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The Category is…"Opulence, You Own Everything!"

The Black Decadent and Ballroom

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Abstract

Sites of unique forms of relationality, 1980s ballrooms are portrayed in the tv show *Pose* (2018-2021) as sanctuaries of non-normative gender and sexual expression where NYC Black gay and transgender people who are shunned by society gather to have fun. In their celebration of the frivolous and the excessive, the balls appear utopian (Muñoz 2009) because they materialize the hopes and dreams of a marginalized collective with the ephemeral instantiations of joyful becoming in its most decadent expressions. Here, decadence does not just signal the utmost devotion to the self in its own search for jouissance, but is in fact the evidence of the abject's very coming into being, of its dramatized subjectivation (Butler 1993) in an anti-Black world; decadence is a mode of Black queer performance that both encompasses and explodes social death as the ontological status and horizon in which Blackness is inscribed. Standing against the city's racism and homotransphobia, all of which AIDS exasperates in the pathologization of the infected, the balls' extravaganza and their obsession for the mundane suggest a turn to the ecstatic as a "pleasurable reckoning with everyday ruin in contemporary Black lives," a critical invitation "to register and revere rapturous joy in the broken-down present" (Abdhur-Rahman 2018). Through an analysis of various scenes from *Pose*, this article explores the irreducible proximity of Black queer life and death and proposes a theory of decadence that reads the fabulous, the eccentric and the opulent as the ballroom's specific response to that proximity, a response that informs not only the aesthetics of bodies, but the very modality of representation in contemporary cultural productions. Rooted in the subculture's performances of *realness*, the Black decadent disavows mimetic representations of reality and substitutes its language with a complete surrender to the absurd of the narrative.

1. Scenes of Decadence: *Pose* and *Paris is Burning*

"Royalty!" Pray Tell exclaims in the microphone fifteen minutes into the 2018 pilot of the TV series *Pose*.[1] "The category is…bring it like Roooyaltyyy," he continues, stretching each letter to impossible lengths as the beat from Suzi Lane's "Harmony" drops and the crowd's cheers and

[1] Created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals, *Pose* is an American TV drama that helped popularize several aspects of Ballroom culture and the Black transgender experience. It first aired on FX (2018-2021).

screams, and snaps welcome the contestants to the ball. The tone is set, the emcee starts commentating and praises the looks of those walking the category in a flamboyant vernacular: "Yes! You own everythiiing…Everythiiing is yours. You own your jewels, you own your country, you own your man." Slowing down to let the anticipation build, he finally shouts: "You own every motheeerfuckiiiing thiiiing that is there." The House of Abundance enters the building and its "children" walk and vogue and strike poses in some replica costumes just stolen from "The Royal Court" special exhibit in Brooklyn. As each of them comes forward, the contestants show up and show out in a chaotically assembled plethora of colorful garments, a sea of imitation gold, silk, tulle, velvet and fake tiaras. They wear them with no particular attention – or care – to historical detail, yet offer themselves to the avid watcher as the embodiment of noblesse, the visual signifier of elitism and prestige in their most absolute sense. Framed from the bottom up, their figures appear enhanced, larger than life, magnified by the camera in the act of *serving* face and body.[2] Delighted, Pray Tell applauds their performance: "We're giving taste," he cries, "we're giving richness, we're giving capes, we're giving pannier and corsets, we're giving wands, and surcoats and crowns," until his excitement – indeed, the excitement of the whole assembly – explodes into raptures of joy at the sight of Elektra, the Mother of the House of Abundance. With her eyebrows painted white, a furred red cape on her shoulders, a fake pearl-encrusted black corset and gown, and the entire set of the Crown's jewels on her neck, Mrs. Abundance solemnly steps into the ballroom like a queen. Ecstatic, all hail the Monarch, members from every House bow, the judges stand up and throw their cards on the floor, unable to contain their jubilation in the presence of such grandeur. "The Queen," Pray Tell shouts at the top of his lungs, "the Queen is giving a ball" he repeats, "the queeeeenn of theeeeem aaaallll" he proclaims at the close of his chant as she walks towards the stage to collect her grand prize, patting her cheeks with some imaginary powder – a delicate pantomime meant to signal both the satisfaction and the simultaneous downplay of her predictable triumph.

Referencing the iconic "O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E" scene from *Paris is Burning* (1990), *Pose* incorporates Junior LaBeija's creative enunciation of the word in the announcement of the pilot's very first category – *Royalty*. In Jennie Livingston's docufilm, Labeija is recorded at the end of a ball night in the act of spelling the word theatrically and then pronouncing it, changing the standard English /ˈɑpjəl(ə)n(t)s/ into a distinctive /ˈɑpʰjʊlɛn(t)s/ while explaining its meaning to the cameraperson.[3] As he stresses each letter in a way that merges the bodacious, visceral

[2] Popularized in Ballroom culture, that of *serving*, or *giving*, face is "a self-conscious and deliberate practice of elevating one's facial features through the conventions of celebrity portraiture, make-up and lighting, with the intention of producing desire, envy, and idolization" (Fleetwood 2015, 57).

[3] Both words are written in conformity with the IPA system. Compared to its standard form (see Oxford Dictionary at oed.com), this variant: 1) emphasizes an aspiration of the voiceless bilabial plosive (from /p/ to /pʰ/); 2) reproduces a near-close near-back vowel sound instead of the first mid-central sound (/ʊ/

inflections of both Black and camp parlance (Barrett 2017; Harvey 2000; Hurston 1934),[4] the camera cuts back and forth to one of the contestants posing in a black suit and a cascade of pearls in her best imitation of sophisticated women like Dominique Devereaux from the TV show *Dynasty* (1981). In fact, one would argue that the emcee is not simply describing what opulence means, but testifying to the power of the word itself, an action whose strength, vigor, and simultaneous gentleness of tones, the aliveness with which each sound is spoken, contains and conveys unique elements of worldmaking.[5]

