Family Time Gone Awry: Vogue Houses and Queer Repro-Generationality at the Intersection(s) of Race and Sexuality

Desintegración de los tiempos familiares: el voguing *y la reproducción generacional queer en la encrucijada entre raza y sexualidad*

A desnaturalização do tempo da família: casas Vogue e repro-geracionalidade queer *na interseção de raça e sexualidade*

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Abstract: The paper at hand interrogates the queer temporal politics of "houses" in the ballroom and voguing scene. Houses constitute the axiomatic unit of this community marked by racial and sexual marginalisation and as such create alternative familial relations between members in response to rejections from the biological family and society in general. Mirroring the traditional family institution, vogue houses not only become a source of protection, care, trust and knowledge; their very structure, I argue, induces a queer repro-generational time. Countering the sequential heteronormative time of lifetime milestones and age-fitting achievements, the queer time of voguing is a temporal disidentification that jumbles around and constructively misappropriates generational and reproductive imperatives. In doing this, the politics of voguing opens the horizon of possible futures: it is a spark of embodied resistance with a queer utopian imaginary.

Keywords: Voguing; Queer Theory; Critical Race Theory; Time Studies; Subcultures

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Resumen: El presente artículo cuestiona las políticas temporales queer de las *casas* (salones) de baile y los escenarios del *voguing*. Las *casas* constituyen la indiscutible unidad de esta comunidad marcada por la marginación racial y sexual y, como tales, forman relaciones familiares alternativas entre los integrantes, ante el rechazo de la familia biológica y de la sociedad en general. Al reflejar la institución familiar tradicional, las casas *vogue* se convierten no solo en fuente de protección, seguridad, confianza y conocimiento, sino que su estructura misma parece dar paso a tiempos de reproducción generacional queer. Como contrapeso entre los tiempos heteronormativos secuenciales de las etapas importantes de la vida y los logros relativos a la edad, la carencia temporal de identidad de los tiempos del *voguing* confunde y usurpa de un modo positivo los imperativos generacionales y reproductivos. De este modo, la política de *voguing* abre los horizontes a futuros posibles: enciende una chispa de resistencia materializada con un imaginario utópico queer.

Palabras clave: Voguing; teoría *queer*; teoría crítica de la raza; estudios de tiempo; subcultura

Resumo: O artigo em questão interroga a política temporal *queer* das "casas" no salão de baile e na cena *voguing*. As casas constituem a unidade axiomática desta comunidade marcada pela marginalização racial e sexual e, como tal, criam relações familiares alternativas entre os membros, em resposta às rejeições da família biológica e da sociedade em geral. Espelhando a tradicional instituição familiar, as casas Vogue não só se tornam uma fonte de proteção, cuidado, confiança e conhecimento; sua própria estrutura, eu argumento, induz a um tempo de reprodução *queer*. Contrariando o tempo heteronormativo sequencial dos marcos da vida e das realizações d'acordo à idade, o tempo *queer* do *voguing* é uma desidentificação temporal que se mistura para construir criativamente os imperativos geracionais e reprodutivos. Ao fazer isso, a política do *voguing* abre o horizonte dos futuros possíveis: é uma centelha de resistência incorporada com um imaginário utópico *queer*.

Palavras-chave: Voguing; Teoria Queer; Teoria da Raça Crítica; Estudos do Tempo; Subculturas

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> Yo soy un puente tendido
> del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
> lo pasado me estira pa''trás
> y lo presente pa''delante,
> Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide
> Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado
> (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25).

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> Delinking the process of generation from the force of
> historical process is a queer kind of project: queer lives
> seek to uncouple change from the supposedly organic
> and immutable forms of family and inheritance; queer
> lives exploit some potential for a difference in form that
> lies dormant in queer collectivity not as an essential
> attribute of sexual otherness but as a possibility em-
> bedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives
> (Halberstam, 2011, p. 70).

"A house? A house, let's see. Let's see if we can put it down sharply. They're families. You can say that. They're families for a lot of children who don't have families. But this is a new meaning of 'family'" (Dorian Corey in Livingston, 1990 [24:20]). These are the words of the experienced ballroom participant Dorian Corey, recorded as s/he slowly puts on another layer of make-up in Jennie Livingston's important 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*. Corey is not talking about just any kind of family: s/he describes community constructions in the vogue community; a dance community arising primarily in queer/trans black and latino communities on the US East Coast. With roots in the 1960s' and 1970s' ballroom scene, this dance constitutes the centre of a community that reflects affective needs rising from the homophobic and transphobic rejection from biological families and racism from the surrounding society, that is, the need to create alternative relations of care and trust. Through the construction of "houses" as the smallest organisational part of the vogue community with the institution of mother(s) and possibly father(s), we see the emergence of a new meaning of what to have a family implies—a *chosen* family.

What, then, does this creation of "a new meaning of family" that Corey addresses signify for the way that one's possibilities in life are configured? What kind of desires and identifications does a family construction at the intersection of racial and sexual marginalisation allow for? In this article, I treat these as fundamentally temporal questions, so let me here emphasise this angle in the politics of vogue houses. In which way are conceivable futures in the mainstream contingent upon white heterosexual affective relations, and how can vogue houses be read to offer an alternative account of a desirable life? *What are the queer temporal politics at play in this counter-cultural familial institution?*

Considering life possibilities and potential desires and identification means interrogating which possible futures this alternative familial constel-

lation engenders. Although a house alludes to a spatial entity and therefore a spatial analysis, the anchorage in physical domesticity is today only of secondary importance (Bailey, 2013, p. 5). Even if historically the construction of a house has in some cases designated actual spaces, the house unit first and foremost gains its importance as a non-physical construction—the building of a community—where a redefinition of what is desirable in life can occur. This article aims to understand how a desirable life can be understood through the construction of futures, how they become communally imaginable, and how they can offer alternatives to heteronormative futures. I am interested in the social function of the house as temporally constituted.

