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# Queer Reproduction: AIDS Activist Pasts and Futurity in *Pose*

**Abstract:** This paper explores the concept of queer reproduction through an analysis of the FX series *Pose* and its revisitation of several key audiovisual documents in queer cultural history. After briefly introducing the series, the argument will be situated in discourses around queer temporality and the frame of what reproduction can come to mean in a queer context will be expanded by examining the social and cultural rather than biological processes through which queer people “birth” themselves and each other. Finally, several sequences from the series will be discussed in relation to the films and videos they reference to argue that *Pose* not only represents but also performs queer modes of reproduction through this revisitation.

**Keywords:** Queer Studies, Reproduction, Kinship, Temporality, Futurity, Video Activism, HIV/AIDS, Care, Trans Studies, Film

Is reproduction always already heterosexual?<sup>1</sup> Can it be wrested from a heteronormative frame? How do queers reproduce? And what relation to the future emerges when we turn our attention to queer reproductive labor? In this paper, I want to explore the concept of queer reproduction through an analysis of the FX series *Pose* and its revisitation of several key audiovisual documents in queer cultural history. *Pose*, which ran from 2018–2021, centers on New York City’s Black and Latinx ballroom scene in the 1980s and 1990s, a queer subculture built around balls where participants compete in different categories to win trophies for their houses. The houses function as a kinship structure where house mothers and fathers take in and mentor the ballroom children, who are often estranged from their families of origin. Across its three seasons, *Pose* follows Blanca, a Black trans woman, as she starts her own house, the House of Evangelista; she adopts Damon, Angel, Lil Papi, and Ricky as her children and fights for both their survival and happiness as they navigate the AIDS crisis as well as the racism, homophobia, and transphobia that further exacerbate the epidemic. While its narrative is entirely fictional, *Pose* doesn’t merely revisit this significant period of queer history, it also explicitly cites *PARIS IS BURNING*, Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary on the New York City ballroom culture, as well as several AIDS activist videos that chronicle the actions of ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, a prominent AIDS activist group that was founded in New York City in 1987. Through these citations, *Pose* pays tribute to films and videos that have been formative for many queers across genera-

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler: Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual? *differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13/1 (2002), 14–44.

tions and differences, while foregrounding the role of Black and Latinx communities in AIDS activism. Indeed, both *PARIS IS BURNING* and AIDS activist video have been important touchstones in my relationship to my own queerness, despite the temporal and geographical distance and differences of race, class, and HIV status that separate me from many of their subjects. As a white HIV-negative cis woman who was born in Western Europe in the mid-1990s and came to queer culture in the late-2010s, my encounter with these works was not one of immediately recognizing myself in them, it was rather a process of working through my enduring fascination for them. It was the radical promise of misfitting together, of fabulously inventing new ways of being in the world and taking care of one another that kept me returning to them again and again. Beyond my personal longing for the radical queer politics and community they depict, the cultural significance of these works is attested to by the persistent resonances they produce through continual, even if hotly debated, screenings of *PARIS IS BURNING*, the re-use of video material of AIDS activist protests in countless documentaries, as well as ongoing conversations about each in academic and popular discourses.<sup>2</sup> In adapting these materials, *Pose* further proliferates their reach, even as it remakes them in the process by inserting its characters into them. I argue that the revisitation of these films and videos as well as the communities of care represented within *Pose*'s narrative both function as modes of queer reproduction.

## 1 How We Make Each Other Possible: Queer Futurity and the Work of Reproduction

In his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, US-American literary critic and queer theorist Lee Edelman famously asserts that “the future is nothing but kid stuff.”<sup>3</sup> Through his frame of reproductive futurism, Edelman argues that the political is inextricably tied to the goal of creating better futures for “our children” at the expense of the present. He writes that “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.”<sup>4</sup> This perspective, which in one fell swoop dismisses the future, reproduction, and the figure of the child as antithetical to queerness

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2 For an elaboration of the debates around *PARIS IS BURNING*, see Tavia Nyong'o: *After the Ball, Bully Bloggers* (2015). <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/07/08/after-the-ball/> (last accessed 15 August 2022); Lucas Hilderbrand: *Paris Is Burning. A Queer Film Classic*. Vancouver 2013. The revisitation of AIDS activist pasts has been charted by Alexandra Juhasz and Ted Kerr, see Alexandra Juhasz / Theodore Kerr: *We Are Having This Conversation Now. The Times of AIDS Cultural Production*. Durham, NC 2022.

