Freak Show, Reimagined

Ballroom Culture and the Figure of the Queer Freak

Carlotta Harold, Tulane ‘26

Abstract: This paper analyzes the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* through a blended lens of feminist, disability, and queer theory to explore how the queer ballroom culture depicted in the film demonstrates both a subversion and embracement of queer and trans enfreakment through ballroom culture, removing the voyeuristic, othering gaze of dominant society. I employ the disability studies term “enfreakment,” coined by David Hevey to refer to the process by which difference becomes fashioned as otherness. Through an exploration of the joint history of queerness and disability and of freak show history, I ultimately use *Paris is Burning* to argue that ballroom culture constitutes a refashioning of the freak show, inverts the “freaky” spectacle and instead putting normality on display.

Introduction

Wherever drag queens, transgender people, and gender non-conforming people go, accusations of monstrosity and freakishness soon follow. The 1990 documentary, *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston, captures this "enfreakment" of queer bodies, through the depiction of the New York City queer ballroom scene in the 1980s. I use the disability studies term "enfreakment," coined by David Hevey, a disabled photographer and theorist, to refer to "the process by which individual difference becomes stylized as cultural otherness" (Samuels, 2011, p. 56). Ballroom culture is both performance and community; simply put, it is a space where people "walk" (compete) in "balls" (performance competitions) for various categories, usually configured around non-normative constructions of gender or, alternatively, "realness," which means one must "minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in a heteronormative society" (Bailey, 2011, pp. 369-370; p. 378). *Paris is Burning* demonstrates how the label of "freak" is externally placed onto queer and transgender (often shortened to "trans") bodies by dominant, heteronormative society and how this othering of queer folks creates the necessity for alternative kinship communities, like a "house"—the "ballroom family-like structure" (Bailey, 2011, p. 366). Each "house" has a mother, sometimes a father, and is united by a shared, chosen last name. Furthermore, the film represents how balls are dependent upon attention and gazing, since the main attraction of "walking a ball" is recognition, attention, and in-group stardom. In this paper, I use a blend of feminist, disability, and queer theory to explore how the ballroom culture depicted in the film demonstrates both a subversion and embracement of queer and trans enfreakment through ballroom culture, removing the voyeuristic, othering gaze of dominant society; instead, *Paris is Burning* shows how ballroom culture is reliant upon the queer gaze of fellow ballroom members. Additionally, I use *Paris is Burning* to argue that ballroom culture constitutes a refashioning of the freak show. It does not simply subvert the freak show's dynamic of power; it actually inverts the spectacle: the "realness" of ballroom puts normality on display.

Queerness & Disability: A Shared History

Before diving into an analysis of the film, it is important to underscore the intertwined history of queerness and disability. Feminist disability theorist Susan Wendell (1996) argues that disability is socially and culturally constructed, marked by any bodily differences or "deviations from a society's conception of a 'normal' or acceptable body" (p. 7). Queer and transgender bodies and lives are often considered to be "deviant," given that they play around with normative standards of gender presentation or behavior (McCreery, 1999, p. 40). Women wearing masculine clothing, men behaving femininely, and people expressing their gender transition with clothes, medical treatments, or otherwise, do not, therefore, fall beyond the limits of normative or acceptable bodily standards. Thus, one may deem gender non-conforming and queer folks to be disabled by society. Furthermore, homosexuality and transness have long been pathologized, considered to be mental illnesses. For many years, "transsexualism" and other "gender identity disorders" were included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM);

now, the term "gender dysphoria" is used instead. Homosexuality was not removed as a disorder from the DSM until 1973 (Castro-Peraza et al., 2019). This shifting medicalization of queer and trans identities only serves to highlight Wendell's theorizing about the constructed nature of disability: as time goes on, notions of who is disabled, or not, change. Eli Clare (2017), a transgender, disabled scholar and poet, highlights how trans people sometimes play into pathologization narratives, naming "their transness a birth defect, a disability in need of repair" (p. 177). Repair comes in many forms for trans people, including many medical interventions like hormones or body modification surgeries. Clare (2017) argues not for a rejection of trans-cure, but rather for grappling with the many complexities of cure (p. 178).