What *Pose* does, then, is bring the drama and pathos of this testimony into cinematic life. Across its twenty-six-episode run, the show fictionalizes the life of the late 1980s Black and Latinx queer communities of Harlem and the Bronx as they participate in weekly events known as vogue balls (or drag balls, or simply, balls) in which they form non-biological family units, the Houses, with transgender women at their head. While having fun, dancing, and even cruising are all pivotal activities at the balls, the constitution and maintenance of a proper social structure occurs in the ritualized formulation of each event as a contest where the members of each House compete against one another under a variety of categories. As the category is announced, the aisle turns into a runway for the contestants to sashay, pose, and vogue. Their sought-after reward is a fleeting but precious moment of glory. At their core, the balls are sanctuaries of non-normative gender and sexual expression where the marginalized Black working-class can gather and explore their most queer self through complex practices of creative self-fashioning.[6] In the intoxicating sense of liberation equally fueled by music and cheap alcohol, caught between the reverence for Parisian *haute couture* and the consumeristic hyper-fixation with fashion and labels, participants come together as multitudes of exaggerated, lavishly camp bodies who demand to see and be seen. In the ballroom, Black queer bodies are on a mission to be unapologetically spectacular and spectacularized. The existence they celebrate is one of extravaganza and fabulous creation.

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instead of /ə/); 3) replaces the second mid-central sound with a fully reproduced open-mid front unrounded vowel sound (from /ə/ to /ɛ/).

[4] In "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), Zora Neale Hurston outlines key traits of African American cultural expressions, especially as they relate to the intersecting realms of speech, storytelling, music, and movement. Among these features she particularly insists on the dramatization of form and the will to adorn language. In a similar way, Harvey (in Barret 2017, 22) explains how utterances typically associated with camp style involve a specific set of linguistic tropes that can be grouped into four broad categories: paradox (incongruities in register, combination of "high" culture and "law" experiences), inversion (of gender markers or expected rhetorical routines), ludicrism (puns or double-entendres), and parody (of gender norms or aristocratic mannerisms).

[5] This is a reference to Kevin Quashie's *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* in which the author uses Black texts to "identify the aliveness notable in the worldmaking aesthetics of poems and essays, in how these poems and essays can be read for what they tell us about our being: about how we are and how we can be. I am interested," he continues, "both in the ways that the world of Black texts constitutes our rightness of being as I am interested in the ethical implications of such constituting" (2021, 2).

[6] What Marlon Bailey describes in his research as *performance labor* (2013).

Because the opulence Labeija talks about reflects the power of an aesthetics of sounds to generate "a worldness" through the very quality of these sounds (Quashie 2021, 3), then the urgency for celebration that emanates from his voice is the evidence of a speech act, the aural production of a self-fulfilling prophesy that constitutes itself in the process of its own manifestation. His understanding of opulence does not simply describe a celebration of luxury, an indulging in forbidden pleasures and one's devotion to a life of excess, but it calls upon the very materialization of all that which opulence signifies and which may be not necessarily in reach. In other words, opulence speaks more of how much fantasy plays into one's dreams of material and sensorial overabundance, fulfillment, and plentitude than one's actual access to them. In the space of joyous becoming that the ballroom provides, this desire constitutes and regulates the aesthetic mode of Black queer performance that I conceptualize as decadence.

2. Decadence: an aesthetics of black queer desire

Studies on the history of decadence come with a wide list of meanings, all of which seem to point to contrasting yet converging ideas of cultural decay and debasement. Rooted in the Latin *decadere* ("to fall down"), the word has been used to describe "racial degeneration, historical decline, philosophical pessimism, personal immorality, physical entropy, artistic imperfection, and more" (Desmarais and Weir 2019, 3), while also allowing for "some remarkably dynamic reversals of meaning, such that the idea of decay and decline becomes – or can be – generative, inventive, creative, even progressive" (2019, 4). From the ancient myths of the Greek Dionysus and the Roman Bacchus to the nineteenth century's dandyism of Wilde, Baudelaire, and Gautier, decadence reflects "a cautionary component in the progressive paradigm of enlightenment thought, the 'obverse' other of reason and progress" (2019, 3), leaving its mark on culture for the critiques of social norms that are embedded in its celebration of life and the constant search for gratification.

As the "O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E" scene from *Paris is Burning* and the *Royalty* scene from *Pose* demonstrate, exquisite hedonism, the worship of flesh, and the obsession with luxury and celebrity do permeate the walls of the ballroom, hence making its culture legible within customary codes of decadence. However, a crucial difference with previous iterations of the concept resides in the latter being "the preserve only of an elite subset of the literary and artistic milieu of the nineteenth century" (Condé 2019, 380). Far from representing a seclusion of choice for the privileged, what defines the balls is their being "born out of discrimination and disillusionment" (2019, 388), their being created for the purpose of giving the Black queer community a place not just to survive, but to thrive against society's anti-Black sentiment and homo-transphobia of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both the docufilm and the series insist on

the extent to which Ballroom provides safety, freedom, and happiness to countless young African Americans from those years who had been forced to leave – or were rejected by – their biological families due to their sexual orientation or gender non-conformity. Homeless, uneducated, hustling sexual favors to afford food, these communities of pariahs were one of the most vulnerable demographics in the country, caught up in the traps of a libidinal economy that turned the Black queer – juvenile – body into the cheapest, most immediate target of abuse and exploitation. Available at all times as irresistible commodity fetish yet invisible as far as the prevention of its victimization was concerned, this body was always already rendered into the site of ultimate excess, the catalyst for abnormal desires and simultaneous terror and revulsion.[7]

Under these circumstances, desire shapes itself after the most primal expressions of want, a visceral hunger, a perpetual need of what the individual lacks. For this reason, Ballroom decadence does not simply signal one's devotion to the self in their search for ectasis, but comes to define what I would call an *aesthetics of the abject*,[8] the testament to a relentless coming into being of those Black folks who are – per Spiller's formulation – made vestibular to culture (1987, 67),[9] the theatrical manifestation of their subjectivation in an anti-queer world. Black decadence, I argue, is a voluntary slipping into the luscious fantasies of abundance and the dreams of fabulousness of a collective who dares moving away – even if only temporarily – from the agonizing *non-beingness* of the present, from the *death of the subject* while they are still alive that mis-informs the (self)perception of the Black queer body and jeopardizes its capacity for generative relations.[10] It is, I believe, the utopian act of imagining and practicing alternatives to an existence that is "predicated upon injury […] or traumas that precede and determine bodiliness itself" (Freeman 2010, 11-12).