3 Lee Edelman: *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC 2004, 30.

4 Edelman: *No Future*, 3.

has been critiqued by several theorists who challenge the assumed whiteness and gay masculinity of Edelman's argument. Cuban American cultural studies and queer theory scholar José Esteban Muñoz cautions that "the future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity."<sup>5</sup> In offering his notion of queer futurity, Muñoz refuses to leave the future to whiteness and heteronormativity and instead calls on a "utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a 'not-yet' where queer youths of color actually get to grow up."<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, US-American feminist media theorist Alexis Lothian indicates the gendering of reproduction in Edelman's argument and points to the history of feminist critiques of reproductive labor, of bearing and rearing those children – something that many queer accounts elide. She asserts that "queer worlds seem self-evidently not to include reproductive futures. Yet reproduction and heterofuturity are not always easily equated."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this slippage from reproduction to heterosexual procreation, while it registers an important diagnostic queer critique of heteronormativity, nevertheless obstructs the view to what other forms of reproduction – what other futures – may be possible.

Elizabeth Freeman reminds us that "we cannot reproduce little queers with sperm and eggs, even if we do choose to give birth or parent: making other queers is a social matter."<sup>8</sup> Queerness does not function as a hereditary trait; rather, it is comprised of a set of sexual, social, and cultural practices and so, despite what anti-gay fear mongering may conjure up, procreation must indeed be a futile strategy for making other queers. Instead, as the Lesbian Avengers and Queer Nation have defiantly put it, *we recruit*.<sup>9</sup> The meanings and relational forms that amount to what we call queerness must be passed on from person to person, from generation to generation, through subcultural circuits and sometimes through something as fleeting as a covert glance. Queerness, as José Muñoz reminds us, has a "vexed relationship to evidence" because historically such evidence has been used to "penalize and discipline queer desires."<sup>10</sup> The resulting secrecy around deviant gender and sexual identities foreclosed many stories to be documented and preserved within official archives, but it

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5 José Esteban Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York, NY 2009, 95.

6 Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia*, 96.

7 Alexis Lothian: *Old Futures. Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. New York, NY 2018, 9.

8 Elizabeth Freeman: Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography. *Social Text* 84–85 23/3–4 (2005), 60–61.

9 The Lesbian Avengers and Queer Nation, both queer direct action groups founded in New York City in the 1990s, have each used the words "we recruit" on flyers, posters, stickers, and T-shirts. The slogan can be read as a tongue-in-cheek response to the right-wing narrative that queer people were supposedly recruiting children into their lifestyle, which the Lesbian Avengers further commented on through their first action outside a primary school in New York City. There, they protested the school-board's rejection of teaching an LGBT-inclusive curriculum by handing out balloons to children that read "Ask About Lesbian Lives." The history of the Lesbian Avengers is chronicled on their website <http://www.lesbianavengers.com/> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

10 Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

also produced elaborate subcultural practices that are only legible within specific publics, such as cruising and gaydar. Far from conceiving of the archive as empty, queer scholars and artists have therefore often taken an affective and at times speculative approach to the archive and its silences.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, queer activists have long been involved in alternative archiving projects, developing their own engaged documentary practices, and expanding the community-based preservation and circulation of queer histories.

Beyond challenging the logic of evidence, document, and archive, the lived experience of queerness also confounds a generational framework of transmission. For what makes a generation in the absence of biological parentage? The affiliation with a specific queer generation, as well as one's position as elder or youth in any given context, is not determined by descent or even age but instead may relate to how long one has been out, when one began a process of transition, or how long one has been enmeshed in queer culture or politics. It is a relational formation that can change dynamically depending on who may be able to take on the role of mentor or caregiver, yet it still borrows its designations from the language of familial structures as with the roles of house mothers and their children in ballroom, or with labels such as elder and baby gay or baby trans. In his analysis of the generational relations in ACT UP's Philadelphia chapter, Pascal Emmer suggests the term "meta-generation" to attend to the fact that seniority in the movement doesn't always map onto age and therefore complicates any straight-forward notion of intra- or intergenerational relationality.<sup>12</sup> While there are somewhat clearly delineated generations in *Pose* with the members of the houses taking up the roles of mothers/fathers and children respectively, there is also movement across those delineations as well as a shifting terrain of relations between them. In the pilot, we are introduced to the House of Abundance, headed by Mother Elektra and comprising the children Blanca, Angel, Lulu, Candy, Cubby, and Lemar. After some internal conflict and receiving the news about testing positive for HIV, Blanca wants to leave a mark on the world by becoming a house mother herself. When Elektra later falls on hard times, losing her source of income and housing, Blanca takes her into the House of Evangelista. The woman Elektra once mothered now mothers her, suggesting that rather than inhabiting a fixed position in this generational set up, it is possible for them to shift roles, depending on the specific context and the needs, capabilities, and resources that must be negotiated. Their meta-generational framework can be adjusted flexibly to organize and at times improvise the provision of care.

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11 See for example Heather Love: *Feeling Backward. Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA 2007; Ann Cvetkovich: *An Archive of Feelings. Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC 2003; Christopher Nealon: *Foundlings Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall*. Durham, NC 2001.

12 Pascal Emmer: Talkin' 'Bout Meta-Generation. ACT UP History and Queer Futurity. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98/1 (2012), 90.

