

University of Chicago
Department of Sociology

WALKING TOWARD RECOGNITION:
PERFORMANCE, EMBODIMENT, AND THE PURSUIT OF REALNESS WITHIN THE
CHICAGO HOUSE AND BALL SCENE

By
Jared Kerman

Bachelor's Thesis

May 2020

Preceptor: Austin Kozlowski
Faculty Advisor: Kristin Schilt

ABSTRACT

The house and ball scene is a unique subcultural space in which members of the queer and trans community gather to engage, compete, and celebrate in the dramaturgic creation of identity. The scene is dynamic and multifaceted; a multitude of ball house communities provide differential support and resources for their members, and these members structure their involvement in the scene via Vail's (1999) processes of group self-incorporation—affinity, affiliation, and signification. Members are driven to demonstrate their authentic engagement in the scene and endeavor to do so by embodying social roles including family positions and occupations. To perform, members cultivate a personal front and acquire social and cultural capital; these work in tandem to generate recognition—the symbolic subcultural capital par excellence of the house and ball scene. Recognition capital is applied towards personal and mutual benefit, and participants are motivated to achieve recognition so as to overcome the pervasive structural violence experienced by the house and ball scene's members beyond the ballroom doors. When a member of the scene accumulates a sufficient amount of recognition, she is awarded with realness—a specially designated status that designates its possessor's authenticity and commitment to the scene. Even the application of this capital, however, is judged according to its authentic use following the internal value system of the house and ball scene. Evaluation and understanding of the house and ball scene provides insight into how identity is created and assumed within hierarchized social space.

INTRODUCTION

“Nah don’t do that, Jared—only the girls do that!” Bill Robichaux¹, a young Black cis-man only a couple of years my senior, laughed shyly before turning his attention to Amii Robichaux, a young Latina transgender woman sitting on my other side. “*Why are you teaching him to clap like that?*”

“*It’s more fun that way!*” Amii beamed and grabbed my hands to demonstrate. “*See?*”

My head was already nearly touching Bill’s in an effort to hear him speak over the ballroom’s blaring sound system when someone turned the music up even higher. Before I could process the change, Bill grabbed the neck of my shirt, motioned for me to stand with him, and suddenly—much like Dorothy—I was transported to Oz.

The “Living in the Land of Oz Ball” was the first ball I attended as an official member of the Chicago house of Robichaux, the Chicago chapter of the ball house Robichaux. Bill and

¹ Both participant names and house names have been substituted with pseudonyms

Amii are also members of this chapter and have donned the house's name as their own, as is convention in the scene. My lesson in how to properly clap was the first of many. With practice and sincere engagement, handclapping also presents itself as one of many skills within the house and ball scene that can—and if you are actually serious about membership, should—be learned and embodied to the point that it feels natural.

The house and ball scene is a niche subcultural field (Bourdieu 1984) established in metropolitan areas both nationwide and globally. The house and ball scene does not describe a singular site but rather a dynamic conglomerate of many distinct subcommunities called ball houses in addition to ball scene itself—a community space where “*the gay Olympics*” are held, according to one interviewee. These two sites are interrelated yet different in the roles that they serve for their participants: the house scene is built around family roles like parent and child, and it prioritizes values like community, care, self-improvement, and mutual aid; in the ball scene, individual members compete against rivals from other houses for personal reward—glory at least, if not also a trophy or cash-prize—based on the success of their performance.

Members join the subcultural social space of the house and ball scene through well-studied processes of affinity, affiliation, and signification (following Vail 1999). Prior research into the house and ball scene provides valuable insight into members' affinities for the scene: for many, the space serves provides resources that enable a unique means of withstanding, negotiating, and transcending the structural violence faced by the queer and trans community (Bailey 2011:366). Susman (2000) calls the scene “a creative response to poverty, joblessness and discrimination [that] provides support and a distinct culture for [its] members” (118). Attention has not yet been paid, however, to what motivates members of the scene to affiliate

and retain membership nor to what compels them to rise through ranks of the ballroom's multileveled hierarchy—to signify and fully self-incorporate their identities into the scene.

I argue that individuals are motivated to move through processes of subcultural self-incorporation—are driven to compete and gain status within the scene—for the purpose of achieving recognition: the symbolic capital *par excellence* of the house and ball scene. One's ability to earn recognition is predicated on her adherence to the subculture's internal value system (Thornton 1996). The house and ball scene prizes authenticity above all else; it is critically important to the successful creation of one's subcultural identity and her signification into the field. Judges—made up of high-ranking members of the house and ball scene who see themselves as auditors of capital—evaluate performers based on their apparent authenticity. To succeed, a performer must not only accumulate the relevant physical, social, or emotional traits of her role but also display her skills and knowledge naturally and effortlessly—she must present her role and its associated skills as authentically embodied and sincerely possessed.

Identity is dramaturgically achieved within the hierarchized social space of the house and ball scene through the skilled deployment of cultural and social capital associated with social roles. In the ball scene, members gain recognition by walking (i.e. competing) in events called “categories” that pertain to runway realness or vogue performance² (Appendix, Figure 1). In the house scene, recognition is earned through acts of family service. Ballroom categories like “executive realness” or “male/female figure” and house positions like “mother” and “daughter” do not represent contrived characters but rather real social positions based on gender, sexuality, and personal network that are actively pursued and embodied in the world of the every day. As members cultivate their performances, they simultaneously merge their personal and subcultural

² An intricate and highly acrobatic form of dance

identities; as such, the myriad embodied traits and behaviors of the scene—e.g., family, freedom, or a thicker skin—become embodied by their possessor both in and outside the ballroom doors.

In certain contexts, the accumulation of subcultural capital becomes about not merely surviving the injury (Ralph 2014) of the non-ballroom world but also, critically, transcending it. As Thornton (1996) elaborates: “subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied* to . . . fuel rebellion against, or rather escape from, the trappings of parental class” and willfully obscure traditional distinctions of class in favor of a more established position within the field (11-12; emphasis original). Vannini and Williams (2009:3) echo this point by describing authenticity as intrinsically related to “the objectification of a process of representation.” It follows that the road towards recognition necessarily involves a unification of one’s “inner self” and the authentic subcultural identity she strives to form behind the ball doors (following Sheinheit and Bogard 2016). In short, the authentic values of the house and ball scene are not only objectified and evaluated by performers and audience-members respectively but also embodied and deployed by the former to achieve status within the hierarchized social space of the house and ball scene. This recognition can additionally be applied towards other directives too like giving back to or further growing the house and ball community. Current literature does not sufficiently explore how authenticity is sought after and honed within a scene, how identity is cultivated within dynamic hierarchy, nor how the successful cultivation of an authentic identity within a subcultural space translates to the world of the every-day.

To explore these aforementioned gaps, I collected 75+ hours of ethnographic data from within the house and ball scene, and conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with active members of the Chicago house and ball scene. I was formally inducted into the ball house Robichaux in July of 2019, and I achieved the bulk of my ethnographic data between July and

December of 2019. In this period I attended weekly practices as well as multiple balls with the house of Robichaux, participated in two balls—walking schoolboy realness—and conducted interviews; 10 of my interview participants were members of the Chicago house of Robichaux. As subcultural identity is honed within the house and ball scene, participants of this scene employ processes of dramaturgic identity formation to hone and embody essential skills and behaviors for life outside the ballroom.

