



**Universitat de les
Illes Balears**

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau

“Live! Work! Pose!”: Re-Imagining Trans Representation in *Pose*

Silvia Nicolau Colomar

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Any acadèmic 2020-21

DNI de l'alumne: 43229760H

Treball tutelat per Dr. Katarzyna Beata Paszkiewicz
Departament de Filologia Espanyola, Moderna i Clàssica

S'autoritza la Universitat a incloure aquest treball en el Repositori Institucional per a la seva consulta en accés obert i difusió en línia, amb finalitats exclusivament acadèmiques i d'investigació	Autor		Tutor	
	Sí	No	Sí	No
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Paraules clau del treball:

Politics of Representation, LGBTQ+ Media Representation, Intersectionality, *Pose*

Contents

Introduction 5

Abandoning Stereotypes 6

Raising Awareness 11

Conclusion..... 16

Bibliography..... 18

Abstract

Pose displays a sympathetic, non-transphobic representation of trans women since they are portrayed as diverse and non-stereotypical. While the series has attracted a lot of critical attention, the discussion on its key characters in relation to the issue of class is minimal. Furthermore, there is a lack of analysis regarding advocacy against transphobia and sexism depicted in the show and performed by the trans women protagonists. The aim of this paper is to analyze and reflect on *Pose*'s politics of trans representation through gender and trans theory perspective. Accordingly, this paper will demonstrate that *Pose* visibilizes trans women's experiences and histories by portraying non-stereotypical, non-othered and activist trans women as well as by pleading for an intersectional and minorities-led approach to activism. On the one hand, *Pose* diverges from portraying transness as something negative. In fact, the series presents trans women as relatable and approachable and debunks representational issues of trans women. The usage of aesthetic devices is relevant since the series uses them in an alternative way to the conventional methods of the film industry so as to not objectify trans women. On the other hand, *Pose* vindicates the role of trans women as advocates against social injustices such as sexism and transphobia. Additionally, the show portrays trans women fighting against the stigmatization of HIV and AIDS and as people of influence among the queer youth to educate them about the ways to prevent the exposure to the diseases. Ultimately, the paper concludes that *Pose* is a useful production that benefits the acceptance and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community, specifically the trans community, in society.

Key words: Politics of Representation, LGBTQ+ Media Representation, Intersectionality, *Pose*.

Introduction

Representation is a key factor to the perception of a group of people since the politics of representation may have an impact on how the audience will genuinely perceive said group. Notoriously, LGBTQ+ people, especially trans individuals, have been invisibilized or hardly represented in mainstream media. Hence, the film industry has endeavored to include the community in newer productions, despite portraying the LGBTQ+ community with negative stereotypes and typically showing it as being othered. A reason that has been attached to these tendencies is that media has been chiefly a cisgender, heterosexual, white male-dominated industry, and the community has been presented through a lens that diminishes it (Chatterjee 2016, 213) as “filmmakers need to not only present accurate storylines but to also find ways to engage the audience to view these portrayals” (Beight 2014, 18). Therefore, “invisibility, stereotypical representations, and assimilation of transgender people in the media can contribute to the public’s lack of understanding or acceptance of this population, potentially fomenting transphobia and discrimination” (Capuzza and Spencer 2017, 215). Nonetheless, platforms such as Netflix have increasingly attempted to provide a positive portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community (2017, 215). This is evidenced, for example, by the TV show *Pose* (2018), which deals with the ballroom scene in the 1980s-1990s New York City during the summit of the HIV and AIDS outbreak, and which has been created along the line of *Paris is Burning*¹, since it also centers its plot on Black, Latina trans women. The series was created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals. Ryan Murphy has created other LGBTQ+ series and productions with LGBTQ+ characters, such as *Glee* or *Scream Queens*.

On the analysis of *Pose*, Alfred L. Martin Jr. states that, “the show can mediate the lives and tribulations of Black, queer, and trans people for an audience largely foreign to the concepts and plotlines it engages, while [...] dualcasting to ‘grab’ stray LGBTQ audience members” (2020, 71). According to Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi Yekani and Jasper J. Verlinden, “*Pose* deliberately steps into and beyond our current moment in the development of mainstream trans representation” (2020, 2), while Noe Montez and Kareem Khubchandani observe that, “*Pose* insists on the value of kinship and pedagogy amidst the AIDS crisis and rampantly transphobic city” (2020, ix). Nonetheless, Eva Pensis criticizes the show stating that, “*Pose*

¹ *Paris is Burning* has been acclaimed by Judith Butler as relevant for gender theory as it “question[s] whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (1993, 125).

aestheticizes the practices of survival sex work by trans women and street queens, [which] subsequently makes Black and trans life presentable and non-threatening to a global audience” (2019, 16). Whilst Pensis’ accusations against *Pose*’s display of sex work are relevant, the series revolutionizes the perception and representation of transness. Thus, it can be argued that the show has had a positive impact on LGBTQ+ acceptance.