For beyond simply birthing children, reproductive labor includes all those often unwaged activities that need to happen after a person is born to keep them alive – activities that have often had to be redistributed in queer communities in the face of institutional refusals. While acknowledging the longstanding work of feminist thinkers who have theorized the exploitative and unevenly distributed nature of unpaid care work along gendered and racialized lines, there has been more of an affirmative, yet critically nuanced, turn to care in queer, trans, Black, and disability studies more recently. Attending to the uneven distribution of care and therefore of life chances, many theorists such as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Hil Malatino, and Marty Fink<sup>13</sup> see a radical potential in the ways in which underserved communities have developed alternative forms of mothering and built their own “care webs”<sup>14</sup> to keep each other alive. AIDS activism and ballroom, in particular its representation in *PARIS IS BURNING*, are two of the most oft-cited examples of such alternative arrangements of reproductive labor outside of the nuclear family.

By expanding the conceptual frame of reproductive labor to explore not just the ways in which queer people care for each other but also the work of passing on aspects of queer culture from person to person, across and among generations, I want to argue that *Pose* participates in the work of making other queers, of reproducing queerness. Queer reproduction, in other words, is not just how we keep each other alive but also how we make each other possible in the first place. It has less to do with procreation than with creating spaces in which queerness can gestate, flourish, and transmute, be passed on and taken up. This is not to say, of course, that making other queers has nothing to do with sex.<sup>15</sup> In fact, sexual encounters are probably one of the central touchstones for many queers in their own becoming – but so, I would argue, are those moments at the cinema, or the library, or in front of a TV or laptop screen, when we feel like something or someone reaches out and speaks directly to us. Arguably, both *PARIS IS BURNING* and AIDS activist video material have been formative in this way for many. Revisiting these documents, as *Pose* does, both attests to

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13 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: *Care Work. Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver 2018; Alexis Pauline Gumbs / China Martens / Mai'a Williams: *Revolutionary Mothering. Love on the Front Lines*. Oakland 2016; Hil Malatino: *Trans Care*. Minneapolis, MN 2020; Marty Fink: *Forget Burial. HIV Kinship, Disability, and Queer/Trans Narratives of Care*. New Brunswick, NJ 2021.

14 Piepzna-Samarasinha: *Care Work*, 32.

15 While queerness has always challenged the naturalized link between sex and procreation, insisting that sex cannot be reduced to a reproductive imperative while also exemplifying that in an age of assisted reproductive technology, procreation no longer necessitates sex, I do not want to entirely untether them here. Especially in relation to the AIDS crisis, our expanded notion of reproduction must encompass the ways in which queer communities taught each other safe sex practices by having sex with each other, as Douglas Crimp argues in “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic.” My focus in this paper, however, lies primarily with cultural rather than sexual practices of reproduction in as far as these can be separated from one another.

and nurtures, to put it in the words of Carolyn Dinshaw, a certain desire “for partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time.”<sup>16</sup> This revisitation, however, also poses ethical questions about whether this desire is welcome and what our duty of care is towards the figures we thus drag into the present.

## 2 PARIS IS BURNING, *Pose*, and the Value of Fantasy

In revisiting two very particular sets of documents that chronicle queer subcultures and are indelibly marked by death, *Pose* amplifies their already iconic subcultural status but also offers them up to new audiences and reconfigures them in the process. Whether or not this reconfiguration and re-contextualization is always done with care is, of course, up for debate. In this section, I will discuss *Pose*’s citation of PARIS IS BURNING, outline some of the controversies that surrounded each of them and consider their relationship to fantasy.

*Pose* quite frequently and explicitly references the people into whose lives PARIS IS BURNING offered a glimpse. These references renew the questions around documentary ethics, looking relations, and power that have long surrounded Livingston’s film. PARIS IS BURNING is arguably the theoretical object par excellence in queer studies, as it has continued to produce theoretical responses as well as popular debates in the more than thirty years since its release. Despite many seething critiques, most famously bell hooks’ argument that the film constructs an ethnographic white gaze,<sup>17</sup> the film continues to resonate with queer audiences across time and across different localities. Tavia Nyong’o, a US-American performance and art scholar situated in Black and queer studies, challenges the “status of a representative feminist of color reaction” that hooks’ piece has attained by pointing to the thrilling – if ambivalent – experience of the film that he shared with queers of color around him.<sup>18</sup> This is echoed by US-American media and film theorist Lucas Hilderbrand, who suggests that a focus on reception and spectatorship would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the ambivalent processes of identification and pleasure the film facilitates for queer audiences, similar to what hooks outlines in her writing on the oppositional gaze.<sup>19</sup> More recently, Sam Feder’s documentary DISCLOSURE: TRANS LIVES ON SCREEN (2020) also attends to the nuanced ways in which spectators (who share some positionalities along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality with the people depicted

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<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw: *Getting Medieval. Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham, NC 1999, 21.

<sup>17</sup> bell hooks: *Black Looks. Race and Representation*. Boston, MA 1992, 151.

<sup>18</sup> Nyong’o: *After the Ball*.

