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Queerness as Sociopolitical Resistance”

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1 Introduction

Almost 30 years after the release of *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990), a documentary film on underground ballroom culture of the 1980s, the documentary film *Kiki* (Sara Jordenö, 2016) and the documentary series *My House* (ViceLand, 2018) offer—otherwise scarce—nonscripted media representations of contemporary underground ballroom culture in the United States. Underground ballroom culture describes communities, social spheres, and ball events where mostly black LGBTQI+ people meet who face substantial marginalization and consider themselves social outcasts due to the intersection of their nonwhite skin color/ethnicity with their nonheteronormative sexual orientation or their transgender identity, or both (Bailey, “Performance as Invention” 254). *Kiki* and *My House*’s representations of contemporary underground ballroom culture have not received any academic attention so far and are the focus of this thesis. Specifically, I analyze the ways in which ballroom culture in *Kiki* and *My House* embodies queerness and how these embodiments of queerness are represented as sociopolitical resistance against the intersecting normalized social identity categories of gender, sexuality, and skin color/ethnicity and the structural marginalizations that result from them.

Queer theory offers a range of lenses to analyze the media depiction of contemporary underground ballroom culture and its sociopolitical agenda. I argue that *Kiki* and *My House* represent ballroom culture in its entity, its kinship system and social gatherings, as well as its members’ ball performances, lifestyles, and on-screen behavior as embodiments of propositions made by notable queer theorists. These theorists maintain that identity categories like gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are socially constructed or established through the ongoing repetition of normalized and hegemonic gendered, sexual, and racialized acts which categorize people according to dichotomies like masculine vs. feminine, homosexual vs. heterosexual, or black vs. white and that such social identity constructs should be contested through the exposure of their performative and exclusionary nature (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 209; Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 196). The representation in the documentaries of contemporary underground ballroom culture as an embodiment of queer-theoretical propositions lays bare, I suggest, the struggle of queer activism that, on the one hand, envisions a world where social identity categories

have lost their influence (Ford 122) and, on the other hand, relies on and even reproduces such categories for sociopolitical reasons (Butler, *Bodies* 229; Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 196; Cohen 46). I assert that the ballroom communities in *Kiki* and *My House* epitomize alternative queer worlds where social identity categories have lost their influence; these worlds function as safe spaces for marginalized and oppressed black LGBTQI+ people to resist sociopolitical norms and perform their self-elected gendered and sexual identities. However, they are also fighting grounds that rely on and reproduce normalized social identity categories to destabilize these identity categories—with the envisioned queer goal of establishing a societal system outside such categories. Additionally, I show, ballroom culture in the documentaries does not fully break from social identity categories to interrogate the intersecting marginalizations that the black LGBTQI+ community members face due to their nonconformity with such social identity categories—with the goal of finding ways to demand political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people in the existing societal system.

According to Marlon M. Bailey, a ballroom culture researcher and former active member of the ballroom scene, the intersection of ballroom culture's members' nonwhite skin color/ethnicity with their nonheteronormative sexual orientation and/or transgender identity sets apart the ballroom community from other queer communities where the category of skin color/ethnicity is frequently not considered to be of particular relevance and where, consequently, black LGBTQI+ people do not find appropriate representation "Gender/Racial Realness" 375). For this reason, the ballroom scene has become an essential safety net for many black LGBTQI+ people in the U.S., since—in addition to discriminations they face due to their nonheteronormative sexual orientation and/or transgender identity—they are disproportionately discriminated against in various areas of life based solely on their skin color/ethnicity (Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness" 367-368; "Performance as Intravention" 261-262). Ballroom culture has developed from the position that "[t]he constant threat of gender and sexual violence that Black queer people endure in both public and private spheres should not be ignored" (Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness" 374).

What started in Harlem, NYC in the 1920s as "Faggots Balls," where mostly white gay and transgender people performed as "impersonators," has developed in the 20th century into what today is known as ballroom culture, which consists of predominantly

nonwhite people (Monforte 28). There are two constitutive dimensions of contemporary ballroom culture: houses and balls. Houses are social constructs with familial characteristics where house members receive support, advice, and a sense of community; in some cases, members even live in spaces provided by houses (Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness" 367). These houses are led by "mothers" and "fathers"; apart from their roles as parental figures who "provide guidance and life skills for their 'children,'" they "recruit, socialize, and prepare their protégés" for performances at balls (Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness" 367-368). Balls are "competitive and celebratory performance events" that include the presentation of "performative gender and sexual identities, vogue and theatrical performances, and [...] fashion and physical attributes" (Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness" 368). People that "walk a ball" are mostly members of recognized houses who must only walk in categories for which they are eligible based on their gender/sexual identity in the realm of ballroom culture (Bailey, "Performance as Invention" 261).

Traditionally, the gender/sexual identity system comprises six options:

- Butch queens (biologically born male[s] who identify as gay or bisexual)
 - Femme queens (male to female transgender people or at various stages of gender reassignment—that is, hormonal and/or surgical processes)
 - Butch queens up in drags (gay males that perform drag but do not take hormones and who do not live as women)
 - Butches (female to male transgender people or at various stages of gender reassignment or masculine lesbian or a female appearing as male regardless of sexual orientation)
 - Women (biologically born females who are gay or straight identified or queer)
 - Men (biologically born males who live as men and are straight identified).
- ("Performance as Invention" 260)

According to Bailey, apart from this system's relevance at ball events, it is "the basis of all Ballroom subjectivities [and] familial roles"; butch queens, femme queens, and women serve as "mothers," while butch queens, butches, and men serve as "fathers" ("Engendering Space" 491-492). Although, as Bailey notes, this system is not entirely independent from normalized social identity categories, "it offers more gender and sexual identities from which to choose than available to members in the 'outside' world" ("Engendering Space" 492).

At balls, people compete against one another in various predefined categories, and they are only allowed to walk in categories for which they are eligible based on their gender/sexual identity in the realm of ballroom culture (Bailey, "Performance as

Intravention” 261). All participants represent the respective houses to which they belong while they are “judged on how effective [sic] they act, dress, and walk” based on the category (Bailey, “Engendering Space” 493). Judges are usually “successful competitors in the Ballroom scene on local or national levels” who are selected by the respective house that organizes a ball (Bailey, “Engendering Space” 499). At the end of a ball, the best performers have the chance to win cash prizes and trophies (Bailey, “Performance as Intravention” 270). According to Jonathan Jackson, “[t]he ritual of the Ball is the time and space when community members most embrace *their own* gendered and sexual meanings” (27, original emphasis).

A crucial part of ball performances and community members’ social practices outside the ball events is voguing. Vogue is a dance that is inspired by “the language of modeling and fashion” (Moore 148), which is predominantly “[w]hite, visually-focused, and commodified” (Jackson 38), as well as by traditionally African dances (Bailey, “Labor of Diaspora” 101-102). Both at fashion shows and balls, for people who “walk the runway,” it is “always about selling it, whatever you’re selling, and making an audience believe the fantasy” (Moore 154). While in the fashion industry, this “selling” is a capitalist practice to convince buyers of clothing, in ballroom culture, people who vogue “sell,” or rather convince other people of their “fabulous queer self” (Moore 152). Vogue consists of five basic steps, which “[m]embers are not *told* [...] all at once at any one time, [but] they *learn* the criteria over time” (Jackson 36-37, original emphasis). Also, there are various movements in voguing that typically represent masculinity or femininity and that through “cutting and mixing,” can embody gender performativity (Bailey, “Labor of Diaspora” 102-103). On top, in order to impress the judges and spectators at balls, the voguers have to adopt individual features and styles (Jackson 36). According to Bailey, “the ultimate goal for each performer in a vogue battle is to execute the elements of vogue in a fashion that distinguishes him from his opponent” (“Engendering Space” 502)¹.

HIV/AIDS has substantially impacted the underground ballroom community and is still one of the most pressing sociopolitical issues that concern the community members. Not only have LGBTQI+ people in general frequently been stigmatized due to the general public assumption that HIV/AIDS is an LGBTQI+ disease but the ballroom community itself

¹How vogue operates as the queer strategy that Muñoz calls “disidentification,” which has the potential to destabilize the norms of majoritarian culture, will be discussed in chapter 2.3.

has also been labeled a place of “unsafe sex practices”—even by some health care specialists; this stigmatization causes many ballroom members to have reservations about seeking help from the medical community (Rowan et al. 474). Ballroom culture and houses, in contrast, are deemed a “refuge from [...] stigma” and “a place of unconditional love and acceptance” (Galindo 297). The house structure’s kinship system, which is based upon trust and mutual respect, allows house parents to “provide daily parental guidance for Ballroom kids on issues such as intimate romantic relationships, sex, gender and sexual identities, health, hormonal therapy, and body presentation” (Bailey, “Performance as Invention” 267). Also, ballroom culture includes HIV prevention work in its ball events (Bailey, “Performance as Invention” 267-268).

Overall, underground ballroom culture unites “spatial practices and ritual performances [...] to foster a sense of belonging, safety, and sociocultural affirmation (albeit brutally competitive at times)” (Bailey, “Engendering Space” 502). How such practices and performances are represented in *Kiki* and *My House* will be addressed in my analyses in chapters three and four.

Before these analyses, chapter two provides a theorization of nonwhite queer gender performativity and a discussion of the marginalizations that black LGBTQI+ people face. First, I delineate various queer-theoretical propositions made by theorists like Judith Butler, Cathy Cohen, Marlon M. Bailey, José Muñoz, and Heather Love. Specifically, I analyze these propositions’ potential—also in the context of underground ballroom culture—to help, on the one hand, destabilize social identity categories and fight, on the other hand, for political and social equality for marginalized groups. Then, particular focus is attributed to Butler’s notion of gender performativity, which illustrates the constructed nature of the binary gender performances of masculinity and femininity, and which aids in comprehending the heteropatriarchal system that marginalizes people—such as members of ballroom culture—who do not conform with binary gender performances and with heterosexuality. The last part of chapter two is dedicated to the marginalizations and oppressions that black LGBTQI+ people face, and to the question of why mainstream LGBTQI+ politics often automatically exclude black LGBTQI+ people. A summary of black queer-theoretical propositions that outline practices to fight against the specific marginalizations of black LGBTQI+ people concludes chapter two.

In chapters three and four, I analyze how the documentary film *Kiki* and the documentary series *My House* represent ballroom culture as invoking a “shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (Cohen 43) and “willfully disavow[ing] that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the ‘real’ [...] through strategies of iteration and reiteration” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 196) in order to resist sociopolitical norms. *Kiki* and *My House* emphasize different aspects in their representations of underground ballroom culture; hence, my analyses exhibit different foci.

Kiki depicts the young generation within the New York City ballroom community and focuses predominantly on the challenges and marginalizations that the members face as well as on the macrostructural community elements—such as the kinship structure, social gatherings, and balls. I observe that these elements represent ballroom culture as a “not-yet” where “queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet” 365) and that opposes “not only the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture” (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 161).

My House, which depicts the adult group of NYC ballroom culture, also thematizes macrostructural elements but places a substantial focus on the microstructural elements such as certain ball categories, voguing, and ball performances. Additionally, it represents the community within a capitalist context and addresses its subjects’ views on reproductive maturity. I observe that the ballroom community overrides “the presumption that biological and sexual relations structure kinship centrally” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 26) and embodies that “performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternative views of the world [which] are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 195).

The conclusion summarizes my findings, addresses the lack of black queer people in the production of *Kiki* and *My House*, and suggests future research directions regarding the representation of black queerness as sociopolitical resistance in visual media.

2 Theorizing Nonwhite Queer Gender Performativity

2.1 The Potential of Queer Theory

Underground ballroom culture represents a continuing struggle between the two poles of queer theory: on the one hand, claiming a vision of a world outside social identity categories such as skin color, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as, by extension, outside sociopolitically prescribed norms based on such social identity categories; on the other hand, relying on social identity categories to destabilize them and fight for the complete political and social equality regarding these categories which are often the basis for the constitution of and even common descriptors within underground ballroom communities. The following chapter explores this struggle by providing an overview of various propositions and positions within queer theory, discussing queer theory's aspirations and limitations, and theorizing identity construction within the underground ballroom culture.

Queer theory originates from the discourse developed by post-structuralist scholars like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, who maintain that normalized, patterned, and institutionalized dichotomies such as masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual, black skin color/white skin color—not biological dispositions—are the basis for the creation of majoritarian and hegemonic identity descriptions. They argue that identity categories like gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity should be regarded as social constructs rather than biological conditions. Queer theory acknowledges this idea of identity categories as social constructs (Cohen 23), but it seeks ways to live outside them so as to establish a world where all people are equal and social identity conventions have lost their influence (Ford 122). Queer theorists have developed various—often considerably varying—ideas on what queerness is in the first place, what a queer world would look like, and to what extent or rather end it can or should be realized.

In the past decades, some theorists have developed queer-theoretical propositions that heavily rely on intersectionality theory. Cathy Cohen, a prominent queer theorist, in 1997, aims at examining the concept of queer to investigate “how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate and police the lives of most people” (25). She maintains that “[o]nly by recognizing the link between the ideological, social, political, and economic marginalization [...] can we begin to develop political analyses and political strategies

effective in confronting the linked yet varied sites of power” (47) with the ultimate goal of constructing “a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all” (25). From a contemporary point of view, Cohen employs what Kevin Duong refers to as “critical intersectionality” to explore queerness. Critical intersectionality seeks to elucidate “concealed structural processes and historical conditions of unfreedom” for people to be able to emancipate themselves from such oppressive structures (Duong 378). Cohen’s understanding of queer theory—which is further discussed in chapter 2.3—is crucial in the analysis of the representation of underground ballroom culture, since people in the ballroom community face oppression due to “linked yet varied sites of power,” that is, the intersection of their nonnormative gender, sexuality, and skin color. Cohen’s proposition is different from gay and lesbian studies, a queer sub-discipline that focuses on adapting LGBTQI+ people’s rights to non-LGBTQI+ people’s rights so as to, as Richard Ford puts it, “merge so seamlessly and imperceptibly into mainstream institutions that it seems impossible to imagine it could ever have been any other way” (122). From a contemporary point of view again, the proposition of normalizing LGBTQI+ rights can be likened to what Duong calls “descriptive representation intersectionality,” which focuses on people’s sociopolitically ascribed adherence to demographic groups and on how excluded people can be included into majoritarian society (373). This form of queer theory—which operates within the field of gay and lesbian studies and, therefore, limits itself to the reworking of purely sexual norms—is widely criticized within queer studies since, as the influential contemporary queer theorist José Muñoz argues, this attempt at “naturalizing” LGBTQI+ rights is the mere “aping of traditional straight relationality,” which supports majoritarian ideologies (*Cruising Utopia* 21). The main element in which queer theory and activism in general and (even contemporary) gay and lesbian studies and activism differ is the rejection of all socially prescribed identity categories in general by the former as opposed to the willingness of the latter to accept such identity categories and to merely normalize minoritarian ones (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 20-21). This willingness is, as addressed in *Kiki*, and as pointed out by various black queer theorists whose propositions are discussed later in this thesis, considerably detrimental to black LGBTQI+ people.

What defines contemporary queer theory is its utopianism and its belief in queer communities—founded on common politics—that view themselves as such. In this

respect, Ford states that “queer denotes not an identity but instead a political and existential stance, an ideological commitment, a decision to live outside some social norm or other” (123). For him, “queer theory [...] seeks the sublime not in resistance,” but by “bullying, razzing, and mocking social conventions until it’s hard to imagine them in the same way. So queer theory has always had a potentially broad applicability” (122). According to the highly influential gender and queer theorist Judith Butler, drag—one of the identity categories in ballroom performance—is a way in which social conventions can be contested because it “mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (*Gender Trouble* 186). My analysis shows that in the representation of contemporary underground ballroom culture, this mocking of social identity conventions is presented as a powerful subversive tool. Coming back to Ford, his poignant description of the attempts of queer theorists and activists at abandoning social identity constructs and conventions illustrates the rigor with which queer people aim at establishing a world in which all people are equal and social identity conventions have lost their influence. This process of abandonment is what Muñoz (*Disidentifications* 195-196) and Duong (378-380) refer to as “queer world making.” For Muñoz, this world making

delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternative views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people. Oppositional counterpublics are enabled by visions, ‘worldviews,’ that reshape as they deconstruct reality. (*Disidentifications* 195-196)

In my analysis, I identify the depiction of performances inside and outside balls (in Muñoz’s words, “theatrical and everyday rituals”) as an attempt at establishing such “alternative views of the world.” Based on his own arguments, Muñoz deduces that queerness is an “ideality” and a “structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present”; his main argument is that “[q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (*Cruising Utopia* 1)—regardless of any identity categories. Similarly, for Duong, queer world making is “an expression of a vision of justice by a collective that claims this vision without any grounds to guarantee or underwrite such a thing” (380). In other words, queer world making is an expression of a vision that claims an imagined world of equal opportunity; it is a political vision of a potential utopian world

order in people's minds. Another crucial factor that Muñoz and Duong have identified within contemporary queer theory is people's own ability and right to self-identify as queer in a political way. Contemporary queer theory places substantial importance on people's agency to claim their queerness. Duong, in this respect, argues that queer theory views queerness as a "successful effect of a political claim" instead of as a description of a demographic group or a "determined product of persistent structures" (378), like gay and lesbian studies and early queer theorists such as Cohen do. Similarly, Muñoz describes queerness as a "collective political becoming" (*Cruising Utopia* 189). Based on these propositions of what queer theory does or seeks to do, it becomes clear that contemporary queer theory—contrary to popular belief—is not only concerned with abandoning social constructs of sexual identity but also with various other notions which are considered to be socially constructed, such as

race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nation, [...] affect, citizenship, the death drive, diaspora, digitality, disability, empire, friendship, globalization, the impersonal, indirection, kinship, living underground, loss, marginality, melancholia, migration, neoliberalism, pedagogy, performativity, publicity, self-shattering, shame, shyness, sovereignty, subversion, temporality, and terrorism. (Love 182)

Therefore, for Heather Love, queer theory is meant to "bring together a range of social outsiders united against the 'regimes of the normal'" (183).