While the series has attracted a lot of critical attention, the discussion on its key characters in relation to the issue of class is minimal. Furthermore, there is a lack of analysis regarding advocacy against transphobia and sexism depicted in the show and performed by the trans women protagonists. For that reason, the aim of this paper is to analyze and reflect on *Pose*’s politics of trans representation: how does *Pose* represent Black, Latina trans characters? How does the series fictionalize trans experiences and histories? And how is *Pose* actively engaged in highlighting the active role of trans women in fighting discrimination? Accordingly, this paper will demonstrate that *Pose* visibilizes trans women’s experiences and histories by portraying non-stereotypical, non-othered and activist trans women as well as by pleading for an intersectional and minorities-led approach to activism. Adopting gender theorists’ lens (Judith Butler, Marlon M. Bailey, Francisco Valdés) and using trans theorists’ perspective (Jamie C. Capuzza, Debra Beight, Julian Kevon Glover), this paper will analyze these aspects in the first and the second season of the series. Section one will be devoted to the discussion of Blanca and Angel’s characterization, which is significant especially considering its relation to the representational politics of trans women’s characters in the mainstream media. Subsequently, section two will focus on the active ways in which several trans characters deal with transphobic and sexist aggressions, as well as how the series addresses their effort to sensitize people, i.e. other characters and the audience, about HIV and AIDS.

Abandoning Stereotypes

An inclusive casting is crucial to an all-embracing production; hence, prioritizing trans interpreters apropos of the representation of transness should be substantial. Not only is it interesting to provide a space for trans women to interpret and shape characters that might relate to their experience, but it is also crucial to avoid transphobic representations that could be misunderstood and eventually result in the erasure of trans bodies. While Jamie C. Capuzza and Leland G. Spencer claim that “cisgender actors can also fulfill [trans] roles successfully and that transgender actors should not be typecast or hired only for transgender roles” (2016, 221), for Aryeh Conrad this argument might imply “position[ing] transness as a costume that

cisgender people can put on and take off at their discretion, and as something that can be mimicked without any meaningful engagement with the trans community” (2015, 5). On the lines of Conrad’s assertion, *Pose* is revolutionary when it comes to “featur[ing] the largest cast of transgender actors in series regular roles and the largest recurring LGBTQ cast ever for a scripted television series” (TV News Desk 2017) by placing MJ Rodriguez (Blanca Evangelista), Dominique Jackson (Elektra Abundance) and Indya Moore (Angel Evangelista), among others, as the main characters of a mainstream production. By doing so, the creators of the series allow “trans women that consume television and film [...] to join the rest of [the audience] by seeing themselves reflected on the screen” (Reitz 2017, 6). Furthermore, the casting team has departed from “color-blind casting”, a practice that “removes race from the casting process and employs the best actor for the role” (Hopkins 2018, 133) and avoided colorism or “prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2021). Hence, *Pose* transforms and visibilizes Black, Latina trans bodies and interpreters by means of displaying a racialized trans-inclusive casting.

Character-building is one of the most significant aspects in regard to representing roles in the media. Therefore, it is relevant to highlight how the film industry has relied on negative stereotypes to portray trans women of color. Consequently, *Pose* strives for avoiding such stereotypes to characterize trans women. Whereas “the media situates transwomen of color [...] as subhuman and thus unworthy of incorporation into the American social fabric” (Glover 2016, 340), *Pose* highlights how society perceives trans women as misfits (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 45:24) and contrasts this view by personifying said women. Thus, the show reflects relatability as it represents Blanca and Angel having a Christmas dinner party with the House of Evangelista as a family and exchanging presents with one another (Mock and Lady J. 2018, S1 E3 53:25). Furthermore, it depicts four Black, Latina trans women going on vacation (Mock and Lady J. 2019, S2 E9 11:20), and portrays Blanca and Elektra sharing their worries and sufferings (Canals 2019, S2 E8 50:44). Another stereotype addressed in the series is how queerness is usually related to violence (Conrad 2015, 11). *Pose* debunks this issue with the figure of Elektra, who is portrayed as selfish or with malicious intentions and even sometimes aggressive (Murphy 2018, S1 E1 22:49), however she is then portrayed as a nice, benevolent, and strong woman with a severe personality (Murphy, Falchuk, and Canals 2018, S1 E8 32:00). Decisively, the media has commonly related transness to fraud as “trans women typically are shown in the process of feminizing their appearances through dress and make-up and [...] this ‘artificial and imitative’ representation contribute[s] to the stereotype of transgender women as

deceivers” (Capuzza and Spencer 2017, 217). To defy that, the show questions realness since the term “real” is referred frequently during the series, especially in a conversation between Angel and Stan Bowes, Angel’s first boyfriend (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 45:44). In fact, Stan acknowledges that “[he] is the one playing dress-up” and asks Angel if “it is wrong [...] to have one person in [his] life that [he] know[s] is real” (45:44). This scene observes that realness is “[a] quotidian performance [that] offers a way to understand how all gender and sexual identities are performed” (Bailey 2016, 56). Ultimately, realness can be related to Butler’s performativity theory as the conversation remarks that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as [...] bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds” (1988, 519). Hence, it can be argued that *Pose* tries to challenge negative stereotypes ascribed to trans women of color by displaying an array of identifiable and diverse character types whilst challenging the normative understanding of realness.