<sup>19</sup> Hilderbrand: *Paris Is Burning*, 125.

in the film) related to it. While critically pointing to the ways in which ballroom has entered mainstream consciousness via the film of white lesbian filmmaker Jennie Livingston, as well as Madonna's music video for *Vogue*, thus providing (through to vastly differing degrees) recognition and monetary reward to two white women while leaving the participants of ballroom mostly empty handed, the talking head interviews in *DISCLOSURE* still attest to the sustenance viewers have extracted from the film.

Perhaps this shifting between a paranoid reading that seeks to expose the complications of the film, especially in regard to who controls the means of representation, and a reparative reading that nevertheless attends to the enduring fascination that draws queer audiences to it<sup>20</sup> provides a model for how to attend to some of the ambivalences produced by *Pose*. The series is, after all, produced by FX, a channel that is owned by Fox Networks Group, a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company, and therefore brings to the fore questions of co-optation and exploitation of marginal histories. The team behind *Pose* tried to attend to some of the material and structural inequalities both behind and in front of the camera by assembling the largest trans cast ever to appear in a scripted series, by including Black/ trans women like Janet Mock and Our Lady J in the writer's room, and by bringing on some of the few survivors of *PARIS IS BURNING* as well as members of the contemporary ballroom scene as advisors and also as the on-screen judges of the balls.<sup>21</sup> However, *Pose* lost some of its credit when Janet Mock called out the team of producers with her speech at the premiere of the third and last season, challenging not just her pay of only \$40,000 per episode but also the tokenism and virtue-signaling that has characterized the marketing of the show.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond these production parameters, *Pose*'s narrative and the ways in which it integrates its source materials raise further questions about its representational politics. For instance, through the storyline of Candy, *Pose* references the story of Venus

20 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC 2002.

21 Nellie Andreeva: FX's 'Pose': Ryan Murphy Sets Largest Transgender Cast Ever For Scripted Series. *Deadline* (October 2017). <https://deadline.com/2017/10/pose-ryan-murphy-transgender-cast-fx-series-1202194718/> (last accessed 15 August 2022); Seth Abramovitch: 'Paris Is Burning' Emcee Junior LaBeija on 'Pose,' RuPaul and Why He Never Let Hollywood Tell His Story. *The Hollywood Reporter* (June 2021) <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/paris-is-burning-emcee-junior-labeija-pose-ru-paul-1234964404/> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

22 According to Kevin Fallon at the Daily Beast, Mock's "speech ended on a note of accountability, and that meant piercing through the talking points, the ones tied up in a bow about inclusivity, opportunity, and progress that have been served to the media over the last three seasons. She mocked the standard line in a sing-song voice: 'It means so much to everyone to ensure that we enable Black and brown trans women to make it . . . That sounds good, right?' she said. 'It makes you comfortable, me talking like that. Because then I don't scare you into facing the fucking truth: You all have stomped on us.'" Kevin Fallon: Janet Mock Demands More Pay for 'Pose' in Fiery Speech at Premiere. "You Have Stomped on Us." *The Daily Beast* (April 2021) <https://www.thedailybeast.com/janet-mock-demands-more-pay-for-pose-in-fiery-speech-at-premiere-you-have-stomped-on-us> (last accessed 15 August 2022).



Xtravaganza, a trans woman of color who was murdered in 1988 during the shooting for *PARIS IS BURNING*. While the documentary only includes a brief scene of Angie Xtravaganza reacting to Venus' death, *Pose* renders that violence hypervisible. It provides the images of Candy's violated body that must be absent in *PARIS IS BURNING*. As contemporary debates in trans studies increasingly caution that visibility can pose as a trap for trans People of Color, putting them at an even more heightened risk for violent backlash, we have to ask what is achieved when Black trans death becomes a consumable spectacle on prime time television.<sup>23</sup> This also serves as a reminder that what Canadian-based race and gender theorist Jin Haritaworn and US-American literary scholar of Black transgender identities C. Riley Snorton have termed "trans necropolitics" haunts any discussion of queer reproduction.<sup>24</sup> As they argue, while often not cared for and even actively excluded from white (queer) spaces, "it is in their death that poor and sex working trans people of color are invited back in"<sup>25</sup> as the value extracted from their deaths "vitalizes projects as diverse as inner-city gentrification, anti-immigrant and anti-muslim [sic] moral panics."<sup>26</sup> It exceeds the scope of this essay to discuss in adequate detail the bio- and necropolitical implications of Candy's storyline in *Pose* and its resultant links to homonormative and homonationalist projects – that is to say, the ways in which LGBTQ politics are co-opted and mobilized for neoliberal and neocolonial state agendas. Yet it is nevertheless imperative to stay alert to the questions US-based philosopher and queer theorist Jasbir Puar asks in the introduction to her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. She writes:

How do queers reproduce life, and which queers are folded into life? How do they give life? To what do they give life? How is life weighted, disciplined into subjecthood, narrated into population, and fostered for living? Does this securitization of queers entail deferred death or dying for others, and if so, for whom?<sup>27</sup>

Through displaying Candy's murder, *Pose* feeds into the visual grammar of Black trans death, yet it also escapes back into fantasy in response to this violence. Throughout the course of her funeral, the character of Candy is resurrected, appearing as a lifelike ghost to find closure with the people she left behind and to triumph in a final performance at the ball. In her infamous critique of *PARIS IS BURNING*, bell hooks

23 Reina Gossett / Eric A. Stanley / Johanna Burton (eds.): *Trap Door. Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge, MA 2017.