For those who succeed, I discover there is no greater prize nor greater goal than that of realness. Realness is a state of being that is produced by and fundamentally centers on processes of embodiment, performativity, authenticity, and the quest for status within hierarchized social space. Although an audience may evaluate their performer based on her authenticity, a performer with realness defies their critical eye; their performance is so consistently successful and their accumulated recognition capital is so high that their authenticity can be taken for granted. A performer with realness has according to Butler (2003), “the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect, which is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms . . . [such that] the approximation of realness appears to be achieved and the body performing and the ideal performed appear indistinguishable” (129). An actor’s personal front—her manufactured façade—and cultural capital can thus be combined to produce a performance so irrefutably, naturally, and wholly authentic that no interlocutor could deny the actor’s role and identity. Thus, we understand that identity is formed in part by the geosocial context of social reality *including* our positional relationships in the field, and we understand that it can be actively cultivated in a scene so as to perhaps achieve transcendence beyond it.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dramaturgic Processes of Identity

If we are to accept that identity is dramaturgically constructed, we must also elucidate how it is that social actors engage in this process: what props they use, what costuming they employ, and what additional dramatic effects they deploy to hone their subcultural selves. Goffman (1959) provides an essential framework towards this understanding in his analysis of the performativity of social roles. The façade of one's dramaturgic identity is produced through the deliberate cultivation, deployment, and maintenance of a well-crafted "personal front:" "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance," and it is with this front that actors stake out their own position relative to others' in social space (22). This front includes an actor's chosen adornments (e.g., insignia of a high office or rank, or uniforms) as well as embodied traits such as the gestures they make and the behaviors they display (24). An expertly constructed personal front endorses the legitimacy of the actor in her role (Goodman 2014), and it thereby guides others towards reflexively determining their own position—e.g., doctor or patient, for a nurse—relative to hers. Thus, the social self as well as the relationships in which it is exercised are both dramaturgically produced.

But any nurse could tell you that it takes more than scrubs and a stethoscope to perform their duties and role. There are certain tricks-of-the-trade, learned skills, and picked-up routines that guide the performers through their days, and their audiences expect to see these embodied traits as they suggest a lived-in authenticity and a mastery of their role. Butler (1988) notes that these behaviors are developed "through a stylized repetition of acts . . . of the body [including] bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds [which] constitute the illusion"—

not just of the social role, but in her analysis, “of the abiding gendered self” (519). Our identities are performed much in the same way that our social roles are, and sociologists of gender like Butler evaluate the performative accomplishment of identity based on how believable it appears to their social audience (520). Therefore, those whom we interact with in social reality are not merely our companions within the web of interaction but also the audience that we construct and perform our identities or roles for; and, just like any audience, it is ultimately up to them to decide how well we performed (Goffman 1959:17).

Scholarship on audiences evaluate an actor’s performances is ongoing, even six-plus decades after Goffman. Authors Ellickson’s (2001), Goodman’s (2014), and Adut’s (2005) consider dramaturgic performer-audience relationships on macro-, meso-, and micro-level scales of interaction; yet, despite the amplitude of literature on evaluating these performances, there exists no consistent procedure for how this evaluation process is to manifest within hierarchized social space. Goffman (1959) reminds us that dramaturgic identity is actively pursued: when an actor performs, she does so by actively considering her own geosocial circumstances in relation to those with whom she shares the space with; this is how she knows which role she is to play—which personal front she is to design and which embodied skills she is to deploy.

To evaluate these actors, Goffman (1959) provides us with the metrics “sincere” and “cynical;” he writes: “when the individual has no belief in her own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of her audience, we may call her cynical, reserving the term ‘sincere’ for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance” (18). Considering the importance of authenticity in subcultural spaces, I assert that the sincere actor is she who authentically lives the values of her subculture and applies her skills towards the betterment of her community; conversely, the cynical actor behaves inauthentically and selfishly—cultivating

a personal front and skills that channel subcultural community resources towards personal ends. Authenticity can thereby be used effectively as a key metric for evaluating subcultural capital.

Although previous scholarship on performance considers how actors inhabit their roles, there is insufficient consideration of the myriad interpersonal threads that connect performers to one another in social space—hierarchy and status principal among these. It is critical to evaluate performances and processes of identity formation within this added dimension of hierarchy. Therefore, in subsequent sections, I first engage Bourdieu’s theoretical work on capital and on embodied practices that allow individuals to negotiate status in interpersonal space; second, I investigate how subcultural authenticity is pursued and adopted by prospective and veteran members of subcultural fields.

Cultural Capital, Habitus, and Identity in Social Space

Bourdieu (1987) interprets social reality as a semi-structured, complex web of invisible relationships. Status and hierarchy sit at the center of this analysis of power. Following the sociology of performativity, we understand that social reality and status in particular do not merely happen around us; rather, it is something we dive into and intentionally navigate: we harbor aspirations of achieving higher status or of class mobility, and we necessarily maneuver our way through social hierarchy both passively (e.g., in school) and actively (e.g., striving for a promotion at work, or running for a leadership position) (Hahl and Zuckerman 2014).

The success of each performance relies on two common features: the personal front, and any context-appropriate embodied skills or behaviors that have been accumulated within the scene. Bourdieu names these skills “capitals” and divides their manifestation in social life into four tangible parts—economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1987). Actors draw these capitals from different sources and deploy them towards

different applications: cultural capital entails information, learned behaviors, and tastes; social capital “consists of resources based on connections and group membership; symbolic capital is the form that different capitals take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (4).

Bourdieu fixes these performers within hierarchized social space and differentiates them by the overall volume, composition—“that is, the relative weight in her overall capital, especially economic and cultural”—and by the “trajectory” of their capital relative to one another (4). A skilled actor is one who has acquired sufficient capital volume, composition, and a positive trajectory, yet her fulfillment of these metrics is not dependent on effort alone: her tastes, predispositions, and her instinctual, “kind of practical sense for what is to be done in any given situation—what is called in sport a ‘feel’ for the game” is reliant on what Bourdieu (1998:25) calls “habitus.” An actor’s habitus is socially and culturally developed over the course of her life, and the more she performs within a certain social space or environment, the more skilled she becomes at assessing, assembling, and deploying the capitals necessary to mount a convincing performance. According to Bourdieu (1987), habitus also provides actors with a “sense of one’s place [and] at the same time a sense of the place of others. [This] together with the affinities of habitus experienced in the form of personal attraction or revulsion, is at the root of all processes of cooptation, friendship, love, association, etc., and thereby provides the principle of all durable alliances and connections, including legally sanctioned relations” (5). Habitus thereby acts as an internal barometer for both where one exists in hierarchized social space relative to other actors as well as what actions one can and cannot achieve within that space.

Adut (2005) marries the sociology of performance and habitus in his analysis of scandal, wherein he asserts that “status is relative to audience” (220). A performer and her audience each hold a position relative to one another in hierarchized social space, and—due to this position—

each has her own culturally and socially acquired ensemble of tastes, traits, and embodied behaviors. Habitus is durable within the individual, but its value, especially as it relates to status, is flexible and highly dependent on the context in which the performance takes place. Individual subgroups and distinct subcultural spaces thus have their own special capitals. In subcultural space, status is determined based on who you know—your social capital—what you know—your cultural and subcultural capital—and what you do—the ultimate evaluation of your performance.

Subcultural Authenticity

In subcultural communities, social and cultural capital is reified into a new form symbolic capital that is often completely unique to that scene (e.g., “hipness”) (11). Habitus is understood as being closely related to durable and inter-generational values of social standing, yet this analysis of status achievement and capital accumulation is not sufficient towards understanding how outsiders or otherwise unaffiliated members of a subcultural community enter and gain status within a new scene. Current literature does not sufficiently explore how authenticity is sought after and honed within a scene; as such, in addition to understanding how the audience evaluates the performer in hierarchized social space, we must also explore the processes by which individuals create, establish, and benefit from their subcultural identities.

Authenticity emerges from sociological investigation and debate into the potential for the existence of a core self (Mead 1934, Simmel 1955). As a consecrated social construct, “authenticity connotes legitimacy and can be understood as ‘credibility, originality, sincerity, naturalness, genuineness, innateness, purity, or realness’” (Grazian 2003:168, Thornton 1995). Therefore, even beyond recognition in capital form, realness is intrinsically linked to processes of dialogic self-recognition (see Taylor 1994, Du Bois 1903, Fanon 1967, Appiah 2004). Whether or not a “true self” exists is ultimately inconsequential to this analysis; because the

house and ball scene prizes the embodiment of role-specific behaviors, those being evaluated on the authenticity of their performance nevertheless feel that their true selves are at stake.