Queer and disabled people also share the labels of monstrosity and freakishness. Rosmarie Garland-Thomson (2005), a prolific feminist disability theorist, writes that "the figure of the monster or the freak is perhaps the exemplar of the unexpected, the unfamiliar, the novel. Monsters and freaks are forms that challenge the status quo of human embodiment" (n.p.). As previously explained, disabled, queer, and transgender people are all considered challenges to normative bodies, and thus, using Garland-Thomson's definition, freaks. This enfreakment is depicted in *Paris is Burning*, as one of the ball performers, Venus Xtravaganza (a transgender woman), says that while engaging in sexual relations with a man, she was called a "freak" for having male genitalia (Livingston, 1990, 55:38). Her trans body was unexpected and unfamiliar to her sexual partner, and, thus, his reaction was that of disgust to its supposed freakishness. Gender and disability studies scholar Krystal Cleary (2017) ties together queerness, disability, freaks, and monstrosity through the celebrity figure of Lady Gaga, who has dubbed herself "Mother Monster" and her fans "little freaks," referring to anyone "inhabiting the margins of society," attracting many queer and trans followers (p. 177; p. 183). Gaga has dabbled in both gender and disability drag, performing as Jo Calderone (her drag king persona) and using mobility aids like wheelchairs and forearm crutches on stage (Cleary, 2017). Although Cleary specifically focuses on Gaga, her paper elucidates the labeling (whether subversively or not) of queerness, transness, and disability as monstrous or freaky. Furthermore, Cleary (2017) understands Gaga's performance of freakishness as a "revision of the cultural spectacle of the freak show" (p. 178). Beyond the label of "freak," the historical phenomenon of the freak show is also shared by disabled and gender non-conforming people.

Freak Show as Performance

Disability studies scholars Richard Sandell et al. (2005) argue that the idea of the freak is intimately bound up with performance, given the history of the freak show. Freak shows were entertainment spectacles in which people with physical abnormalities or unusual talents were displayed in front of a crowd, including everything from bearded ladies to conjoined twins to full body tattoos (Grande, 2010). Garland-Thomson (2005) similarly asserts that "[f]reaks were spectacular public displays of novelty that entertained viewers who gladly paid to stare. Droll and fascinating freak figures were created from the unusually embodied by way of exaggeration, irony, and theatrical staging" (n.p.), specifically highlighting the freak show as performance and

the gaze of the audience. She points out the power of the stare, how it is the manifestation of a strong reaction to the novel, the unexpected (Garland-Thomson, 2005, para. 1). It is also important to note the agency of freak show performers, who disabled activist and poet Cheryl Marie Wade (1992) names as "the first disability performance artists" (p. 16). Taking into account this agency, as well as Sandell et al.'s (2005) understanding of the freak show as subversion of power and their call to action to reclaim the freak show, I read the ballroom culture depicted in *Paris is Burning* as a subversive refashioning of the freak show and a reclaiming of freakery.

Revisioning the Freak Show

In *Paris is Burning*, the ballroom is a space of freakery. Bodies move in new, different, and spectacularly "freaky" ways, and that novelty is *desired*, both by the performers and their audience. Portraying non-normativity, in everything other than the "realness" categories, is desired; it is what wins. This freakery is especially seen in voguing, the dance of ballroom culture, which hinges upon skillful contortions of the body and shock value. One of the most prominent voguers of the Harlem ballroom scene, Willi Ninja, says that "voguing is the same thing as like, taking two knives and cutting each other up, but through a dance form" (Livingston, 1990, 36:36). Essentially, a voguer's aim is to outwit their dance opponent by way of quick, unexpected bodily movement. However, voguing becomes more than merely dance: it becomes a form of embodied combat, a way to channel the reality of social violence into performance and spectacle. As Ninja points out, balls allow voguers the space to move their bodies freely and freakily, and, in fact, the goal is to be more *unexpected* than one's opponent—freakery is encouraged. As opposed to the enfreakment of these performers' bodies, wrought upon them by the heteronormative society and ideologies that surround them, balls are a place for them to embrace their non-normative, potentially "freaky" identities on their own terms.