24 C. Riley Snorton / Jin Haritaworn: Trans Necropolitics. A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death and the Trans of Color Afterlife. In: *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker / Aren Aizura. 2nd ed. New York, NY 2013.

25 Snorton / Haritaworn: *Trans Necropolitics*, 74.

26 Snorton / Haritaworn: *Trans Necropolitics*, 66.

27 Jasbir Puar: *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC 2007, 35–36.



criticizes the prominence of the ballroom scenes and reads them as reduced to mere spectacle, in arguing that

moments of pain and sadness were quickly covered up by dramatic scenes from drag balls, as though there were two competing cinematic narratives, one displaying the pageantry of the drag ball and the other reflecting on the lives of participants and value of the fantasy.<sup>28</sup>

This reading, I believe, is predicated on her assumption of a white straight audience that seeks only to be entertained and for whom, in hooks' own words "it is easy to depict black rituals as spectacle."<sup>29</sup> Yet the experiences of queer audiences and audiences of color described above attest to the possibility of a more ambivalent reading. As a serial narrative format, *Pose* has more time than *PARIS IS BURNING* to build intricate narrative arcs that let the audience in on the multiple struggles the characters face as they negotiate how to make an income, find shelter, deal with sickness and violence, negotiate relations with families of origin, and fall in and out of love. Yet it similarly intersperses those narratives with scenes from the balls, providing, perhaps even more so than *PARIS IS BURNING*, a glossy and fabulous visual spectacle: the ballroom is beautifully lit, the participants are artfully dressed in colorful outfits with impeccable make-up, the camera moves smoothly across the floor, showing us the dancers from different perspectives, the editing picks up the rhythms of the music, building to a crescendo that matches the competition. The series' carefully choreographed, HD rendition of the balls certainly has a smoother finish than the 16mm handheld independent non-fiction look of the film, thus heightening the pageantry that hooks critiques in *PARIS IS BURNING*. However, I find that hooks' critique undervalues the link between those two supposedly competing narratives, for it seems to be exactly the harshness of the participants' lives that amplifies the value of fantasy and necessitates the spectacle of the balls as a moment of reprieve from the outside world, a place to come home to, a ritual celebration of their own ingenuity. What, indeed, should we make of the value of fantasy in a setting that is overdetermined by premature death? This question animates discourses around the politics of trans visibility and remains caught in an irresolvable tension since the reprieve that those spectators who share in the protagonists' hardships longingly seek may also let other audience members off the hook, providing dénouement where there is none.

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<sup>28</sup> hooks: *Black Looks*, 154.

<sup>29</sup> hooks: *Black Looks*, 150.

### 3 AIDS Activist Video, *Pose*, and the Cost of Anachronism

This tension around the potential and pitfalls of fantasy also structures *Pose*'s revisitation of AIDS video, as it adapts and re-imagines two AIDS activist protests in its second season. In this revised version, trans women of color whose contributions to AIDS activist history have often been underrepresented in both mainstream representations and subcultural archiving practices<sup>30</sup> are highlighted in a way that may both correct earlier misrepresentations and gloss over exclusionary tendencies in the movement.

After many of the main characters have been diagnosed with HIV in the first season, season two picks up two years later in 1990 and centers more explicitly on AIDS and AIDS activism, marking the urgency of the crisis. The first episode, titled "Acting Up," begins with Blanca and Pray Tell, the emcee at the balls and close friend of Blanca's, visiting Hart Island, the place where unclaimed bodies were buried in mass unmarked graves during the AIDS crisis. In the next scene, Blanca finds out that her T-cell count has dropped and her diagnosis has progressed from HIV to AIDS. Later in the episode, Pray Tell attends his first ACT UP meeting and subsequently urges the members of the House of Evangelista to join a protest at a church that is planned in the following days. The scene that follows is modelled on the Stop the Church action that ACT UP organized together with WHAM!, the Women's Health Action and Mobilization in New York City. In 1989, five thousand people gathered at St. Patrick's Cathedral to protest the Catholic Church's public stand against AIDS education and safer sex, and its opposition to abortion rights, exemplified by Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York, actively discouraging the use of condoms and clean needles and claiming that "good morality is good medicine."<sup>31</sup> This action was documented in Robert Hilferty's *Stop the Church*<sup>32</sup> tape as well as in the 1991 video *Like a Prayer*<sup>33</sup> by DIVA TV. The video material, most of which covers the protest in front of the church, has also since been incorporated into several documentaries, such as Jim Hubbard's *UNITED IN ANGER* (2012) and David France's *HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE* (2012). *Pose*'s version focuses exclusively on the action inside the church. It shows the members of the House of Evangelista lead a group of people who enter the church, pass out pamphlets, and finally stage a die-in in the center aisle. Very briefly we see someone with a camcorder walk into the frame, then our view shifts to the perspective of that die-

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30 Fink: *Forget Burial*, 6.