However, queer theory's vision for people to live outside all socially and societally constructed identity categories can, for now, only remain a desirable vision. In the case of sexual identity, Love warns that "[q]ueer theorizing that calls for the elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival" (184). Similarly, Ford makes a case for the social construct of blackness/race. He maintains that "[a]lienated and isolated individuals crave belonging. Race supplies these; provided everyone keeps to the script, you can count on a community in almost any unfamiliar setting" (125).² Love and Ford's arguments are, I maintain, very much in line with descriptions of queerness as an "ideality" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1) and as a mere "vision" in people's minds to ultimately abandon all these prescribed identity categories (Duong 380), since it seems problematic to think of queer theory in terms of immediately

²Possibilities for the deconstruction of the concept of blackness/race within queer theory will be discussed in chapter 2.3.

wanting to abandon all established socially constructed identity categories without also considering its goal to unite people who consider themselves to be queer based on shared experiences of exclusion and/or estrangement from majoritarian society; such experiences, today, are still frequently caused by social identity categories (Love 184; Ford 125). Following Love and Ford's observations that individual people often long for a sense of community based on hegemonic society's social identity categories (184; 125), I demonstrate in my analysis of the representation of contemporary ballroom culture in *Kiki* and *My House* that many queer theorists' proposed goal to abandon all social categories and all socially constructed identities is not presented as realizable, since their complete abandonment would, as Love finds, leave many struggling individuals in a state of complete isolation without perspective (154). Consequently, it seems, real change—an abandonment of all socially constructed identity categories—can only take place *as soon as* all such existing identity categories are, in fact, politically and societally equal; only then, it appears, all socially constructed identity categories can be abandoned without alienating individuals. Therefore, with respect to the social category of sexual identity, traditional LGBTQI+ activists “who are trying to escape painful histories of pathologization, who want to be considered ‘normal,’ [...] who are demanding [...] equal civil rights” and who are, because of this agenda, seen as traitors by radical queer theorists and activists (Ruti 1), find allies in queer theorists like Ford and Love who warn against a complete abandonment of all socially constructed identity categories.

Butler, too, concerns herself with the question of how queer transformational politics can be realized and of how total equality can be achieved if not through the categorization and specific protection and systemic equalization of social minority groups. She maintains that movements that seek to “maximize the protection and the freedom” of defined social minority groups—whether that be sexual, gender, racial, ethnic, or other minorities—are indeed important factors in the fight for equality (*Undoing Gender* 21). However, she also maintains that a complete reliance on such movements does not aid in transgressing the boundaries of the normal (*Undoing Gender* 26). It is therefore necessary, Butler explains, to find “the conditions by which the object field is constituted, and [...] *the limits* of those conditions”; at these limits, the “real,” or rather the norm, can be contested and the “unreal” can take its place, which entails that “something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place” (*Undoing Gender* 27, original

emphasis). She goes on to state that this contesting of the “real” is a “work of phantasy” (*Undoing Gender* 28), which is, again, in line with descriptions of queerness as an “ideality” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1) and as a “vision” in people’s minds (Duong 380). How this “work of phantasy” can, according to Butler, manifest itself in real life with regard to gender, I will elaborate in the following chapter on gender performativity.

Coming back to the initial question of how queer transformational politics can theoretically take place, Butler suggests that queer politics that seek to contest the “real” should integrate the politics that fight for equality for social minority groups into their agenda. Instead of ignoring social identity categories/terms, Butler argues, “precisely because such terms have been produced and constrained within [oppressive] regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims”; she acknowledges that the proximity to social identity categories may cause “a complicity, a repetition” regarding these categories and potential negative repercussions thereof, but this proximity may also serve to resignify and refute normalized identity categories (*Bodies* 123). If, she continues, social identity categories/terms are ignored in queer politics, they cannot be reworked, and their fabricated nature cannot be revealed (*Bodies* 229). Consequently, real change—the fight for an establishment of a world outside normalized socially and societally constructed identity categories—cannot take place, as suggested before, *as soon as* all such existing identity categories are politically and socially equal, but rather *simultaneously to* the fight for political and social equality for all existing identity categories. Butler’s arguments illustrate that Cohen’s critical-intersectional approach to queer theory—which focuses on intersecting hegemonic structures that cause marginalization and oppression—indeed has the potential to be a successful transformational strategy since marginalizations based on existing, often intersecting identity categories such as a nonwhite skin color and a nonheteronormative gender cannot be contested by merely destabilizing socially established identity categories in general; rather, such socially established identity categories should be destabilized and at the same time, marginalizations based on specific, often intersecting identity categories should be addressed and challenged. Radical queer theorists and activists should, therefore, based on arguments made by Love, Ford, Cohen, and Butler, refrain from pursuing queer politics with the single goal of abandoning all socially constructed identity categories, and instead integrate the fight for equality of such identity categories into their agenda.

U.S. underground ballroom culture is, it seems, a social sphere where queer theory's struggle of wanting to abandon all socially constructed identity categories and, at the same time, of its often necessary reliance on such identity categories to fight for political and social equality for such identity categories manifests itself. Underground ballroom culture is a social sphere where people who frequently self-identify as queer unite, alienated and isolated due to their skin color/ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity, which are considered to be deviating from the majoritarian norm; it is a social sphere where queer people try to create an alternative world outside such normalized social identity categories. However, it is also a social sphere where queer people seek a sense of community, based on such shared prescribed social identity categories; and it is a social sphere where social identity categories are, sometimes willingly, reproduced to destabilize them and fight for political and social equality for marginalized groups. The ways in which contemporary documentaries represent this struggle—which manifests itself through ballroom community members' ball performances, lifestyles, and on-screen behavior as well as thorough the practices of the community as an entity—and how this struggle is represented as a fight against sociopolitical norms of gender, sexuality, and skin color/ethnicity are discussed in the analysis sections of this thesis.

2.2 Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity

Underground ballroom culture consists of a large number of people who do not identify according to heteronormative categories of sex and gender and who try to contest these. Instead of ascribing themselves to their sex assigned at birth (male/female) and/or to the corresponding societally prescribed and normalized gender expression (masculinity/femininity), people in this community often try to untie their gender expression from their anatomical sex. Judith Butler is a prominent theorist who deconstructs this identification system which claims that a person's inherent anatomical features (male body/female body) biologically correspond with a certain behavioral pattern a person exhibits (masculinity/femininity); she maintains that this established and normalized identification system is a mere hegemonic myth with the purpose to promote the concept of heterosexuality. The following chapter provides an overview of Butler's deconstruction of the sex-equals-gender-system, an analysis of how transgender and nonheterosexual—that is nonheteronormative—people are marginalized in this system, and an insight into how

the system can be undermined with a special focus on ballroom culture. Butler's theory serves as the primary lens through which I analyze the construction and deconstruction of gender identity in contemporary ballroom culture as depicted in documentaries.

For Butler, the binary gender system is an "act," a "performance" that is both "stylized" and "repeated" because people continuously reenact and also reexperience socially established, prescribed ("stylized") modes of behavior which are associated with and represent a certain gender expression (masculinity/femininity) and anatomical sex (male/female body); due to the repetition of these stylized acts/performances by most people, this process becomes public, or rather systemic (*Gender Trouble* 191). This systemic reenactment and reexperiencing of stylized "acts and gestures [...] create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality"; the gender core manifests itself "on the surface of the body" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185). In simpler terms, due to the systemic and ongoing repetition/performance of binary (feminine vs. masculine) acts or modes of behavior, which most people experience/witness and, thus, learn, and which are tied to the binary biological sex, people have been made to believe that humans have a fixed gender core within them. Therefore, gender norms need to be regarded as "*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185, original emphasis). Butler illustrates the fragility of this system by further arguing that a person's gender identity—that is how a person identifies—does not necessarily correspond with their gender performance—that is the way gender is expressed; she cites the cultural practices of drag queens as an example to reveal the fabricated, performative nature of gender:

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" [...], it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. (*Gender Trouble* 187)

Since, as this example illustrates, people's biological sex does not necessarily have to correspond with how they identify regarding their gender identity and since their gender performance may as well be different from their gender identity, Butler maintains that

“[b]odies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender” (*Gender Trouble* 12). Butler’s argumentation seems to suggest that people’s anatomical body features, that is male vs. female genitals—to which most people can, in fact, be assigned—should be seen as mere vectors of the socially established and prescribed binary gender system; through these vectors, it seems, the binary gender system is both legitimized and manifested. Literally speaking, a penis does not biologically lead to masculinity and a vagina does not biologically lead to femininity; penises and vaginas have been made to signify and cause the performance of masculinity and femininity by repeated social performances. In abstract terms, people do not have an inherent gender identity that is based on their biological sex, since biological sex is an empty category that has been made to signify within the hegemonic discourse of the binary, heteronormative gender identity system. Gender norms, thus, have been established through gender performances that are presented as the result of gender norms.

But what happens, according to Butler, when people’s gender performance does not correspond with their sex assigned at birth? She argues that

[d]iscrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (*Gender Trouble* 190)

In other words, in order to sustain the concept/idea/ideology of gender as a whole, society has established a mechanism that rewards or “humanizes” people who conform with the binary gender system and, conversely, dehumanizes or “punishes,” ostracizes, and discriminates against people who fail, or rather refuse to subscribe to a masculine or feminine gender performance that is considered to be in line with their respective sex assigned at birth. This binary system is meant to be upheld through “prohibitions that produce identity along the culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 184). When these prohibitions fail to be taken seriously and

[w]hen the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185)

To prevent the exposure of the binary gender system as a fictitious norm, people who want to disrupt the binary gender ideology, who actively decide to resist and ignore it, Butler argues, are punished (*Gender Trouble* 190) by being referred to as “unreal,” “unhuman,” or a “copy” (*Undoing Gender* 30). As a consequence, these people are often faced with physical violence which “delivers the message of dehumanization” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 25). The ultimate punishment for gender-non-conforming people, however, is the fact that they, as a result of the implicit and explicit dehumanization they experience by involuntarily living within (or on the brink of) the binary gender ideology, often feel unnatural and as not having full “access to the human” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 30).

Butler maintains that a similar dehumanization occurs for nonheteronormative sexualities. The binary sex/gender ideology promotes stable gender identities that are “related through oppositional desires,” which is why heterosexuality is often presented as the norm, as the only natural option of sexuality; homosexuality calls into question this “oppositional desire” of stable gender identities (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 95). As a result, homosexual people are marked as unnatural through the “attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender,” that is the attribution of femininity to gay men or of masculinity to gay women—which is deemed to be destructive of “proper” genders, of the gender norm (Butler, *Bodies* 238). In order to defend this norm, this heteropatriarchal performativity of sexuality—the dominance of which also has to be sustained through continuous repetition—, deviations from it are punished, considered unnatural and may also cause oppression and violence directed at nonheterosexual individuals (Butler, *Bodies* 125). According to Butler, this mechanism constitutes the concept of homophobia:

heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome, [since] its efforts to become its own idealization can never be finally and fully achieved, and [since] it is constantly haunted by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself. (*Bodies* 125)

In other words, homophobia is caused by the fear of the disruption of the normative binary gender system. This is why, Butler maintains, while it is important to follow the queer vision of “producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist,” it is crucial to develop “a new legitimizing lexicon for the gender complexity” (*Undoing Gender* 30) and to “rework the norms by which bodies are experienced” so as to “contest forcibly imposed ideals of what bodies ought to be like” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 28).

How is it possible, then, to rework norms and to create this new lexicon of gender categories in order to escape from or even abolish the normalized system? Butler maintains that “when agreed-upon identities [...], through which already established identities are communicated, no longer constitute the theme or subject of politics, then identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them” (*Gender Trouble* 21-22). Ballroom culture, I suggest in this thesis, is depicted in the analyzed documentaries as a political space where such “agreed-upon identities” are not at the core of identity construction since the system which claims that sex equals gender and that gender identification equals gender performance is widely considered a myth. As a result, gender categories and performances both disappear (hypermasculinity, etc.) and emerge (butches, butch queens, drag queens, transgender, etc.)—the latter of which, Butler states, lead to the questioning of established norms and alleged realities through a “becoming otherwise” (*Undoing Gender* 29). In this respect, Butler argues in line with other queer theorists that fantasy and a vision of the “possibility of becoming otherwise” are necessary for the development of new gender identities and that this fantasy is often crucial for the literal survival of people who do not conform with nonnormative gender identities (*Undoing Gender* 217) because it creates “sustaining bonds of community where recognition becomes possible and [it] works as well to ward off violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobia” (*Undoing Gender* 216).

Some may insist that such new gender identity categories also rely on and even reproduce established, normative gender identity categories—which Butler does not negate. She explains that alternative embodiments of identity categories are “not thinkable without a relation to a norm, or a set of norms” because humans are used to having a point of reference—even if this point of reference is, in the case of gender, a mere social construct; this is why gender categories such as butch, femme, and transgender identities—sometimes loosely, sometimes heavily—rely on normative gender categories (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 28). There is, however, another (more practical) reason for this reliance on and reproduction of gender norms within the underground ballroom community: according to Butler, it is a process of “expropriation” of normative gender categories by femme and butch queen identities to expose the performative, constructed nature of the normative gender categories (*Undoing Gender* 209). In addition, my analysis of the representation of underground ballroom culture in *Kiki* and *My House* indicates that

people who think of themselves as born in the wrong body type (male or female) and who undergo surgical and/or hormonal procedures to change their anatomical features to the opposed body type are portrayed as often deliberately choosing to reproduce normative gender performances that are associated with the body type in which they wish to have been born since they want to be considered normal and natural by society; for them, the only chance to achieve this normalization is to perform gender in a way that society would expect a person to behave who does gender in a normative way that also corresponds with the person's sex assigned at birth. This portrayal suggests that an imitation of a normative gender performance by transgender people may also function as a manifestation of the wish to be perceived as natural/normal so as not to be punished or dehumanized by society. Derived from Butler's arguments, I will also show in my analysis that 'realness' categories at balls which aim at deliberately performing normative gender categories as successfully as possible are depicted not as copies of a normative gender category for the mere sake of creating a copy, but rather as a performance of a normative gender identity executed by a person—who does not at all conform with this identity—to expose the performative nature of the normalized, original gender identity that it copies; hence, people who walk 'realness' categories reveal by copying a normative gender identity that anybody can perform a normative gender identity and that, in Butler's words, "the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy" (*Undoing Gender* 209). It is thus the performance of alternative gender identities that has the potential to prompt the contesting and the change of established gender norms since such alternative gender performances lay bare the constructed nature of gender; the reliance on and reproduction of normative gender identity categories often strengthen such a performance. Queer theory's struggle to fight against normalized social identity categories and, at the same time, rely on these normalized categories has become visible in this chapter through the example of gender and will be further discussed in the analysis section of this thesis.

All of these observations lead Butler to the conclusion that it is necessary to "rework the norms by which bodies are experienced" so as to "contest forcibly imposed ideals of what bodies ought to be like" (*Undoing Gender* 28). People who refuse to perform socially prescribed gender norms, such as transgender people but also drag performers, use fantasy as an "articulation of the possible" to debunk norms as social fabrications; this fantasy has the potential to contribute to the reworking of the norms, that is to redefine

“who counts as human, and what norms govern the appearance of ‘real’ humanness” (*Undoing Gender* 28).

2.3 At the Nexus of Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality

Since underground ballroom culture is a sphere where mostly black LGBTQI+ people meet who face substantial marginalization and consider themselves social outcasts due to the intersection of their nonwhite skin color/ethnicity with their nonheteronormative sexual orientation or their transgender identity, or both, this intersection needs theorization to guarantee a truly queer analysis of the representation of contemporary underground ballroom culture in the documentaries. In the following, I summarize and discuss propositions made by various black queer theorists like Cathy Cohen, Roderick A. Ferguson, Meg G. Henderson, Alison Reed, Marlon Bailey, and others, who conceptualize the intersections of ethnicity/skin color, sexuality, and gender, illustrate why queer theory and activism need to acknowledge that universalism within the field disadvantages black LGBTQI+ people, and propose ways to utilize intersectionality to destabilize normalized social identity categories.

Johnson and Henderson state that black studies in the U.S. during the civil rights movement and beyond was occupied by black male heterosexuals who discussed blackness from one single angle—namely their black male heterosexual one; other dimensions like gender and (homo-)sexuality were widely ignored “due principally to an identitarian politics aimed at forging a unified front under racialized blackness” (3-4). Only a few women (some of which were homosexual) like Alice Walker, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Angela Davis came forward and thematized the dimensions of gender and sexuality within black studies (Johnson and Henderson 4). However, Johnson and Henderson, citing various sources (Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, and Haki Madhubuti), state that while these women’s views on the intersection of race and gender were frequently marginalized or silenced, homosexuality was coined a “white disease” that could merely “infect” black people (4). Especially with regard to HIV/AIDS, black homosexual men were represented as vectors of infections by the black community (Bailey, “Performance as Intravention” 259). This pathologizing of homosexuality within black studies indicates that the field

operated heavily within the binary sex/gender ideology which, as described in chapter 2.2, punishes deviations from the heterosexual norm.

Up until the late 20th century, black studies—just like queer studies and gender studies—employed this almost exclusively one-dimensional and homogenizing approach to their identity politics. While queer and gender studies focused largely on the social constructs of sexuality and gender to deconstruct the hegemonic norms of heterosexuality and the patriarchy respectively, black studies was exclusively interested in the concept of blackness as a social marker and in deconstructing the black/white dichotomy. The black, queer, and gender movements aimed at destabilizing or deconstructing the black/white, gay/straight, and feminine/masculine identity dichotomies as well as the oppressions resulting thereof as separate dimensions within their respective realms. Some of these single-variable approaches have sustained over the years to the present time; those scholarships and activism that have employed intersectional approaches have often been neglected by what is considered mainstream theorizing and activism (Eguchi and Asante 172).

What about a black gay transgender woman, then, who finds full representation and support in neither of these movements? How is it possible for this person to find legitimization, representation, and support if queer theory omits their blackness and gender identity, if gender studies omits their blackness and sexuality, and if black studies omits their gender and sexuality? All of these social identity markers are factors that, considered separately, can cause substantial oppression and discrimination; combined, they hold enormous discriminatory potential. According to the black queer theorist Kai Green, the lack of representation of “black trans subjects” in considerable parts of queer theorizing and black feminism is exacerbated by the fact that even black lesbian feminism “at times disavows the presence of black trans subjects,” just like white feminism created “a politics centered in whiteness that invisibilized black lesbian women” (Green 67). According to him, “black women have not had the privilege of easy access to the category ‘women,’” because they have frequently been marked as “too big, too tough, too strong, too black, too masculine” by mainstream society, which is rooted in white hegemony and, thus, operates within a gendered frame that deems white womanhood to be the ideal; hence, black cisgender heterosexual women have united in black feminism to fight for their rights (71). And since black lesbians are often considered to be an “excess to the

category ‘black woman,’” that is superlatives of what black cisgender heterosexual women have been marked, black cisgender lesbian feminism has also sought to create a “coherent category”—just like white women and black women did—to strengthen their presence in the public discourse; this coherent category is believed by black lesbian women to be disrupted through the inclusion of “black trans subjects” into the category (Green 71-72).

