that the Pier appears in the scene, affection, love, and support is being shown. After being a space for survival such as for the homeless and the sex workers in the 1990s, now the Pier is even more essential, because it is the space where relations are built and conceived, as it can be seen in figures 24 and 25. Hence, being the space that allows the construction of these relations of affection, the Pier is no longer just a political space of refuge for queer people, but a politicized space, of representativity in the fight for the rights of these people to occupy these spaces, to exist, to have a story and be seen by society.

The documentary *KIKI* (2016) provides evidence that the kiki scene is a space that reflects the power of resilience and creativity of the LGBTQIA+ community. It paves the way for a new renaissance, one that amplifies and celebrates the diverse voices and experiences that have long been marginalized. By challenging norms, rewriting narratives, and centering marginalized communities, the kiki scene inspires us to imagine a future where everyone's stories and identities are valued and embraced.

The choice of setting in the documentaries *Paris is Burning* and *KIKI* reflects the dynamics of access to spaces experienced by BIPOC queer individuals. During *KIKI* (2016) we are introduced to many different people that build the kiki scene doing daily activities such as work, or cutting hair, or buying a shoe. Hence, the choice of setting in the documentaries *Paris is Burning* and *KIKI* reflects the dynamics of access to spaces experienced by BIPOC queer individuals. While both films feature interviews conducted in intimate and private spaces, *Paris is Burning* primarily focuses on enclosed settings, possibly reflecting the historical context of the 1990s, marked by the peak of the HIV pandemic and hostility towards the queer community. These enclosed spaces highlight the challenges and threats faced by marginalized individuals in occupying public spaces freely.

Thus, the queer body is a political statement. As we could see, Gia Marie Love suffered an aggression simply by walking the streets (figure 5). Through their performances, individuals in the kiki scene reclaim agency by using their bodies as a powerful medium of expression, challenging conventional notions surrounding

gender, sexuality, and beauty. The performances witnessed within the kiki scene go beyond mere entertainment: they carry a profound political and symbolic meaning that their body is theirs, and they would do whatever they want with it because the body is their political statement. Hence, bodies become a tool of resistance, a means of reclaiming authorship over their own narratives, and a defiant rejection of the limitations imposed by a heteronormative society.

KIKI (2016) depicts the reappropriation of BIPOC protagonism in the occupation of spaces as well as resignifies its representation. As mentioned in this thesis, most of the representations of the BIPOC queer in the documentary attempt to destigmatize them. Through the scenes described in Figures 08, 09, and 11, we can perceive how Gia, as a Black transgender woman, breaks away from a stereotypical narrative associated with individuals like her. As elucidated by hooks (1981), two prevailing stereotypes can emerge: the seductive woman, and the strong and resistant woman. According to her, these roles can be detrimental, as they tend to stigmatize as well as overlook the ramifications of racism and sexism against Black women. Moreover, the idea of strength, when applied to Black women, often implies an ability to endure oppression rather than to overcome it. Concerning the concept of strength, hooks (1981) argues that the strong Black woman archetype can be pernicious, as it diverges from the struggles encountered by white women who sought to reject the confines of being seen as mere breeders, burden bearers, or sexual objects. Instead, Black women were extolled for their unwavering dedication to motherhood. These stereotypes, deeply entrenched in society, perpetuate distorted depictions of Black women and contribute to the perpetuation of ideologies that perpetually undervalue their worth. By drawing a parallel between Gia's embodiment in the ballroom scene and the stereotypes imposed upon Black women, we were able to critically understand some of the challenges faced by individuals who live in her subject position.

Gia, Twiggy, and Chichi, as well as the other members portrayed in the film can be considered legendary children by the BIPOC queer community. By telling their stories, like many others did in *Paris is burning*, they put themselves on the same legacy as those who came before. For instance, as I previously argued, Gia acknowledges the trans woman who came before her. The acknowledgement they receive is the same recognition she must receive when we talk about the kiki scene and the ballroom as well. Thus, Gia's role in the kiki scene is undeniably pertinent,

because she can represent the voices of her brothers and sisters, the trans community, which as I already discussed, was always the protagonist in the LGBTQIA+ fights.

Gia is the embodiment of the ballroom scene. Throughout the documentary, we can observe how her embodiment is made visible, whether through her performance in the kiki balls or through the narrative she presents to us. Gia's embodiment can be seen as an act of resistance, reclaiming agency and challenging the prescribed narratives that seek to constrain Black women. Gia's physical presence in the ballroom scene and the embodiment of her identity as a Black trans woman challenge societal norms and expectations. By proudly expressing herself through her appearance, movements, and performances in the kiki balls, Gia defies the limited and oppressive notions of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Gia's performance becomes a symbol of resistance as it disrupts and challenges dominant power structures. In a society that marginalizes and discriminates against queer and marginalized communities (hooks, 1995), Gia's unapologetic existence and self-expression serves as a form of defiance. Through her visibility and representation, she becomes a powerful tool for challenging societal norms and asserting the agency of historically marginalized individuals. Through her personal stories and experiences, she sheds light on the realities and struggles faced by queer individuals, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. By sharing her journey and highlighting the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, Gia challenges societal misconceptions and stereotypes, fostering understanding, empathy, and ultimately, resistance against oppressive systems.

Gia's narrative can be evidence of how it is to be a Black trans woman in the 21st century, as well as it breaks with the stigma under its representation. As a Black trans woman, Gia, confronts the challenges of racism, transphobia, and sexism simultaneously. Her story, as I discussed in chapter two, exemplifies a deeper understanding of the unique struggles faced by individuals who are often marginalized within both the Black community and the LGBTQIA+ community, highlighting the need for inclusive and intersectional approaches to social justice. In addition, by being critically aware of her subject condition, Gia used the film as a platform to advocate for her community. By doing it, she puts herself in the same space as Crystal, Pepper, Dorian, and Venus. The recognition she received made her become not only a legendary child, but also a *phenomenal woman*.

The powerful and empowering poem from Maya Angelou *Phenomenal Woman* (1978) resonates with Gia's performance in life. Throughout this thesis, it was possible to see that both the poetry, and the discussion of Gia's representation in the documentary, evidence how Gia is resilient, resistant, and politically active. In the following stanzas of *Phenomenal Woman*, Angelou synthesizes why this phenomenal woman does not bow to others.

Now you understand
 Just why my head's not bowed.
 I don't shout or jump about
 Or have to talk real loud.
 When you see me passing,
 It ought to make you proud.
 I say,
 It's in the click of my heels,
 The bend of my hair,
 the palm of my hand,
 The need for my care.
 'Cause I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me. (Maya Angelou, 1978)

Gia embodies the *phenomenal woman* described by Angelou. She not only defies limitations, but she challenges social norms and asserts her worth and agency as a Black transgender woman in the 21st century through her performance on the kiki balls, through her performance in daily life, and through her critical and political engagement. Gia's unwavering self-acceptance and confidence reflect the powerful message of embracing one's individuality, regardless of societal expectations that is evoked in the poem. Her resilience and empowerment in the face of challenges demonstrate her determination to rise above adversity and become a voice of strength for the transgender community. Furthermore, Gia's transformative influence disrupts harmful stereotypes and reshapes perceptions, paving the way for a more inclusive and understanding society. Finally, Gia's celebration of her trans identity serves as a powerful statement of self-affirmation and encourages others in the LGBTQIA+ community to embrace and take pride in their identities. Thus, by leaving a lasting impact on those who encounter her story and challenging societal norms along the way,

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