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Living (in) the Margin: The Intersectionality of Language and Body in the Ballroom Culture. A Preliminary Study

Roberto Esposito

(L'Orientale – Università di Napoli, IT)

Abstract

The sociological and legal recognition of the intrinsic relationship between social categorisations and the perpetuation of discrimination and oppression is encapsulated by the concept of 'intersectionality'. This multifaceted notion, serving as both an analytical challenge and an interpretive framework, additionally encompasses the idea of a margin where individuals inhabiting the juncture of divergent social spaces converge and, in doing so, engender an innovative dimension – an interstitial realm transcending fictitious boundaries. Building upon this conceptual foundation, the current study aims to shed light on the so-called 'Ballroom Culture' as a compelling illustration of this perspective, with a specific emphasis on its linguistic facets, both on a verbal and non-verbal level. From the early 1960s, ballrooms have gathered marginalised individuals who fought those rules that impeded them from expressing their identity. This social context unavoidably exerted an influence on language, as the convergence of diverse cultures and (hi)stories facilitated the intertwining of multiple discourses. The linguistic outcome emerging from this intersectional margin/space was the emergence of a language that transcends any difference of origins and identity. As this is true for both language and body language, this article first explains what intersectionality is, how it works, and what is its relationship with language. Then, it retraces Ballroom Culture's history and traditions, which have always revolved around verbal and non-verbal display of self or other's identity meant to make individuals feel relieved from social discrimination. Finally, the study shows some popular examples of intersectional language also to hypothesise which methodology/ies would better fit linguistic research addressing the contemporary and mediated version of the Ballroom Culture.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Ballroom Culture; Drag Culture; marginal spaces; body language.

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Introduction

This study represents an embryonic state of research. It was carried out after learning the core of intersectional theory, when two curiosities were raised: (1) since intersectionality is meant to frame and tackle an issue that has always existed, is there an example of socio-cultural agency that has been displaying intersectional attitudes way before? (2) If so, does it showcase a language that can be defined 'intersectional'? The latter question is enhanced in the light of the main role that language plays in contemporary society in debates concerning the politically correct and the respect in addressing different identities.

The relationship between language and society is the main and general focus of sociolinguistics. A specific scope is the interplay between linguistic practices and forms of social classification: gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, etc. However, many scholars argue that these categories have been discussed singularly, without taking into account the intricate and mutual enhancement among them (Romero 2017, Maegaard et al. 2019). Therefore, much sociolinguistics and critical discourse take up re-addressing intersectionality (Baker, 2008; Baker and Levon, 2016; Milani, 2014; Levon, 2015; Levon and Mendes, 2015).

In this light, the historical Ballroom Culture provides suitable examples of intersectional identities and language, as it has always brought marginalised individuals together in a community struggling with a society that discriminated their identities. As this research sits on the margin between language and cultural studies, and since it adopts a sociological perspective, the article dedicates a first section to explaining the intersectional framework; this is followed by a paragraph on methodological approaches for linguistic-intersectional case study; Ballroom Culture is then overviewed from its origins and traditions to its contemporary legacy; finally, the article focuses on the inclusive language of this tradition, which is articulated in both verbal and non-verbal dimensions. The marginal crossroad between perspective, case study and methodology help to set a pragmatic research to be carried out starting from this embryo.

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Intersectionality: understanding it, thinking it

As premised by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020), providing a concise and thorough definition of 'intersectionality' is a complex task since, over the last two decades, this term has been widely used both in academic and socio-political fields. Students and scholars encounter and explore the notion of intersectionality in a variety of disciplines, such as Women's, Cultural, Media Studies, but also Sociology, Political Science, History. In current global debates on human rights and environmental matters, intersectionality is a key point, embraced and used on and off-line to shape public opinion, as for instance in the transformation of schools and the promotion of intellectual and political projects. Collins and Bilge agree that, although definitions of intersectionality coming from different domains may even be contradictory, it would be generally descripted and mostly accepted as it follows:

> Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences (Collins and Bilge 2020, 5).

First of all, intersectionality is a problematization: it takes into account the ways in which systems of inequality based on various categories intersect and determine specific dynamics and effects: "in a given society at a given time, power relations of race, class, and gender, for example, are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together; and that, while often invisible, these intersecting power relations affect all aspects of the social world" (2020, 5). For example, when a woman experiences sexism, the case is likely to be debated – or possibly taken to trial – also in relation to the colour of her skin, to her religion, or social status. This is due to power distribution along 'axes of social division':

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> The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other (Collins and Bilge 2016, 2).