It becomes thus clear that due to the lack of representation in both mainstream—that is white—and black gender activism, “[l]esbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color who are committed to the demise of oppression in its various forms, cannot afford to theorize their lives based on ‘single-variable’ politics” (Johnson and Henderson 5). It is therefore necessary, according to Johnson and Henderson, to find ways in which this triple-intersection of blackness, gender, and sexuality can be adequately conceptualized; contemporary queer theory that integrates black studies into its field “carries the potential to overcome the myopic theorizing that has too often sabotaged or subverted long-term and mutually liberatory goals” (6).

Cathy Cohen maintains that the notion of queerness has the potential to destabilize intersectional structures of oppression and marginalization. She maintains that queerness needs to be thought of as a concept that, as already outlined in the discussion of the potential of queer theory, encompasses all potentially marginalized identity categories in an intersectional way; also, a nonheteronormative sexuality should not be deemed a denominator that all queerness has in common, it should not be the condition of queerness (43). She argues that queerness needs to account for the “shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (43). At the same time, Cohen states, queerness should not homogenize queer people since not all marginalized people—especially not those who face intersectional marginalization—share the same history and experiences of oppression (44). This means that queerness should be recognized as a means to raise awareness of the marginalizing sites of power—in this case, normalized identity categories—through which heteropatriarchal dominance is sustained. And while various queer groups face varying experiences of oppression and marginalization and, by extension, pursue varying “political commitments,” Cohen maintains that their common denominator should be the raised awareness of the marginalizing sites of power—which could result in the “*destabilization and radical politicalization*” of social identity categories (Cohen 44-45, original emphasis). Therefore,

a model of queer theory that both unites queer people as a marginalized group and differentiates between various queer groups that face marginalization due to varying—frequently intersecting—social factors or rather identity categories seems, based on Cohen’s arguments, to be the most desirable option; such a model would allow both to better explore the conditions and mechanisms of oppressions based on the intersections of numerous identity categories such as skin color/race, gender, and sexuality and, as a consequence, find ways through which hegemonic identity categories can be destabilized in general (Cohen 44-45).

Applying Cohen’s propositions to the situation of the black gay transgender woman who does not find representation in mainstream queer, gender, black, and transgender activism, it seems, could have the potential to positively impact this person’s life. All the marginalized groups of black women—black cisgender heterosexual women, black cisgender lesbian women, and black transgender women—have, as Green’s argues, defined identity categories for themselves based on which they perform activism for their respective categories (67; 71-72). These limited categories result in groups of black women working individually instead of working together against the system of oppression that marginalizes them—a racialized and gendered system that is based on white hegemonic heteronormativity and that impedes all black women (cisgender and transgender, both gay and straight) from fully entering into the category ‘woman,’ since, according to Shange, “dominant genders—both masculinity and femininity—are based on white bourgeois normativity” (qtd. in Chaudhry 522). Hence, it seems, instead of working separately to destabilize idealized white norms of femininity, all black women should acknowledge, following Cohen’s proposition, their blackness and their womanhood as their common denominator to destabilize these idealized white norms of femininity and, by extension, racial and gender norms in general. This proposition, I deduce, would not only serve black people who identify as women, such as black cisgender women and black transgender women but, by extension, also black transgender/gender-non-conforming people and even black transgender men.

Concerning the marginalization of black LGBTQI+ people, queer theorists and activists who focus solely on the destabilization of gender and sexual identity norms will need to acknowledge, according to Cohen, the fact that identity categories like skin color and social status do indeed intersect with gendered and sexual identity categories; it has

to be acknowledged that black LGBTQI+ people face different forms and intensities of oppression compared to white LGBTQI+ people (44). The common denominator or goal of black and white LGBTQI+ people should, thus, be—as already demonstrated above with the example of black cis and trans women—the overall destabilization of all social identity categories which marginalize people because the more such categories are destabilized, the fewer people will face marginalization. At the same time, specific issues of black LGBTQI+ people need separate continued thematization.

In my analysis of the representation of contemporary underground ballroom culture in documentaries, the lack of this shared common denominator/goal as perceived by black LGBTQI+ people becomes evident. Interviewees in the documentaries consider the often life-saving function of underground ballroom culture for its members as a result of both historical and present conditions of life of black LGBTQI+ people in the U.S. They maintain that underground ballroom culture was established because especially black LGBTQI+ people were widely ignored or marginalized by politics; and they maintain that ballroom culture has sustained over the years up until the time at which the documentaries were filmed (2012-2018) due to the continuing marginalization of—especially black—LGBTQI+ people. This continuing marginalization of especially black LGBTQI+ people in the U.S. is, according to the interviewed members of the ballroom community, also because mainstream—that is white—queer and LGBTQI+ politics and activism have widely ignored the intersections of gender, sexuality, and skin color; instead, they describe, queer and LGBTQI+ politics and activism have mainly focused on the inclusion of specific LGBTQI+ rights desired by white middle- and upper-class people—such as marriage equality—into mainstream institutions. This omission of black LGBTQI+ people and their special desires, needs, and rights from mainstream LGBTQI+ and queer politics and activism is, as portrayed in *Kiki* and *My House*, the reason why underground ballroom culture is still essential for its members.

Based on these observations, one crucial question arises: How is it possible that black people state in the documentaries that while white LGBTQI+ people's rights seem to have improved over the years, black LGBTQI+ people's rights seem to have been barely impacted? In other words: Does an improvement of LGBTQI+ rights in general not also entail improved LGBTQI+ rights for black people? Alison Reed, a black queer theorist, argues that many white gay rights activists' calls for the social category of sexuality—

regardless of skin color—to be considered an affirmative action category run the danger of ignoring “a long history of racial injustices in the United States through a claim to marginalization along the lines of sexuality that erases the specific experiences of queer and trans people of color” (50). In other words, Reed maintains that by solely demanding measures against the marginalization of homosexual people regardless of their skin color, predominantly white homosexual people profit; this is because black people in general experience life in a country with a long history of racism differently than white people and, by extension, black LGBTQI+ people experience life in a different way than white LGBTQI+ people. Even if the social category of sexuality, for example, is their common denominator, the social category of skin color sets apart black and white homosexual people to the detriment of black people because, as Ellison et al. postulate, “[b]lack is a modifier that changes everything” (166, original emphasis). This is why black LGBTQI+ people need politics that acknowledge and propose counter-measures against the marginalizations they face due to the intersection of their nonheteronormative sexuality and/or gender and their skin color.

Similarly, Roderick A. Ferguson asserts that whiteness on its own is already a condition that heavily benefits the attainment of a heteropatriarchal ideal—even for members of the LGBTQI+ community (53); and since many white middle- and upper-class LGBTQI+ people pursue assimilatory or even normalizing agendas and politics regarding their own rights—such as the fight for the legalization of same-sex marriage—, they have managed to find acceptance and tolerance in U.S. mainstream society that is governed by heteropatriarchal norms (61). In other words, predominantly white LGBTQI+ people’s white skin color but also their willingness to adapt to patriarchal norms have generated a certain degree of acceptance and tolerance toward them. Black people, however, do not have the societally constructed advantage of a white skin color, which is why white/colorblind LGBTQI+ politics do not make it possible for black LGBTQI+ people to attain the same social rights as white LGBTQI+ people potentially can; in other words, black LGBTQI+ people are automatically excluded from white LGBTQI+ people’s politics due to their skin color (Ferguson 61). This proposition is employed in the representation of contemporary underground ballroom culture in *Kiki*: token agendas of white LGBTQI+ activists such as the legalization of same-sex marriage are presented in *Kiki* as ineffective since they do not solve any problems that community members face—problems such as

violence, homelessness, police brutality, unemployment, the spread of diseases, and death, all of which are caused by the intersecting social identity categories of their nonheterosexual sexuality and their frequently nonheteronormative gender, compared with their nonwhite skin color. These problems, which almost all community members who are portrayed in *Kiki* and *My House* face, are presented in the documentaries as the primary reason for the existence of the ballroom scene. This is why the documentaries suggest that contemporary underground ballroom culture is only impactful by combining the queer vision of weakening social identity categories—in this case, gender, sexuality, and skin color/race—with the fight for political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people within the existing societal system.

Even in the fight against HIV/AIDS, “the role of whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle- and upper-class status” as a sociopolitical norm has long not been ignored and has resulted in inadequate HIV care for black LGBTQI+ people (Watkins-Hayes 449). While the status as an LGBTQI+ person regardless of skin color already implicates substantial stigmatization with regard to HIV/AIDS, “*racial stratification* [...] within White corporate administrative society” contributes to even higher levels of stigmatization of black LGBTQI+ people compared to white LGBTQI+ people (Hwahng and Nuttbrock 55, original emphasis). As far as ballroom culture is concerned, some health care specialists exhibit preconceived notions toward the ballroom community and connect it with “unsafe sex practices” (Rowan et al. 474). The stigmatization of black LGBTQI+ people in the medical system, compared with many health professionals’ lack of knowledge about ballroom culture causes many ballroom members to have reservations about seeking information and help from the medical community regarding HIV/AIDS and, therefore, contributes to the spread of the disease (Rowan et al. 474). Rowan et al. found that economic reasons also frequently contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS in the ballroom community; out of a necessity to generate income, many community members resort to performing sex work—which elevates the risk of infection (473). This is why, “in addition to offering free HIV testing and health care services, offering more tangible supports such as food, shelter, and transportation may be needed to reduce the spread of HIV” within black LGBTQI+ communities (Rowan et al. 473). My analysis will show that ballroom culture in *Kiki* is portrayed as utilizing its kinship structure, balls, and social gatherings to perform HIV prevention work.

In the following chapters, I analyze how the ballroom culture's members' embodiments of contemporary queer theory are represented in the documentaries *Kiki* and *My House* as aiding them in resisting sociopolitical norms of gender, sexuality, and skin color/race as well as fighting against HIV/AIDS. One crucial aspect in this analysis will also be the notion of "disidentifactory performance," which was coined by Muñoz. According to him, "hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities"—which can be found numerous in underground ballroom culture—can manage through performance to establish new ways of self-representation; thereby, "the social order receives a jolt," i.e., hegemonic, socially constructed gendered, sexual, and racial identity categories are contested (*Disidentifications* 6). This type of performance is what he refers to as "disidentifactory performance," which

willfully disavows that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the 'real.' [...] Disidentifactory performance's performativity is manifest through strategies of iteration and reiteration. Disidentifactory performances are performative acts of conjuring that deform and re-form the world. *This reiteration builds worlds*. It proliferates 'reals,' or what I call worlds, and establishes the groundwork for *potential* oppositional counterpublics. (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 196, original emphasis)

Such performances can be described as the embodiment of a queer theory that seeks to contest sociopolitically prescribed norms by revealing the performativity of what society has deemed to be "real," or rather the norm such as the binary sex-equals-gender-system, heterosexuality, and whiteness. Members of communities that practice disidentifactory performance seek to challenge sociopolitical norms by adopting these norms and adapting them in a way that would make them appear strange or even unrecognizable to majoritarian society—briefly by showing the norms' adaptability and performativity. The crucial aspect is that disidentification is always about intersecting systems of marginalization. Muñoz states that "[d]isidentifications is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social" (*Disidentifications* 8, original emphasis). He explains that disidentification works in a way that

scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the

code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (*Disidentifications* 31)

Disidentification is, thus, a deeply political mechanism that aids gendered, sexual, and racial minorities in representing their own political agenda and empowering themselves. Eguchi and Asante summarize disidentifactory performances' goal in the following way: "Disidentifications allow minoritarian subjects to utilize the code of majority to empower a marginalized positionality that has been historically constructed as unthinkable or impossible" (176).

An example of a disidentifactory performance is vogue. Vogue combines "the language of modeling and fashion" (Moore 148), which is predominantly "[w]hite, visually-focused, and commodified" (Jackson 38), with traditional African dance moves (Bailey, "Labor of Diaspora" 101-102). Black queer people who vogue iterate and reiterate the white-coded movements of fashion to present their true and inner black queer selves. In other words, using their black bodies, black voguers reappropriate fashion poses, which have been destined predominantly for white bodies, to 'sell' themselves—instead of selling fashion—and thereby, as Muñoz classifies disidentifactory performances, "empower minority identities and identifications" (*Disidentifications* 31). By combining the white-coded moves that their black bodies perform with African dance moves, the voguing black bodies undermine white marginalizing ideals in a double sense. Vogue, consequently, is not just a "simple appropriation of high fashion," but a "tune of racialized self-enactment in the face of overarching opposition" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 80). The dance, however, not only disavows the identity category of ethnicity/blackness, but also the category of gender and, by extension, sexuality. Apart from vogue's five basic steps, it frequently includes various movements that typically represent masculinity or femininity and that through "cutting and mixing," can embody gender performativity (Bailey, "Labor of Diaspora" 102-103). Hence, vogue offers "its gender-fluid language" to people so as to represent their true gender identity (Chatzipapathodoridis 12). On top, the voguers have to adopt individual features and styles (Jackson 36). Jackson summarizes the practice of voguing as follows: Voguers "tell at least two overlapping stories. One story involves claiming power from the powerful by disrupting dominant views. The other story involves the formation of a personal aesthetic in competition with peers according to evolving

community standards” (38). According to Bailey “the ultimate goal for each performer in a vogue battle is to execute the elements of vogue in a fashion that distinguishes him from his opponent” (“Engendering Space” 502). Vogue, in *Kiki* and *My House*, is not only performed at balls but also at social gatherings outside ball events and is used in both contexts as a disidentifactory performance. The way disidentification is employed by the underground ballroom communities represented in *Kiki* and *My House* in connection with voguing and social practices other than voguing will be explored in chapters three and four respectively.

3 *Kiki*

Kiki is a documentary film directed by Sara Jordenö, a Swedish filmmaker, first released at the Sundance Film Festival in 2016 and subsequently screened at numerous film festivals worldwide such as Berlinale, Luminor Paris, Sydney International Film Festival, Outfest Los Angeles, and Transition Film Festival Vienna; it is available to rent on various online platforms like *Amazon Prime*, *Apple TV*, and *YouTube*. *Kiki* won the 2016 “Teddy Award for Best Documentary and Essay Film” and it was featured on the “Must-See” movie lists in the *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Verge*, and others. The film was shot between 2012 and 2015 and co-written by Jordenö and Twiggy Pucci Garçon, a member of the New York City ballroom community.

The documentary follows a select group of black LGBTQI+ people, all of whom are members of the Kiki scene, a subcategory of the NYC underground ballroom scene that focuses on black LGBTQI+ youth. Jordenö, on her website, describes *Kiki* as a film in which “viewers are granted exclusive access into this high-stakes world, where fierce Ballroom competitions serve as a gateway into conversations surrounding Black- and Trans-Lives Matter movements” (Jordenö, “Kiki”). Gia Love, a key figure in *Kiki* and the portrayed ballroom community, states in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, “[E]ven when there is no light on our politics and we are completely erased from the conversation, we are still having it” (Anderson). The documentary, therefore, aims at representing the Kiki scene as a space of sociopolitical agendas. *Kiki* received highly favorable reviews from film critics, who lauded the documentary’s depiction of NYC’s black queer youth as a marginalized but resilient group. The *New York Times* writes that “*Kiki* fluidly combines interviews with on-the-street and dance-floor scenes to create an exhilarating, multifaceted portrait of ballroom participants” (Dargis). In the *Los Angeles Times*, *Kiki* is deemed a film that “leaves you with the bracing sense that however tough and resilient its subjects might be forced to become, their hope of a better, more tolerant future will never go out of style” (Chang).

Kiki’s representation of ballroom culture operates primarily through a mixture of verbal and visual narratives. Various members of the depicted ballroom community recount in interviews their life stories that are often defined by experiences of marginalization and discrimination based on their skin color, combined with their

nonheteronormative sexuality or their transgender identity, or both. These interviews are filmed in medium close-ups³, close-ups, and extreme close-ups to emphasize the interviewees' emotions—which is a device frequently employed in queer documentaries to stimulate the viewers' emotional investment (Geiger 184-185). Thereby, *Kiki* also utilizes a recurrent feature of queer documentaries to present “LGBTQ lives not through authoritative facts and narrative transparency but through conveying intensely real, difficult, sentient experiences of the world” (Geiger 181). Apart from their life stories, the interviewees describe the ballroom community including its house and gender system, its balls, and its importance for the community members. Some interviewees even offer theorizations on the performativity of social identity categories and on the potential individual and sociopolitical impact of alternative, nonhegemonic performances of such identity categories within underground ballroom culture. Most utterances in interviews are accompanied by visuals which serve as deictic devices, or which frame the settings where the interviews take place. Interview settings are mostly quiet, neutral locations, such as people's homes or community centers, where the interviewees can talk without disturbances. Generally, the audience sees the ballroom community members at various sites across the city, such as in their homes, in the streets, at the Christopher Street pier, at community centers and dance practice halls, and at the community ball halls. At these locations, some interviews are conducted, and people attend gatherings where they socialize, vogue, dance, debate, and conduct HIV prevention. These social gatherings are mostly filmed through long shots, medium shots, and medium close-ups to provide the audience with a view of the scenes as if they were bystanders or even participants. Visual proximity to the depicted characters is a recurrent device in queer documentaries to elicit “public engagement” (Geiger 183). Stand-alone visuals without any verbal commentary or dialogue are rare in *Kiki*. When they are used, they mostly show the community members performing at balls or voguing at public locations—supported by deictic sound—and, thereby, provide the audience with impressions of the performative practices employed by the ballroom scene. Performative elements in queer documentaries are utilized “where narrative, explanatory devices, or other forms of ‘official’ discourse no longer suffice in producing meaning and knowledge” (Geiger 192).

³I employ the film analysis terminology described in *Film Studies: The Basics* (2007) by Amy Villarejo.

The film, therefore, is characterized by the expository and the performative mode of documentary filmmaking. In the expository mode, narratives by interviewees serve as the primary source of information, while “[i]mages serve a supporting role by illustrating, illuminating, evoking, or acting in counterpoint to what is said” (Jordan 13). The performative mode, in contrast, “uses artistic expression to convey a particular aspect of experience” (Jordan 15). Both of these modes potentially conceal the fact that documentaries cannot provide “straightforward access to the truth” because they do not include reflective passages in which the filmmakers “remind the audience of their status as a text” (Jordan 15-16). Thereby, *Kiki* invokes the concept of documentary realism—which makes documentaries appear real and reliable but cannot be equated to an accurate and reliable representation of reality (Moon 53). The film, consequently, needs to be considered what Rabiger calls an “artfully constructed impression” of reality (64).

