

A CASE STUDY EXPLORING THE AGENCY OF BLACK LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN
NYC'S BALLROOM CULTURE

By

Shamari K. Reid

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Michelle Knight-Manuel, Sponsor
Professor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz

Approved by the Committee on the Degree of Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

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Recognizing the importance of context with regard to youth agency, this study explores how 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth understand their practices of agency in ballroom culture, an underground Black LGBTQ+ culture. Ballroom was chosen as the backdrop for this scholarly endeavor because it allowed for the study of the phenomenon — Black LGBTQ+ youth agency — in a space where the youth might feel more able to be themselves, especially given that the 2019 Black LGBTQ+ youth report published by the Human Rights Campaign revealed that only 35% of Black LGBTQ+ youth reported being able to “be themselves at school” (Kahn et al., 2019). Thus, instead of asking what is wrong with schools, this study inverted the question to explore what is “right” about ballroom culture in which Black LGBTQ+ youth might practice different kinds of agency due to their intersectional racial and LGBTQ+ identities being recognized and celebrated.

Framed by the youth's understanding of their own agency across different contexts, my research illuminates the complex interrelationships between youth agency, social identity, and context. Extending the literature on youth agency and Black LGBTQ+ youth, the findings of this study suggest that in many ways these youth are always already practicing agency to work toward different ends, and that these different end goals are greatly mediated by the contexts in which they find themselves. In making connections between the ways Black LGBTQ+ youth feel liberated within ballroom space to use their agency to explore and affirm their identities outside socially constructed norms, the findings of this study point to new opportunities for education research, practice, and policy to learn from ballroom culture about how to better invite Black LGBTQ+ youth into schools in humane and educative ways, encourage their agentive imaginations within education spaces, and promote liberatory school environments that recognize and embrace these youth's intersectional identities.

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DEDICATION

For Ballroom.

And for the legacies of yesterday's Black LGBTQ+ folx, the Black LGBTQ+ folx of today, and the beautiful Black LGBTQ+ folx yet to come

"This world is for me too, honey"- Octavia St. Laurent

This world is for Us too!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A Flower is never unseen by the Sun.

We are at once That which reveals the ephemerality of shadows and That which gracefully pauses dreams to kiss the yellow dwarf at the center of life.

Dear Us,

We have never been and will never be invisible—We see Us.

Because we exist we can be sure that there is always someone holding Us.

As surely as we rise each day as/with the Sun, someone grows Us.

We heal Us.

We continue Us; We continue them too.

We love Us.

We and our love will always be enough.

You are much larger than language, thus, much too powerful a thing that is only acquired.

You are too vast to exist solely to be learned.understood.

(then, consumed. temporarily worn.discarded.)

Things that are much larger than language cannot be learned, They create.

You cannot be articulated, you control the articulation.

My love,

You exist too largely for language. Even the alphabet collapses under your weight.

You are the answer to the many questions others haven't even learned to ask.

Questions about freedom too complex for their mouths to speak.

Too free to be trapped in their minds; cognition fails them.

You live outside societal constraints flowing from whiteness and cis-heteronormativity.

You are the most human human.

Nobody can dip like *You*.

Your body isn't defined.

You define.

Your slayage is peerless.

You caaaarrrry.

You are unique in your ability to enact a radical love spacious enough for those only the wise enjoy seeing.

Keep being.

You are not misunderstood, because you understand you.

You love you.

You and your love will always be enough.

You're the greatest gift you've ever received.

What becomes possible when we acknowledge the pain that anti-Blackness and anti-LGBTQ+“ness” have introduced into our lives, while simultaneously exploring our gifts?

The challenges we encounter are real. The pain they bring are real, as is the suffering. And in our lives tragedy may exist. But our lives are not tragedies. We are gifted.

Yes, being disowned by family hurts. But an aptitude to create and redefine family is incredible. That, too, is us. We breathe life into us, thwarting attempts at suffocation led by the unfree.

And let me be clear: this is not a call to overlook the very real discrimination we know too well, but a charge to also remember our genius and power to embody and enact radical love in a world in which the bereft believe we are disposable.

We are enough. We know we exist. We know we are human. Our knowing these things suffices.

Let us move beyond the desire to expend our precious energy trying to prove our humanity to anyone. We are much too special to resign ourselves to living a life characterized by serving those who fear freedom. They need us. They are well aware that we have been instrumental in any movement that has ever existed for liberation. Our pain gives them purpose but our radical love gives us all hope. But let us remember: We don't gotta prove anything to them. They have the problem. And some of us may *choose* to help them with their unlearning, but that's their work. Know that we have a choice. We can choose to create. To play with joy. To saunter about our world accompanied by laughter. To fall asleep underneath the stars and wake up to kiss happiness. To live. We can choose to live.

A Flower is never unseen by the Sun.

We are at once That which reveals the ephemerality of shadows and That which gracefully pauses dreams to kiss the yellow dwarf at the center of life.

We are enough.

We are you.

You are much larger than language, thus, much too powerful a thing that is only acquired.

You are too vast to exist solely to be learned.understood.

(then, consumed. temporarily worn.discarded.)

Things that are much larger than language cannot be learned, They create.

You cannot be articulated, you control the articulation.

You are enough.

You are me.

I wake up every day and marvel at our power.

Our very existence opens up the truths of this earth.

We live outside imaginary lines, traversing multiple worlds.

The world that is and the world that must be.

How beautiful we are. To be radical BlackLGBTQ+ love in human form.

To be love in human form.

To be human.

Black LGBTQ+ folx: I see you & knowing that we exist sustains my hope.

Thank you,

S.K.R.

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PREFACE

Whether you're transgender or not, most of us get to a point in our lives where we can no longer lie to ourselves; We are not what other people say we are. We are who we know ourselves to be, and we are what we love (Laverne Cox quoted in; Rueckert, 2017).

I spent most of 2018 trying to walk more fully and more intentionally my truth, thus, walk more fully in my power. Toward the end of 2018, I decided to use this newfound power and self-acceptance to articulate my lived experiences as a cisgender Black LGBTQ+¹ man to a scholar I looked up to. A scholar I trusted. I wanted to get his thoughts on an idea I had for a manuscript around Black LGBTQ+ youth agency. He responded to my idea with a question. His question stung. I had looked up to him for quite some time, and to learn of his misunderstanding of my life humanized him. He was no longer superman and I had to accept the sobering truth that he would never be able to save me. I would have to stop waiting. We would have to stop waiting.

And after sharing with him my manuscript ideas centered around the experiences of those leading a life plagued by racism and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, he dismissed my idea, stating that I was “doing too much” by trying to focus on race *and* queer identity; he asked me to choose: would you rather live in a world of homophobes or a world of racists? His question was a clear demonstration (to me) that he had no idea what it truly meant to live at the intersections of racism *and* heterosexism *and* transphobia. He seemed unaware that every day I had to navigate a sociopolitical terrain littered with

¹ Throughout this chapter I will use the terms “queer” and “LGBTQ+” interchangeably to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth, while simultaneously recognizing the range of variation within the ever-evolving constructs of gender expression and sexual identity.

racist and heterosexist landmines, and that if the most he or anyone was willing or able to do was remove the racist OR heterosexist landmines, then they would still be leaving me to die. And so, I wouldn't choose between a world of racists or homophobes, as my lived experiences and the critical work on intersectionality have afforded me the language to articulate what I have always known: I am both Black and Queer always, and to invite me to privilege one identity over the other renders a partial narrative that is unable to capture the fullness of my lived experiences within interlocking (racist and heterosexist) systems of oppression.

The scholar I referenced earlier did not have a clue as to who we are. But I do. I know that we are magic. I know that Black LGBTQ+ folx possess something special. We have gifts. It is that truth that motivated this study. This dissertation is my attempt at writing us back into the stories we tell to and about Black LGBTQ+ people. And not only do I want to make visible our lives and challenges, but our unique gifts. I write this for Black LGBTQ+ youth. So that they know they belong to a community of beautiful people who know we are worth fighting for. And that we are worth loving. And that our Black LGBTQ+ lives are worth living.

I- INTRODUCTION

We were never meant to survive. — Audre Lorde (1978)

Statement of Problem

Often excluded from scholarly discourses around the K-12 educational experiences of Black youth and LGBTQ+ youth are the lived realities of students who identify as both Black and Queer (Bartone, 2017; Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Brockenbrough, 2015; Cohen, 2004; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Pritchard, 2013). Similarly to what Crenshaw (1989) argues in her work on intersectionality, the multidimensionality of Black women, and the interlocking systems of racism and sexism, Black LGBTQ+ youth do not live through or in fractured bodies (Love, 2017). Like Black girls and other youth whose bodies are home to intersecting identities, Black queer youth do not have the ability to vacillate back in forth between their racial, gender, and sexual identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Dessell, Westmoreland, & Gutiérrez, 2016). Black LGBTQ+ youth are not Black on Monday in math class, Queer on Tuesday in science, but Black and Queer every day in every class, during extracurricular activities (McCready, 2004), and in out-of-school spaces, too (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Thus, due to their racial, gender, and sexual identities they are uniquely positioned at the intersections of structural racism, transphobia, and heterosexism.

Therefore, any narrative advanced around the experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth must explore the various intersecting identities these students bring with them into learning spaces (Bartone, 2017; Mayo, 2018), the educational realities these intersecting identities produce within a racialized, gendered, and sexualized education system

(Pritchard, 2013; Quinn, 2007), and how these youth exercise agency to navigate sociopolitical terrain littered with racist, transphobic, and heterosexist landmines (Brockenbrough, 2015; Love, 2017).

Recognizing the dearth of research on Black LGBTQ+ youth in K-12 settings, a handful of education researchers have begun amassing a corpus of scholarship to illuminate the challenges Black queer students face in schools (Bartone, 2017; Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Dessell et al., 2016; McCready, 2004; Pritchard, 2013; Quinn, 2007). For example, McCready (2004) explored the experiences of Black Queer males, and found that the participants, because of their race and sexuality, had a hard time finding safe spaces in school. The participants even cited difficulty “fitting in” spaces that were supposed to be for them such as the gender and sexuality alliance (GSA) which they stated often only addressed the concerns of white queer students. In addition, McCready’s (2004) interview data highlighted how other “Black” spaces such as the Afro dance club were often hyper masculine, heteronormative, and required one of the participants to endure violent assaults in order to continue participating in the club.

Though it is necessary to note the importance of scholarship that visibilizes Black Queer youth and their unique challenges, it also warrants mentioning that much of the contemporary scholarship produced on the Black LGBTQ+ youth experience presents a myopic and victimizing narrative of these young people (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2015; Love, 2017). In other words, the stories being told to and about Black LGBTQ+ youth often center around victimhood, vulnerability, and largely feature cisgender Black Queer males (Ellison, 2016; Ferguson, 2004). Consequently, Black Queer youth are represented *only* as victims of bullying, school harassment,

homelessness, poverty, and as more susceptible to HIV/Aids due to their perceived promiscuity (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2015). In addition, the stories included in this research frequently spotlight Black gay cisgender males, rendering invisible the narratives from Black Queer youth who do not identify as cisgender, male, or conform to the current gender binary system.

It is important to reveal the tragedies of Black Queer lives. It is dangerous to present their lives solely as tragedies and characterized by victimhood. And it is equally as dangerous to exclude the voices and perspectives of non-Black LGBTQ+ cisgender males (Bailey, 2011; Ellison, 2016; Ferguson, 2004). Thus, I argue throughout this study that we must complicate the single stories (Adichie, 2009) too often relayed in research with Black youth and LGBTQ+ youth. I argue that we can complicate these single stories by allowing the voices of Black Queer youth to take center stage, with special attention to non-cisgender male Black Queer youth and how they practice agency to reimagine their identities and spaces to subvert oppression. This study does not aim to overlook the discrimination facing Black Queer youth, but to illuminate their agency as “youth who are not either victims or agents but both simultaneously” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 90). Let me also mention that while I recognize the experiences of non-cisgender Black Queer boys as different from cisgender Black Queer boys, I am not interested in participating in the oppression Olympics wherein groups vie over who has it the hardest. Simply put, with this project I seek to lift up the stories (of agency) that are often skirted around and not presented in contemporary discourse(s) around sexual, gender, and racial oppression, discrimination, and exclusion in education.

Educational Realities of Black LGBTQ+ Youth

Black lives matter, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, education level, ability, religious beliefs, immigration status, age, or location.

— Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018, p. 230

As Black Queer youth are unable to separate their Black and Queer identities, their educational experiences are almost always informed by racialized, gendered, and sexualized discrimination (Kumashiro, 2001; Pritchard, 2013). Alongside their cisgender heterosexual Black peers, Black LGBTQ+ youth wade through an education system that is mired in racism and white supremacy. To better illustrate the racialized schooling realities of *all* Black students, I present an argument articulated by critical historian, James Anderson. Anderson (1988) argued in his history of Black education in the South that there has long existed a tradition in American education that has engendered two distinct end goals for schooling—one for citizenship and the other, reserved for Black people, for second-class citizenship. This tradition, rooted in racism and white supremacy, has led to the quality of schooling that Black students receive being much poorer than that of their white classmates (Anderson, 1988; Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Coles, 2021; Horsford, 2016; Kendi, 2016); This tradition has also given way to a school culture in which Black students are frequently misread as “empty cans” who bring nothing of value to the classroom and are in need of interventions (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene; 2015). Racism in education also normalizes instances of Black students being educationally abused, under challenged, and having their cultural capital overlooked (Banks, 2006; Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Muhammad, 2020; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene; 2015; Woodson, 1998).

In addition, many contemporary critical race scholars have written extensively on the ways Black students are misperceived in schools as disengaged, disruptive, and deficient for their raced beings (Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019; Lyiscott, 2017; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015). Furthermore, Sealey-Ruiz and Greene (2015) reveal with striking clarity how these negative perceptions of Black students greatly affect their academic performance in schools, contributing to what this duo of researchers refers to as “educational genocide”, or the killing off of any chances at an equitable education.

In sum, “Black students are not educated, they are crucified” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 329). They are told by their teachers that becoming lawyers is impossible due to their racialized beings (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Malcolm X & Haley, 1965). Black students never hold promise but are always “at risk” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). They are schooled in “rote discipline and only considered educated if they can walk in single-file lines” (Coates, 2015, p. 25). They are not placed in “gifted classes even when their results on standardized tests suggest that they should be; And when they are in these gifted classes, the teachers talk down to them like their beings are more than the sum of the Black students they teach” (Moore, 2018, p. 85). Black students are educated in “schools with no real campus, but that are replete with metal detectors and police. They become things to be policed and discarded” (Khan Cullors & Bandele, 2017, pp. 25-26). Black students and their genius have been paid little to no attention in our country’s (mis)education system, comprised of prison prep schools for Black bodies (Alexander, 2010; Muhammad, 2020; Shedd, 2015). Or, in other words an education system that

places more Black bodies in prisons than it does in higher education (Love, 2019; Wilson, 2013).

In addition to navigating educational terrain littered with racist landmines, Black LGBTQ+ youth often fall prey to cisheterosexist school practices and policies as well—which I refer to at various times throughout this dissertation as cis-heterosexist landmines. Many of these landmines are assembled and set to detonate by approaches to schooling that privilege cis-heteronormativity, thus position any gender or sexual identity that falls outside that category as inferior (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). This positioning of queerness as deviant or inferior makes it possible for Black LGBTQ+ students, as they do not conform to cis-heteronormative practices, to suffer from increased risks of bullying and harassment (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Brückner & Himmelstein, 2015; Quinn, 2007); and from institutional sanctions that are disproportionate to the rates of their transgressive behaviors (Brückner & Himmelstein, 2011; Fields, Hoenig, Snapp, & Russell, 2015; Irvine, 2015). For example, one study on the disproportionate number of school sanctions for transgender youth found that they were being punished for being unwilling *or unable* to conform to dominant cis-heteronormative cultural norms with regard to dress codes and self-expression (Glickman, 2016; italics-mine). And not only do LGBTQ+ youth contend with bullying and harassment, but Gilbert, Mamo, Fields, and Lesko (2018) argue that if we look beyond bullying, we find that “queer youth are often failed to be recognized as valued and enfranchised members of their school communities” (p. 166). Thus, in this way the totality of their lives is reduced down to damage-centered narratives, and their unique gifts and contributions are overlooked (Gilbert et al., 2018; Tuck, 2009).

To illustrate my argument above about the educational experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth being racialized, gendered, *and* sexualized, I present some data from the latest GLSEN climate survey. Not only do the data reveal the racialized, gendered, and sexualized experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth, but how the combination of these identities intensify the negative consequences for Black LGBTQ+ youth in today's classrooms (Pritchard, 2013). It also warrants mentioning that in presenting the climate survey results, I do not seek to pathologize or further victimize this group of students.

In the latest GLSEN climate survey, around 23,000 queer students between the ages of 13 and 21, from all 50 states and five U.S. territories were surveyed about their experiences in schools. The survey data revealed that Black LGBTQ+ students were more likely than their other queer counterparts to experience out of school suspension or expulsion. We also learn from the survey that over a third of Black LGBTQ+ students reported hearing racist remarks and feeling unsafe because of their race/ethnicity (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Another school climate survey completed specifically with 2,130 queer students of color with 16% of the sample population identifying as Black reported that more than half of the Black LGBTQ+ students were commonly harassed because of their race (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009). All respondents attended a public high school in the United States at the time of responding to the survey. This report revealed that students who contend with racism and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination have different experiences from those who just experience only racial or anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009). For example, students of color who are severely harassed in school because of both their queer identity and race are more likely to miss school than those who are severely

harassed based on queer identity or race only (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009). Furthermore, the survey data demonstrated that LGBTQ+ students of color who experience high severities of harassment based on both their sexual and gender identities have significantly lower grade point averages than students who report experiencing a high severity of harassment because of only one of these identities (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009). And I recognize that this survey is over 10 years old. However, the Human Rights Campaign recently published a report which relied on surveys completed with 1,600 Black LGBTQ+ youth which reported data that resonated with the 2009 report shared above (Kahn et al., 2019). Unfortunately, only 32% of Black LGBTQ+ youth feel safe at school, almost half reported being bullied, and less than 22% said they heard positive messages about Black LGBTQ+ people in schools (Kahn et al., 2019). In addition, 80% of these youth feel depressed, and 71% feel worthless (Kahn et al., 2019).

Single-Identity Interventions

However, though Black LGBTQ+ youth face similar challenges as other Black students and other queer students, they are often excluded from initiatives focused on improving their schooling experience such as school gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) which Black LGBTQ+ students often regard as racist (McCready & Blackburn, 2009; Brockenbrough, 2016; Mayo, 2018). To that point, Cianciotto and Cahill (2003) found that :

LGBTQ+ youth of color often experience racism in white-dominated LGBTQ+ communities, organizations, and support networks, which may disproportionately help white, suburban, middle-class LGBTQ+ youth. In contrast, there may be fewer resources connected to the LGBTQ+ community for urban youth, who are more likely to be Black or Latino, and the institutions that do exist may be perceived as “white,” inaccessible, or irrelevant to their experiences. And initiatives to make schools safer for LGBTQ+ students, and to

integrate LGBTQ+ issues into the curriculum, sometimes lack an understanding of how the experiences of youth of color differ from those of white LGBTQ+ students. (pp. 18-19)

And the same is true for services and resources around combating sexualized biases (Brockenbrough, 2016). “Black LGBTQ+ youth who attend racially segregated schools are less likely to have programs specifically aimed at queer youth; there simply are not enough economic resources to support such efforts (Blackburn & McCready, 2009, p. 228). Mayo (2018) also writes about how her time spent interviewing four Black LGBTQ+ youth in two different high schools in south Chicago led her to the realization that their struggles with heterosexism were not always recognized as part of larger school initiatives around racial justice.

Inclusion, if incomplete, becomes exclusion. And so what happens when Black LGBTQ+ youth are left to fend for themselves in a world that says their Black bodies, and ways of living and loving do not matter? When the collision of race, gender, and sexuality are ignored? When racial inclusion, gender inclusion, and sexual inclusion is incomplete and Black LGBTQ+ youth experience full erasure (Mayo, 2018)? When these youth experience non-being (for more see DiPietro, 2016)? I argue that sometimes what happens is Black LGBTQ+ agency. Magic. Voguing (Poulson-Bryant, 2013). Ballroom culture (see Bailey, 2013; Murphy et al., 2018). The Kiki scene (Jordeno, 2016). Endless nights of *slayage*, *werking*, *sashaying*. In spaces free from societal restraints and expectations where creative prowess and imagination is unleashed; where you are not expected to be anything, so you can be everything. Black LGBTQ+ agency. And in contexts of youth, Black LGBTQ+ youth agency. However, much more needs to be known about Black LGBTQ+ youth agency and how they use their agency to fashion

lives, identities, and spaces that value, affirm, visibilize, and love them, consequently, reimagining this thing we call life.

Rationale for Study

Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized (when not brutalized into insensitivity). Those who do not feel psychologically and physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest- the women, lgbtq+ people of all races, the dark-skinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign.

— Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 4

In this paper, I have drawn on the work of multiple authors to advance the following conceptualization of agency. Agency as used in this study refers to a concept that allows us to understand how youth envision, negotiate, and navigate their lived realities amidst social, cultural, political, and economic continuity and change; and within specific contexts and power structures. In addition, agency as a concept affords us insight into how youth rely on their imaginations, creativity, and hope to collectively construct identities and spaces for themselves. Spaces and identities that might work toward specific ends, such as living a quality life, addressing inequities, promoting positive well-being, and imagining futures or alternative realities (DeJaeghere, Josic, McCleary, 2016; Walker, 2010). One of these alternative realities is the ballroom scene or ballroom culture, the research context for this proposed study.

The contemporary ball scene, which is depicted in the fictional tv series *Pose*, docuseries *My House*, and the documentaries *Legendary* and *Kiki* began in Harlem in late 1960s (the gold era) led by the efforts of Crystal Labeija who started the first ballroom house, the house of Labeija. After recognizing the limitations of white LGBTQ+ benevolence to include them in white LGBTQ+ spaces and being ostracized from Black

spaces, which were often deeply grounded in narrow interpretations of Christianity that vilified queerness and transness, Black LGBTQ+ individuals came together to draw on their radical imaginations and quests for freedom to build on the legacy of the Harlem drag ball community to create their own spaces centered around performance and community (Hart & Roberson, 2021). These Black LGBTQ+ folx used their agency to create a subaltern reality made up of ball rituals and houses (Bailey, 2013). The ball rituals or simply “balls” are events in which ballroom members walk, perform, or compete in various categories for prized trophies (Bailey, 2013). And houses serve as social, and sometimes literal, homes for its members (Bailey, 2013). They have also been referenced as the houses and families one gets to choose. Though there is some scholarship around houses and ball rituals as characteristics and important aspects of ballroom culture, there is still a need to explore additional characteristics and conditions of these spaces and how they mediate agency of its members. I explore ballroom culture in greater depth in the following chapter of this dissertation.

Specifically in this study, I am interested in Black LGBTQ+ youth agency and how they practice their agency to respond to, resist, and/or subvert racial, gender, and sexual discrimination. This exploration was guided by my wonderings about how these youth rely on their imaginations and creativity to construct lives for themselves-lives in which their bodies matter, their way of living matter, and their ways of loving matter (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010).

This study illuminates Black LGBTQ+ youth agency in ballroom culture to better understand how we can support Black LGBTQ+ youth in negotiating barriers to their academic and personal success. Exploring Black LGBTQ+ youth agency, as noted above,

also has the potential to lay the groundwork for those interested in reimagining education and achieving the seemingly elusive goal of providing equity for all students. I argue that an exploration with these youth around their agency better positions educators to work *with* them to come up with novel pedagogical innovations to bring about social, racial, and sexual justice in education. In addition, educators stand to learn from exploring the characteristics and conditions of ballroom culture that support Black LGBTQ+ youth in practicing their agency to reach personal and academic success.

Theoretical Framework

What a miracle it is that despite everything we are taught, we dare to love ourselves and each other.

— Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 2014

Queer of Color (QOC) critique draws on the work of intersectionality advanced by Black feminist scholars (Collins, 1995; Crenshaw, 1991) and queer theory/studies (Sedgwick, 1993; Warner, 1993). Ferguson (2004) first articulated QOC critique as an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship that centers the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color, emphasizing their relationship and resistance to power. In its analysis, QOC critique maintains that often our approaches to studying race, class, gender, and sexuality are single-identity approaches or approaches that present one social identity marker (e.g., sexual identity *or* race) as the most significant and having developed independently from other aspects of our identity (Manalansan, 2018). This single identity approach relies on the myth of the “normal person” informed by notions of normalcy, whiteness, and heteronormativity (Callier, 2016; Ferguson, 2004). And these single-identity approaches frequently leave out and reinscribe inequitable experiences for our

most marginalized such as those who are at once racially and sexually minoritized while “giving precedence to those within the group who are more privileged” (Callier, 2016, p. 916). For example, we see this in the privileging of white LGBTQ+ individuals in queer spaces and cisgender heterosexual Black men in Black spaces (Callier, 2016).

Scholar Brockenbrough (2015) draws on QOC critique to charge educators to explore the agency of LGBTQ+ youth of color. Brockenbrough (2015) presents QOC agency as a framework emerging from QOC critique for educators to think more deeply and intentionally about the pedagogical benefits of exploring “the agentic practices that enable queer youth of color to successfully negotiate the obstacles to their academic and personal successes” (p. 29). He adds that in these narratives of agency lie transformative possibilities for fashioning curriculum and educational experiences that better respond to the unique materialities of queer youth of color. In this study, I take up Brockenbrough’s charge to explore the agency of LGBTQ+ youth of color. And in drawing on the literature on youth agency which argues that context matters, I explored their agency not only in school contexts but in a context created and sustained by Black LGBTQ+ individuals in which the young might practice different forms of agency that we might not see in schools, such as how they practice agency in ballroom spaces.

Love (2017) draws on the Black radical imagination from the work of Kelley (2002) to offer a Black ratchet imagination methodological approach as a heuristic for exploring the complex and intersectional agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth. Love (2017) writes:

The Black ratchet imagination should not be viewed as a site where young people come to simply act out but a disruption of respectability politics, particularly for queer youth of color, reclaiming autonomy from middle- and upper-class White male heterosexuality and healing from normalized state-sanctioned violence toward Black and Brown bodies; the Black ratchet imagination as a methodological perspective affords researchers a lens that is deeply focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of Black queer youth's identity constructions through purposeful and reflective qualitative research questions that are intersectional, seek to understand youth's agency to reclaim space, refuse binary identities, subvert language, create economic opportunities with new economies, and recognize the precariousness of queer youth of color. (p. 541)

Therefore, with this project I explored with Black LGBTQ+ youth how they make sense of their agency in the spaces they create by way of their Black ratchet imaginations as a response to their unique lived realities.

Research Question

Specifically, the current qualitative case study examined as a phenomenon—the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth—within a specific context—the ballroom scene in a large metropolitan city in the northeastern region of the United States. Undergirding this project were my assumptions that within the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth lie transformative possibilities for those committed to creating spaces within institutions (i.e., school) that promote sexual, racial, and gender justice (Anzaldúa, 1987;

Brockenbrough, 2015; Love, 2017). The proposed exploration was guided by the following research question:

- How do 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth who are active members in the ballroom scene in the understand and make sense of their agency in ballroom spaces?