Besides their intentional freakishness, balls mimic the freak show on two main accounts; the first is the creation of a performance identity and the second is the intentional attempt to obtain and retain the audience's attention and gaze. Sandell et al. (2005) explain that many freak show performers would create specific performance personas by changing their names and inventing other aspects of their identities. Similarly, the members of ballroom communities, like those depicted in *Paris is Burning*, create specific ballroom personalities through the invention of new names and "house" families. Pepper LaBeija, one of the ballroom performers featured in the film, chose her name to be such, and stated that she was "the legendary mother of the House of LaBeija" (Livingston, 1990, 03:38).[1] Pepper LaBeija is just one example of this larger phenomenon of identity and kinship reformulation within *Paris is Burning* and ballroom culture, writ large. Pepper LaBeija also says that at a ball, "you can become anything and do anything right here, right now, and it won't be questioned" (Livingston, 1990, 07:25). Balls, thus, hinge

[1] Although she did not identify as a woman, Pepper LaBeija preferred the feminine pronoun ("Pepper LaBeija," 2003, para. 2).

upon an element of fantasy and creation; they are a space where one can take up a persona that is larger than themselves.

Additionally, both Sandell et al. (2005) and Garland-Thomson (2005) highlight the engagement of the stare implicit in the performance of freakery. *Paris is Burning* makes evident the fact that attention from the audience is highly coveted while walking a ball. Many of the performers state that they are looking for a certain kind of stardom or fame through balls (Livingston, 1990, 05:23). Dorian Corey, one such performer, explains that when walking, "you like the adulation, the applause, the people cheering you on" (Livingston, 1990, 10:57). However, the coveted gaze is one of fellow queer community members, not the strange, paying customers of freak shows past. In this way, balls remake the freak show, as there is an implicit understanding that non-normativity, queerness, and freakery are cherished and protected, rather than cast out and othered. Skillful performativity does not hinge on one's distinction from the audience, but rather their active involvement in the larger community of the ballroom. This understanding is fomented by the blurred lines between audience and performer, as nearly everyone involved in ballroom walks a ball, eventually (Livingston, 1990, 06:17). The balls depicted in *Paris is Burning*, thus, subvert the othering gaze of the freak show; performers put their queer, freaky bodies on display not to be gawked at, but to be revered.

"Realness": Normality as Spectacle

Finally, *Paris is Burning* demonstrates how ballroom culture inverts the spectacle of the freak show by putting so-called "normality" on display, through the ball's "realness" categories. Dorian Corey describes realness as the ability to "look as much as much as possible like your straight counterpart," so much so that one can "pass" as straight to both the trained or untrained eye (Livingston, 1990, 19:16; 18:59). Heteronormativity and gender norms are literally performed during balls, which highlight their constructed nature. Just as Susan Wendell understands disability as a societal construct, feminist theorist Judith Lorber (1994) explains that gender is also socially constructed (p. 125). Stefania Lodi Rizzini (2025), a gender studies scholar, further analyzes gender construction and realness in ballroom:

> By imitating hegemonic norms of femininity or masculinity, voguers produce an idealized and cherished subjectivity, recreating and parodying the world from which they feel excluded. Ballrooms and the practice of 'Realness' offer individuals a space to perform their cherished gender identities within a supportive environment. 'Realness' categories thus serve as tools for participants to rehearse and enact various identities, which may be seen to help them navigate and prepare for life outside the Ballroom scene. (p. 7)

In other words, the performance of realness is both parody of and preparation for the enfreakment of queer and trans people by the outside world. Although it is bound up with the desire for assimilation to normative society, the double function of realness described by Rizzini makes it a subversive force; within this community, normality is spectacularized; it is a costume to put on which allows for survival in the harsh conditions of "real" (non-ballroom) life.

Furthermore, "realness" allows participants to play with gender, feeling out which gender presentations feel most comfortable to them. "Realness" is subversion, exploration, and survival, all at once. Therefore, the ballroom's reimagination of the freak show, through its performance of normativity as the spectacle, gives space for this creative play and the cherishing of queer bodies, in all their complexities.

Paris is Burning: Freak Show?