The following analysis of *Kiki* is divided into two sections. Chapter 3.1 is a summary and theorization of all experiences of marginalization and discrimination that the community members who are depicted in *Kiki* face(d). Chapter 3.2 concerns itself with the question of how queer strategies are represented to signify both the denaturalization of social identity categories—predominantly of the categories of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity—and the fight against marginalization and discrimination based on these social identity categories within the sphere of the ballroom community that is portrayed in the documentary.

3.1 Marginalized Lives in the Heteronormative System

“In a heteronormative society, everyone’s the same. That’s what they promote.”—Gia Love

In the opening statement of the film, the performativity of social identity categories—especially of gender—is immediately thematized. Gia Love, who is later in the film revealed to be a highly educated male-to-female transgender person and who, throughout the movie, offers insightful theorizations on the life of black LGBTQI+ people inside and outside the underground ballroom culture, shares the following thought:

Everything we do is a transition, and I feel like a lot of people can relate to that experience. People dressed me up to be something else, I was socialized to be something else and now I have to deconstruct all of that to get to where I’m

supposed to be, because if you had left it up to me, I would have been like this since I was four when I said I was a girl.⁴

Via this opening statement, the creators of *Kiki* make it clear that their film's central motif is the deconstruction of societally imposed, hegemonic norms by people who do not identify with these norms and who, due to the forceful imposition of these norms on them, have been transformed into variants of people whom they would not have chosen to become. Also, three of the film's queer-theoretical positions regarding identity politics can be deduced: firstly, society forces people into identity categories by imposing bodily and behavioral imperatives on them; secondly, people's true identity is located within them and it cannot be truly changed through the imposition of bodily and behavioral imperatives; thirdly, people can deconstruct, or rather break out of the socially imposed identity categories and sociopolitical norms which force them to hide their true identities and they can transition into variants of people that best reflect their true identities.

Gia, still as part of the documentary's opening statement, considers heteronormative ideologies that permeate societies as the roots of most underground culture members' marginalized lives. According to these ideologies, she maintains, all people are promoted to be "the same"—not in the sense that all people have the same rights but suggesting that all people are supposed to identify using the same two restricted, stylized categories of what society deems to be normal within the system of binary gender expression. In other words, Gia states that society expects people to clearly identify as male and female and, thus, perform coherent acts of gender expression (masculinity and femininity) which are marked as normal for males and females; by extension, society also expects people to conform with the norms of heterosexuality, which, as Butler argues, are based on the binary gender system due to the belief in "oppositional desires" between the two genders (*Gender Trouble* 95). As it becomes clear in the documentary, most of its subjects have experienced marginalizations based on heteronormative identity categories. In the following, I summarize and theorize all experiences of sociopolitical marginalization and discrimination that the community members face(d), based both on their own recounts of such experiences in interviews and on the depiction of such experiences as part of the film's narrative.

⁴All direct quotations in chapter 3 for which the authors are not specified in parentheses are taken from *Kiki*.

All of *Kiki*'s subjects are presented as cognizant of society's expectation to accept one's sex assigned at birth as the determinant of one's gender expression, and of the repercussions that can result from the refusal to follow this expectation. As one of the documentary's two main characters who identify as transgender women, Gia is a key figure in the film. Not only is she portrayed as a person who can offer insight into the importance of the ballroom community for transgender people, but she also represents the hardships that black transgender people face in mainstream U.S. society—that is marginalization and discrimination based on their blackness and their refusal to accept their sex assigned at birth or their normative, prescribed gender identities which are believed by society to conform with their sex assigned at birth. In an interview, Gia reveals that growing up, she felt “different” and that the reason why she did not choose to cease openly identifying as male for a long time was her expectation, or rather fear that society would consider her to be too “big” to pass as a woman. Her gender identity, it seems, was at that time determined by how society expected her to perform her gender based on her anatomical body; due to society's expectations to perform her gender in a conforming—masculine—way, it appears, she refused to acknowledge her true gender identity for a long time—also out of fear of negative reactions. Gia says that although “people were insisting on gender norms,” she started to not comply with these norms during her years in college; this, however, resulted in her being bullied and faced with verbal and physical attacks. Consequently, she recounts, she felt extremely lost and misunderstood, exhibited behavioral problems, and adopted a “big and bad” attitude as a defense mechanism. Gia is represented as fully aware of most people's expectations to perform gender in a way that was predefined by society since she experienced first-hand that bullying and attacks can be the consequences of her not fulfilling society's normalized gendered expectations. In representing Gia's experience with negative repercussions following her defiance of gendered norms, *Kiki* exemplifies Butler's argument that people who do not comply with gendered norms are frequently punished (*Gender Trouble* 190).

Such punishments can, as indicated in *Kiki*, reach extremely violent dimensions. In an interview, Gia's mother explains that she was worried when Gia came out as transgender because she did not want her daughter to experience the potential negative ramifications that a neglect of gender norms can have. The mother reveals that she is still worried about her daughter because a transgender friend of Gia's was killed due—

supposedly—to their transness. In establishing a connection between violence/murder and a transgender person, the film thematizes a severe problem with which the transgender community is frequently faced: according to queer activists and theorists, violence toward and even murders of (black) transgender people are a systemic problem. Butler, in this respect, argues that people who do not conform with heteropatriarchal norms often become the victims of physical violence, which is supposed to deliver a “message of dehumanization” (*Undoing Gender* 25). Bailey found a noticeably high number of murders of transgender people in his ethnographical research on the ballroom scene (“Gender/Racial Realness” 366). The utilization of violence against transgender people as theorized and observed by queer scholars is, thus, thematized in the documentary. Gia’s friend’s rejection of their sex assigned at birth or rather their refusal to accept their sex assigned at birth as the determinant of their gender expression is portrayed as a cause for violence and as the reason why this friend died. Since Butler labels the murder of a transgender person in *Paris Is Burning* as a “killing that is performed by a symbolic that would eradicate those phenomena that require an opening up of the possibilities of the resignification of sex” (*Bodies* 131), the murder of the transgender person in *Kiki* can also be regarded as the manifestation of the fear of the disruption of the normalized gender system which is based on biological determinism.

Gia herself also becomes the victim of violence during the documentary’s production. While Gia gives an interview to the filmmakers in the streets, she gets verbally attacked by a teenager; this scene illustrates both the utilization of violence against a black transgender person and the harm it causes to the victim. During the interview, without any prior notice of the attacker, a teenager starts cursing several times at Gia, calling her a “faggot.” The handheld shaky camera effect of the scene emphasizes the unscripted and authentic nature of the situation. By referring to Gia as a faggot, which is a derogatory term frequently used to marginalize gay men (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*), the attacker tries to deny Gia access to the category ‘woman’; he identifies her, presumably due to her tall body type that is typically ascribed to the category ‘man,’ as a man who, based on a mixture of feminine and masculine gender markers, must be gay. According to Butler, gay men are marked by homophobic people through the attribution of femininity (*Bodies* 238). Thus, when the attacker establishes a connection between Gia’s body, which exhibits some features that are typically ascribed to male bodies, and her feminine gender

performance, and, as a result, labels her as a gay man, he uses the notion of attributing femininity to gay people; this notion is used in this particular case as a barrier for Gia to be recognized as a woman. In other words, her womanhood is attacked by labeling her—as promoted by homophobic people—as just another effeminate gay man. In the aftermath of the attack, Gia admits that she feels “triggered” by this incident and “not OK.” At that point, the scene ends and the film cuts to another scene. Although Gia does not further elaborate on her feelings, the fact that she admits to feeling triggered can be interpreted as a sign that she experienced similar traumatizing situations before, and that the incident reminds her of such previous traumatizing experiences. This situation testifies to the fact that while Gia tries to come to terms with her identity as a woman, she still faces the threat of constant hostility due to her transness and is constantly reminded of her denaturalized status outside the ballroom community.

Izana Vidal, the second transgender woman in *Kiki*, became homeless due to her transness when she was 16, which resulted in her being forced to perform sex work out of a lack of job alternatives. She, thus, represents three issues with which members of the depicted ballroom community—especially transgender members—are frequently faced: homelessness, a lack of job opportunities, and the need to perform sex work. During an interview, Izana states that when she was 16, she revealed that she wanted to live as a woman, whereupon her mother called her “unnatural” and asked her to leave her home. Izana’s mother could not understand that her daughter’s true gender identity is not reflected in her biological sex assigned at birth; she could not understand that her daughter did not feel comfortable in a body that society expected to perform masculinity. The sex-equals-gender-identity system seemed to be instilled in Izana’s mother to the point where she rejected her child’s new gender identity due to its nonconformity with heteropatriarchy’s norms of gender. Hence, unlike Gia, Izana did not have a supportive family and became homeless due to her transness. Her homelessness, combined with the fact that she wanted to undergo hormone therapy and initiate her surgical transition into a woman, led her to the necessity to generate income through sex work. And although she searched for other jobs, she was not successful in finding one due to her “look,” and because, according to Izana, “employers discriminate against trans people and don’t hire them.” Izana’s status as a transgender woman, therefore, resulted in both homelessness

and the impossibility to find an official occupation—both of which led to the necessity to perform sex work.

What is striking in this scene is that *Kiki* misses out on an opportunity to directly/verbally thematize the intersecting sociopolitical systems of oppression—which are based on racism and transmisogyny—that result in a highly elevated degree of marginalization toward a member of the depicted ballroom community. Of course, one could assert that since the film’s self-proclaimed purpose is to portray “a youth-led social movement for House and Ballroom LGBTQ+ youth *of color* in New York City” (Jordenö, “About,” my emphasis) and since all of its subjects are black, the social category of blackness does not need to be explicitly thematized. Krell argues that the social category of blackness is widely ignored in mainstream trans feminism since this trans feminism focuses solely on the category of transgenderism and women’s issues (232-233). As a result, black trans women—due to their nonprivileged skin color—are excluded from mainstream trans feminism, hence, lack representation, and are, thus, frequently the victims of (minimum) double-marginalization (238). While Izana’s black skin color is of course visible to viewers and can be interpreted as part of her look, by asking Izana what she defines as her look or directly inquiring whether she considers her blackness to be a factor that elevates the level of discrimination against her, *Kiki* could have highlighted the intersection of transness and blackness which, according to Krell, contributes to black transgender people being considerably marginalized by society (238). A film like *Kiki* should place a substantial focus on the intersection of transness and blackness and its sometimes violent ramifications, instead of, in the best case, positing the audience’s awareness of this intersection and its particularly oppressive power against affected people or, in the worst case, simply ignoring skin color as a factor and employing mainstream transgender feminism’s single-variable approach.

Generally, familial rejection and homelessness are prominent issues in the representation of the ballroom culture in *Kiki*. Gia identifies homelessness as one of the main reasons why ballroom culture, and specifically the Kiki subsection, is essential for its members. The reason why ballroom members become homeless and join the community is, according to Gia, the fact that they often experience “rejection, homophobia, and a lack of acceptance” within their own families. *Kiki* portrays several people—predominantly gay men but also some transgender people—who have been rejected by their families and

who, as a consequence, became homeless. Divo Pink Lady, who “like[s] men and women,” is presented as a prime example of how homophobia and rejection within one’s own family result in homelessness and in the need to join the ballroom community for reasons of self-love and literal survival. He explains that when he came out at age 9—he does not specify a certain sexuality or gender identity since he rejects labels—, his mother banned him from his childhood home; as a result, he had no place to live or sleep except subway trains and other people’s couches. When he was younger, he could not understand why his mother was upset with him “for liking boys and girls.” Today, he understands how the system of homophobia works and that LGBTQI+ people “go through a lot” because he experienced rejection due to homophobia first-hand.

Divo states that he generally avoids exhibiting nonnormative—that is feminine—gender performances in public; instead, he says, he saves his femininity for voguing. It is highly likely—yet not confirmed in the documentary—that Divo refrains from exhibiting gender performances that are coded feminine because he fears being labeled gay due to the frequent association of femininity in men with homosexuality. Thus, in not exhibiting gender performances that are coded feminine, Divo probably aims at preventing the possibility of being associated with homosexuality. This can be interpreted as a way of escaping all forms of marginalization that the intersection of blackness and homosexuality and/or a nonnormative gender expression could entail.

According to Divo, the environment, or rather the neighborhood in which he grew up in NYC is “not a good place to vogue,” since people’s reaction to him voguing “would not be cute.” Considering society’s awareness of vogue as a dance that is frequently performed by LGBTQI+ people due to its commodification and popularization in the 1990s and beyond (Chatzipapatheodoridis 1-2), Divo insinuates in his statement that the neighborhood in which he grew up is not an LGBTQI+-friendly environment, which may have contributed to his mothers’ homophobic reaction. Divo’s childhood neighborhood is only one example that illustrates that geographic space is represented in *Kiki* as a factor that embodies positive and negative sentiments toward LGBTQI+ people⁵.

⁵*Kiki* creates a distinction between spaces of LGBTQI+-positive versus LGBTQI+-negative sentiments through verbal descriptions and visuals—on which I elaborate in the discussion of the portrayal of underground ballroom culture as a utopian “not-yet” in chapter 3.2.

With regard to geographic space, *Kiki* represents rural areas as spaces where LGBTQI+ people struggle substantially due to considerable intensities of rejection and marginalization. The documentary, therefore, confirms Judith Halberstam's observation that nonheteronormative people who live in rural areas often face significantly more and more intensive oppression and discrimination (*Queer Time* 34-35). The scene in which this notion is employed is when Twiggy Pucci Garçon, co-writer of the documentary and father of the House of Pucci, travels to his rural hometown to visit his mother for an interview. In this scene, Twiggy and his mother—sitting in a restaurant because Twiggy's father still does not accept his son's sexuality, which prohibits them from filming in Twiggy's childhood home—recount instances of marginalization and rejection that Twiggy faced due to his homosexuality and "feminine mannerisms." By contrasting recounts of Twiggy's marginalized life in his "stereotypical and homophobic" hometown with his life in NYC—where he is portrayed acting as a house father, participating in balls, and socializing with fellow LGBTQI+ people—, it seems that the documentary reflects Halberstam's observation that in many narratives, the city is presented as a sphere where people come out into a setting that "supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to other gays/lesbians/queers" (*Queer Time* 36). In juxtaposing urban and rural areas, *Kiki* also confirms Doderer's contention that "social and familial control function to a lesser extent in the cities, and more opportunities exist to meet other LGBTQs and consequently to pool together" (432).

Twiggy and his mother specify in the interview the forms of marginalization and oppression that Twiggy faced in his hometown. Twiggy's mother states that when her son came out as gay, she "thought it was just a phase," that she did not fully accept it, but has since come to terms with her son's sexuality. The father, in contrast, did and still does not accept his son's homosexuality and blames Twiggy's mother for it. Generally, Twiggy explains, his sexuality was constantly under attack in his hometown, which he describes as a "very stereotypical and homophobic place." He recounts that in church, which he regularly attended, he was told "to act more masculine or to leave" because people thematized his "feminine mannerisms," which led them to believe that he was gay. Given that the church assumed Twiggy's homosexuality based on his "feminine mannerisms," the church employed the notion of associating a nonnormative gender expression with homosexuality. According to Butler, this notion is frequently called upon to defend the

normative system of binary genders that is based on oppositional desires; since homosexuality calls into question this “oppositional desire” of stable gender identities, it is believed that by labeling homosexual people as unnatural exceptions from the norm, the heteronormative system of binary gender can be upheld (*Gender Trouble* 95). Hence, the church’s critique of Twiggy’s “feminine mannerisms” is informed by homophobia which, according to Butler, represents the fear of a disruption of the normative gender categories of masculinity and femininity (*Bodies* 125). Interestingly, by asking Twiggy to change his gender expression, Twiggy’s church—probably unwillingly and unknowingly—invoked Butler’s notion of gender performativity which demonstrates that the sociopolitically prescribed gender norms of masculinity and femininity are not the result of a fixed gender core but rather of “stylized repetition[s] of acts” and that gender is essentially a performance of certain acts and gestures that can be chosen consciously (*Gender Trouble* 191). Thus, in telling Twiggy to change his way of gender expression, Twiggy’s church revealed the performativity of gender. Nonetheless, since the revelation of the performativity of gender by Twiggy’s church occurred unknowingly and, consequently, remained unrecognized by all of the implicated people, Twiggy was rejected by his church community and felt “extremely hurt.” This goes to demonstrate that “[a]ny lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who has experienced exclusion from indigenous institutions, such as the exclusion many openly gay black men have encountered from some black churches [...], recognizes that even within marginal groups there are normative rules determining community membership and power” (Cohen 35).

Considering all the instances of marginalization and oppression addressed in this chapter, it becomes clear that the ballroom community members portrayed in *Kiki* are the victims of a society that ostracizes all people who do not conform with its sociopolitical norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. By asking the community members to recount their individual stories of marginalization and portraying heteronormative ideologies that permeate U.S. society as the roots of its subjects’ marginalized lives, *Kiki* utilizes Cohen’s model of queerness that acknowledges people’s individual hardships caused by various intersecting forms of marginalization and establishes a “shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (43). This shared marginal relationship is represented as the basis for ballroom culture’s sociopolitical resistance—as I will show in chapter 3.2.

