

Space and Identity in *Pose*: Creating Queer Sanctuaries Within a Discriminatory Society

by

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Pose (2018) is an American TV series, created by Stephen Canals et al. It refers to ball culture, which became widely popular within African-American and Latino members of the LGBTQ+ community in 1980s New York City. The show had a major impact on viewers, since it addressed socially relevant issues on identity. The directors intended to criticize the homophobic, transphobic, and racist beliefs of 1980s American society and honor the history of the LGBTQ+ community. They illustrate the harsh treatment queer individuals experienced in public spaces, the rise of ball culture, and the need to create underground spaces where they could be protected. In the first episode of *Pose* sexual, gender, and racial identities shape the role of space within the narrative. In the 1980s, New York was for the LGBTQ+ community a city marked by discrimination and exclusion, but simultaneously it was a city where they started creating their own safe spaces of self-expression and inclusivity.

The ballroom scenes provide a lens through which *Pose* explores the relationship between space and identity. The series perfectly demonstrates how the ballroom served as a space for black and Latino queer people to experiment artistically and feel free to express themselves. It is through ball performances and the tools they used, for example costumes, makeup and choreographies, that they had the opportunity to explore and reconstruct their identity in a way that challenges the social limitations on gender roles and sexual expression (Buckner). In comparison to public spaces where homosexual and transgender people were insulted and marginalized for the way they looked and behaved, this underground space offered them a sense of representation and visibility. For most of them the ballroom was like an escape from reality, their own world where their sole concern was to make art, deliver the most outstanding performances, and win trophies. While they were spending their everyday life with the constant fear of being mistreated and assaulted in public, the nights in the ballroom were the only time they could actually feel empowered and confident. This is depicted in the scene of Damon's first ball performance, where he is finally given the opportunity to express his dancing talent in front of an audience and celebrate his queerness, after a long time of trying to hide this part of him from his violent, homophobic father. As X. Ramos-Lara puts it, "[b]allroom brings

oppressed people together in attempts to combat structural violence, with the resulting product(s) being works of bodily art meant to convey a desire to love each other and oneself” (Ramos-Lara 27). There is no doubt that the ballroom was their place of redemption, where pride and confidence suddenly replaced the shame and fear society instilled in them.

In addition, the Houses were also a part of ball culture and were a space of protection and mentorship for black and Latino queer youth. In case young ball participants were not accepted by their biological families for being homosexual or transgender, they often lived with their ball Houses. For instance, Damon’s parents forced him to leave their household and later he met Blanca, who introduced him to the ballroom scene and offered him a home in the House of Evangelista. Every House had a mother, who was the leader and the protector of the other members and prepared them to participate in ball competitions. The series effectively transports the viewer into the lived reality of the Houses, mainly focusing on the House of Evangelista. Blanca, the mother of the house, founded for Damon and other characters a chosen family, where they can find acceptance and guidance. More specifically, Damon’s biological family did not support his decision to become a dancer, but Blanca encourages him to follow his passion for dancing, proving the importance of having a supportive maternal figure as a young queer person. Marlon Bailey agrees that “Houses are the means by which members of the Ballroom community experience cultural belonging and care in ways that are often more supportive and affirming than in their families and communities of origin” (Bailey). Moreover, Blanca motivates the members of the House of Evangelista to work harder on their dancing skills and stage presence, so they can win against the House of Abundance in the ball competition. It is crucial for young ball competitors to have a mentor like Blanca that does not only push them to become the best version of themselves in the ballroom, but also teach them to be proud of their identity and evolve into independent and self-assured adults in the outside world.

In contrast to the ballroom and the House of Evangelista, which are depicted as spaces of identity expression and acceptance, the public places and the streets of New York City are presented as unwelcoming and even dangerous for the black and Latino LGBTQ+ community. In the beginning of the first episode, the House of Abundance carry out a heist in a local museum with the intention to wear the stolen costumes to their ball performance. This scene implicitly symbolizes the exclusion of black and Latino individuals from white upper-class institutions, pointing out issues of racial and class discrimination. Their act can be considered as revolutionary, since by stealing something that belongs to the white high culture and

adjusting it to their black underground culture, they turn against social stereotypes and redefine their identity by reclaiming power in spaces that had historically denied their presence. Furthermore, the case of Damon being rejected by his biological family and left homeless is a great reflection of the hard living conditions queer kids were put through. His family's homophobic opinions left him no other choice but to live on the streets, where he is exposed to crime and harassment. This is notably evident in the scene where he was robbed, while sleeping on a park bench, which shows how unprotected and vulnerable queer youth can be in urban spaces. Both the museum heist scene and the robbery of Damon scene display in different ways that most non-white homosexual or transgender people that belong in the working or lower class in the United States face several forms of discrimination from society along with rejection from their original communities (Bailey).

The decade of the 1980s was undoubtedly a point in history for the LGBTQ+ community, especially in the United States. It was an era marked by the AIDS epidemic, a lack of government support and social injustice toward these individuals. Due to inadequate medical care, an overwhelming number of homosexual and transgender people died from AIDS, while many others were socially stigmatized from it for the rest of their lives. Meanwhile, police violence against queer people was a common phenomenon, the government neglected their needs and prejudice led society to turn against them. All these factors contributed to the outbreak of a revolution for LGBTQ+ rights: pride parades, protests, and awareness campaigns were organized all over the United States. As previously stated, the rise of ball culture was another significant event of that period. Voguing is a stylized form of dance originating in the black and Latinx ballroom scene that became a symbol of confidence and empowerment for queer people. My collage includes real-life photographs that depict the inside of ballrooms at the time and reveal the darker side of things: the arrest of a ball performer and signs from protest movements of that decade. It also features photographs and quotes of two important figures who went down in history as queer icons: Willi Ninja, a black homosexual dancer, who specialized in voguing, and Marsha P. Johnson, a black transgender woman and activist. The aim of my collage is to connect all the events mentioned, draw attention on the issues the community was dealing with, and offer a glimpse into the reality of that era. *Pose*, in turn, functions as a reminder of the value of representation on media: not only representation of different sexual or gender identities, but also of different races and social classes. Its viewers can identify with the characters and find visibility on national television, after many years of feeling like their communities did not have a place on mass media. Moreover, by emphasizing

the role of space, *Pose* highlights the importance welcoming and affirming environments have for queer individuals, even nowadays. The directors of the show invite the viewing audience to reflect on the continued relevance of these issues in the present and on their own role, as members of society, in building a better future for marginalized communities.

Considering all the above, *Pose* portrays how New York City during the 1980s was both a place where queer African-Americans and Latinos could create their own community and find representation, and a place where they still faced homophobia, transphobia and racism from society. The first episode, through the illustration of the ballroom and the House of Evangelista, sheds light on the underground world where these people could freely embrace their queerness, while also stressing the cruel reality of the public world—discrimination, homelessness, hate crimes, white supremacy—that they had to tolerate. The creators of *Pose* focus on this comparison between underground and public spaces of New York City in order to criticize social inequalities, express their support for the LGBTQ+ community and emphasize the need to still create queer sanctuaries in today's society.

Works Cited

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