II- LITERATURE REVIEW

Summary

In this literature review, I explore 3 bodies of work important to this dissertation and my research question. First, as my research question deals explicitly with youth agency, I explore the theoretical underpinnings of agency as a concept and how these concepts have been applied to educational research. Furthermore, I discuss how youth agency has previously been taken up empirically in educational research and examine the specific conditions and characteristics of internal and external forces that mediate practices of agency. At the close of this section, I highlight the scarcity of studies on youth agency done involving youth with intersecting racial and queer identities; and the dearth of research exploring how youth understand their own agency.

In the second section of this review, I extend the conversation of agency to explore how agency is not only used to reimagine identities but spaces, as well. Here, I detail how Black people in the United States historically and in contemporary contexts have practiced agency to create spaces outside the white gaze to affirm their bodies, lives, knowledges, and cultures. However, I argue, that due to their intersectional identities, Black LGBTQ+ folx have had to use their agency to fashion additional spaces that affirm not only their racial identities, but their queer identities as well. Nonetheless, there is very little known about these spaces and how the unique aspects, characteristics, and conditions mediate the agency of those within them.

I finish my literature review with a discussion on the evolution of Black LGBTQ+ studies and how scholars in this discipline have worked to provide frames and lenses to excavate, document, and understand more completely the story of Black LGBTQ+ lives.

I recognize the contributions of and draw on the work of these earlier Black LGBTQ+ studies scholars for this dissertation, while simultaneously noting the absence of empirical research on the agency of Black LGBTQ+ lives, and the absence of Black LGBTQ+ youth generally within the discipline.

Explorations of Youth Agency

In the introduction to their edited volume on education and youth agency, DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary (2016) explain that though the agency of young people has increasingly become the subject of educational research, policy and practice, the term itself is fraught with “practical ambiguities in diverse settings” (p. 2). That is, agency has been articulated by many scholars as being highly contextual, interdependent on multiple forces, and at once individual and collective (Bajaj, 2009; Klocker, 2007; Murphy-Graham, 2010).

Agency is a term that changes meaning based on the bodies it is attached to, the bodies by which it is being defined, and where those bodies are located physically and socially in relation to others (Bajaj, 2018). Though they recognize the inherent ambiguity within the multifarious constructions of agency, DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary (2016) provide the following common understanding of youth agency: “youth agency is the ability of youth to take action toward their own life and well-being” (p. 2). However, these “actions” that youth may take vary depending on a multitude of factors. In other words, while all youth might be able to exercise some form of agency, the agency in itself will *not* be the same. These ideas and many others around youth agency derive mainly from the earlier work of Bourdieu, who often spoke about the ways social structures and norms had power to influence youth’s dispositions, thoughts, and actions in ways that

could reproduce dominant societal norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). He referred to this concept as habitus.

To illustrate Bourdieu's concept of habitus, I share an excerpt from Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) oft-cited Ted talk on the dangers of a single story in which she argues against presenting any one person or group as a single narrative or set of limiting stereotypes. She shares: show a people as one thing, as only one thing, and that is what they become. Habitus then, speaks to internalization of a "single story" about oneself and using your agency to make that story a reality. Similarly, King (2000) writes that:

habitus is derived directly from the socioeconomic or structural position in which conditions, such as their economic class, so that they have the appropriate tastes and perform the appropriate practices for that social position. (p. 423)

These understandings resonate with Merton's (1984) self-fulfillment prophecy which speaks to the notion that false conceptions, if believed, evoke new behavior which make the original false conception a reality. That is, if structures, systems, and pervasive ideologies lead to the internalization of inferiority or superiority, humans will act as if those ideologies are true. They will act or exercise agency as if they are, as compared to others in their society, inferior. Therefore, they will use their agency to perpetuate their inferiority. In speaking of racial oppression, Woodson (1933) claimed that if you make a man feel inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. In other words, under oppressive systems, members of that society will exercise agency in a way that maintains the status quo.

In a book about social class, race, and gender and their sticky relationships to educational inequity, Bettie (2014), draws on interview data with more than 60 white and Mexican-American girls from working-and-middle class families to argue that working

class girls are more likely to become working class women facing similar problems as their mothers such as low wages, and lack of stable housing. Bettie's book extends Bourdieu's theory of habitus from sociology to education to unearth how certain structural constraints in schools such as the lack of variety of classes offered to working class Mexican-American girls result in these girls not experiencing much social mobility. Thus, working class girls get working class lives.

Moreover, youth, due to their different social locations, will not have access to the same possibilities of agency. Bourdieu, argued that within *habitus* or now what some mean by agency, through reproductive systems in schools and other institutions, individual subjectivity that aligns with dominant notions of power is reproduced (Bajaj, 2018). Students with less social and cultural capital will reproduce such inequalities while students with more social and cultural capital will reproduce their privilege. In this way, youth internalize their subordination or superiority through *habitus* or "commonsense assumptions and embodied characteristics that indelibly are marked by such social factors as class, race and gender" (Kennelly, 2009, p. 260).

Education anthropologists have since extended Bourdieu's theories to argue that all human beings, regardless of their social location, have the capacity to use their agency to express themselves in ways that go against societal norms and imagine alternative realities to that which already exists (Bajaj, 2009; Chavez & Griffin, 2009; Dierker, 2016). Some of these alternative realities are illustrated in the following paragraph of this literature review and in section two in which I take up how Black people have used their agency to fashion subaltern spaces that counter their immediate realities and resist dominant norms and ideologies. However, though these scholars recognize that all

humans beings are capable of agency, they simultaneous hold that agency is constrained by our social locations. That is, we all have access to agency, but our access is different and mediated by internal and external forces.

And so even though youth have “an inherent creativity of the human being given expression through subjectivities that fashion the structures they encounter” (Levison et al, 2011, p. 116), we must remain cognizant that their inherent creativity and agency are also fashioned *by* the structures they encounter (DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary, 2016). This discourse extends Bourdieu’s theory to argue that though our social locations may inform how, when, and why people practice agency, it does not relegate to them to leading lives as *only* agents of continuation. Agents of continuation then refers to those who use their agency to perpetuate dominant societal ideals and norms.

To illustrate the constraints that dominant discourses and pervasive ideologies operating in schools place on youth agency I offer a few examples, before turning to a discussion on how practices of agency that resists the status quo can persist despite these structures and limitations. In a study exploring the science identity creation process of a Black girl, Olitsky (2006) found that due to the dominant discourse circulating through the participant's school around who could and could not do science, the participant’s agency was limited. Her agency as it related to forming a science identity was constrained, as she found it difficult to imagine herself as a scientist based on the messages she received about science being for white boys. The author concluded that not only was it hard for the participant to use her agency to reimagine herself as a scientist, but the discourse in the school also complicated the process of her imagining an alternative. This study speaks to the complexities of agency and demonstrates the

importance of context. As we think of agency and the choices that young people make to reimagine their identities and spaces, we must be mindful that their agency is mediated by race, gender, sexual identity, and other social identity markers (Aaltonen, 2013; Bajaj, 2009).

To that end, McCleary (2016) documents how gender norms and identities play an important role in youth's negotiations of agency. She argues that although all young people have some agency, the possibilities are not infinite. McCleary (2016) conducted case studies with 3 Latinx young people around their decisions to challenge gender inequity in their shared village. She found that though they all used their agency to challenge gender inequity, the young man in the study was well received for challenging the status quo. The community applauded his efforts and held him up as a role model for all committed to gender equity. In stark contrast, the two young women in the study who practiced similar kinds of agency such as rejecting traditional roles in the home and speaking out against gender injustice were met with criticism and dissuaded from engaging in such resistance. Olitsky (2006) writes, "gender plays a role in how a young person's agency is enacted vis à vis the relationships they have with family, peers, and their community" (p. 104).

Not only does this study invite us to think about gender norms and how they mediate agency, but how social norms and traditions of local and national communities dictate youth agency, as well. These findings are echoed by Bajaj (2018) who extends the previous work of Kabeber (2002) in a theoretical essay to argue that "the pressures and norms of the larger society often result in a dissipation of the ability to act independently towards transforming unequal conditions" (p. 8). And as demonstrated above, this

dissipation is not distributed equally. However, not only does one's community have the ability to thwart their practices of agency or constrain their agentive imaginations, but communities may also be the source of powerful agentive imaginations as people think of themselves as part of something bigger. Many scholars have referred to this as coalitional agency, or agency that is inextricably tied to people, history, and culture (Chavez & Griffin, 2009).

Coalitional agency

As theorized by scholars Chavez and Griffin (2009) coalitional agency can be illustrated in the following oft-cited quotes and phrases:

InLak'ech/You are my other me — indigenous Mayan phrase

Ubuntu/I am because we are— Nguni Bantu word

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere —Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

Originating in feminist scholarship, coalitional agency is about “connections to larger histories, examinations of power asymmetries, and situating current interrogations within a larger trajectory of intergenerational activism and solidarity” (Bajaj, 2018, p. 12). It is generated from a genuine understanding and feeling of connectedness to a movement, a community, a people, and a history of struggle; a history of resistance.

In a study done with six African-American youth who self-identified as activists and advocates in a large midwestern city, Dierker (2016) sought to understand how these young people's agency, advocacy, and activism were tied to their understandings of their communities and unique histories. In her conclusion, the author argues that the youth derived their agency from being a part of something bigger than them. They saw their (coalitional) agency as tied to their communities, ancestors, and histories of racial

struggle. The youth, through in-depth interviews, shared that they got their strength to resist from knowledge learned while participating in a social justice youth group. Knowledge about the collective struggles of their ancestors, and of their collective resistance. The knowledge gained inspired them to continue the legacy, honor their ancestors, and to do something to bring about social justice in the future such as start a youth violence campaign with the local Black Lives Matter group.

Similarly, Rosen (2019) worked with a group of 14 racially diverse youth organizers in Philadelphia to learn about their agentic participation in an increasingly neoliberalized world. Across individual interview data, the youth shared that they belonged a strong social network of young people who saw themselves as one collective activist group. This feeling of connectedness allowed the youth in the study to use their agency to take risks and work hard to fight for justice.

This practice of agency extends the earlier work of Bourdieu, to state that individuals and collectives need not use their agency *only* to perpetuate dominant societal norms, but that in solidarity, people may coalesce their agency to improve the situations of many, of all. This belief is not much different from Freire's (1970) argument that with a critical consciousness, people, specifically students, can analyze their place in the world and take action toward individual and/or social collective transformation. This can be referred to as transformative agency.

Transformative Agency

Transformative agency refers to the belief that through their agency individuals and collectives can transform inequitable systems (Bajaj, 2009). Furthermore, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) write that this collective action or transformative agency is

only possible when motivated “by a sense that individual and social change is possible” (p. 320). Bajaj (2018) offers that “transformative agency in students is the ability to act in the face of structural constraints to advance individual and collective goals related to positive social change” (p. 7).

However, to avoid romanticizing transformative agency and presenting it as this “thing” that can be enacted equally by all, I must mention that the levels of transformative agency may differ due to differing levels of coalitional agency, or the ability to exercise agency within and because of a certain group, and other factors such as social identity markers (DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary, 2016). And though a growing number of researchers have focused on agency as mediated by gender and race from which I presented a few studies above, others have explored connections between youth agency and social class (Archer, 2007; Farrugia, 2013; Shirazi, 2011), sexual activity (Averett, Benson, & Vaillancourt, 2008; Bell, 2012), and professional occupations and social mobility (Evans, 2007). This section is not intended to serve as an exhaustive review of the entire body of literature around youth agency in education, but I intended to share these selected articles to demonstrate how many scholars who have done work around youth agency, albeit with different foci, understand that agency is always being negotiated by many internal and external factors. And to illustrate the differing perspectives from Bourdieu’s earlier conceptualizations of agency which demonstrate how coalitional and transformative agency can bring about new possibilities (McLeod, 2005). Simply put, since Bourdieu’s work in the 1970s, scholars have revealed that agency does not always reproduce the status quo. It can, in fact, bring about new possibilities.

In my exploration of the literature around youth agency, I found very few studies that centered the youth's understanding of their own agency, and fewer studies in which the researchers explored the agency of youth who are at once gender, sexually and racially minoritized. Drawing on the previous work around agency and the notion that young people who are constructed as problematic from society's point of view exercise different forms of agency to create opportunities to improve their lives (Aaltonen, 2013), I extend this body of scholarship to invite the youth to articulate their own understandings of agency and how it might be tied to internal and external factors in their lives. It is my hope that this exploration serves as the starting point for a discussion around what we can learn regarding the possibilities for Black LGBTQ+ youth agency in school settings (Brockenbrough, 2015; Love, 2017). Though I have not discussed it much here in this first section, many scholars have also documented how people have used their agency to reimagine not only their identities but spaces (Evans, 2007; Nunley, 2011). The ballroom, as the research site for this study, is one such space. In the ensuing section, I explore ballroom spaces and other spaces that have been created through agency to respond to, resist, and/or subvert oppression.

Black Agency from Hush Harbors to Ballroom

From magical girls with afro puffballs who own the block and their ratchetness, to joyous Black boys sweeping up hair in the barbershop, to incredible Black trans and queer youth redefining realness as they love themselves publicly and without shame, to Black folx lifting their voices in perfect harmonies in Black churches, to Black abolitionists resisting by loving that which we have been taught to hate-Blackness, to Black women gathering around kitchen tables and in beauty shops to discuss the weight

of contorting their beings to become bridges and structures to carry and advance a world that refuses to say their names, to Black hush harbors. Black agency has always existed. Coupled with Black love, Black joy, Black healing, Black genius, and Black freedom dreaming, Black people in this country have long practiced agency to respond to a world that has tried to disappear us and our love into the miasma of racial discrimination (Love, 2019).

Specifically, if we look across history, we see that Black people have always engaged in transformative and coalitional agency. Agency, that as noted above, speaks to the ability of an individual or a collective to connect to communities, and histories of struggle and resistance to practice agency in ways that transform their immediate situations and improve their quality of life. It is this practice of agency that is of most importance to the current study. Specifically, in this study I am interested in exploring how such practices of agency lead to the creation of alternate spaces and identities that respond to, resist, and/or subvert racial, sexual, and gender oppression. Though I am particularly interested in the spaces created by and for Black LGBTQ+ folx, I recognize the importance of connecting such creations of spaces to a long history of the use of Black agency to create spaces outside the purview of whiteness; spaces to just be Black. I write this section to work toward a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of Black agency to fashion spaces that attend to Black identities as they intersect with gender and sexual identities.

Hush Harbors

One of the first physical manifestations of Black agency in this country were hush harbors (Nunley, 2011). Hush harbors was a term developed by enslaved Black people to

refer to spaces such as “the slave quarters, woods, and praise houses where Black folks could speak frankly in Black spaces in front of Black audiences” (Nunley, 2011, p. 23). These hush harbors were necessary because Black life was closely monitored and policed under the gaze of whites and whiteness. That is, outside these safe havens Black people were unable to be free to engage their own knowledges, practices, and cultures unique to their Black bodies. These hush harbors doubly served as not only a way to affirm Blackness but sustain it. In these spaces, Black people shared knowledge that would help their communities avoid Black social death. In other words, to borrow the words of Paris and Alim (2004) from their work on culturally sustaining practices, hush harbors were spaces that sustained Black bodies, Black lives, Black culture, and Black knowledge outside the white gaze. They were a way of continuing immortal conversations with our ancestors. Conversations that transcended time, space, all five senses, and Eurocentric conceptions of life. These conversations sustained Blackness by inculcating in all present Black culture, or Black ways of knowing and doing life.

Quite literally, hush harbors were “necessary to the maintenance, circulation, and affirmation of Black knowledge” (Nunley, 2011, p. 24). Hush harbors were Black lifeworlds. Hanchard (2006) uses the term lifeworlds to refer to “common sense notions of beliefs, positionalities, epistemologies and the linguistic choices ordinary people practice to construct meaning” (as cited in Nunley, 2011, p. 37).

“Kitchen Tables”

Black people are not a monolith. Black is not a biological category that can be reduced to an individual trait (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007). It is a social group united by a long history of racialized experiences in the United States (Davis, 1991). I

draw on intersectionality, as presented in chapter I, to also understand that the experiences of Black people are always informed by other aspects of our identities such as gender and sexuality. In addition, as some of these identities are also marginalized, certain groups of Black folx have also had to practice agency to create additional spaces within already marginalized communities to affirm and celebrate not only their racialized identities, but other identities as well. One example would be the spaces created for and by Black women to respond to racial *and* gender oppression.

Many Black women scholars have documented the realities of being both Black and woman in a country founded on racism and patriarchy (Davis, 2017). Due to the pervasiveness of racism and sexism, Black women and girls are often left to lead lives in the margins of the margins (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). In other words, Black women and girls are frequently rendered invisible in the fight for racial justice and their racialized experiences are often flattened in discourses on sexism. Consequently, the unique realities of Black women and girls are left out of the discourses on racial and gender inequity; And absent are discourses that take up the unique realities informed by the combination of racism and sexism. In fact, it is this reality that moved Kimberlé Crenshaw to coin the term intersectionality to illuminate this intersectional oppression (Crenshaw, 2016). Thus, if hush harbors or Black spaces do not proffer space, time, or resources to address issues of sexism, Black women and girls will not be wholly cared for or able to “just be” (Evans-Winters, 2015). However, Black women and girls have not waited for the rest of the world to construct spaces outside the white and male gazes. They have exercised their own transformative and coalitional agency to create their own

spaces. Some of the spaces include beauty shops (Gill, 2010), kitchen tables (Haddix et al, 2016), and modern-day digital hush harbors (Kynard, 2010).

In 2010 Carmen Kynard explored how 13 Black girls in a large urban city in the Northeast used their multiple digital literacies to create contemporary reinventions of hush harbors to challenge the constant policing of their racialized and gendered identities. In this autoethnography, Kynard (2010) argued that these candy girls (herself included) were “multiply silenced and erased due to the inattention paid to them in and out of schools” (p. 35). Thus, the girls created a digital online space in which they centered their bodies, lives, and cultures in a world that often sends implicit and explicit messages about the disposability of Black women and girls. This article highlights how these spaces such as hush harbors, do not only exist physically, but can exist digitally, as well.

Similarly, Haddix and her colleagues (2016) introduce another “hush harbor” created for and by Black women as an alternative or extension to the spaces that already exist for Black people—the kitchen table. They describe the kitchen table as a place where:

mothers and daughters prep Sunday dinners on Saturday afternoons and each head of hair is pressed for Sunday’s church service. Where women kinfolk play cards and drop dominoes. Where girlfriends drink morning coffee and afternoon tea, sharing the latest gossip and breaking down politics. The kitchen table represents physically and symbolically an inclusive space for Black girls and women to come together, to be seen, to be heard, and to just be. The kitchen table signifies the rich history of our foremothers and grandmothers who sat at the kitchen table

where, beyond gossip and social talk, women bared their souls and received healing and affirmation in the company of their sisters. (p. 380)

It is also important to note that the authors do not refer solely to a physical kitchen table, but kitchen table here doubles as a metaphor to “emphasize the political act of Black women creating their own table when the dominant group denies them a seat at their table” (p. 381).

I share these examples to illustrate how certain groups of Black people due to their intersectional identities must use their agency to create spaces outside of traditional hush harbors to affirm parts of their identities that might be rendered invisible in racially insulated spaces. Black women, as Kynard (2010) and Haddix et al (2016) have revealed, deal with situations that are different from their Black male counterparts and from other non-Black women, which necessitates a “space” albeit digitally, physically, or psychically to just be. That is, spaces that exist outside the white and male gaze(s).

Black LGBTQ+ Spaces

It is also of note that like Black women, Black LGBTQ+ folx do not always enjoy protection or experience full acceptance of their identities in spaces created to sustain Black identity (Johnson, 2014). In traditional hush harbors or modern-day hush harbors such as barbershops where young Black men explore masculinity (Nunley, 2011), Black churches, Hip-Hop cyphers, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Black Greek fraternities and sororities, and Black churches, Black LGBTQ+ folx have encountered others who were particularly unaccepting of things they did not understand, such as queerness and gender expressions that fall outside cis- heteronormative lines.

Johari (2017) argued throughout a conceptual piece on the Black church, that Black LGBTQ+ folx have often “found Black churches particularly hostile toward queer identities” (p. 19). This cis-heteronormative hostility toward Black LGBTQ+ people has been documented by several scholars even though these Black churches were realized during the post emancipation era to offer refuge for *all* Black people during the realities of Jim Crow and to fuel resistance against racist practices (Johari, 2017; Melton, 2016; Moore, 2012). Even former president Barack Obama recognized Black churches as “places of hush harbors and community centers where Black people organized for jobs and justice, and a sanctuary from so many hardships (as cited in Johari, 2017, p. 18). Nonetheless, due to their intersectional identities Black LGBTQ+ folx are often unable to “just be” in these “safe” spaces.

Ballroom Culture

However, like Black women, Black LGBTQ+ folx have not waited for others outside their community to create spaces free from racial and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination. They have used their agency to dream up such spaces on their own, such as ballroom culture. Many ballroom historians have stated that ballroom culture has a rich history that goes back to the Harlem Renaissance and the Harlem drag ball community in which mainly Black trans women and drag queens competed in their own competitions after becoming fed up with the racist and restrictive drag culture of the 1920s (Buckner, n.d.). Other historians trace ballroom culture to the 1884 Masquerade and Civic Ball held by the Hamilton Lodge which was an annual ball held on the third Friday in February to coincide with the Hamilton Lodge’s founding (Jones, 2017). The Hamilton Lodge ball was described in great detail by journalist Geraldyn Dismond, who wrote about the event

for *The Afro-American*, a newspaper with national circulation, and the *Interstate Tattler*, a Harlem weekly publication. Dismond wrote that the highlight of this event was a drag pageant in which Black drag queen contestants competed for cash prizes based on their glamorous attire and appearance. Though it was often criticized by religious and community leaders for its open celebration of LGBTQ+ individuals, the ball grew so popular that in 1929, it had to turn away an estimated 2000 people whom the venue could not accommodate. In his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes, describes the Hamilton ball as the “strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem spectacles in the 20s”.

The popularity of the Lodge ball in the 1920s corresponds with the Harlem drag ball community gaining prominence after Black drag queens began throwing their own functions in which they could perform without having to “lighten their faces” or appeal to white Eurocentric ideals of beauty. In present day, many ballroom members reference the Harlem drag ball era as the predecessor to the gold area of ballroom which spanned from the 1960s to the early 1970s

In the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, Pepper LeBeija, a legendary figure in ballroom culture shares that, “a ball is as close as we’re going to get to the fame and culture that rich people have. The balls are like a fantasy for us. Or like being at the Oscars; Whatever you want to be, you be.” Bailey (2009) explains ballroom as “a culture or minoritarian social sphere where performance, queer genders and sexualities, and kinship coalesce to create an alternative world” (p. 367). Ballroom can also be referred to as “house ball culture”. (Bailey, 2009). And in using Black LGBTQ+ I reference my own observations in balls and echo Bailey’s (2009) point that while I acknowledge the

participation of Latinx queer people in ballroom culture in some locations, most ballroom members are Black LGBTQ+ folx.

The contemporary ball scene, which is depicted in the fictional tv series *Pose*, docuseries *My House*, and the documentaries *Legendary* and *Kiki* began in Harlem in late 1960s (the gold era) led by the efforts of Crystal Labeija who started the first ballroom house, the house of Labeija. After recognizing the limitations of white LGBTQ+ benevolence to include them in white LGBTQ+ spaces and being ostracized from Black spaces, which were often deeply grounded in narrow interpretations of Christianity that vilified queerness and transness, Black LGBTQ+ individuals came together to draw on their radical imaginations and quests for freedom to build on the legacy of the Harlem drag ball community to create their own spaces centered around performance and community (Hart & Roberson, 2021). It is said that Crystal Labeija grew tired of the racism she experienced in the downtown drag scene, thus she began hosting her own balls for Black performers and started the first ballroom house, the House of Labeija. Soon after we began to see other houses such as the House of Corey, the House of Dior, the House of Wong, the House of Dupree, and the House of Xtravaganza (Brathwaite, 2018). Since, the ballroom scene has grown significantly into a global cultural enterprise comprised of balls and houses (Bailey, 2009). However, despite its growing expansion and popularity from its members appearing in Madonna's music video "Vogue" (1990) to Livingston's popular documentary film *Paris Is Burning* (1990), this unique culture has received minimal scholarly attention (Bailey, 2009; 2011).

Houses

Houses serve as social, and sometimes literal, homes for its members who have been rejected by their biological families, social institutions, and society at large (Bailey, 2009). Houses do not refer to physical spaces but rather the complex kinship structure in ballroom culture (Bailey, 2013). Houses are chosen families led by house mothers and fathers. These house parents then not only work to hone the individual talents of the house children so that they can win trophies in balls and bring the house prominence, but they also help nurture, support, and guide the personal development of the house children. It is within ballroom families that many Black LGBTQ+ individuals are supported through transitioning¹, learn about sexual health and wellness as it relates to their LGBTQ+ identities, and receive advice about what it means to navigate society as a Black queer and/or trans person. I do not mean to simplify houses to the roles of parents and children, as there are many other roles constituted by the labor of house members. Houses are often named after ballroom pioneers who founded houses such as the House of Corey founded by Dorian Corey, and the House of Xtravaganza founded by Hector Xtravaganza. The houses are also named after luxury designer brands such as the House of Dior, the House of Gucci, and the House of Balenciaga. Houses compete against other houses at balls to gain respect, prominence, and notoriety within the house ball community.

¹ Transitioning refers the process in which people of trans experience began taking the steps toward affirming their gender identity. These steps are different for every trans person and are always decided by the individual. That is, some trans people consider changing their names as a step toward transitioning, while others might say that transitioning begins when one starts taking hormones.

Balls

Ballroom culture is made up primarily of competitive ball rituals and houses. The ball rituals or simply “balls” are events in which ballroom members walk, perform, or compete in various categories for prized trophies. As gender performance is central to ballroom culture, the categories largely reflect how the members see themselves. All members of the ballroom community identify with either one of six categories and generally perform in categories that coincide with their gender/sexual identity within the community (see table 1). Generally, balls have themes such as Disney characters or winter wonderland in which all competing must walk/perform donning attire that represents their interpretation of the theme. These balls serve as “spaces to celebrate, affirm, and critique the everyday lives of its Black LGBTQ+ members” (Bailey, 2009, p. 261). No longer just centered around beauty competitions that closely resemble pageants or the drag competitions of the 1920s, contemporary balls now include performance categories such as vogue, fashion categories like runway and best dressed, and beauty categories like face, in which contestants battle it out for the trophy or grand prize.