As all forms of inequality reinforce mutually, it is therefore necessary to analyse and address them simultaneously. As for instance, tackling the gender pay gap without including other dimensions such as ethnicity or socio-economic and immigration statuses, would probably increase inequalities among women. This perspective is true for both individuals who struggle in society and for scholars approaching sociological matters with an intersectional approach: on the one hand, "[o]rdinary people can draw upon intersectionality as an analytic tool when they recognize that they need better frameworks to grapple with social problems" (Collins and Bilge 2020, 6); on the other, researchers can in turn adopt it as a theoretical and methodological framework, but keeping in mind that an intersectional analysis should focus on "what intersectionality *does* rather than what intersectionality *is*" (Cho *et al.* 2013, 795). What it does is allowing for the conceptualisation of a person, a group of people or a social problem as affected by several discriminations and disadvantages. By considering people's overlapping identities and experiences, it is possible to make the margins between them fade, and to understand the complexity of the prejudices they face.

The general overview outlined so far is necessary to understand the very recent applications of intersectional in society, politics and academy. Nonetheless, the origins of this notion go back to the previous century and require attention to some critical and even paradoxical dynamics within social structures:

> Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked—feet standing on shoulders—with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the

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> very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor rush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that "but for" the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. [The others] are not invited to climb through the hatch and told to wait in the unprotected margin until they can be absorbed into the broader, protected categories of race and sex (Crenshaw 1989, 151-152).

The term 'intersectionality' was coined by law professor and social theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her 1989 essay *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. The title is reported here because, on the one hand, the concept of margin turns out to be intrinsic in that of intersectionality, while on the other, every phrase of the title is a hint for more than the content of the text. "Demarginalizing the intersection" may sound contradictory, since it is immediately obvious that the intersectional framework virtually needs different and well-defined social axes to recognise the way they collide. Nonetheless, that is where the margin between understanding and thinking intersectionality fades: to fully grasp the core of intersectionality, it takes considering that some edges do exist between categories, but they are 'permeable'. That is the case of race and gender, long treated as "mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis [...] by a single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics" (Crenshaw 1989, 139). Crenshaw enhances the Black feminist critique against the antidiscrimination doctrine because, despite the fight for which it is meant, it ends up perpetuating discrimination and oppression, since antisexist and antiracist "doctrine[s] are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences. Under this view, Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups" (Crenshaw 1989, 143).

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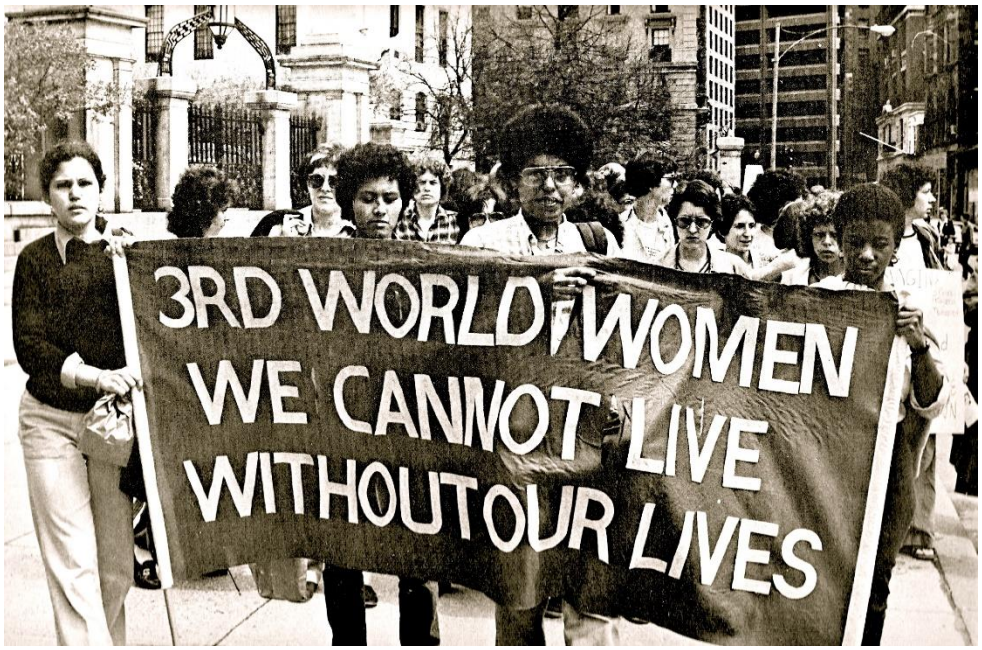

Figure 1. A demonstration of the Combahee River Collective. Cover of the *New Women's Times*, 5 (13), 22nd June 1979.