3.2 A World Outside Sociopolitical Norms?

—“As queer people, we try to live in systems that are oppressing us; we try to live in the heteronormative systems. And they don’t work for us. So why don’t we just create our own?”—*Gia Love*

This chapter explores how the documentary represents the depicted underground ballroom community and its members’ ball performances, social gatherings, and on-screen behavior as embodiments of queerness to fight against sociopolitical norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. According to Muñoz, queerness is heavily future-oriented because it represents “a possibility for another world” (*Cruising Utopia* 1) and “collective political becoming” (*Cruising Utopia* 189). Therefore, theories of queerness “that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal” (Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet” 364). In other words, without considering the social categories of ethnicity and class in queer theorizing and activism, the current hegemonic system of white heteronormativity will be continuously reproduced. Muñoz concludes:

It is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity. That dominant mode of futurity is indeed ‘winning,’ but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up. Utopian and willfully idealistic practices of thought are in order if we are to resist the perils of heteronormative pragmatism and Anglo-normative pessimism. Imagining a queer subject who is abstracted from the sensuous intersectionalities that mark our experience is an ineffectual way out. (“Cruising the Toilet” 365)

Kiki makes this essential point: The reason why a queer-political agenda is essential in ballroom is due to the problem that, as Gia states, LGBTQI+ politics that solely aim at equalizing LGBTQI+ people’s rights to the rights of non-LGBTQI+ people fail to address issues like youth homelessness, inadequate access to health care, disproportionate rates of homicide, and mental health issues—all of which frequently affect black LGBTQI+ people. Such equalizing politics are, according to Gia, a “gay white males’ initiative.” She concludes that “[t]he white upper-middle-class gay men are in Chelsea living it up” while, conversely, lower-class black LGBTQI+ people in the ballroom community struggle to survive. *Kiki*, therefore, confirms Ferguson’s observation that black LGBTQI+ people are automatically excluded from white assimilatory LGBTQI+ politics due to their skin color, because the norms to which LGBTQI+ rights are assimilated are based on white ideals of femininity and masculinity and, by extension, sexuality (61). This also illustrates

Halberstam's point that queer subcultures, such as underground ballroom culture, "oppose not only the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture" (*Queer Time* 161). Such assimilatory politics often rely on the automatic inclusion of all people into its agenda—which does not work (Krell 235; Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon" 453). Krell asserts that a "discourse of 'inclusion,' as many critics of multiculturalism have espoused, is both anti-Black and anti-indigenous in that it posits inclusion as an antidote rather than questioning the structures that produce an inside and outside" (235). Krell, just like Butler and Cohen, implies that the questioning of intersecting marginalizing structures is necessary to improve the lives of black LGBTQI+ people. This is why, I argue, in order to bring about positive and impactful change regarding black LGBTQI+ people's rights, the Kiki culture—a subgroup of the NYC underground ballroom culture that focuses on queer youth—in Jordenö's *Kiki* has created for itself what Muñoz calls a "utopian political imagination," which represents a "'not-yet' where queer youths of color actually get to grow up" ("Cruising the Toilet" 365). This chapter analyzes how ballroom culture as an entity in *Kiki* represents a queer vision of a not-yet as well as how the ballroom community members' social practices—that is ball performances, social gatherings, and on-screen behavior—within the not-yet are represented as embodiments of queerness and, by extension, as sociopolitical acts of resistance. The analysis starts by scrutinizing the ballroom community as an entity and the performance of familial structures within it, and it proceeds to examine how certain social practices such as their ball performances, social gatherings, and voguing are represented as notions of queerness.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Gia asserts in the opening statement of the documentary that "[i]n a heteronormative society, everyone's the same. That's what they promote." She describes society's expectation for all people to clearly identify as male and female and, thus, to perform coherent acts of gender expression (masculinity and femininity) and, by extension, heterosexuality. Conversely, underground ballroom culture, and specifically the Kiki subcategory, is, according to Gia, "a space for youth development. Everyone's unique. It is where young people explore their uniqueness." Ballroom culture is, therefore, portrayed as a counter-argument to heteronormative society, as an alternative social sphere, a not-yet version, or rather a vision of the world that does not yet exist outside ballroom where, following the opening statement, nobody is the same or

rather where everybody is unique with regard to their sexuality and their gender expression.

Kiki describes underground ballroom culture, and specifically the Kiki scene, as a “safe haven, a place that allows youth that haven’t been fortunate, that haven’t been given an opportunity, that didn’t have family or friends or a support network in place to come and find that.” Ballroom culture is, thus, represented as a space of opportunity, family and friendship, and support. According to Twiggy, the reason why the ballroom community needs to be this space of opportunity, family, friendship, and support is because its members often experience familial rejection and a lack of acceptance based on homophobia and transphobia. By providing people with a social sphere where they find alternative families and where they are free to perform their identity regardless of normalized gender, sexual, and ethnic identity categories, the ballroom culture in *Kiki* employs Muñoz’s notion of queerness as “oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people” (*Disidentifications*, 195-196) so as to create a “‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (“Cruising the Toilet” 365). This process of queer world making is characterized by “bullying, razzing, and mocking social conventions until it’s hard to imagine them in the same way” (Ford 122) or by what Muñoz calls “disidentifactory performance,” which “willfully disavows that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the ‘real’ [...] through strategies of iteration and reiteration” (*Disidentifications* 196).

The ballroom community in *Kiki* mocks or disavows the social convention of family and, by extension, provides space for the disavowal of the sociopolitical norms of gender and sexuality. The community in *Kiki* reappropriates the heteronormative concept of family and associates it with the “houses” that constitute the community. Houses are seen as “families” run by “mothers” and “fathers” who sometimes do and sometimes do not use these descriptions correspondingly with their normalized gender denotations; Twiggy, for example, who identifies as a man, refers to himself as a “mother.” These house parents are described as “health specialists and gatekeepers” who provide guidance, give advice, and encourage house members. House members are sometimes referred to as “children” by house parents and as “brothers and sisters”—terms that, too, are not limited to their normalized male and female gender denotations—by other house members. Also, parents can choose and reject their children, which is illustrated through a scene where Chi Chi

Mizrahi, mother of the House of Unbothered-Cartier, at a house meeting, demands unity within his house or else, he says, some people will have to leave his house. This house system exemplifies Butler's assertion that because normalized identity categories "have been produced and constrained within [oppressive] regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims" (*Bodies* 123). Since the hegemonic concept of family and its gendered distribution of roles rely on normalized identity categories that are based on biological determinants, the ballroom community in *Kiki* reproduces/repeats/reiterates familial structures and roles but resignifies them according to their needs and, thus, mocks normalized identity categories and biological determinism. This strategy has the potential to contest "that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the 'real'" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 196) and to reveal the fabricated nature of social conventions (Butler, *Bodies* 229). Briefly, ballroom houses are represented in *Kiki* as a not-yet that functions as a "kinship structure that critiques and revises dominant notions of gender, sexuality, family, and community" (Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness" 367).

The film employs visual strategies to identify the locations at which the not-yet transpires. The repeated depiction throughout the documentary of the exact same spaces where members of the ballroom community can openly meet, socialize, discuss pressing issues, and vogue without any disturbances—the Christopher Street pier, a park, community halls, dance practice halls, and ball halls—paints a picture for the viewers that is aimed at delimiting the spaces in which ballroom culture/the not-yet occurs. Thus, both public and nonpublic spaces serve as "useful staging grounds for disidentifactory performances" (Johnson 140). These spaces are connoted with positive sentiments throughout the movie—people are portrayed laughing, conversing, dancing, and cheering in medium long shots, medium shots, and medium close-ups—or they are the venues of activist work. The not-yet is clearly limited to the aforementioned geographic spaces, which becomes even more obvious due to the film's labeling of certain other spaces as anti-LGBTQI+. For example, the interview in which Twiggy talks about his difficult past in his homophobic hometown takes place in his hometown; Divo's interview in which he describes his home NYC neighborhood as homophobic is set in his home neighborhood; various other interviews in which marginalizations are thematized are not conducted in spaces of the not-yet either. Hence, whenever community members recount experiences

of marginalization in interviews, these interviews do not take place in spaces that the film marks as the not-yet so as to separate spaces that are associated with anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments, discrimination, marginalization, and rejection from spaces where pro-LGBTQI+ sentiments dominate. The scene in which Gia is attacked and labeled a “faggot” emphasizes this distinction of not-yet and not-not-yet. When the attack happens, Gia is situated in none of the spaces that constitute the not-yet, which conveys the message that as soon as community members step out of the not-yet, they must fear anti-LGBTQI+ attacks.

Principally, *Kiki* lays bare the need to distinguish between nonnormative performances gender, sexuality, and ethnicity at balls versus in the social sphere of ballroom culture outside balls. Although balls are not thematized extensively, the documentary allows viewers to draw pertinent conclusions as to their importance for the community’s resistance against sociopolitical norms. At Kiki balls, which are characterized as “creative outlets” for young people “to get away from all the things that put them at risk”—that is homophobia, transphobia, and racism—and which are not as competitive as compared to the balls of the adult ballroom scene, people perform identities that are based on “the theme of the ball,” which “sets the tone of the category.” Categories, according to Chi Chi, describe what people are expected to perform. Examples of such categories in *Kiki* are “Runway: all-black haute couture” or “Vogue femme: the look of a rockstar.” Ball organizers, hence, determine the ways people are expected to present themselves regarding their outfit choice, make-up, and behavioral/articulatory performance.

Kiki shows multiple series of long shots, full shots, medium long shots, and medium shots of various people performing at balls, which are mostly filmed using the shaky camera technique. Most shots are not filmed from the perspective of ball attendees, but the camera is situated in the performance space itself. The visuals are accompanied by diegetic sound, i.e., the music and noises emanate from the on-screen world; the viewers hear the chatting noises from the crowd, the music to which people perform, and the utterances of the ball commentators. Such scenes aim at creating visual and auditive proximity, which is an immersive effect that grants viewers an authentic impression of the ball performances. This proximity is a typical characteristic of queer documentaries; however, the fact that the camera is situated in the performance space itself constructs “a

filmgoer positioned on the outside looking in” (Geiger 185), which represents the struggle of queer documentaries to create intimacy “without resorting to forms of narrative and visual colonialism” (Raimondo 116). These scenes in the ballrooms portray various performances of gender that are primarily constructed through costume and make-up. While performances of normalized masculinity and femininity are represented by people in tuxedos with short hair or in elegant dresses with long hair and without extravagant make-up, drag queen performances are characterized by campy outfits and elaborate and exaggerated make-up; nonbinary performances of gender are not associated with any costume or make-up choices that could unambiguously be interpreted as typically masculine or feminine—for example a person with a bald head, light make-up, and a knee-length turquoise dress. These three types of gender performances at balls represent either unironic and realistic reproductions of normalized masculine and feminine gender performances; or parodic and hyperbolic imitations of the normalized gender performance of femininity; or renunciations of stereotypical normalized gender performances.

Balls in *Kiki* are, thus, represented as spaces where hegemonic gender norms are willingly and accurately reproduced, hyperbolically imitated and mocked, and fully ignored at the same time. The hyperbolic mocking of gender norms represents Ford’s proposition to think of queerness as “bullying, razzing, and mocking social conventions until it’s hard to imagine them in the same way” (122). While many queer theorists have debated quite contrastively over the years whether drag performances can contribute to a destabilization of gender norms, I shift the focus in the analysis of balls in *Kiki* away from this particular question. Instead, I argue that it is not only the performance of drag on its own that has the potential to question gender—and by extension sexual and racial—norms but also the juxtaposition/contrastivity of all gender performances that occur at balls. The fact that at balls, people can perform gender in ways which either conform with normalized gender norms, or which hyperbolically mock normalized gender norms, or which are entirely disconnected from normalized gender norms, I propose, has the potential to lay bare the performativity of gender and, by extension, destabilize gender norms.

This reading of the potential of the different yet intersecting gender performances at balls to destabilize gender, sexual, and racial norms is based on Cohen’s proposition to view queerness as a notion that both unites queer people as a marginalized group, and

that also differentiates between various queer groups which face marginalization due to varying—frequently intersecting—social factors or rather identity categories (43-45). The people at the balls in *Kiki* belong to various black queer groups—cisgender homosexual people as well as binary and nonbinary transgender people of all sexual orientations—and, therefore, as Cohen argues, face varying experiences of oppression and marginalization and, by extension, sometimes pursue varying political commitments (44). Trans researcher Saoirse Caitlin O’Shea outlines the varying (also politically relevant) agendas of drag performers and binary transgender people: hyperbolic performances such as drag “may well ironically question gender but the femininity of binary transgender women is as natural and real as it may be to cisgender women; it is not an ironic questioning of gender but an expression of gender and how they feel” (8). Drag performers are frequently homosexual people who do identify according to their biological sex—even if their gender performances do not represent normalized femininity or masculinity—, while transgender people—binary or not—refuse to acknowledge their biological sex at all. I argue that although these group exists within the ballroom community in *Kiki*, they have managed to, as Cohen proposes, find a common denominator—their “shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” hegemonic binary white gender and sexual performances—which can result in the “*destabilization and radical politicalization*” of these social identity categories (Cohen 43-45, original emphasis). Thus, while balls in *Kiki* offer the various groups of black queer people a platform to pursue their respective agendas, they also unite these various groups of people as black queer people in a queer world that opposes social and biological imperatives. This unity—characterized by the juxtaposition of performances of the categories of gender and sexuality that are not destined by society for the ball participants’ biological bodies—has the potential to destabilize the social identity categories of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Balls in *Kiki*, hence, can be regarded as a crucial part of underground ballroom culture’s vision to establish a queer world where people can perform their gender and sexuality regardless of sociopolitical norms.

The documentary film also includes a scene where, at a ball, condoms, HIV testing, and HIV pamphlets are offered. In this scene, viewers see the condom packages and the pamphlets displayed on a table as well as a banner that offers “Health & Education Alternatives for Teens” in a series of close-up shots; seconds later, the film cuts to a long

shot of a community ball hall filled with people in which a commentator reminds the ball attendees that “we have HIV testing up here.” This represents balls not only as “creative outlets” to perform gender regardless of sociopolitically prescribed norms but also as caritative, informative, and health-political events. Thus, this queer world at balls has the double purpose of fighting not only against sociopolitical norms but also against a disease that has spread among members of the community because of the continuing societal marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination.

Generally, HIV/AIDS is portrayed as a serious threat to the members of the ballroom scene and the community as a whole; it is stated that there is a “pandemic within the community.” This is why HIV/AIDS is addressed at house meetings and occasions of social gatherings. *Kiki* illustrates that, as observed by Kubicek, McNeeley et al., “the community lends itself well to the design of community-level HIV prevention interventions” (1537) and that, as found by Rowan et al., community members prefer “HIV prevention messages” based on a “peer model with personal stories” (472). One community member offers an anecdotal recount of the day of his HIV diagnosis. This interview takes place in a calm space where the interviewee is framed in stable medium close-up shots to attract the viewers’ attention and highlight the person’s emotions. He describes that he woke up one morning exhibiting flu-like symptoms. He states that he was honest to himself “about the [sexually] risky behavior” that he had exhibited and assumed that he was HIV-positive. At the Department of Health, he was tested and informed that he had indeed been exposed to the HI virus. During a conversation with a health professional, he recounts, he was “absent-minded, shocked,” and thought to himself, “Shit, I became a statistic”⁶. In addition to this recount, *Kiki* also includes a scene where at a social gathering, condoms are distributed, and community members are reminded that “If you are gonna do it, Kiki makes sure you are safe about it” as well as a scene where a member of the community who deceased due to AIDS is honored by a large group of mourning and sometimes crying community members during a memorial

⁶According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2018, “Black/African American people accounted for [...] 42% (16,002) of the 37,968 new HIV diagnoses”; men accounted for 74% of these new HIV diagnoses among the Black/African American population; gay men accounted for 80% of all new HIV diagnoses among Black/African American men; overall, Black/African American gay men accounted for 25% of all new HIV diagnoses in the U.S. in 2018 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

ceremony. This memorial is used as a reminder that “[o]ur community is on very intimate terms with death, which comes from police brutality, HIV, all sorts of health issues, suicide, hate crimes, and other things.” These scenes illustrate the strong bonds within the community in which people support one another in times of crisis and that all types of events are used by the ballroom community in *Kiki* to raise awareness of the dangers of HIV/AIDS; these dangers are particularly detrimental to the ballroom community and its black LGBTQI+ members, since black people—and especially black LGBTQI+ people—face extreme stigmatization regarding HIV/AIDS due to its reputation as a black gay male disease (Bailey, “Black Gay” 240). *Kiki*, hence, underlines that HIV prevention within the community is essential because “organic forms of support, information, love, and acceptance,” which people find in ballroom culture, are often not considered to be impactful by health professionals although they actually help raise awareness about HIV/AIDS (Arnold and Bailey 12).

Not only is HIV/AIDS addressed in house meetings and gatherings but also the related topic of sex work. Since many members of underground ballroom culture face issues like homelessness and discrimination in the workplace, sometimes combined with the wish to undergo a costly sex change, they resort to generating income through sex work. Apart from financial reasons, Izana states that some transgender people perform sex work because it makes them “feel good and validated”; other people, according to a community member, escort for money to buy expensive looks in order to “look fab at a ball, for social fame.” At a house meeting, sex work within the ballroom community is debated and people exhibit varying sentiments about it. While some contend that “the ramifications for your body don’t measure up,” others do not recognize sex work as a problem “on the condition that it is done safely.” According to Kubicek, Beyer et al., it is crucial to provide “those who are involved in sex work with information that may reduce HIV-risk behaviors” (188)—which the community portrayed in *Kiki* does. And although *Kiki* does not provide a clear positioning regarding sex work, it seems that the community does inform its members about the positive and negative aspects of escorting and, therefore, neither glorifies nor condemns people involved in the business. This illustrates the supportive yet critically informative nature of ballroom culture regarding issues of health. It seems that through this supportive yet critically informative setting, *Kiki* invokes yet again Cohen’s concept of queerness as a notion that acknowledges people’s individual

situations caused by various intersecting forms of marginalization but seeks ways to find a common denominator toward which everybody should work (43-45)—in this particular case, the health of the community.

Social gatherings are also frequently connected with voguing. The documentary includes various scenes in which people are depicted in a park, at the pier, and at dance practice halls, where they socialize, debate about balls, and thematize black LGBTQI+ marginalizations and propose counter-measures against them—all while expressing themselves through vogue. In such scenes, people are portrayed voguing in various shots with switching angles and foci between voguers and people cheering for the voguers. Especially the moments in which the cheering people erupt in excitement at certain vogue moves illustrate vogue's special language with which one has to be familiar to understand what vogue truly signifies. While most viewers of the film probably do not recognize the message behind certain moves, the community members fully grasp the voguers' intentions and react accordingly. These scenes highlight vogue's importance for its members, but they do not reveal to the audience in which ways voguing signifies. Hence, *Kiki* connects voguing—an inherently queer disidentifactory performance that, for outsiders of ballroom culture, does not convey much meaning—with debating social issues, offering advice, raising awareness of the dangers of HIV/AIDS, as well as thematizing and proposing counter-measures against marginalizations that black LGBTQI+ face—all inherently sociopolitical acts. *Kiki* can, therefore, be categorized as a queer documentary aimed at marking “the impossibility of desires for fuller explanation or completion, gesturing towards unknown and ambivalent horizons of experience even while advancing a politics of social change and intervention” (Geiger 194). The documentary, thereby, emphasizes the importance of performative practices as gateways into ballroom culture's fight for political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people.