Table 1. *Gender/Sexual Identity System*

<p>Ballroom Culture: Three Sexes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Woman (one born with female sex characteristics). 2. Man (one born with male sex characteristics). 3. Intersex (one born with both male and female sex characteristics or with sex characteristics that are indeterminate).
<p>Six-Part Gender/Sexual Identity System</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Butch queens (cisgender men who identify as gay, bisexual, or queer; and are and can be masculine, hypermasculine, or effeminate). 2. Femme queens (women of trans experience). 3. Butch queens up in drags (cisgender men who perform drag; identify as gay/bisexual/queer but do not desire to lead lives as women). 4. Butches (men of trans experience). 5. Women (cisgender women who identify as gay, heterosexual, lesbian, queer, or bisexual). 6. Men (cisgender men who identify as heterosexual).
<p>House Parents</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mothers: Butch queens, femme queens, and women 2. Fathers: Butch queens, butches, and men.

Adapted from Bailey (2011). *Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the gender system in ballroom culture. Feminist Studies*, (37) 2, 365-386.

It is worth emphasizing once more that ballroom culture has received limited attention in research. In my search for empirical scholarship on ballroom culture, I found very few articles (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Bailey, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014; Murill et al., 2008; Phillips II et al., 2011; Rowan, Long, & Johnson, 2013). Two of the articles authored by Bailey and a third Bailey co-authored with Emily Arnold were foundational as I designed this study and thought about what it would mean to engage in empirical research within ballroom culture. All three articles rely on ethnographic data. In *constructing home for family*, Arnold and Bailey (2009) focus on the houses within a particular ballroom community in San Francisco and Detroit. In order to explore their question regarding the ways in which ballroom houses and families engage in HIV-prevention for young Black men who have sex with men, they conducted an ethnography in 2006 that lasted 8 months. The data came from participant observations and 15 in-depth interviews and 10 group interviews with 25 Black LGBTQ+ folx who were active members in the ballroom community. Relying on grounded theory for data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), Arnold and Bailey (2009) concluded that “the house mothers provided safe-sex advice based on life experience, their involvement in professional HIV-prevention work, and also sex work” (182). Meanwhile, “the house fathers often focused on structural factors pertaining to vulnerability to HIV, such as improving the socioeconomic circumstances of their children” (p. 182). As they recognize the lack of attention HIV-prevention professionals have given to Black LGBTQ+ folx, these scholars encourage more collaborations between HIV prevention services and ballroom communities. They note that ballroom families have valuable insight regarding HIV prevention specifically among Black LGBTQ+ folx.

This article brings visibility to ballroom culture in research, however, there is no mention of Black LGBTQ+ youth in these ballroom spaces nor any mention of the specific conditions and characteristics of the ballroom community that allow for such attention to be placed on HIV prevention. That is, what is it about the ballroom structure that allows for such possibilities?

In a similar article on HIV prevention in ballroom, Bailey (2009) focuses only on the ethnographic data collected in Detroit to argue that “the ballroom community is a site where its members have the opportunity to be nurtured, to experience pleasure, and to access a better quality of life in the face of the AIDS epidemic, particularly for those that are located at the very bottom of society” (p. 259). However, extending the work done with Arnold (Arnold & Bailey, 2009), he discusses one characteristic of ballroom that makes this HIV prevention work possible.

According to Bailey (2009), ballroom is a cultural space of hope. This ethos of hope allows ballroom members to contend with negative representations of their racial and sexual identities by encouraging “brand new identities and brand new slates” (p. 266). In other words, ballroom allows space for its member to hope and dream up new identities that they get to choose. And as their self-esteem improves and they begin to see themselves as valuable with lives worth living, they begin engaging more seriously in HIV prevention.

Responding to the dearth of research on Black folx of trans experience, Bailey (2011) relied on a 6-year ethnography conducted in ballroom cultures between 2001 and 2007 in Detroit, Michigan, Oakland, and Los Angeles to better understand the experiences of ballroom members of trans experience. This research allowed him to

theorize the gender/sexual identity system and create the table shared above (see table 1). This ethnographic data is also the base for Bailey's (2013) book on gender performance in ballroom culture in Detroit which takes up gender performance in ballroom culture, HIV prevention within ballroom houses, and in its final pages speaks to how the culture is beginning to spread worldwide and in younger Black communities.

It is this final part of the book that most connects to this dissertation. As the articles shared here bring important attention to ballroom culture, they also highlight the need for more empirical work to be done to better understand the agentive possibilities in these spaces and what aspects of ballroom support or inhibit such practices of agency; And they point to the need to explore the experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth in these spaces, as Bailey (2013) clearly illustrates that Black LGBTQ+ youth are entering into these communities. Thus, the foundational work of this small but powerful body of scholarship on ballroom culture presents many possibilities for pushing this work forward. These possibilities motivate my research question around Black LGBTQ+ youth and how ballroom spaces support and/or inhibit their practices of agency to improve upon their well-being. Furthermore, my research question also draws on the work around the spaces created by Black agency explored above, specifically responding to the gap in knowledge around Black LGBTQ+ spaces and their unique characteristics and the conditions within them.

In the final section of this literature review, I briefly explore the evolution of Black LGBTQ+ studies as a discipline to emphasize my attempt to build upon the work of these scholars by pushing the conversation forward from speaking of the unique challenges Black LGBTQ+ people face to illuminating how we practice agency in a

world that says our Black bodies and ways of expressing our gender and sexual identities do not matter.

I document this evolution to clearly illustrate how Black queer studies as a discipline emerged from the need to make academic space for Black LGBTQ+ humanity, and in its most recent iteration has begun to explore the Black LGBTQ+ body as valid way to understand the world. That is, many of these early Black LGBTQ+ studies scholars used their intellectual gifts to advocate for the inclusion of Black LGBTQ+ folx in Black studies and in queer studies. This early corpus of scholarship has allowed a new wave of Black LGBTQ+ scholars to focus less on charging others to value the inherent humanity of Black LGBTQ+ folx and acknowledge the challenges they face and focus more on making visible the gifts that Black LGBTQ+ folx possess, their agency. Nonetheless, this body of research could stand to be strengthened by more empirical studies on Black LGBTQ+ness, studies that center youth, and still more work around the agency of Black LGBTQ+ folx.

Black Queer Studies

This study builds upon the work of the burgeoning field of Black queer studies, which has provided language and lenses through which the new wave of Black LGBTQ+ scholars can speak about, document, and explore Black LGBTQ+ lives. It is because of this important foundation and the critical work of early Black queer studies scholars in the fight for recognition of racialized queer identities that this study was even fathomable. However, after reviewing the literature on Black queer studies, I argue that though the field has made significant and important contributions to illustrate a more a complete

picture of Black LGBTQ+ humanity, thus humanity in general, we have not fully realized this chief aim. We have not yet devoted enough time and attention to Black LGBTQ+ agency, and how Black LGBTQ+ folx use their agency to reimagine identities and spaces that respond to, resist, and/or subvert racial, gender, and sexual oppression. In addition, more empirical work still remains to be done on Black LGBTQ+ youth and how they navigate social terrain littered with racist and cis-heterosexist landmines.

Almost 15 years ago, the first ever volume of Black queer studies was released. The volume consisted of a collection of essays centered on the intersections of race and sexual identity. It was the first of its kind to bring visibility to the field of Black queer studies. In its introduction, Johnson and Henderson (2005) write that the volume and Black queer studies as a discipline “serve as a critical intervention in the discourses of Black studies and Queer studies” (p. 1). They continue to share the objective of this body of work: “build a bridge and negotiate a space of inquiry between these two fields of study while sabotaging neither and enabling both” (p. 1). Though a relatively new body of scholarship, many Black LGBTQ+ studies maintain that often wanting in the discourses around Blackness and Queerness are the stories of those of us who identify as both Black and Queer (Bartone, 2017; Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Cohen, 2004; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Hong & Ferguson, 2011; Pritchard, 2013). Thus, though Black LGBTQ+ scholars write on a range of topics from film studies to legal studies, to politics, to performance studies, they all recognize that one of the chief goals of Black queer studies is to excavate, document, and understand the full histories and contributions of Black LGBTQ+ lives (Johnson & Henderson, 2005).

Black Studies

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black students and faculty petitioned, and protested to put pressure on institutions of higher learning to think more deeply and intentionally about including programs and departments devoted to Black studies (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). Extending the work of the Civil Rights and Black power movements, these Black activists fought for more representation in the ivory tower. It is worth noting that the majority of those leading this struggle for the formation of Black studies as a discipline were cisgender heterosexual Black men (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). And this is not to say that Black women were not leading but to acknowledge that even in the fight for racial equality the patriarchy reared its ugly head and Black women “were relegated to secondary status with their contributions ignored and overlooked as Black male leadership held up race as the proper sphere of study” (Johnson & Henderson, 2005, p. 3). Thus, given the subordinate status of Black women within Black studies, it should come as no surprise that sexuality was often purposefully excluded from the discourse around what constitutes Black studies, and what constitutes Black lives worth exploring (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). It would take more time then for Black studies to “realize that its place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference (Audre Lorde, 1982, p. 226). To that end, Lorde (1982) writes that “self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition” (p. 226) as no one Black experience can be pinned down, assumed or generalized (Ellis & O’Connor, 2010). That is, as Black bodies are home to many different intersecting identities, racial liberation alone will not guarantee freedom to all

(Ellis & O'Connor, 2010). Our freedoms are tied up with one another and until we are all free, none of us are free.

Extending this idea, Evans-Winters (2015) offers:

Black women must fight for racial and gender equality simultaneously. They cannot afford to privilege one group's struggle over the other, for Black liberation will not eradicate gender oppression and the elimination of gender domination will not automatically eradicate White racial domination. (p. 132)

I extend this argument to argue that “until all Black lives matter, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, or gender expression, none of them will” (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018, p. 230).

(Black)Queer Studies

Nearly 20 years after the arrival of Black studies to institutions of higher learning, queer studies would arrive to the academy to not only speak of the oppression of those sexually minoritized in society but destabilize fixed notions of identity by deconstructing binaries such as heterosexual/homosexual, gay/lesbian, and masculine/feminine (Bravmann, 1997). However, many Black LGBTQ+ scholars have documented how queer studies often ignores the multiple subjectivities present in queer bodies who do not enjoy white privilege (Cohen, 2004; McCready, 2009; Johnson & Henderson, 2005; Reed, 2016). It is this argument that concerns many of the essays in the first volume of Black queer studies and many of the premier Black LGBTQ+ writings that center people who are at once sexually, gender, and racially minoritized. That is, many of these initial writings serve as a clear documentation of Black LGBTQ+ exclusion, relying upon the

intellectual faculties of early Black LGBTQ+ scholars to advocate for ourselves as a people, as a discipline.

For example, scholar Cathy Cohen has written extensively on the limitations of queer politics for true liberation from all forms of oppression. Cohen (2005) argues that queer politics has the radical potential to “challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics (p. 23). However, she simultaneously recognizes that queer politics have increasingly become concerned with Queer folx being accepted and allowed to operate queerly in a system that has for long excluded them and regarded them as sexual deviants. She argues that as many of these queer politicians are white, thus have white privilege, they engage a resistance that does not seek to transform the current social order but be welcomed into it. Cohen continues to state that queer politics, if it is in fact to achieve its goal of true liberation, must engage a more radical leftist stance that seeks to disrupt and dismantle the social order, thus guaranteeing all who are marginalized to enjoy genuine freedom from all oppressions and stripping from all the freedom to oppress. She argues that we must also avoid the straight/queer binary, wherein all who are queer are powerless and all who are straight have power. It is much more nuanced and complex than that. In such a binary, white queers are able to disavow white privilege and present their experiences of sexual oppression as those all queer folx face, even queers of color (Reed, 2016).

Cohen is not alone in her critique of queer studies. Johnson (2005) extends Cohen’s argument to work toward a theoretical re-framing of queerness that makes space for all shapes, sizes, and colors of queerness. As a response to the exclusion of race and class from queer studies, Johnson offers the term, “quare”. Quare studies concerns itself

with the body, bringing attention to the emotions the body feels, as well as the many ways the queer body might be affected by racism, classism, and other insidious forms of discrimination. This focus on the queer body as home to various emotions and identities, engenders possibilities for documenting the unique realities of Black LGBTQ+ lives as they are always queer bodies, Black bodies, and classed bodies, and gendered bodies.

Like Cohen and Johnson, Ferguson (2004) is also concerned with the erasure of Black LGBTQ+ folx. In his groundbreaking work *Aberrations in Black: Toward a queer of color critique* (2004) he challenges “the traditional historiography of race in America that presents *cisgender heterosexual* Black men as the central characters in the history of exclusion” (p. vii; italics-mine). Ferguson (2004) offers a queer of color critique to unearth the narratives, ways of being, and epistemologies that are often left out and rejected from the canonical literature on sociology. After looking at how we have traditionally documented history and historical figures, Ferguson (2004) asks: where are the transgendered men, sissies, and bulldaggers? These questions he argues must be taken up and explored by looking from within queer of color subjects. That is, their lives become a prism through which to “investigate how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative interventions of nation-states and capital (Ferguson, 2004, p. 4). For example, Ferguson (2004) explores the lives of Black women sex workers of trans experience to better understand the interplay of race, gender identity, gender expression, and social class in contemporary U.S. contexts and how these identities contribute the marginalization of certain bodies.

I mention queer of color critique and quare studies because they have enabled new Black queer studies scholars to explore with more freedom. For example, both

Brockenbrough (2015; 2016) and Love (2017) draw on Ferguson's queer of color critique to engage ways of being and knowing within the Black LGBTQ+ community, with special attention to their agency. Respectively, Brockenbrough (2016) examines the strategies by queer staff members of color used at an out-of-school site to respond to LGBTQ+ queer youth of color within urban contexts; And Love (2017) explores the ways in which Black LGBTQ+ folx disrupt normativity in New Orleans genderfluid Black music culture. In both studies, the researchers position Black LGBTQ+ groups as experts on their experiences and regard their lives as valid ways to understand the interrelationships between race, gender, and sexual identity and power, privilege, and oppression. In addition, there is an explicit focus on the agency employed in both contexts to reimagine approaches to working with queer youth of color in out of school contexts and learning from how Black LGBTQ+ folx take something as hypermasculine and homophobic as hip hop to reimagine it as something that celebrates their queer identifies. Furthermore, queare studies as a theoretical frame is particularly useful for this study as it helps to illuminate how Black LGBTQ+ people and their experiences are often not valued within Black studies and queer studies. Consequently, the cultural knowledge and work of communities such as ballroom culture are ignored (Bailey, 2013).

In the second and latest volume of Black queer studies released in 2016, the world is introduced to new wave of Black queer studies scholars "who have taken the work of Black sexuality done in the first decade of the 21st century to generate new and deeper understandings of racial queerness with a critical difference" (Jonson, 2016, p. 2). Introducing the volume Johnson (2016) makes the argument that the new wave of Black queer scholars has taken their cues from their predecessors but have enacted and

extended this scholarship with a certain level of freedom and unapologeticness. He notes that they are more explicit and direct in their critiques of racism and heterosexism, they reject respectability politics, they talk explicitly about sex, and they are not here to prove anything to white people. In their work, they have elected to “just be” and let the rest of the world come along on their journey of becoming.

Evolving the critiques presented in the first part of the decade, these new wave Black queer scholars use their work to lodge more direct critiques of Black and Queer scholars who privilege single-identity narratives (Reed, 2016). These scholars move beyond just naming acts of erasure to instead illuminate the dangerous effects they have had for Black LGBTQ+ bodies. Furthermore, these scholars also take up Black LGBTQ+ agency and performance.

For example, Bruce (2016) engages in an exploration of drag queens to problematize heteroperpetuity. He argues (2016) that “heteroperpetuity works to convince us that (white and middle class) heteronorms are desirable, natural, essential, and eternal. All the while, it produces material structures and conditions to sustain those heteronorms” (p. 169). Ellison (2016) takes up the coding of sexuality as racially neutral (white) in legislation and the consequences this produces for Black LGBTQ+ members, particularly Black transwomen. And Story (2016) returns to a discussion of Black LGBTQ+ agency to speak of the desires of Black LGBTQ+ folx to “throw shade on normativity, sashay away from a politics of respectability, and get our lives from a politics of deviance” (p. 364). In this conceptual essay Story (2016) shares that “for the first time in her academic career, queer theory/studies is not white, and for the first time black studies is not straight” (p. 363). She continues to state that this academic

recognition of her Black LGBTQ+ identities coupled with her gender identity allows her the freedom to practice agency in a way that rejects respectability politics and eschew practices that make her life more palatable to the larger public. Nonetheless, though, Black LGBTQ+ identities are being discussed more in contemporary discourses, there is still a need to attend to these identities in young people and explore not only how the discourse encourages freedom from racial, gender and sexual oppression, but how the creation of inclusive spaces encourages such freedom, as well. In addition, there is still much to be explored in these spaces, particularly their unique aspects, characteristics, and conditions and what possibilities they afford or foreclose with regard to agency.

Though the field of Black queer studies is quickly evolving, wanting still are explorations of Black LGBTQ+ agency and how it results in the creation of alternate realities and futures. Also missing from this scholarship, which is largely theoretical, are the realities of Black LGBTQ+ youth and their practices of agency as explored in empirical studies. As I explored in the first chapter of this dissertation, much of the empirical work done on Black LGBTQ+ youth presents them as solely victims and fails to document their agency (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2015; Love, 2017). And as I have demonstrated here, much of the theoretical work excludes Black LGBTQ+ youth and has only recently begun engaging examinations of agency.

Thus, with this study I contribute to the chief aim of Black LGBTQ+ studies: to excavate, to document, and understand more completely the story of Black LGBTQ+ lives by pushing the field forward to think about Black LGBTQ+ youth agency and how they use their agency to transform spaces into modern day hush harbors free from racial, sexual, and gender oppression. I argue that in these spaces and practices of agency lie

transformative possibilities for all committed to creating within institutions such as schools, spaces that promote racial, sexual, and gender equity. However, we have yet to explore the specifics of these spaces. In addition, this study extends the scholarship on agency to look at agency as practiced at the intersections of race, gender, and sexual identity, and the work done around modern-day hush harbors to contribute more understandings of the spaces racially, gender, and sexually minoritized people create to affirm, celebrate, and sustain their bodies, lives, and cultures.

As I mentioned above, at the heart of the first anthology on queer studies is a commitment to resistance, a naming of our lives, and unearthing our marginalization which often results in our invisibility. An invisibility that not only minimizes our challenges but disappears our gifts, too. And is the latter part that concerns this study, as I believe that within Black LGBTQ+ bodies are gifts-transformative possibilities that could move the world forward as we think about trying to realize a world more free. However, much more needs to be known about our gifts, our agency, and our radical imaginations that have led to the creation of spaces that challenge standard conventions of personhood.

III-METHODOLOGY

Responding to the dearth of research on the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth, this qualitative case study explores the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth in New York City's ballroom scene. Undergirding this project are my assumptions that within the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth lie transformative possibilities for those committed to creating spaces within institutions (i.e., school) free from racial, gender, and sexual discrimination (Brockenbrough, 2015; Love, 2017). This study was guided by the following research question:

- How do 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth who are active members in the ballroom scene understand and make sense of their agency in ballroom spaces?

On the Case

I elected to conduct a qualitative case study given the nature of my inquiry which centers around a question of “how”, and the fact that this study is centered on a specific phenomenon- Black LGBTQ+ youth agency- in a specific context- the ballroom scene. Yin (2003) writes that qualitative case studies are useful for exploring “cases” or units of analysis that should not be considered without the context. In other words, it would be impossible to capture a true picture of the case being studied without considering the context in which it occurred. Case then has been defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as “phenomenon of some sort occurring in bounded contexts” (p. 25). For this study, my case is Black LGBTQ+ youth agency, and I am particularly interested in studying this

agency in the contexts of ballroom culture. Thus, I am binding my case by time and place (Stake, 1995).

Furthermore, case studies often rely on multiple sources to describe the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2003). In this project, I plan to rely on interview data to better understand the youth's understandings and perspectives of their agency, observation notes to document my understanding and perspective of the youth's agency, and focus groups to work toward a collective understanding of all participants of their agency. This strategy of including multiple data sources will also enhance data credibility (Patton, 1990). Each of these data sources will serve as one piece of the "puzzle" contributing to my understanding of the whole phenomenon.

Participant Recruitment

I used snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to recruit 8 youth, ages 16 to 19 enrolled in high school, who all self-identify as openly gay, queer, transgender, bisexual, or gender non-conforming; Black or African-American; and are members of a "house" in the ballroom scene. I intended to recruit more participants but was only able to identify 8 who fit the criteria and who were willing and able to engage in all parts of data collection.

I have elected snowball sampling for recruitment as the ballroom scene is still very much a clandestine culture which affords those outside the community limited access to its members, especially its youth. Thus, I leveraged my relationships with house parents in ballroom culture to recruit and help me build trust with the youth. Once youth were suggested, I reached out to sit down with them in person to explain the nature of the

study. I opted for in-person discussions rather than letters or emails, as many youth within the ballroom scene experience situations which make access to computers and technology difficult.

During these in person conversations, I explained that I was looking to explore their participation in the ballroom scene and what it means to them. I shared that I planned to explore these things through three 45-60-minute interviews, observations during balls including photos and videos, and during two 1-hour focus group discussions with all the youth in the study. I also made it clear that if at any time they no longer wanted to participate in the study, they could and should let me know. Lastly, I shared that their participation in the study was voluntary and there were no direct benefits for participating. After receiving verbal consent, I shared formal assent forms with them to receive their signatures.

To recruit the adult informants, I reached out to two adult ballroom members I met while volunteering at a non-profit organization dedicated to providing services to LGBTQ+ youth. As a volunteer, I helped person the front desk, answer phones, greet guests, unlock doors, and get youth cups for water and paper towels (for more on informants see Pettica-Harris, deGama, & Elias, 2016). I spent time getting to know the staff. Upon establishing those relationships, I invited these two people to help with the study through a series of conversations in which I explained my project. They agreed to help me recruit 8-10 youth. They also agreed to look over my research questions, data collection and analysis methods. I invited the informants to collaborate to help me stay cognizant of how my own biases seep into the research and also serve as an additional

safeguard to avoid doing harm to the youth in the study. I explain this more in the subsequent section dedicated to interrogating my positionality.

Positionality

I am a Black LGBTQ+ cisgender man from the southwestern part of the United States raised in a working-class household headed by a single mother. It is important that I make known my social location, as my location brings with it many lived experiences which most certainly guide how I see, read, and have chosen to explore the world, especially regarding the intimate relationships I have come to know between race, sexual identity, gender identity, social class, and education (Milner, 2007; Pillow, 2003; Villenas, 1996). My lived experiences have led me to the sobering realization that racism is alive and well, and is accompanied by (hetero)sexism, and transphobia. These beliefs and assumptions most certainly inform my approach to life and research, and fuel my commitments to design, carry out, and position my research so that it alters existing social structures (Fine & Weiss, 1996). I also share that I have worked in education as a teacher since 2012 and a teacher educator since 2016. During my time in education, I have taught at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels in Oklahoma, New York, Uruguay, and Spain. I am committed to teaching for social justice. I believe Black lives matter; I proudly proclaim that love is love.

I share this piece of myself because my positionality, specifically as a Black LGBTQ+ person and doctoral student conducting a case study around Black LGBTQ+ youth agency most certainly produces tensions within myself, and within this exploration. I have spent many waking hours trying to make sense of what it means to a Black

LGBTQ+ researcher engaging with Black LGBTQ+ youth. These 2am wonderings resonate quite powerfully with Villenas (1996) who once wrote about her ethnographic work with Latina daughters and mothers:

As a Xicana and indigenous woman, I cannot escape my own experiences of marginalization and dislocation in this artificially bound entity known as the United States of America. At the same time, I cannot escape the privilege afforded to me as a university professor. (pp. 75-76)

Like Villenas (1996), I recognize the power dynamics at play in this research study. I feel the tension she explains when interrogating her own position as an insider doing research which places her on the outside and otherizes and exoticizes her community. In my case, I am not even an insider from the ballroom community, and I am working with youth. Campano, Paula Ghiso, and Welch (2016) remind us that always in explorations with youth from marginalized backgrounds, there is a hierarchical power dynamic. And those power dynamics are not absent from my study just because I identify racially and sexually with the community. However, I have elected to make known and embrace these tensions. I have elected to draw on my complicated positionality for strength.

Though I am in many ways an outsider to the ballroom community, the connections I do share motivate my commitments to not only refrain from doing harm to the community, but to do good (Siddle-Walker, 1999). These commitments motivate me to think deeply and intentionally about my own marginalization which also does not disappear with my role as a doctoral student (Villenas, 2002). And so I embrace the messiness and draw on such messiness to think of new methodological considerations to avoid the “risk of making false connections and presuming special understanding because

of the similarity of my own cultural or ethnic background to that of my research subjects” (Siddle-Walker, 1999, p. 239).

Simply, I present my positionality not as the beginning or the end of my interrogation of my presence in the space, my shared connection with racially and sexually minoritized youth, or my power and privilege as a university researcher. Instead, I present my positionality as an explicit statement of my acknowledgement of my own power, privilege, and biases and my decision not to move toward being a neutral observer, but to take “ethical responsibility for my own subjectivity and political perspective, resisting the trap of presenting an interpretation as though it has no self (Madison, 2005, p. 8). The data collected for this study are not neutral. They are biased and messy, especially given that I, the researcher, a human, is “the analytical instrument with my own perspectives, analyses, and representation and the main methodological instrument that carries out the research” (Beach, Bagley, & Marques da Silva, 2018, p. 142). I am a complex human; and any research I am part of must be complex, too.

Though I am aware that my positionality informed my approach to and execution of all phases of this project, I actively complicated my own inclinations to overcast my experiences over those of my participants and constantly checked my interpretations by enlisting the assistance of the two adult informants: Lady O and Vanessa. Lady O and Vanessa in their words were both born and raised in the ballroom scene in New York City. As adult informants, they reviewed my research questions, and gave feedback on methods.

After sleepless nights due to the discomfort and uncertainty produced by my position as a Black LGBTQ+ doctoral student, I came to know sleep again by

remembering that my positionality, in fact, as messy as it is, is precisely why I must do this work. “When we interpret other’s lives we use our own words and paradigms to present stories of our experiences engaged with them” (Ropers-Huilman as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 183). So, yes, my interpretation of the data is biased, but as a member of a marginalized community who does not seek objectivity but authenticity (Ladson-Billings, 1995), the academy needs my “colored” research. Milner (2007) speaks of colored research as emanating from the epistemologies, theories, perspectives, views, positions, discourses, and experiences of people and researchers of color. And so I have come to know sleep again. Resting peacefully. Remembering the words of Villenas (1996): I cannot be neutral in the field, because to be so is to continue to be complicit in my own subjugation and that of my communities (p. 727).

Data Collection

Interviews

To explore my research question, I conducted three separate interviews with 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth following Seidman's (2013) in-depth model. I also recorded qualitative field notes (handwritten and audio) during my time in balls from June 2019-December 2020. Lastly, I convened two 1-hour focus group discussions toward the end of the study with all participants. I relied on theories of queer of color agency (Brockenbrough, 2015; Ferguson, 2004) to frame my data analysis.

