

***Pose*: Representation and Awareness of the Afro-American and Latinx LGBTQ Communities in the Ballroom Scene and the Stigmatization of People with HIV/AIDS**

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Abstract

This critical analysis paper analyzed Ryan Murphy's *Pose* which is centered around the Afro-American and Latinx LGBTQ community in the ballroom scene of the late eighties, early nineties, during the AIDS crisis. The analysis focused on the significance of *Pose*'s attempt to create awareness for transgender people and other LGBTQ members within the Afro-American and Latinx communities, as well as addressed the stigmatization of individuals afflicted with HIV/AIDS. Further, the analysis also considered the importance Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* and Madonna's "Vogue" music video had for bringing to mainstream the ballroom scene, and the significance of the Stop the Church demonstration by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power for the fight against AIDS. The analysis considered the creators of the show, those within the writers' room and how their experiences influenced the creation of *Pose*; the drama genre and targeted demographics for the show; the context of actual events and the encoding of reality, representation, and ideology; and the representation of the LGBTQ community through the cast, with emphasis on the character Blanca and her relevance as an Afro-Latinx American, transgender woman with AIDS.

Keywords: LGBTQ, transgender, Latinx, Afro-American, HIV/AIDS, ballroom, queerness, community, representation, discrimination, stigmatization.

1. Introduction

Pose, is an American television drama that was released on June 3, 2018 on FX network and was created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals. The show is available on Netflix and spans two seasons with eighteen episodes total and has been renewed for a third season.¹ *Pose*'s first season was met with critical acclaim and was nominated for two Golden Globe Awards: Best Television Series—Drama and Best Actor—Television Drama for Billy Porter who played the character Pray Tell. Porter also won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series in 2019, becoming the first openly gay, black man to win an award for that category.² *Pose* was also nominated that same year for Outstanding Drama Series. The plot of *Pose* centers around the drag ballroom scene dominated by the Afro-American and Latinx LGBTQ communities in New York of the late 1980s and early 1990s during the AIDS crisis and the last years of Reagan's presidency. The show focuses on the various members of the House of Evangelista, run by Blanca Evangelista, a transgender woman with AIDS that tries to create a better world for her "children" by meeting challenges head on and standing her ground to fight for her rights. *Pose* "had 108 trans cast or crew members, as well as 31 LGBTQ characters" (Nussbaum, 2017, p.327) and "made history when it announced its cast, which has the largest ensemble of trans actors ever to appear on a scripted television show as series regulars."³ Because of *Pose*'s significance at bringing awareness to a highly marginalized group—that is, people of color that identify as transgender or other LGBTQ member—within a highly stigmatized community—those affected by HIV/AIDS—it was important to analyze this show to gain a better understanding of how *Pose* handled

representation while creating awareness. Therefore, to analyze the significance that is *Pose* for the LGBTQ community, particularly those who identify as transgender, and the representation of the Afro-American and Latinx communities of the ballroom scene, as well as individuals afflicted by HIV/AIDS, it was necessary to consider various aspects of *Pose*. This analysis considered the creators of the show, who is in the writers' room and how that influenced the creation of *Pose*; the targeted demographic and the genre of the show; its context and its codes; representation through the cast of characters, with particular emphasis on Blanca and her importance as a transgender, Afro-Latinx American with AIDS.

2. The Creators of *Pose* and the Writers' Room

The executive producer of *Pose*, and "the Most Powerful Man on TV," is showrunner Ryan Murphy.⁴ Murphy gained recognition through his 2003 satirical melodrama, *Nip/Tuck* but rose to prominence with global phenomenon *Glee* (2009) and later with *American Horror Story* (2011—present).⁵ As Nussbaum (2018) puts it, "His legacy is not one standout show but, rather, the sheer force and variety and chutzpah of his creations, which are linked by a singular storytelling aesthetic."⁶ Murphy is a gay, white man and his identity is often influential of his storytelling and creative process. Consequently, some of the creative minds behind *Pose* share similarities with Murphy's LGBTQ background. Steven Canals, who wrote *Pose* and pitched it to Murphy, is an Afro-Latino queer screenwriter; "African American trans author and activist Janet Mock; the *Transparent* writer Our Lady J, who is white and trans; and Falchuk, who is white and straight," are all part of the writers' room for *Pose*.⁷ Further, it is important to note that along with representing LGBTQ members, Afro-American and Latinxs members, *Pose* also brings to light the struggles of individuals with HIV/AIDS, and all these groups are reflected by those in the writers' room; writer/producer for *Pose*, Our Lady J, recently disclosed that they are HIV-positive.⁸ These similarities with each other and with the characters of the story they are telling fuel the creation of *Pose*:

Murphy [...] likes his writers' room to be pragmatic, not self-indulgent or therapeutic. But the *Pose* room was host to raw confessions and about surgical transitions and "survival sex"—"deep, third-level" conversations, as Canals puts it, that helped them create story lines.⁹

Pose is available through the Netflix streaming platform and Murphy believed that more LGBTQ content is needed.¹⁰ Therefore, this versatility, diversity, and queerness of *Pose*'s writers' room allowed for more similar stories to be pushed not only to a large audience, but also to more specific demographics.