A crucial strategy that the film employs to represent vogue's liberating and subversive function is the cross-cutting between interviews in which community members recount instances of marginalization, caused by dominant norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, and short, carefully staged scenes in which these members vogue. Thus, *Kiki* uses performance and gesture as devices that are frequently employed in queer documentaries to “occupy a space where narrative, explanatory devices, or other forms of ‘official’ discourse no longer suffice in producing meaning and knowledge” (Geiger 192). These

short voguing scenes take place at various venues: on sidewalks, in subway stations, and in a theater hall. One such scene in a theater hall, for example, shows Twiggy and Chi Chi voguing with elongated and elegant movements in long shots and medium close-ups in front of a black background with their faces and looks occasionally directed at the camera. Blue and pink lighting—which may represent masculinity and femininity—fills the montages. The background music is a nondiegetic house music tune accompanied by the repeated rap of the line “Show me how you walk like a legend.” A similar scene depicts Divo voguing in a subway station. The film uses a variation of long shots and medium close-ups, paired with nondiegetic background house music—in which the word “feminine” is continuously repeated—to set the scene; Divo occasionally looks directly into the camera to establish a connection with the audience. Such performance scenes in queer documentaries usually aim at giving “impressions rather than offering definitive factual statements and consumable information” and at establishing intimacy with the audience (Geiger 190-193). In *Kiki*, they emphasize the importance of vogue performances, which allow the community members to disidentify with and resist the dominant binary norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity/skin color that marginalize them.

The representation of queerness in *Kiki* is disrupted in one scene of the documentary. When Twiggy’s mother, in an interview, states that “children can be born gay,” Twiggy, while his mother utters her thoughts, is shown nodding his head, signaling his agreement with his mother’s utterance. This is problematic since the justification of homosexuality through biology is a notion that is anti-queer. Twiggy’s mother, a religious woman with strong ties to the church, probably thinks of homosexuality as a biological disposition because any “stance in favor of LGBTQ people often becomes of necessity linked to biology in defending LGBTQ rights from the ‘sinful chosen lifestyle’ rhetoric of the Christian Right” (Weber 114). *Kiki*, therefore, represents homosexuality as a biological disposition, which is a notion that is also frequently utilized in popular media—such as in Lady Gaga’s song *Born This Way*—as a pro-LGBTQI+ stance and that is often perceived as such by the LGBTQI+ community; however, this notion “reasserts the hegemony of biology in understanding the identities and experiences of LGBTQ people” (Weber 112). Since queer theory is diametrically opposed to biological determinism in its theorization of identity construction, the representation of homosexuality as a biological disposition attenuates the documentary’s representation of queerness as a tool to deconstruct

sociopolitical norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity that are often based on biological dispositions.

Despite this drawback, my analysis shows that *Kiki* successfully invokes several queer-theoretical propositions and notions of queer filmmaking that represent ballroom culture's fight for a world where societal norms do not dictate people's identity. Also, the film addresses many recurrent tropes in queer visual media, which have been identified by queer studies professor Ramzi Fawaz:

people living with and dying of AIDS; people being subjected to physical and sexual violence; people being emotionally abused; people being shunned by communities; people being embraced by communities; people instructing others how to use condoms; people not using condoms; people being excommunicated from families; people losing jobs, homes, and security; [...] and people changing their identities altogether. (764-765)

Kiki ends on a hopeful political and future-oriented note that, once again, underlines its subjects' queer vision of destabilizing the heteronormative system that marginalizes them. Gia concludes, "Sometimes, doctrines change, and then belief systems change. And when belief systems change, then people get the rights that they deserve."

4 *My House*

My House is a documentary series about the NYC ballroom scene, created by Elegance Bratton, an American filmmaker, which consists of ten episodes of approximately 25 minutes. The series premiered on April 25, 2018 and concluded on June 27, 2018 on the U.S. television channel *Viceland*; it can be bought on the online video platform *Amazon Prime*. Although the documentary did not generate much media attention, it received some positive reviews: the *Atlantic* writes that “[t]he show highlights how even though voguing is associated with the ’80s and early ’90s, it remains a vibrant practice” (Kornhaber); in the *New York Times*, *My House* is called an “insiders’ view on the sociopolitical nuances of today’s scene” (Hawgood); additionally, the series can be found on one of *Entertainment Tonight*’s “Essential Viewing” lists. *My House* won the “Diversify TV’s Excellence Award for Representation of LGBTQ, Non-Scripted” at MIPCOM, an annual trade show in Cannes, France. So far, the series has not been renewed for a second season although various ballroom members who starred in it petitioned for its renewal on social media platforms.

My House represents underground ballroom culture primarily through the lenses and lives of its four main subjects: Precious Ebony, a nonbinary person; Alex Mugler and Jelani Mizrahi, two gay men; and Tati 007, a transgender woman. *My House* focuses, compared to *Kiki*, less on the marginalizations with which members are confronted, and more on the representation of ballroom practices such as category and voguing performances, the competitiveness within the ballroom scene and especially at balls, and the positive effects—both economic and social—of ballroom culture for its members. The show employs a combination of visual and verbal narratives to portray ballroom culture. Visuals serve as the basis for the representation of ballroom practices, while in voiceover narrations, these practices are contextualized, theorized, and explained to the audience by community members. Throughout the series, viewers are granted insight into various balls that take place in NYC—the show’s main setting—as well as in Philadelphia and Chicago. In addition to the depiction of ballroom practices, *My House* portrays various members of the ballroom community as they attend social gatherings and pursue their professional careers—which are sometimes related to the ballroom scene—and private lives outside ballroom culture. All these scenarios represent the ballroom community as a

space of sociopolitical resistance, of queer world making that “delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternative views of the world” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 195).

Most scenes in *My House* are shot using the shaky camera technique to convey a feeling of unscriptedness, authenticity, and spontaneity to the viewers; this technique invokes a feeling of realism, which, according to Moon, is a recurrent feature of documentaries to create an illusion of reality and reliability, but which cannot be equated to an accurate and reliable representation of reality (53). *My House* also exhibits multiple characteristics of reality television, such as “non-diegetic music, glossy title sequences, and clearly constructive rather than reactive editing” (Lovelock 11). The series’ creation of realism is also achieved through its focus on the characters and their emotions—which is a feature of reality TV that is informed by scripted drama TV (Bignell 114). Thus, I observe, apart from using “realism of observing everyday situations,” *My House* also “connect[s] with audiences on the level of emotional realism” (Bignell 111-112). *My House* can therefore be classified as a documentary series that invokes multiple esthetic devices from scripted and nonscripted television formats.

In the following, I analyze the ways in which ballroom culture in *My House* is represented as a queer-political sphere. Chapter 4.1 delineates how the community as an entity and members’ vogue and ball performances are made to signify personal liberation and sociopolitical resistance. Chapter 4.2 is concerned with the impact of ballroom culture on *My House*’s subjects’ private and professional lives that aids them in creating a future in which they find recognition, legitimization, and financial stability.

4.1 Performative Resistance

“In the ballroom, you’re legend.”—Jelani Mizrahi

In the series’ closing statement, Precious Ebony, a nonbinary ballroom commentator who offers valuable insight into ballroom culture throughout the entire series, summarizes *My House*’s core message: “The world is a dark place, and we are here to brighten it up. We’re gonna do it one vogue at a time”⁷. Voguing, as will become evident in my analysis, is portrayed in *My House* as the primary strategy to cope with and fight against sociopolitical

⁷All direct quotations in chapter 4 for which the authors are not specified in parentheses are taken from *My House*.

injustice and marginalization. While this sociopolitical resistance is a common denominator that people in *My House* associate with vogue, each of them also expresses deeply personal reasons for resorting to voguing and performing at balls. In that, *My House* invokes Cohen's proposition to think of queerness as a notion that unites queer people to contest the marginalizing sites of power but does not homogenize all queer people to permit a differentiating approach in dealing with intersecting marginalizations (43-45). Also, I observe that the series "refuses to explicate any unified 'truth' of black LGBTQ life and instead triggers a felt presence, situating [bodies] within a complex world of hostility and violence, and also of sensation, desire, humour, and pleasure, encouraging audiences to participate in these interlocking spheres of experience" (Geiger 193). In other words, the documentary is in line with other queer documentaries that refrain from offering hard facts, or rather a universal 'truth' about black queer people to their audience, but instead places the marginalized, yet expressive and performative queer bodies at the center of its narrative, portrays them as emotional individuals within a group, and creates an immersive experience for the audience that does not homogenize queer people's lives. The question of how *My House* represents voguing and ball performances as unifying, yet personal ways of expression and coping mechanisms will be addressed in this chapter. Additionally, I delineate how ballroom culture is portrayed as a capitalist sphere and how 'realness' categories are made to signify in the TV show.

Ballroom culture is described in interviews as a "secret society" and "safe space" where people can "express their feelings," "live their imagination," and "create stories." One member states, "If you're alone, this is your family." The reason why people need this "secret society" is, according to Alex Mugler, a well-known butch queen in the NYC ballroom scene, because people are rejected by mainstream society; he says, "We're too different, too queer, too black, so we come to the ballroom." Alex, thus, identifies deviating gendered, sexual, and racial norms as the main marginalizing social categories that incentivize people to join the community. Jelani Mizrahi, also a butch queen who is featured throughout the series, asserts that "ballroom brings the LGBTQI community together"; he maintains, "Ballroom allows us to be politically strong, to break so many expectations," and, thereby, invokes Muñoz's concept of queerness as a self-identified "collective political becoming" (*Cruising Utopia* 189). The strong ties within the community are illustrated in multiple scenes throughout the series. At various balls, the attendees are

depicted cheering for the ball performers through chanting, clapping, and vivid gesturing—on occasion in slow-motion to emphasize these moments. In interviews outside ball halls, people are questioned about certain community members such as Alex Mugler or Tati 007. Various interviewees maintain that Alex “brings it to you,” that “his movements are different,” and that he “is *it*.” Femme queen Tati 007 is deemed “the new IT-girl” and people contend that “she brings it.” Such surveying of community members demonstrates that people know and appreciate one another in the community. Generally, whenever balls and other social gatherings occur, the community members in *My House* can frequently be observed greeting one another, conversing, and laughing together. Alex states that at balls, they “support everyone.” All of these instances represent the ballroom scene as a space where positive feelings dominate, where people are happy and support each other. *My House*, thus, confirms Cohen’s observation that “[w]hile a marginal identity undoubtedly increases the prospects of shared consciousness, only an articulation and commitment to mutual support can truly be the test of unity when pursuing transformational politics” (47).

However, the community is also described as “fucked up” and a “battleground” where one needs “a thick skin” to succeed. Such negative feelings are frequently caused by the intense competitiveness within the scene. Members declare in interviews that “[t]o be a part [of ballroom], you have to be at the top,” because everybody wants to win the prize for the best ball performance. Precious summarizes, “You gotta be on your A-game because any bitch can be replaced.” At some balls, people even exhibit aggressive behavior, which sometimes causes physical fights and interruptions during balls; in one instance, Jelani even expects a ball to be canceled because multiple altercations occur during that evening.

Hence, *My House* offers its viewers a differentiated take on the NYC ballroom community. While most people laud ballroom culture for its inclusiveness and freedom of expression, some people criticize the pressure to succeed at ball performances and to not be “chopped,” that is eliminated, by the “harsh” judges. Generally, however, positive feelings and connotations regarding ballroom practices seem to dominate. Individual community members describe their personal relationships to ballroom practices in a positive manner and deem criticism and failure to be helpful incentives to improve future performances. This is why throughout the TV show, all of its subjects are mostly portrayed

glorifying balls, talking at almost all occasions about balls, using balls as reasons to meet outside ball events, and discussing individual members' voguing styles. Ballroom practices are constantly at the core of the show's depiction of ballroom culture. *My House's* representation of ballroom culture, therefore, confirms Jackson's observation that "[b]alls and their traditions like Voguing are the most important discursive manifestations of the system of kinship that binds different subjectivities together in the community" (38).

Ball practices are visualized in two different ways with two different goals throughout the series. Whenever universal characteristics and agreed-upon meanings of ballroom practices such as vogue and ball categories are verbally explained to educate the audience, visuals that are staged in a realistic, toned-down manner underscore the verbal explanations. Whenever, on the other hand, community members elaborate on their personal interpretations of voguing and ball performances, these scenes are characterized by cinematographically elaborate visuals accompanied by voice-over narrations. This goes to show that "[m]uch new queer documentary draws on cinema technology to heighten attention to the gestural so often suppressed in everyday modern life, and cinema, to articulate the intermediacies of movement" (Geiger 191). Thus, while it is frequent practice in queer documentaries to include performative elements "where narrative, explanatory devices, or other forms of 'official' discourse no longer suffice in producing meaning and knowledge" (Geiger 192), *My House* combines performative elements with explanatory devices. In that, *My House* tries to address Bell Hooks's criticism of *Paris Is Burning*:

Much of the film's focus on pageantry takes the ritual of the black drag ball and makes it spectacle [sic]. Ritual is that ceremonial act that carries with it meaning and significance beyond what appears, while spectacle functions primarily as entertaining dramatic display. [...] [T]hose elements of a given ritual that are empowering and subversive may not be readily visible to an outsider looking in. Hence it is easy for white observers to depict black rituals as spectacle. (150)

It seems like *My House* aims at minimizing the possibility of a spectacularized reading of ballroom practices that is informed by the white gaze through the usage of voice-over narrations to outline what ball rituals signify to individual members of the community. This technique is employed in various scenes, in varying settings, and with multiple performers/narrators.

Vogue is illustrated to the audience early in episode one. Precious describes that vogue consists of five basic elements; cross-cutting between Precious, who verbally explains and physically demonstrates each of the elements, and various other people performing the respective elements is used to introduce the viewers to the art of voguing. The basic element is “hands,” which is characterized by soft and swirling hand movements, and which is part of most other elements. The second element is “catwalk,” where people strut across the performance space. Then, there needs to be a transition to “duckwalk,” for which people squat and jump. In “spin and dips,” the fourth element, voguers spin elegantly in a standing position and lower their bodies toward the floor. During the last element, the “floor performance,” which is considered “the time where you sell your inner sex,” the performers lay on the floor and pose seductively. Overall, vogue is deemed a form of “self-expression” and a way for “people to overcome the oppression that they go through on a daily basis and express it.” This signification of vogue is, as addressed in previous chapters, the fundamental signification that all vogue performances have in common; it is a disidentifactory performance to resist the gendered, sexual, and racial norms that oppress the voguers and claim “power from the powerful by disrupting dominant views” (Jackson 38). At dance practice, an instructor reminds the voguers that for all voguing performances, people need to know why they “do it,” which makes the individual performances special. This individual touch of each vogue performance is what community members refer to as the “element of surprise.” The description of vogue performances in *My House* is in line with Bailey’s assertion that “the ultimate goal for each performer in a vogue battle is to execute the elements of vogue in a fashion that distinguishes him from his opponent” (“Engendering Space” 502). Various people throughout the show elaborate on their reasons for resorting to vogue and category performances and on the personal meanings that they associate with such ballroom practices.

In an interview with Tati, vogue is represented as a catalyst for personal growth. Tati reflects on her rebellious past that was characterized by aggressive outbursts and desperation regarding her gender identity. She also recounts that when she wanted to initiate her gender transition, she was not old enough to legally acquire hormones without parental permission, which is why she purchased them from a street vendor. Like many other transgender people in the community, she escorted to support herself and her

hormone therapy. The moment in which she realized that she had to change her life was, Tati says, when shortly after she had undergone sex reassignment surgery, she was jailed for physically assaulting one of her customers. Following this story, *My House* cuts to a scene where Tati vogues on her own at the pier, by night, with the NYC skyline in the background; in a slow-motion series of full shots, medium long shots, medium shots, medium close-ups, and close-ups, she looks directly into the camera while performing vogue moves. The visuals are accompanied by soft nondiegetic background music with a steady beat. In a voice-over narration, Tati states, “I came from not knowing who I was to knowing who I was. [...] I went from being a rebellious teenager out in the street to being a grown woman now, finding herself in this world.” Vogue and, by extension, ballroom culture epitomize Tati’s journey from a “rebellious teenager” to a “grown woman”; they epitomize a process of personal growth, of resistance against all social injustices through which she has lived, and which led her to become the person that she is today. Ballroom seems to have given her the strength to resist sociopolitical norms, initiate her transition, and find her true identity.

In a similar scene, Alex elaborates on his vogue and ball performances. For him, voguing at a ball is an act of liberation and freedom but also of inspiration. He describes, “Everything around me disappears and becomes a fantasy world.” Through vogue, he shares with the viewers, he forgets “all the shit in real life.” But he does not only vogue for himself; he says that he feels a certain “responsibility to shine and to share” in order to inspire others to “keep doing this work because a lot of people come from struggle and unacceptance.” While Alex utters these thoughts in a voice-over narration, he is portrayed voguing at a ball, surrounded by people who cheer for him in a series of long and medium shots and medium close-ups; this visual focus on both Alex and the attendees underlines Alex’s intention to both express himself and inspire the audience through dance. This noise that the crowd and the music diegetically generate fades into the background when Alex dances and voice-over narrates—which emphasizes Alex’s statement that everything around him disappears when he vogues. Alex, thus, creates a fantasy for himself when he vogues and he tries to inspire other ball attendees to liberate themselves from the marginalizations that they experience outside the ballroom. This represents ballroom as invoking queerness as a “work of phantasy” to contest dominant sociopolitical norms that marginalize people (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 28). Butler states that fantasy and a vision of

the “possibility of becoming otherwise” are necessary for the development of new gender identities and that this fantasy is often crucial for the literal survival of people who do not conform with nonnormative gender identities because it creates “sustaining bonds of community where recognition becomes possible and works as well to ward off violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobia” (*Undoing Gender* 216-217).

Tati further elaborates on the importance of balls and vogue for her. She is again portrayed in a series of shots—mostly medium long, medium, medium close-ups, and close-ups—in slow-motion, this time voguing at a ball. Some shots are filmed from the perspective of ball attendees and the judges, but for most shots, the camera is situated in the performance space. The visuals are accompanied by nondiegetic audio—a house music tune in which the line “Reclaiming my time” is repeatedly audible—as well as by diegetic audio—the cheering of the crowd. In voice-over narration, Tati states, “This chapter in my life, this is reclaiming my time for all my missed opportunities. My time is now!” Following her performance, Tati wins the grand prize and people cheer loudly for her. She says, “This solidifies that I don’t need a house to win a ball. I am my own brand.”