Engaging with Siedman’s (2013) interview process, I conducted three separate interviews with all 8 youth. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. The first interview focused on inviting the youth to establish a context of their experiences. In the

second interview, I sought to learn more about how the youth conceptualize some of the items, themes, ideas, and topics that emerge during the first interview, and invite them to recall certain moments and memories referenced in these initial conversations. The third interview was dedicated to asking the youth about the choices behind certain agentic practices they mentioned from their discussions of their everyday actions and decisions in school and ballroom spaces. After each interview, I wrote a memo to reflect on analysis, methods, dilemmas and conflicts, my frame of mind, and points of clarification (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I also used those memos to document things unable to be captured by an audio recording such as smells, and details about the setting.

Qualitative field notes

In addition to interviews, I also collected qualitative field notes through audio notes, handwritten memos, and photos and videos during my time immersed in ballroom culture from June 2019 to December 2020. I attended 10 balls, 8 house practices, two ballroom retreats, and one vogue theory class exclusively for ballroom members. My field notes served as “documented accounts of what I hear, see, experience, and think in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 111). I elected to collect qualitative field notes based on the nature of my research question and its direct relation to the study of culture and explorations of the participants’ lived articulations and interpretations of life. The ways in which Black LGBTQ+ youth in this study “do ballroom”. Thus, collecting these qualitative field notes allowed me to begin to formulate my own biased and narrow understanding of ballroom culture as context and

Black LGBTQ+ youth agency as a phenomenon, while recognizing how these things mutually inform one another.

As the balls were often dimly lit spaces with, at times, elaborate stage productions and lighting designs, I opted for handwritten notes rather than working on a laptop from which the light might interrupt the space. These handwritten notes were recorded in two columns (see Bernard, 2006). On the left-hand side, I recorded basic descriptions of what was happening in the space: things that can be known based on our senses. What is heard, what is seen, what is felt, what is smelled. These kinds of observations in the left-hand column, informed by my theoretical framework, largely focused on moments during the balls that in some way demonstrated a practice of agency to respond to, resist, and/or subvert racial, gender, and/or sexual discrimination. In other words, the balls were dynamic spaces in which many things took place at once, so I focused my attention to documenting instances or particular routines in which dominant racialized, gendered, and sexualized conventions were disrupted.

On the right-hand side of the paper, I recorded any thoughts, wonderings, questions, first impressions, and connections I began to make to theory or data that had already been collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The purpose of this right-hand column was to document “my relationship to the setting, data, and evolution of the design and analysis” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 114). I wrote more complete notes after each ball, relying on my handwritten notes and audio notes to help me recollect and piece together moments only briefly referenced in the notes taken during the balls.

Focus Group Discussions

The final phase of data collection took place during two 1-hour collaborative focus group discussions with the participants. In these focus groups, youth were encouraged to think collectively about how they are making sense of their agency, how the balls as spaces support or inhibit their practices of agency to subvert racial, gender, and sexual oppression, and speak back to my preliminary themes and codes. In these focus group discussions, I shared my initial preliminary themes and codes from interview and field note data. The purpose of this was to get their perspectives around themes I was coming up with and also create more space and time for collaboration for collective data analysis (Love, 2017). In these focus group discussions, I encouraged a collective conversation around their perspectives on the words I had recorded, unanswered questions I was left with, and got feedback on connections or interpretations of the data created, and asked what they had learned.

Pilot Study: Lessons learned

This research study has undergone many iterations. I want to point that the pilot study not only made me aware that agency was not always exercised for means of subverting oppression as argued by Bourdieu, but sometimes reinforcing or internalizing oppressive ideas (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Thus, my initial questions around exercising agency to subvert oppression and spaces that support such practices of agency have been modified to make room for understandings of agency that do not subvert oppression but respond in other ways, and for allowing conversations around how certain

spaces may inhibit Black LGBTQ+ youth from exercising their agency to challenge dominant white supremacist and cis-heteronormative values and ideals.

I conducted my pilot study with one Black LGBTQ+ youth-Lawrence- around his agency. I met Lawrence at a promotional event for a social justice group committed to addressing the rising number of queer youth of color experiencing homelessness. I expressed that I wanted to keep in touch with many of the folks in attendance and established Instagram connections with all who were open to continuing the conversation around the experiences of queer youth of color. After observing Lawrence's Instagram profile in which he had posted photos that defied gender expectations of men regarding dress (e.g., wearing clothing traditionally designed for women) and posts that displayed pride in both his racial and sexual identities, I invited him to participate in my pilot study.

With Lawrence, we explored the following research question: how does one 18-year-old Black LGBTQ+ man who completed his education who completed his 9-12 schooling in a public education system understand his agency during his high school years? I engaged Lawrence in Seidman's (2013) in depth interview process. After analyzing the interview data, I found that Lawrence spoke of his practices of agency in ways that did not resonate with the youth included in studies in the literature review for my pilot study. Throughout our interviews, Lawrence mentioned on several occasions that instead of embracing his racial and sexual identities, he often chose to "play roles" and "turn himself off" in certain spaces.

In the literature I reviewed for my pilot study on Black LGBTQ+ youth agency I found multiple accounts of Black LGBTQ+ youth exercising their agency to create alternative spaces for subversion and pleasure (Blackburn, 2005) in which they learn to

embrace and love all of themselves (Bartone, 2017; Love, 2017). However, in Lawrence's case, he exercised his agency to create a cage for himself and his identities (Vaught, 2008), and he shared that it was not due to a fear of being bullied or harassed by the school community. It was fear of himself.

Lawrence's understanding of his agency gives a more nuanced depiction of Black LGBTQ+ youth agency and the ways in which their uses of agency differ. For example, Black LGBTQ+ youth in New Orleans might feel able to exercise their agency in different ways due to "New Orleans's ratchet and imaginative musical and cultural past" (Love, 2017, p. 544). However, this practice of agency is wildly different from that of Lawrence who attended school in a different region of the country, submersed in a different culture.

Thus, informed by my literature review which revealed that agency is dependent upon context, in the current study I explored if Black LGBTQ+ youth agency could in fact be coalitional and transformative (see Chapter II) in the ballroom scene- a context that is intricately tied to a history, community, and people. A context that I assumed would invite practices of agency that interrupted societal norms with regard to race, sexual identity, and gender. In other words, how might being in a space at the intersections of racial, gender and sexual oppression, *assumed* to be free of racial, gender, and sexual discrimination, influence the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth within these spaces?

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was framed by my theoretical and methodological underpinnings. I relied on QOC agency (Brockenbrough, 2015), and a Black ratchet imagination perspective (Love, 2017) to look for specific occurrences in the data in which the young people articulated understandings of their agentic practices as they related to their identities and worked toward responding to, resisting, or subverting racial and anti-LGBTQ+ marginalization. For example, I did not spend much time diving into the seemingly mundane practices of agency such as when the youth mentioned what they chose to have for breakfast and why. Rather, I focused my attention on comments that revealed the youth's understanding of why they chose certain outfits for school to seem less queer or wear make-up to embrace their LGBTQ+ identity.

Following Siedman's (2013) data analysis approach, I read all transcripts multiple times after each interview, highlighting paragraphs or sections that addressed my research question. Then, I culled the data and engaged in open-coding, reading over the highlighted paragraphs and sections, developing initial, low-inference codes which were grounded in my QOC analysis framework. Some of these initial codes were "practice of agency", "challenges to practicing agency", "context mediating agency", "understanding agency" to name a few. I used these initial codes to create a codebook with which I made sure to use in analyzing each interview. I wanted to make sure if a code came up in a later transcript that I revisited earlier transcripts to ensure I had not missed a connection or example of the code. Within each general coding category were further defined codes, or parent and child codes. For example, one of my general or parent codes was "identity" which I used to highlight any moment in which the participants described their identities.

And within these general or parent codes were child codes such as “racial identity”, “sexual identity”, and “gender identity”.

After coding the highlighted paragraphs, sections, and sentences, I organized the data excerpts by code, and then category which were large groups of similar codes. The categories were continually revised through my iterative research process as I read new transcripts and new codes were created (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Subsequently, I revisited the culled data categories asking as I read: what have I learned (Seidman, 2013)? Concurrently, I wrote memos to document my thoughts (Horvat, 2013), which led to the themes I explore in my findings section such as “agency in the presence of fear” which was a theme that consisted of categories connected to the youth’s understanding of how they practiced agency in school spaces where they feared rejection and abuse. Lastly, I explored the theme I interpreted in the data using my theoretical framework and centering my research question.

Once I analyzed the interview data, I engaged in member checking by taking my preliminary ideas to the focus groups in which the youth and I worked toward a collective understanding of their agency in ballroom and schooling spaces (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Informed by the interview and focus group data, I drew conclusions about how the Black LGBTQ+ youth in my study made sense of their agency in schools and in the ballroom spaces that were created by way of the Black ratchet imaginations of Black LGBTQ+ individuals as a response to their unique lived realities.

As the field notes constituted a larger set of data, I stored these data in a database management system and employed a different approach to analysis. I assign each page of field notes a number and kept them separate initially by date. I coded everything of

possible interest on a daily basis from the beginning of the study in order to have as comprehensive a record of data as possible. My initial codes were rooted in my framework, research questions, and pilot study. I coded my observation data in two phases: initial coding and focused coding (Charmaz, 2015).

In the initial coding phase, I used short codes (gerunds) that were close to the data to describe what I thought was happening. Keeping in alignment with my research question and theoretical framework, I focused special attention on those happenings that I felt directly responded to or challenged dominant norms with regard to sexuality, race, and gender. For example, the code “using nonconventional language” was used for instances in the data in which the ballroom members used pronouns typically reserved for women to refer to cisgender men. During this initial coding phase, I remained open to modifications and refinements (Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2018). The primary purpose of these initial codes was to make it easier to compare the codes with other codes, to explore the frequency of certain actions, identify anomalies, and notice patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

After the initial coding, I used the codes that were “the most significant or frequent to sift through the large amount of ethnographic data” (p. 426). These became my focused codes which were more directed, selective, and conceptual (Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2018). Focus codes are often used to analyze larger segments of data. I also wrote memos after each ball and each coding session to make sense of how I was understanding connections and relationships between data. The purpose of these memos was to document my own thoughts during the analysis process.

Once, I analyzed both the interview data (youth's perception of their agency) and observation data (my perception of their agency), I checked my perceptions against those of the youth. I took the preliminary ideas I had about my data to the focus group in which the youth worked toward a collective perception of their agency. This data analysis process resulted in multiple perspectives on the research question, and allowed for more credibility (Krefting, 1991). In the final focus group in tandem with the youth, I utilized theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) to attempt to specify possible relationships between the emergent themes across all data sets and how they may contribute to our understanding of Black LGBTQ+ youth agency in ballroom culture.

Implications

As a teacher education scholar who has enacted and has studied critical pedagogies and cultivating classroom communities, it is my belief that in ballroom culture, at the intersections of racism, (hetero)sexism, and transphobia and within Black LGBTQ+ youth agency are transformative possibilities for pedagogy and classroom culture. Just as Emdin (2016), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Love (2018), I believe we must seek out pedagogical possibilities in spaces we normally neglect to look such as in the hearts and minds of successful teachers of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995), local barber shops and churches in majority Black communities (Emdin, 2016), abolitionist spaces (Love, 2019), and spaces created and sustained by Black LGBTQ+ agency.

In addition to learning more about the lives of Black LGBTQ+ youth and adding to and complicating the discourse around Black youth and LGBTQ+ youth, this study

also provides insight into ways we can create spaces in schools that are free from racial, sexual, and gender discrimination. In sum, this study contributes to theory, policy, and practice in the following ways:

- Provide insight into the characteristics and conditions that inhibit or support the creation of spaces free of (or that challenge) racial, sexual, and gender discrimination.
- Diversify representations of Black youth and LGBTQ+ youth.
- Extend current research on Black LGBTQ+ youth.
- Eventually implement more equitable schooling spaces, practices, and policies to improve the educational experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth.

Methodological Limitations and Trustworthiness

No study is without its limitations. One of the most salient limitations of this qualitative case study was the relatively short amount of time that was spent within the ballroom scene. As part of a dissertation, I was not able to spend years often asked of researchers who seek to explore cultures, especially those as rich as ballroom culture with a complex history. Thus, this exploration is only a starting point around the things we can learn from explorations of a specific phenomenon- Black LGBTQ+ youth agency- in a bounded context-ballroom culture- and encourage more research be done in such spaces and for longer durations of time with attention to the ballroom members and their agency.

There is also the question of validity or trustworthiness (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995). With this case study, I established trustworthiness by supporting my analysis with multiple sources of data to enhance data credibility and offer multiple perspectives with

regard to my research question (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003): interviews, observations, and focus groups. Using multiple sources of data also allowed me to engage in triangulation in which I juxtaposed each set of data representing different perspectives against the others to constantly evaluate my findings to more wholly understand the phenomenon under study (Frey, 2018).

Furthermore, I was committed to remaining reflective throughout the entire process and documenting my reflections in my researcher's journal after every data collection phase and seeking to understand how my own positionality contributed to my overall analysis. Lastly, I checked in with my two adult informants to elicit their feedback on questions and receive feedback around overall research design and analysis and engaged in member checking during the two focus group discussions (Krefting, 1991).

IV- A CASE STUDY EXPLORING THE AGENCY OF BLACK LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN SCHOOLS AND IN BALLROOM CULTURE

Abstract

In recent years, youth agency has become more prevalent in education research with many scholars agreeing that youth agency is highly contextual, interdependent on multiple forces, and inextricably connected to social identity. However, few of these studies explore the agency of youth who are at once racially, sexually, and gender minoritized and there are fewer studies that explore how youth understand their own agency. This study extends the literature on youth agency and LGBTQ+ of color by exploring the following research question: How do 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth who are active members in New York City's ballroom culture make sense of their agency in school and ballroom spaces? Following Siedman's (2013) interview process, three separate interviews were conducted with all 8 youth. In addition, all 8-youth participated in two focus groups. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using an iterative data analysis method drawing from grounded theory and comparative analysis between the interview and focus group data. Findings indicate that the youth regarded school as a confining space in which they were fearful of anti-LGBTQ+ rejection and abuse. Thus, they used their agency to suppress their LGBTQ+ identities in order to minimize their experiences with discrimination. Contrastingly, the youth understood ballroom as a liberatory space in which they felt able to confidently explore and express their LGBTQ+ identities, and create alternatives for themselves outside of socially constructed gender expectations. Results suggest that Black LGBTQ+ youth are always practicing agency, albeit to work toward different ends such as occulting or exploring their LGBTQ+

identities. Findings suggest that schools can learn from ballroom spaces how to better invite Black LGBTQ+ into schools in humane and educative ways, encourage their agentive imaginations within education spaces, and promote liberatory school environments that recognize and embrace these youth's intersectional identities.

Keywords: agency, Black youth, LGBTQ+ youth, ballroom culture

Introduction

“Last night was magical. From the first nasty catwalk to the last dip- the energy was electric. The affirmation, the celebrations. The Love. The visibility. I had always wondered what the world would look like if it took its cues from Black LGBTQ+ folx, and last night I witnessed what was possible. I finally got to see what I have always known- that we are magic. When left alone, look what we can do, what we can create. I came home and cried tears of joy because I felt like my life mattered. Thank you for sharing the address of the ball and for answering all my questions and text messages. You have no idea what you’ve done for me. I am so inspired.” (personal communication, April 1, 2018)

That was the text message I sent to the person who introduced me to ballroom culture and made it possible for me to attend my first ball. Ballroom culture is an underground culture consisting of balls (competitions) and houses (chosen families) that emerged during the 1920s in Harlem. Ballroom comes from the radical imaginations and resilience of Black LGBTQ+ individuals, with an emphasis on Black trans women, to create a space where they could affirm, celebrate, and love their racial, gender, and sexual identities without fear of rejection or abuse. I explore ballroom culture in greater detail later in this paper. That night in my first ball changed my life forever, and was also the first time I had seen a mermaid outside of Disney films.

Chanel, The Mermaid

The mermaid's name was Chanel. Many people might not identify Chanel as a mermaid, but as a 16-year-old Black trans girl. I had met Chanel while volunteering at a non-profit organization in a large metropolitan city dedicated to providing services to LGBTQ+ youth. As a volunteer, I assisted at the front desk with answering the phone, greeting students and visitors, and buzzing people in at the door. This non-profit shared a building with a public high school and my shift often began a few hours before the end of the school day. At the front desk, I saw the students as they moved between classes, went to the restroom, and interacted with their peers, school staff and faculty. I always saw Chanel while at the front desk. Chanel was very shy and reserved. She did not say much and often walked by the desk alone and with her head down. After about 6 months of observing Chanel, I concluded that shy, reserved, and quiet was just who she was. In the ball I referenced earlier I learned that Chanel was also a mermaid.

We were about midway through the femme queen face category¹ when I looked toward the back of the runway and saw a group of people lifting up a mermaid above their heads. Her shiny green tail glittered. She wore an equally dazzling green brasserie that had been embellished with little gem-like flakes. Her red hair waved down her back stopping right below her waist. The house beats were pumping. The mermaid by way of the crowd of people hoisting her up made her way to the stage. She then sauntered down the runway, turning her head periodically and in sync with the house beats to engage with folks on both sides of the runway, blowing kisses, smiling, and batting her over the top

¹ Femme queen face is a category in ball competitions. In this category women and girls of trans experience compete against one another to see who is the most successful in convincing the judges that they are the most beautiful. Criteria *can* include: confidence, bone structure, symmetrical facial features, grace, and other markers that the ballroom community regard as examples of physical beauty.

eyelashes. The mermaid walked, or floated rather, with so much grace and allure. All eyes were on her. Every one of her movements seemed carefully, intentionally, and delicately executed. Once she reached the judge's panel, she walked from the left side of their table to the right side making sure to give each judge time to experience her charm. She used her hands to frame her face, accentuating her features and displaying her facial symmetry. Every few moments she would look up toward the light to show off her incredible bone structure as she ran one finger down the middle of her face. She was awarded her 10s, meaning she would advance to the next phase of competition in which she would battle the other competitors who had too been given their 10s. And as she walked off the runway to prepare for battles she made eye contact with me. I gasped, Chanel!

Motivated by that first text message of my emotional reaction to ballroom culture and experiencing the enchantment of Chanel the mermaid, in this article I draw on interview and focus group data to explore how 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth who are active participants in New York City's ballroom culture understand their agency in schools and in out-of-school ballroom spaces. The stories the youth participants in my study share of their agency reveal the complex and intimate relationships between youth agency, social identity, and context. Furthermore, their understandings of their agentive practices suggest that in many ways these youth are always already practicing agency to work toward different ends. Findings suggest that these different end goals for their practices of agency are greatly mediated by the contexts in which they find themselves. In what follows, I present the theoretical underpinnings framing this study and examine the extant literature on youth agency. After I share my methodological approach, and findings. I end

with a discussion around what an exploration of Black LGBTQ+ youth agency means for education stakeholders committed to improving the schooling experiences of these youth.

From Queer of Color Critique to Queer of Color Agency

In my study, I rely on queer of color analysis as the conceptual framework. In his groundbreaking text, *Aberrations in Black*, Ferguson (2004) writes that queer of color critique (QOC critique) is a “heterogenous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique” that engages ways of knowing and being from within queer and trans communities of color who live at the intersections of racism, heterosexism, transphobia, and classism (p. 149). In addition, a QOC critique works toward analyses of how these communities practice agency to resist these interlocking systems of oppression. QOC critique employs the theory of intersectionality advanced by Black feminist scholars as an analytic tool to unearth how, like Black women, Black LGBTQ+ individuals are unable to vacillate back and forth between their racial, sexual, and gender identities (Crenshaw, 1989); consequently, they have lived experiences constituted by racism, heterosexism, and transphobia (Pritchard, 2013). Furthermore, due to an overwhelming number of folks in society who do not work from an intersectional lens, Black LGBTQ+ individuals are often left to fend for themselves as they navigate social terrain littered with racist, heterosexist, and transphobic landmines (Callier, 2016).

The stories I heard from young people in my study illustrated the many ways in which their multiple marginalized identities required them to navigate a barrage of challenges in schools but often without support from the school community. Their

articulations of their agency in schooling contexts resonated with the literature which argues that youth who contend with racism *and* anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination have different experiences from those who experience only racial or anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination which often complicates their ability to benefit from school initiatives that focus only on one kind of social identity discrimination (Brockenbrough, 2016; Hong & Ferguson, 2011; Kumashiro, 2001; Mayo, 2018). Thus, though LGBTQ+ youth of color are more likely than their white queer counterparts to experience out-of-school suspension or expulsion; a quarter of them feel unsafe because of their race/ethnicity, nearly half of them experience bullying and harassment about one or more of their identities, and many of them are unable to benefit from gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) and racial justice initiatives (Brockenbrough, 2016; Khan et al., 2019).

Due to a lack of intersectionality-informed initiatives, GSAs are often centered around whiteness and racial justice groups rarely recognize their privileging of cisgender heteronormativity (Brockenbrough, 2016). It is also worth noting that due to stigma associated with queerness and transness in their communities and a racist distribution of LGBTQ+ resources in schools, Black LGBTQ+ in urban schools rarely have access to GSAs or other community services to support LGBTQ+ individuals (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Brockenbrough, 2016; Cianciotto & Cahill, 2003). As a result, Black LGBTQ+ youth are left alone to navigate their own realities of having lower grade point averages than their counterparts, being disciplined disproportionately for being unable or unwilling to conform to societal norms, and higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide ideation (Khan et al., 2019). However, a queer of color critique moves us beyond merely shedding light on the discrimination Black LGBTQ+ students experience to

recognize them as “youth who are not either victims or agents but both simultaneously” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 90).

Scholar Brockenbrough (2015) draws on a QOC critique to charge educators to explore the agency of LGBTQ+ youth of color. Brockenbrough (2015) presents QOC agency as a framework emerging from QOC critique for educators to think more deeply and intentionally about the pedagogical benefits of exploring “the agentic practices that enable queer youth of color to successfully negotiate the obstacles to their academic and personal successes” (p. 29). He adds that in these narratives of agency lie transformative possibilities for fashioning curriculum and educational experiences that better respond to the unique materialities of queer youth of color. In this study, I take up Brockenbrough’s charge to explore the agency of LGBTQ+ youth of color. And in drawing on the literature on youth agency which argues that context matters, I decided to explore their agency not only in school contexts but in a context created and sustained by Black LGBTQ+ individuals in which the young might practice different forms of agency that we might not see in schools, such as how they practice agency in ballroom spaces.

Youth Agency

Though youth agency has become more prevalent in education research, the term itself is fraught with “practical ambiguities in diverse settings” (DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary, 2016, p. 2). Research shows that youth agency has been articulated in variety of ways by different authors, however, a handful of scholars agree that youth agency is highly contextual, interdependent on multiple forces, and at once individual and

collective (Bajaj, 2009; Klocker, 2007; Murphy-Graham, 2010). Seeking to demystify and provide a common understanding with regard to the term, DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary (2016) conducted an exhaustive literature review on youth agency and provided the following explanation: “youth agency is the ability of youth to take action toward their own life and well-being” (p. 2). However, they continue to mention that these “actions” that youth may take vary depending on a multitude of factors including the contexts in which youth find themselves, and their social identity markers.

Levison and their colleagues (2011) argue that youth have “an inherent human ability to use their agency to fashion or change the contexts they inhabit” (p. 116), while DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary (2016) add that their inherent agency is also fashioned by the contexts within which they find themselves (DeJaeghere, Josic, and McCleary, 2016). In the discourse around the relationships between youth agency and the contexts in which they are located, there is also an assumption that though their agency is informed by the contexts within which they exercise agency, youth always retain the power and ability to act on their behalf (Blackburn, 2004). One context in which many youth may find themselves and practice agency is school. And as this study explores the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth, I must also highlight that schools often negatively impact the ability of marginalized youth to use their agency to achieve social, personal, and academic success.

This current study connects to others that illustrate that youth agency in schools is mediated by how the school community participates in the resistance and/or perpetuation of societal norms around race, gender, sexual identity, and other social identity markers (Aaltonen, 2013; Bajaj, 2009). There is an increasing number of scholars who have

engaged in research exploring the effects that dominant discourses and pervasive ideologies operating in schools have on the capacity of youth with marginalized identities to use their agency in ways that work toward their academic and social success (Aaltonen, 2013; Betrand et al., 2020; Blackburn, 2004; Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell, 2019; Evans, 2007; Farrugia, 2013; Maslak, 2008; Murphy-Graham, 2012; Olitsky, 2006; Shirazi, 2011). However, in my exploration of the literature around youth agency, I found very few studies that centered the youth's understanding of their own agency, and fewer studies in which the researchers explored the agency of youth who are at once gender, sexually, and racially minoritized in schools (Bartone, 2017; Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Mayo, 2018) and out-of-school spaces (Blackburn, 2005; Cruz, 2013; Love, 2017). Thus, in the current study I draw on a QOC agency framework to explore how Black LGBTQ+ understand both their agentic practices in schools and in ballroom spaces.

Black LGBTQ+ Youth Agency

In surveying the literature on the educational experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth, I found that much of this body of scholarship centers on the challenges these youth face in schools. And while I find it important to illuminate the challenges these youth face, I also think it is important to explore how they use their agency to respond to, resist, and subvert the discrimination they encounter due to their racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities (Love, 2017). In this way, I recognize Black LGBTQ+ as not only victims but as victims and agents simultaneously (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2015; Love, 2017; McCready, 2013). To that end, Brockenbrough (2015) writes that “it is crucial that educational researchers find ways to balance a concern for the social and

academic dilemmas facing queer students of color with an investigation of the agentive practices that enable these youth, ideally with ally and institutional supports, to successfully negotiate the obstacles to their academic and personal successes” (.p. 29).

Within a QOC analysis, I articulate youth agency as the power or ability to make decisions and take actions that resist, respond to, and/or subvert the discrimination young people face with regard to their identities. It warrants mentioning that I am not the first scholar to recognize the gap in the literature with regard to the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth in K-12 spaces. A handful of scholars have explored how not only Black LGBTQ+ youth experience marginalization in schools, but how they rely on their agency to resist this marginalization (Blackburn 2004; 2005; Bartone, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Mayo, 2018; Venzant & McCready, 2011). For example, Mayo (2018) discusses how Black queer youth rely on traditions of struggle within their racially insulated communities to develop activist identities in school. The youth in this study were agentive in that they pushed for school change that takes into account the unique challenges they face at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. In schools, they advocated for themselves. In sharp contrast, these same youth were careful not to assert their LGBTQ+ identities too much in their home communities as to not jeopardize their membership in these racialized communities. Mayo (2018) concludes by discussing the complexity of Black LGBTQ+ youth agency especially as it is informed by their schooling and home contexts.

Another example, Blackburn (2004) draws on Giroux’s (1983) notion of resistance to demonstrate how two Black queer youth used their agency to resist participating in schooling spaces that they perceived as abusive. Blackburn (2004) argues that Black LGBTQ+ youth can engage in agentive practices of resistance that could differ

from their white counterparts and that may not conform with school-sanctioned activities such as participating in GSAs or queer-focused projects. She argues that in choosing to withdraw from schools, whether physically or emotionally, to remove themselves from abusive situations her participants demonstrated agency.