Constantly confronted with the impossibilities of its present, which is a present at all times scarred by the horrors of Black American history, the decadent body articulates a way of being in the world that takes up space, ferociously. It is a celebration of the flesh deemed excessive, a

[7] Fleetwood describes this simultaneity as *hypervisibility,* i.e., "both historic and contemporary conceptualizations of Blackness as simultaneously invisible and always visible, as underexposed and always exposed" to the conditions of danger and aberration it is nonetheless premised on (2011, 111).
[8] Here, the obvious reference is Julia Kristeva, who theorizes the *abject* as that which is expelled from the self in its capacity to disrupt the boundaries of one's identity, between self and other, inside and outside (1980, 3-4).
[9] Introduced by Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), vestibularity describes the metaphorical precipitation of Black (enslaved) women into the embodied threshold that separates bestiality from culture. As such they have been forced into a space of sanctioned violence that constitutes the antechamber to the category of the human where the laws and ethics of civilization do not apply.
[10] What Orlando Patterson refers to as *social death* with specific reference to slavery (1982) and which Afropessimism (see, for instance, Hartman 2007 and Wilderson III 2020) takes to its extreme conceptualization by reading current forms of anti-Blackness that are built into society's legal, economic, and cultural foundations as the afterlife of slavery.

refracting of the obsession to discipline Black bodies for their anticipated abjection onto itself with defying purpose (Fleetwood 2012, 112). In his exploration of fabulousness as the *ars creandi* of many Black queer people, Madison Moore explains how heteronormativity's policing gaze forces them to embody the abnormal:

> When you tell someone they are "sickening" or that they are "slaying" a look (as in looking really really good) know that there are folks out there who do think that people forced to the margins *are* sick […] and realize that there are people who want to (and do) physically slay them on the streets […]. When you are brown, queer, or an outcast – already a moving target – fabulousness is the politic. It is glitter as defiance – think of glitter bombing… (2018, 8-9; 19)

In the history of hypervisibility and construction from without that anticipates and prescribes Blackness, Ballroom members embody a radical tradition of turning the terrible spectacle of their own existence into terrific displays of spectacularity. The image they project is one of violent self-determination because, despite the comfort it provides, its performative alignment with preferred categories of presentations and comportment – that seamless extension of the body into the world (Ahmed 2004, 148) – is constantly met with suspicion, mockery, and loathing. Self-fashioned, looking phantastic, walking and posing like on a runway, the Black queer body inhabits the ballroom as a space for reclamation of theatrical extravaganza, of the very excess it is punished for by the world for reaching beyond the expanse of the acceptable.

Crucially, decadence is a living in the unashamed cultivation of hope whose fantastical reaches provide the ballroom with a gateway to the American Dream, a kind of dreaming that is forever deferred for Black trans women and gay men.[11] What participants like Venus Extravaganza and Octavia St. Laurent (*Paris is Burning*) and – by extension – characters like Blanca and Elektra (*Pose*) address in their performances of fame and glory does not just reflect the urgency of self-affirmation of the socially mutilated individual, but also the fantasy of luxury and living comfortably that goes hand in hand with that level of recognition. Walking the categories, therefore, represents the intentional creation of a universe where the imaginary collides with and eventually replaces the real. It is the release of a magnified, virtually omnipotent self for whom fame is code for affluence and recognition is synonym for power, both

[11] The notion of the American Dream and its white, male, heteronormative, and materialistic implications – which demographics seem entitled to it and which ones it excludes – have been widely and thoroughly investigated by scholars. Countless works on the matter, from hooks (1981) and Jane Flax (1998), to Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) and Marlo D. David (2016) point at how the concept of the American Dream is deeply intertwined with issues of race and identity in the US, how narratives around it are framed through a white-centered perspective which routinely excludes or marginalizes Black experiences, and how racial stereotypes and systemic racism prevent the accessibility to this dream by insisting on the notion of personal responsibility with a complete disregard of the historical oppression and lack of tools for upward mobility.

concepts standing in diametrical opposition to the near-destitution and invisibility these communities face daily. Problematically, as bell hooks and other theorists have argued, this "idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by whiteness. What viewers witness is not Black men longing to impersonate or even to become like 'real' Black women but their obsession with an idealized fetishized vision of femininity that is white" (1992, 147-148). This dreaming, as it were, relies on a "phantasmatic promise" of happiness that constitutes itself mostly via signifiers of privileged white femininity – the supermodels and celebrities these people look up to and the aesthetics of wealth they aspire to achieve in their simulations all point to the pervasive nature of white heteronormative structures of power (Butler 1993, 90).[12] Nonetheless, such a tragic saturation of space cannot overshadow the balls' power to reintroduce possibility in the vocabulary of the Black queer individual because it foregrounds an otherwise lost structuring of feeling that is relational at its core – a feeling of the other, a feeling of the self that comes from the other, a feeling of the self in space with the other. Drenched in decadence, the ballroom enables the utopian materialization of this feeling in the event of the perpetuated exclusion of the queer African American from practices of happiness that are always scripted in conformity with the normative imaginings of a white heterosexual horizon.

My use of the word *utopian* is not unintentional. Enfleshing the unlimited bounties of imagination and the possibilities of (self)creation, the decadent body draws on a theory of utopia as the exquisitely queer searching for alternatives to the oppressive prospects of white heteronormativity. Queerness, Muñoz writes:

> is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport, we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us

[12] While extremely compelling for its exposure of the inner workings of white supremacy in beauty culture, this line of critique does not fully account for a level of nuance that emerges in the tension between imitation, aspiration, and political resistance in Ballroom aesthetics. In this respect, Butler argues that while *Paris Is Burning* does suggest a "simultaneous production and subjugation of subjects in a culture which appears to arrange always and in every way for the annihilation of queers, [it] nevertheless produces occasional spaces in which those annihilating norms…are mimed, reworked, and resignified" (1993, 194-195). For instance, Madison Moore looks into the habit within queer of color circles of describing things as "Caucasian" as a trope that is profoundly parodic in nature, being "less about aspiring to whiteness and more about poking fun at whiteness and the stereotypical things white people say and do, subtle racism and micro-aggressions included" (2018, 192). And while an obsession with white referents of feminine beauty is undeniable across American culture, Marlon Bailey argues that "contrary to what was presented in *Paris is* Burning […], Black drag traditions have almost exclusively emphasized Black women singers rather than White women," with an emphasis to dance performances and specific vernacular references from the African diaspora that can be appreciated only upon direct recognition from the spectator (2013, 132). This would further solidify Ballroom as one space of preservation rather than mere assimilation.