This analysis reveals significant insight into how actors pursue and achieve identity in hierarchized social space. The identities expressed the ball scene are tied to occupation, gender, sexuality—social categories with distinct identity features that can be created and assumed in a process of social becoming, made politically active, and academically studied within social reality (Foucault 1978, Valentine 2007:43, De Beauvoir 1949, Hacking 2006). Although these roles are socially constructed, they are nevertheless directly felt. Following Foucault (1978), the lived experience produced by the embodiment of social categories is directly “included in the body as a mode of specification of individuals” (48); thus, the evaluation and discussion of sexuality produces categories of personhood that can be further analyzed this is how authenticity becomes directly embodied and evaluated as an essential trait within the house and ball scene.

Sociologists of deviance have keenly documented processes by which individuals seek out and secure membership within a subcultural community. These are: affinity—the “natural biographical tendency borne of personal and social circumstance that suggests but hardly compels a direction of movement” (259); affiliation—“the process by which the subject is converted to conduct [what is] novel for her but already established for others” (261); and signification—the “reconceptualiz[ation of] one’s life in terms of that deviance” or subcultural community (265). A critical part of this process is its inheritability; Vail notes that “deviance is taught in symbolic interaction with successful deviants” (261)—the actor’s peers and audience thereby have a major stake in her successful incorporation into the scene. In addition to maintaining the right personal front and deploying the right capitals, the actor must—above all

else—act authentically within her space. Within subcultural spaces, authenticity is thus the chief metric for evaluating an actor’s performance.

Recognition is the preeminent subcultural capital of the Chicago house and ball scene, and a keen understanding of performativity, authentic deployment of capital, and “realness” is essential towards understanding how status is achieved and leveraged within this scene. Because recognition is linked to the legitimacy of one’s identity, the quest for realness can be quite fraught with the danger of misrecognition. Understanding how members of the scene hone their performativity and develop the embodied traits necessary to engage in a battle of authenticity within the hierarchized social space of the ballrooms and ball houses thus bears new insight into processes of embodiment, performativity, and status-achievement.

DATA AND METHODS

My research question is two-pronged: what do members of the house and balls scene put into this community, and what do they achieve out of it? I explore the first part of this question in both the house and ball scene, and I analyze how the paths towards status change between the ball scene—wherein performances of embodiment reign supreme—and in house communities—where caregiving is praised above all. This focus emerged inductively over the research period. My two chief sources of data for this project are 75+ hours of ethnographic data—collected at balls, weekly practices, mandatory house meetings, and during the downtimes and car-rides that occurred in-between—and 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with current and active members of the Chicago house and ball scene.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and include seven members from the house of Robichaux and four from other house communities. I gained membership in the house of Robichaux through its founder, Barry Robichaux, who I met at a ballroom history lecture and

then later at a mini-ball on the Southside of Chicago. Barry invited me to attend practices and family meetings, put my potential membership to a vote within the house, and passed it through unanimously. Individuals in the house of Robichaux were primarily recruited for on-site at house practices, and interviews with members of other house communities were recruited via snowball sampling. Four of these interviews were conducted with house parents (i.e., mothers and fathers), three were conducted with house leadership (i.e., the Chicago house prince, the Chicago overseer, and the overall godfather), and the remaining four were conducted with house children.

Early interviews concerned advice—both good and bad—that my interlocutors received from peers or mentors within the house and ball scene; however, these interviews evolved to inquire more into my interlocutors' lived experience in receiving aid from, giving aid to, and participating in the robust and dense family networks of the house and ball scene. Despite the scene's interconnectedness, ethnographic research reveals that houses operate independent of one another—after all, they are in competition. As such, I focused data collection on the house of Robichaux to elucidate greater understanding of its discrete family structure, and interviewed additional house parents from other units to elucidate differences in family structures among houses. Before initiating interviews, I dedicated two months of research time to strengthening my relationships with my fellow members of the house of Robichaux—e.g., by means of attending events, offering my assistance in finding spaces to practice—in order to better inductively develop my research question and to achieve more nuanced data from the interviews.

Interviews were conducted at locations convenient to my interlocutors and included practice sites, their homes, coffeeshops, and outdoor public spaces. Interviews were digitally recorded on my cell phone, uploaded to UChicago Box—a secure cloud-based storage service—and were transcribed verbatim by myself with assistance from Otter.ai—an AI-based

transcription service. Interviewees were paid \$20 cash for participating in interviews. Transcripts were anonymized and stripped of both house and house-member names in order to protect sensitive and identifying information.

I used Dedoose—an online qualitative coding software—to code interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes, which I typed up immediately upon returning home from field research. Following the procedure outlined by Sweet (2019), I read and re-read my interview transcripts multiple times in order to write a memo about each house and ball scene member's life story including the conditions that lead them to affiliate with ballroom, how this community continues to serve them, and how they serve this community. I compare these memos to develop a conceptual explanation based on the lived experiences of my interlocutors. Themes spanning multiple levels of analysis emerged during this process: macro-level forces such as structural violence, homelessness and homophobia; meso-level forces such as community networks such as house communities; and micro-level forces such as intimate care-giving strategies as well as the personal ambitions and needs they endeavor to fulfill within the ballroom. I thereby develop a “situated analysis” within my primary case study the house of Robichaux, following Clarke (2005), to link my interlocutors' experiences to broader social forces and structures that may be influencing the actions and behaviors of other members of the Chicago house and ball scene.

RESULTS

“Don’t bend your arm like that. If you’re going to have it out, hold it out like this.”

Gloria Robichaux, a genderfluid Black person who uses she/her pronouns, extends her left arm all the way out to her side, dramatically flexes her wrist, and walks down an imaginary catwalk. The house of Robichaux meets for weekly practice in the multipurpose room of a community health center located in Hyde Park, Chicago. Although Gloria spends the bulk of these practices

going outside to smoke weed with Amii and chatting with the other Robichauxs on the sidelines, her focus is undivided and absolutely serious when it comes to helping others with their walks:

When you walk, give some to the audience. Walk forward, and give a little here, and a little here—” Gloria drops down and flirts briefly with the imaginary audience. “You gotta hit both sides. Hit both sides, and when you get to the judges it’s not even going to matter what they see because you’re going to have all that energy behind you—the entire audience ‘Yeah Yeah Yeah!’ cheering for you—pushing you through.

This swell of energy, this moment-making support from the audience—this is recognition, the social and cultural capital *par excellence* of the house and ball scene.

Gloria Robichaux describes the ball scene as the competition grounds wherein participants meet and fight to achieve a moment of transcendence: *“The ballroom scene is a fantasy. This is where you escape real life to go and release your problem. This is where you bring all you’re stressing the issues and go on that floor and just let it out.”* In the ball scene, recognition capital is awarded to recognize performers who present an adeptly curated personal front and embodied behaviors in order to produce a role-based performance. In the house scene, recognition is awarded to honor those who perform, to a laudable degree, the caregiving roles needed to help sustain the house community and encourage its growth. Both the ballroom and the ball houses are highly hierarchized (Appendix, figure 1); as such, earning officially designated status reifies the symbolic recognition capital that a performer has achieved. This title can then be recognized by anyone in the international house and ball scene, and they will immediately be made aware of the volume of the recognition-possessor’s social and cultural capital.

Members of the house and ball scene participate in both house and ball communities: houses will sit together at house tables at the balls and unite to shout out the house cheer when one of their fellow members compete; moreover, house parents as well as high-ranking members of the ball scene, like stars or icons, collaborate to serve on the judges’ panel and deem who is or

is not worthy of recognition. Importantly, recognition—including its social as well as cultural sub-capitals—is gathered as an ends in and of itself; rather, gaining recognition gives members direct and active benefit in the real world. Nearly every person I talked to in the house and ball scene told me that the fields were, first and foremost, meant to prepare you for life outside of the ballroom. If someone does not meet the criteria of the category they are liable to get chopped, and perhaps even read—ball-speak for “cleverly insulted”—publicly by the commentator; through this harrowing experience, ballroom participants learn to read the pamphlet and learn the rules, rely on their peers and family members within the scene, and learn to diligently prepare their performances and thereby identities in order to meet the judges’ expectations.