3. The Genre and Targeted Demographics

Drama, according to O'Donnell (2017), "is the most varied, complex, expensive, and popular television genre."¹¹ Dramas tend to be serial and have an ensemble cast of actors that play the same role weekly.¹² Further, because dramas are costly to create, episode plots can be "self-contained with a resolution at the end of the hour."¹³ This structure seems to hold true for *Pose* as each episode is self-contained and the plot is mostly resolved by the end of each episode. For example, episode eight of season one, "Mother of the Year," begins with Elektra Abundance, who was previously a prominent house mother, now working in the sex industry once more. As she is preparing for her routine, she is found by Blanca Evangelista, her former daughter, who takes her under her wing, and gives her a place to stay. Elektra effectively becomes a member of House Evangelista and Blanca wins the award for Mother of the Year. This episode serves as a reversal of roles between Elektra and Blanca; originally Elektra found Blanca and sheltered her but now Blanca did the same for Elektra. Further, it could be said that Blanca's character arc ends here; her desire, or purpose, from the beginning of the series, is to provide shelter for others, and nurture them, but also as someone who is not long on this Earth because of her illness, she wants to leave a lasting impact. She accomplishes this by raising her children, creating the legendary House Evangelista, and winning Mother of the Year. However, season two picks up after a three-year time skip and Blanca's character arc is renewed again with many of her values still intact.

This show heavily revolved around the ballroom scene of the 1980s and 1990s in New York and according to Chatzipapatheodoridis (2017) "Born to stand out, the ballroom subculture emerged as the paradigmatic anti-heteronormative indictment against ills and flaws sustained by the dominant American lifestyle."¹⁴ The scene was, and remains, largely dominated by the Afro-American and Latinx communities, and Molina-Guzman (2010) says "Puerto Rican migrants followed by Dominican immigrants are [New York City's] largest two Latina/o groups."¹⁵

The main characters of *Pose* are a variety of Afro-Americans and Latinxs, particularly Dominicans, reflecting Molina-Guzman's (2010) statement. Further, the AIDS crisis was also wreaking havoc on the LGBTQ community during this era, especially those of color and within the transgender community, and it is an illness that continues to afflict many members of the LGBTQ community today. However, it is important to note that people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) continue to be highly stigmatized; stigmatization "refers to a process by which individuals are devalued and treated as less than others. It involves overt discrimination (from the stigmatizer), labeling and separation (e.g., "the other"), and attribution of unfavorable qualities (e.g., promiscuous, immoral)."¹⁶ Ramirez-Valles et al. (2013) mentions that negative attitudes toward PLWHA have declined over the years, but "the general public continues to believe that PLWHA are responsible for their illness."¹⁷ The two lead characters of *Pose*, Blanca Evangelista, played by Mj Rodriguez, a transgender, Afro-Latinx woman, and Pray Tell, played by Billy Porter, an openly gay Afro-American man, are both early on diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Blanca finds out about her illness in the Pilot episode after going to the hospital to be tested and Pray Tell is later tested in episode four of season one, "The Fever." Both characters keep their illness to themselves, only confiding in one another due to their close friendship, but initially keeping the rest of the people in their lives in the dark. Blanca and Pray Tell do this as a defense mechanism to protect themselves because they feel a sense of guilt at having contracted HIV/AIDS and fear rejection from those close to them and from society, but they also hide their condition to insulate the youths in their lives from the harsh reality that could possibly await them. Blanca and Pray Tell's actions reflect Ramirez-Valles et al.'s (2013) idea that "Many PLWHA report internalized stigma in the form of guilt and shame about their status and/or difficulty in telling others about their infection."¹⁸ Therefore, having lead characters that are not only people of color and LGBTQ members, but who are also afflicted by an illness that disproportionately affects this community, helps create awareness amongst the public to an ongoing health crisis, and allows people from the LGBTQ community to feel identified and represented through their identity, social issues, and shared culture being portrayed.