Key, however, to my argument, is that it is the *balls* depicted in *Paris is Burning* that subvert the othering gaze of the freak show, not the film. The film itself ironically reifies the voyeuristic gaze of an awestruck audience, as it was made by a white lesbian woman about predominantly Black and Latina gay men and trans women. bell hooks (1992), in her critical essay, "Is Paris Burning?," argues that Jennie Livingston directed the film from the position of "outsider looking in," distorting the original image, ultimately depicting "black rituals as spectacle" (p. 152). Furthermore, the reclaimed gaze of the peer-community audience of ballroom's reimagined freak show is lost on film, as *Paris is Burning* has reached viewers far beyond the intimate space of a ball. Therefore, it is vital to note that *Paris is Burning* documents the practice of reimagining the freak show, but it is not the practice itself. The way that this reimagination is both survives and is subverted by the film's mediation merits further analysis.

Conclusion

Fashioning the ballroom culture of *Paris is Burning* as a subversive reimagination of the freak show is important because of its reclamation of freak show history, which both Wade and Sandell et al. call for; imagining freak performers of the past as queer and disabled heroes of the present imbues them with the power and agency they were so often stripped of by society. Furthermore, a disability-focused analysis of a queer cult classic movie, like *Paris is Burning*, aids coalition building between marginalized communities. Patricia Hill Collins (1993), the epochal Black feminist theorist, argues that coalition across strata of marginalization (race, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, etc. is necessary for social change. This coalition building comes from the realization of a common cause, which, in the case of *Paris is Burning* and ballroom, is the enfreakment of queer, trans, and disabled bodies. Uniting queer/trans and disabled struggles, and realizing that queer history *is* disabled history, and vice versa, creates the potential for social change built on transformative justice.

References

Bailey, M. M. (2011). Gender/racial realness: Theorizing the gender system in ballroom culture. *Feminist Studies*, *37*(2), 365–386.

Castro-Peraza, M. E., García-Acosta, J. M., Delgado, N., Perdomo-Hernández, A. M., Sosa-Alvarez, M. I., Llabrés-Solé, R., & Lorenzo-Rocha, N. D. (2019). Gender identity: The human right of depathologization. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *16*(6), 978. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16060978

Clare, E. (2017). *Brilliant imperfection: Grappling with cure.* Duke University Press.

Cleary, K. (2017). One of us?: Disability drag and the Gaga enfreakment of fandom. In B. Kirkpatrick & E. Ellcessor (Eds.), *Disability media studies* (pp. 177-196).

Garland-Thomson, R. (2005). Staring at the other. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *25*(4), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v25i4.610

Grande, L. (2010, September 26). Strange and bizarre: The history of freak shows. *Things Said And Done*. https://thingssaidanddone.wordpress.com/2010/09/26/strange-and-bizarre-the-history-of-freak-shows/

Hill Collins, P. (1993). Toward a new vision: Race, class, and gender as categories of analysis and connection. In Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee (Eds.), *Gendered voices, feminist visions* (pp. 75-88).

hooks, b. (1992). Is Paris Burning? In *Black Looks* (2nd ed., pp. 145–156). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743226-10

Livingston, J. (Director). (1990). *Paris is burning* [Film]. Miramax Home Entertainment.

Lorber, J. (1994). The social construction of gender. In Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee (Eds.), *Gendered voices, feminist visions* (pp. 125-128)

McCreery, P. (1999). Beyond gay: "Deviant" sex and the politics of the ENDA workplace. *Social Text*, *61*, 39–58.

Pepper LaBeija, 53; Queen of drag ball scene in Harlem. (2003, May 29). *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-may-29-me-passing29.2-story.html

Samuels, E. (2011). Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where enslavement and enfreakment meet. *Signs*, *37*(1), 53–81. https://doi.org/10.1086/660176

Sandell, R., Delin, A., Dodd, J., & Gay, J. (2005). In the shadow of the freakshow: The impact of freakshow tradition on the display and understanding of disability history in museums. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *25*(4), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v25i4.614

Wade, C. M. (1992). Disability culture rap. In Barrett Shaw (Ed.), *The ragged edge* (pp. 15-18).

Wendell, S. (1996). *The rejected body: Feminist philosophical reflections on disability*. Taylor & Francis.