31 Associated Press: Vatican AIDS Meeting Hears O'Connor Assail Condom Use. *The New York Times* (November 1989). <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/14/world/vatican-aids-meeting-hears-o-connor-assail-condom-use.html> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

32 Robert Hilferty: *Stop the Church*. (Frameline Distribution, 2014). <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/stopthechurch> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

33 DIVA TV: *Like A Prayer*. (Deep Dish TV Vimeo Account, 2016). <https://vimeo.com/178261617> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

getic camera. The diegetic video material is marked by the standard definition 3:4 aspect ratio, deviating from the rest of the episode which is shot in the 16:9 aspect ratio for high-definition television, as well as through horizontal flickering lines that make the outlines of everything appear kind of fuzzy, creating an emulated video look. In that way, *Pose* seems to gesture to its source material which was only available because AIDS video activists took it upon themselves to chronicle these actions. But while it may thus be a deferential representation of the action, it is of course not a faithful one since *Pose*'s fictional characters take center stage.

The insertion of queer and trans characters of color into a re-enacted version of this particularly notorious ACT UP action can be read as an attempt to contest the mainstream perception of AIDS activism as predominantly white, male, and cis. In this manner, *Pose*'s strategy is reminiscent of the speculative modes of queer historiography and documentary practice that have been used in films such as Cheryl Dunye's *THE WATERMELON WOMAN* (1996) to challenge the exclusion of queer People of Color from dominant historical narratives. However, this particular revisionist take on ACT UP history has also incurred disapproval from former ACT UP members. In her book *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York*, Sarah Schulman laments ACT UP's lack of control over its own representation, asserts that only one white trans woman was arrested at St. Patrick's Cathedral, and claims that former ACT UP members "expressed anger that corporate representations of ACT UP inserted nonexistent people of color while ignoring the people of color who actually were there and did the work."<sup>34</sup> In turn, Schulman was criticized by Vicky Osterweil, who challenged the methodology of Schulman's book and expressed her disappointment at the fact that "Black trans women only appear in the book insofar as Schulman can insist upon their absence in the movement."<sup>35</sup> While Schulman disputed this critique in the ensuing debate, Osterweil's intervention clearly outlines the stakes of attempting to write a comprehensive history of ACT UP to serve as a model for contemporary movements. Although *Pose* certainly doesn't aim to provide a blueprint for radical organizing, its reenactment of ACT UP actions implicates it in the debates around the accuracy of this particular movement history as well as the purpose of movement histories in general. To that effect, Laura Stamm's critique of *Pose* cautions about "the cost of historicization."<sup>36</sup> While she applauds the gesture of reinserting trans women of color into the memory of AIDS activism, she argues that positioning one of the few representations of HIV/AIDS that focuses on trans women of color and their activism in the past obscures that both still have an urgency in the present. This echoes Alex-

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34 Sarah Schulman: *Let the Record Show. A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993*. New York, NY 2021.

35 Vicky Osterweil: What the Record Doesn't Show. *Jewish Currents* (2021). <https://jewishcurrents.org/what-the-record-doesnt-show> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

36 Laura Stamm: *Pose* and HIV/AIDS. The Creation of a Trans-of-Color Past. *TSQ. Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7/4 (2020), 615.

andra Juhasz's and Ted Kerr's writing on "AIDS Crisis Revisitation," in which they similarly critique that much contemporary work on AIDS looks back at the early days of the crisis rather than focusing on present-day HIV/AIDS, making it "almost impossible for people to conceive of HIV in the now."<sup>37</sup>

While Laura Stamm justly points to the dearth of media dealing with the HIV/AIDS epidemic as an ongoing rather than historical issue, especially as it pertains to trans women, I would argue that the specific way in which *Pose* plays on its source documents has the potential to open up a relation to that history rather than necessarily relegating AIDS and AIDS activism to the past. For instance, the insertion of *Pose*'s characters already partly re-signifies the action and links it to ongoing struggles by way of the shifting associations rendered by their embodied presence. When the protestors lie down in the church, they start chanting "Stop killing us!" after which there is a brief sequence where we see police rushing into the church and violently attacking protestors, dragging them away and carrying them out on stretchers. Here the accentuation of Black and brown protestors, paired with the desperate cry "Stop killing us!" which was chanted at the original Stop the Church action but, at present, is primarily known as a slogan in the movement for Black lives, prompts the viewers to consider not just the acquiescence to the suffering and death of people with AIDS but also the ongoing murder of Black people at the hands of police. A line is drawn from historical to contemporary forms of state violence in a way that highlights the centrality of racism and anti-Blackness and their entanglement with classism, homophobia, and transphobia in fueling the AIDS crisis.