Heteronormativity is the object of critique for queer theory, and if we are interested in temporal critiques of heteronormativity, we talk of "queer temporalities." Just as queer theory has been said to have had a "linguistic turn" in the 1990s inspired by Derrida, Austin and Searle, and an "affective turn" in the 2000s inspired by Deleuze, Guattari and Tomkins, some authors have begun to speak of a "temporal turn" of queer theory in the late 2000s (Baraitser, 2014, p. 232; Winnubst, 2010, p. 138).[1] The claim that such a turn has occurred in this millennium reflects the explosion of literature on time and temporality in queer studies as central to denaturalisation of gender and sexuality. Temporality has, however, always been at the core of the critical queer project. Already in 1993, Michael Warner writes in his foundational introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* that sexuality is "the carrier of utopian imagination" (Warner, 1993, p. viii), and only two years later Deborah Britzman maintains that "[i]n its positivity, Queer Theory offers methods of imagining difference" (Britzman, 1995, p. 154). Queer theory, however, is not only about different futures, but structures and is structured by the past as well. Britzman again: "Discourses, of course, have a history and the history of the term 'queer' is one that both enables and disables an everyday" (Britzman, 1995, p. 155). In the early work of Judith Butler, too, we find the importance of the temporal in queer studies as "a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings" (Butler, 1993, p. 228). What remains is that queer theory has from its outset been interested in reconfigurations of past, pres-

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[1] Tim Dean argues that one ought to read the affective turn together with the temporal turn as the scholarship in this latter field tends to focus on "the affective implications of living asynchronicity and anachronism (Dean, 2011, p. 79).

ent and future as a structuring principle of human experience. Time is at once reproducing "regimes of the normal" and a medium for resistance.[2]

Through my engagement with the field of "queer temporalities", I have constantly been surprised by the dissimilar ways in which this concept is employed, differing both between authors and, very commonly, within the analysis of an individual theoretician. In this context, I find it useful to view the literature on queer temporalities through the division that Rita Felski offers in *Doing Time* (2000). Although Felski is not a queer theorist *per se*, and despite the fact that this work predates the "temporal turn" of queer theory, her three-fold temporal structure for feminist temporal critique offers a model that because of its simplicity provides a useful overview, and her partitioning gathers together a group of issues whose cross-reading is highly valuable. In this article, only the "life time" level of Felski's model will be interrogated in depth, but for negative definitional purposes the other levels are worth mentioning. The first temporal level that Felski analyses is the realm of "everyday time", or the phenomenological sense of time. Central here is the structure of experience of time in our day-to-day life. Is time passing slowly or quickly; do we feel controlled by time and where does time flow? The second temporal layer that Felski proposes—and for our intentions the most important—is that of a "life time". Central here is how events structure our lives and life expectancy: how does the normativity of milestones and achievements in life as a whole make sense of our daily experience. This has to do with personal or shared narratives and with seeing these autobiographies as structuring our possibilities and limits in life. Lastly, the third temporal level that Felski proposes is "large-scale time" which addresses temporal processes that go beyond the limitations of our personal experience in that it allows to talk about collective pasts and futures that are shaped by group identity (Felski, 2000, pp. 17-18). Crucially, these layers are only analytically separable: they intertwine and affect each other. The model is, however as we shall see, useful for analytic purposes.

Relating to the level of "life time" that in Felski's model targets "life milestones", *i.e.* normative life progression, this analysis interrogates the vogue house structure as containing a spark of resistance. As a counter-temporal organisation, vogue house temporalities offer an alternative to heteronor-

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[2] Warner defines normalcy as the object of queer critique (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi).

mative "life time". Drawing on his own nocturnal temporal experiences, J. Jack Halberstam writes: "Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from narrative coherence of adolescence-early adulthood-marriage-reproduction-child rearing-retirement-death" (Halberstam in Dinshaw, 2007, p. 182). The paper at hand moves from nightclub to ballroom and interrogates the alternatives inherent in the perverse time of voguing.

This analysis can be done in many ways, and an emerging literature on the ballroom scene and voguing testifies to a rich field subject of study. I am here interested in interrogating the temporalities of the vogue house scene as a site of resistance, that is, as tentatively offering a contextualised alternative to heteronormative reproductive futurism. This angle has two consequences for my analysis. On the one hand, it means that my analysis is limited to the "life time" level in Felski's model, reading together generationality and reproductivity. The many temporalities on the level of "everyday life" (of the dance itself and its rhtyhm, of the chanter) and on the level of "large-scale time" (of the identity community from past and future) are all important bricks in the general puzzle that the temporal landscape of voguing constitutes. For present purposes, however, and in order to study this particular link to heteronormative time, I confine myself to the study of the level of "life time". On the other hand, my inquiry understands that the vogue scene is not set in a vacuum where classism, racism, misogyny, etcetera, do not access. The critical potential that I here interrogate is constantly interrupted when other generationalities and thus the possibility of thinking different futures are cut short by extra-community power dynamics, the outburst of latent transphobia, or by instances of patriarchal authoritarianism by heads of houses. My point here is that whereas these dynamics are present in the vogue community as anywhere else, the vogue scene configuration of kinship shows alternative modes of becoming and organising life events.