Underlining character development, Blanca, *Pose*’s main protagonist, can be perceived as the epitome of a non-stereotypical representation of transness. That is, she is presented as an ambitious, perseverant, and good-hearted woman who uses her nature to uplift herself and simultaneously improve her and her community’s precarious situation. *Pose* presents the initial stage of Blanca’s personality through flashbacks where she is depicted as a naïve, inexperienced, and insecure girl who seeks refuge and protection in the ballroom scene (Canals 2018, S1 E5 1:35), however she gains confidence when she finds Elektra’s sympathy (2:10). Hence, it could be argued that “desire for support and acceptance are primary motivations for involvement in the House and Ball communities” and that “the Ballroom scene [...] encourag[es] and celebrat[es] shamelessness, a strong contradiction to internalized [LGBT]phobia” (Kubicek, et al. 2013, 1536). Moving to the ongoing timeline, Blanca has gained experience and her resilient nature comes to light when she is diagnosed with HIV (Murphy, Falchuk and Canals S1 E1, 16:46). This motivates her to work towards creating her own house and owning her personal beauty salon (19:14) despite facing transphobia and racism (Murphy, Falchuk and Canals 2019, S2 E1 30:12) when she is forced to quit her former job position at a beauty salon (29:56) and when she starts her own business (Mock 2019, S2 E2 10:42). Arguably, Blanca’s characterization challenges the mass media’s motivations to “further stigmatize or exploit those within the [trans] community” (Glover 2016, 339). In order to argue for the representation of Blanca as a good-hearted woman, it is necessary to draw attention to her role as a mother. José Javier Torres Fernández has already explored such role and states that, “Blanca’s willingness to become a mother is based on the necessity for help in her community and her desire to educate, support, and reach out to LGBTQ people in need”

(2020, 170). That is, not only does she uplift herself as previously exemplified, but she enhances others to pursue their dreams. For instance, Blanca helps Damon Evangelista to become a professional dancer (Murphy 2018, S1 E1 47:51), obliges Elektra to quit a dangerous job position in sex work and finds her a job as a receptionist at a fancy restaurant (Murphy, Falchuk, and Canals 2018, S1 E8 11:24), and supports Angel to pursue her career in modelling so that she can abandon her job as a sex worker in the piers (Murphy, Falchuk and Canals 2019, S2 E1 14:11). Consequently, it can be concluded that Blanca Evangelista is a powerful image that presents a trans woman of color as the core of her own uplifting whilst reinforcing others' improvement at the same time.

Further in the refraining of stereotypes, *Pose* diverges from adversely stereotyping cis/trans romantic relationships by not typifying trans women. However, the series depicts cisgender male characters fetishizing and sexually reifying them by incorporating Stan and Angel's relationship. First and foremost, Stan insists that Angel is authentic "even though the price [she] pay[s] for it is being disinvited from the rest of the world" (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 45:24). In doing so, *Pose* presents a potentially subversive image of a cisgender middle-class white man that challenges the heteronormative discourse and displays a sympathetic, non-transphobic approach to Angel, making her feel unthreatened (Cragg 2018, S1 E3 17:01). Therefore, it could be argued that the series is criticizing "the ideology that sutures heterosexual gender and sexual norms to [society], and even jettisons all non-normative gender and sexual practices" (Bailey 2014, 496). As for their sexual encounters, the sex scene in episode three in season one is laid-back and by no means is hypersexualizing Angel as the camera focuses on both naked bodies instead of displaying Angel from Stan's point of view (Cragg 2018, 18:03). This is contraposed to the conventional male gaze in the film industry in which "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 2006, 246). Nevertheless, such cinematic representation "entail[s] intimacy more than carnal passion and thus, 'professionalizes and sanctifies the sex worker'" (Pensis 2019, 20). For that reason, it is important to note that Stan fetishizes Angel (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 35:22) creating a toxic atmosphere in their relationship because "[he] gets jealous when other men see her [in the booth]" (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 37:28). In fact, the word "fetish" is visible in the frame when Stan enters the "private viewing booths" (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 35:27) and Angel realizes that "he want[s] to keep [her] like a doll" (Murphy and Mock 2018, S1 E6 1:27) suggesting that Stan might treat Angel "right", but he also sees her as a mere object that satisfies his needs. Hence, it can be argued that Stan is looking at Angel through the lens of "white patriarchy and

white privilege [...], that is, the male and the imperial gazes” (Kaplan 1997, 15) and is sustaining the hegemonic colonial gendered discourse present in the dynamics of exoticism (Arrizón 2008, 190). Namely, “‘exotic’ objects have been constituted by applying [...] a system of exotic representation that commoditized the non-West in order to suit Western consumption” (Savigliano 1991, 2). Consequently, what can be extracted from Stan and Angel’s relationship is that, according to Pensis, “racialized female sexuality, [...] offers a site of ‘polymorphous perversity, a place of dangerous possibilities’ that seems far from [...] transnormative femininity” (2019, 18). Therefore, even though *Pose* does not objectify Angel by means of aesthetic devices when staging her intimate relationship with Stan, it does point to the fetishization Black, Latina trans women suffer by showing Angel objectified by Stan and other men that go to the booths to watch her.