Following Vail’s (1999) notes on the process of becoming deviant—initiating with affinity, progressing to affiliation, and concluding with signification—I trace how members of the house and ball community gain entrance and recognition status. I also connect the final stage, signification, with the house and ball community’s aspiration for authenticity and, eventually, realness. Aspirations for realness are rooted in experiences of injury and social as well as structural violence (see Ralph 2014), and ball scene members who do not use the recognition capital nor its social or cultural capital subparts towards the authentic and sincere benefit of their peers are shunned for being self-serving and uncaring “*snakes*.” Social networks cannot be adequately nurtured and built nor can injury be truly healed in the ball scene alone; as such, the most community-oriented and caring aspects of the ball scene converge and coalesce together to form the house scene, of which the Robichauchs constitute only one small part.

Joining the house and Ball Scene—Affinity and Community

Bourdieu’s (1987) “habitus” posits that individuals have differential access to opportunities based on the capitals they possess, yet it exists as an all-encompassing

superstructure; these opportunities are not chosen but rather born into. In the house and ball scene, however, the reverse is true: prospective members will self-induct into the scene and freely navigate among its subcultural niches based on their “affinity” (following Vail 1999) for its respective resources, values, and identity. Sylvester Summer, Chicago mother of the house of Summer, describes the ball house selection process like that of signing a lease:

You sign a contract to live in a space that [is] conducive to your particular situation. When that situation becomes counterproductive to what you're trying to do—when your lease is up—you break it and go sign another lease. You want to be in a house where the people that you're connected to or are associated with share the same vision that you see yourself.

One's affinity is conditioned by her personal and social circumstances. When Sylvester first entered the scene, he engaged in sex work in order to survive; as such, he joined a house with a well-established network of sex workers in order to gain their community support. Sylvester tells me that most houses are themed around specific community networking opportunities or skills. His first house was one of many where “*that sex, drugs, rock and roll lifestyle is glamorized.*” As Sylvester developed his talents in vogue dancing, however, he transitioned into a house that specialized in the art so as to better hone his skills. Now the mother of his own house, Sylvester has transitioned into medical outreach and has many children involved in sex work who often approach him for medical advice, skill development outside of sex work, and emotional support.

Sylvester has been a member of seven different houses throughout his ballroom career, and each house was chosen to fulfill the need of his particular geosocial circumstance at that point in time. Different houses and leadership produce different opportunities for growth, and both incoming and veteran members will consider these opportunities as they choose which house to join. Members of one house will maintain their familial connections, too, as they transition to another house; the house and ball scene has deep roots towards community support

and celebration—only the “*snakes*” face hostility as they move around. Gloria Robichaux tells me that, for many of the house and ball scene’s members, the initial affinity for joining the community is prompted by the structural violence that they collectively face:

The ballroom scene consists of a lot of homeless youth—you get what I'm saying? To come together and build a bond like that with a lot of strangers that you don't know and stuff like that it's amazing and then when you create these bonds and stuff like that, and it's outside of a ball it's like not like, 'oh, we're just in a house together and I don't see you.' I let them all know we together. We checking in on each other on a daily basis.

I ask Bill Robichaux about why he joined the house and ball scene, and he echoes Gloria by telling me about the sense of community and family he when he saw his first LSS³:

It was dope to me, just kind of like seeing the community coming out to celebrate what they do best, so that's what made me happy and made me want to join the Robichauxs. The Robichauxs, they got support no matter what. Some of the other houses support them, some may don't, but we got to understand that . . . and honor that the other houses that support them is there for them and we're there for everybody else. That's what I like about Robichauxs, and that's why I joined Robichauxs.

Bill was pulled into the ball scene by his affinity for LGBTQ-positive community spaces and into the house of Robichaux for what its members assert is a uniquely strong family bond.

Barry Robichaux—or “*father founder Robichaux*,” as he often introduces himself—founded the house of Robichaux and adopted its name as his own in the late 1980s, back in the Chicago house and ball scene’s nascency. Today, Barry’s black-brown hair and beard are both streaked with grey, and the Robichauxs have chapters throughout the country and globally—from California to New York, Rio, Toronto, and Paris too. The house of Robichaux is distinguished from its peer houses by the diversity of its members—something Barry brags about

³ Every ball begins with a celebratory period called “legends, stars, and statements”—“LSS” for short; during this time, the entire audience stands to attention and claps as high ranking figures in the house and ball scene take a moment to parade across the floor. An MC provides constant commentary throughout the event and sets the pace of the event and keeps it running smoothly, and they work the status of whoever is walking into the commentary as they go: “*Can I see the founder!*” “*Show me the mother!*” “*Let me see the icon!*”

often. He tells me that certain historic and well known houses have been racially exclusive since their conception, granting membership only to Latinx individuals or African American vogue performers, for example. The house of Robichaux has members representing all gender identities, nationalities, racial/ ethnic groups, and socioeconomic status.

Many of the Robichauchs I spoke to were also deeply compelled by the diversity of the house—it's how they saw themselves included within the scene. The first time I met Barry and the Robichauchs, he shocked me by walking me around the room and pointing at each person he passed: *“Amii’s a transgender woman and she’s Puerto Rican. He’s butch queen⁴. That’s mother Donna—I’m really excited to have her as mother ‘cuz she’s an African American and she’s a transgender woman so now maybe we can recruit some more trans women. He’s . . .”* The list goes on. Amii tells me this herself, too: *“The other houses are like gangs—the Latinas with the Latinas . . . The Robichauchs weren’t like that. And I liked that the mother’s trans too.”*

This diversity also brought in former-“007s”—free agent-characters who walk balls without a house affiliation— like Bill and Curtis Robichaux, a college-aged White cis-man who specializes in vogue dancing. The Robichauchs stood out to them as being a house that welcomes newcomers who have not yet found their place. Bill and Curtis both were compelled to join the ball scene because of its celebration of queer identity but also by the way legends, parents, and other high-ranking members of the scene are celebrated for the recognition capital they possess during the LSS portion at the beginning of each ball. Rudolph Robichaux, a younger Black man who walks “thug realness”, tells me he was brought into the family for this same sense of inclusivity: *“I didn’t have to do what everyone else did, do you feel what I’m saying? I was able to be myself and be regular. Knowing me how I come from the street and in what ways I’m like I*

⁴ Members of the house and ball scene use gender labels “butch queen” and “femme queen” to represent performers who present male (i.e., cis- and transgender men) and female (i.e., cis- and transgender women), respectively.

can bring what I do have naturally and bring that to the table.” By including diverse groups of people and developing chapters in multiple cities, Barry hopes that “*the International house of Robichaux*” will not just establish a winning presence within each city’s house and ball scene, but also gain recognition and elevated status based on the strength of their family ties.

The house and ball scene provides its members with a community, security, and protection—even at the most immediate level of entry; additionally, house parents occupy space in their houses as both leaders and caretakers and offer much-needed support to their children—especially regarding issues of gender identity and sexual health that the child’s own parents are either unwilling or unable to provide. Sylvester speaks about being a house parent with pride:

As a parent, I want to make sure that I'm always acting and fulfilling that role that I have as being the mother because I deal with a community of people who don't have their real [biological] mothers in their life. So I'm making sure that they have the things that they need: you know, if they're hungry, I'll feed them; if they need training in their categories, I'll train them; if they need help with effects or even just something to wear, I'll use my resources that I may have to get them the things that they need.

Through dynamic and egalitarian internal systems of needs assessment, members of the house and ball community form connections between each other and with their house parents to satisfy the basic needs of a community that lives in injury within a space entirely of its own creation. Despite the mobility that members of the house and ball community have in this subcultural space, the space itself remains highly hierarchized based on traditional nuclear family roles⁵; thus, I argue that the decision to advance through the hierarchy of the house system or ball scene is produced not by need but rather by one’s affinity for the embodied behaviors or other benefits

⁵ Gloria Robichaux helps outline this for me: “*First, you have the founder. Then the overseer, which is the person that the founder confides in and who mediates and tries to handle stuff. Then the overall mother, overall father, and then the state parents—for example, the Chicago father, Chicago mother. Next, you have the prince and the princess. If there's an issue going on in the house, the first chain they go to will be the prince or the princess, and if they can't get through to them, they go to the mother, the father. If they can't get through to the mother, the Father, that's when you go to the overall parent.*” See Appendix, figure 2.

associated with those particular roles. Sylvester adds the caveat that he is not a “*real mother*,” yet for him this phrase only indicates biological connection—house parents and kids are deeply connected, and the positive importance and effect of this family network is undeniable.