> onwards…that thing that let us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. (2009, 1)

Whenever I return to this passage, my attention is always drawn to what I consider the gift of immediacy, rather than the urgency of newness and projection of queer living in the future – which, to be clear, is not a small feat in the face of ever-present Black queer erasure. What Muñoz points at as the "pleasures of this moment," what both a normed/norming hegemony may deem frivolous and ephemeral and political militancy may claim as the antisocial horizon of queer lives, is indeed what keeps people alive by propelling them forward. It is in the desiring that they dare feel and express to themselves and others that change can be manifested. Rejection of the here and now, as the author writes (2009, 1), occurs in the face of the *quagmire* that surrounds Black queer living. That is not, however, a looking away, but a looking through and beyond. Prospects of happiness, as it were, can only really be imagined when the seeds of a joy that is cultivated, that is carefully practiced, crack the terrible now's concrete surface wide open. Ultimately, futurity is registered in the tension between the current state of Black queer undoing and the extents to which one's capacity for desire can act against it. Queer futures are indeed the realm of the educated hope, a hope that sees its instantiation in the still traumatic present.

Reaching into the depths of their imagination, the hundreds of Black bodies pumping up and down the ballroom floors, night after night, celebrate their becomingness through ephemeral performances, momentary executions of aesthetic immaculacy that reorient the subject more and more towards their truest self in the name of artifice. At each strut, each hand gesture, each facial expression, each garment or piece of jewelry flaunted with purpose, flesh is invested with countless processes of queer signification that both precede and survive its material existence, processes that inhabit the flesh temporarily – and that do it again and again – while carrying the memories of previous performances that those around it watch, study, make their own and, in turn, project into the future. In the moment of the performance, the Black decadent body is both itself and the many other bodies in the ballroom that came before it, the recipient of and catalyst for shared rituals of irreverent longing and belonging. An outrageous archive mapping the highs and lows of queer feeling across times and spaces that reshape life's duress into fleeting glimpses of hope.

Exploding the linear, straight-oriented constructions of time-space, the ballroom is a site of generative disruption where decadence reveals a "pleasurable reckoning with everyday ruin in contemporary Black lives," a fabulous invitation "to register and revere joy in the broken-down present" (Abdur-Rahman 2018, 345). It is the elusive realm of the not-here-yet, simultaneously in and of this world but progressively moving out of it as the nightly celebrations of opulence

take place. Because each category involves moments of profound transformation, balls intercept the expressive urgency of the abject as simultaneously the proof of a mourning for the continuous losses of community and the capacity to envision a self that is made whole through the elaboration of that loss. Decadence is how the marginalized allow themselves to envision and briefly materialize the utopian, how they instruct the body to reach beyond the claustrophobic limitations of current norms and seize upon the otherworldly by holding on to the ecstatic feeling that takes over them whenever they perform the version of themselves they are most comfortable with. Ultimately, decadence is a glamorized revisioning of the real when the real is tragically not enough.

3. "You've got to be real": realness as a Black queer art of signifyin(g)

If decadence is the aesthetic mode that expands the horizons of Black queer existence towards a utopian reach for subjectivation, then *realness* is its *medium*, the literal and figurative category that dictates the terms through which this subject-in-the-making becomes imaginable. Much more than a simple contest in which club patrons compete, *realness* is a standard of identity assessment. It is "the aesthetic imperative defining the ball and its culture" (Goldsby 1993, 110), an organizing principle of Black queer (re)creation that is rooted in a communal compliance to illusion and artifice as the defining markers of the individual's own reality. To *be real* in the context of the balls is to produce, visually and sonically, a subject that compels belief in their performance of gender, class, and sexual signifiers so that their body appears indistinguishable from the idealized image that they seek to convey. By turning the myth of an interior gender core into a tantalizing spectacle, realness cuts at the site of identity's very iterability and mobilization. And it does so by dramatizing the continuous work of inscribing thoughts, gestures and desires on the body which create the fantasy of one's essence while simultaneously displacing such work in the cult(ivation) of this fantasy as the finite (re)production of an authentic self. In the world of shared sexual and gender non-conformity of the balls, realness reflects the painstaking structuring, destructuring, and re-structuring in plain sight of the seamless imbrications that constitute identity, an architecture of the performance of semblance that continuously effaces itself.

While serving as a criterion of self-presentation that responds to one's need to blend into a larger heteronormative landscape, realness as an artform of undetectability also reflects the ballroom's ambitious requirement to adhere to certain performances that are believed to capture the authenticity of hegemonic gender and sexual identities. Because these requirements are shaped after white heteronormative idealizations of beauty, gender presentation, and sexual orientation, the way in which the balls perform realness to create the illusion of normativity

implicitly determines an injunction to reiterate those "coded imperatives of style and deportment that create the discursive ideas of masculinity and femininity" (Bailey 2013, 60). For this reason, a strong sense of defeat emerges in the ballroom's performance of realness, as it witnesses and produces "the phantasmatic constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded" (Butler 1993, 131).