The criticisms towards feminist theory and antiracist politics began years before Crenshaw's writing. The concept of intersectionality emerged earlier in the 1960s when, in addition to racism, Black women started to find it difficult to identify themselves with the issues of the mainstream white feminist movement. For example, being a homemaker was a problem for white women, but a luxury for Black ones, who often had to work to keep their families afloat. At the same time, many Black women experienced sexism while participating in the Civil Rights movement, where they were often shut out of leadership positions. Experiencing racism in the feminist movement and sexism in Civil Rights shaped a first, clear intersectional trope. This led to the birth of movements such as the Combahee River Collective (Figure 1), a North American working-class Black lesbian organisation struggling not only to be represented in both feminist movements and Civil Rights, but also to be recognised as Black women, rather than just Black or just women. Early terminological and conceptual suggestions of intersectionality appeared when the members of the Collective declared their standing against racial, sexual, heterosexual and

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class systems of oppression that 'interlock' and 'synthesise' in disadvantaged people's lives. Moreover, it turned out that intersectionality is concerned with identity too: in fact, the moment it shifts from personal/collective to political, it becomes clear that oppressive politics are to be found and faced in the discourse around identity: (Combahee River Collective Statement 1977).

By now, it is assumed that intersectionality is both an entrenched problem and a preliminary solution: without an intersectional perspective, injustice towards one group is likely to end up perpetuating systems of inequalities towards other groups. That is why over the decades this social framework has been extended to numerous categorizations, from historical ones, such as ethnicity, citizenship and class, to gender, religion, age and disability. This widening of applications fosters what Bilge defines as "queer intersectionality" (2012), which is the expression that bridges intersectionality with linguistics in search of a proper methodology to explore the traditions pertaining to the Ballroom Culture.

A 'fair' methodology for a 'fair' case study

Intertwining linguistics and intersectionality requires some necessary theoretical and methodological compromises, first and foremost the adjustment between intersectionality and queer theory. Sirma Bilge underlines "how intersectionality and queer theory can complement and challenge each other and, further, why it is crucial to uphold and extend a dialogue between them in order to firm up a critical ethos and ethics of non-oppressive politics of coalition. [...] [W]e may call this approach 'queer intersectionality' or 'queer anti-racist critique' (Bilge 2012, 22-23). She derives her theory from what Douglas *et al.* previously said about the importance not "to separate questions of gender, sexuality, and queerness, from questions of raciality and racialisation. This form of intersectional critique serves as a tool for building spaces and movements that are committed to interrogating gender and sexuality norms, whilst simultaneously identifying, challenging, and

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countering the overt and embedded forms of racism that shape them" (Douglas et al. 2011, 108). Bilge's proposal "can be seen as the outgrowth of reciprocal challenges and productive tensions between an *intersectionalized queer* and a *queered* intersectionality" (Bilge 2012, 23), the former being conceptualised earlier in 2005 by Johnson and Henderson.

Despite its terminological suitability, the expression 'queer intersectionality' was not that easy to acknowledge. According to Gray and Cooke:

> On an initial view it could be said that the idea of a queer intersectionality is something of a paradox. Intersectionality clearly deals in social categories and identities (admittedly with varying degrees of commitment), while queer theory (although hardly a unified project) is deeply distrustful of all social categories, heteronormative and homonormative regimes of gender and sexuality, as well as the notion of essentialised identities which are sometimes held to pertain to certain categories of person (e.g. gay people, trans men, trans women, etc.) (Gray and Cooke 2018, 409).

The authors immediately add that the solution to 'blur the margin' between the opposite frameworks of intersectionality and queer theory is in Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) queer linguistics. Even if queer theory detaches from identity, queer linguistics takes it into account by framing it with the critical expression used by Judith Butler – a 'necessary error' (Butler 1993, 174). Queer linguistics draws from three fields: queer theory, sociocultural linguistics and feminism. The first one prevents from assigning a fixed, categorical meaning to the long-debated notion of 'queer', which instead deserved strong academic attention (Kulick 2005); the second one highlights the centrality of local understanding and contexts in the study of specific languages and discourses; the third one contextualises queer and hegemonic sexualities in relation to other sociopolitical phenomena, such as gender, race, and social class (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 490).