Networking and Affiliation

Maurice and Robin Robichaux, the owners of our ride back from the Oz ball, sat in the sedan’s front seats, so me, Bill, Gloria, and Curtis all piled together into the backseat. I ended up sitting on Curtis’ lap. I had been eager to attend the ball with the Robichauxs so as to join in on what Goffman called the “backstage”—the sphere of authentic interaction, where people build solidarity with one’s “team” (Sheinheit and Bogard 2016). Curious about my fellow passengers’ experience, I ask the car: “*What is the most important part of being there at the balls?*”

Gloria looks off dreamily, and answers: “*Networking.*” Our seatmates murmur in agreement, and Bill nudges Gloria’s ribs to whisper a sex joke. Maurice and Robin—overseer and godfather for the Chicago house of Robichaux, respectively—overhear and begin to cackle.

“*But,*” I respond, “*It’s so loud! You can’t even hear anyone!*”

Building your social network is a valuable skill in the house and ball scene, and much like the trophies themselves, social networks are something that must be competed for and earned. Curtis Robichaux is one of the house’s newest members, having only entered the scene a couple of months prior, and I sought out his perspective on social networking in particular as his was only in a nascent stage. He speaks about cultivating his network in an interview:

Curtis Robichaux: “*There’s this whole thing of like, making a moment—just getting your name out there and then waking it up a little bit.*”

Jared Kerman: “*Could you talk a little bit more about that making a moment?*”

CR: “*Yeah! That’s like when you come out and you do something memorable or you gag them or something, and they’re like, ‘I’ll remember that.’ Maybe your clip gets posted to the Facebook page and a bunch of people like it and shit, and you just get tagged in shit. It’s cool [laughs].*”

Curtis also highlights the importance of recognition in building one's social network: if you produce the right social front, employ the right capitals during your performance, and produce that feeling of momentum described earlier by Gloria—if you make a moment and achieve recognition—people will remember you and your social network grows.

Recognition and social networking can take subtle and caring forms, too. At the Oz ball, there was one moment when a young Black woman from another house walked past our table. As she passed, Amii caught her attention and mouthed, “*you’re beautiful!*” The woman—who I later saw competing in “FQ Performance,” a voguing category for transgender women—could not hear Amii over the music and mouthed, “*What?*” Amii repeated again, “*You’re beautiful!*” The woman beamed and mouthed back, “*No, you’re beautiful!*” She and Amii air-hugged, and then the woman went to join her house. I asked Amii, “*Do you know her?*” and she matter-of-factly responded, “*Nope!*” This is just one example of the many non-competitive, intimate moments wherein members of the ball scene engage in a mutual exchange of recognition.

Step two of joining a subcultural community is that of “affiliation” (Vail 1999:261) and although there are myriad reasons for which a person may choose to self-incorporate into the house and ball scene, networking ranks chief among them. Vail (1999) notes that incoming members of subcultural communities are “taught [via] symbolic interaction with successful” and established members, and one of house parents’ principle functions is to fulfill this mentorship role. As house parents, Sylvester and Barry are thereby tasked with evaluating the trajectory, value, and volume of folks’ capitals (following Bourdieu 1998) and guiding them towards deploying these capitals efficaciously—in their walks, in their networking, and outside the ballroom doors too. This special ability is ascribed to house parents due to their perceived

extended experience within and of the field. Sylvester elaborates on his own experience of joining the house and ball scene, and the impact this needs-assessment had on him:

Sylvester Summer: *“Ballroom is the common ground, but we all have different walks. Being able to connect with people who look like you, and who have had a similar path of circumstances, all having to get through and doing the same thing—it can be liberating, and it can be healing at the same time”*

Jared Kerman: *“Could you talk a little bit more about that liberation and healing?”*

SS: *“Well, the healing comes from the trauma aspect that we experienced as people of the LGBT community. . . These are a lot of people who are ostracized in their particular communities and in their families, who are misunderstood by the people they live around. Now so now I got a chance to step into this realm where everything about me that was maybe downplayed or compartmentalized and my community as a child is celebrated in this social demographic. So it's empowering to be in a setting where, what the real world doesn't like about me—I can be this fantasy, and everybody loves and appreciates. But you can't make ballroom your life. Everybody's not your friend. Before I kind of got myself together I was a stripper and an escort and I had some who were like, 'bitch make your money,' and I had some telling me, you know, 'you're too smart for that use the other things you can do and other avenues that you can take to provide for yourself.' Ballroom has been like a charm school for me as far as finding out what my something was and being the best 'that' that I can. Because I think that had I not had that guidance, I don't think that I would even be the man that I am today.”*

The affiliation process is carefully considered: members may consider their own deficiencies alongside the strengths of their prospective houses in order to find the right match for what they hope to gain out of the scene. Additionally, house leaders have their own criteria regarding who is appropriate for them to parent or join their house community; as such, selecting a house is thus a two-way street: the house needs to be appropriate for the member and vice versa.

Barry Robichaux requires that every member of the house of Robichaux be actively invested in bettering themselves outside of the ball scene, and it is not uncommon for him to proudly list off members of the house of Robichaux's achievements: *“That's my daughter she's working on her nursing license, and my other daughter owns her own nail studio, and my son*

over there is pursuing his education . . .” Robin Robichaux, the Chicago godfather for the house of Robichaux, echoes Barry in his Facebook posts to the house: “*The house of Robichaux is family first, education, employment—ballroom last!*” Thus, if a Robichaux hopes to gain status within the house of Robichaux and elevate their position, they must exhibit what Barry deems an authentic devotion to the Robichaux family. Houses also become critical networks for members of the scene, providing valuable employment opportunities for their peers in addition to support.

Status in the Ballroom and At Home

Achieving status in the ballroom or within a house community is no easy feat: one must put years of dedicated work, time, and energy into cultivating an effective personal front as well as curating a knowledge bank of deployable skills in order to successfully perform her role. Recognition is a subcultural capital and is thus a form of symbolic capital; as such, a performer must possess both social and cultural capital if she wishes to generate recognition for herself. As previously noted, a performer’s success in the house and ball scene depends on her personal front, skill, and social capital. Consider, for example, a vogue dancer: not only does she need to possess a strong arsenal of poses, she must also know that every fourth beat is both a down beat and an opportunity to pose and that the eighth beat—that’s when you make a moment. To become recognized as the most deft and talented performer, our vogue dancer must be able to speedily contort and unfurl to the rhythm with these aforementioned lessons—and many others, too—internalized to the point of near-instinct. This is cultural capital. Having a role-typical personal front—for vogue: long, sinewy limbs and a lean, flexible body—is an advantage, but performers with more ample proportions certainly achieve a lion’s share of the recognition if they nevertheless demonstrate an expertly-honed personal front of athleticism and flexibility. Lastly, recall Gloria’s quote from the beginning of the results section about creating a swell of

energy during her performance; this energy is a key manifestation of recognition, and having social capital is a critical means of achieving this support as a large social network can work within the audience to raise momentum or sit on the judges panel and advocate for your win. It is only through these powers combined that members of the scene can gain recognition.

Parents, founders, and other high-status members or leaders of the house and scene—gatekeepers who have earned their positions after decades of commitment to their community—engage in yearly meetings to decide who ought to gain status. This evaluative process is a crucial component of recognition’s construction. Minor balls like the “Oz” ball will draw attendance upwards of 80 people, but major balls can draw attendance well into the hundreds; this is where your moments will have the most impact. Consistent participation at minor balls, however, does demonstrate dedication and a willingness to improve, and this is also factored into status considerations; Gloria reports: *“Your name can be brought up because, ‘okay he’s been out there and getting out there traveling. He may not win but he has his moments. He put his time in so we should put him on the list to be legend.’”* Consistency demonstrates authenticity, and authentic commitment to the ball scene and to one’s category may earn one a designated status within the scene. Thus, the cultural capital of embodied skills within a performance and the social capital of peer competitor networks are of tandem importance with respect to earning recognition capital.