The second AIDS activist action that *Pose* revisits in the seventh episode of season two, titled "Blow," is more integrated into the narrative of the season and thus even more loosely adapted. In 1991, the ACT UP affinity group Treatment Action Guerrillas wrapped a giant inflatable condom over Senator Jesse Helms' house in Arlington to protest his homophobic views and his dangerous stance on AIDS policies. The action was taped by Robert Hilferty and the video titled *TAG HELMS* is available through former ACT UP member Peter Staley's YouTube account.<sup>38</sup> In *Pose*, Blanca and Pray Tell, who are situated as elders, give the task to figure out how to implement this action to the children Damon, Ricky, and Lulu. The target, however, is not Jesse Helms but Frederica Norman, a real estate mogul who threatened to evict Blanca's business earlier in the season. Through this shift, the action is re-signified as a response to the racist and transphobic housing discrimination that Blanca faced, but it is also specifically used to thematize the ways in which new generations are brought into the fold

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<sup>37</sup> Alexandra Juhasz / Theodore Kerr: Home Video Returns. Media Ecologies of the Past of HIV/AIDS. *Cineaste Magazine* XXXIX 3 (2014). <https://www.cineaste.com/summer2014/home-video-returns-media-ecologies-of-the-past-of-hiv-aids> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Hilferty, *TAG Helms: When ACT UP Put a Giant Condom over Sen. Jesse Helms's House* (Peter Staley's YouTube account, 2014). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TS-w4Pqvkuw> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

of activism – the work, in short, through which movements reproduce themselves. The narrative arc of the episode suggests that Damon, Ricky, and Lulu are feeling lost and without purpose, not in the least because this episode shortly follows the death of Candy. Through organizing this action, they come to feel empowered again, which suggests that beyond the immediate political purpose of the action, it also serves to reinvigorate the community. In both revisitation scenes, *Pose* seeks to emulate the rough and ready video look, thereby paying tribute to the documentary practices of AIDS video activists. Like the *Stop the Church* sequence, this scene establishes a diegetic camera and then switches back and forth between the regular sleek HD look of the series and the fuzzy video look, which is now emphasized even more as it is framed in a viewfinder with a red dot recording icon and battery display. This contrast makes the regular look of the series suddenly seem hyperreal but also oddly sleek, creating a sense of anachronism. Both the scenes of the balls and of the AIDS activist actions, which are familiar (at least to some viewers) in the grainy softness of 16mm film or the often blue-toned slightly slurred look of video respectively, are rendered glossy thus forfeiting the implied historicity of the traces that use and re-use would have left on the analogue materials. Perhaps it is useful to think about *Pose*'s citation of these source materials – both in terms of their storylines as well as their visual registers – as a form of what Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag,” a “performance of anachrony” that in this case is played out not primarily on the bodies of the characters but rather on the surface of the images.<sup>39</sup> The future intrudes on the past, revises the past – but, we may ask, what vision for the future is offered here?

In this glossier, high production value version, the experience of fantasy that hooks critiqued in *PARIS IS BURNING* is heightened in more than one way. *Pose* constructs a vision of AIDS activism where trans People of Color are supposedly seamlessly integrated into ACT UP without having to address the internal debates around racism, classism, and misogyny – let alone transphobia – which AIDS activists were having at the time and continue to have today. This is a form of anachronism that makes the series more palatable to contemporary audiences by performing a kind of pseudo-inclusivity that goes hand in hand with “the idealization of the trans woman of color in the dominant imaginary of LGBT history” that US-American scholar of transgender history Jules Gill-Peterson identifies.<sup>40</sup> Gill-Peterson discusses the construction of the figure of the street queen as “a poor, transfeminine figure, often a femme of color” who is hyper visible and typically associated with certain stigmas connected to sex work and its criminalization as well as militancy, thus functioning as either “symptomatic or iconic.”<sup>41</sup> While this figure is often taken up to perform a cer-

39 Elizabeth Freeman: *Time Binds. Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC 2010, 95.

40 Jules Gill-Peterson: *Being Street. The Trans Woman of Color as Evidence, Imagining Trans Futures* (Simpson Center for the Humanities, 12 January 2021). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mINM1fB8bm4> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

41 Gill-Peterson: *Being Street*.

tain kind of radicality, for example in the revised memorialization of the Stonewall Rebellion which now tends to emphasize the role of trans activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, it can also be invoked to prop up a false sense of unity in an imagined queer community. As well as reducing the complexities of the lived experiences of trans women of color to a set of characteristics that respectively makes them function as a symptomatic or iconic figure in queer discourses, this fantasy glosses over the power relations, conflicts, and complicities that continue to structure queer movements and instead constructs a de-politicized identity-based constituency that is more easily assimilable into a liberal progress narrative.