Contrasting Stan’s dubious incentive to be in a relationship with Angel, Esteban "Lil Papi" Martinez-Evangelista’s love for Angel stems from wholesomeness, unconditionality and reverence. Remarkably, *Pose* presents a cisgender, heterosexual man that understands and uplifts a Black, Latina trans woman as Papi does not “let [Angel] apologize” for standing him up (Mock 2019, S2 E3 33:41) because she was prioritizing her modelling career (36:24). Notably, the scene contrasts with the commonly cis/trans romantic trope in which “transgender people are often depicted as people who could never have a sex life or healthy relationship” (McLaren 2018, 91). Papi and Angel’s engagement scene (Mock 2019, S2 E10 48:56) illustrates the defiance of this recurrent stereotype. Not only are they voicing their admiration, love, and respect for one another (48:01 and 48:32), but they are also demonstrating the egalitarian nature of their relationship since Angel and Papi propose to each other at the same time (49:43). Hence, they debunk and differ from the “hetero-patriarchal categories and hierarchies that privilege masculine, heterosexual men and subordinate all other sex/gender types” (Valdés 1996, 169). The egalitarian power dynamics of Angel and Papi’s relationship is present in their sexual relations as well. In episode seven in season two, Angel and Papi are screened naked from an external point of view, which does not hypersexualize Angel as the camera is focused on both naked bodies (Livingston 2019, 20:02). Additionally, the scene portrays Papi lovingly caressing Angel’s body (20:10) and both Papi and Angel confessing their love for one another while having sex (20:14). Markedly, *Pose* is diverging from the “cisgender gaze of these visual texts [which] ‘fixes’ transness, [that] render[s] trans people as knowable and legible curiosities [and] shor[es] up binaries of self/other and cis/trans” (Sandercock 2015, 441). Consequently, the series visibly “underscores that transgender women should be included into dominant heteronormativity, especially with regard to their sexual and romantic attractions by suggesting

that their identities as women are not substantially different from those of cisgender women” (Glover 2016, 339). Thoroughly and arguably, the portrayal of such relationship visibilizes healthy and respectful emotional and sexual connections. It can be argued that Papi and Angel’s partnership vindicates that a racialized trans woman can experience a vigorous, fulfilled, heterosexual romance with a cisgender man since Papi’s intentions towards Angel are far from exoticizing, othering and fetishizing her.

All things considered, “stereotypes are associated with discriminatory behaviors through a relationship that is mediated by prejudiced affect” (Gazzola and Morrison 2014, 77). For that reason, *Pose* is challenging the film industry by avoiding negative stereotypes ascribed to trans women. Not only is the series giving a platform for Black, Latina trans women interpreters, but it is also presenting powerful and meaningful images that might impact the audience. In effect, it includes relatability towards trans women and debunks negative conventions ascribed to transness, especially to female transness, by presenting Blanca and Angel as independent, strong characters as well as people that are capable to fulfill their dreams. Furthermore, the series is also emphasizing how transness relates to society and how society interacts with transness. That is, *Pose* includes characters that reinforce the idea of othering trans individuals, yet they are enhanced, uplifted, and portrayed as powerful since the plot is developed from trans women’s point of view.

Raising Awareness

Aside from abandoning stereotypes, it can be argued that another of *Pose*’s objective is to raise awareness on the precarity trans people faced in the 1980s-1990s (and are currently facing) as well as presenting trans people as activists who fight against racism, transphobia, sexism, and the stigmatization of HIV and AIDS. For that reason, *Pose* denounces the capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal social order that excludes and others trans women. The series reflects this by contrasting Stan’s world (the white, normative, accepted world) and Angel’s community (the marginalized world). Hence, it compares the privileged world or higher- and middle-class that is able to enjoy basic commodities and a reasonable amount of money (Cragg 2018, S1 E3 48:46) with the non-privileged, ostracized world or lower-class that has limited economical resources, both to pay rent (Murphy, Falchuk and Canals 2019, S2 E1 54:20) and to access education (Murphy 2018, S1 E1 1:08:31). *Pose* may do this to denounce that “women and sexual minorities are the specific targets for subordination under conflationary heteropatriarchy and its particularized constellation of sex/gender dictates” (Valdés 1996, 209). Due

to this differentiation in society, trans women are faced with a barrier to obtain well-paid jobs since “one of the main characteristics of the social exclusion of LGBT people is their invisibility and marginalization, or [...] the lack of recognition of LGBT people as full members of a community and as citizens” (Tackács 2006, 21). Fundamentally, they are afraid to be “discovered” and hence fired or exploited (2006, 55). These two reasons are exemplified in the series by Angel and her modelling career. She is “discovered” (Mock 2019, S2 E10 13:32), then rejected by brands (14:20), and in another instance she is coerced to do a nude photoshoot because the photographer has discovered her “secret” (Murphy, Falchuk and Canals 2019, S2 E1 37:07). All things considered, *Pose* is portraying a relatable society to reflect (or make reflect) on how the world is organized as well as to emphasize trans’ fragility in the social fabric.