Moving right from Butler's theories, Rusty Barrett explains that in queer linguistics "identity categories are not accepted as a priori entities, but are recognised as ideological constructs produced by social discourse" (Barrett 2002, 28). In this process of self-

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definition, power plays a main role. The interplay between identity and power is central in some remarkable works, such as Balirano (2014), in which masculinity is said to be hegemonic and represented through unbalanced power relations with the very concept of femininity, so by a contrast in which femininity represents what masculinity is not. This is echoed in Baker and Balirano's (2018) edition on linguistic and cultural evidence of non-heteronormative masculinities: "since masculinity is traditionally seen as one half of a mutual and binary identity construal (along with femininity), it is only through its relationship with other linguistically, semiotically, and socially construed instances of identity that contemporary dominant tropes on masculinity can be produced" (2018: 2). A different, still equally meaningful perspective is that of Milani (2014), who notes that

> queer theory provides us with an important analytical toolkit to unpack the operations of power in relation to gender and sexuality (and other social categories) without falling into too easy conflations between processes" (a man's/woman's desire for another man/woman), on the one hand, and "identities" ("gay"/ "lesbian"/"heterosexual"), on the other (Milani 2014, 203).

In his study on Linguistic Landscape, Milani discusses 'signs' with reference to the definition of Backhaus (2007), who emphasises the material meaning that sign carries on "an inscribed surface displayed in a public space to convey a message" (4-5). This apparently out-of-context note is quoted here to reflect on the analogy it has with identity, which signifies itself in the public sphere through performative language and body:

> identities are understood as performatively enacted in language, where language is understood 'not [as] an exterior medium or instrument into which I pour myself and from which I glean a reflection of that self' (Butler 1990, 196) – but rather as a medium in and through which speakers actively insert themselves into the discourses which are culturally available to them (Gray and Cooke 2018, 410).

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Judith Butler's Performativity Theory is an essential layer in the theoretical basis of this research, because inquiring the language of the Ballroom Culture means studying bodies' expressiveness. In this tradition, words and bodies cannot be conceived separately: the language spoken is addressed to corporeality and aesthetics of bodies that speak for themselves. "Several aspects of performativity are useful in the linguistic analysis of sexuality. In particular, the concept challenges the notion that either gender or sexuality is 'natural' by maintaining that both acquire social meaning only when physical bodies enter into historically and culturally specific systems of power" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 492).

To sum up, even if it is firmly believed that a sought specificity of definition would take off more than it could yield, the right scope ought to be placed may be intersectional sociolinguistics, which brings social categories and individual lived experience together through a focus on language, and on the role it plays in making queer intersectionality visible (Levon and Mendes 2016). Furthermore, since this research focuses on the use of language within a specific context, it makes the case for an intersectional sociopragmatic research.

The in-betweenness of the margin: the Ballroom Culture

By using a metaphorical explanation, Crenshaw suggests that margins should not be merely considered as either material or figurative dividing lines, but rather as empty spaces of occurrence:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. [...] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. In these cases the tendency seems to be that no driver is held responsible, no treatment is administered, and the involved parties simply get back in their cars and zoom away (Crenshaw 1979, 149).

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Intersectionality denotes an idea of margin which is home for people who are excluded from heterogeneous worlds, living squeezed between two or more of them. In this no man's land, they happen to meet, interact, and mutual respect and empathy eventually lead them to create a brand-new dimension by dilating that margin against which they are pushed: an interstitial space out of a fictitious line. Ballroom Culture is a clear example of this reading, for it has always gathered marginalised individuals since its early times. Initially, this community was formed by a majority of African Americans, Latinos, gay men, and trans women – people fighting a society that disapproved and sentenced the expression of their identity –, but today it has come to include people from many other social categories and cultural backgrounds. Also known as Ballroom Scene, Ball Culture, House System or Ballroom Community, the concept identifies a branch of American LGBTQIA+ culture characterised by competitions called 'balls'. Participants challenge each other in pageant, dances and other skills (Figure 2), according to categories announced by a host and meant to emulate or even satirise social and identity categories: as it is proper to say, they 'walk a category'. A jury gives votes, and the best competitors are awarded with trophies, cash prizes and, if they keep winning, higher statuses (a more detailed account will be offered in the following paragraphs).

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Figure 2. Tina Montana, Avis Pendavis Ball, Red Zone 1990. Photo by Chantal Regnault.

