

Queens of Language

Paris Is Burning

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"If money wasn't important in the world today to survive, I guess I wouldn't want anything but what I have now," Octavia St. Laurent muses as she readies herself for a photo shoot. "But since money does, I hope that the way I look puts money in my pocket." A model-perfect beauty with smooth cocoa complexion, beckoning green eyes, a pouty but playful mouth, a mane of hair that bobs thickly just above her shoulders, and firmly muscled legs and tightened torso that do serious justice to a two-piece bathing suit, Octavia St. Laurent has reason to be confident about the value of her appearance. But her ambitions can only be realized once her self is completed; as she confides to filmmaker Jenny Livingston in the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), Octavia St. Laurent hopes "to become a full-fledged woman of the United States" by having a sex change operation in the near future.

If the world according to *Paris Is Burning* seems disorienting, that's because (wo)men like Octavia St. Laurent defy simple categorization. What Livingston accomplishes in this, her first feature documentary, is to record how Octavia and her coterie recode conventional meanings of race and class through their representations of gender. *Paris Is Burning* bursts open another closet door, leading into New York City's black and Latino drag society, and the culture of Harlem's drag balls, where gender-fuck is not just a theoretical concept but is, first and foremost, a way of life.

Establishing a stable life is a priority for the gay men, transvestites, and transsexuals who are citizens of the ball world. Disowned by their families of origin because of their sexual orientations, the "children" (the term house members use to refer to themselves) flock to the piers fronting the Hudson River near Christopher Street where, as Cherríe Moraga would say, they "make familia from scratch," finding safer refuge in cliques or family units known as "houses." Adopting the name of either a famous haute couture corporation—such as St. Laurent (hence Octavia's surname), Chanel, or Armani—is one way houses identify themselves. The other is to take on the name of the most powerful member of the group, the "mother" of the clan:

the houses of Pepper Labeija, Angie Xtravaganza, and Willi Ninja are three that are featured in the film. In the world of *Paris Is Burning*, a house is not a home; the film reconstitutes what that fabled term means. It certainly shakes up Daniel Patrick Moynihan's black-woman-as-head-of-the-household-is-necessarily-pathological thesis. Here, (wo)men of color raise and nurture each other, not only to provide a measure of protection against the violent dangers facing them as sexual outcasts in Manhattan, but also to groom themselves to become "legends" at the balls.

To be a "legend," one must "walk" or compete in—and win—a drag ball. If personal reputation and community stature are on the line, so is one's very sense of identity, because in the ball world drag goes beyond female impersonation. Every conceivable form of identity becomes subject to (re)interpretation. Contestants—hand-picked members from various houses—battle for honor, glory, and six-foot trophies in a bevy of categories that would make Bert Parks's head spin: Femme Queen Realness, Butch Queen Realness, Military Realness, Executive Realness, Town and Country, High Fashion Evening Wear, and Butch Queen First Time in Drag Realness, to name an easy-to-decipher few.



Angela Jendell walking as a futuristic femme queen in *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston

The critical term here is “realness,” which is the aesthetic imperative defining the ball and its culture. The point of the competition and the categories is not only performance but, more importantly, the re-presentation of self—to re-form a cultural ideal, to erase the signs of difference, and to be(come) an ultrafeminine “Virginia Slims” girl/ a GQ hunk/ a decorated army hero/ a Merrill Lynch trader/ a Ralph Lauren pseudo-aristocrat gone black or brown/ a Lincoln Center-going society matron. The trope of “realness” derives its charge from the gesture of erasure precisely because the marks of race, class, and sexuality limn these image(s) indelibly and cannot be suppressed no matter how hard the children try. At the same time, the improbability of the synthesis that is drag reframes just what is liminal in the terms of the ball world. Dislocating the oppositions of male/female, colored/white, power/disenfranchisement, margin/center, the aisle-cum-runway at the Imperial Elks Lodge (where many of the competitions were filmed) becomes a path into the psyche of ball culture; its logic unfolds in subversive splendor.

Credit for the exposition of the political critique implied in the social practices of the ball world goes to director Livingston and editor Jonathan Oppenheim. From the def(t) resurrection of Cheryl Lynn’s late-seventies flash-in-the-pan hit record *Got to Be Real* as an aural leitmotif to the smart cutaways counterpointing the “real” world of white, heterosexual culture to the ball world, the film’s narrative structure dissolves any notion of “authentic” experience.

The relationship between terminology and imagery underwrites the film and gives it its narrative drive. To begin with, Livingston couldn’t have happened upon a more wittily critical, verbally dexterous group of folk if she tried; these queens serve up delicious dish and incisive commentary at a moment’s notice (though, as Livingston jokingly confides in an essay that accompanies the press packet, they were notoriously late for interviews). Though the participants love the camera and play to it (the close-up is, after all, what their culture is about), they also relax and let Livingston and her crew record them as they are. At one point, each of the main participants—Pepper Labeija, Dorian Corey, Willi Ninja, Venus Xtravaganza, and Octavia St. Laurent—sheds his or her facade and names what it is he/she wants most—fame, a “normal” domestic life—with a shuddering of the shoulders, a bittersweet closing of the eyes, or a pang of resignation that is testimony to the trust Livingston formed with them over the course of two years of filming (1987–89).