A central feature of *Pose* is the portrayal of Black, Latina trans women as activists against transphobia and sexism. The most highlighted scene in regard to fighting transphobia is Elektra’s defending herself from a rich, white, cisgender woman in a restaurant. This woman states that, “[she] know[s] a man pretending to be a woman when she sees one” (Mock and Lady J. 2019, S2 E9 26:15). To which Elektra responds:

God may have blessed you with Barbies, a backyard with a pony and a boyfriend named Jake and an unwanted pregnancy that your father paid to terminate so you could go to college and major in being a basic bitch. None of these things makes you a woman. Your uniform of ill-fitting J. Crew culottes, fake pearls, and 50-cent scrunchies cannot conceal the fact that you do not know who you are. I know our presence threatens you. We fought for our place at this table. And that has made us stronger that you will ever be (25:45).

The rebut highlights that, “gender is a ubiquitous social construct that wields power over every individual in our society” and that “the traditional dichotomous gender paradigm is oppressive, especially for transgendered people” (Burdge 2007, 243). Furthermore, it debunks the “belief that transgender individuals are confused about their gender identity and require therapy to resolve this confusion” (Gazzola and Morrison 2014, 82) and places transgender people as resilient (Kubicek et al. 2013, 1534). To further exemplify their wary character, Elektra reprimands Blanca for going on a date with a man because “it’s unsafe for girls like [them] to walk off in the middle of the night with a stranger. [...] [They] can’t trust a man once the sun goes down” (28:53). This underlines “an increasing awareness of an often racialized

anti-trans violence” (Koch Rein et al. 2020, 2). Nonetheless, Elektra is not the only character who is vocal against transphobia and sexism. Blanca also “constructs a discourse of activism against the marginalization and discrimination of black trans women within and outside the LGBTQ community” (Torres 2020, 171) when she rebukes Damon’s teacher for downgrading the ballrooms and suggesting that Damon is distracted by them (Cragg 2018, S1 E3 31:39). Altogether, *Pose* is illustrating the worries and distress trans women undergo for existing and defying the normative system and emphasising their resiliency and strength as human beings.

Besides condemning society’s transphobic and sexist behaviour, *Pose* denounces and depicts discrimination within the same LGBTQ community. The clearest transphobic and sexist aggression is suffered by Blanca and Lulu, Blanca’s friend, when they are hanging out at a gay bar (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 20:40). They are discriminated first by the barman who states that, “[they] don’t like women in [there]” (22:41) once Blanca clarifies that Lulu and she are not Drag Queens (22:39), and then by the manager who misgenders Blanca systematically (51:38) and a policeman arrests her for being “aggressive” because she was correcting her pronouns (57:54). These discriminations are denounced by Lulu as she confronts Blanca by saying that, “everybody needs someone to make them feel superior. [...] This shit runs downhill past the women, the Blacks, Latins, gays until it reaches the bottom and lands on [trans] kind” (23:41). Ultimately, what Lulu suggests is that “these are forms of oppression based on gender power relations in terms of categories and gender presentation in the community. [...] Masculinity can be, resiliently, privileged and oppressive without regard for those to whom it is ascribed and by whom it is performed” (Bailey 2016, 225). Another discriminatory behaviour towards trans women within the LGBTQ community is the allocation in ballrooms. Elektra criticizes that, “[trans women] built ballrooms, yet all [they] have are three categories and no rightful place on the council” (Mock 2019, S2 E10 9:04) and specifies that, “[trans women] put [their] best foot forward in [their] most coveted finery, only to be met with the glaring eyes of men. Sitting on their perch, squinting, and inspecting, and tallying” (9:17). To which Angel adds that, “[they]’re judged enough by the outside world to be judged so harshly by [their] own” (9:44). These accusations could be summarised by saying that “power and privilege are afforded to gay men and masculinity within the community” (Bailey 2011, 376). Overall, *Pose* exposes how trans women are uncomfortable even within their own community and portrays scenes where hierarchical orders are questioned and challenged.

Contrastingly, *Pose* presents scenes of ballroom culture that display the image of kinship and family. Substantively, Pray Tell emphasizes that “the whole point of the balls is to remind you that you’re not alone” (Mock 2019, S2 E10 3:01) when cheering Blanca because