This scene addresses two crucial aspects in *My House*. First, ballroom and vogue performances have deeply personal meanings to all people. For Tati, they are opportunities to make up for everything that she has missed in her life, to show her true identity, and, by extension, to promote and even extend her brand and career to the world outside ballroom. For her, vogue and ballroom performances are not only a means to resist social identity categories but also a heavily future-oriented tool to further her career and social status⁸. The second crucial aspect that the scene highlights is Tati’s status as a ‘007,’ that is a community member who does not belong to an established house. Throughout the series, Tati’s status as a 007 is thematized by community members and considered to be a disadvantage. People maintain that all the advantages that a house membership entails—mutual support and encouragement at balls and outside balls, house parents’ advice, and a feeling of belonging and safety—prevent Tati from discovering her full potential. Although, Tati says, she is aware of the advantages of belonging to a house and she misses the House of Mugler—her former house—and her family there, she wants to establish her own brand so that people respect her regardless of a house.

⁸I discuss in chapter 4.2 how ballroom culture furthers community members’ careers outside ballroom.

Houses are essential elements of ballroom culture in *My House*. They are represented—just like in *Kiki*—as sites of disidentification where normalized identity categories are “repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims” (Butler, *Bodies* 123) through the reappropriation of the heteronormative concept of family and its association with the houses—with the purpose of scrambling and reconstructing “the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 31). Alex summarizes that houses are “about family, bonding, being safe.”

Additionally, houses are associated with status, prestige, and business practices—all of which are deemed to facilitate individual house members’ success in ballroom culture and specifically at balls. Alex states, “As a Mugler, [it’s all about] opulence, appearance, knowing your worth, knowing that I look the best and I wear the best.” He states that the House of Mugler is a “brand” that is destined “only for the best.” When Tati meets with the fathers of the House of Lanvin who want to recruit her for their house, the houses’ business approach becomes evident. The scene is staged like an informal business meeting with Tati and her companion situated on one side of a table and the recruiters to their opposite. Tati elaborates on her expectations and demands for the House of Lanvin, while the recruiters describe their house and delineate their visions for Tati as part of their house. They explain that they specifically pick people within their house for certain balls and categories based on a “look book.” This business approach, according to the recruiters, is aimed at “trying to establish brands for members.” While the financial aspect is not directly addressed in this meeting, one can assume that one goal of the House of Lanvin’s scheme is to maximize the house members’ and the house’s overall monetary profit, since, as Alex states, everybody wants to win the cash prize. Such instances represent houses and balls as capitalist business ventures and underline *My House*’s depiction of ballroom culture as a meritocratic system where “any bitch can be replaced,” or rather where failures are punished, and high achievement is rewarded.

Ball and vogue performances, thus, have the triple function of not only contesting sociopolitical identity norms and allowing people to express their individuality but also of generating income for the life outside ballroom culture in a capitalist society. While Hooks

maintains that “consumer capitalism undermines the subversive power of the drag balls” (155), I argue that the community in *My House* willfully combines the subversive nature of ball performances with capitalist practices to establish a connection between the ballroom and the majoritarian capitalist society in which the members do indeed live. This is in line with arguments made by Love, Cohen, and Butler asserting that queer politics with the single goal of abandoning all socially constructed identity categories should integrate the fight for equality for marginalized people into their agenda. Since a lack of capital is indeed a factor that negatively impacts the lives of the community members (Eng 45), the amassment of capital within the social sphere of ballroom culture can, conversely, be read as sociopolitical resistance against a system that systemically marginalizes and discriminates against those who cannot participate in its capitalist practices.

A scene in which Lolita Balenciaga retrospectively narrates the intentions and thoughts that she had during a ball performance epitomizes balls as highly competitive capitalist practices. She states, “I came here to do one thing, and that’s to win.” She explains that she has a “shady mind” when she walks a ball. Lolita can be observed walking the runway and constantly trying to impede her opponent’s performance. She thinks to herself, “I’m sorry sis, you’re not gonna win!” After she triumphs over two opponents, she proceeds to the final round. Viewers see the two contestants blocking one another; Lolita explains her ensuing move: “I gotta slay real quick. Unwrap this ponytail and whip it like a helicopter. Create a moment because that’s what it’s all about.” After she wins her category, she competes in the cash category together with a house sibling against all the winners from each of the evening’s categories and they win the ball. Lolita holds the pile of cash that she won into the camera and screams, “I get to pay my phone bill!” Balls in *My House*, therefore, situate its participants in a capitalist arena where performances have the triple purpose of deconstructing sociopolitical identity norms, allowing people to express their individuality, and defying majoritarian capitalist society by reappropriating its system. I argue that regarding the reappropriation of capitalism, too, ballroom is a site where “minoritarian subjects [...] utilize the code of majority to empower a marginalized positionality” (Eguchi and Asante 176).

Central aspects of queer resistance in *My House* are “realness” categories. According to Bailey, “‘realness’ categories [...] call for a performance in which participants are judged on how effective [sic] they act, dress, and walk, in ways that are

indistinguishable from any other working class man or woman in everyday society” (“Engendering Space” 493). This can be seen as a strategy through which at balls, performers aim at being unrecognizable as the ‘other’ that society labels them due to their nonnormative gender, sexual, and racial identity. Therefore, “realness ultimately signifies the possibility of deception” (Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness” 378). Butler argues that in realness performances, “we witness [...] a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded” (*Bodies* 131). The disidentifactory function of realness categories and the performative nature of gender and other social categories that realness categories purport to reveal are best represented in a scene where Jelani’s house mother Myah coaches him for his “thug realness” performance at a ball. He explains to his mother that the performers are expected to appear as boxers; the props he uses are boxing gloves, a boxing belt, a headpiece, and a mouthpiece. Myah reminds him that not only the props are crucial for his performance but also his gestures and attitude. She states, “You have to bring raw, gutter thug realness.” She asks him to demonstrate his planned performance. Jelani bends his knees, adopts a serious look, and imitates boxing moves. His mother tells him that she is “not scared yet,” whereupon she shows him how to perform thug realness. She reminds him, “It’s confidence, it’s character, it’s attitude [...] that leads up to a winner.” Jelani summarizes before his performance at the ball, “Realness is more about a character rather than who you are in real life. I have to make you believe it.” At this moment, he can be seen changing into his performance outfit and subsequently performing his interpretation of thug realness as a boxer for the camera. This scene illustrates that realness performances are mere roles that people take on; they are copies of normalized, stereotypical acts, looks, gestures, and behavioral patterns typically associated with certain types of people. Thus, in *My House*, realness categories at balls that aim at deliberately performing normative gender categories as successfully as possible are depicted not as copies of a normative gender category for the mere sake of creating a copy but rather as a performance of a normative gender identity executed by a person who does not at all conform with this identity so as to expose the performative nature of the normalized, original gender identity that it copies; people who walk realness categories in *My House* show by copying a normative gender identity that anybody can perform a normative gender identity and that, in Butler’s words, “the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy” (*Undoing Gender* 209).

This contesting of social gender identities is especially powerful in the “realness with a twist” categories. In realness with a twist, the performers walk the demanded realness category, but then they change their performance into the opposite of what is deemed ‘real.’ In *My House*, realness with a twist is explained through a cisgender-looking man who walks “thug realness” in regular street clothes—in jeans, a sweater, and a jacket—and who tries to convince the attendees of the ball of his performance of stereotypical masculinity through his clothes, slow movements, and toned-down gestures. At the twist, “when the beat hits,” it is clarified, the performer starts voguing and “doing the exact opposite.” In the case of thug realness, which requires the performance of hyper-masculinity, the exact opposite is represented by voguing moves that are coded feminine—including fast movements and large gestures. This change in gendered performances demonstrates, according to an interviewee in *My House* and Bailey, “the skill of the competitor to instantly change her/his gender performance from ‘unclockable,’ meaning they unmark themselves as queer, to ‘clockable,’ marking themselves as queer” (“Gender/Racial Realness 379). Realness can, thus, be regarded as a disidentifactory performance that “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 31). Hence, the performance of altering gender identities has the potential to prompt the contesting and the change of established gender norms, since such altering gender performances lay bare the constructed, performative nature of gender. The reliance on and reproduction of normative gender identity categories often strengthen such a performance (Butler, *Bodies* 123; 229).

Realness in *My House* does not only epitomize gender subversion but also seeks to prepare the community members for their lives in majoritarian society. According to Precious, Jelani embodies realness with a twist. To illustrate that, Jelani is portrayed voguing in an empty warehouse in a series of slow-motion medium long shots, medium shots, and medium close-ups. He wears black jeans, a white shirt, a silver jacket, sunglasses, and sneakers—an outfit that does not ‘clock’ him, or rather mark him as queer. In a voice-over comment, Precious states, “He got the masculine physique, but when he vogues, it’s like ‘Sis, who taught you that?’” The lyrics of the nondiegetic music—

“Realness, realness with a twist, these are the girls that vogue like this [...] Realness with that feminine twist, realness, flip your wrists like this”—underscore the performance and Precious’s description. Jelani’s warehouse performance, thus, represents masculine realness—visualized by his clothes—and a feminine twist—visualized by his vogue moves and underscored by the audio. Later in the show, Jelani states, “[Outside ballroom,] realness is basically where I just display how I blend in with other heterosexual people. [...] I don’t wanna be getting clocked all the time and getting glass bottles thrown at me.” Hence, Jelani is a person who can adapt his gender performances to the respective contexts; while in ballrooms, he experiments with his gender performance by copying sociopolitical norms and defying them, outside ballrooms, he adapts his gender performance to sociopolitical norms that he practiced inside the ballroom by copying them. Jelani represents that, as described by Bailey, outside the ballroom, community members “enact their realness performances to create the illusion of gender and sexual normativity and to blend into the larger heteronormative society to avoid homophobic discrimination, exclusion, violence, and death” (*Butch Queens* 56).

Phillip Harper, a gender and sexuality studies scholar, is critical of realness performances and their impact in real life. He asserts in his analysis of *Paris Is Burning* that “the critical difference between normative subjects and those produced in the enactment of Realness is that the former are discursively constituted as recognizable within the governing social structure and, thus, are legitimated in a way that the latter are not” (96). I argue that this criticism of realness cannot be universally applied to realness performances in *My House*, as becomes obvious in the case of Jelani. At balls, he practices performances of what society deems ‘authentic’ masculinity and seems to, according to his own evaluation, successfully transfer his ballroom performances of realness into the world outside the ballroom. If, of course, one would apply Harper’s assertion to specific categories such as “boxer thug realness,” Harper would probably be verified in his argumentation because Jelani would likely not be recognized as a boxer outside the ballroom. But since Jelani does not intend to perform such specific realness categories outside ballrooms but rather extracts a key aspect—the performance of masculinity—from his realness ball performances, his performance of ‘real’ masculinity outside ballrooms can certainly be recognized as legitimate by society.

Another critical point regarding realness categories is voiced by Tati in the series. For her, realness for transgender people “is just a real contradiction.” “Femme queen realness,” according to her, “defeats the whole purpose. You can’t sit there and tell a female figure that they are not real when they live their life like this every day.” If the goal of femme queen realness is for transgender women to perform ‘real,’ that is normalized, femininity, then the purpose of that category is probably not to subvert gender norms but to practice and perfect them in order to be able to perform this realness outside ballrooms and to be unmarked as queer. Marquis Bey argues that black transgender people are imagined in a white hegemonic arena like the U.S. as “counterstatements” to American culture since they contradict the white heteropatriarchal norms on which American culture is based and, thus, reunite at least two identificatory aspects in them that are in diametrical opposition to white hegemonic cultural norms (278). Page and Richardson add a third identificatory aspect: Hegemonic gender ideologies

so constrain Black subjectivity that Black trans subjectivity is often deemed anathema; anyone sporting what Halberstam (2005) called ‘the transsexual look’ in Black communities today may be seen as an internal threat to the community’s racial identity. They can become a target of body backlash because their very presence seems to place those communities in racial danger that academia so far does not acknowledge. (65)

Briefly, black transgender people are not only oppressed in white but also in black cultural spheres—which is why, in femme queen realness in *My House*, they are given the opportunity to practice their femininity so as to ‘pass’ as women in mainstream hegemonic society.

According to trans researcher Saoirse Caitlin O’Shae, transgender people who desire to appear “natural,” that is according to one of the societally prescribed gender categories of femininity or masculinity, are labeled as “passing” (8). For transgender people, “passing” is a “means of stigma management, [which] allows them to slip through a cisgender society unnoticed as their preferred rather than birth-assigned gender”; therefore, “[p]assing is a means to avoid abuse and physical assault” due to society’s expectations to perform gender in a way which aligns with prescribed norms of femininity and masculinity “in a world where—as Butler has repeatedly noted—a failure to conform with the norms of society may result in abuse, physical assault” and even murder (O’Shae 7-8). Coming back to Tati, while she does not criticize the opportunity to perform her true

identity as a woman in ball categories that are not associated with realness, she is critical of the idea that in femme queen realness, people judge the effectiveness or realness of her performance since she lives her true identity as a woman outside ballrooms every day. In other words, having her womanhood evaluated at balls seems counterproductive to Tati since she already faces judgment regarding her womanhood outside balls.

Generally, however, in providing binary transgender people—in separate categories such as “femme queen performance”—opportunities to perform binary genders, the ballroom community in *My House* reflects Love’s observation that “some traditional social identities [...] can, in fact, be important to one’s survival” (184). This aspect is particularly important for binary transgender people since, according to O’Shea, “the femininity of binary transgender women is as natural and real as it may be to cisgender women; it is not an ironic questioning of gender but an expression of gender and how they feel” (8). Apart from the representation of Tati as a woman who seeks to appear as feminine as possible, the recount of a transgender man in the show illustrates binary transgender people’s desire to be recognized as authentic men or women. He states, “Biological men are socialized as men when they are young. We [read: transgender men] have to learn all that. For me, when I was transitioning, I paid attention to every little thing that a man does. Just because you transition, that doesn’t make you a man.” While he utters his point of view, he is depicted walking at a ball in a ‘masculine’ manner; viewers see his broad shoulders, toned-down movements, a serious facial expression, and his hands folded behind his back. While this scene lays bare the performative nature of gender and refutes the idea of a fixed gender core, it also demonstrates binary transgender people’s desire to be perceived as what society deems ‘authentic’ men or women. At balls in *My House*, binary transgender people have the opportunity to be recognized as authentic men and women—which is frequently difficult for them in mainstream society due to society’s expectation to perform gender in a way that reflects one’s biological sex assigned at birth.

Overall, *My House* invokes several queer notions to represent ballroom culture as a site where ball and vogue performances serve as acts of resistance to override the sociopolitical system that marginalizes its members. How the series represents ballroom culture as impactful in shaping its members’ potential professional and private futures is the central question in the following chapter.

4.2 Toward a Queer Future

“Everybody looks at ballroom right now.”—Tati 007

Queer world making is a visionary, heavily future-oriented process (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1). This chapter explores how ballroom culture in *My House* extends into its members’ professional and personal lives and thereby potentially disrupts a system of cultural appropriation and financial exploitation as well as dominant hetero and homonormative views on interpersonal relations and family to create a future for its members in which they find recognition, legitimization, and financial stability.

Chatzipapatheodoridis describes that in *Paris Is Burning*, “[m]ost of the participants [...] desired to attain stardom and spread both the glamour of the ballroom scene and their personal notoriety to the world” (3); the same is true for some of the subjects in *My House*. Within the ballroom scene, individual members have achieved a star-like image. Alex and Tati have attained the “legendary” status—which means “five or more years of conquering a category and continuously winning trophies and prizes.” At balls, they are constantly recognized, people cheer for them, and they get “called out,” that is invited to deliver spontaneous ball performances without competition. Precious is a well-known ball commentator in the scene—not just in NYC but also in Philadelphia, Chicago, and outside the U.S. They get booked to commentate multiple balls per year, for which they receive financial compensation. Precious finds, “Not everybody is as [financially] privileged as I became.”

Precious’s success in ballroom extends to their life outside ballroom. They were featured in a campaign advertisement for the sports brand *Nike*, and they record an album with DJ and producer Byrell The Great. Precious fantasizes about “working like the Cardis, the Nickis, the B’s” and about being “the one gay rapper that everyone wants to work with.” The fact that Precious wants to be recognized as a gay rapper can be interpreted as the positive impact of ballroom culture, which probably confirms and encourages them in their status as a black LGBTQI+ person. Also, in referencing Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé—highly successful black women—as their idols, Precious lays bare the shift that has taken place since the release of *Paris Is Burning* regarding ballroom participants’ ideal of femininity. While in *Paris Is Burning*, according to Hooks, the characters exhibit an “obsession with an idealized fetishized vision of femininity that is white” (148), for Precious, black women serve as their inspiration. Precious, a nonbinary black person in a

financially privileged situation due to ballroom culture, I argue, embodies the disruption of oppressive gender, sexual, and racial norms and the possibilities that this disruption can generate.

Tati and Alex have built careers in the entertainment industry, too. Alex mentions that he danced for music producer Bob Sinclar and singer FKA Twigs and choreographed for singer Rihanna and “companies like Hermès”; pictures that show him with Rihanna and FKA Twigs are displayed to support his statements. Also, *My House* features scenes that depict Tati and Alex modeling at New York Fashion Week. They credit ballroom culture for their professional success: Tati states, “Who knew that ballroom could take us to these heights and could lead us to being in these fashion shows? [...] Everybody looks at ballroom right now.” Considering Hooks’s criticism of popular culture’s—in the context of *Paris Is Burning* Madonna’s—attempt at exploiting black cultural practices like vogue (152), the question arises whether the subjects in *My House* may also be the victims of cultural exploitation; *My House* thematizes the issue. Alex explains, “A lot of people in ballroom get taken advantage of [...] in the entertainment industry [...]. But it’s our responsibility now to tell them, ‘Don’t just take on the low and not give us the credit—or the coin!’” Alex, thus, is aware of popular culture’s attempts at cultural exploitation, or rather its frequent omission of ballroom members in its usage of ballroom practices and demands inclusion, recognition, and financial compensation. I maintain that he represents ballroom culture’s attempts and first success at disrupting a system of cultural appropriation and financial exploitation that permeates the entertainment industry.