4. Context and Codes

Context refers to the concept of intertextuality by referencing actual events within a story.¹⁹ Context "also includes cultural values, social issues, trends, and fads."²⁰ The era in which *Pose* is set is centered around the beginnings of the ballroom scene into the mainstream due to Jennie Livingston's 1990's documentary *Paris Is Burning* and Madonna's "Vogue" music video.²¹ In the first episode of season two, "Acting Up," Madonna's "Vogue" is used as a recurring theme throughout the episode, both in the ballroom, from which the song was inspired, but also as a track played for various scenes outside of it, particularly with Blanca in them, as she is one of the few amongst her peers that feels Madonna's single will help break the barriers of discrimination and stigmatization for transgender people. For Blanca, it is a sign of hope. However, during this time, the pushback for the lack of AIDS medical assistance and preventative measures also led to surges of organized movements to bring about awareness, such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, ACT UP, holding the Stop the Church Demonstration on December 10, 1989 that interrupted a Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.²² In the "Act Up" episode of *Pose* Pray Tell gets involved with the ACT UP movement and he becomes very passionate about spreading awareness and encourages the House of Evangelista to join him on the day of the demonstration. Seeing the characters emulate an important movement juxtaposed with ballroom scenes becoming popular and gaining attention reflects the dichotomy of what members of the LGBTQ community were simultaneously experiencing, that mainstream society was only willing to accept what it could appropriate and reject the cry for help. The scene served not only as a reminder of an ongoing crisis but as a challenge to mainstream society's view on transgender people, since unironically during the 1980s, the Trump empire was at its peak and it is in the present, during the Trump administration, that transgender individuals have felt the most pushback:

The Trump administration has taken a number of actions which transgender activists have decried as discriminatory, including banning transgender people from serving in the military; changing a Bureau of Prisons policy that requires prisoners to be housed in facilities for the sex they were assigned at birth; and introducing new Department of Health and Human Services rules to allow hospitals and insurance companies to deny patients care based on religious or moral beliefs.²³

The context used in *Pose* highlighted ongoing societal issues and used the past as a reminder to seek change in the general public's view on transgender, LGBTQ, and HIV/AIDS people.

Pose used a variety of codes to communicate various meanings within the show; O'Donnell (2017) provides a definition of code from Fiske, "[codes are] a rule-governing system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared

amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture.”²⁴ According to Fiske, there are three categories of codes: reality, representation, and ideology.²⁵ O’Donnell (2017) breaks the codes down as reality being encoded by social codes, such as “appearance, behavior, speech, sound, and setting” which are then encoded by representation through technical codes, these being camera work, “lighting, sound, music, and editing”²⁶ to convey the substance of the narrative, and these codes are lastly organized into ideological codes like “individualism, patriarchy, class, materialism, capitalism, and so on.”²⁷ Representation codes are represented through the Afro-American and Latinx actors and actresses of the LGBTQ community cast for the various characters in *Pose*. Further, “The show’s creators also recruited real-life legends to contribute to the show. These included the choreographer Jose Gutierrez-Xtravaganza, a ballroom luminary who was featured in the influential documentary *Paris is Burning* and toured with Madonna after she released “Vogue.””²⁸ The creators of *Pose* made use of people familiar with the ballroom scene to represent it accurately. Further, the technical codes of lighting and music create a believable depiction that make the audience feel part of the underground scene. The ballroom being heavily lighted with a variety of camera shots and angles, with music from the late eighties and early nineties blasting in the background afford the viewer an intimate view of the scene and feel as another person in the crowd. The ideological codes are encoded through the depiction of *Pose*’s characters’ various lifestyles. For example, Stan Bowes, played by Evan Peters, from the first season is the stereotypical image of a white man from the suburbs, married, educated trying to make it big in the city but unhappy with his “boring” life. His interactions with those of his “world” are more muted compared to the characters from the ballroom, the music is orchestral, the colors monochrome and flat, everything is clean and pristine. Conversely, the members of Evangelista or House of Abundance are colorfully dressed, vibrant makeup and big hairstyles, spotlights bouncing off them as they perform, the crowd cheering for them to pose, pop music reverberating throughout the room when they are on the scene. Outside of the ballroom, in their everyday lives, much like Stan, their lives become more subdued, but unlike Stan they do not try to hide who they are as they continue to wear clothes that may be flashy and colorful wear their hair in lively updos. The scenes of the hospital wing for the care of HIV/AIDS patients or the piers where prostitution is a regular occurrence, those images are often depicted as unpleasant, unhygienic, and seedy, ultimately representing once more the dichotomy of the reality in which transgender and other LGBTQ members lived and continue to live.