My own involvement with the Mexican vogue scene performs the bodily basis on which this article is written. In November 2016, Begonia Drag Queen adopted me as "hija" (Sp. *daughter*) to the vogue house House of Queens, now House of Jotas, and I have since then represented the house at several balls.[3] The study that I here present is not based on systematic ethnographic fieldwork, but is based in the fleeting moments of what José Esteban Muñoz

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[3] Because of personal issues with the house, I later decided to leave it, and participate in balls as what is called "007": community members who do not represent a recognised house.

calls "the ephemeral" or what Gayatri Gopinath calls a "scavenger methodology": the anecdotal and a structure of feeling whose evidence is not based in scientific rigor but in the spark of difference for a queer communality nested in the most unlikely places (Gopinath, 2005, p. 22; Muñoz, 1996). Furthermore, by drawing on my personal experiences I am not suggesting that the construction of vogue houses in Mexico City comes as a reaction to sexual and racial stigma that is identical to that of emergence of the ballroom scene some 50 years ago on the US East Coast. Instead, this paper is *informed* by my involvement with the Mexican vogue scene. This is important because it is here that I have experienced the counter-cultural strengths of chosen families, which made this article possible. It is important because it substantiates the claims that I allow myself to make, and it situates myself as complicit in those very disidentifications that I try to explain. The paper at hand is therefore a series of reflections on the temporal structures implicit in the vogue scene, their subversive potentials as they appear in the minimal literature on the subject and as I have lived them myself, and as they have crystallised in fleeting moments or common sensations. I thus aim to substantiate my analysis with my own experiences, just as I hope my analysis in general exhibits my own commitment and respect for a tradition that predates both my own involvement and the Mexican scene in general.

In order to understand the standard to which vogue house temporalities offer an alternative, I first set out to define heteronormative time in this regard, its logics and material context for the development of a queer temporal critique. Central here are Halberstam's inquiry into age-specific lifetime milestones, Lee Edelman's discussion of "reproductive futurism" and Dustin B. Goltz's analysis of the consequences of temporal non-conformity. Since the house construction can only be understood as a reaction to sexual and racial marginalisation, one must pay careful attention to these dynamics of othering and how they frame the possibility of a critique. Moving therefore to a closer study of the cultural politics of voguing, I discuss negotiations of sexuality and race in the context of vogue house constellations where I find José Esteban Muñoz's account of *disidentification* particularly helpful to understand vogue community members' navigations of desire and identity in relation to racialised and heteronormative norm imperatives regarding beauty, body, fame and individuality. I then pass on to an in-depth discussion of temporal politics entailed by the generational and reproductive imperatives internal to the familial arrangements in the vogue community. Of central

importance in this part is the performativity of the family construction, the (temporal) space it opens, and the way generational imperatives on the basis of merit, effort and experience reconfigure what a desirable life can bring.[4]

"Life time": generationality with reproductive time

The queer temporal potential of vogue houses emerges as a response to heteronormative time. Given the divergence in the literature on the subject, it seems essential to clarify these terms and processes by which family alternatives and futurities become intelligible. On the "life time" level of Felski's triad of social time discussed above, we find queer critiques of heteronormative structuring of life events and life expectancy that render life narratives of different temporal progressions unintelligible. Queer temporalities, on this level, offer alternative ways of organising life periods and milestones. This means creating fundamentally diverging valorisations of the important things in life, restructuring autobiographies, politicising and regrouping collective belonging and intimacy away from monogamous twoness.

A monumental work to consult on queer temporal critique is J. Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005). Although Halberstam dedicates surprisingly few pages of an almost 200 pages book to the question of time in queer lives and studies, his account of both the object of critique—heteronormative time—and empirical suggestions for opening up the field for imagining life progression differently—queer time—is both poignant and well-cited in the literature on queer temporalities. Halberstam is very explicit that "[q]ueer time is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk / safety, and inheritance" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6). Halberstam here posits four interconnected fields for heteronormative time: reproductive time; longevity as having intrinsic value; risk management through temporal discipline; and inheritance time or generational time. One great value of Felski's tri-level partitioning of criti-

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[4] The present analysis was written during the spring and summer of 2017. Being a young scene with a great creative outlet, the Mexican vogue is in constant development—and so is its politics of intimacy and familial care. Although the examples used might already be dated in such a rapidly changing environment, and despite conflicts that have led to deep splits within houses, the arguments put forward here remain as pertinent as ever for the politics of voguing in Mexico and abroad.

cal temporalities is its ability to put into dialogue otherwise disparate critical tendencies. The following analysis of vogue house temporalities shows the relevance of considering these four fields for queer intervention together. Most significantly for the present analysis, the model allows us to think about the time of reproduction and generationality as coming together in the structuring of the desired life of heteroreproductive normalcy, its milestones and limits of divergence.

The intersection of reproduction and generation is in many ways the object of Lee Edelman's book *No Future* (2004), which has in this regard become (in)famous as a monumental work in the so-called anti-social turn of queer theory and politics. Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" the heteronormative performative futurity that "generates generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence, not towards the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to assure repetition" (Edelman, 2004, p. 60). It is the lining up of a sequential logic that structures not only what is a thinkable future. By constructing a normative consideration of future possibilities, it also constitutes identity through repetition in the present. As such, it "impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse […] by casting outside the political domain the possibility of queer resistance to this organising principle of communal relation" (Edelman, 2004, p. 2). Reproductive futurity defines the political field affecting the imaginary order and thus rendering any alternative claims to futurity unintelligible.

Central in Edelman's account is the Child as the focal point for constructing the political field. He writes: "The Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman, 2004, p. 3). Everything that is worth achieving in life, Edelman's analysis goes, is structured around reproductivity. The Child, being a "fetish of heteronormativity", is erotically invested in the sense that desire circles around the creation of possibility for reproduction in the near or distant future. Hence, since the construction of heteronormative futures is the only intelligible way to found identity, subjects that fall outside this structure are not only politically unintelligible; their very existence remains unrecognised.