As strange as it may seem, Ballroom Culture was not intersectional since its very beginning (Lawrence 2011). Early and sporadic forms of these competitions appeared in the second half of the XIX century: queer masquerade balls, conceived as sort of entertainment shows. They started to gain notoriety in Harlem during the 1920s. In drawing a detailed overview of the history of this culture, Tim Lawrence reports the words of social activist and writer Langston Hughes: "[He] proclaimed the drag balls to be the 'strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem's spectacles in the 1920s' and described them as 'spectacles in colour'. Noting the presence of 'distinguished white celebrities' during this period, Hughes concluded that 'Harlem was in vogue' and 'the negro was in vogue'" (Lawrence 2011, 3). After a decade, the balls struggled during the 1930s because of Prohibition and Depression. Then, after the World War II, they counted several attendances of those who had been to New York while heading to the battlefront, finally coming back. This success made it quite difficult for the authorities to tackle and repress

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homosexuality. However, "[b]y the early 1960s, drag ball culture had begun to fragment along racial lines" (Lawrence 2011, 3). Issues within this new-born community were due to the presence of white people at the balls and the exclusively 'drag' nature of the events. The problem of 'whiteness' was a matter of expectations from both spectators and attendees: although the ballrooms had a racially integrated floor, white audience, organisers and judges, as well as white participants and winners, led black participants to get used to painting their faces white (Wilson 2010, 86). Consequently, Black and Latino queens started to hold their own balls, which were characterised by peaks of glamour and extravagance, with clothes and dresses realised hours before the events and made up of fabrics and items arranged and sewn together. Later, the balls would open to more and more categories, being the term referred to either the identity of the participants or the challenges of the competitions.

Figure 3. House of LaBeija, Central Park, 1989. Photo by Chantal Regnault.

The turn in the organisation of the balls was a clear display of intersectionality, but it is also interesting to notice how the people who claimed this practice redrew those social

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margins that have been suffocating them, especially the idea of family. In fact, when talking about the Ballroom Culture it is common to think about not only balls, but also houses, which are basically "familial structures that are socially rather than biologically configured" (Bailey 2011, 367). These communities consist of chosen families (Figure 3) made up of friends who share a bond, a roof, a daily routine of duties and needs and, most of the times, the sad experience of being estranged by their families or forced to leave:

> Led by house mothers and fathers, houses function as families whose main purpose is to organize elaborate balls and to provide support for their children to compete in balls as well as to survive in society as marginalized members of their communities of origin. Houses offer their children multiple forms of social support, a network of friends, and a social setting that allows free gender and sexual expression. Ultimately, houses within the ballroom community constitute figurative, and sometimes literal, "homes" for the diverse range of members involved in them (Arnold and Bailey 2009, 174).

Houseparents are individuals with consolidated experience on the Ballroom scene, who educate and guide their 'children' (considering each other as 'siblings') providing them with life skills and discipline. 'Mothers' are mostly butch queens (gay men) or femme queens (transgender women), while 'fathers' are mostly butch queens or butches (transgender men). Houses gather various ages, races/ethnicities (usually Black and Latina/o), genders and sexualities, and nowadays their inclusiveness has grown up according to the acknowledgement of several different identities, for whom houses keep on being sheds whenever they feel ostracised by conventional support systems: (Bailey 2011, 367). Houses are typically named after haute couture designers, like those of Gucci, Dior and Saint Laurent, but others are named after mottos and symbols that express values and ambitions with which the children associate themselves. There are houses who went down in history, and some even prospered up to date: the very first one, the house of LaBeija, those of Dupree, Pendavis, Ninja and probably the most famous one and the first Latin ever, the house of Xtravaganza.

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Intersectionality of (body) language

Although this embryonic research still lacks a defined corpus and a properly calibrated methodological framework to carry out a focused and in-depth linguistic analysis, insights of language and visual inclusivity can nevertheless be provided to confirm the validity of the choice of Ballroom Culture as an object of linguistic research. This confirmation comes right with intersectionality. In such a special social context like that of the Ballroom Culture, intersectionality has inevitably flown into language, as the encountering of different cultures and (hi)stories brought multiple languages together. The linguistic outcome of the intersectional marginal space created by this community is a language which calls off any difference of origins and identity. This language, together with its rightfulness, has been inherited by the following younger generations, and it has become a signature of LGBTQIA+ culture.

Thanks to the new media, it is quite likely to run into, and then acquire, terms and expressions whose derivation from the Ballroom Culture is ignored. Very detailed and useful dictionary to learn about them and their etymologies are Baker's (2002) dictionary of Polari and gay slang (a remarkable text on the history of Polari was published by the same author in 2019) and Davis' (2021) Queens' English dictionary. The epithet 'queen' itself has never been a prerogative of women or those who feel and state to be such, and it has never implied a pure meaning of royalty and majesty – which in turn pertains to a semantic domain where bloodline and conventional family are central – but instead a sense of fierceness, pride and fabulousness inspiring admiration and celebration. Another example is telling someone "do your best" by saying "work it", pronounced and written "*werk* it", which is a typical incitement that can be heard during the runaways of the balls. Even the stressed 'yes' that becomes '*yaaas*' originated from the context of the ballrooms. 'Reading' and 'shading' have even shifted from terms and practices typical of the competitions to common speech acts: reading a person means to highlight and exaggerate their flaws, from ridiculous clothes and imperfect makeup to anything else the reader can

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come up with, in a battle of wit, irony and sarcasm whose winner is the one who gets the audience to laugh the most; on the other hand, throwing shade consists of paying backhanded compliments to subtly insult someone.