However, scholarship shows that appropriation does not present itself unaltered, and it is precisely in those alterations embedded in the performance that alterity emerges in an overwhelming sense of insurrection (Butler 1993,124-125; 132). While Black queer bodies that mimic the *real* inadvertently subject themselves to the surveillance and pressure of the mainstream, not only do the aesthetic degenerations of this mimicry provide "a defiant and spectacular way for marginalized bodies to inhabit the world […], assert agency and call out normativity" (Moore 2018, 185), but they most crucially expose the very constructedness and, indeed, the equally unstable nature of the reality that is being imitated. As Halberstam's formulation of queer times makes clear (2005), reality is nothing but the inscription, the maintenance, and the continuous reading of all bodies in a teleological narrative of heterosexual reproduction through the reiteration of practices that naturalize such narrative as normal and desirable.[13] It follows that performances of *realness* do not simply stand in a relation of derivative imitation with that which we call reality, but explode the latter's very unitary and coherent re-presentation through the performers' experience and expression of the real in its highest dramatization of form – what I have been so far referring to as the *Black Decadent*. Caught in the irresolvable tension between assimilation and subversion, realness does not just put in place a performance of reality, but one that hinges on the abject's fabulous interpretation of the hegemony's subterranean workings to impose itself as the norm. Ultimately, realness is an altering of what was never there in the first place, a playing with the – socially constructed – terms that produce the fantasy of a universal truth, the act of Signifyin(g) upon hegemonic renderings of the real that is meant to create spaces of Black queer agency against practices of defilement, exclusion, and erasure.[14]

[13] Our reality, in short, is not the categorical expression of *what is*, but a social construct resulting from a normative scheduling of life that validates the present in light of the promises that posterity holds. Specifically, Halberstam points at the self-sustaining myths surrounding the heterosexual family as that which causes this organization of time-space (2005, 5).

[14] According to Gates, Signifyin(g) identifies a figurative mode of language which strongly relies on verbal indirectness and opacity, a feature that is masterfully achieved within the rich oral tradition, the vernacular, of the African American due to its aptness to produce multiple meanings within a relation of formal identity with standard English. In his work, Gates understands the Signifyin(g) as the very colonization of the white linguistic sign where Black people vacate this signifier, the substitute "as its concept a signified that stands for a system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition" (2014, 52).

In this Signification,[15] *realness* accesses the realms of the spectacular, the outrageous, the excessive as the most fitting spaces for the articulation of Black queer existence through a paradigm of fabulous be(com)ing that reads fabulousness in its theoretical proximity to the *not-here-yetness* of the utopian. Coming from the Latin adjective *fabulosus*, fabulous connotes that which relates to fables, myths, and legends and overall describes a person, thing, or circumstance that "lives way beyond the expanse of the believable and what the mind has been prepared to process" (Moore 2018, 23). In its performances of *realness*, the decadent body cracks the surface of the illusion and artifice that create subjectivity's naturalized effect wide open, unapologetically embracing the process of make-believe at the heart of the production of a coherent, unitary, and stable identity. *Realness*, in short, exposes the simple truth that bodies are indistinct flesh waiting on discourse to signify them. And it does so by subtly stripping away from the hegemony the prerogative to do it, reshaping the terms of its validity in the interest of the marginalized Black queer people.

4. The Black decadent and the deception of mimesis

In its embrace of the spectacular, decadence registers the insufficiency of the real in which Black lives are an afterthought, the afterlife of slavery,[16] and its utter inadequacy to provide them with a platform of joyous reformation and redress. In fact, decadence goes as far as to disinvest in reality as a suitable category of (self-)determination and fulfillment insofar as both these outcomes are predicated upon notions of personal responsibility and self-made-manness that are framed outside the grasp of Black queer subjectivity. Disidentifying with reality and reimagining its contours to include the incredible, the unacceptable, and the freak that society would not allow, decadence stages a formal remodulation of queer feeling that saturates the gaze and troubles any totalizing rendering of Blackness as an inconvenience. This saturation is infectious, the leap towards a renaissance operated via and by the body far-reaching and uncontainable, shaping not just the normative modes of seeing and feeling but the very perception of the space that one inhabits. Because decadence foregrounds a practice of elusion

[15] Intentionally written in upper case, Gates uses "Signification" as the Black linguistic sign of a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity. While "signification" (lower case) denotes, in standard English, the meaning that a word conveys, "Signification" signals, in the alteration only perceptible at a graphic level, the cultural processes of repetition with a difference embedded in the Black vernacular universe (see Gates 2014, 50-55).

[16] In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman describes how slavery, while formally abolished, is still very much a constant of contemporary Black life. "If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of Black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too long memory, but because Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to healthcare and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (2007, 2-3).

and resignification of the real that starts with and is body-outbound, the mind, the eyes, the skin, the wigs, the fake eyelashes, the make-up, the pumps, the stage props are all involved in a radical conjuration of Blackness that pervades representation in all its expressive forms. The Black decadent, in other words, is as much about the body's transformativity in the ballroom as it is about how this transformativity also affects the platforms and the registers that mediate its portrayal.

Within this framework, it is possible that *Pose* cinematically conjures decadence as a Black queer aesthesis rooted in the rendering of reality through the work of artifice, which shapes not only bodies and places, but the very act of looking at them. It is clear how moments of spectacular transformation take place in the series at each walking of the ballroom categories. Like the pilot's *Royalty*, the categories of *Intergalactic Best Dressed Bizarre*, *Butch Queen up in Drags*, *Mother of the Year*, *Executive*, *Banjee*, *High Fashion Parisian* and the many extravagant iterations of *Body*, *Face*, *Runway*, and *Voguing* all underscore a communal pact of believability that bends reality and the rhetoric of authenticity to the specific needs of the body in the performance. Even more interestingly, such pact also exceeds both the temporary dimension of the performance and its attachment to the singularity of flesh, investing the whole narrative process with the same extravaganza that informs the body in its decadent expressions. In other words, the register of decadence is not confined to the aural, visual, and performative enactments of the Black queer contestants at the balls, but it provides the aesthetic lens through which crucial scenes from the world of *Pose* come to fruition. Specifically, moments from the series that plunge into the tragic interrelations of Black living and loss seem to eschew mimetic representations of reality and substitute its language with a complete surrender to the absurd. Singularly out of joint, desynchronized from the logical progression of the main narrative, these moments express a resistance to realism as a suitable representational tool of Black queer crisis via a writing that sounds cheesy, melodramatic, too forced – simply put, too bad to be even considered serious at all. In that, the series aligns with a tendency of contemporary Black queer productions to reflect "the understanding that conjuring Blackness solely within existing, normative aesthetic and political representational apparatuses […] risks restoring Black subjects who are cited and sighted within Blackness's domain again to the status of commodity" (Abdur-Rahman 2018, 347).