Continuing her work on agency, Blackburn (2005) also explored how Black LGBTQ+ youth used borderland discourses or what Gee (1996) refers to as community-based discourses outside the confines of whiteness. Here, Blackburn (2005) asserts that in using “gaybonics” or a Black queer version of English, the youth in her research subverted oppression by engaging in a discourse they could understand but that their oppressors could not. Using gaybonics allowed for the young people to assert agency through discourses to create intimacy among themselves and avoid potentially harmful interactions with those outside their community.

Bartone (2017) combined critical race theory and intersectionality to better understand how Black gay males exerted agency in school spaces in ways that were collective, healthy, and loving. Bartone (2017) argues that though society constructs very strict categories of what it means to Black and gay, the young Black gay men his study were able to co-construct spaces with one another in which they could assert their identities outside of narrowly constructed societal expectations around race, gender, and sexuality. And by creating their own communal spaces within schools, they were able to help each other successfully navigate schooling spaces in ways that resulted in them feeling confident and secure in their identities. Similarly, Venzant and McCready (2011) concluded that the Black gay students in their study used their agency to carve out spaces in their schooling days to be together. During these moments between classes or

extracurricular activities, the authors found that the youth felt safe enough to explore and express their full identities in ways that directly challenged domination notions of who they could be.

And in thinking about how Black LGBTQ+ youth practice agency individually or in moments in which they are not able to be in community with others who share their identities, Johnson (2017) identified uses of agency in the way that Black LGBTQ+ youth position their writing as a space to affirm their identities, challenge dominant ways of being, and to illustrate their authentic selves. Thus, like in the aforementioned studies, they were able to “carve out space” to be their full selves, only this time it was in their written assignments. Nonetheless, the desire, ability, and decision to find or make a space to affirm themselves remained present.

In looking across these works, I notice a pattern among Black LGBTQ+ youth to use their agency to carve out spaces for themselves, whether informal spaces between classes or during extracurricular activities (Bartone, 2017; Venzant & McCreedy, 2011), in their writing (Johnson, 2017) or by charging schools with creating these spaces (Mayo, 2018). This pattern suggests that though many things about schools have changed with regard to educational equity, these youth still feel a need to create additional spaces for themselves. Thus, I argue that if education stakeholders are genuine in their desire to create Black LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces within schools, we must explore how these youth understand why and how they create such spaces and engage in more scholarly explorations of Black LGBTQ+ spaces in out-of-school contexts (Love, 2017), such as ballroom. With this study I extend the scholarship on Black LGBTQ+ youth agency by inviting the youth in my study to articulate understandings of their own agency and how

it might be tied to the connection between their social identities and the different contexts in which they practice agency.

Ballroom Culture

In the beginning of this manuscript, I recount my experience of witnessing Chanel the mermaid in my first ball. Many ballroom historians have stated that ballroom culture has a rich history that goes back to the Harlem Renaissance and the Harlem drag ball community in which mainly Black trans women and drag queens competed in their own competitions after becoming fed up with the racist and restrictive drag culture of the 1920s (Buckner, n.d.). Other historians trace ballroom culture to the 1884 Masquerade and Civic Ball held by the Hamilton Lodge which was an annual ball held on the third Friday in February to coincide with the Hamilton Lodge's founding (Jones, 2017). The Hamilton Lodge ball was described in great detail by journalist Geraldyn Dismond, who wrote about the event for *The Afro-American*, a newspaper with national circulation, and the *Interstate Tattler*, a Harlem weekly publication. Dismond wrote that the highlight of this event was a drag pageant in which Black drag queen contestants competed for cash prizes based on their glamorous attire and appearance. Though it was often criticized by religious and community leaders for its open celebration of LGBTQ+ individuals, the ball grew so popular that in 1929, it had to turn away an estimated 2000 people whom the venue could not accommodate. In his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes, describes the Hamilton ball as the "strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem spectacles in the 20s".

The popularity of the Lodge ball in the 1920s corresponds with the Harlem drag ball community gaining prominence after Black drag queens began throwing their own functions in which they could perform without having to “lighten their faces” or appeal to white Eurocentric ideals of beauty. In present day, many ballroom members reference the Harlem drag ball era as the predecessor to the gold era of ballroom which spanned from the 1960s to the early 1970s.

The contemporary ball scene, which is depicted in the fictional tv series *Pose*, docuseries *My House*, and the documentaries *Legendary* and *Kiki* began in Harlem in late 1960s (the gold era) led by the efforts of Crystal Labeija who started the first ballroom house, the house of Labeija. After recognizing the limitations of white LGBTQ+ benevolence to include them in white LGBTQ+ spaces and being ostracized from Black spaces, which were often deeply grounded in narrow interpretations of Christianity that vilified queerness and transness, Black LGBTQ+ individuals came together to draw on their radical imaginations and quests for freedom to build on the legacy of the Harlem drag ball community to create their own spaces centered around performance and community (Hart & Roberson, 2021). It is said that Crystal Labeija grew tired of the racism she experienced in the downtown drag scene, thus she began hosting her own balls for Black performers and started the first ballroom house, the House of Labeija. Soon after we began to see other houses such as the House of Corey, the House of Dior, the House of Wong, the House of Dupree, and the House of Xtravaganza (Brathwaite, 2018). Since, the ballroom scene has grown significantly into a global cultural enterprise comprised of balls and houses.

Houses serve as social, and sometimes literal, homes for its members who have been rejected by their biological families, social institutions, and society at large (Bailey, 2009). Houses do not refer to physical spaces but rather the complex kinship structure in ballroom culture (Bailey, 2013). Houses are chosen families led by house mothers and fathers. These house parents then not only work to hone the individual talents of the house children so that they can win trophies in balls and bring the house prominence, but they also help nurture, support, and guide the personal development of the house children. It is within ballroom families that many Black LGBTQ+ individuals are supported through transitioning², learn about sexual health and wellness as it relates to their LGBTQ+ identities, and receive advice about what it means to navigate society as a Black queer and/or trans person. I do not mean to simplify houses to the roles of parents and children, as there are many other roles constituted by the labor of house members. Houses are often named after ballroom pioneers who founded houses such as the House of Corey founded by Dorian Corey, and the House of Xtravaganza founded by Hector Xtravaganza. The houses are also named after luxury designer brands such as the House of Dior, the House of Gucci, and the House of Balenciaga. Houses compete against other houses at balls to gain respect, prominence, and notoriety within the house ball community.

Balls are events in which ballroom members walk, perform, or compete in various categories for prized trophies. As gender performance is central to ballroom culture, the categories largely reflect how the members see themselves. Most members of

² Transitioning refers the process in which people of trans experience began taking the steps toward affirming their gender identity. These steps are different for every trans person and are always decided by the individual. That is, some trans people consider changing their names as a step toward transitioning, while others might say that transitioning begins when one starts taking hormones.

the ballroom community identify with either one of six categories and generally perform in categories that coincide with their gender/sexual identity within the community. No longer just centered around beauty competitions that closely resemble pageants or the drag competitions of the 1920s, contemporary balls now include performance categories such as vogue, fashion categories like runway and best dressed, and beauty categories like face, in which contestants battle it out for the trophy or grand prize (for more on ballroom see: Bailey, 2013).

Though some scholars have done work to explore the gender system of ballroom culture and its efforts at HIV intervention, ballroom culture has received limited attention in research (Bailey, 2009; 2011; Phillips II et al., 2011; Rowan, 2013). I specifically note the absence of empirical work done to better understand the agentive possibilities in these spaces and lack of scholarship that explores the experiences of school-aged youth who more and more are entering into these communities in search of themselves, community, and an alternative to what many of my participants define as a confining school culture that inhibits them from being themselves.

Methodology and Modes of Analysis

Love (2017) draws on Kelley's (2002) work on the Black radical imagination to offer a Black ratchet imagination methodological approach as a heuristic for exploring the complex and intersectional agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth. Love (2017) writes:

the Black ratchet imagination as a methodological perspective affords researchers a lens that is deeply focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of Black

LGBTQ+ youth's identity constructions through purposeful and reflective qualitative research questions that are intersectional, seek to understand youth's agency to reclaim space, refuse binary identities, subvert language, create economic opportunities with new economies, and recognize the precariousness of queer youth of color (p. 541).

Taking up the Black ratchet imagination I designed a qualitative study to explore the following research question:

How do 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth in NYC's ballroom culture make sense of their agency in ballroom spaces and in school spaces?

Guided by my Black ratchet imagination, I engaged in a qualitative research study grounded in semi-structured interview and focus group data. I used snowball sampling (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007) to recruit 8 youth, ages 16 to 19 enrolled in high school, who all self-identify as openly gay, queer, transgender, bisexual, or gender non-conforming; Black or African-American; and are members of a "house" in the ballroom scene. I intended to recruit more participants but was only able to identify 8 who fit the criteria and who were willing and able to engage in all parts of data collection.

Table 2. *Participants*

Pseudonym	race/ethnicity	gender	sexuality	age
Paris	Black	trans/girl	heterosexual	17
Legend	Black	trans/girl	pansexual	17
Jordan	Black	cis/boy	gay	17
Mike	Black	cis/boy	gay	18
Kofi	Black	cis/boy	gay	17
Kevin	Black	cis/boy	gay	19
Cherry	Black	trans/girl	heterosexual	16
Velvet	Black	trans/non binary	pansexual	16

Engaging with Siedman's (2013) interview process, I conducted three separate interviews with all 8 youth. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. The first interview focused on inviting the youth to establish a context of their experiences. In the second interview, I sought to learn more about how the youth conceptualize some of the items, themes, ideas, and topics that emerge during the first interview, and invite them to recall certain moments and memories referenced in these initial conversations. The third

interview was dedicated to asking the youth about the choices behind certain agentic practices they mentioned from their discussions of their everyday actions and decisions in school and ballroom spaces.

After each interview, I wrote a memo to reflect on analysis, methods, dilemmas and conflicts, my frame of mind, and points of clarification (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I also used those memos to document things unable to be captured by an audio recording such as smells, and details about the setting. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The final phase of data collection consisted of two 1-hour focus groups with all participants. In the focus group, I encouraged the youth to think collectively about how they are making sense of their agency, how ballroom and schools as spaces support or inhibit their agency as it relates to their marginalization, and speak back to my preliminary themes and codes from interview data, creating more space and time for collective data analysis (Love, 2017). The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was framed by my theoretical and methodological underpinnings. I relied on QOC agency (Brockenbrough, 2015), and a Black ratchet imagination perspective (Love, 2017) to look for specific occurrences in the data in which the young people articulated understandings of their agentic practices as they related to their identities and worked toward responding to, resisting, or subverting racial and anti-LGBTQ+ marginalization. For example, I did not spend much time diving into the seemingly mundane practices of agency such as when the youth mentioned what they

chose to have for breakfast and why. Rather, I focused my attention on comments that revealed the youth's understanding of why they chose certain outfits for school to seem less queer or wear make-up to embrace their LGBTQ+ identity.

Following Siedman's (2013) data analysis approach, I read all transcripts multiple times after each interview, highlighting paragraphs or sections that addressed my research question. Then, I culled the data and engaged in open-coding, reading over the highlighted paragraphs and sections, developing initial, low-inference codes which were grounded in my QOC analysis framework. Some of these initial codes were "practice of agency", "challenges to practicing agency", "context mediating agency", "understanding agency" to name a few. I used these initial codes to create a codebook with which I made sure to use in analyzing each interview. I wanted to make sure if a code came up in a later transcript that I revisited earlier transcripts to ensure I had not missed a connection or example of the code. Within each general coding category were further defined codes, or parent and child codes. For example, one of my general or parent codes was "identity" which I used to highlight any moment in which the participants described their identities. And within these general or parent codes were child codes such as "racial identity", "sexual identity", and "gender identity".

After coding the highlighted paragraphs, sections, and sentences, I organized the data excerpts by code, and then category which were large groups of similar codes. The categories were continually revised through my iterative research process as I read new transcripts and new codes were created (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Subsequently, I revisited the culled data categories asking as I read: what have I learned (Seidman, 2013)? Concurrently, I wrote memos to document my thoughts (Horvat, 2013), which led

to the themes I explore in my findings section such as “agency in the presence of fear” which was a theme that consisted of categories connected to the youth’s understanding of how they practiced agency in school spaces where they feared rejection and abuse. Lastly, I explored the theme I interpreted in the data using my theoretical framework and centering my research question.

Once I analyzed the interview data, I engaged in member checking by taking my preliminary ideas to the focus groups in which the youth and I worked toward a collective understanding of their agency in ballroom and schooling spaces (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Informed by the interview and focus group data, I drew conclusions about how the Black LGBTQ+ youth in my study made sense of their agency in schools and in the ballroom spaces that were created by way of the Black ratchet imaginations of Black LGBTQ+ individuals as a response to their unique lived realities. My findings reveal that the youth often experienced fear of rejection and abuse in school spaces fueled by anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination. Motivated by this fear, the young people used their agency to suppress their LGBTQ+ identities which led to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and depression. Contrastingly, the participants understood ballroom culture as a liberatory space in which they felt able to they draw on their agentive imaginations to explore and express their identities in ways that transcended socially constructed boundaries of who they could be in this world. In ballroom they could be mermaids. In the ensuing section, I present my findings and discussion

Findings Part I: Agency in the Presence of Fear

Schools as Confining Spaces

As I explored in greater detail above, many researchers have argued that the possibilities for young people's agency is greatly mediated by complex relationships between their social identities (i.e., race, gender, sexuality) and the contexts in which they find themselves such as schools (Bajaj, 2018; Klocker, 2007; Murphy-Graham, 2010). In articulating an understanding of their agency, the participants in my study drew stark distinctions between the ways they practiced agency in school spaces and the ways they practiced agency in ballroom spaces. Furthermore, after analyzing my data I arrived at an understanding that their agentic practices in these two distinct spaces worked toward different ends. In speaking about their schooling experiences, the participants talked about school as a confining space which they felt required them to pour much of their agentic energy into suppressing their LGBTQ+ identities as a means of protecting themselves from harm and/or rejection. And though using their agency to "be less of themselves" minimized their experiences with anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, it also resulted in them feeling, isolated, academically unmotivated, and misunderstood. The young folks understood these feelings of isolation to be linked to their disconnection in schools, lower grade point averages, and depression and anxiety.

The 8 participants in my study shared a collective understanding that schools, as they are typically structured, often privilege cis-heteronormativity which makes it dangerous for LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves in ways that are perceived to fall outside of dominant notions of gender identity and expression, and sexual identity

(Kosciw et al., 2020). This privileging of cis-heteronormativity can invite LGBTQ+ youth to show up in schools in ways that are inauthentic to who they are as a way to reduce their experiences with bullying, harassment, and abuse fueled by heterosexism and transphobia. Take, for example, this interview excerpt from Kevin, who self-identifies as a Black cisgender gay boy, as he describes how his fear of rejection and abuse motivates him to move in a particular way to avoid anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in school:

Um, I think what I did was, well I just had to be like everyone else in school. I just had to do it. I was holding myself back from just like fear of rejection. I've always had a fear of rejection. And that fear stopped me from being me. It stopped me from excelling. It stopped me from doing so many things. I felt the safest option was to um, you know, conform to everyone around me, do what everyone else was doing. I wouldn't be me, but I might get some acceptance, you know?

In this quotation, Kevin speaks to the fear he has of being rejected by peers if he chooses to be himself, which in his case, I assume to mean embracing his queer sexual identity and perceived femininity. Thus, as he shares across our interviews, he opted to “be like everyone else” which can be read as cisgender and heterosexual, which are socially regarded as normal with regard to gender and sexual identity. Kevin later explained that in his quest to conform and enjoy acceptance, albeit temporary, he had to remain mindful of his voice, his hand gestures, the way he walked, and even the kind of language he used when interacting with others in the school building as never to appear gay or too feminine. Kevin’s everyday decisions and actions, or agency, illustrates how agency can be practiced to exercise self-censorship. Elsewhere, I have drawn on Pritchard’s (2017) notion of literacy self-suppression to, through a metaphor of tying a tie, write about this self-censorship or the moments which Black LGBTQ+ individuals

due to a hyperawareness of the white cisgender heterosexual gaze enact practices that censor or minimize their LGBTQ+ identities based on dominant notions of what is considered acceptable within this gaze. To a tie a tie then one would:

Place the tie around your neck. Adjust the wider end so that it hangs lower than the skinny end, just as your narrowly defined masculinity would have to hang lower than your undervalued femininity. Cross the wide end over the small end. Keep the Beyoncé references to a minimum and un-remember everything learned from Tyra about *werking* the runway. Place two fingers over the wide end. Lower your voice; be mindful of the ways you move your wrists, and never roll the eyes. Bring the wide end around the two fingers and behind, up into, then down through the loop. Do this with the same flair demonstrated in last night's game by popular basketball players whose names were dangerous to forget. Remember: it is very important that you only manipulate the wider more masculine end, the skinny feminine side must remain idle. And if you have executed this knot successfully, the skinny end will remain invisible, concealed by the masculine end. An illusion that could save your life. (Reid & Devereaux, 2019, p. 66)

In speaking to his inability to be himself, Kevin's words connect to recent GLSEN survey data which reveal that only 35% of LGBTQ+ youth of color feel able to be themselves in schools due to fear of rejection, bullying, and harassment (Khan et al., 2019). Across the interviews with Kevin, I learned that he attended a public school in Brooklyn, New York which he described as "an early college school which was like the number two school in the area as far as like, test scores and graduation rates". In addition, when describing the school culture Kevin shared that "the school building was a warehouse, and the students were like 99% Caribbean and West Indian. Everybody was focused on academics and about their business. And uh, a lot of the teachers were White." Kevin's description of his teachers as mostly white is in line with recent studies which have found that though schools across the country, especially in large metropolitan areas, are becoming more Black and Brown, the teaching force still remains predominantly white (NCES, 2019). It is important to note this reality of the teaching

force, as Kevin and three other participants mention their difficulty finding their place in schools due to feeling disconnected from their white teachers and their peers of color who appear cisgender and heterosexual.

In an effort to learn more about the possibility of finding a “safe space” in school, I asked Kevin if his school had a GSA. He quickly said no and offered that the idea of having a GSA would never work in his school because of the negative stigma associated with LGBTQ+ identities in the community which he considered “a Black community”. This reality is true for many Black LGBTQ+ youth who speak about their experiences of navigating the stigma of homophobia and transphobia within their own communities (Bartone, 2017). And this is not to argue that Black communities are more homophobic and transphobic than other communities, but to recognize that even with already marginalized communities there still exists other insidious forms and discrimination. Furthermore, we must recognize that belonging to a marginalized community is in no way a mask that protects us from ingesting the pollen of oppression blowing around this country. No matter our identities, we are all susceptible to consuming the insidious ideas that flow from misunderstanding and hate.

It is important to highlight that even though Kevin’s school was regarded as a “good” school with adequate resources which resulted in good test scores and graduation rates, it still did not have a GSA. Research shows that GSAs are spaces where LGBTQ+ youth can receive support, gain access to resources about LGBTQ+ issues, make friends, receive validation, and interact with others without fear of abuse or harm (Poteat et al., 2017). However, Kevin’s experience reminds us that often GSAs due to community stigma and/or an uneven distribution of LGBTQ+ resources, are absent from schools with

predominantly Black and Brown student bodies (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Thus, like Kevin, other Black LGBTQ+ youth are often left alone to navigate schools which often serve as premier sites of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination (Callier, 2016). And left alone, Black LGBTQ+ youth like Kevin are forced to come up with their own solutions to avoiding harm, which unfortunately might be self-censoring or suppressing their LGBTQ+ identity (Pritchard, 2017).

Though Cherry does not identify exactly as Kevin (Cherry is a young Black trans heterosexual girl) and did not attend the same school, she too shared similar thoughts around being afraid to be her full self in school spaces. And in speaking about the source of her fear, Cherry shared in an interview about not wanting to place herself in situations in which she would have to defend her way of being, defend her humanity:

Being me in school compromised my safety, I believe. If they saw me as too fem- because they saw me as a boy-, the other boys would be trying to bully me and stuff. Yes, I could, like defend myself and stuff like that, but do I want to? No. Like, nobody wants to defend themselves every day. Like, I just want to walk in my, like, truth and just mind my business, but I know that's not the reality of it. Like, I know I can't be myself in the school because it puts me at harm, not even just physically, but mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Like, it was just harmful, um, just not being able to be me. But I chose to not be me, so I wouldn't be in harm's way.

Cherry's comment above speaks to the ways in which youth agency can be confined, limited by certain contexts, and impacted by fear. That is, though many scholars recognize that all youth are capable of agency, they simultaneously hold that agency could be constrained by young people's social locations. In this way, young people have access to agency, but what they do with this agency is different and mediated by internal and external forces. In the case of LGBTQ+ youth of color, due to dominant notions of race, gender, sexuality, and humanity, these youth often feel limited with

regard to how they can move and act in schools due to a very real fear of rejection or as Cherry shared above, physical or emotional harm (Brockenbrough, 2015; Pritchard, 2013). Consequently, some LGBTQ+ youth, like Kevin and Cherry, choose to avoid walking in their truth in order to ensure they can “walk the school halls safely” even though it requires them not being themselves. Once again, self-censorship appears more desirable than having to confront bullies or fight every day.

And though the people in her school did not recognize Cherry as trans she shared that “I always knew I was trans and I wanted to start transitioning at the age of 13. But I knew I couldn’t transition because school was already kind of rough.” It was clear to me that Cherry was sure of her gender identity from a very early age but did not “start transitioning” because school was already rough, which she later described in another interview as meaning that it was very “anti girls like me” or unaccepting of girls of trans experience. When I asked how Cherry was so sure that she would suffer bullying and abuse if she embraced her gender identity, she shared that, “I dressed up like one time, hair and everything. I had like spandex tights. And then this kid got like really disrespectful with me, because I had dressed up. He was saying ‘faggot’ and all this. I took the wig off and everything and went home”. In the story Cherry shared, I could see that this incident was enough proof for her to conclude that being herself would invite bullying and harassment, and motivated her decision to be mindful of how she expressed her gender identity as to not surpass the limits she was afforded as someone people in her school community perceived as a boy.

It is worth noting that often the extant literature on LGBTQ+ agency demonstrates how these young people exercise their agency to create public spaces for subversion and

pleasure (Blackburn, 2005) in which they can embrace and love all of themselves (Bartone, 2017; Love, 2017). However, my data reminds me that there are also many instances in which they might use their agency to be less of who they are due to a fear of being bullied or harassed by the school community (Vaught, 2008). In the interviews with Cherry and Kevin, I was able to see how they were not only victims in these scenarios but agents too (Blackburn, 2005). That is, they elected not to passively experience bullying and harassment, and made decisions and took actions to minimize these negative experiences. They both felt like of the options available to them, being less of themselves was the best one to avoid rejection and harm. In this way, they practiced agency. They took steps toward improving or not inviting further discrimination into their educational realities. And it is important that we regard their decisions and actions as examples of how they use their agency to respond to the discrimination they face.

These interview excerpts from Kevin and Cherry remind us that agency can be used in many ways but is mediated by the spaces in which we find ourselves. If we recognize the actions of Cherry and Kevin as shared above as uses of agency, we might then be better positioned to explore why they feel they must practice their agency in this way to feel safe in schools and begin mitigating the things that make them fearful of being themselves or the things that invite self-censorship. Due to space constrictions, I have chosen to emphasize the experiences of Kevin and Cherry while recognizing that this theme of fear of being oneself to avoid rejection and harm showed up in all the experiences of the participants in the study. In fact, every participant shared quotes similar to those of Cherry and Kevin. Here is a collection of quotes from participants as they speak about being afraid to be themselves in schools:

Jordan: I remember in ninth grade was when I first realized I wasn't allowed to be myself because school wasn't really accepting of me. That year they tried to get me to convert myself to being straight, it was a Christian school. That was a big mess so I started pretending I wasn't gay anymore.

Kofi: I've been bullied a lot in school. Like a lot and by everybody for being feminine.

Fable: High school is high school. It's not my environment. I be pretending.

Velvet: You know how much I hear "faggot". You know how it goes, like, name-calling. And the teachers don't ever do anything. They act like they don't hear it. They do nothing.

Paris: School was fine. I played the role, I played it very well. But I always knew I wanted something different.

Although the participants in this study did share moments of using their agency to avoid harmful confrontations, they also spoke to how having to suppress their identities and not feeling like they could be themselves in schools often resulted in feelings of isolation and complicated their ability to form interpersonal connections with others in the school building. In the second focus group with the participants, a few of them shared about feelings of isolation and alienation:

Velvet: School was so lonely. I was the only me.

Interviewer: And how did that affect how you showed up in school spaces?

Velvet: Um, I would just, like, not do the school work. I did not want to do anything. Like, I remember just feeling alienated and empty. And when it came to extracurricular things at school, like hobbies and all that, I lacked the confidence. I was scared to show up fully and show what I had to offer.

Cherry: Can I add to that? I was a depressed child just looking to be their selves, um, looking to be more open and free. And I couldn't do that in schools. I became very antisocial at, a, like a lot of the time. You know, I was anti-social because I wasn't able to do everything that I wanted to do. So it was ... It kind of sucked. And nobody talked to me, well they didn't know me cuz I was hiding.

Kevin: Right, nothing seemed important to me my sophomore year. It was really a disconnect. But I guess that makes sense, how can someone connect with me when I don't even show up as me? Who they supposed to connect with? I was figuring things out but it was hard. I felt so disconnected from my peers, the teachers, like school. I just had trouble fitting in especially being in the school I was. I was different as a like, a Black, gay man, you know.

Jordan: So ninth grade was crazy for me too. After they tried to convert me and I had to pretend I wasn't gay, I went into a depressive state. I was so emotional

because it's just like, I can't be myself and I'm in an environment where the real me isn't really wanted.

Paris: Yea, I'm very emotional and sheltered.

As illustrated above, when the young people in the study suppressed their LGBTQ+ identity to avoid bullying and abuse, it often resulted in feelings of isolation and alienation. As the young people in Kevin's words "were not showing up as themselves" their ability to form interpersonal relationships with their peers was complicated. They felt that no one in the school knew them or understood them because, in fact, they had not presented themselves in ways that would invite school members to get to know them and build relationships. And to be clear, I am not blaming the students but only illustrating how costly it is for their sense of self and feelings of belonging to be less of themselves to respond to a valid fear of rejection and abuse. The mental and emotional price they pay for that safety is high.

As they perform their gender and sexual identities in ways that conform to societal expectations with regard to gender and sexuality to avoid harm, they simultaneously erect barriers that complicate their ability to form meaningful interpersonal relationships in the school building. Consequently, they experience feelings of loneliness and isolation. And this is important to note as many scholars have documented the intimate connection between feelings of isolation and teen suicide (Kahn et al., 2019). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among U.S. teenagers, and LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk due to the impact of social stigmas, family rejection, bullying, harassment, and abuse (Kahn et al., 2019). These rates are increased for Black LGBTQ+ youth due to compounding struggles with transphobia, heterosexism, racism, and cultural stigma (Kahn et al., 2019).