This seems to match the ways in which *Pose*'s narratives sometimes lean into the same fantasies of fame and fortune but also of marriage and white picket fences that were voiced by some of the participants in *PARIS IS BURNING*. By the end of the second season, the children of the House of Evangelista have all had career breakthroughs, two are engaged to be married, and they are all moving out of their mother's house. So far, so linear. The unsettled temporality of lives marked by racist, homophobic, and transphobic violence is neatly reordered here into what Jack Halberstam describes as

the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood; this life narrative charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction.<sup>42</sup>

The season concludes with a performance in which Blanca, just recently discharged from the hospital, enters the ballroom in a wheelchair from which she then dramatically rises while lip-synching to the American national anthem. At first glance, this may seem like the "fatally unsubversive appropriation" of the American dream in all its racist, misogynist, and homophobic glory that critics of *PARIS IS BURNING* have cautioned against.<sup>43</sup> However, this progressive onwards and upwards temporality doesn't last. After her performance, Blanca meets two homeless children named Quincy and Chilly on the street outside the ballroom. She takes them under her wings, suggesting a kind of cyclical domestic time where the work of raising children is only done to begin anew. In season three, however, these two characters are not picked up again. While there might be numerous (likely economic) reasons why they don't become part of the main cast of characters, their disappearance reminded me of the disappearance of M— from Daniel Peddle's documentary *THE AGGRESSIVES* (2005) that Kara Keeling considers in her essay *Looking for M*— Keeling argues that at the end of the

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<sup>42</sup> Jack Halberstam: *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York, NY 2005, 153.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler: *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York, NY 1993, 128.

documentary, failing to conform to the linear time the film seeks to impose on its subjects, “M— is out of time (and unlocatable).”<sup>44</sup> She urges us to

ask not the policing question attuned to the temporal and spatial logics of surveillance and control (where is M— today), but, rather, in this case, the political question of when M’s visibility will enable hir survival by providing the protection the realm of the visible affords those whose existence is valued, those we want to look for so we can look out for and look after them.<sup>45</sup>

In the same essay, Keeling references *PARIS IS BURNING*, cautioning us about the “unequal calculus of visibility distribution” that becomes evident when considering that within five years of the film’s release, five of the subjects of the film were dead.<sup>46</sup> The question that haunts *Pose*, then, is *when* Venus Xtravaganza might be. This question insists on the possibility of a future, even as the future already appears lost.

## 4 Queer Reproduction and Ambivalence

I don’t want to close by offering a definitive verdict over *Pose*’s imaginative revisitation of *PARIS IS BURNING* and AIDS activist video; rather, I find that the mixed feelings it left me with tellingly point to the ambivalence at the very heart of queer reproduction. Through its narrative, which centers on the alternative arrangements of care that queer and trans people have devised in the context of ballroom and AIDS activism, *Pose* represents the potency of queer reproductive labor. It situates it as a necessary survival tactic in the face of the fragmented and traumatic experiences of kinship that marked many of its characters’ lives, having been exiled from their families of origin. Yet these alternative forms of kinship are also shown to be fraught with tension and uncertainty through the conflicts within the houses, as well as insufficient in the face of the fatal structural violence that costs many of the protagonists their lives. I have further argued that *Pose*’s citation of iconic queer films and videos *performs* rather than just *represents* queer reproduction as it reproduces, revises, and re-circulates these materials for new audiences who may take them up in devising their own identities. Such a proliferation of queerness through cultural transmission can function as a radical gesture, insisting on caring for queer pasts and enabling queer futures. However, as the debates around visibility in queer of color critique that I referenced above teach us, visibility without protection often turns to surveillance, scrutiny, and violence for those who are most precariously positioned. In its attempt to create positive and celebratory representations of queer and trans People of Color, *Pose* constructs an occasionally

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<sup>44</sup> Kara Keeling: Looking For M – Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15/4 (2009), 577.

<sup>45</sup> Keeling: *Looking For M*, 577.

<sup>46</sup> Keeling: *Looking For M*, 577.



anachronistic fantasy that oscillates between a counter-narrative to a whitewashed history and a smoothed out, easy to consume story of inclusivity. It is within the queer reading practices – desirously reading both along and against the grain, drawing out what is just beneath the surface and speculatively expanding on the traces we find – that we may hold this ambivalence in suspense.

As Sophie Lewis reminds us, “the work of social reproduction brings forth new hope for revolutionary struggle, but also produces new lives for oppressors to suck and crush.”<sup>47</sup> As such, merely reproducing other queers, whether through the cultural processes I sketched out above or through the very material work of housing, feeding, and nurturing them, does not guarantee more livable futures. But I would argue, the reproductive labor we can witness through *Pose*, both in its narrative and in the ways it revisits archival materials and engages new audiences, does mark a refusal to give up on the future, as well as a refusal to let go of the past. And for communities who have often been denied either, that is a defiant act.

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<sup>47</sup> Sophie Lewis: *Full Surrogacy Now. Feminism Against the Family.* London 2019, 165.

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