While the glitter and sequins of Ballroom lure and distract the audience, the show actually drowns in the sorrows of its characters. Bringing the ballroom's out-of-space- and out-of-time-ness centerstage, *Pose* creates a universe of fictional events where Black queer survival is in full display. Here, expendability and precariousness define the contours of Black aliveness: in between balls, children are thrown out of their homes, transgender women who work on the streets are assaulted and murdered by their homophobic clients. And in the midst of all that,

the community is facing the complete devastation of the HIV crisis. Joy, in other words, registers as a temporary, and illusory, suspension of the looming presence of death that feels all the more tangible and overpowering – dare I say more *real?* – the more escapism it provides in its theatricality.

The epitome of Black queer annihilation, representations of AIDS follow a script in which terror, misery, and hopelessness are the totalizing reality of the infected.[17] Rough, unsanitized, brutal, AIDS is everything, everywhere, all at once in the show: it is Blanca and many other characters receiving news of their status; it is Pray Tell and Damon's dance teacher spending endless visiting hours grieving their loved ones at the run-down, criminally understaffed and de-funded HIV hospital ward; it is the Black and brown patients incapacitated to walk, eat, drink, or breathe, stranded in their blood-stained sheets to choke on their own vomit; it is society dreading to associate with every and any homosexual or transgender person that the misinformation at both local and federal levels turns from victims to infectious criminals; it is the city disposing of the unclaimed bodies from the morgues by ditching them into unnamed pine boxes on Hart Island; it is the Ballroom community itself growing desensitized at the endless list of funeral memorials they are attending every other week. It is the infinite number of "I" who lose not just the center of their world but its periphery too, having to sit with the pain of their loss while facing the terror of their approaching end (Crimp 2002, 196).

Tragically poignant in their mimetic capture, these representations also turn the sick body into the site of pornographic attention, its suffering and slipping into irreversible decay serving as the pathetic catalyst for morbid curiosity, suspicious surveillance, and scrutinous attention. Whether expressed in the gruesome effects of the illness on the sick or in the ritualization of mourning by those who remain, AIDS exposes the all-too-familiar and yet at-no-point less violent staging of Black suffering, coercing the ravaged body into a history of pain that is both regressive and recursive. In her critique of representations of Black subjection, Saidiya

[17] Watney (1987), Bersani (1987), and Sontag (1989) – among others – have abundantly detailed how the AIDS epidemic was not simply a medical crisis of scary proportions and devastating physical and psychological effects, but it came soon to be a crisis of representation where non-normative sexualities became the target of stigma and policing at all levels of society. "At the highest levels of officialdom," Bersani explains, "there have been criminal delays in funding research and treatment, the obsession with testing instead of curing […]. Doctors have refused to operate on people known to be infected with the HIV virus […]. Television and the press continue to confuse AIDS with the HIV virus, to speak of AIDS as if it were a venereal disease, and consequently to suggest that one catches it by being promiscuous" (1987, 198-199). Within the conservative US culture of the 1980s, to get AIDS, Sontag writes, "is precisely to be revealed […] as a member of a certain risk group, a community of pariahs. The illness fleshes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, job-mates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity, and among the risk group in the United States most severely affected at the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution" (1989, 112-113).

Hartman points at Blackness as the threshold that blurs the line between sympathy and complicit participation:

> Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain […]. Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? […] At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or the endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible. (1997, 1-2)[18]

From Saartjie Baartman's post-mortem exhibit in Paris, to the mass of undistinguished African flesh brutally made captive and sent off to the US Southern plantations;[19] from the nameless slaves toiling in the fields and forced to dance for their masters – or couple with them – in the quarters,[20] to those involved in the heart-shattering theatrics of the coffle and the auction blocks;[21] from the parodic buffoonery of the minstrel shows to the strange fruits hanging from the poplar trees,[22] Blackness and its pain have continuously provided America with a terrible vision to which portrayals of AIDS follow suit in their desperate conjuration of sympathy and anger. To this pornographic exposure of agony – the horrific spectacle of the Black body in pain – decadence responds with a pervasive and persuasive display of Black queer spectacularity that rings through the show with the resonant echoes of the absurd.

In the next and final section, I will look into three scenes from the series that point to this modality of displaying and displacing Black queer finitude outside the realm of the plausible, three different moments in the lives of the characters where decadence's ostentatious out-of-touch-ness replaces the mimetic language of suffering and dying and destabilizes normative

[18] As Moten explains, Hartman's effort to hide the notorious spectacle of a slave woman being beaten in Frederick Douglass' narratives still only results in drawing attention to the event itself. He writes: "The decision not to reproduce the account of Aunt Hester's beating is, in some sense, illusory. First, it is reproduced in her reference to and refusal of it; second, the beating is reproduced in every scene of subjection the book goes on to read […]. The question here concerns the inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it" (2003, 4).

[19] The epitome of racist colonial exploitation, Bartmaan – also known as the Hottentot Venus – was an African woman exhibited as a freakshow attraction in 19th-century Europe for her steatopygia. After she passed away, her body cast and skeleton were displayed in Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle d'Angers and, later, in at Musée de l'Homme in Paris.

[20] Innocent amusements under the vigilant eye of the master, Hartman explains, "were designed to promote the gaiety by prudent means, ameliorate the harsh conditions of slavery, make the body more productive and tractable, and secure submission of the slave by the successful harnessing of the body. In effect, plantation ceremony endeavored to make discipline a pleasure, and vice versa" (1997, 43).

[21] A group of enslaved people chained together and marched from one place to another, Hartman describes the coffle as a melancholic spectacle, an extravagant display "intended to shroud the violence of the market and deny the sorrow of those sold and their families" (1997, 36).

[22] The expression, popularized by Billie Holiday's 1939 "Strange Fruit," is the evident metaphor for lynched bodies as they were hanged from trees. For more on the barbaric practice of lynching, see Goldsby 2006.

perceptions of the real as unitary, objective, and true all around. From Candy's ghost lip-synching at her own funeral, to Pray Tell's hallucination of a cabaret night performance, and on to Blanca's melodramatic rendition of the National Anthem mid-recovery, the Black queer body defies the boundaries of logic and rationality, and moves towards death as the grand stage of its own becoming.