Linking the portraits of the individuals and the spectacle of the competitions is language, which, along with the notion of performance, structures both the ball world and the film. The film unfolds conceptually, initiating visual understanding of the culture through its linguistic signifiers. Title cards

flash periodically—“BALL,” “HOUSE,” “REALNESS,” “VOGUEING,” “READING,” “SHADING,” “MOPPING”—as if to drill the viewer into learning the ball world’s lexicon. In this way, *Paris Is Burning* becomes a kind of talking book, a radically updated and resituated version of Raymond Williams’s classic historiography of language, *Keywords*.¹ Williams attributed language’s slippery fix on meaning to its subjection to political contexts. *Paris Is Burning* projects a similar critique, specifying the body as both subject to and the instrument of re-vision because of its (dis)engagement with commodity culture.

Two legends, Pepper Labeija and Dorian Corey, recall that, at their beginnings during the 1960s, the balls trophied “big costumes, feathers, and beads,” or the Las Vegas showgirl look. In the seventies the ball world was enamored with movie stars. By the Reagan eighties it was appropriating the symbols and personae of the nouveaux riches as well as their plebeian underside: supermodels, captains of designer fashion, oil barons, and junk bond kings crossed competitive paths with “bangee girls” and “bangee boys”—“you know, the ones who tried to rob you on your way to the ball,” an MC jokes. That the children, legendary or not, want what these life-styles represent is entirely explicable; indeed, their desires are wholly logical within the scheme of consumer capitalism. They should want to be Alexis Colby and Blake Carrington (or Ronald and Nancy Reagan, for that matter) precisely because they are of color, poor, and queer, living in one of the most class-conscious cities in the country. Why shouldn’t they want out of their reality?

Once the ball expanded the categories available for competition, its critique of identity politics and consumer culture deepened. Equating identity with symbolic constructions, the children take consumerism to its logical conclusion: identity is nothing so much as a commodity fetish. Placing *Town and Country* on a par with either bangee type demystifies the system of values that produces and defines these as socially meaningful categories. Drag, for these black and Latin queens (femme and butch alike), disrupts the economy of desire and difference, the identification of self with objects meant to represent self, that fuels consumerism. By “mopping” (stealing) the clothes and accessories necessary to effect their look, or by buying breasts, reconstructed noses, lifted chins, and female genitals, the children turn traditional ideas of labor around: far from being alienated from some true self by such exchanges, the children who opt to re-produce themselves through cosmetic applications or surgical procedures find meaning and a kind of freedom in their actions. When Brooke Xtravaganza announces that her “transsexualism” operation is complete and that she is, as she exults, “as free as the wind on this beach,” she declares an independence, one that calls the material and ideological bases of identity into question.

The ball world recycles commodity culture, much as rap music samples



Left to right: Octavia Saint Laurent, Freddie Pendavis, Kim Pendavis, Pepper Labelija, Dorian Corey, and Willi Ninja in *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston

from the musical gene pool. In their respective recombinations, both insist upon a sense and system of referentiality that mitigates the ahistoricism of much poststructuralist aesthetic theory. As we ask of rap, What is that riff; who performed it first, and when? so we should ask of the balls, Who is that persona; what are its social origins; whom does it represent and from what era? Indeed, the critical challenge posed by (and confronting) the ball world comes down to a question of origins, namely, when is borrowing not appropriation, and/or when does appropriation become co-optation? Or, in other words, what does it mean that the ball never ends?

It means that when *Paris Is Burning* cuts to 1989, voguing enjoys its Warholian moment and becomes the featured entertainment at a benefit sponsored by the Design Industries Foundation for AIDS. The film borrows

clips from news broadcasts that, predictably, conceal the true roots of voguing by using that generic signifier of blackness, "Harlem." Voguing's move downtown raised over three hundred thousand dollars to provide assistance to homeless people with AIDS. However, that the film does not pass comment on the obvious irony of the event leaves the politics of charity and compensation open to query. As we learn in the film, house members earn their income through low-paying jobs, hustling sexual favors, or performing as "showgirls." Could the participating houses really afford to donate their labor to this event? Is the hot light of the media sufficient payback? Though the film doesn't tell whether the houses were paid for participating in the benefit, its silence on this point suggests that levels of exploitation exist in even the most worthy of circumstances.

It means that Madonna can convert voguing into excess (the film correctly depicts the dance form as just one category to be walked in a ball) and into a cultural cash crop, banking on the ball world's invisibility and its inability to publicly claim voguing as its own. Hence the power of her visual remix of the song *Vogue* at the end of *The Immaculate Collection* video (1990). The original studio version was shot in black and white. In Madonna's live, color performance at the 1990 MTV awards, the scene is dramatically reset: the poseurs are arranged as if in a tableau vivant, corseted and bewigged in eighteenth-century French court fashions. In consuming a representation of Paris, a dying Paris (Madonna reportedly bought the gown worn by Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Liaisons*), is Madonna (figuratively) burning it? Is Paris burning? Reasoning through the logic of Madonna's performance leads us (or me, anyway) to revise the title of Livingston's film, which is named after the most important ball of the season.