Across the interview and focus group data, there was a recurring theme of fear of rejection and fear of abuse. This fear is real and justified especially if we acknowledge the pervasiveness of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in schools and absence of GSAs or spaces in which they do not have to invisibilize their queerness and transness to feel safe. And though the young people in this study were able to avoid or minimize abuse, it does not come without any costs. In order to avoid anti-LGBTQ+ confrontations, the young people had to perform their gender and sexual identities in ways that were not true to how they knew themselves to be, and these performances had negative effects on their senses of self. Schools are supposed to be spaces where young people can explore and learn about their identities, but this exploration is complicated when fear is present and students feel like they have to forego explorations of their identities to expend energy on hiding.

Findings Part II: Ballroom as a Liberatory Space

When contrasting the youth's understandings of their agency in schools with that practiced in ballroom, they spoke more positively about the ways in which they felt ballroom allowed them to use their agency to access and operationalize their creative imaginations. Generally, the young people who formed part of this project consider ballroom a liberating space which promotes self-confidence, builds character, makes healing possible, and invites them to engage in explorations and expressions of themselves beyond the discursive limits of prescribed social identities grounded in racist, heterosexist, and transphobic notions of personhood. That is, in ballroom the young people felt able to reject the status quo about who they could be; Consequently, they

chose to exist and create outside socially constructed lines drawn to narrowly delineate how they can show up in the world.

On Freedom

One theme that emerged from the data around the youth's understanding of their agency in ballroom spaces was ballroom as a place where they could enjoy the freedom to explore their identities without fear of rejection or discrimination. And in using freedom here, I am referring to the youth's power and ability to act upon their thoughts and feelings without being hindered or restrained. Furthermore, in describing ballroom as liberatory I emphasize the action involved between the youth's presence in ballroom spaces and them experiencing a liberation or a release from societal expectations with regard to who they are *and* can become.

In speaking with Kevin, I asked him explicitly if he felt that he was free to be himself in ballroom and without hesitation he said, yes.

Researcher: So, you would say, like, for you specifically, you could be completely free in ballroom? In Ballroom there's no confines, no restraints, no... You can legit be you?

Kevin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Completely!

Other participants responded to the same question with "be *completely* myself? Yes" (Paris) and "to be frank, it's the only place where I can. I don't feel freedom anywhere else" (Fable). In our first interview, Kofi commented "I mean as far as freedom goes, yeah. When I'm in ballroom, definitely. Um, definitely, I definitely feel like I can finally be myself."

This feeling of ballroom as a liberatory space is further emphasized in Mike's comment:

seeing how liberated everybody in ballroom was did something to me. Um, it just made me more comfortable within myself, and like just be like, "You know what? At this point, it's, it's whatever, I gotta be me! In ballroom, we don't conform. The culture is based off just being true to oneself. Where you have systems and school systems that are more so, like, follow this and you'll succeed. So, it's, like,

the structure's totally different where almost as school is more so, like, too controlled whereas Ballroom is just, like, let things be and let them, you know, like let them bloom on their own and ballroom is the light. The sunlight I mean.

In sharp contrast to the ways in which they described schooling spaces, the participants spoke extensively to how liberatory ballroom spaces are for them which consequently produce within them feelings of freedom and motivation to embrace and explore their identities. We can clearly see in Mike's comment that if schools are spaces where he feels controlled or limited with regard to self-expression, ballroom is one where he can just be; and he can bloom on his own. Moreover, in recognizing how free other ballroom members seem, Mike expressed that he felt moved to freely express himself too. This theme of ballroom as liberatory was a recurring theme across the data. Furthermore, many of the participants cited ballroom as the only such space in their lives in which they could enjoy such freedom as evidenced in Fable's statement.

Learning that the young people in my study considered ballroom a liberatory space did not surprise me as ballroom culture was created by Black and Brown LGBTQ+ folx as a space where they could affirm, celebrate, explore, and love their identities (Bailey, 2013). And so when Fable mentioned in one of our interviews that "she never feels out of place in ballroom because everyone there understands on an intimate level who she is" it demonstrates that even almost a century after the initial concept of ballroom was born its members are still able to enjoy a sense of liberation within the community. And these liberatory spaces are increasingly important especially when we consider how my data revealed that none of the participants in my study felt a sense of freedom in school contexts. Instead of exploring their identities in school, they suppressed them.

The ways in which the participants spoke about ballroom as freeing in many ways presented ballroom as a possible home place in their lives. In her text on abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom, Love (2019) presents bell hooks' notion of homeplaces or spaces in which Black people- through being able to be themselves- learn to truly matter to each other, honor their inherent humanity, be nurtured, and heal from the trauma they have experienced at the hands of what hooks (2000) calls the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Love (2019) continues to write that homeplaces are often built around principles free of discrimination and center a deep and genuine love for its members. As I reflect on this concept of homeplace and the role they play in the healing and community and character building of Black people, I think to all the homeplaces that cisgender heterosexual Black youth may find within communities but that are often sites of trauma for Black LGBTQ+ youth due to stigma associated with homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. And in mentioning this I am not seeking to engage in a game of oppression Olympics wherein groups vie over who has it the hardest. Rather, I seek to expand our conversation of homeplaces for Black people to include those who often experience exclusion in these spaces due to their multiple marginalized identities.

There are countless reports and an immeasurable amount of data that talk about the need for LGBTQ+ youth to feel supported, nurtured, validated, and loved. And we know that when they do not experience these things, they are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation. This fact has led to the creation of spaces like GSAs. However, rarely are Black LGBTQ+ youth able to benefit from the initiatives such as GSAs created to provide this level of support for LGBTQ+ youth for the reasons

I highlighted earlier in this paper around the lack of GSAs in schools where many Black LGBTQ+ youth find themselves.

Without access to homeplaces like the ones Love (2019) describes or GSAs, Black LGBTQ+ youth are sometimes left to learn to matter in a world that tries incessantly to get them to believe that they do not. In examining the youth's understanding of ballroom as liberatory, I argue that ballroom could serve then as an intervention or an interruption to this discourse of "un mattering". It is a space where these young people can enjoy a sense of liberation from being shackled to fear-generated invitations to perform their identities in ways that are not congruent with who they know themselves to be. My data revealed a shift in their agentive energy from thinking about how they must suppress their identities to avoid abuse to how they could show up fully as themselves. In looking across the data, it became patently obvious to me that when they feel safe and free, the young people in the study could use their agency not to occult their identity but to explore the realities of who they are, and the possibilities of who they can become. That is, in ballroom the young people were able to draw on their agency to push the limits of self-expression to construct identities that may be considered far outside societal expectations but close to their hearts and authentic understandings of self.

On Confidence

Love (2019) and other scholars have connected confidence to mattering and mattering to agency. In speaking about their agency, the participants shared across the interviews that ballroom had a profound impact on their confidence and sense of self. For

example, during one of the focus groups the following exchange happened after I invited the young people to share about how ballroom has impacted their lives:

Cherry: one thing ballroom gave me was confidence, the attitude and being able to just have that confidence within myself, that the world I think tries to strip away from you. Ballroom definitely takes you in and definitely builds character.

Kevin: I definitely agree with that. Like I definitely agree with it, and I think a lot of us, in general, can agree that that was a space that, you know, built our confidence. Being in ballroom, it really helped like the character development as far as like, you know, I'm confident, and not being afraid of being all of me, and showing that to the world, you know. What I have is enough, so I definitely will say that is the energy that ballroom gave me.

Velvet: Um, me personally speaking, I think that, um, I also think, cause before joining ballroom, I would say like my confidence wasn't as high as, you know, the typical person, and I definitely feel like, you know, you know, God placed me into this scene to really build my confidence.

Fable: Because of ballroom I just stopped being fearless of like who I was, what I was thinking, my thought process. And I just started being more vulnerable with me, and being honest with myself, and vulnerable with people. And I think that's what like guided me on a road to healing and finding self-worth.

Paris: It changed- it changed me a lot. I think it, um, it gave me confidence but it also kept me grounded. I think before, before I entered ballroom, I was very insecure, I had no type of confidence, um, I was very shy. Once I came to ballroom, it- it built me up. It taught me confidence, it tau- it tau- it taught me how to stay humble. Ballroom is special because we grow our confidence so that we can unleash... which we can't really do on an everyday basis.

According to the 2019 GLSEN climate survey, 80% of Black LGBTQ+ youth feel depressed and experience high levels of anxiety, 71% feel hopeless, only 32% of them feel safe in schools, less than 25% report receiving positive messages about their identities in schools, and when compared to their white queer and trans counterparts they demonstrate poorer psychological well-being (Kahn et al., 2019). This data reveals just how powerful it is then that the Black LGBTQ+ in my study spoke about having confidence, being able to begin the process of healing, learning to see themselves as whole, and not being afraid of who they are.

In speaking of feeling confident in themselves and their abilities and how ballroom placed them on a path toward healing and learning their worth, I noticed a connection between confidence and their uses of agency. And as I sought to understand their agency in ballroom spaces, many of the young people cited their confidence as a necessary component of being able to use their agency to express themselves in ways that resisted societal expectations with regard to how they could show up in the world. They needed to first cultivate a confidence in themselves and their abilities. Toni Morrison (1987) so famously once wrote that, “freeing yourself is one thing but claiming ownership of that freed self is yet another.” The data revealed that ballroom may have been a safe and liberatory space which began the conversation in young people about freedom, but confidence would be the fuel they would use to claim ownership of their freed selves or move in ways that honored their understandings of self even if their movements and actions defied the discourse around who they could be. In this way, ballroom not only provided them with a space for freedom but encouraged them to confidently use this freedom to choose themselves in and outside of ballroom. Simply, due to being in ballroom the young people shared about feeling confidently able to resist and expand conceptions of self-expression and creativity.

The young people spoke at great length about the ways they could exist without fear of being discriminated against and explore the range of possibilities within LGBTQ+ identities. For example, in our final interview Velvet shared:

It's so liberating to me, where it's like wow, I can wear this and no one... And everyone's just like, 'Oh, she looks good' or 'That's, that's a sickening, like that's an amazing costume. Like I love that effect.' You get what I'm saying? It's

liberating to get to wear like cunty³ effects and like just really be like, you know, wearing heels and like just walking around and being me. It's so liberating to me. Ballroom allows that.

Similarly, Jordan speaks about the liberation he feels to confidently explore his identity but also highlights how ballroom exposes him to options of self-expression, perhaps, that he had not thought of before entering the scene:

So I came to the house practice and like, and it's just... It was so exciting to see like, you know, femme queens, like trans people and people that are in drags. And just like seeing so many openly Black LGBTQ people, it was just like, it was like wow, I'm in a place where I really can like... I could wear a wig and not feel judged (laughs). Like I could really be myself. And I don't know who that is but I am so excited to explore and find out. Maybe I do wanna start wearing wigs.

In many ways, as Jordan shares above, the possibilities with regard to self-expression were broad in ballroom. Regardless of actual or perceived gender and sexual identity, ballroom members can confidently express themselves in any way that makes sense for and feels good to them.

In the last of our 3 interviews, Jordan shared, “Before I joined ballroom, I would never wear a purse, or like a crop top. But now that I've joined ballroom, like even outside of balls, I'm wearing purses, doing makeup and like being me. I can honestly say I'm happy now and I want to live. Ballroom is the reason for that.” In a separate interview, Kofi shared a similar point in that he realized after his first ball that he had always loved Black nail polish. And now he feels confident enough to wear nail polish, like Jordan, even outside of ballroom spaces. Both Jordan and Kofi spoke of engaging in things that are socially considered feminine and frowned upon such as men wearing

³ Cunty is a word that is often regarded in dominant culture as a derogatory slur used for women. However, in ballroom culture the term has been reclaimed to refer, in a positive way, to femininity. That is, in ballroom being feminine or cunty is a desired attribute.

purses, make up, or nail polish. After being immersed in the liberatory waters of ballroom which washed away self-doubt and societal constraints, they developed the confidence to use their agency to challenge gender norms not only in ballroom spaces but outside the scene as well. And in thinking about existing and creating outside the lines, my exploration with the young people of their agency also illuminated the effects ballroom has on their creative agency as they respond to the invitations in ballroom to interpret various themes to compete in their respective categories at ball rituals.

On Creativity

In speaking about their agency in ballroom spaces, many of the young people focused on how they felt free to create and imagine in ballroom. That is, unlike in school spaces which evoked fear, ballroom invited them to flirt with freedom in a world where they often feel shackled to negative experiences mired in racism, heterosexism, and transphobia. And with this sense of freedom and the confidence it promoted, they felt encouraged to engage their creativity. In one of our interviews Mike who expressed interest in becoming a licensed interior designer shared the following when speaking about his creativity being sparked by his presence and participation in ballroom spaces:

Ballroom is my happy place. I feel like balls force you to push that limit, like you need to- you need to create something new, something that is gonna wow people. It's liberating in a way. Um, and it- it- it lets you put your creativity into like work. And what you create you get to share in the ball. All eyes are on you, it's like spotlights are on you. Like everything is on you, the judges are looking at you, your house is looking at you, different houses are looking at you, spectators uh, it's just everything, lights are on you. So it just feels like everybody came for you, everybody came to see you, how beautiful you are. Um, and it- it- it lets you put your creativity to use.

Mike who also identifies as a dancer was introduced to ballroom by a close friend. Mike did not know what ballroom was when he accepted the invitation to attend the ball. In his words, “I was a dancer so I figured it would have a ball with like people dancing. But once I arrived and saw the runway category I was so impressed by the fashion and creativity. I said like wow this is wild. I wanna do that. How can I be part of this?” And after that initial experience, Mike joined his first house. In Mike’s statement he expressed an excitement about not only being to create but to share his creation with the other members in ballroom. This is different from the moments in which the youth practiced self-censorship in schools as to not stand out, and in doing so they also suppressed their creativity. However, in ballroom they are encouraged to create. They are encouraged to think outside the box and draw outside the lines. In this way, they are able to use their agency to imagine new ways of being and existing and receive positive feedback from other ballroom members on their creations. Mike’s statement above not only demonstrates his excitement about being creative, particularly with regard to designing looks to walk the runway category, but also his capability to imagine and bring his vision to life. And in creating, the young people find a sense of purpose. In reflecting on his agency in ballroom, Mike elaborated on how he could focus on harnessing his creativity because he did not have to expend agentive energy into practicing self-censorship. And this creativity became helpful as he prepared to walk his category.

Often in ballroom, the categories will ask the competitors to come up with their own interpretation of a theme, idea, or character. And the young people get to then use their agency to create their own unique interpretation that speaks to the category and represents their unique flair. Kevin spoke a lot about feeling disconnected in school, not

attempting the school work, and feeling uninspired. However, when asked about how he feels about preparing to walk a ball he said this:

Um, it's just, um... You know, like, we call it, like, the fantasy world and stuff like that, but I don't see it as a fantasy because literally, you have people fantasizing about something and bringing it to life. You know, like, um, so many things that we say are not possible, um, are possible. Like, Ballroom, there's no limit. Like, we literally strategize, we plan, we think of it, and we find a way to make things work, um, and we do it in a space that is not confining or, like, restricting anybody of being whoever they want to be. So, like, that's one of the most important things. And so getting ready for balls, I mean it can be stressful, it's exciting. I get to create. I get to do something that no one has ever done before. I get to showcase my talent and my hard work. Wait that wasn't your question. You asked me about preparing for balls. (laughs). So first you select what ball you wanna pick, or you wanna walk. Then you look at what category, and my category's Butch Queen Vogue Fem. Um, and then if the category says like bring in a... 'Cause usually categories say bring in- like an inspired look. So like if I have to... If they say bring in a, like Dora the Explorer inspired look, I'm gonna bring in a Dora the Explorer inspired look. I'm gonna have the, uh, the purple, um, the purple shirt, but listen, you have to make it inspired. You don't wanna look like Dora the Explorer, so you wanna make it cunty. So what you would do is like you would get the purple shirt and you will crop it and make it really tight, and get like a purple skirt and like maybe some purple heels too, and then that's how you make a cunty Dora the Explorer effect, because that's what makes it inspired. You know? So you look at that, and then after that you just keep creating and creating. And making changes. You keep dreaming.

In many ways one could look at the ballroom categories as like invited tasks. The members select the categories they want to walk, many times this is also decided on by the house leaders, and they start thinking of how they want to complete the task. However, as Kevin shared above, you want to do something different that stands out. Thus, each member must draw on their imaginations to create an inspired look. And because they feel safe, their creations do not have to conform to how many folks might feel like young men like Kevin should present themselves. In ballroom, Kevin can wear tight clothing, crop tops, skirts, and heels. In his words, he can interpret Dora the

Explora, but in the cuntiest (or most feminine) way possible. Paris shared a similar line of thinking as she prepares for balls:

So what I do is, I like to ... I like to, um, walk like three categories a night. So I sit there with the flyer, I look at the categories and try to see what I could walk, how I can budget my money and walk like three different things this night. I try to get a different feeling in each category, I try to make it my own. So if one of the categories is calling for fur, I'm gonna give you a story. I will come out as Cruella, the lady who loved fur. like I will bring Cruella to life.

Like Kevin, Paris focuses on how she can use her own imagination to come up with unique approaches to the category themes. She talks about how she plans and strategizes so that she can walk multiple categories a night. In commenting on their preparation for balls, the young people understand that not only is it safe to explore outside dominant gender/sexual boundaries, but they have the ability to do so. They are confident in their abilities to come up with effects that are “sickening” and have all eyes on them. The young people articulated a positive relationship between the use of their agency and being in ballroom spaces. In feeling free, they could create outside the lines. They could traverse the boundaries with regard to what is acceptable. They could reject pervasive ideologies grounded in homophobia/transphobia and that restricted their options of being. They could just be, and in just being they were able to create new identities for themselves not only in ballroom but outside ballroom as well. Thus, instead of rending parts of their identities invisible or self-censoring, they could take up space and in doing so use their creativity to express themselves outside of rigid gendered and sexualized boundaries.

Conclusion

Framed by the youth's understanding of their own agency across different contexts, my research illuminates the complex interrelationships between youth agency, social identity, and context. My findings suggest that due to the privileging of cisgender heteronormativity in schools and absence of GSAs and safe spaces in schools, Black LGBTQ+ are subjected to anti-LGBTQ+ rejection, bullying and harassment. The young people in my study out of a fear of rejection and abuse, articulated a deliberate use of their agency to mask or make less noticeable their LGBTQ+ identities. In this way, they could minimize their experiences with rejection and harm, however, it also resulted in feelings of isolation, disconnection, and depression.

Contrastingly, the participants described their practices of agency in ballroom spaces as ones that worked toward healthy and creative explorations and expressions of their identities. They shared that these uses of agency were possible in ballroom because they felt safe and liberated. And in feeling secure, valued, and loved, they identified as agents who could work toward realizing a world, even if only in ballroom, in which they exist confidently as themselves and without fear.

As a cisgender Black gay man, I have had my own experiences with anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination. And I have shared about my experiences in public and private spaces. Overwhelmingly, when folks hear of my experiences, they encourage me to "keep my head up." However, keeping my head up does nothing to mitigate the discrimination I face. The fact that I could be bullied, harassed, or rejected remains, and keeping my head up could make me more visible and invite more harm. So, at times, I

put my head down in order to fit in, appear less noticeable, and avoid possibly discriminatory confrontations. Perhaps, this is why I always saw Chanel the mermaid with her head down in school. And putting our heads down is a valid example of our agency. Thus, it might be more fruitful to instead of cheering these youth to keep their heads up, ask about why their heads are down; what are they trying to avoid; what do they not want to see or experience; what are they afraid of? In this way, I draw on my findings here to encourage education stakeholders to realize that Black LGBTQ+ youth are always practicing agency, even if it is to self-censor or keep their heads down. Our job, as education stakeholders then is to identify the things that motivate them to hang their heads low out of fear, and then work toward eliminating the sources of their fear.

As other scholars have shared, this will require addressing the anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment queer and trans youth face by all members in the school community, including educators. This will charge school administrators to provide ample opportunities for school faculty and staff to engage in training around how to intervene or interrupt acts of bullying and abuse among students. Particularly, in the case of Black LGBTQ+ students, schools will also need to address the absence of GSAs in schools with primarily students of color. And in exploring GSAs and other "homeplaces" in schools, we must be intersectional to make sure that students who live at the intersections of multiple interlocking systems of oppression are not excluded from initiatives intended to address the unique challenges they face. And as we design school initiatives and explore the possibilities with regard to the inclusion of Black LGBTQ+ youth, we might benefit from taking our cues from ballroom culture and other queer and trans communities of color, as they often are more effective in creating liberatory spaces. Thus, we must move

beyond regarding Black LGBTQ+ youth and their communities as only victims, to understanding that they are agents, who when able to exist outside the white cisgender heterosexual gaze, have the unique abilities to access a radical Black LGBTQ+ creative imagination that not only has the potential to open up possibilities for their existence, but move us all closer to a world in which we can more fully exist.

Our radical imaginations and freedom dreams are tools for decolonization, and for reclaiming our right to make our realities what we deserve them to be (Brown, 2019). In his work on freedom dreams, Kelley (2002) maintains that throughout history Black people have relied on their agency to imagine and create alternative realities in which they could just be and freedom dream up new ways of being and living. However, Kelley (2002) argues that freedom dreaming and accessing our radical Black imaginations is only possible when we have the physical, mental, and emotional space and freedom to do so. For the Black LGBTQ+ youth in my study, ballroom is such a space. It is their homeplace, and it provides them with the space to live and dream out loud. If only other spaces in which they inhabit could learn from ballroom so that these young people could free themselves, and perhaps free us all from narrowly conceived ideologies around what it means to be human. To end, I will leave us all with Cherry's words:

I think the world could learn from ballroom that as long as you're able to freely express yourself, as long as you're given the opportunity to grow and stay alive, and have basic rights that everyone has, freedom of expression, everything will be ok. If we all had that in spaces, the world would be so much more loving, the world would be so much more accepting, the world would be more understanding, it would be more human. Yea, the world would be more human.

V- USING A QUEER OF COLOR CRITIQUE TO WORK TOWARD A BLACK
LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE K-12 CURRICULUM

Abstract

As Black LGBTQ+ youth are unable to separate their Black and LGBTQ+ identities, their experiences with schooling curriculum are almost always informed by racialized, gendered, and sexualized discrimination. After years of work from grassroots organizers dedicated to LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy, in 2011 California became the first state to pass legislation requiring schools to teach LGBTQ+ history. Since, five other states (Oregon, California, Colorado, Illinois, and New Jersey) have adopted legislation that amend curricular standards to include affirming representations of LGBTQ+ communities in schools. Nonetheless, though these states have been mandated to include positive LGBTQ+ representations in curriculum, there is still no formal LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. Thus, the decision on what to teach is left up to individual districts, schools (and in many cases individual teachers) to rely on their own interpretations of “positive representation” to adhere to new mandates. This is particularly concerning given the lack of preparation many preservice and in-service educators have received around gender and sexual diversity as part of their teacher preparation programs and the resistance teachers have demonstrated to teaching LGBTQ+ content when left on their own. And when you couple this overwhelming silence in teacher education around gender and sexual diversity with the common misunderstanding that LGBTQ+ identity is largely a white issue I am left with very little hope that Black LGBTQ+ individuals and other queer and trans people of color will ever find their way into LGBTQ+ inclusive school curricula.

In recognizing the negative schooling experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth, the fact that informal LGBTQ+ curriculum often centers whiteness, and the lack of clarity around what constitutes LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula. In this article I draw on Queer of Color Critique (QOC critique) to present an approach to designing K-12 LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum that affirms, celebrates, and reflects the lived experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth. As a framework, QOC critique charges us a) to explore the resilience of queers of color and their communities as they navigate oppression, b) rely on the experiential knowledge of queers of color as a primary source of knowledge production, and c) examine how queers of color use their agency to defy the constraints of queer of color marginalization. Applying a QOC critique analysis, I offer up examples from a larger study on the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth in ballroom culture to illustrate how curriculum that is grounded in a QOC critique can resist reproducing LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum that centers whiteness and damage-centered narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Keywords: curriculum, LGBTQ+, Black, queer of color critique

Introduction

“I want this [ballroom] culture to be studied. I wanna hear about it in college, lecture halls, and part of that requires that we finally admit that ballroom culture is, indeed, Black history. We won’t be here forever. There will be a new generation and they are going to want to know where they came from, and that’s us.”- Icon Aamina 007

In 2019, The *Philadelphia Inquirer* released an online article and short film titled, “Legendary: 30 years of Philly Ballroom” which explores the history of Philadelphia’s ballroom culture. Toward the end of this short film, The Iconic¹ Aamina 007², who is featured throughout the visual shared the words that open this paper. Ballroom culture is an underground culture consisting of balls (competitions) and houses (chosen families) that emerged during the 1920s in Harlem. Ballroom was created by Black LGBTQ+ individuals as a space where they could affirm, celebrate, and love their racial, gender, and sexual identities without fear of rejection or abuse. I explain ballroom culture in greater detail in a later section.

In this article I draw on Queer of Color Critique (QOC critique) to present an approach to designing K-12 LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum that affirms, celebrates, and reflects the lived experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth. As a framework, QOC critique charges us a) to explore the resilience of queers of color and their communities as they

¹ In ballroom culture, there are titles that ballroom members are given based on their status in the culture. The title of “legend” or “legendary” is often reserved ballroom members who have participated in ballroom culture and have won a significant number of trophies in their categories. Similarly “icon” or “iconic” is attributed to members who have been in ballroom culture for a substantial amount of time, have won a significant number of competitions in their category, and have contributed to ballroom culture in some way.

² Often in ballroom, house members take on their house names as their last names. For example, Jacen Prodigy is in the ballroom house of Prodigy. Members without houses use 007 or free agent.

navigate oppression, b) rely on the experiential knowledge of queers of color as a primary source of knowledge production, and c) examine how queers of color use their agency to defy the constraints of queer of color marginalization. Applying a QOC critique analysis, I offer up examples from a larger study on the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth in ballroom culture to illustrate how curriculum that is grounded in a QOC critique can resist reproducing LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum that centers whiteness and damage-centered narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals (Brockenbrough, 2015; Tuck, 2009).

The Problem

Many curriculum scholars have articulated curriculum studies as a complicated conversation that examines how, to what end, by whom, and to whom knowledge is constructed and communicated (Grumet & Stone, 2000; Pinar, 2004). This complicated curricular conversation is further informed by socio cultural factors and mediated by identity, power, privilege, and oppression (Brown & Au, 2014). That is, the conversation is one that changes greatly depending on who is involved in the conversation, about whom they are conversing, and to whom they are communicating. Curriculum, in itself then, could be understood as a tool by which institutions that largely represent those in power achieve certain aims (Bishop & Atlas, 2015). To that end, Britzman (2003) writes that compulsory education was driven by the need to socialize European immigrants by using the curriculum to inculcate in them the values of the middle class and knowledge of the Anglo-protestant culture. And with regard to the education of Black people, Coles (2021) reminds us that early manifestations of curriculum were “meted out within a

nation birthed through white settler colonialism, thus, the curriculum naturally works to uphold whiteness and white supremacy” (p. 1). Similarly, Griffin and Oulett (2003) reveal the ways in which curriculum has historically and in contemporary contexts found itself being utilized as a tool to reproduce ideologies around the deviance and abnormalcy of LGBTQ+ people which result in violence inflicted upon queer people and their communities.