5. "Death becomes her": fabulous stagings of Black queer unfinitude

After Candy Ferocity dies at the hands of one of her clients in "Never Knew Love Like This Before" (S2, E4), an arch of unrealistic events follows her murder. First, the appearance of Candy's spirit at her own funeral memorial. I have explained elsewhere how her marginalization at the balls speaks of the community's ever-present negotiations of antagonisms and affiliations that result from one's always mutable iconic status. In her several fiascos at reaching iconicity – specifically, her hysterical failures in the *Body* and *Voguing* categories across the first two seasons – Candy's relegation to the status of the community's punching bag "proves that, despite the alleged existence of a safety net for 'those of her kind,' the terms of its inclusion have limits, the most relevant being the replication of white misogynoirist paradigms of evaluation exasperated by – and hidden behind – the glitter and flamboyance of Black queer verbal and performative irreverence" (Polise 2020, 99-100). Within this framework, it is easy to understand her phantasmatic materialization at the funeral as the conduit for the characters' reckoning with the part they have played in her isolation. Her ghost, as it were, is instrumental to displaying the extents of their guilt for actively participating in her oppression.

It is towards the end of the service, however, that the writing yields any claim of adherence to the language of the real – one that the deployment of Candy's ghost still somehow retains in its visual rendering of the characters' psychic turmoil vis-à-vis their unfinished businesses. As Pray Tell calls for one last moment of recollection, the mourners slowly turn their lighters on while the open casket is chaperoned through the walls of the funeral home where a huge door now constitutes the fantastic passageway into the ballroom. Highly symbolic, this scene does not simply convey the proximity of Black queer life and death already suggested in the pilot,[23] but produces a narrative that counters the linear, inexorable flowing of the former into the latter by exploring its paradoxical reverse. When the casket enters the ballroom, Candy's unmoving body suddenly awakens at the sound of "Never Knew Love Like This Before" by Stephanie Mills

[23] The show's reliance on aurality is crucial in the suggestion of this continuity. As the hospital doctor's door opens to give Blanca confirmation of her seropositivity, that sound instantly conjures the series' opening credits in which the exact same clacking sound foreshadows the viewer's access to the tantalizing world of Ballroom.

and is ready to lip-synch. In her immaculate execution, the woman moves around the floor surrounded by former friends and enemies who snap their fingers in approval, blow kisses, and caress her face until she is finally given her grand trophy. Overjoyed, she slowly heads to the door connecting the two worlds, walking backwards as the song fades into the singer's ending falsettos and the camera frames the disco-ball on the ceiling. In the following scene, her once friends are sharing a meal in the deafening silence of their own sorrow.

Picturing the exhausting deferral of Black joy through its unbelievable actualization in a post-mortem scenario – should one call it a queer heaven? – the series momentarily suspends the finitude that swallows the subject whole. Unlike the confessionary tones of the one-to-one conversations the mourners previously have with the woman-ghost, the funeral-turned-to-festivity is not an entryway to the conscience of the living, it is not the reflection on screen of somebody's own perception of the world whose interior monologue constitutes our very point of access to that specific scene. Here, there is no mingling the fantastic with some rational(ized) explanation that would lessen the estrangement elicited by the lack of plausibility. In short, the absurdity of the event is not conjured through the narrative's strategies that inscribe the incomprehensible within the logics of the real, but it insinuates itself into the real's very fabric to the extents of the uncanny. Naturally, Candy does not escape Black queer finitude,[24] she still stays very much dead under circumstances that reiterate her historical disposability. What decadence allows the transwoman, however, is a platform to show at the very least the plethora of possibilities that she could inhabit in her extravaganza, the *other* spaces of self-actualization diverging from narratives of historicized misery that saturate the horizon of the Black queer experience.

This inhabiting the extravagant is explored as the default counternarrative to dominant representations of AIDS in the show. After Pray Tell passes out and is hospitalized due to an adverse reaction to AZT in "Love's in Need of Love Today" (S2, E6),[25] the man experiences a train of fever-induced hallucinations culminating in a full-on Broadway performance that he is asked to give for the entertainment of the dead at the AIDS cabaret fundraising that he was supposed to attend before getting sick. Escorted by his deceased fiancé, Pray Tell completely loses himself to the ridiculousness of the hospital ward-turned-into-a-stage as the man sashays into a room all decked out in silver tails and a lengthy train festooned with purple flashing bags. In a sublime synthesis of living and dying, he lands a dramatic rendition of Judy Garland's "The Man that Got Away" from *A Star is Born* (1954) while unknown AIDS victims match the

[24] The Black subject's death-bound position that JanMohamed describes in his research as "the aporetic zone occupied by bare life, a zone between the status of 'flesh' and that of 'meat,' neither quite alive nor quite dead" (2005, 19).

[25] Also known as azidothymidine, ATZ is a medication used in combination with other retroviral drugs in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. It was the first retroviral used for this purpose.

spectacularity of the moment with the gory spectacle of their stained gowns, blood, vomit, and infected wounds all suggestive of an insufferable stench of death. Eerie, melancholic, and even irreverent in its portrayal of the departed, this hallucination constitutes a monument to the fallen (and the falling), a tribute that relinquishes all claims of mimetic urgency in its parade of Black disturbia.

While Pray Tell is literally the star of the show in his hallucination, such outrageous parading of Blackness is not just limited to him, but extends to other characters like Candy, who makes her return to the scene as his personal angel of mercy. Appearing in a long pink evening gown as she sits on the bed next to a paler and paler Pray Tell, Candy is going through his medications before she moves to a vanity to fix her make-up and exclaims "Stunning Bitch!", snapping her fingers. Contrary to the woman's own funeral memorial, alteration of consciousness and the oneiric do represent the show's straightforward modality of access and expression of internal turmoil. Specifically, Candy's sharp commentary on what good there is in living life for Pray Tell when he has to watch his community slowly pass away and wait his turn and her offering him a whole box of sleeping pills clearly voice the man's intrusive suicidal thoughts. The dream world, in the shape of his late frenemy Candy, becomes the door to the man's mind where instinctual self-preservation fights off not just the fear of death but the terror of spending what is left of his life in unimaginable agony. Candy phrases it best: "You don't know pain, Pray Tell. You may have held the hand of your lovers when they shat themselves and drowned in their own bile, but when it's you in that bed […] you gon' wish you would have given up gracefully sooner."