For Edelman, the antidote to the marginalisation of certain subjects, which reproductive futurism entails, is queer resistance in the shape of "*sint*homosexuality". The prefix refers to the "sinthome" in Lacanian theory which, on the one hand, points to the singularity of each subject's coming to

terms with and tying together the three realms of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real (Edelman, 2004, p. 35), and on the other, to rejecting all belief in a final master signifier that makes sense of all other chains of signification (Edelman, 2004, p. 74). If we consider *sint*homosexuality a queer undertaking, we may say that the queer temporality at play in Edelman's work is negatively defined as questioning reproductive futurism's intrinsic good (Edelman, 2004, pp. 6-7). Queerness can, however, only disturb identity (which is based on a heteronormative premise) but never form one (Edelman, 2004, pp. 17, 24): queer is anti-identity *per se*. It embodies a Freudian death drive in its rejective nature and tendency towards inanimate states from the point of view of futurism itself, that is, "*sint*homosexuals [are], like the death drive they are made to represent, […] made to represent [it only] insofar as the death drive both evades and undoes representation" (Edelman, 2004, p. 74). Queerness, which for Edelman becomes an ethical imperative for the queer person, inhabits the place of meaninglessness associated with the sinthome insofar as representation is what constitutes meaning itself (Edelman, 2004, pp. 47-48, 109).

An important complementary work in the documentation of the effects of reproductive futurity, which however puts a slight emphasis on generationality, is Dustin B. Goltz's *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation* (2010). Through an analysis of over a hundred feature-length films and twenty-five television series dating between 2000 and 2007, Goltz aims to understand the representational politics of time in regards to queer and gay male subjects. The visual representations in films and series form a privileged access to categories of identity through recognition that are affecting identity constitution by offering a given future (Edelman's argument).

I believe Goltz has two useful insights that he gathers in interaction with his vast empirical data. Firstly, as he is represented in mainstream film and television, the gay male is doomed to ageing characterised by sadness, misery, isolation and perpetual loss. The "youthism" of gay mainstream culture, *i.e.* its extreme valorisation of youth and following mourning of lost youth, casts future itself as punishment. When heteronormativity translates into gay culture as being "shallow empty, self-destructive and self-loathing" (Goltz, 2010, pp. 57-58), this self-annihilation indicates a future of misery and non-existence. Goltz notes: "A happy, productive or satisfying future is wedded to monogamy, procreation, government-sanctioned unions, and proper sexual citizenship" (Goltz, 2010, p. 41). Not following these life mark-

ers, the gay life as a whole is seen as a failure. Secondly, representational non-existence if anything characterises non-normative sexualities. Grey areas of sexuality challenge the hetero/homo divide which heteronormativity must uphold as a constitutive Other (Goltz, 2010, pp. 23, 95-96). This means that only certain queer subjects become "edible" to the mainstream audience. The gay male character is thus highly depoliticised and preferably white, middle-class and gender conforming. He values the institutions of heteronormativity as he constantly tries to compensate, project and cover over his deviation from the sexual norm.

Halberstam's framework is in many ways coherent with Edelman's reproductive futurism. Analysing reproductive and generational temporalities from the standpoint of cultural studies rather than psychoanalysis, Halberstam speaks of "paradigmatic markers of life experience" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2), which structure a desirable life. Like Edelman and Goltz, he sees queer time as the perverse turn away from heteronormative life stages, verging on the unintelligible, but, unlike Edelman's queer negativity, he does look for positively manifested alternatives to hetero-futures. For Halberstam, a queer alternative can and is often arising from collectivities that affirm a non-fitting life. This inquiry takes its cue from Edelman's juxtaposition of reproduction and signification and Goltz's analysis of the consequences (misery and unintelligibility) for temporally non-conforming subjects. However, following Halberstam, it places great emphasis on the queer affirmative possibilities in embodying what is simultaneously a critique and an alternative to heteronormative life time.

The politics of voguing

If vogue house temporalities can be seen as queer alternatives to heteronormative time, the historical and political context of their emergence creates the necessary background on which these strategies become possible and potent. Voguing arose in the 1960s and 1970s from the Harlem ballroom dance and drag scene in the African-American and latino sexual minority community. Initially consisting of runway (walks and poses inspired by the fashion magazine *Vogue*), voguing over the decades developed into three different dance styles with, as some scholars note, some similarities with martial arts: *Old way,* which emphasises poses of lines, spins and dips; *New way,* where flexibility is added to lines and poses; and *Vogue Femme,* the most

feminine of the styles. Participants compete in these styles and a variety of other categories in the hunt for prestige for oneself personally but first and foremost for one's "house".[5] Since the first houses started to form in the early 1970s, the number of houses rose to 75 across major US cities by 2004 (Jackson, 2002, p. 26), and it has since only expanded and developed—especially internationally where, by the time of writing, 6-7 national houses compete in Mexico, and vogue houses can be found in communities across the globe.

As many commentators have noted, community members are doubly marginalised on the basis of sexuality / gender performance and race, which in both spheres gave rise to counter-hegemonic politics.[6] Negotiation over ethnicity and especially the African origins, which characterises the black and parts of the latino community, is sometimes expressed directly in the house name, where for instance House of Ebony and House of Xtravaganza are explicitly centring the question of racial belonging. In Mexico, the ethnic dimension's decolonial side also occurs as scene members negotiate *mestizaje*, belonging and pre-Hispanic aesthetics. This plays out both in balls, *e.g.* the Pre-Hispanic Ball in autumn 2016, and house names where the recently established House of Aztecs negotiates colonial history and House of Jotas reappropriates a racialised sexual stigma. In relation to sexuality, in the ballroom scene, one operates with four gender categories separating groups so that one wouldn't compete with a person with a different gender performance (with approximate definitions in parentheses): butch queens (gay androgynous men), femme queens (feminine trans women), butches (masculine transmen and lesbian women) and (cis) women (Jackson, 2002, p. 27). Bailey even pleads for the additional genders butch queens in drag and (cis) men (Bailey, 2011). These categories are, like all other gender categories and identities, not unproblematic, but they point to the creation of a counter-culture that is not easily assailable to the dominant LGBT definitional framework (Susman, 2000, p. 131).

This amalgamation of race and sexuality politics is a practice that has from the beginning of voguing been seen as odd in black resistance move-

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[5] Other examples are: face performance, hand performance, bizarre, realness and sex siren.