Although these examples still appear quite neutral – reading and shading may even be perceived as negative linguistic performances – that is exactly where the intersectionality of the language spoken in the Ball Culture spreads from: on the one hand, as previously said, it prevents any necessity of enhancing differences among people, may it be for praising or denigrating; on the other, verbal disputes rely on a fair competition in which contestants are 'politely impolite', never meaning to really hurt each other (see Passa 2023). The most symbolic expression of this attitude is probably "sissy that walk", that has been popularised in 2014 by recording artist, producer and entrepreneur RuPaul Charles in his American television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Nick Murray 2009-present) and with his homonymous recorded song from the album *Born Naked*: (RuPaul, 2014).

Figure 4. Cover of RuPaul's 2014 album Born Naked, RuCo Inc.

As per the definitions of the Collins online dictionary, 'sissy' can be both a noun and an adjective: "some people describe a boy as a sissy when they disapprove of him because he does not like rough, physical activities or is afraid to do things which might be dangerous"; "if someone describes an action or activity as sissy, they think it is

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appropriate for girls or women but not boys and men." (Collins Dictionary) Nonetheless, this taunting apposition has been verbalised and associated with the traditional runway show of the Ball Community, becoming an explicit incitement for queens to perform a catwalk with pride and courage. RuPaul is also used to often repeat the question "Reading is what?", to which all the participants and spectators answer "Fundamental!": (RuPaul, Nick Murray 2009-present). This gives an idea of the genuineness of these verbal provocations and challenges, as if they were a sort of catharsis.

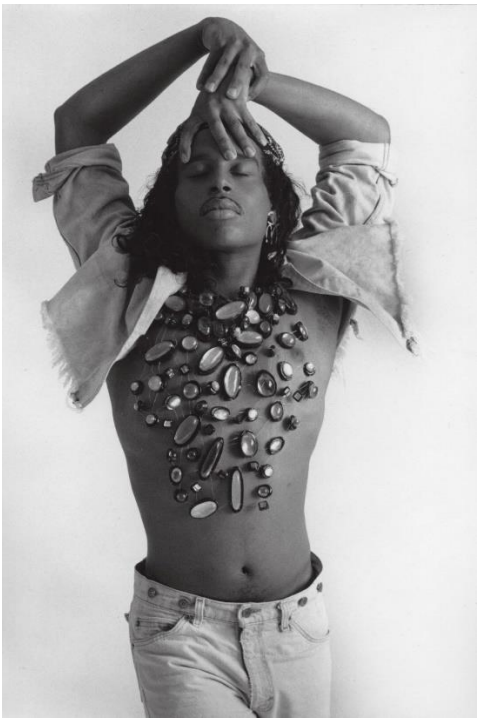

Figure 5. Willi Ninja studio 1989. Photo by Chantal Regnault.

Linguistic intersectionality, which is inextricably associated with the body, is deeply rooted in the flourishing decades of the Ballrooms, and it has been 'fundamental' both for the birth of the famous practice of voguing and for the social and political fights in the dark years of AIDS pandemic in North America. Concerning the voguing (Figure 5), it

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started as an alternative to throwing shade, early performed by the houses and then introduced to the balls, where different subcategories of it were established:

> "It all started at an after hours club called Footsteps on 2nd Avenue and 14th Street," says David DePino, an influential DJ for the voguing community. "Paris Dupree was there and the bunch of these black queens were throwing shade at each other. Paris had a Vogue magazine in her bag, and while she was dancing she took it out, opened it up to a page where a model was posing and then stopped in that pose on the beat. Then she turned to the next page and stopped in the new pose, again on the beat." The provocation was returned in kind. "Another queen came up and did another pose in front of Paris, and then Paris went in front of her and did another pose," adds DePino. "This was all shade—they were trying to make a prettier pose than each other—and it soon caught on at the balls. At first they called it posing and then, because it started from Vogue magazine, they called it voguing" (Lawrence 2011, 5).