Even more interestingly, however, *Pose* locates in the oneiric not just the point of release of strong, ambivalent feelings, but also the internal machinery of affect for the vehiculation of a *post-truth*-like imaginary.[26] When Candy mentions the upcoming photoshoot with Mapplethorpe, the lunch with Liberace and the private classes with Alvin Ailey as the activities she was looking forward to in heaven, it finally dawns on Pray Tell that she too was HIV positive and decided it was in her best interest to keep it from everybody.[27] Pray's altered state, in other words, provides the only way to acquire knowledge about Candy that is technically undisclosed in the main, rationality-driven, storyline. Cinematically manifested in a time-space that is not

[26] Popularized after the 2016 American presidential election, the term describes circumstances where emotions and personal beliefs or ideologies have more influence on public opinion than objective facts. For more on the subject, and especially how far-right governments exploit it to further their political agenda, see McIntyre 2018.

[27] This is a clear nod to the acknowledgment – later explored in the series – of the different experience of sexuality for HIV positive Black gay men and Black transwomen in the 1980s, the latter having to face the risk of constant rejection – or worse – by their potential male straight partners for the stigma society attached to the virus and its carrier.

of the narrative proper but which develops from its interstices, the provision of such knowledge eschews all logics of reliability for the ephemeral form into which it is revealed. Nevertheless, its disclosure still holds power because it affects the recipient of the information to some considerable capacity. Whether it is Pray Tell or the viewers ourselves, a combination of renewed pity and guilt informs our emotional response to Candy's presence, whose amended story we now simply assume as convincing and in no way less authentic to the psyche's registering of the facts than any of her previous life experiences. In other words, the structure of the scene does not simply collapse the divide between the fiction's "real" and its detour into the absurd, but it insists on the latter as a legitimate zone of narrative completion, demanding the spectator to re-consider the very terms through which ideas of plausibility are delineated away from reality's pretense of objectivity and coherence. Losing all meaning as a relation to factual accuracy, truth becomes the signifier of strong, convincing emotional delivery.

The structural implications of truth and absurdity is foregrounded once again at the end of "In My Heels" (S2 E10), when Blanca makes her way through the ballroom floor still visibly recovering from a severe case of HIV-induced pneumonia that she was not likely to survive. While her stay at the hospital turns into a pathetic display of sentimentality with friends bringing in flowers and helping her write down her will as her House children line up to cry by her bedside, her return to the world – of the living – stands as the utmost glorification of artifice. Welcoming the House Mother back, Pray Tell announces her as the first contestant for the lip-synching category of the night. Preceded by the sound of the drum rolls and the pompous blowing of horns, Whitney Houston's 1991 version of the "Star-Spangled Banner" blasts through the speakers while Blanca appears in a wheelchair from behind the two flags with which the children are hiding her, touching her chest dramatically as she pretends to sing. Fully invested in the performance, she removes the baggy trackies and stands in a flaring red tight bodysuit in the middle of the room before Houston gets into the second part of the National Anthem. "And the rockets' red glare" the lyrics famously go, and Blanca is not simply playing catch up but simulating complete control over them as if the voice were actually coming out of her own mouth. Round and round she walks, raising her arms in victory to incite the crowd as Houston is hitting notes that are impossibly higher and higher. Her mouth wide open, the uvula and the lower jaw move in synchrony with the back-track's unwavering vibrato in a celebration of her triumphant comeback to the ballroom, her very personal "home of the brave."

With even more power than Candy's show from beyond the grave, Blanca defines the space of the lip-synching performance as the ultimate ground for the reinterpretation of the real according to the (il)logics of never-ending fabricated approximations. Unlike her departed friend, Blanca is not simply repeating the lyrics to just any song – itself the irreverent acting upon the phantasmatic quality of the recorded voice – but she is lip-synching to a specific

performance that had been itself the result of another mimicking, this time acted by Houston herself. Not really disclosed until several days later, Houston's "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the 1991 Superbowl was, in fact, speculated to be a pre-recorded track to which the celebrity sang along at the game.[28] Now, the singer's vocal prowess is certainly not the point of this conversation; what is, instead, is the overall reaction to that moment of staged presence and delivery. Garnering unanimous acclaim not just immediately after, but ever since the very performance, that spectacular rendition went down in history as one of Houston's career highlights right before "I Will Always Love You" would consign her to the Music Hall of Fame indefinitely. In hindsight, it helped establish her image as the 1990s ultimate vocalist, the queen of music, the voice of a generation. Few insiders knew about the lip-synching, but even fewer from the general public seemed to care to the point that that version is still being cited as the benchmark for the performances of its kind and a unique event in contemporary popular culture. Impressed on the heart of the American Nation, the myth of the singer's quasi-divine grandeur alters the memory of the performance itself, overshadowing the actual circumstances of that day as reality is being rewritten time and again beyond the tenuous constraints that legitimate any truth claim.

If Houston's performance is indeed indication of the real's fictitiousness and of the affective mechanisms that regulate its reception, Blanca's delving into an eccentric, over-the-top rendition of the late singer's famous spectacle constitutes the very Black act of Signifyin(g) upon that performance, the formal *repetition with a difference* (Gates 2014) of that which is being elevated to reality that exposes the artificial operations involved in its pre-emptive, totalizing circumscriptions. A mimicry of a mimicry, Blanca's lip-synching attests to the self-reflexive power embedded in that moment of meta-performance for she is staging the art of performance itself, exposing the very illusion that sustains the agreed-upon theater of life through the gargantuan lenses of her decadent show. Just like drag reveals the imitative structure of identity by dramatizing the cultural mechanisms that naturalize what is, instead, the fabricated unity of gender (Butler 1990, 175), Blanca's melodramatic ventriloquism acts as a magnifying lens, zooming in on the mystifying processes that constitute the real via fabulous excess and flashy nonsense while it simultaneously tells them all apart. A camped-up version of Houston's recording that develops at the intersection of authenticity and approximation, this lip-synching is the element of disturbance that exposes the fiction of reality at each moment of parodic imitation. It is a gesturing toward reality's alleged unity and coherence that both rises from and critically builds on its pervasive myths; the wondrous acknowledgment and response to life's

[28] For more on the controversy, see Abril (2007, 78).

very constructedness whose very real, very tangible consequences are tragically written on the skin of the Black queer oppressed.

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Bionote

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