[6] Susman further introduces the dimension of class as a sphere of marginalisation hitting the vogue community, underlining the economic aspect of sexual and racial stigmas (Susman, 2000, p. 122). For purposes of simplicity, and since I would reserve the analysis of class to an economic relation of exploitation which I do not wish to forefront in this analysis, I here restrict myself to the intersection of race and sexuality.

ments and mainstream gay and lesbian politics. In one of the conceptually most developed works on the world of voguing, Becquer and Gatti (1991) distinguish between hybridity and syncretism. "[H]ybridity may", the authors write, "still presuppose the 'pure' origin of elements—that is, their fixed, essential identities—prior to their hybridization" (Becquer & Gatti, 1991, p. 66). By contrast,

> the discursive alignment implicit in syncretism remains contingent to relations of power and subject to change according to historical specificity; the elements united in it are denied any a priori "necessary belongingness", and are precluded any sense of an originary fixity both to their identities and to their relations. In this manner, syncretism designates articulation as a politicized and discontinuous mode of becoming (Becquer & Gatti, 1991, p. 69).

Hybridity, in other words, posits pure identities and categories of race and sexuality prior to cultural and political signification. Conversely, syncretism is the historically situated differentiation of categories that are always-already both mutually affecting and in constant change. As Susman explicates, "[v]oguing is a syncretic practice *par excellence* because the dance combines and articulates different elements while remaining a heterogeneous whole" (Susman, 2000, p. 127). Voguing thus occupies the syncretic position in the analysis of Becquer and Gatti as the expression of a syncretic struggle for the reappropriation of African and latino culture, which also negotiates clear-cut LGBT representations. Vogue, hence, not only understands racial and sexual oppression together; it understands not an intersection of oppression, but an inseparability of these struggles, which fundamentally undercuts the idea of authenticity within both spheres of marginalisation (Becquer & Gatti, 1991, p. 78).

In this way, the subject matter of voguing calls for a conceptual framework that allows for a good amount of flexibility, for discontinuous processes of becoming and for differential negotiations of sexual and racial marginalisation. In his first book *Disidentifications* (1999), José Esteban Muñoz depicts survival strategies for minoritarian subjects at the intersection of race and sexuality—subjects who do not conform to normative citizenship. In so doing, Muñoz draws upon the identity negotiations and resistances that become possible in the lack of representation in mainstream white, heterosexual media and culture. Some minoritarian subjects opt for the assimilationist, "model minority" exemplar (*identification*); others see that project as a necessary failure and radically reject majoritarian cultural signifiers (*counter-identification*). Muñoz, by

contrast, develops a third account of minority subject cultural politics in the meeting with white heterosexual mainstream culture—a project that he labels *disidentification*. Like counter-identification, disidentification takes as a point of departure anti-assimilationism, but it simultaneously critiques the former for validating mainstream culture through its mirroring negation—a move that essentialises both mainstream and counter-culture. Instead, it embraces the necessarily failed interpellation as it works on and against identification by incorporating the many contradictions that the failed recognition induces. Disidentification thus escapes the assimilation *versus* anti-assimilation debate since it views power and discourse, which ground identity, as unstable and differential. This, by consequence, necessitates an equally flexible mode of resistance. Central to this project are therefore decoding mainstream culture, partial disavowal and scrambling around of identification: "disidentification is a step further than cracking open the core of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 30). Instead of the radical rejection that counter-identification proposes, disidentification reworks the given from within finding pleasure and self-affirmation in something that has been constructed to exploit and marginalise (Muñoz, 1999, p. 72).

If we read the vogue scene as a project and process of disidentification in the sense Muñoz here proposes, we can appreciate the way in which, for instance, white beauty standards are cited but reconfigured by not being interpellated "properly" in the vogue community. Cultural critic and race scholar bell hooks will help us identify the difference between counter-identification and disidentification as it appears in the vogue scene. In her important critical chapter "Is Paris Burning?" (1992), hooks interrogates the racial politics of the ballroom scene as portrayed in Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*, and she makes the case that the subversive potentials in cross-dressing, gender bending and drag so present in black male culture are cut short by the represented pursuance of white, middle-to-upper-class notions of womanhood. "[I]n Jennie Livingston's new film *Paris is Burning*", she writes, "[w]ithin the world of the black gay drag ball culture she depicts, the idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by whiteness. What viewers witness is not black men longing to impersonate or even to become like 'real' black women but their obsession with an idealized vision of femininity that is white" (hooks, 1992, pp. 147-148). And she

continues: "Significantly, the fixation on becoming as much like a white female as possible implicitly evokes a connection to a figure never visible in this film: that of the white male patriarch" (hooks, 1992, p. 148). These aspiration sustained by white supremacy is in hooks' analysis supported by and perpetuating imperial capitalist culture of commodification of black bodies. The commodification process, the argument goes, becomes possible only through a superficial interaction with the social setting of the vogue scene; hooks distinguishes between a "ritual" and a "spectacle". A ritual is "that ceremonial act that carries with it meaning and significance beyond what appears, while spectacle functions primarily as entertaining dramatic display" (hooks, 1992, p. 150). The white supremacist classist implications of Livingston's film are therefore predicated upon Livingston's inability to reflect upon the cultural reproduction and representational politics of race. hooks dedicates the last half of her essay to demonstrate this racial blindness on behalf of the film maker.