she is ill, and her children have become independent. Pray's utterance reflects how "ballroom members join kinship and ritualized performance at ball events to create alternative spaces for both individual and collective self-fashioning, affirmation, and sociocultural support" (Bailey 2014, 491). A further instance of kinship is the ballroom's council discussing the issue of inequality as women are not represented in it (Mock 2019, S2 E10 11:16). By presenting this discussion, *Pose* might be referring to how "the social structures of houses and ballroom performance rapidly evolved to provide even more inclusive, safe spaces for the many young QPOCs [Queer Peoples of Color] disproportionately affected by a variety of economic and social hardships" (Rio 2020, 123). In fact, a member of the council underlines that "it's about sisterhood. It's about solidarity" (Mock 2019, S2 E10 12:01). This sense of inclusivity is also portrayed by Papi's creation of a manager agency named Fidelity. Papi states that he wants to "work with girls like [Angel], girls from the scene" (Mock 2019, S2 E10 20:46). Hence, Fidelity's ethics mark that "[ballroom] subculture [...] forms a network of positive queer solidarity against a myriad of urban, social, and political violence" (Rio 2020, 131). Finally, it is interesting to draw attention to the concept of chosen family. Torres argues that, "chosen families [...] perpetuate the need for a family as a socially configured environment free of discrimination and judgement where individuals can grow, receive support, and develop their identities, their education, and their living conditions" (2020, 165). This is clearly noted in any ballroom preparation setting, however the most seemingly impactful scene is Blanca's reappearance in the ballroom after she has been hospitalized because of aggravated HIV symptoms (Mock 2019, S2 E10 52:37). During the walk, Blanca's children (Damon, Blanca, Papi, and Angel) accompany and uplift her showing an image of unity and pride. Such feelings are emphasized in the frame by Damon and Papi holding the LGBTQ flag as well as the House of Evangelista flag, respectively (52:52). By doing this, the characters and the series are conveying "the idea of shamelessness or pride in oneself, [which] can potentially counter the effects of [LGBTQ]phobia, both external and internal" (Kubicek et al. 2012, 1536). In conclusion, *Pose* could be suggesting that, even if there are disputes and incongruences in the community, they should stand together and form alliances to combat the injustices the LGBTQ community suffer as a whole. Furthermore, the show arguably conveys a message of unity, commonality, and diversity in order to progress and reach a harmonious coexistence in society.

Apart from highlighting the activist nature of trans women, *Pose* works to destigmatize and debunk myths related to HIV and AIDS. Arguably, the series does so by firstly portraying Damon's biological mother claiming that, "the Bible condemns homosexuality, and God will punish [Damon] with that disease" (Murphy 2018, S1 E1 14:41). This allegation shows bigotry

and invisibilizes the gravity of HIV and AIDS as well as emphasizes the misinformation about the diseases (Bailey 2009, 263). For that reason, *Pose* throughout the whole series displays characters raising awareness about HIV and AIDS within the same LGBTQ community. To provide a specific instance, Blanca gives Damon a sex talk and warns him about the importance of having sex safely and getting tested regularly (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 17:35). Hence, *Pose* stresses how “mothers play a crucial role in teaching their house members to be safe and to use condoms [...] and by identifying various resources such as housing, medical care, and support groups for house members living with HIV/AIDS” (Arnold and Bailey 2009, 185). Furthermore, *Pose* depicts mobilization to fight the illnesses by portraying Pray Tell in an “Act Up” meeting. The connection of activism with the ballroom scene, that is Pray Tell attending an activists’ meeting, is significant as “performance is [...] a radically multidisciplinary and embodied approach to examining an object of inquiry, and an active participation in performance as ‘tactics of intervention’ in spaces of alterity and struggle” (Bailey 2009, 257). During a speech in the meeting, the organization asserts that, “[they] will not allow [the Church’s] racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies to affect the health of every single person on this planet” (Murphy, Falchuk and Canals 2019, S2 E1 19:57). By the speaker emphasizing that “the health of every single person in this planet” would be affected by misinformation, Murphy, Falchuk and Canals could be addressing the misconception that HIV and AIDS are exclusively suffered by LGBTQ people (Piot et al. 2009, 2). As for debunking more myths, the series is evidently showing that the virus cannot be spread by touch (Srivastava et al. 2011, 88). This is clear as the audience knows from the beginning that Blanca has tested positive in HIV (Murphy 2018, S1 E1 16:46) and she is hugged by many characters that are not infected throughout the whole series. One example is Damon hugging Blanca after the sex talk (Murphy 2018, S1 E2 19:12). All things considered, *Pose* strives for putting the severity of HIV and AIDS in the spotlight. In fact, the narrative resolves to some extent around the awareness and consciousness-raising of the diseases as it engages the characters of the series in fighting said illnesses.

To conclude, *Pose* acts as an advocate to not only showcase trans women as powerful and opinionated people, but also as a vehicle that makes the audience reflect on society’s values, organization, and flaws. Moreover, the series serves as a tool to vindicate new forms of societal distribution by having the characters state their opinions on the system and constantly defying it, either by their existence or by their activism against injustices and aggressions. Additionally, *Pose* highlights the importance of kinship within the same community and with the outside world as a crucial factor to rectify the societal relations among individuals. Finally, it could be

argued that the TV show supports sexual education and the destigmatization of HIV and AIDS by portraying characters discussing the severity of the diseases and the measures they take to avoid getting infected. The images of such characters taking this spectrum of health earnestly could transcend the audience and inculcate how serious and important is to be tested as well as emphasizing that it is a way to respect and take care of one another.

Conclusion

This essay has considered some aspects regarding the representation of trans women in the TV series *Pose*. In the first section, the paper has discussed how *Pose* is revolutionary in terms of casting and providing a platform for Black, Latina trans interpreters and production team. It has also argued how trans women are presented as atypical depictions since they are portrayed in a way that deviates from focusing transness as their central and unique feature. Hence, avoiding the stereotyping of trans women and rebutting the widespread tendency in the film industry of portraying negatively stereotyped trans women. Subsequently, the essay has exemplified through Stan, Angel and Papi how *Pose* furthers its personifying of trans women by portraying healthy, heterosexual relationships and tarnishing the fetishization of trans women. In the second section, the dissertation has demonstrated that *Pose* and its main characters advocate for an intersectional and inclusive form of activism as the characters resist and fight against sexism, transphobia and misconceptions about HIV and AIDS. Firstly, the paper has discussed the issue of precarity, exclusion and subordination Black, Latina trans people endure and how it reflects on their lifestyles by contraposing their daily life to higher- and middle-class characters' way of life. Afterwards, the essay has displayed the discrimination of transness within society and the LGBTQ community and how, contrastingly, *Pose* shows a unified image of Queer People of Color to highlight the importance of solidarity, commonality, and diversity to defy societal discriminatory behaviors. Finally, the paper has explored how the series advocates for the destigmatization of HIV and AIDS by treating the topic in a serious manner and raising awareness among the young queer characters.