Black LGBTQ+ Youth and Curriculum

As Black LGBTQ+ youth are unable to separate their Black and LGBTQ+ identities, their experiences with schooling curriculum are almost always informed by racialized, gendered, and sexualized discrimination (Kumashiro, 2001; Pritchard, 2013). Alongside their cisgender heterosexual Black peers, Black LGBTQ+ youth wade through an education system that is mired in racism and white supremacy. This system is informed by a tradition in American education that has engendered two distinct end goals for schooling- one for citizenship and the other, reserved for Black people, for second-class citizenship (Anderson, 1988; Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Horsford, 2016; Kendi, 2016). This tradition has also given way to curriculum that centers the experiences of white people and quite minimally focuses on the historical and contemporary narratives of Black people. And many scholars have emphasized the benefits for Black students, and all students, when they are able to enjoy a curriculum that centers the histories and present-day realities of Black people (Coles, 2021; Dumas & ross, 2016; Kirkland, 2021; Love, 2019).

In addition to navigating educational terrain and curricula littered with racist landmines, Black LGBTQ+ youth often fall prey to cis-heterosexist school practices and policies, or cis heterosexist landmines. Many of these landmines are assembled and set to detonate by approaches to curriculum that privilege cis-heteronormativity, thus positioning any gender or sexual identity that falls outside that category as inferior (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). This positioning of queerness as deviant or inferior makes it possible for LGBTQ+ students, as they do not conform to cis-heteronormative practices, to suffer from increasingly negative experiences in school (Berlan et al., 2010; Brückner & Himmelstein, 2015; Fields et al, 2015; Irvine, 2015; Quinn, 2007). In addition, Gilbert, Mamo, Fields, and Lesko (2018) argue that if we look deeply into school curricula and the messages communicated to and about LGBTQ+ youth, we find that “queer youth are often failed to be recognized as valued and enfranchised members of their school communities” (p. 166). Thus, in this way the totality of their lives is reduced down to damage-centered narratives which emphasize bullying, and their unique gifts and contributions to history are overlooked (Gilbert et al., 2018; Tuck, 2009).

However, it does not have to be this way. There are many academics who have invested scholarly energy into conceptualizing approaches to curriculum that seek to achieve the seemingly elusive goal of education equity (Camicia, 2016; Kean, 2020; Keenan, 2017; Muhammad, 2020). Britzman (2003) writes that education must constantly evolve and respond to the current times. This charge to evolve becomes even more pressing when we consider the present-day experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth, the contemporary social climate in which they find themselves, and the role of curriculum in perpetuating a status quo that makes the violence in their realities possible. To

illustrate, the latest GLSEN climate survey revealed that only 35% of LGBTQ+ youth of color feel able to be themselves in schools due to fear of rejection, bullying, and harassment (Khan et al., 2019). According to that same survey, 80% of Black LGBTQ+ youth feel depressed and experience high levels of anxiety, 71% feel hopeless, 43% experienced harassment and abuse in school, only 32% of them feel safe in schools, and less than 25% report receiving positive messages about their identities in schools (Kahn et al., 2019). However, those same surveys revealed that 75% of LGBTQ+ students who attend schools in which they enjoy learning with LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula shared that their educational experiences were most positive, and their peers were more accepting than 39% of those without an inclusive curriculum.

LGBTQ+ Inclusive Curriculum

After years of work from grassroots organizers dedicated to LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy, in 2011 California became the first state to pass legislation requiring schools to teach LGBTQ+ history (GLSEN, 2020). This was a feat because only in the late 1980s and early 1990s did educational research focused on improving the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ youth emerge (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). It is also worth noting that to date only five states (Oregon, California, Colorado, Illinois, and New Jersey) have adopted legislation that amend curricular standards to include affirming representations of LGBTQ+ communities in schools. In contrast, five states (Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama) have passed legislation that prohibit affirming representations in K-12 school curricula.

Nonetheless, though the states listed above have been mandated to include positive LGBTQ+ representations in curriculum, there is still no formal curriculum. Thus, the decision on what to teach is left up to individual districts, schools (and in many cases individual teachers) to rely on their own interpretations of “positive representation” to adhere to the new mandate. This is particularly concerning given that lack of preparation many preservice and in-service educators have received around gender and sexual diversity as part of their teacher preparation programs and the resistance teachers have demonstrated to teaching LGBTQ+ content when left on their own (Crocco, 2001; Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013). In fact, Gorski and their colleagues (2013) concluded that according to the official curriculum of multicultural teacher education, as codified in course syllabi, little attention is paid to LGBTQ identities, oppressions, and resistances. Similarly, Bishop and Atlas (2015) found that in New York State elementary schools, there is little recognition of LGBTQ+ people in terms of curriculum, practices, and policies. In addition, too often teachers lack depth of understanding around gender and sexual diversity and bring religious and personal objections to LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools (Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013). Lastly, scholars have also presented data from students that mentioned that although students have learned about LGBTQ+ issues in some classes, teachers missed several opportunities to teach inclusive curriculum and intervene in homophobic and transphobic bullying and harassment (Snapps et al., 2015).

And when you couple this overwhelming silence in teacher education around gender and sexual diversity with the common misunderstanding that LGBTQ+ identity is largely a white issue (Cohen, 2004; Kumashiro, 2001), I am left with very little hope that Black LGBTQ+ individuals and other queer and trans people of color will ever find their

way into LGBTQ+ inclusive school curricula. Especially if we take into account the myriad ways that Black LGBTQ+ people and communities have been rendered invisible even in curriculum that is supposed to reflect the lives of all Black people (Brockenbrough, 2013; Dumas & ross, 2015; Callier, 2016). In recognizing the negative schooling experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth, the fact that informal LGBTQ+ curriculum often centers whiteness, and the lack of clarity around what constitutes LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula, I draw on a QOC critique to present ballroom's approach to a Black LGBTQ+ history curriculum to offer a guide as we seek to design LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum that responds to the realities of Black LGBTQ+ youth.

QOC Critique

QOC critique draws on the work of intersectionality advanced by Black feminist scholars (Crenshaw, 1991) and queer theory/studies (Sedgwick, 1993; Warner, 1993). Ferguson (2004) first articulated QOC critique as an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship that centers the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color, emphasizing their relationship and resistance to power. In its analysis, QOC critique maintains that often our approaches to studying race, class, gender, and sexuality are single-identity approaches or approaches that present one social identity marker (e.g., sexual identity *or* race) as the most significant and having developed independently from other aspects of our identity (Manalansan, 2018). This single identity approach relies on the myth of the "normal person" informed by notions of normalcy, whiteness, and heteronormativity (Callier, 2016; Ferguson, 2004). And these single-identity approaches frequently leave out and reinscribe

inequitable experiences for our most marginalized such as those who are at once racially and sexually minoritized while “giving precedence to those within the group who are more privileged” (Callier, 2016, p. 916). For example, we see this in the privileging of white LGBTQ+ individuals in queer spaces and cisgender heterosexual Black men in Black spaces (Callier, 2016). And in the case of curriculum, which is the focus of this article, queer youth of color are frequently left out of LGBTQ+ curriculum and anti-racist curriculum.

Though QOC critique emerges from outside the field of education, education scholars like Brockenbrough (2015) have begun to take up this analysis to charge educators to explore the pedagogical and curricular benefits of intentionally engaging the ways of knowing and being from within queer and trans communities of color as they lead lives at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In addition, these scholars invite education researchers to move toward analyses of how these communities practice agency to resist these interlocking systems of oppression (Brockenbrough, 2015; Callier, 2016; Love, 2017). Thus, I argue here that a QOC critique might be particularly useful in interrogating the exclusion of queer youth of color from curricular approaches. As such, it provides a helpful lens for analyzing their absence within curriculum and conceptualizing how curriculum workers might work to address it.

In lieu of formal tenets I will follow Brockenbrough’s (2015) lead and offer three framing questions based on a QOC critique that are particularly helpful for this analysis: how does ballroom’s approach to teaching its history a) explore the resilience of queers of color and their communities as they navigate oppression, b) rely on the experiential

knowledge of queers of color as a primary source of knowledge production, and c) examine how queers of color use their agency to defy the constraints of queer of color marginalization? I use these framing questions to present and analyze data from a larger project on the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth in ballroom culture as one example of how an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum informed by a QOC critique might look.

Methodology

Context

The findings for this paper rely on ethnographic observation data during my time immersed in ballroom culture from summer 2019-winter 2020. Many ballroom historians have stated that ballroom culture has a rich history that goes back to the Harlem Renaissance and the Harlem drag ball community in which mainly Black trans women and drag queens competed in their own competitions after becoming fed up with the racist and restrictive drag culture of the 1920s (Buckner, n.d.). The contemporary ball scene, which is depicted in the fictional tv series *Pose*, docuseries *My House*, and the documentaries *Legendary* and *Kiki* began in Harlem in late 1960s led by the efforts of Crystal Labeija who started the first ballroom house, the house of Labeija. Since, the ballroom scene has grown significantly into a global cultural enterprise comprised of balls and houses.

Houses serve as social, and sometimes literal, homes for its members who have been rejected by their biological families, social institutions, and society at large (Bailey, 2009). Houses do not refer to physical spaces but rather the complex kinship structure in

ballroom culture (Bailey, 2013). Houses are chosen families led by house mothers and fathers. These house parents not only work to hone the individual talents of the house children so that they can win trophies in balls and bring the house prominence, but they also help nurture, support, and guide the personal development of the house children. It is within ballroom families that many Black LGBTQ+ individuals are supported through transitioning¹, learn about sexual health and wellness as it relates to their LGBTQ+ identities, and receive advice about what it means to navigate society as a Black queer and/or trans person. I do not mean to simplify houses to the roles of parents and children, as there are many other roles constituted by the labor of house members. Houses are often named after ballroom pioneers who founded houses such as the House of Corey founded by Dorian Corey, and the House of Xtravaganza founded by Hector Xtravaganza. The houses are also named after luxury designer brands such as the House of Dior, the House of Gucci, and the House of Balenciaga. Houses compete against other houses at balls to gain respect, prominence, and notoriety within the house ball community.

Balls are events in which ballroom members walk, perform, or compete in various categories for prized trophies. As gender performance is central to ballroom culture, the categories largely reflect how the members see themselves. Most members of the ballroom community identify with either one of six categories and generally perform in categories that coincide with their gender/sexual identity within the community. No longer just centered around beauty competitions that closely resemble pageants or the drag competitions of the 1920s, contemporary balls now include performance categories such as vogue, fashion categories like runway and best dressed, and beauty categories

like face, in which contestants battle it out for the trophy or grand prize (for more on ballroom see: Bailey, 2013).

Data Sources

The data analyzed for this article comes from a larger qualitative case study exploring the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth in New York City's ballroom culture (Yin, 2003). The larger study included three semi-structured interviews with 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth following Siedman's (2013) model. In addition, all 8 youth participated in two 1-hour focus groups. The data analyzed here draws on qualitative field notes that I took while immersed in ballroom culture through audio notes, handwritten memos, and photos and videos (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

From summer 2019-winter 2020 I attended 10 balls, 8 house practices, two ballroom retreats, and one vogue theory class exclusively for ballroom members. The house practices in which house members practice for their respective ballroom categories took place once a week for around 2 hours. Generally, house practices consisted of members practicing the different components involved in their categories and getting feedback from other house members, especially more senior house members and house parents. Typically, these practices took place at local community centers in which there were often multiple house practices taking place simultaneously in the same building. I attended two ballroom retreats, generally reserved for new ballroom members, and were not organized around house affiliation. Both the retreats I attended had around 10 participants from a variety of houses. The retreats both took place in a resort in upstate New York. All accommodations and food were provided to the attendees free of service.

The retreats lasted 2 days and included lectures, a series of workshops, independent writing activities, vogue practice, leisure and bonding time, and group activities.

During my study, I was also able to attend a vogue theory course for new ballroom members. The class lasted 2 hours. During the class, which took place in a dance space in a popular dance studio in New York City, the 9 members were invited to practice the various elements of vogue performance receiving feedback and history lessons from the instructor. This class was also free of charge and was attended by members who were new to ballroom and from a variety of houses. A large portion of my data came from attending balls in New York City during the time of my study. Generally, the balls lasted more than 4 hours and took place in large event centers, school gymnasiums, outside on the pier, and in theaters.

Lastly, I was given access by ballroom members to private Facebook pages which out of privacy concerns, I cannot detail much here. These private Facebook groups are only for ballroom members and feature content such as upcoming ball dates, times, themes, and other community concerns, questions. These private social media pages also serve as space for members to share videos and photos from past balls.

Data Analysis

With regard to data analysis, I began by organizing my qualitative field notes data into 5 sections centered on the spaces in which I observed the young people in my study explicitly engaging with ballroom history: balls, house practices, retreats, theory classes, and private ballroom social media accounts and pages. To clarify, I had one section that included all my observation notes of the youth learning history in balls, another for their

engagement with ballroom history in house practices, retreats, and so on. Then within each section I came up with initial codes to describe what I perceived to be happening with regard to how the young people were expanding their knowledge of ballroom history. For example, some of these initial codes were “being lectured on ballroom history”, “watching videos of legendary and iconic ballroom members”, “listening to others share personal stories of moments in ballroom history”, and “engaging in q & a about ballroom history” just to name a few.

After coding the data in each section, I wrote memos to explore how and if the data responded to QOC critique-informed questions around how these coded moments highlighted queer of color resilience, how these coded moments relied on the experiential knowledge within the community, and how these coded moments spoke to the ways in which ballroom members use their agency to engage in a historical curriculum that defies the constraints of QOC marginalization. Ultimately, I wanted to engage in an exploration of how they engaged in their own teaching of their history from a QOC critique perspective. I then looked across my memos to identify patterns across how within the different spaces (e.g., house practices, retreats) ballroom members engaged in a history curriculum that resonated with a QOC critique. In what follows, I draw on my data to highlight how ballroom culture’s approach to engaging in history curriculum centers queer of color resilience, the experiential knowledge within local intra-historians, and the use of their agency to digitally resist QOC erasure.

Findings

Queer of Color Resilience

Contrary to popular approaches to school curriculum that present race as separate from gender and sexuality (Brockenbrough, 2015), and often present queer youth of color from a damage-centered perspective (Tuck, 2009), I found that in ballroom culture its members teach ballroom history in ways that resonate with QOC critique's charge to analyze how queer people of color resist the intersections of racism, heterosexism, transphobia, and classism (Ferguson, 2004). That is, as they recount the legacies of ballroom legends and icons there is care taken as to not minimize or erase any aspect of their identities with regard to race, gender, sexuality, and class status. Furthermore, in my analysis of the moments in which my participants were engaged in learning ballroom history, I observed that their teachers emphasized the resilience and contributions of ballroom members as opposed to privileging what Tuck (2009) refers to as damage-centered narratives or narratives that present people and communities only as broken and damaged. This focus on queer of color resilience (Brockenbrough, 2015) is the first example I present from ballroom's QOC critique approach to engaging in a history curriculum.

I use QOC resilience to speak to the act of thinking and teaching about ballroom history from an intersectional lens that emphasizes agency and resilience. This approach resists reducing ballroom members down to only one of their social identity markers. It resists presenting ballroom members as only victims and incapable of practicing agency to respond to the unique challenges they may face due to their social locations. Below I

share two examples of how QOC resilience showed up in ballroom's approach to teaching its history.

Example 1: The Retreat

We arrived quite late on a Friday evening. After waiting for what seemed like hours for the young people to arrive to our shuttle bus parked in downtown New York City and a 2-hour bus ride of Popeye's chicken sandwiches and classic R&B music, we had finally reached the resort which would serve as the backdrop to our retreat experience in upstate New York. I, along with the other 8 young people present, had been invited to engage in a 2-day retreat for new ballroom members. I was invited by the creator and principal facilitator of the retreat after he had learned of my research interests about ballroom and the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth. Our first evening at the resort was spent enjoying dinner together, playing board games, and getting to know one another. Though I was there for research purposes, I was invited to participate in every activity. After a late night of monopoly, the participants hurriedly consumed coffee during breakfast the next morning before walking into the first lecture of the retreat. As we walked in, the facilitator was there full of energy and ready to begin his talk on Black trans women and the creation of ballroom culture.

Rob: We will start with a video of a Black trans woman, Princess Johnae. Let's talk about the politics of performativity. Trans women often performed on Sunday, the day we were ostracized from Church, so the club and these performances became our church. The trans woman's lip sync performance became not only the preaching word, but a way of ministering to a people who have been ostracized. This performance is a way of bringing our ancestors into the room.

Rob proceeds to turn down the lights and show the participants a video of Princess Johnae performing "rhythm of love. After the video ends, he continues.

Rob: That was in 2010. What we did not know is that during that performance Princess Johnae was suffering with cancer. She was in pain and later wound up passing away. She's a reflection of the numerous ancestors in our community who we have lost. Black trans women, somehow, someway, they made a way out of no way. Why are our Black trans women ancestors so important to ballroom? Black trans women created Black drag balls which later morphed into the present-day house ball community. The greatest gift of my life. Ballroom is Black, and it's important to lift up Black trans women, because they created these spaces of freedom that we all enjoy. They are brilliantly resilient, even when faced with brutality they created ballroom out of love, out of care. And we must lift them up because younger Black trans women don't have access to that history, and when you don't tell your story, someone will tell it, and they'll tell it wrong. And usually through a lens of pathology. We often talk about these women when we want to lift up their deaths or the violence they encounter. But oh, these women are so much more than that and those of us in ballroom, we owe them everything. They created a space for us when everybody else counted us out! What a gift.

In Rob's opening of his first retreat lecture we see his commitment to engaging with the resilience and agency of the Black trans women ancestors of ballroom culture. That is, instead of as he mentions "presenting Black trans women and ballroom members through a lens of pathology", he teaches about the many ways they were brilliantly resilient even in the face of racism, transphobia, and classism. He is careful to emphasize their resilience and the love and care they have for themselves and the community. After the opening shared above, Rob continued in that first lecture to teach about Tracy Africa Norman and Leiomy Maldonado, two living iconic Black trans women in ballroom, though from different eras. Specifically, Rob teaches the young people present on the retreat not only of Tracy's contributions to ballroom but her career as a working model. Rob lifts up the resilience she had to practice once she lost her modeling contract after it was found out that she was trans. However, as Rob shared, Tracy persevered and never gave up. And in 2015 she resumed her career as a model. In addition to Tracy's story, Rob showed a clip from Nike's Be True campaign featuring Leiomy Maldonado. Now an

icon in the ballroom scene, Leiomy was the first trans woman to appear on MTV's "America's Best Dance Crew" in 2009. She has also appeared in popular music videos for artists like Willow Smith.

Over the next few days, the young people would engage in lectures around the creation of ballroom culture, the resilience of Black trans women, the art of performance, the many legends and icons of ballroom culture; and be invited to perfect their vogue and runway crafts. In between lectures and activities, the retreat attendees had time to form bonds with one another during leisure time, which was often spent in the resort's swimming pool, or together in one of the attendee's hotel rooms. I present Rob's approach to honor his work and offer it as an *example* of what becomes possible when we approach the designing of history curriculum grounded in a QOC critique which allows us to design and present LGBTQ+ curriculum from an intersectional lens and with an emphasis not on Black queer and trans victimhood but on resilience.

Example 2: Vogue Theory Course

As a part of my research, I attended a vogue theory class facilitated by an icon in the ballroom scene, Stallion. This class was not part of the aforementioned retreat. I only attended one class, but I later learned that the vogue theory class was a part of a series of sessions in which the participants would explore the history of vogue, the different artistic interpretations of vogue by ballroom icons and legends, and enjoy multiple opportunities to hone their own performance skills. The class lasted a few hours and took place at a dance studio in New York City. The class I observed was attended by 9 young people. However, after looking through the private social media page for the vogue

theory series, it could be assumed that classes have been attended by up to at least 20 people. While observing the class, I observed that like Rob in the retreat, Stallion talked about ballroom legends and icons, lifting up their gifts with regard to performance and providing their social identity markers as the reasons for those gifts. In his approach Stallion talked about how they had these gifts because of who they were, not in spite of it.

In the class, the Stallion moved through beautifully woven discourses of the five elements of vogue, making it a point to offer up examples of how ballroom legends and icons told stories through these elements, through their vogue. At various times he encouraged the participants to use their performance to tell their stories. During one exercise in which the participants were lined up against a wall and invited to showcase their performance one-by-one, Stallion stopped one of the young people and shared the following:

Stallion: Wait a minute, wait a minute. Stop the music. I know you have more in you. I know you do. So, I don't want you to think of this like you gotta get through all the elements. I want you to use your vogue to discover who you already are and tap into your imagination. Do y'all remember what I said earlier about how the iconic girls use their performance to articulate themselves? They tell their story. And the things that people like, um, get amazed by, the moves, that comes from the power of who they are. Only they can move like that. There is power in being them. And there is power in being you. Don't let anybody tell you different. Only we can move like this because of who we are. But we can't be afraid. We gotta let go. So you were being all shy just now. Don't deny yourself, that would be denying your power. When you are at home watching the iconic girls like Sinia, Alyssa, Daesja, really get into them. Only fem queens (trans women) can move like that. It's a part of who they are. It's their power. But that only happens when you surrender to it. Be you baby. Be you.

At the beginning of the vogue theory class and before the excerpt above, Stallion gave a quick explanation of how ballroom legends and icons articulate themselves through their performance. He told the history of vogue and ballroom performance

through the lives of ballroom icons and legends. And like in the ballroom retreat, he emphasized the power that lies in the intersection of racial, gender, sexual, and class identities, stating that there is power in the intersections. There is power in being able to traverse multiple words, power in being able to embrace all parts of your identities. And he continued to offer up ballroom legends and icons as human examples of this power. And in the excerpt above, as he did many times while the participants practiced, he stopped the music to remind them that there is power in being them and fully expressing themselves without fear, the same way the ballroom icons and legends before them have done. Stallion spoke about these legends and icons in a way that connected the power of their performances and contributions to ballroom to who they were. He mentions that only fem queens (trans women) can move like that because it is part of who they are. It is in them. Thus, like Rob above, he focuses on their unique agency, resilience, and abilities while not disconnecting these things from their social identity markers.

I have not dedicated much space here to discussing the retreat and vogue theory specifics in great detail, as my intention is just to illuminate a few of the ways in which ballroom engages in a history curriculum informed by a QOC critique. What is important to this paper, are the ways in which the ballroom retreats and vogue theory class relied on QOC critique as not only a way to lift up those who are often left out of in-school history books because of the intersections of their identities (Cruz, 2013), but also to invite the youth participants to consider how their identities converge to create ample opportunities for resilience and agency (Love, 2017).

The Experiential Knowledge of Local Intra-historians

One distinguishing aspect of QOC critique from other fields and analytical frameworks is its reliance on the experiential knowledge of those within queer communities of color who are often excluded in the politics of knowledge production (Brockenbrough, 2015). Rarely are queers of color invited to speak to their own lived experiences and often when others seek to tell our stories, they tell them through a lens of pathology (Cruz, 2013). QOC critique holds that in privileging these pathologizing victimization narratives shared by those outside queer communities of color, the agency, contributions, and knowledges of queers of color are erased; Consequently, systems that continue to exclude the lives and knowledges of queers of color are maintained. In contrast, QOC critique regards the experiential knowledge of queers of color as its primary source of knowledge production (Brockenbrough, 2015). In my analysis of ballroom's approach to teaching history, I found that ballroom's reliance on local intra-historians to communicate its history is an example of operationalizing their value of the experiential knowledge within queer folks of color and their communities.

I use local intra-historians here to refer to members from within the local ballroom community who are called on to share the history of the community with other ballroom members, as illustrated above with Rob and Stallion. Local then refers to their identification as members of the same local context, while intra refers to their status as members from within the ballroom community. For example, Rob who lives in the same city as the young people on the retreat would be local and as an active member of ballroom he would be intra, or within the community. Not only did I see the use of local intra-historians in the retreats and vogue theory classes, but I also observed this approach

in house practices as well. Below I share an example from a series of house practices I attended in which the house mother invited many local intra-historians to engage her house children in expanding their historical knowledge of ballroom's legends and icons.

While immersed in ballroom culture for my research, I was invited by the house mother of S.T (pseudonym to protect the house's identity) to attend weekly house practices. These practices were held every Wednesday evening from 6:30pm-9pm. The practice locations varied between different community centers across New York City. Each house practice was attended by between 10-15 members, the house children. Generally, the house practices were devoted to allowing the house children an open space to perfect their performance. That is, someone from the house might start the practice by leading everyone in a group stretch before playing house beats and inviting everyone to spread out across the area and practice. During a handful of practices toward the end of 2019, the house mother elected to invite guests to run the practices. These guests were always ballroom members from other houses, many of them being legends and house mothers or fathers. In one particular practice, Cookie (pseudonym) was the guest judge. Cookie was the founding mother of the house of C.J. She began the practice with some warmup activities and then she launched into a series of training activities. Throughout the activities, Cookie would stop the music to ask the group if they knew who certain ballrooms and legends were. For example, Cookie stopped and asked, "do y'all know who Sinia is?" All the members nodded their heads as to say yes. Cookie then proceeded:

Cookie: who is she?

House member: well, she's an icon. And she vogues down!

Cookie: Ok, and what else? Talk to me about her story and her performance. And how she used her performance to tell her story.

House member: well, she has presence.

Cookie: Yes, but give me more. What about her story?

House member: I mean, I've seen her clips a million times. She's one of the best.

Cookie: Y'all gotta know your history. Y'all must understand that performance, and vogue specifically, is not just coming out and jumping around. There are elements. There is technique. There is style. Icons and legends use these things to tell their story. Take your time. Tell a story. And respect the art of it all. Respect those who have come before you and what they have contributed to the community. And always be mindful of how the icons have helped ballroom and its people evolve.

In this instance, Cookie called attention to a ballroom icon so that the new generation of ballroom would not only recognize her names but would grow their understanding of the contributions these legends and icons have made to the ballroom community. Cookie was not unique in stopping the practice at various times to talk about ballroom's icons and legends. There were 3 more guests in the house practices during the final months of 2019, and each time, like Cookie, they shared personal stories and anecdotes to connect the stories of icons and legends to the enduring legacy of ballroom. Another example was Darnell. Just as Cookie had done, Darnell came to run the house practice with his own unique set of practices, drills, and exercises. He did not stop the drills as much as Cookie did, but he did give feedback to the whole group after every drill. And in his feedback, he mentioned many stories he'd had with ballroom legends and icons. Simply, in providing a rationale for his feedback, he always referenced a legend or icon who had helped him deepen his understanding of his performance and stage presence. When I asked the house mother about her decision to invite outside guests to run practices, she responded, "those were not *outside* guests, baby. They're from within the community. And I knew they would be the only ones to let these young people know who they are, where they come from, and who they can be."