I think hooks' analysis has its absolute greatest strength in the discussion of her critical engagement with the colonial logics of a white lesbian entering and seemingly "objectively" documenting the "undiscovered" world of a sexual minority black subculture; hooks' critique of the racial politics of documentary is, however, at times difficult to distinguish from a critique of the voguing scene itself. When Livingston has Venus Xtravaganza statement that "I would like to be a spoiled rich white girl" (Venus Xtravaganza in Livingston, 1990 [22:30]), is this Livingston's own assimilationist project, or are these desires not also Venus' own, however constituted by white supremacist capitalism? What about Dorian Corey, whom hooks herself describes in favourable terms (1992, p. 155), when s/he recounts of the history of vogue that "everybody wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe" (Dorian Corey in Livingston, 1990 [17:00])? How do we take seriously these, according to Corey, widespread desires in the history of the vogue community? It seems that hooks' reading is very selective; her counter-identification project hovers dangerously close to disregarding actual desires and pleasures of vogue community members. This becomes a problem when, as Tavia Nyong'o points out, hooks' analysis is elevated to the status of a representative feminist of colour reaction (Nyong'o, 2015). Navigating white supremacist heteronormative mainstream culture as a non-conforming subject is by no means an easy task, but claiming different trajectories for different subject positions within this structure must be a starting point for a critical analysis; hooks' counter-

identification project seems not only essentialising blackness but patronising on the verge of shaming of racialised voguing community members.

My aim here is not to make an analysis of *Paris is Burning.* I mention these portrayals of Venus Xtravaganza and Dorian Corey since I feel them resonate with some expressed aspirations that I see in the Mexican vogue scene and which seem integral to the negotiations of race and sexuality that are the foundations of the house culture. In Mexico, this can take the shape of admiration or desire for white(r) skin and certain body traits like tallness or facial hair; for "minimalist cleanness" stereotypically connected with Nordic countries, or for capitalist individualism. It should be noted that these norms are not in any way uncritically let circulate in the community but are under constant revision in dialogue over identity at this place and time in history. The community is, however, not set in a vacuum separated from white supremacist, heterosexist imperialism. It is therefore imperative to find a different model for racialised desire that doesn't idealise counter-identification in the sense hooks can be read to do, but that understands the critical potential of "identity-in-difference". Muñoz's disidentification allows us to appreciate such a spark of resistance. In regards to white beauty standards and ideals of success, the project is to

> be teasing out the ways in which desire and identification can be tempered and rewritten (not dismissed or banished) through ideology [i.e. mainstream heteronormative white culture]. Queers are not always "properly" interpellated by the dominant public sphere's heterosexist mandates because desire for a bad object offsets that process of reactionary ideological indoctrination. In a somewhat analogous fashion, queer desires, perhaps desires that negate self, desire for a white beauty ideal, are reconstituted by an ideological component that tells us that such modalities of desire and desiring are too self-compromising. *We thus disidentify with the white ideal. We desire it but desire it with a difference. The negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are part of the important work of disidentification* (Muñoz, 1999, p. 15, my emphasis).

This proposal of "desiring with a difference" intuitively seems more honest to the actual desires circulating in the Mexican vogue community. It is true to the different strategies at play in the vogue scene of navigating sexual and racial stigmatization.[7] To be sure, here I am not suggesting that desires constituted through heteronormative white supremacy are predominant in the

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[7] Muñoz is, however, clear that disidentificatory politics is not the ideal strategy for every minoritary subject, but can be used as an analytical frame to understand seemingly assimilationist approaches to racial and sexual stigmatisation (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5).

vogue scene that I have experienced, nor even that what I read as mainstream inclinations are actually conforming by intent. What I propose is that insofar as some voguers desire and identify with white, capitalist ideals, Muñoz's analytics of disidentification allows us to account for misappropriations of heteronormativity, classism and white supremacy. Such disidentifications can be read as micro-resistances from within a society based on racial and sexual exploitation and marginalisation. Finding pleasure and self-affirmation by misunderstanding these ideals should be appraised as creative strategies of survival. In the following, the temporal politics of the house structure becomes a queer example of heteronormative family disidentification.

The creation of the house culture

Being socially and politically marginalised on the basis of race, class and sexuality, changing the way one looks might, as Susman (2000, p. 134) and Harper (1994, p. 92) suggest, be one of the only ways of exercising one's power. Playing with gender performance may allow one to "pass", and vogue is a medium that allows practice in this discipline. The Ballroom scene creates a space for exercising the chameleonic practice of "fitting in" and, on the other hand, resignifying or "owning" the stigma of the queer, pervert, *marica*, etc. It is my experience that voguing in the community is valued as an exploration of gender and sexuality and at the same time as gaining confidence in one's gender presentation. As one member of the Mexican vogue community expresses with regards to her gender identity: "It [voguing] is a space of self-discovery and validation, of reinventing the relation to my body and finding a space of camaraderie that has allowed me to take a step towards my transition" (EFE, 2017, my translation). Notably, the Realness category, where dressing, walking and behaving in accordance with a given stereotype, e.g. Hetero Guy Realness, Yuppie Realness, *Barrio* Realness,[8] became from the very beginning of the history of voguing an important means to survive, understood as both being able to live in one's

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[8] In addition, some realness categories emphasise the possibility of passing as a trans person. The category Femme Queen Realness, where trans women are asked to pass as cis women, has in recent times been the subject of a heated debate in Mexico because of its gender essentialism and evaluation of one's performance as the woman that one is from a panel of judges. For a historical discussion of this category, see Bailey, 2013, pp. 55-68.

skin and to change gender performance. This exercise is essential in a society largely hostile to or even lethal for queer blacks and latinxs.