I ask Gloria: *“Do you think about making moments when you perform?”*

Her expression dissolves, she giggles, and then pulls me in close: *“When I walk, I imagine that I’m in the bathroom at my grandmother’s house, and I’m wearing my mother’s floral robe that I loved to put on just to see it go when I would twirl in it . . . I block everybody out—I turn them all to just black black black black black—and I dance like I’m in my frou-frou shorts and I’m in my living room.”* Within that space, Gloria feels authentic: she dances as a

joyful and transcendent end in and of itself. What's more, when the embodied skills she deploys during her dance of freedom and celebration combines just so with the rhinestones or tassels of her personal front, the result is magnificent; the audience sees the performance as not merely a successful portrayal of a role performed for their pleasure but rather as an authentically cultivated and embodied identity—one that can be celebrated within the ballroom, independent from injury and structural violence.

In the house scene, recognition is earned via commitment to family values, like altruism and loyalty, as well as adherence to the house community's *modus operandi*. In addition to promoting the status of outstanding performers in the ball scene, the aforementioned gatekeepers also seek to recognize good stewards of the ball community—folks who are deftness at authentically cultivating embodied skills with a bend towards caregiving. Therefore, a vital part of signification into the house and ball community is also the realization that recognition capital can be directed towards not only self-improvement but also mutual benefit. Gloria Robichaux speaks plainly about this phenomenon: *“After the five, six hours of ballroom are over, we're back into reality, we go back when the lights come on, and it's over. We go back into the real world. What do you have to offer when the real world come on? You got a job, you got a place to stay or you staying at your girlfriend's house? Are you sleeping on your girlfriend's floor?”* The ballroom was established to fulfill community need and overcome structural violence, yet the injury still looms outside; how will you get by, and how will you help others? The scene was created to help its members answer these questions.

Bill has a soft voice and a shy laugh, but he speaks with confidence and with a sincere and heartfelt sense of appreciation for the scene. Walking schoolboy—a character that requires a confident walk and a stony face—helped Bill become a hardworking student of the ball scene; he

“goes with the flow” and takes advantage of the myriad opportunities to practice his technique or learn from his peers. As Bill gained confidence, he reached a point of signification:

I came in quiet. I did my own thing. And then they was like, I can [walk] “school boy [realness]”. And then I started kind of leading the meetings like the mandatory meeting . . . And then like, at first [the Robichaoux] wasn't like showing up to balls together and then walking in together, there was more like, one come in then two come . . . and I'm like, “that's not what the ball community is about.” You want to come in together so you can have a presence. So I kind of put that into like, stereo.

As house father, Barry nurtured Bill and guided him towards fulfilling schoolboy realness. In turn, Bill began to assert himself more in the ball house community: he hosted practices in his apartment, and he secured the house of Robichaux's Hyde Park practice location too. Bill developed a sense of how he wanted to transform his community for the better and acted on it—not for his own benefit but rather for his whole family's; for this, Bill was rewarded with status.

In recognition of Bill's devotion to the Robichaux family and to the LGBTQ community at-large, Barry granted Bill a title; in doing so, Barry reifies Bill's recognition capital into a distinct position—“*Chicago Prince*”—with distinct meaning in the house and ball community's hierarchized social space. I asked Bill one day if he wants to be the parent of his own house one day and, of course, he first responds with a shy chuckle. Bill's dream is to be a community health worker and to advocate for the health needs of Chicago's queer communities, and his earlier moment of realizing “*what the ball community is about*”—what Bill gained from the house and ball community was not merely the knowledge and confidence to walk school boy but also, and most importantly, the knowledge and confidence to engage in a career of community service.

Signification and Realness

Bill gained recognition and thus status by the merit of his successful role performance, but he also earned it for who he *is* and who he *became*—for his identity, painstakingly crafted

and honed despite the structural violence beyond the ballroom doors. Vail (1999) would call this actualization of an authentic and transcendent identity “signification” (265)—the stage in which one’s life and actions become reconceptualized in terms of her subcultural community. In the house and ball scene, however, this stage bears additional significance: that of realness. The road towards recognition is challenging and the stakes are high, as Gloria tells me solemnly:

I've given a lot, but overall ballroom has been life changing—an up and down roller coaster. It's been good times and bad times. I've cried, I've been more than overjoyed, I've been depressed. I broke my ankle voguing. I've been at the point where I just feel like, 'Damn I wanna give all this shit up' because you just feel like you dedicated so much of your time and you go to place and they shade you like in Detroit . . . They weren't giving everyone a fair shot if you didn't have a girlfriend on the panel.

Realness is related to the embodiment of recognition-worthy skills and the production of an effective personal front; moreover, realness is the result of an authentic and transcendent performance of self that resists injury. Yet the hierarchy is steep and the competition intense; one’s social and cultural capitals are under constant scrutiny, and it can feel particularly frustrating when the deck is stacked against you within the scene as well as outside it.

The skills honed, internalized, and embodied within the ball scene are transformative; yet, its members are diligent not to let themselves be consumed by their quest towards realness. One nearly ubiquitous piece of advice I heard on the scene was “*don’t make ballroom your whole life.*” Gloria has achieved tremendous success within the house and ball scene, but her ballroom career has not been an easy one. She especially cautions newcomers to the scene against losing themselves to the ballroom, telling me:

Losing yourself to ballroom means you just care about the next ball, like nothing else matters . . . not even worried about how you gonna eat this week; how you gonna pay for this ball because balls costs transportation to get there, effects, sometimes \$25-30 to get in, a drink or something . . . With a ball comes a lot of basic necessities—stuff that you need to get by. You get sucked in and then sooner or later you're just completely gone.

Maurice Robichaux, on the other hand, tells me concretely about how he benefitted from the recognition he earned walking in the ball scene: *“You gotta walk out there [at a ball] with confidence, so it helped me leave somewhat of my macho-ness behind when I was scared to come out as gay. I had to put on that fake confidence like boom when I first ever walked but then afterwards now it's easy for me because I know I already think I'm better than a lot of people [laughs].”* Although a confident demeanor may have only been initially part of the personal front Maurice developed for himself, his confidence eventually became embodied. Gloria echoes Maurice’s point: by gaining confidence within the house and ball scene, she developed the confidence to live happily and successfully outside of it. She tells me:

In real life I have to have alligator skin because being a African American homosexual male, out here in this time and day, they look at you funny. If you don't have that skin they're gonna break you easily like a toothpick. They're just gonna snap you in half. When you vogue and everything, you just give all that energy—just bring it to the floor, don't carry it back with you. Just bring that weekly problem that you had you take it to the ball on Saturday and say, ‘bitch, I'mma let it out on the floor bitch and I'm gonna carry and I'm gonna cut up’

Maurice’s joke, as well as Bill and Gloria’s self-reflections, both bear truth about the vulnerability that is so deeply associated with recognition and realness. Bill, too, has gained confidence and finely honed abilities in the ball scene that actively applies towards queer community organizing in Chicago. To be able to walk confidently outside the ballroom doors—to not only pass but also live sincerely as one’s authentic self without fear of stigmatization nor discrimination—this is the ultimate goal of the ball scene. Barry tells me simply: *“Balls prepare you for life.”* Throughout the process of affiliating and signifying into the scene, one also works diligently to develop the personal front, social and cultural capital, recognition, authenticity, and support necessary to achieve it. Bill, Maurice, and Gloria’s personal front and embodied capitals allow each to one live confidently and authentically—both in and outside the ball scene.

“What Goes Up Must Come Down” — Consequences of Inauthenticity

Unlike the other members of the house of Robichaux, Rudolph Robichaux is adamant that he does not need help from anyone; he is confident in his own authenticity yet suspicious of his other members—not the Robichauxs specifically, he clarifies, but those outside his family:

If your head in the clouds already, we can't have a conversation. I can't say nothing to you that will bring you back down to reality or nothing like that, You've got realness, and you got Fufu. I'm real. I'm an underdog. I'm able to look at life like that while your head is up there in the clouds and you thinking of picking cherries and apples because you so far up there. You got to start from somewhere. A lot of people want to start off as being [a member of] all them [elite] houses, and the number one problem in it is you trying to jump to the top instead of crawl to the top. You ain't making your way up the ladder, you trying to jump all the way up there. And if you jump up, what happens? What goes up must come down.