However, *My House* also clarifies that these choreographing and modeling jobs do not suffice for Alex to be financially independent—which is illustrated by a scene where Alex is walking the runway at a fashion show, accompanied by nondiegetic music and the sound of people cheering. After a cut, the music and cheering stop, and the viewers see a lift truck driving into a warehouse; after another cut, Alex is depicted sitting in front of a small office desk. He explains that for financial stability, he works as a sales representative at a furniture company. This montage and scene illustrate Alex’s awareness that he needs “multiple hustles” to achieve a financially stable situation and that his work in the entertainment industry cannot be considered a reliable and steady source of income. Overall, *My House* shows that the queer sphere of ballroom culture has aided some members—to varying degrees—in starting financially lucrative careers inside and outside

the ballroom and in thereby potentially shaping their futures. However, given the show's sole focus on Tati, Precious, and Alex's professional endeavors, it only provides a limited view on ballroom culture as a gateway into a career outside the ballroom.

My House not only hints at future professional opportunities for ballroom culture's members but also at a possibility for a future that is not shaped by heteronormative versions of partnership and family. According to Muñoz, queer people "who do not choose to be biologically reproductive, a people without children, are, within the dominant culture, people without a future" (*Cruising Utopia* 98). Halberstam argues that to debunk this notion, queer subcultures have established themselves as "sites where queers reinvent notions of time, space, embodiment, community and relation" by abandoning a generational, white heteronormative model of family and by replacing it with a kinship structure of people who are not related through biology and do not conform with classic parent/child relations ("Forgetting Family" 319). This kinship structure does not only aid queer people in finding support, advice, and love, which they do not receive from their biological families, but since "many queers refuse and resist the heteronormative imperative of home and family, they also prolong the periods of their life devoted to subcultural participation"; this "challenge to the notion of the subculture as a youth formation could [...] challenge our notion of adulthood as reproductive maturity" (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 161-162).

The challenging of normalized notions of family and heteronormative reproductive maturity or partnership is represented by the show's subjects' attitudes regarding family and partnerships which they repeatedly express in interviews. When Tati hosts a party for her "sisters, daughter, and homegirls," the women—all transgender—talk about their dating preferences. Whereas some state that they are "open for everything," meaning that they would date anyone regardless of their gender, others identify as strictly homosexual or heterosexual; none of the women address a wish for marriage or children. Regarding the question of whether they "prefer sex or love," the group is divided; some of them desire relationships for emotional reasons, others deem partners as means to satisfy their sexual desires. Dora Santana, a trans theorist, states that "black trans people and trans people of color socializing, sharing [...] stories, coming together to care for one another is indeed a form of trans revolution" that has the power to, quoting Angela Davis, "disaggregate things that naturally appear to belong together" (212). Thus, the

representation of the group of trans women at Tati's party can be read as a way through which the sociopolitically established ties between biological sex and gender expression, between biological males and females, and between partnership, love, and procreation can be loosened.

Other people in the show also have varying sentiments about and views on relationships and love. Alex challenges both reproductive hetero and homonormativity and monogamy. For him, "monogamy is dead as of right now"; he adds, "I haven't been in a relationship for a long time because I really didn't care to be in relationships." Yet, he was in various open relationships where he and his "bae" could meet other people. For Jelani, a relationship does not have priority because he is "focused on progressing in life"; he states, however, that in the future, he imagines himself in a stable partnership with a man and "of course" with kids. Jelani would "choose love over sex" because he is a "romantic person," and he likes to develop deep intimacy with his partner. Precious has two boyfriends in the series, yet they often feel used by them. One of their current boyfriends, in a phone call, tells them that he is hungry and does not have any money. After the call, Precious admits that they have never had sex with this boyfriend, which is why they suspect that they are being used by him for financial benefits. Precious's other boyfriend—to whom they refer as "hubbie"—offers them "everything a relationship does," including sex. However, Precious does not appear to be content with their polyamorous relationship status. In an emotional scene, Precious reveals that they desire a genuine relationship, a husband, and to "make moments with another person."

The variety of gender identities combined with the variety of sexual orientations, the varying reasons for entering relationships, and the multiple forms of relationships represented in *My House* reveal the hetero and homonormative ideals of partnership and family to be two out of a variety of options for people to find friendship, companionship, validation, pleasure, and love. While some of the series' subjects long for intimate, normalized heterosexual or homosexual relationships, others do not desire to follow sociopolitical norms of relationship and love. Sexuality, thus, "becomes open to a number of social articulations that do not always imply binding relations or conjugal ties" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 26). In this respect, David Eng asserts in line with Ferguson that since "queer liberalism extends the right of privacy to gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects willing to comply with its normative dictates of bourgeois intimacy, and able to afford the

comforts of bourgeois domesticity” and that since this queer liberalism fails “to recognize the racial genealogy of exploitation and domination” that defines bourgeoisie, black LGBTQI+ subjects see the necessity to establish alternative forms of domesticity and kinship just like white LGBTQI+ people did before they were granted access to bourgeois domesticity (45).

Such alternative forms of domesticity and kinship are, apart from the house system and the nonnormative forms of partnership, represented by the ballroom members’ social environments. Tati explains, “I did not have anybody who taught me what family really was. We have to be one because otherwise, we have nobody.” Throughout the series, Tati, Alex, and Jelani are portrayed spending most of their time outside the ballroom with other people from the ballroom scene—visiting restaurants, bars, stores, beauty salons, and dance practice, and preparing for balls. Tati maintains that “you need your girls” for support, encouragement, and advice. Precious describes that their “real” father abandoned them and that their “gay father” Marquis helped them overcome many of their problems in life. Their “gay family” represents “genuine love” for Precious—something that they never experienced in their biological family. Precious recounts that they have established a network of ballroom members across various cities that allows them to find housing and company everywhere they go. All of these instances illustrate Butler’s assertion that “kinship ties that bind persons to one another may well be no more or less than the intensification of community ties, may or may not be based on enduring or exclusive sexual relations, may well consist of ex-lovers, nonlovers, friends, and community members” (*Undoing Gender* 26). These kinship ties that the ballroom members have created for themselves in *My House* have replaced the traditional notions of family and partnership in their lives; they demonstrate that “[w]hen these modes of intimate association produce sustaining webs of relationships, they constitute a ‘breakdown’ of traditional kinship that displaces the presumption that biological and sexual relations structure kinship centrally” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 26).

My House closes with a scene where Alex, Tati, Jelani, and Precious emphasize the importance of ballroom culture and its kinship system for black LGBTQI+ people. In four separate settings, they are portrayed voguing, accompanied by nondiegetic electronic and piano music and their own voice-over narrations. Ballroom, they say, allows them “to have people around you that go through similar experiences,” “to be politically strong,” and “to

do so many things and break so many expectations and barriers.” This montage represents once more the ballroom community as an alternative queer world where through disidentifactory performance and dedication to mutual support, its members unite as a political group, with the vision of destabilizing the sociopolitical norms that, outside ballroom, marginalize them and fighting for political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people. Precious, referring to *My House*, hopes that “[t]his, right here, is gonna show people that just because we’re gay, we’re not negative, loud, destructive. Why is LGBT a rainbow? Because the world is a dark place, and we are here to brighten it up. We’re gonna do it one vogue at a time.”

5 Conclusion

My analysis shows that *Kiki* and *My House* invoke similar notions of queerness that manifest themselves differently in the two texts to represent contemporary underground ballroom culture as a space where sociopolitical norms are contested. In both documentaries, this process of contesting the norms serves both as a reassurance of the ballroom community's members' self-elected identities and a critique of the current societal system to fight for political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people.

Kiki invokes Cohen's proposition of queerness as a differentiating yet unifying notion to establish a "shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges" (43); its goal is the "*destabilization and radical politicalization*" of social identity categories (45, original emphasis). Large parts of the film portray community members recounting their individual stories of marginalization, while the disruption or destabilization of heteronormative ideologies that are introduced as the roots of its subjects' marginalized lives is represented as the goal that unifies the community. Cohen's notion is also reflected in the balls, where various groups of black queer people pursue their respective agendas—the ironic mocking, realistic reproduction, and complete neglect of normalized social identity categories—but also unite as black queer people in a queer world that opposes social and biological imperatives. This unity—characterized by the juxtaposition of performances of the categories of gender and sexuality that are not destined by society for the ball participants' biological bodies—has the potential to destabilize the social identity categories of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. The hyperbolic mocking of gender norms at balls represents Ford's proposition to think of queerness as "bullying, razzing, and mocking social conventions until it's hard to imagine them in the same way" (122).

Another recurring queer proposition in *Kiki* is Muñoz's notion of disidentifactory performances, which "willfully disavows that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the 'real' [...] through strategies of iteration and reiteration" to question social identity categories (*Disidentifications* 196). Disidentification is represented in the film's portrayal of the houses as families. The ballroom community reproduces/repeats/reiterates familial structures and roles but resignifies them according to their needs and, thus, disavows normalized identity categories and biological determinism. The film, thereby, also

illustrates Butler's assertion that because normalized identity categories "have been produced and constrained within [oppressive] regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims" (*Bodies* 123).

Vogue's disidentifactory nature is represented in *Kiki* as a means to overcome marginalizations. Generally, vogue contests the dominant norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. In *Kiki*, by juxtaposing interviews in which community members recount instances of marginalization with short, carefully staged scenes in which these members vogue, I assert that voguing can be regarded as a creative outlet that allows the community members to disidentify with or resist the dominant binary sociopolitical norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity/skin color that marginalize them. The film also connects voguing—an inherently queer disidentifactory performance—with debating social issues, offering advice, raising awareness of the dangers of HIV/AIDS, as well as thematizing and proposing counter-measures against the marginalizations that black LGBTQI+ face—all inherently sociopolitical acts. The documentary, thereby, emphasizes the importance of performative practices as gateways into ballroom culture's fight for political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people.

In sum, all of these queer notions—and the repeated depiction of the same spaces where members of the ballroom community can openly meet, socialize, discuss pressing issues, and vogue without any disturbances—represent ballroom culture in *Kiki* as Muñoz's vision of a "'not-yet' where queer youths of color actually get to grow up" ("Cruising the Toilet" 365). In this not-yet, HIV/AIDS prevention is conducted in house meetings and at balls and other social gatherings to raise awareness of the dangers of HIV/AIDS, lower the numbers of new HIV infections and, by extension, contest the ongoing stigmatization of the black LGBTQI+ community regarding the disease.

My House introduces vogue and ball performances as the primary strategies that all of its subjects utilize to cope with and collectively fight against sociopolitical norms. Throughout the series, individual subjects are portrayed voguing in visually elaborate scenes, while in voice-over narrations, they explicate their deeply personal reasons for resorting to voguing and performing at balls. In that, *My House* also invokes Cohen's proposition to think of queerness as a notion that unites queer people to destabilize social identity categories but does not homogenize all queer people to permit a differentiating approach in dealing with intersecting marginalizations (43-45). Such ball and vogue

performances are constantly at the core of the show's depiction of ballroom culture and the subjects' conversations. *My House's* representation of ballroom culture, therefore, confirms Jackson's observation that "[b]alls and their traditions like Voguing are the most important discursive manifestations of the system of kinship that binds different subjectivities together in the community" (38).

Especially 'realness' performances are portrayed in *My House* as powerful subversive tools. Realness, according to Butler, is executed by "a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded" (*Bodies* 131). People who walk realness categories in *My House* show by copying a normative gender identity and insisting on the performative nature of their 'realness' that anybody can perform a normative gender identity and that, in Butler's words, "the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy" (*Undoing Gender* 209). Even more subversive are 'realness with a twist' categories, in which the performers walk the demanded realness category, but then they change their performance into the opposite of what is deemed 'real.' This change in gendered performances demonstrates, according to Bailey, "the skill of the competitor to instantly change her/his gender performance from 'unclockable,' meaning they unmark themselves as queer, to 'clockable,' marking themselves as queer" ("Gender/Racial Realness 379). While realness with a twist in the series exposes the performative nature of identity categories through its sudden change in identity performance, it also teaches the performers "to blend into the larger heteronormative society to avoid homophobic discrimination, exclusion, violence, and death" (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 56).

The vogue and ball performances in *My House* serve not only to disidentify with and question the sociopolitical norms that marginalize the performers but also to defy majoritarian capitalist society by reappropriating its system. Houses have developed strategies to facilitate the victory at balls for their members; ball winners receive cash prizes. I argue that the amassment of capital within the social sphere of ballroom culture can be read as resistance against a sociopolitical system that systemically discriminates against those who cannot participate in its capitalist practices.

Ballroom culture in *My House* also extends into its members' professional and private lives. Some members have, due to ballroom, attained a financially lucrative career and, thereby, embody the possibilities that the disruption of oppressive gender, sexual,

and racial norms in ballroom can generate. In their private lives, the series' subjects spend most of their time with other people from the ballroom scene who provide them with support, encouragement, advice, and parental love; thus, they have replaced the concept of a biological family with a kinship structure of other community members. Also, I argue that the variety of gender identities combined with the variety of sexual orientations, the varying reasons for entering relationships, and the multiple forms of relationships represented in *My House* reveal the hetero and homonormative ideals of partnership and family to be two out of a variety of options for people to find friendship, companionship, validation, pleasure, and love. Hence, I observe the ballroom community overrides "the presumption that biological and sexual relations structure kinship centrally" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 26) and may "challenge our notion of adulthood as reproductive maturity" (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 162).

All these scenarios represent the ballroom community in *My House* as a space of sociopolitical resistance, of queer world making that "delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternative views of the world [which] are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate minoritarian people" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 195). Also, they confirm Cohen's observation that "[w]hile a marginal identity undoubtedly increases the prospects of shared consciousness, only an articulation and commitment to mutual support can truly be the test of unity when pursuing transformational politics" (47).

Paris Is Burning is criticized by Hooks as a white hegemonic representation of a nonwhite community whose intersectionally marginalized circumstances and black queer practices could never have been fully grasped by the white director due to their nonblackness (151); similar arguments can be made for *Kiki* and *My House*. *Kiki's* director is also a white person, and the film was merely co-written by a ballroom community member (Jordenö, "About"). Regarding *My House*, only its "creative team [...] is black and some identify as LGBTQ" (Barksdale, my emphasis). Therefore, although the aim of this thesis is not to evaluate the authenticity of the depiction of ballroom culture in *Kiki* and *My House*, I deem it necessary to point out that my observations in this thesis can be considered to be based on a (partly) white hegemonic depiction of ballroom culture. However, large parts of my thesis and, most importantly, the analyses of *Kiki* and *My House*

chiefly rely on the queer-theoretical positions of nonwhite queer scholars like Muñoz, Cohen, Ford, Johnson, and others who analyze the intersectional marginalizations that black LGBTQI+ people face in the U.S. and theorize black queer strategies of resistance from their respective—black—perspectives.

Future research on the representation of black queerness in visual media could go various directions—and may not focus exclusively on ballroom culture. The drama series *Pose* (FX, 2018-2021) is a fictional portrayal of NYC underground ballroom culture in the 1980s and 1990s that is partly informed by real events; Alex Mugler from *My House* and Twiggy Pucci Garçon from *Kiki* serve as choreographers for the series. The drama film *Port Authority* (Danielle Lessovitz, 2019) centers around the love of a black transgender woman who is a member of the ballroom community with a white cisgender man. *Pose* and *Port Authority* could offer insight into how black queerness and ballroom culture are represented in scripted television and film. One particularly relevant representation of black queerness in visual media is rapper Lil Nas X's video to his song *Montero (Call Me by Your Name)*, which was released during the writing process of this thesis and caused a public discourse on queerness and, particularly, black queerness. In the video, the black gay rapper embodies various queer notions, such as Muñoz's concept of disidentification, to question the social identity categories of gender, sexuality, and blackness. Similar to *Kiki* and *My House*, such representations publicly look “*both* for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, and for *the limits* of those conditions. The limits are to be found where the reproducibility of the conditions is not secure, the site where conditions are contingent, transformable”; consequently, “something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place” (*Undoing Gender* 27, original emphasis).

To conclude, *Kiki* and *My House* represent contemporary ballroom culture as a queer sphere where its members find support, advice, and space to perform their true identities because sociopolitically imposed categories and norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity do not dictate people's gendered and sexual performances. Yet, it is also a sphere where social identity categories are willingly reproduced and mocked to reveal their performative nature and destabilize them. Additionally, intersecting and marginalizing social identity categories and sociopolitical norms are thematized to fight for political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people.

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Abstract

English Version

This Master's Thesis sets out to analyze how the documentary film *Kiki* (Sara Jordenö, 2016) and the documentary series *My House* (Viceland, 2018) represent embodiments of black queerness in U.S. contemporary underground ballroom culture as sociopolitical acts of resistance. Queer propositions by theorists like José Muñoz, Judith Butler, Cathy Cohen, and Judith Halberstam serve as the primary lenses through which I scrutinize the documentaries. I argue that *Kiki* and *My House* represent contemporary ballroom culture as a queer sphere where its members find support, advice, and space to perform their true identities because sociopolitically imposed categories and norms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity do not dictate people's gendered and sexual performances. Yet, it is also a sphere where social identity categories are willingly reproduced and mocked to reveal their performative nature and destabilize them. Additionally, intersecting and marginalizing social identity categories and sociopolitical norms are thematized to fight for political and social equality for black LGBTQI+ people.

Deutsche Version

Diese Masterarbeit hat zum Ziel, die Darstellung der gegenwärtigen U.S.-amerikanischen *Underground Ballroom*-Szene in den Dokumentationen *Kiki* (Sara Jordenö, 2016) und *My House* (Viceland, 2018) hinsichtlich ihrer Verkörperung schwarzer Queerness als soziopolitischen Widerstand zu durchleuchten. Queere Thesen von Theoretikern wie José Muñoz, Judith Butler, Cathy Cohen und Judith Halberstam sind die Basis meiner Untersuchung. Ich argumentiere, dass *Kiki* und *My House* die gegenwärtige *Underground Ballroom*-Szene als eine queere Sphäre repräsentieren, in der die Mitglieder Unterstützung, Rat und einen Ort finden, an dem sie ihrer wahren Identität nachkommen können, da an diesem Ort die soziopolitisch auferlegten Identitätskategorien und -normen von Geschlecht, Sexualität und Ethnizität die Performanz geschlechtlicher und sexueller Identität nicht beeinflussen. Dennoch ist es auch eine Sphäre, in der soziale Identitätskategorien bewusst reproduziert und verspottet werden, um deren Performanz offenzulegen und sie zu destabilisieren. Zudem werden intersektionelle und marginalisierende Identitätskategorien und soziopolitische Normen thematisiert, um für die politische und soziale Gleichheit schwarzer LGBTQI+-Personen zu kämpfen.