All things considered, *Pose* is a clear example which demonstrates that portraying trans women as non-stereotypical, good-hearted, relatable, and powerful people is not challenging. The series is also a form of activism to make the audience reflect on society's capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal hierarchical order that diminishes and downgrades Black, Latin, female transness. Furthermore, it enhances the destigmatization of sexually transmitted illnesses such as HIV and AIDS. The series does so by emphasizing society's apathy and alienation towards

marginalized and subordinated human beings. Despite doing all this, the series lacks the representation of more diverse character types in regard to sexual orientation as the characters in the production are either gay or heterosexual. Hence, it leaves behind a myriad of ranges and spectrums of sexuality and identities. Thus, this could be a potential topic to be analyzed as a downside of the TV show. Nonetheless, *Pose* arguably focuses its advocacy on questioning the cisheteropatriarchal hegemonic discourse since it centers its plot around trans women who are considered competing forces of such detrimental social order.

Bibliography

- Arnold, Emily A. and Bailey, Marlon M. 2009. "Constructing Home and Family: How the Ballroom Community Supports African American GLBTQ Youth in the Face of HIV/AIDS." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 21:171-188. DOI: 10.1080/10538720902772006.
- Arrizón, Alicia. 2008. "Latina Subjectivity, Sexuality and Sensuality." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 183:189-198. DOI: 10.1080/07407700802495928.
- Bailey, Marlon M. 2009. "Performance as Intervention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society* 113:254-274. DOI: 10.1080/10999940903088226.
- Bailey, Marlon M. 2011. "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture." *Feminist Studies* 372:36-386. DOI: 130.206.32.11.
- Bailey, Marlon M. 2014. "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 214:489-507. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2013.786688.
- Bailey, Marlon M. 2016. "'Ain't Nothing Like a Butch Queen': The Gender System in Ballroom Culture." In *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, edited by Jill Dolan and David Román, 29-76. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Beight, Debra. 2014. "Transgender Misrepresentations in the Paratexts of Motion Pictures: Masking the Authenticity of the Transgender Experience in *TransAmerica* and *Boys Don't Cry*." *Sprinkle: An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies* 7(spring):18-25.
- Burdge, Barb J. 2007. "Bending Gender, Ending Gender: Theoretical Foundations for Social Work Practice with the Transgender Community." *Social Work* 523:253-250. DOI: 130.206.32.11.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 404:519-531.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion." In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, edited by A. McClintock, A. Mufti, and E. Shohat, 121-141. New York: Roudedge.
- Canals, Steven. 2018. "Mother's Day." *Pose*, season 1, episode 5. Directed by Silas Howard, aired July 1. Netflix.

- Canals, Steven. 2019. "Revelations." *Pose*, season 2, episode 8. Directed by Steven Canals, aired August 6. Netflix.
- Capuzza, Jamie C., and Spencer, Leland G. 2016. "Regressing, Progressing, or Transgressing on the Small Screen? Transgender Characters on U.S. Scripted Television Series." *Communication Quarterly* 652:214-230.
- Chatterjee, Adharshila. 2016. "'Fantastic Bodies and Where to Find them': Representational Politics of Queer Bodies in Popular Media." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 83:213-220. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v8n3.22>.
- Conrad, Aryeh. 2015. "Towards a Truer Representation: Transphobic Casting Politics and the Cis-Gaze in Film." *Summer Research* 239:1-19.
- Gazzola, Stephany Beryl and Morrison, Melanie Ann. 2014. "Cultural and Personally Endorsed Stereotypes of Transgender Men and Transgender Women: Notable Correspondence or Disjunction?" *International Journal of Transgenderism* 15(2):76-99. DOI: 10.1080/15532739.2014.937041
- Glover, Julian Kevon. 2016. "Redefining Realness?: On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media." *Souls* 182:338-357. DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1230824.
- Hopkins, Kristin Bria. 2018. "There's No Business Like Show Business: Abandoning Color-Blind Casting and Embracing Color-Conscious Casting in American Theatre." *Harvard Journal of Sports & Entertainment Law* 19:131-155.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. 1997. "Travel, Travelling Identities and the Look." In *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze*, 3-26. New York: Routledge. <https://books.google.es/books?id=sprbBYy0bPwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Kaplan+looking+for+the+other&hl=es&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi1563O2b7wAhX3D2MBHX MzC7wQ6AEwAHoECAYQA#v=onepage&q&f=true>.
- Koch-Rein, Anson; Yekani, Elahe Haschemi, and Verlinden, Jasper J. 2020. "Representing Trans: Visibility and Its Discontents." *European Journal of English Studies* 24:11-12. DOI: 10.1080/13825577.2020.1730040.
- Kubicek, Katrina, McNeeley, Miles, Holloway, Ian W., Weiss, George, and Kipke, Michele D. 2012. "'It's Like Our Own Little World': Resilience as a Factor in Participating in the Ballroom Community Subculture." *AIDS Behav* 17:1524-1539. DOI 10.1007/s10461-012-0205-2.