Inauthentic members of the house and ball community hone and apply their skills not towards mutual aid but self-improvement; they want recognition and status because they want power within the scene, yet they are not willing to put in the care work required to earn such a position. Rudolph distrusts these folk not because of a perceived lack of ability, but rather because of their perceived threat: *“A lot of people will help you to make it to the top—to make it better than you. You got people who would use you to help themselves, you got people who would help you because they want to benefit them, you got people who will help you out the kindness of they heart. You just got to distinguish one which one messing with.”* Inauthentic members use the ballroom and their peers’ resources only to enrich their own transition out of injury. I am familiar with this suspicion, as these folk are public enemy #1 for Barry Robichaux.

A spectre haunts the house of Robichaux: the spectre of Ms. Eartha Emotion. Barry Robichaux recruited Ms. Eartha, a Black transgender woman in her 30s, to join the house of Robichaux a couple of years back, as Barry tells it, *“she got too big for her britches.”* Barry sees himself as an auditor of capital, and he tells me knowingly how far certain people will make it in

the scene: *“I know her. She’s good—she can win ‘Schoolgirl [Realness]’ at [the house of] Chic’s mini-balls, but she won’t ever win at the major balls. No chance. I could have trained her, Jared, but she needed time.”* Barry speaks here of a young Black transgender woman named Anita, who used to walk schoolgirl for the house of Robichaux but recently left the house over a fight with Barry. Anita had wanted to be named Chicago Princess, but Barry said she was not dedicated enough to benefiting the Robichaux community; her ambition was inauthentic and only committed towards elevating her own status. Barry discusses Anita like a disappointed father reflecting on his wayward daughter. Ms. Eartha is another story.

Barry first told me about Ms. Eartha as we were on our way to a planning meeting held by the Ballroom Council regarding an upcoming ball. Barry had already decided not to attend this upcoming ball but felt obligated to attend and represent house Robichaux. Before entering, however, he paused and asked: *“That trans-deceiver Ms. Eartha isn’t gonna be in there, is she?”*

“No, Barry.” Marvin, a local health worker, smiled as he wearily responded.

“Good.” Barry starts to pace. *“She makes me sick!”* He pretends to retch, repeating *“Sick!”* twice more for good measure. Barry, although typically placid and easy-going, will bolt up out of his seat upon the slightest reference to Ms. Eartha or one of her subsidiaries. *“Behind her smile, behind her façade, she’s a false person; she’s a trans-fraud. Trans-FRAUD!”*

A couple of months later, as I sat with the Robichauchs at a mini ball, Price Chic—Chicago mother of the house of Chic—concluded LSS by presenting Ms. Eartha with an award to recognize her commitment to the LGBTQ community. Despite this award, however, Barry still seethes at her like dogs at the Terminator. As it turns out, Ms. Eartha had joined the Chicago house of Robichaux years ago when she first moved to Chicago—allegedly on import from the New York house of Franklin. She quickly began making demands of Barry: *“Despite having no*

wins to her name, she started asking me to have the house pay for her effects. Some women do this, Jared; they just have a sugar daddy pay for all of they shit and they don't think they gotta work for anything." Barry scoffs: "She asked me to make her Midwest Mother." Midwest mother is a position of high status and authority in the house of Robichaux and necessarily demands a certain amount of preexisting recognition, as the position itself yields a lot of recognition. For Ms. Eartha to make such a ludicrous request set off alarm bells in Barry's head. As father and founder of Robichaux house, Barry has quite the extensive social network; so he phoned up his friends in the house of Franklin, New York, NY. As it turns out, they had never heard of Ms. Eartha before: "They said 'she certainly didn't walk in our house.'"

Confronted with Barry's discovery, Ms. Eartha jumped-ship and joined the house of Emotion as house mother. Barry tells me that she immediately began funding everyone's effects and using her resources to enhance their personal fronts. Performers in the house of Emotion began looking good, "like they got a little money in them," and talented performers rose to join Emotion in order to gain a little more recognition for themselves. Most offensive of all, though, was that Ms. Eartha had begun infiltrating the house of Robichaux again to poach its members out from under Barry. This was a step too far, and I understand why: Barry prioritizes family and community first and foremost, and Ms. Eartha disrespected both him and his entire subcultural family by coming into his house, inauthentically displaying ill-gotten capitals, and attempting to con him in a cynical performance designed for her own benefit. Barry says that even the non-profit she founded is a front for her own selfish accumulation of recognition. In our last meeting, he gleefully whispers to me: "Ms. Eartha's disappeared for a little bit. The cops are auditing her fake-ass." Social and cultural capital are not enough to achieve recognition and its associated benefits within the scene; without authenticity, the doors of the subcultural scene shut tight.

CONCLUSION

Participation in the house and ball scene is thematically akin to the “deep play” Geertz (2005) observed among Balinese cockfighters, who export competitions of status into “the body of the cockfight” (72). Just as cockfighting holds particular meaning in Bali yet bears universal applications towards the understanding of deep play and status achievement, the house of Robichaux’s experience provides unique insight into the fraught road to recognition experienced by members of the house and ball scene at large. Unlike in Bali, however, the competitions for status that occur in the house and ball scene are felt in a real and immediate way as rather than abstracting one’s status and identity into a gamecock, the participants themselves are at stake: when competitors are evaluated by their audience, their gender and personal identities are scrutinized and the competition for recognition becomes all the more severe. Each members’ experience represents only their own specialized way of navigating structural violence and creating identity; therefore, findings of this study are not externally generalizable to the national house and ball scene nor to each and every house in the Chicago house and ball scene but can serve as a framework for future investigation into the scene.

Dazed Magazine LGBTQ editor-at-large Shon Faye pointedly writes: “Realness is not just a sassy by-word for a convincing costume but a tragicomic disguise of the chasm between what is being emulated and what is absent (namely racial justice, class equality and safety).” (Dazed.com). In the ballroom sense, realness bears the subtext of defying injustice and structural violence: through the use of artifice as well as acquired capitals and skills, performers may create the illusion of a lifestyle that has been unjustly denied to them. In Livingston’s renowned documentary about the ball scene, *Paris is Burning*, she presents realness as being defined by the ability “to blend” (Livingston 1990). Although this definition lacks the fundamental recognition

of authenticity that I have encountered during my own ethnographic experience in this field, it is nevertheless echoed by one of Livingston's interlocutors, Dorian Corey. In an interview segment, he says of the category "executive realness:" *"Black people have a hard time getting anywhere. Those that do are usually straight. In a ballroom, you can be anything you want. You're not really an executive, but you're showing the straight world: 'I could be an executive if I had the opportunity 'cause I can look like one'"* (Livingston). Members of the house and ball scene show quite plainly that an abundance of capital—even in high volume and good trajectory—is not enough for a role performance to succeed; habitus and situational opportunity matters too, and so does hierarchy and other superstructural impositions. In the ballroom, however, anything and any role becomes possible and performable; *anyone* can become real. This is how members of the house and ball scene achieve transcendence within injury.

In addition to defining realness as a metric for evaluating performances within established social categories, Butler's (2003) definition of realness also delves into its embodied feeling; what she calls "[a] kind of metaphorical substitution, an act of imposture, a kind of sublime and momentary participation in an ontological illusion produced by the mundane operation of [performance]" (317). Realness compels belief and produces a naturalized effect through the deployment of embodied capitals (129). An actor's personal front as well as her social, cultural, and symbolic capital can thus be combined to produce a performance so wholly, irrefutably, and naturally authentic that no interlocutor could deny the actor's role or identity.