As Lawrence further explains, voguing was improved and articulated through the kung fu moves brought into notoriety by Bruce Lee and the plasticity of Egyptian representations, whose ethnicity voguers had a natural resemblance with. Intersectionality can be perceived spreading from the poker faces of *Vogue*'s models, from which nothing transpires except for self-confidence. For example, if Figure 5 were to analysed according to Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001, 2006) grammar of visual design and framework of Multimodality, on the interactive level it could be observed that:

- the photo is an 'offer' (a term that, by chance, is also typical of Ballroom Culture), as the actor is not looking directly at the viewer, and which means they want to show something, to communicate a meaning through their body;
- the angle of interaction is horizontal with a medium-long shot, meaning that an intimacy is trying to be increased and achieved as if the actor wants the viewer to perceive a closer-coming movement and gradually focus on the details of the look;
- the modality, hence the grade of adherence to reality, swings from high to low, as the represented body communicate realness, however light, tone, colours and

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depth make lend a sort of 'historicity' to the photo, making the subject look like 'unworldly'.

Figure 6. Cover of Madonna's 1990 single *Vogue*, Sire, Warner.

The expression 'vogue' and voguing itself became famous worldwide in 1990, when Madonna released her single *Vogue* (Figure 6), from the album *I'm Breathless*. The song and its videoclip are the result of an artistic and cultural collaboration between the popstar and the Ballroom Culture: "Ladies with an attitude / Fellows that were in the mood / Don't just stand there, let's get to it / Strike a pose, there's nothing to it", says the singer, inviting listeners to "vogue to the music" while featuring Luis and Jose Xtravaganza in her dance video: (Madonna 1990).

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di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

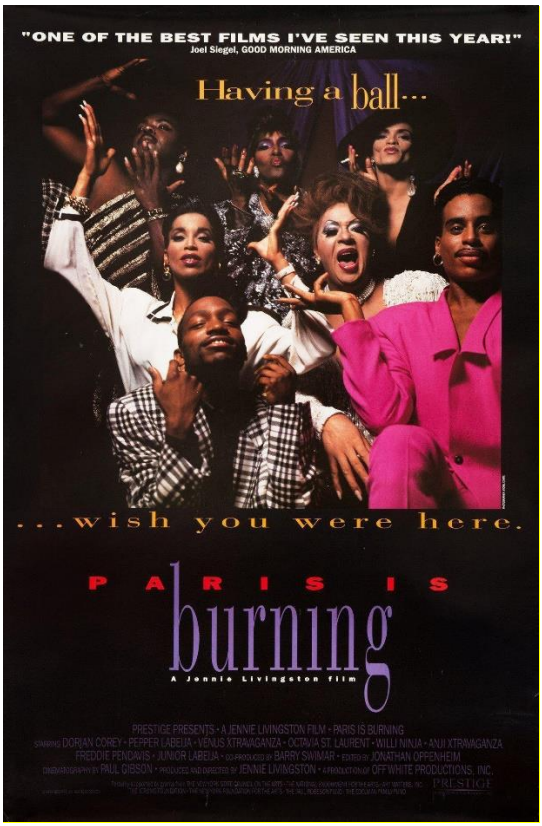

Figure 7. Poster of *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston, 1990, Off-White Productions.

During the same year, the milestone film *Paris Is Burning* (Figure 7), produced by Jennie Livingston, debuted in cinemas. Named after the 1986 ball staged by Paris Dupree and her house, it is a docu film that provides insights of the 'underground' beginnings of the Black and Latin drag balls, focusing on the hard lives of the 'kids' of the houses. The clear intersectional trope affecting the context that is shown is highlighted when one protagonist tells another: "You have three strikes against you; you're black, gay and a drag queen" (Livingston 1990). By now, reviewing the notion of intersectionality and the history of the Ballroom Culture ought to make it easily understandable that acknowledging this statement as a problem means – and has always meant – also knowing how to tackle it: it only takes turning that 'against' into 'with'.

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Representation and self-consciousness were important in facing the problem of HIV, which peaked in 1995. In commenting Jesse Green's 1993 article on the *New York Times*, titled *Paris Has Burned*, Tim Lawrence notes that:

> [...] the fateful narrative of Aids = Queer Death should not be allowed to obscure the fact that as terrible as the consequences of the disease have been for the drag ball community, the demonstratives and courageous underpinnings of ball culture also went on to infuse the political and aesthetic radicalism of Act-Up, the campaign that applied dramatic public pressure on the US government to act more decisively around Aids, with drag queens a prominent, declarative presence on the organisation's high-octane marches (Lawrence 2011, 9).

Before Madonna's hit and Livingston's film, New York counted 27 active houses; after just one year, such an enhancement raised the number to 70. This was crucial to address and face AIDS by organising balls whose purpose was not only to contribute to the scene, but also to increase the awareness of the disease that affected the world both physically and psychologically.