The social divide that privileges Madonna to enter the ball world and exit with its cultural goods in tow, and that also impedes the ball world from rebutting her move, was described in an earlier time (1903, to be exact) by W. E. B. DuBois.² He called it the "veil." Then DuBois believed that the veil symbolized the problem of the twentieth century, "the color line." Now, however, in the late twentieth century, the conversion of the veil into a commodity (how else to explain the growing media attention to racially motivated police brutality and public enthusiasm for "crossover" rap?) suggests that African American theories of cultural alienation and economic disenfranchisement are in need of revision.

Paris Is Burning and the ball world play back and rework concepts of community and culture sacred to African-American discourse. In a truly grand diva move, the children restitch the veil to mean something other than socially imposed, self-abnegating denial, since, in the ball world, veils allow illusion, which allows self-expression, which allows self-fulfillment. "Home" no longer stands as the unproblematic site of Black cultural salvation it

represented for DuBois; it is, instead, a fount of homophobia that damns difference and sponsors rejection, which, in turn, inspires the rebirth of the "house."

That the difference between "house" and "home" transcends the semantic points toward the children's swiftest step; signifyin' on the theory of signifyin(g) as they work the ballroom floor, they walk straight into the halls of black academe.³ In the ball world the children clarify the workings of power in signifyin(g) exchanges because they split the notion into two forms: "reading" and "shading." Where the former is an insult that occurs between dissimilarly advantaged speakers, the latter happens when two similarly positioned speakers square off to spar verbally.

For example, the film catches a femme queen's encounter with a group of black teens. The confrontation is clearly hostile. When her humanist appeal to defuse the danger fails—"If you cut me, I bleed, just like you"—she "reads" them, taunting the girls in the group as being her "sisters" and "bulldaggers" and claiming the boys as her "boyfriends." To "throw shade," on the other hand, one addresses an equal on the sly. As Miss Dorian explains it, for two black queens to call *one another* "black queens" is "not a read, but a fact." Shading casts unflattering light on flaws and foibles through insinuation. When, for example, David Xtravaganza is ejected from the men's evening wear competition because he is wearing a woman's fox coat, that is, as an audience member observes, "shady." Signifying, traditionally conceived, assumes that such language contests are racially motivated—black folks talking back to white folks. However, the ball world makes it clear that blacks can read each other too. The fact of the matter is that black heterosexual culture—from assimilationist to nationalist—exercises the power and privilege to exclude and silence its (queer) own.

Yet, as much as the film opens the ball world to our view, it also betrays its subjects. The film's form as documentary—even if it becomes a *Roger and Me*-like media splash—is inimical to the participants' desire for glamour and mass fame. For example, simply by representing Octavia St. Laurent, the film exposes the fiction informing her "realness." She'll never become the supermodel she hopes to be. Not surprisingly, it is Willi Ninja, with his butch looks, who crosses over into *Village Voice* feature stories and Malcolm McLaren music videos.

But therein lies the dilemma. The documentary is probably the only genre that will acknowledge this world as it is: colored and queer. Interestingly, Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989) depicts drag queens as pathetic, lonely figures, who are ultimately silenced by the subjectivity of Riggs's narrative "I" (and by the voices on the sound track of singer Nina Simone and poet Essex Hemphill). If the din of voices heard throughout *Paris Is Burning* leads us to ask why Riggs quiets his queens, we can—and should—

also ask what it means for Livingston, a white woman, to give the members of the ball world a public voice. Though Livingston herself dismisses such discussions by recounting the acceptance she earned within the ball community, and the hostility she faced soliciting funds from straight black and Latino communities, the point remains: she can tell this story because her identity is not implicated in it, clearly not in the same way as is Riggs's. This is not to say that Livingston shouldn't have made the film, or that a "black" film necessarily would have been different. It is to suggest, though, that the cultural and social privilege of the filmmaker is inscribed into the film, however unobtrusive she strives to be. That Riggs silences drag queens is the obverse of Livingston's authority to accord them speech.

But I am thankful that she did, because never has speech, as performance and oral text, been so irresistible to my eyes and ears. In a way, finally, *Paris Is Burning* is about writing; it documents the impossibility of archiving identity in gendered or racial terms. Which makes the final vocabulary flash card so apropos: the words "PIG LATIN"—the dissimulation of language by reversing the pronunciation of words—signal that we can't know this world fully. Levels of signification and understanding amongst the children remain that, like their bodies, defy translation.

Notes

1. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
2. See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969).
3. Signifyin(g) is, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and numerous others have described and argued, a form of verbal parody. Folk address and redress power imbalances in the occasion of dialogue through a strategy of indirection; the point is to level critique by inference. An example: A white person enters a crosswalk just as the light turns red. The motorist, who happens to be black, waits for the pedestrian to reach the opposite curb safely, but not without shouting, "You better run!" The warning could be interpreted two ways: it is a blunt but caring injunction meant to hasten the pedestrian out of harm's way, and an equally blunt cut acknowledging the pedestrian's lack of power in the moment. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).