I share the above vignette from Cookie's practice to highlight ballroom's use of local intra- historians. That is, all of the people who I observed communicate ballroom history came from within the ballroom community. In ballroom, there is value placed on the expertise within the community. There were no instances of bringing someone from outside ballroom or from other institutions to share knowledge of the history of ballroom. And this allowed for the telling of personal anecdotes with legendary and iconic ballroom members grounded in the local intra historian's experiential knowledge. To illustrate, as Rob did when speaking of his personal experiences with Princess Johnae, Cookie spoke of getting her first chop³ from Sinia (ballroom icon) and later receiving advice from Sinia on how to improve her performance. The stories she told of her interactions with the icon Sinia were only stories that she could tell as they were personal memories she had of her time with the icon. And by inviting Cookie and other local intra-historians from within ballroom the young people were exposed to a variety of stories about ballroom legends and icons, consequently expanding their knowledge of ballroom culture and the legends and icons behind its creation and evolution. I spoke to Rob about my observations of ballroom's use of local intra-historians to which he responded, "you got it. I like to think of it as the organic intellectual. Ballroom has a lot to teach the world and you've just mentioned one of them, which is this idea that intelligence is grounded in community, it has to emerge from the people."

³ A chop refers to the moment in which one of the judges makes the decision to remove a competitor from the competition. Competitors can be chopped for various reasons ranging from not adhering to the guidelines for the category, to not performing to the judges' standards.

Digital Resistance of QOC Erasure

The final aspect I want to present from my analysis of ballroom's approach to history was its use of digital platforms to communicate ballroom history to the global ballroom community. In a world that has become increasingly more digital, ballroom as a community has taken full advantage of the digital tools available to them. During my time immersed in ballroom culture, I realized that many ballroom historians and archivists shared their work not through traditional methods like print, but through social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, personal websites, and twitter. In applying a QOC critique, we can also see ballroom's creation of digital history archives as a way to resist QOC erasure. That is, due to the politics of knowledge production explored earlier, ballroom history is understudied thus relatively absent in traditional textbooks, histories, and academic journals. Thus, the community has relied on their agency to resist this historical erasure by using the tools available to them to document their own history outside of traditional methods. In the following paragraph I present a few examples.

There is a Facebook account called "humans of ballroom" in which its creator shares weekly profiles of important ballroom figures with the global ballroom community. I reached out to the creator of the humans of ballroom Facebook account and learned that they have hopes to start a podcast and video series based on this content being communicated on Facebook. On its Facebook page, the creator of the humans of ballroom shares this about the page's creation:

I hope to bring impactful, personal, deeply riveting stories of ballroom participants. Through this, I wish to most importantly humanize ourselves to each other. I believe all of 'us' share many of the same experiences. This is from my years of meeting many walks of life. So, I created Humans of Ballroom to connect our community through storytelling. As the community grows into different parts of the world (Brazil, Japan, Europe, etc.) and pop culture, I believe it's our stories

and personal experiences that will ground our voice as One. Simply because those colonizers keep trying it! We are the mecca of creativity, influence, beauty, language, and more in today's times—*Period!*

Another example, Noelle has organized an archive of ballroom's legendary and iconic performers through twitter threads in which she not only shares background information about these important figures but also analyzes their performance and highlights what makes them so unique. Noelle's twitter account "@noellearchives" has over 19,000 followers and more than 30,000 videos of ballroom icons and legends. I was able to speak to Noelle about her motivation for her digital archive:

Researcher: This is really amazing what you have built. Like when, sort of where and how did you get started?

Noelle: I started a few years ago when I joined my first ballroom house. It was in 2019 and like when I started transitioning and figuring out who I was. And watching old videos of femme queen performances helped me figure out who I was and who I wanted to be. So, I just started posting videos but then I realized that a lot of the people in my house was really into the scene of today, which is fine. But a lot of young people in the scene don't know our history and the history that comes within the categories. And our history is really hard to find. So, I wanted to share what I was learning about our history. And I'm still learning. And I never really think about what I do, my archive. I just love giving people their flowers, especially those who influenced me. And people are always telling me that what I'm doing is special. I just need to sit with that, you know? And own it. I won't stop. Eventually I'll get a website, but I need more money and resources for that. But it's coming.

Another example of digital archiving is the icon Niambi's learnyourhistory.net which is often referred to as ballroom's first online museum. On learnyourhistory.net visitors can deepen their understanding about the pioneers, icons, and legends of ballroom and the different eras of ballroom and what distinguishes one from the other. Lastly, there is also a digital video archive on YouTube called [ballroomthrowbacks](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3) which hosts hundreds of videos recorded from balls that have happened over the last two

decades. Ballroomthrowbacks was founded and continues to be run by Caesar Will. It is worth mentioning that across the interviews nearly all my participants spoke about being introduced to ballroom and perfecting their crafts from watching video clips featured on the ballroomthrowbacks YouTube channel. The examples of digital archives I mention here are by no means exhaustive. There are many other digital archives of ballroom that exist. I chose to lift these up as I observed many instances across the different research sites (house practices, vogue classes, retreats, etc.) in which the young people were engaging with or referencing the digital archives I have just shared. In addition, the videos hosted on ballroomthrowbacks were shown at every house practice I observed and at multiple times during the retreats. I will use the following paragraphs to share the implications my findings have for curriculum workers.

Implications

Ballroom's use of QOC resilience in its approach to history curriculum takes up the charge put forth by many scholars who have long advocated for an intentional centering of historical figures who live the interactions of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Aronson & Laughter, 2020; Brockenbrough, 2015; Kumashiro, 2001; Love, 2017). In addition to its intentional highlighting of the ways race, gender, sexuality, and class inform the lives of ballroom figures, the community makes sure to present their stories as more than struggle, presenting their lives as something more than just their engagement with their oppressors. In this way, ballroom subverts the victimization narratives often told to and about Black LGBTQ+ people, to emphasize their gifts and unique contributions to ballroom culture, thus, contributions to Black and LGBTQ+

culture and history. This approach is unique in that it pushes curriculum makers and designers to think about the ways that school curricula can not only be intersectional but move beyond the tropes often associated with Black LGBTQ+ life.

Ballroom's use of QOC resilience invites us to think about how we can design an LGBTQ+ curriculum in schools, especially history curriculum, in a way that centers the experiences of those who are often left out of contemporary curricula and educational discourse due to their multiple marginalized identities (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, class) and resist reducing their lives down to the tragedies they face because of racialized homophobia, sexualized and gendered racism, and transphobic classism. In this way, if schools are genuine in their desire to improve the educational experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth, then they must resist presenting Black history, LGBTQ+ history, American history in ways that center the traditional historiography of race in America with cisgender heterosexual Black men as the central characters in the history of exclusion, and white and non-Black LGBTQ+ figures as the principal figures in the history of queer and trans individuals (Ferguson, 2004). And most importantly, curriculum designers should constantly reflect on the ways that curriculum might reify an U.S. American narrative that disappears the many ways Black LGBTQ+ people have contributed to every facet of our society. As we move forward in reimagining curriculum in schools to reflect the lived experiences of all students, may we allow ballroom to serve as one such model of a curricular approach grounded in QOC resilience.

Many QOC critique scholars have written extensively about the need to regard experiential knowledge, particularly within queer communities of color, as valuable sites of knowledge (Brockenbrough, 2015; Callier, 2016; Ferguson, 2004; Love, 2017). These

scholars have maintained arguments that the oral histories passed down through generations of LGBTQ+ individuals of color contain invaluable knowledge around the legacies of the queer folks of color who have come before us. Similarly, other critical researchers have revealed the necessity to position members of marginalized communities as experts of their communities, legacies, and histories (Love, 2017; Tuck, 2009). These ideas connect to ballroom's insistence on relying on local intra-historians to communicate the histories of ballroom's legendary and iconic members. Ballroom's use of legends and icons in the scene to pass down the oral histories that sustain ballroom culture is an example of what is possible with regard to an LGBTQ+ inclusive history curriculum. That is, as schools seek to make LGBTQ+ curriculum relevant and sustaining for Black LGBTQ+ youth and others, I argue they need to collaborate with local members of these students' communities. Not only will these local intra-historians be able to provide histories that might not be captured in traditional and contemporary texts, but they model to the young people that their community is valuable, knowledgeable, and has expertise. This becomes especially important when we consider the ways in which Black LGBTQ+ communities have been positioned by society as helpless, vulnerable, weak, and susceptible to bullying, harassment, hate crimes, and HIV/Aids.

By relying on local intra- historians from within the culture, ballroom youth were able to see themselves as people who can know things. Thus, schools might benefit from thinking of an approach to curriculum that is designed and facilitated in collaboration with local figures from students' communities. And this moves beyond the traditional "family day" or "parent day" in schools in which a member from students' families comes to the class once a week or the annual diversity fair. This approach is much more

involved and should invite students to interact frequently with members of their own communities, as they seek to grow their understanding of their own cultures and histories.

In their new book on racial literacy in the digital era, Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz (2021) write that in the 21st century, many young people are increasingly using social platforms such as Facebook, twitter, Instagram, and tik tok. This has prompted many education scholars to advocate for curricula that incorporate these digital tools to meet students where they are, especially given that the Pew Research Center reported that 95% of teens have access to mobile technology and almost all are constantly online (Anderson & Jiang, 2020).

Recognizing the importance of social media not only in the lives of young people but in the lives of many folks living in our contemporary society, ballroom historians and archivists have leaned into using these technologies. By using social media platforms, they are placing content in places where ballroom youth already are. Thus, ballroom offers an example of how curriculum can be communicated using digital tools and not only rely on traditional print methods, many of which are inaccessible to ballroom youth and youth who may not have access to libraries or to online academic publications. And as a way to resist historical erasure, the community has used their agency to respond to their absence in historical print spaces to maintains their history in digital spaces.

I argue here that it would be fruitful for curriculum workers to use these digital archives in schooling spaces as not only a way to bring in content that is often absent in curriculum, but to decenter traditional histories mired it whiteness and meet students where they already are in this digital era. I also argue that we support these digital

archivists and historians as they expand their platforms and continue doing the valuable work of documenting the history of ballroom and keeping its legacy and people alive.

If we are serious about inviting Black LGBTQ+ youth into the schools in ways that honor their lived experiences, we might also think seriously about how we respond to the call to design LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula that reflect their lived experiences.

Ballroom is one such example of how an LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula informed by QOC critique could look. Ballroom gives us a guide to think about as we begin the process of creating an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.

Lastly, I do not assume that all Black LGBTQ+ are able to or are interested in being part of ballroom culture. And I do not assume that designing an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum wrapped around ballroom will respond to the lives of all Black LGBTQ+ youth, rather what I offer here is an invitation to take our cues from ballroom to invoice a QOC critique as we seek to design inclusive curricula that is responsive to the lived experiences of Black LGBTQ+ youth.

Conclusion

We are currently in a moment in which LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum has become part of the larger conversation around educational equity. At the time of writing this article at least 5 states have adopted legislation that mandates that schools must implement LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula. Nonetheless, the legislation falls short of giving clarity around what an LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula look like. And we know that often when left up to individual schools and teachers, LGBTQ+ content is rarely included in K-

12 curriculum in ways that are intentional, intersectional, and centered on LGBTQ+ resilience and agency. Thus, I am arguing here that now is the perfect time to engage in thoughtful conversation around what constitutes an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.

I argue that in these early conversations around LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, we rely on QOC critique as an approach to designing curriculum that reflects the lived experiences of queer youth of color with ballroom culture as an example. A QOC critique will require us to shift from thinking of ballroom and queer and trans communities of color as only victims and damaged, to thinking about how we can learn from the ways in which they use their agency to reimagine ways of living outside the constraints of QOC marginalization. And though schools in many ways have failed Black LGBTQ+ youth, ballroom culture has worked toward sustaining them, and making sure they know they are, who they have been (as a community), and who they can become.

VI- CONCLUSIONS

As I have chosen the alternative format for writing a dissertation, this space, this final chapter is truly mine. It does not belong to my participants, or even to ballroom. It is mine. Due to presenting my findings chapters as independent articles complete with their own implications and discussions, I do not need to dedicate much space to recasting those findings and implications here. Thus, this chapter is mine.

In one of my favorite YouTube videos Beyoncé asks, “what do you do after 19 Grammy awards?” (Knowles, 2011). She mentions earlier in the video that getting a Grammy award was her dream. As a young person, she practiced her craft incessantly, ran the treadmill in heels while singing to build endurance and develop the ability to sing and dance simultaneously, lost sleep, and forwent many of her high school rituals like graduation, prom, and pep rallies. She had a goal. She had a dream. She wanted a Grammy award. In that same video, however, she talks about not stopping even after receiving her first Grammy. After accepting her first award, she jokes about leaving the stage and heading straight to a rehearsal. And 19 Grammy awards later, she lamented:

“I’ve won 19 Grammy awards and I have no idea what winning a Grammy feels like. I just kept running to the next thing, to the next award. I was never satisfied. And I don’t think that’s a healthy way to live. I don’t want to never be satisfied. I want to stop and smell the roses. Live in the moment. Be present with everything I do. Feel them. I want to know what it feels like to win a Grammy. Because what do you do after 19 Grammy awards? Whatever you want.” (Knowles, 2011).

I do not want to never be satisfied. I am satisfied with this dissertation.

I began this dissertation process with a question inspired by ballroom culture. After experiencing my first ball I asked myself, “what if school was like a ball?” In many ways, this dissertation is the beginning of my journey toward asking and collaborating with ballroom members to answer that question. Specifically, in this dissertation I wanted to explore Black LGBTQ+ youth magic, Black LGBTQ+ youth agency and how ballroom culture allows for, or not, expressions and manifestations of that magic and agency. And I wanted to know how the young people in my study understood their magic. I did that. And I am satisfied, for now. With the completion of this dissertation, I have just won my first Grammy. So, before I briefly revisit some of the findings and implications and talk through future directions for my scholarship, let me feel this moment. Let me sit with it. Here’s what it feels like:

I am writing this from an empty cafe inside The Hotel Indigo in San Antonio, Texas. There is Tejano music playing in the background. A row of red doors cover the wall directly in front of me. I am the only one here. The lights are off, it’s just me and my Grammy [my dissertation]. In this moment I am wearing my favorite T-shirt which features on the front a large photo of Toni Morrison. I feel liberated. I feel very light. As Toni suggested, I have surrendered to the air. This dissertation journey has been a long one. There were many beautiful moments and some that were not so beautiful. I have experienced a range of emotions. I went back and forth with the IRB board for 6 months to get approval for this study. But that was the easy part. It would take even more patience and energy to recruit participants for this study. There was no shortage of

obstacles. As I was collecting data, COVID-19 happened. And I had to wait patiently as ballroom figured out how to hold in-person balls again, and they did; and I attended them to collect data. Unsurprisingly, I got COVID-19. That was a low point. I lost valuable dissertation time. Fortunately, I recovered, and I finished my dissertation, but the obstacles would continue. On the day that I was told I could schedule a date to defend my dissertation, my sister suffered a severe heart attack which resulted in her exchanging her 4-bedroom home for a room in the intensive care unit at the Cardiovascular Institute in San Antonio, Texas. So, this is a bittersweet moment. I have just won a Grammy, but my sister is less than a mile away from me on life support. I am happy to be done. I feel light. At the same time, I feel heavy and sad. I start each sentence here with a smile, but the tears fall before I reach the punctuation mark. But that's what ballroom is, isn't it? An oasis in the middle of the desert. A space in which ballroom members can exist. A space where they can be restored when the world drains them. A world within a world. A dissertation about the magic of Black LGBTQ+ youth in a current socio-political climate in which messages about the disposability of Black LGBTQ+ lives are pervasive, resulting in a seemingly ubiquitous sea of Black LGBTQ+ names circulating around social media preceded by a hashtag. A contradiction. That's how *this* feels, for now.

Summary of Findings

The goal of this dissertation was to explore how 8 Black LGBTQ+ youth within ballroom culture understood their agency within ballroom spaces. I approached this study from a queer of color analysis framework which charges educators to study how queer folks of color not only live within the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality

but how they practice agency to resist the intersections of racism, heterosexism, transphobia, and classism. Briefly, here's what I learned.

Revisiting Chapter IV

Findings in chapter IV indicate that the youth in my study regarded school as a confining space in which they were fearful of anti-LGBTQ+ rejection and abuse. Thus, they used their agency to suppress their LGBTQ+ identities in order to minimize their experiences with discrimination. Suppressing their identities resulted in the youth feeling disconnected from school, isolated, and increased their risk for depression and anxiety. Contrastingly, the youth understood ballroom as a liberatory space in which they felt able to confidently explore and express their LGBTQ+ identities and create alternatives for themselves outside of socially constructed gender expectations.

Results suggest that Black LGBTQ+ youth are always practicing agency, albeit to work toward different ends such as occulting or exploring their LGBTQ+ identities. Understanding the things that invite youth to be less themselves in schools suggests a need to address from an intersectional lens the role of school in perpetuating anti-LGBTQ+ in discrimination. Findings suggest that schools can learn from ballroom spaces how to better invite Black LGBTQ+ into schools in humane and educative ways, encourage their agentic imaginations within education spaces, and promote liberatory school environments that recognize and embrace these youth's intersectional identities. This will require addressing the anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment queer and trans youth face by all members in the school community, including educators. This will

charge school administrators to provide ample opportunities for school faculty and staff to engage in training around how to intervene or interrupt acts of bullying and abuse among students. Particularly, in the case of Black LGBTQ+ students, schools will also need to address the absence of GSAs in schools with primarily students of color. And in exploring GSAs and other “homeplaces” in schools, we must be intersectional to make sure that students who live at the intersections of multiple interlocking systems of oppression are not excluded from initiatives intended to address the unique challenges they face. And as we design school initiatives and explore the possibilities with regard to the inclusion of Black LGBTQ+ youth, we might benefit from taking our cues from ballroom culture and other queer and trans communities of color, as they often are more effective in creating liberatory spaces. Thus, we must move beyond regarding Black LGBTQ+ youth and their communities as only victims, to understanding that they are agents, who when able to exist outside the white cisgender heterosexual gaze, have the unique abilities to access a radical Black LGBTQ+ creative imagination that not only has the potential to open up possibilities for their existence, but move us all closer to a world in which we can more fully exist.

Revisiting Chapter V

In writing up my findings chapters as independent articles I wanted to challenge myself. I did not want to take the “easy” approach to presenting my findings. Thus, in chapter 5 I elected to think deeply and intentionally about the everyday work of teachers. I wanted to think about where we were in our present moment and how my data might assist educators in responding to the current times. So, in chapter V I address the reality

of having legislation mandating, in some states, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ representation in schools but without offering further guidance on how teachers might achieve this inclusion. I wrote chapter V reflecting on questions that teachers might have with regard to “how do we do LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum?”. And in working from a QOC analysis which allows me to invert the paradigm within which we often approach ballroom and queer and trans communities of color, I was able to direct that question to ballroom. Instead of asking how schools can “save” ballroom youth, I wanted to explore how ballroom could guide teachers in their efforts to collaborate with Black LGBTQ+ youth to improve their experiences with curriculum in schools. So, in exploring the agency of ballroom members, I saw a connection between their approach to history and the assumptions underpinning a QOC analysis. In this way, ballroom provides everyday teachers with an example of a QOC analysis approach to LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. It is also more evidence, not that anymore was needed, that ballroom culture has a lot to teach the world over. It is time that we listen.

Future directions

I want to expand this research by spending more time immersed within ballroom culture and working with more ballroom youth to grow my understanding of their agentive practices within ballroom spaces. In addition, I want to continue working with the 8 youth in this study to see how their understandings and practices of their agency change and evolve over time and in other spaces in their lives outside of schools and ballroom. I am also interested in exploring the experiences of teachers who seek to use

ballroom and QOC analysis as a lens through which to reimagine their approach to LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. Finally, I would like to facilitate explicit collaborations between ballroom and schools in the pursuit of educational equity, and explore the affordances and limitations of such a collaboration. In order to truly unpack the potential of the methodological and pedagogical possibilities that lies within the agency of Black LGBTQ+ youth, future research must consider what this line of inquiry would look like with other types of Black LGBTQ+ students (i.e., students not who do not have access to nor interest in ballroom culture, students within queer and trans communities of color outside of ballroom, Black students of trans experience, etc.).

Additional Learnings

I want to end this dissertation with more insight from the young people in my study. At the end of chapter IV, I shared a quote from Cherry about what she believes the world can learn from ballroom. I asked every participant in my study what they thought the world could learn from ballroom. Here are their responses:

Kevin: Everything. You know, like, we call it, like, the fantasy world and stuff like that, but I don't see it as a fantasy because literally, you have people fantasizing about something and bringing it to life. You know, like, um, so many things that we say are not possible, um, are possible. Like, in Ballroom, there's no limit. Like, we literally strategize, we plan, we think of it, and we find a way to make things work, um, and we do it in a space that is not confining or, like, restricting anybody of being whoever they want to be. So, like, that's one of the most important things. Um, and also, it's just, um, just to love. It's so cliché, and it goes back to that one word, but genuinely love somebody for who they are and I promise you, like, they will love you, they will grow, like, everything will work properly. So, I think that's something that a lot of people could learn from Ballroom.

Mike: The world can learn from ballroom, expression, creativity, and just loving and uplifting one another. Um, these balls are competitive, but in the end... Within the venue it's competitive, but once everyone is out of that venue, we're congratulating each other. We're like, "Oh, you did amazing." Like, "You earned that." And whether you didn't win, "You got out there and you did what you needed to do." Eh, like I think that's the best that like, inside it's competitive, but outside everybody is congratulating each other; for even walking, for coming to the ball, talking about how great of a time it was, seeing all the costumes, the effects they had, everybody was on, how- how the energy was in there. Um, just you know enjoyin' - they enjoyed themselves competing.

Fable: The greatness, the sacrifice, the turmoil, the pain that we go through on a regular basis, that people think that we don't go through. But the different types of hate that is shown to our community. It's really crazy. All these things matter, um, people matter, but the way the world and society, they make it, uh, uh, they make us like an abomination. I wish that they would learn that that's not the case. But I feel like people should learn that all people, though they may be different, though they may be strange to you, they may have things that you don't understand and don't know. I would want them to learn...I would want them to accept.

Paris: Love. Um (laughs). Definitely love. like, just happiness. Um. Yeah. Very much love and very much happiness. You know, people come out and let out their frustrations on the floor, but the root of ballroom came from just the love of ballroom, like you know, people just love to dance, love to express themselves, their body, our appreciation, like you know like, people appreciated what they had to offer on the ballroom floor, you know? These trans women come out and you know, they have work done and, you know, day to day society won't appreciate the work that they have, like you know? But like when you- when you- when you see them, when you see them in ballroom, like they're celebrated, like you know they have a category, they have categories dedicated to them and them only. So definitely appreciation, definitely happiness, definitely love, you know? So it was just, that was, that's what- that's what the world is missing. We need to love one each other (laughs).

Kofi: Hmm. Um. The world could learn resilience definitely. The world could learn um, just untold history like there's so much, so much history in ballroom that people in ballroom don't even know. Um, and I feel like a-also, um it's history like it, it-it's such an ingrained, like ballroom has such a huge piece in the Harlem Renaissance, but people just don't, don't know about it. Right now I'm reading a, a book on um Black art um from pre-colonial Africa to 2005, and I just read the Harlem Renaissance piece. And besides it being a short, short piece, like of course there's no like, no genderqueer, no LGBT section like nothing, um, nothing about ballroom, um nothing about drag ball culture, nothing, Um, so definitely the, the history that was created, also that was created by black trans women. Like I wish they knew that. (laughs)

Jordan: Acceptance. Definitely acceptance. They could really learn acceptance from ballroom.

Velvet: Whew, so much! Get back to me.

Cherry: I think the world could learn from ballroom that as long as you're able to freely express yourself, as long as you're given the opportunity to grow and stay alive, and have basic rights that everyone has, freedom of expression, everything will be ok. If we all had that in spaces, the world would be so much more loving, the world would be so much more accepting, the world would be more understanding, it would be more human. Yea, the world would be more human.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions and Focus group Prompts

Background

Could you share a little bit with me about your experiences in schools?

Where did you attend school?

What was it like being a student at this school?

How would you describe yourself as a student? How would your friends describe you?

Teachers?

Who did you hang out with? Any clubs or extracurricular activities?

What are your dreams?

Give an example of some things that make you happy? Make you smile?

Entry into Ballroom

Could you share with me a bit about your first experiences/interactions in the ballroom scene?

How were you introduced to ballroom?

How would you describe your life before and after your entry into your house and the ballroom scene?

What were some of the moments of your life that led up to you joining a house?

Experiences in a House

How did you end up becoming a member of your particular house?

What is it like being a member of your house?

How would you describe your house?

What are some of the things you like about your house?

How are your experiences as a member of your house different from other experiences you may have had with other groups, families, communities?

What makes your house unique?

Who is the closest person to you in your house?

Preparing for a Ball

Could you walk me through some of the things you do to prepare for a ball?

How long does it take generally take to prepare for a ball?

Who comes up with the themes for the balls?

Walking a Ball

Which categories do you walk/perform at the balls?

Are there categories that you have yet to walk that you would like to?

Are there categories that you have yet to walk that you would like to?

How would you describe a ball to those who have never been?

How would you describe how you feel when walking a ball?

Would you ever wear things for a performance outside the ball? Like, around the city?

Why/Why not?

How are you different when performing from when you're not performing?

How would you describe yourself when you're in a ball? Is that different from when you're not in a ball? Why? Why not?

Which things do you rehearse? Which things do you not choose to rehearse? Why? Why not?

Are you completely free to be yourself at balls? What does "being free" mean?

Why do you think ballroom allows (or doesn't allow) you to feel free to be yourself?

Can you give some specific examples of things about ballroom culture that invite (uninvite) you to “be yourself”?

I heard the word/phrase....., what does it mean?

Why is the word/phrase....used in the ballroom? I’ve never heard it before.

If you could choose the next ball theme, what would you choose and why?

If you could create a new ballroom category, what would you create?

Where do you see ballroom culture in 5 years? 10? 20?

Focus Group Prompts

What are your thoughts on these (preliminary) themes I have come up with?

Do you see your participation in ballroom reflected in the themes I have presented here?

Would you agree with some of the statements I have come up with about ballroom culture? Why? Why not?

What would you add to what I have come up with?

How would you change what I have shared here?

How would you all describe ballroom culture? Houses? Balls?

Why do you think spaces like these (balls) exist?

What’s the importance of spaces like these (ballroom)?

What do the following terms mean.....?

Can you think of another place that makes you feel as you do in the balls? What are they?

How are they similar? Different?

How do you feel when you’re walking/performing?

I’ve heard some new language while being in the balls, what do they mean? Who came up with these words/terms/phrases?