Apart from the examples made so far, over the years plenty of sources of the intersectional jargon of the Ballroom Community were created: besides *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Paris Is Burning*, other screen products include tv series like *Angels in America* (Tony Kushner 2003), *Dear White People* (Justin Simien 2017-2021) and *POSE* (Ryan Murphy, Brad Marchuk, Steven Fanals 2018-2021), and films like *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino 2017) and *The Boys in the Band* (Joe Mantello 2020). In these representations, as well as in other artistic domains such as music, fashion and theatre, the mastery of language goes hand in hand with sumptuous looks: from fabulous dresses and hairstyles to showy makeup and jewellery, the body plays a shared main role together with the use of mind and words. Tim Lawrence's review of the history of the Ball Culture, which has helped this preliminary study, is an accurate preface that Stuart Baker chose as introduction for his 2011 edition of *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92*. The book displays several shots taken by Chantal Regnault, photographer and documentarist of the Ball Scene in its golden ages, collected along

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recent interviews she did with members of famous houses she got in touch with, creating a multimodal archive of images and speeches.

It turns out that, as the houses, the balls and their language were born from margins of mutual understanding, intersectionality shows and is shown in several shapes and practices. It is to be found by means of more than one sense. The same way as it is framed by law and sociology, intersectionality marks both the start and the goal of the Ballroom Culture.

Further research and conclusions

The direction in which this study is progressing involves the collection of a corpus of drag performances – the art that has inherited the legacy of the Ballroom Culture – in order to study the verbal and non-verbal language discussed so far, but with a contemporary focus. The corpus will be analysed with an interdisciplinary approach between Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Stylistics, the former to inquiry into the body language of drag culture, the latter to de/en-code this language and see if the common concept of style (in the aesthetic sense) that is central to drag practices can be overlaid with linguistic style – a multimodal style, a visual pattern with critical implications.

Although this article is an 'incipit' of research, the literature and the case study outlined prove what Milani (2014) calls the 'uncertainty' necessary for queer studies, which already characterised other foundational theoretical writings (Butler 1993, Jagose 1996, O'Rourke 2011): "a form of insecurity, I should add, that is not viewed as negative, but rather as the *sine qua non* for queer theory to uphold its radical potential and not be domesticated" (Milani 2014, 221). For the sake of the term queer itself, even a clear framing of intersectionality should not be taken for granted, since, as we hope to have made clear in this article, the intersections between identity categories and the power dynamics that occur between them are multiple and sometimes unexpected. Similarly, politically correct and apparently inclusive language may lack the necessary intersectional perspective.

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What is deemed as interesting and meaningful about the language of the Ballroom Culture observed in this early study is that since its birth, either when it comes to empathising or to offending, it has always succeeded in nullifying not only any margin of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class, but also in avoiding those terminological implicatures that could cause discontent within its context of use. Language can be intersectional in a wonderfully natural way: while gathering, respecting and highlighting different social categories, it doesn't let any issue stem and poison the faceted and balanced scene in which it is articulated. Moreover, it is believed that this practice is consolidating more and more, for nowadays the target of LGBTQIA+ seems to be shifting from diversity to authenticity. In fact, diversity has long been the flag of a culture history wasn't kind with: since racism and sexism decided what was normal and what was not – consequently marginalising those who did not fit in – the Ballroom Culture took up 'wearing' and 'walking' their diversity with pride, but also with anger and frustration. Today, diversity turns out to be an ambiguous term starting from the way it is defined in dictionaries, where it is sometimes exclusive (being different) and sometimes inclusive (being varied). The goal is – and must be – the authenticity of every individual in their being what they feel and are.

In conclusion, besides law and sociology, intersectionality is an individual feature of language as well. And it seems like language has several ways of overcoming the margins: communication is meant to cross margins, tear them down, redraw them or, as it has been tried to explain here, expand them. The same way translation creates a third space, the intersectionality of language branches out and dilates those margins by languaging and (body)languaging diversity.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Roberto Esposito is a PhD student in Literary, Linguistic and Comparative Studies at the University of Naples L'Orientale. His doctoral research investigates drag language and representation as a compelling example of social semiotics, through a stylistic and multimodal analysis of the tv show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. His research interests lie in the fields of Stylistics, Multimodality, and Critical Discourse Studies, with particular attention to meaning creation, discursive representation and intersectionality. He focuses on how the interplay between verbal and non-verbal language can foster social change in terms of visibility and accessibility of queer identities.

E-mail address: r.esposito12@unior.it

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