This latter circumstance in the creation of voguing and the ballroom scene in general cannot be overstated. Racial and sexual stigmas are the necessary background on which to understand the need to create alternative familial constellations. They are crucial elements in the shape the culture surrounding the dance took. As parallels to the gang culture of the 1960s' and 1970s' New York, repeated violence against sexually minoritised black and latino youth created the urgent need for physical protection and, hence, to form groups of what Bailey calls "gay gangs" (Bailey, 2011, p. 366): houses of drag and vogue. As Dorian Corey tells us in *Paris is Burning*: "A house is a gay street gang. Now where street gangs get their rewards from street fights, a gay house street fights at a ball. And you street fight in a ball by walking in the categories" (Dorian Corey in Livingston, 1990 [25:30]). Shunned by their biological families because of their sexuality, members entered "houses" with this double mimicking function: mirroring (racist) gangs and (heteronormative) families. Functioning as *de facto* orphanages of people that were rejected and thrown out of their biological families, house children would not only receive the services that a biological family would ideally provide such as support and care; house mothers would often be able to provide counselling on identity issues, safe sex, hormones, sex change, etc.—knowledge that was otherwise difficult to access to (Bailey, 2011, p. 368; Birardi Mazzone & Peressini, 2013, p. 110). Houses can in this light be seen to offer knowledge that the biological nuclear family could never provide; not a substitute family but a solution or answer to marginalisation that mirrors the familial structures as they recast their promises of care and support.

It is important, however, to notice the interconnectedness of the dance (vogue) and the house culture. Vogue is a competition and the differentiation between mothers, fathers and children has to do with experience in the ball culture and prestige won through successful participation in balls.[9] There is no official dance institute or a rulebook of vogue: newly arrived members are not told the rituals for a winning performance—they learn it over time

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[9] Houses can have a mother and a father, only one of the two, or only fathers or mothers as leading members. In Mexico, all other members are children, independently of their prestige. In the US, many houses have found other titles such as Prince, Empress, Aunt, Uncle, Grandfather and Grandmother to give prestige, privileges or responsibilities to certain members.

via participation in balls and training in houses (Jackson, 2002, p. 36). Status within the house is gained by those who win most balls and / or by those who work hard to improve (Jackson, 2002, p. 30). House mothers and fathers are therefore doubly transmitting knowledge not only on the dance practice but also on issues related to sexual health and identity: two fields that are, due to the corporeal nature of the dance practice, highly intertwined.

Constructing alternative repro-generationalities

Reproductive futurism and its life span milestones and thereby foreclosure of life trajectories cast as intelligible only certain kinds of (re)productive bodies and mark others as miserable subjects in Goltz's analysis, or more radically, outside of conceivable politics in Edelman's. Against the backdrop of violent heteronormative time, Halberstam invites us to think through vogue house temporalities as positive and communal manifestations of thinking time otherwise. These familial structures reflect a queer kind of kinship that reconsiders reproductive and generational time.

For decades, anthropology of kinship has aimed to understand the family as a societal institution and the particular social relations that characterises the family. In the tradition following Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (2004 [1913]), houses and families are viewed as anti-incest constructions. In this fundamentally heteronormative view, the family is not just a connection or relatedness; it has the necessary logic of sex and marriage prohibitions. Anthropologists often criticise this position for generalising a theory that by no means is obviously of universal application. They argue that the continuation of the "bloodline" implicit in the incest argument is an aristocratic invention, and they show how the "father role" that psychoanalysis centres around isn't translatable into all cultures and historical contexts (González Echevarría, 2010, pp. 98-101). As an alternative, González Echevarría posits a threefold defining feature of a family: "the sociocultural regulation of procreation, belonging and fostering of (the) children" (2010, p. 101, my translation). Notice that in this definition neither biology nor the age of the children are necessarily defining features if we understand procreation in a wide sense of reconstitution / rebirth of gendered and sexual identity and transmission of cultural knowledge.

If this theory can define the familial relation, we have good reasons to label voguing houses "families." In "Queer Belongings" (2007), Elizabeth Fre-

eman describes the impossibility to conceive of vogue houses (among other constellations) as valid families within the heteronormative kinship lexicon simply because, as Judith Butler would have it: "kinship does not work, or does not qualify as kinship, unless it assumes a recognizable family form" (Butler, 2002, p. 14). The problem can, according to Freeman, be regarded linguistically. How to do justice to the non-recognisable intimate relations that are at a smaller scale and emotionally stronger than concepts like the amorphous and generic "community" or "nation", *e.g.* "affairs, *ménages à trois*, friendships, cliques, or subcultures" (Freeman, 2007, p. 297)? Such relations can only be recognised through dominant concepts: "for instance, one gay man can unofficially take another as an adoptee, but only if the adoptee is as young as a genetic offspring would be and the relationship preserves normative generationality; otherwise the two men are interpreted as friends or lovers" (Freeman, 2007, p. 297). Vogue houses' auto-definition as families can thus be interpreted as an approximation; at best a (socially but not legally) recognised kinship form. Or it may be understood as a Mu-ñozesque disidentification that works the dominant conceptual framework from within: a performative that reconfigures the concept of family and, most importantly, uses it as a political strategy of affect and the creation of a space to think the "otherwise".

Let us stay with this latter interpretation. In my experience, this familial relation (and its explication as such) between house members is strong in the community. In Mexico, it is very common to address other house members as "hermanas" (Sp. *sisters*), or in written the gender-neutral "hermanxs". This interpellation is not only a reference to the "objective" relation *qua* fellow house members but a speech act that affectively reinforces intimacy. It thus seems to me that mirroring the family and using its vocabulary hails this communal relation as familial and, hence, draws implicitly on its promises of care and intimacy. At the same time, it is clear to me that this interpellation is not to be understood literally in the way it is used in the vogue community. The family assemblage performs intimacy, care and trust, but is otherwise distanced from its biological sense as if to underline this latter's infusion in toxic heterosexuality. As Chandan Reddy argues, if "home" denotes the site of heteropatriarchal domination, a house is where these imperatives are reworked, challenged and directed towards communal ends (Reddy, 1998, p. 372). The vogue community's family performance is a queer disidentification with heteronormativity; a pleasurable and community-affirming misappro-

priation of an institution that is contingent upon the stigmatisation of the queered vogue house member. Disidentification in this context is a decoding and strategic use of the family form simultaneously with a conscious and partial disavowal of its common mainstream use.