- Martin Jr., Alfred L., 2020. "For Scholars... When Studying the Queer of Color Image alone isn't Enough." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17:169-74. DOI:10.1080/14791420.2020.1723797.
- McLaren, Jackson Taylor. 2018. "Recognize Me": An Analysis of Transgender Media Representation." PhD diss., University of Windsor.
- Merriam-Webster, s.v. "colorism," accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colorism>.
- Mock, Janet. 2019. "Blow." *Pose*, season 2, episode 7. Directed by Jennie Livingston, aired July 30. Netflix.
- Mock, Janet. 2019. "Worth It." *Pose*, season 2, episode 2. Directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, aired June 18. Netflix.
- Mock, Janet and Our Lady J. 2018. "Giving and Receiving." *Pose*, season 1, episode 3. Directed by Nelson Cragg, aired June 17. Netflix.
- Mock, Janet and Our Lady J. 2019. "Life's a Beach." *Pose*, season 2 episode 9. Directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, aired August 13. Netflix.
- Montez, Noe and Khubchandani, Kareem. 2020. "A Note from the Editors: Queer Pedagogy in Theatre and Performance." *Theatre Topics* 30:2ix-xvii. DOI: 10.1353/tt.2020.0026.
- Mulvey, Laura. 2006. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, 342-352. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Murphy, Ryan, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals. 2018. "Pilot." *Pose*, season 1, episode 1. Directed by Ryan Murphy, aired June 3. Netflix.
- Murphy, Ryan, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals. 2018. "Access." *Pose*, season 1, episode 2. Directed by Ryan Murphy, aired June 10. Netflix.
- Murphy, Ryan, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals. 2018. "Mother of the Year." *Pose*, season 1, episode 8. Directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, aired July 22. Netflix.
- Murphy, Ryan, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals. 2019. "Acting Up." *Pose*, season 2, episode 1. Directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, aired June 11. Netflix.
- Murphy, Ryan, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals. 2019. "In My Heels." *Pose*, season 2, episode 10. Directed by Janet Mock, aired August 20. Netflix.
- Murphy, Ryan and Janet Mock. 2018. "Love is the Message." *Pose*, season 1, episode 6. Directed by Janet Mock, aired July 8. Netflix.
- Lady J., Our. 2019. "Butterfly/Cocoon." *Pose*, season 2, episode 3. Directed by Janet Mock, aired June 25. Netflix.

- Pensis, Eva. 2019. "Running Uphill": On Work, Sex, and Love in Pose." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31:215-24. DOI: 10.1525/jpms.2019.312003.
- Piot, Peter, Kazatchkine, Michel, Dybul, Mark and Lob-Levyt, Julian. 2009. "AIDS: Lessons Learnt and Myths Dispelled." *Viewpoint* 374(9685):260-263. DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60321-4
- Reitz, Nikki. 2017. "The Representation of Trans Women in Film and Television." *Cinesthesia* 71:1-7.
- Rio, Malcolm. 2020. "Architecture is Burning: An Urbanism of Queer Kinship in Ballroom Culture." *Threshold* 48:122-142. https://doi.org/10.1162/thld_a_00716.
- Sandercock, Tom. 2015. "Transing the small screen: loving and hating transgender youth in *Glee* and *Degrassi*." *Journal of Gender Studies* 244:436-452.
- Savigliano, Marta E. 1991. "Political Economy of Passion: Tango, Exoticism and Decolonisation." PhD diss., University of Hawaii.
- Srivastava, Anurag, Mahmood, Syed Esam, Mishra, Payal, Shrotiya, V. P., and Shaifali, Iram. 2011. "Adolescence Awareness: A Better Tool to Combat HIV/AIDS." *National Journal of Community Medicine* 21:86-90. DOI: 0976 3325.
- Takács, Judith. 2006. *Social Exclusion of Young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People in Europe*. Brussels: ILGA-Europe and IGLYO.
- Torres Fernández, José Javier. 2020. "Chosen Families and Feminist Mothering in the Ballroom Community: Blanca Evangelista from *Pose*." *Raudem, Revista de Estudios de las Mujeres* 8:162-188. DOI: 2340-9630.
- TV News Desk. 2017. "New Ryan Murphy Musical Dance Series POSE Gets Full Season Order." *BroadwayWorld.com*. December 27, 2017. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/New-Ryan-Murphy-Musical-Dance-Series-POSE-Gets-Full-Season-Order-20171227>.
- Valdés, Francisco. 1996. "Unpacking Hetero-Patriarchy: Tracing the Conflation of Sex, Gender & Sexual Orientation to Its Origins." *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 81:161-211.