Works Cited

- Adut, Ari. 2005. "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde." *American Journal of Sociology* 111(1):213–48.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2014. "Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction." Pp. 247–60 in.
- Bailey, Marlon M. 2011. "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture." *Feminist Studies* 37(2):365–386,472.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. 1989. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. "What Makes a Social Class? On The Theoretical and Practical Existence Of Groups." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32:1–17.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40(4):519–31.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- Clarke, Adele E. 2005. *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Dazed. 2016. "Looking at Paris Is Burning 25 Years after Its Release." *Dazed*. Retrieved January 7, 2020 (<https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32530/1/looking-at-paris-is-burning-25-years-after-its-release>).
- Du Bois, W. E. B., David W. Blight, and Robert. Gooding-Williams. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Boston: Bedford Books.
- Ellickson, Robert C. 1999. *The Evolution of Social Norms: A Perspective from the Legal Academy*. SSRN Scholarly Paper. ID 191392. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vintage Books.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1972. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." *Daedalus* 101(1):1–37.
- Goodman, Philip. 2014. "Race in California's Prison Fire Camps for Men: Prison Politics, Space, and the Racialization of Everyday Life." *American Journal of Sociology* 120(2):352–94.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor books edition. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company.
- Goffman, Erving. 1986. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. 1st Touchstone ed. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Grazian, David. 2005. *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hahl, Oliver and Ezra W. Zuckerman. 2014. "The Denigration of Heroes? How the Status Attainment Process Shapes Attributions of Considerateness and Authenticity." *American Journal of Sociology* 120(2):504–54.
- Livingston, Jennie. 1991. *Paris Is Burning*.
- Mead, G. H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Ralph, Laurence. 2014. *Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Sheinheit, Ian, and Cynthia J. Bogard. 2016. "Authenticity and Carrier Agents: The Social Construction of Political Gaffes." *Sociological Forum* 31(4):970–93.
- Simmel, Georg. 1955. *Conflict and The Web of Group-Affiliations*. New York, NY, US: Free Press.
- Susman, Tara. 2000. "The Vogue of Life: Fashion Culture, Identity, and the Dance of Survival in the Gay Balls."
- Sweet, Paige L. 2019. "The Sociology of Gaslighting." *American Sociological Review* 84(5):851–75.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition." Pp. 25–74 in *Multiculturalism: Expanded Paperback Edition*. Princeton University Press.
- Thornton, Sarah. 1996. *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Vannini, Phillip. and J. Patrick Williams. 2009. "Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society." in *Authenticity in culture, self, and society*. Farnham, England: Ashgate Pub.
- Vail, D. Angus. 1999. Tattoos are like potato chips . . . You can't get just one: The Process of Becoming and Being a Collector. *Deviant Behavior*. 20: 253-273.
- Wynn, Natalie. 2019. *Opulence | ContraPoints*.

Appendix

ORDER OF CATEGORIES:	
REALNESS:	
MR/MS/MX EXECUTIVE: BEST SHOWCASE YOUR BRAND/SERVICE/PRODUCT!	
SCHOOL BOY/GIRL: BE REAL & BRING YOUR LGBTQ+ HISTORY HOMEWORK!	
PRETTY BOY/GIRL: CAMPAIGN FOR CPS TO ALLOW CONDOM DISTRIBUTION!	
MALE/FEMALE FIGURE BANG! HARDWARE W/ PEP/PEP PILL UNDER EYE!	
WHO'S ZOOMING WHO?! COUPLES FOR SEXUAL HEALTH IN MATCHING LOOKS!	
FACE:	
BQ: IN AN ARMED FORCES EFFECT SERVING YOUR FACE FROM THE BACK!	
FEMALE FIGURE FUTURISTIC: PAINTED INTO A WHOLE NEW DIMENSION!	
PHYSIQUE:	
OTA BODY: COVERED IN +, -, & = SIGNS FOR HIV EQUALITY; HIDE PRIVATES!	
OTA SEX SIREN: INC. U=U OR I=I INTO A SEXY, BUT CONSERVATIVE EFFECT!	
FASHION:	
OTA BEST DRESS: DONE FROM DOOR IN AN EFFECT FOR HIV AWARENESS!	
OTA THE LOOK: FASHION FORWARD GLITZ & GLAMOUR DONE HEAD TO TOE!	
OPEN TO ALL:	
MC VS MC: FOR 10S PREPARE A PG13 CHANT & THEN BATTLE FROM THERE!	
BIZARRE BAZAAR: IN AN EFFECT THAT BRIDGES TWO POLAR OPPOSITES!	
RUNWAY:	
UP IN PUMPS: W/ OVAH CHURCH LADY HAT & DEADLY CLOSED TOE PUMPS!	
BQ: IN AN OVAH BRONZED EFFECT FOR THE BRONZEVILLE WALK OF FAME!	
FEMALE FIGURE: BRING IT AS A TEACHER IN ALL RED, BLACK, & GREEN!	
AMERICAN RUNWAY: BRING IT W/ A TOY GUN TO PROTECT YOUR RIGHTS!	
DANCE:	
HAIR PERFORMANCE: HAIR AFFAIR MEETS CONTINUOUS SPINS TO SERVE!	
HAND PERFORMANCE: CATCH THE BEAT & OUR EYES WITH OVAH GLOVES!	
OLD WAY VS NEW WAY: FLASHBACK SERVING IT IN ALL BLACK & WHITE!	
BQ RWT: GET 10S IF REAL REP'N SCHOOL & TWIST IN SAFER SEX EFFECT!	
BQ SOFT & DANTY: COME READY TO VOGUE TO LEGENDARY SONGS ONLY!	
BQ DRAMATICS: BRING IT IN AN ALL BLACK WICKED EFFECT & MAKEUP!	
FEMALE FIGURE PERFORMANCE: COME IN A CATSUIT READY TO POUNCE!	
OTA DANCE OFF: COME READY TO DANCE IN HOUSE COLORS OR ALL WHITE!	

Figure 1: Program from a ball; November, 2019

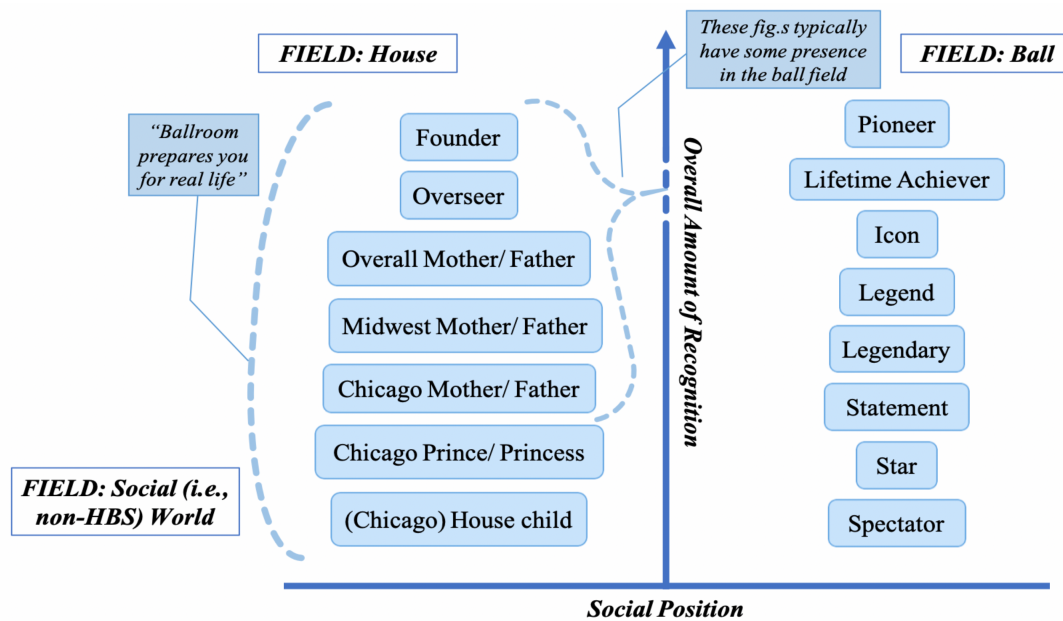


Figure 2: Social positions distributed by overall amount of recognition, which is itself determined by social-capital flows within the house and ball fields