The seemingly ludicrous characterisation of vogue houses as families allows us to consider the family as an institution in society and, thus, also as a site of possible resistance on a supra-individual scale. María Eugenia Olavarría describes the family as being both about the reproduction of status and power in the larger community and the mediating function of what she calls a "double metamorphosis": hegemonic economic and social relations in society as a whole is translated into the family structure (first metamorphosis), which is then translated on to the children (second metamorphosis) (Olavarría, 2002, pp. 101-106). This mediation of the family creates the frame for "a society within society" where alternative gendered and sexual norms can thrive — norms that are of course not cut off from society, but can work them differently. In the vogue house culture, the imperative of a nuclear family is structurally reproduced but translated into a flexible organisation where age difference and aristocratic bloodlines take a back seat, and where seniority, talent and dedication determine assignation of roles and status within each family (Bailey, 2013, p. 105 f.). It is not abnormal that house children were older than their mothers. Further, one can have both a vogue mother and a drag mother, just as one can be part of a local house that has more mothers and fathers on a national or international level (Bailey, 2013, p. 96). This creates cases where one can be both mother and child of another person; where child is older than vogue mother who is older than that person's drag mother; where mother is much older than father, etc. For example, my vogue mother, Begonia Drag Queen, is younger than me. Before creating House of Queens, Begonia was part of House of Drag with Zebra Drag, who is younger than her, being her vogue mother. Mika Ehla Drag is the drag mother of Zebra despite, once again, being younger than her. Mika Ehla, in turn, was until recently drag mother of Eva Diva Drag—a voguer who I figure is around 10 years older than me. Vogue house culture, thus, jumbles around generational narratives and expectations while at the same time invoking the promise of the nuclear family.

In his discussion of the ACT UP movement and its history, Pascal Emmer coins the term "Meta Generation" to describe cross-temporal cross-generationality. Meta generation is a hybrid of the "intergenerational",

i.e. constituted by different age groups, and the "multigenerational", *i.e.* made up by different generations of a 30-40 years old movement. These two concepts are not always the same as some may enter the movement at a very young age and thus be at the same age as other members but from a different generation of the movement. Meta generational communities bring together historically marked styles of identity and fashion; it constitutes an active archival process where knowledge of the past is a living entity and object of discussion and rewriting. The ideal knowledge transmission of heteronormative families is reproduced but as a copy that negotiates "on what terms this transmission [is] conducted" (Emmer, 2012, p. 91).

Emmer's concept of meta generation is highly useful for understanding the vogue house culture as well—not surprisingly given the historically parallel existence and often shared member circles of the ballroom culture and the ACT UP movement. The styles of Old Way, New Way and Vogue Femme as well as historically specific categories of Runway are examples of multigenerationality where different contexts develop different styles of dancing. These styles are in constant reinterpretation by the new generations in what Emmer calls "critical nostalgia": a lived, critical engagement with the past (Emmer, 2012, p. 93). By contrast, intergenerationality and the twists and turns that it, as we have seen, takes in the house culture, provide alternative ways of knowledge transmission but also bring together different aged imperatives for gender performance. Farrier, for example, shows how older gay men in HIV/AIDS activism have more "radical" aspirations than younger activists who are generally more concerned with mainstream inclusion (Farrier, 2015, p. 1411). I believe it is hard to generalise this conclusion to the world of voguing, but the insight that the way one organises one's political engagement is contingent upon one's age (at a particular historical moment) is worth holding on to.[10]

From disidentifications to queer utopias

Meta generationality as played out in the vogue scene—including the above-discussed disidentificatory practices of queer family construction—embodies a certain utopian spark. In *Disidenfications*, Muñoz declares utopianism of

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[10] Emmer for example speaks of "radical capital" in his discussion of different age generations within the ACT UP movement (Emmer, 2012, p. 92), and Baraitser analyses "politics of skin" as a field of anti-ageist intervention (Baraitser, 2014).

central importance to the project of disidentification: "Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility [...] in the labor of making a queerworld" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 25). This kernel of utopian possibility becomes the object of study for Muñoz' second and last book publication *Cruising Utopia* (2009). Queerness, Muñoz here states, is an openness, a rejection of the here and now for the future: "We must vacate the here and now for the then and there" (2009, p. 185). This "not yet here", which is a highly utopian impulse, shall, however, always be known in relation to lived temporal alternatives of past and present. Useful in this context is Muñoz's adaptation of Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch's distinction between concrete and abstract utopias. In Muñoz's reading, concrete are those utopias that are "relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualised or potential. In our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3). The difference is whether the utopian dream is constituted in the material circumstances that point to particular issues and their ideal overcoming. Vogue houses' utopian impulse of disidentification consists in reconfigurations and misappropriations of mainstream cultural politics that originate in concrete desires and actual identifications-disidentifications that point to alternative ways of constructing possible futures and desires. "Queerness' form is utopian", Muñoz writes (2009, p. 30), indicating that a queer project must necessarily point beyond the present. Queer utopianism is born out of heteronormative time's failure to allow difference and the disidentificatory possibilities this creates. Contrary to Edelman's anti-social position and in line with Halberstam's critique, "[q]ueer utopian practice is about 'building' and 'doing' in response to that status of nothing assigned to us by the heteronormative world" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 118).

Reading generational time together with reproductive time as Felski's three-level model allows us, we can appreciate vogue houses' meta generational constitution as a lived critique of what Edelman calls "reproductive futurism". Substituting the Child with grown-up children that might be older than the head of the family, opens the queer political field that heteronormativity forecloses. Lifetime expectancy has, as Halberstam shows, to do with lifetime markers, and a way such possible events become available to us is, as Goltz argues, through representation of the past generations of our kin. Vogue house culture embodies disidentification by creating different criteria for prestige and ageing as it jumbles around and reverses mainstream generational imperatives. Based in the materiality of racial and sexual stigmas,

the imagination of the vogue house culture signifies the promise of Blochean "concrete utopias" in the play with futurity itself.

Acknowledgements

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