5. *Pose* Cast, Representation, and Blanca Evangelista

Reiterating once more, the cast of *Pose* is the largest ensemble of recurring transgender individuals, as well as other LGBTQ members. Further, all the lead characters that are part of the ballroom scene are individuals of color, mostly representing the Afro-American and Latinx communities, respectively. However, it is important to mention that while it is groundbreaking to have such a diverse cast, marginalization continues to pervade in Hollywood, particularly with transgender women. According to Nikki Reitz (2017) transgender women are negatively represented on television because of the importance society places on what is masculine, and that giving up their masculinity to embrace femininity is perceived as a mental disorder or deviant behavior; that “Trans women are seen by our society as giving up their masculinity, and therefore power, to become feminine.”²⁹ Further, acts of violence toward transgender women continue to pervade as well, “in 2019, seven transgender people have been violently killed...All the victims in 2019 were black trans women. Additionally, trans women of color make up four out of five anti-trans homicides.”³⁰ Many of the members of the cast for *Pose* experienced discrimination and some form of violence for their identity; “The casting session for *Pose* had unsettled Murphy: Many of the trans actors lacked health insurance and bank accounts; nearly all had stories about sexual violence.”³¹ Some transgender individuals and other members of the LGBTQ community have found it easier to keep their identities secret, especially those from the Afro-American and Latinx communities, “For Latino sexual minority men and Latina transgender women, passing as heterosexual or cisgender may minimize some discrimination, thereby, reducing multiple marginalization that may incur from embodying multiple minority statuses.”³² Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize the significance of *Pose* pushing for more representation for these groups and breaking the stigmatization.

Mj Rodriguez, who plays Blanca Evangelista, is a transgender woman of color and according to Herrera (2019) “Rodriguez’s character arc has depicted many of the hardships of transgender people growing up in that era, most of which persist today, making the show feel profoundly relevant.”³³ Further, Blanca is of Dominican descent and in episode five of season one, “Mother’s Day” she is faced with the death of her biological mother and an uncomfortable reunion with her biological family that ostracized her for being who she is. This episode reflected not only the types of coming out stories many people from the LGBTQ community have faced, but also the continued hostility some have face within both majority and minority groups. Rodriguez herself stated “a lot of people of color, especially black

people and, obviously, Latinx people, go through [discrimination] when it comes to not only their skin, but their cultural background,”³⁴ and that within the Latinx community “There’s still a lot of aggression when it comes to men in the Latino community, because they don’t understand.”³⁵ Further, according to Patel et al. (2016) “Young MSM [Men who have sex with men] and transgender women, especially those who are Black or Latino and poor, bear a disproportionate burden of HIV compared to other subgroups of MSM.”³⁶ Therefore, having a lead character like Blanca Evangelista, who is a transgender woman of color, representing the Afro-American and Latinx community, who has AIDS, a highly stigmatized group of individuals, creates awareness among the general population who may or may not be familiar with the struggles that come with being someone from these groups.

6. Interpretation

The Netflix drama series *Pose* centered around the ballroom scene of the late eighties and attempted to bring about awareness through the various representations of individuals from the LGBTQ communities and from minority groups such as the Afro-American and Latinx groups. At the forefront of the series is the ongoing AIDS crisis and various social issues like discrimination, racism, stigmatization, poverty, and inequality. The show addresses these different issues through the characters and their different ways of coping with their reality or attempts to fight back and resist against injustice or health issues. The various codes of reality, representation, and ideology serve to inform the audience of a passed era that has heavily served to both inspire future generations of LGBTQ members and remind society of continual afflictions and struggles faced by this community. The show juxtaposes scenes of the highlights of the ballroom with the everyday stigmas that all the characters face simply for being who they are. However, it is the second season of *Pose* that goes in depth with addressing these issues, since season one served more as an introduction to the ballrooms and sets up character stories; season one began three years before Madonna’s “Vogue,” Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, or the Stop the Church demonstration.

The first season gave too much time to characters that have nothing to do with the ballroom scene nor are directly affected by the AIDS crisis and do not appear again in the second season; those characters are Stan Bowes, his wife Patty, and his boss, Matt Bromley. These three individuals, played by Evan Peters, Kate Mara, and James Van Der Beek, respectively, served no real purpose to the plight or struggles of the other characters, aside from Angel, played by Indya Moore, nor had any direct correlation to the ballroom scene, again aside from Stan and Angel’s whimsical affair. It is possible that they were used because as well-known actors, their names would likely attract a larger audience, and because having white actors at the forefront would make people more willing to watch the show since a cast of color and queer individuals is not something mainstream viewers would likely consider watching. Nevertheless, and taking into consideration everything discussed throughout this paper, *Pose* did effectively bring to the forefront a highly marginalized, stigmatized group. Further, the diversity and queerness of the writers’ room allowed for a show like *Pose* to be created by those that have experienced similar stories to those they are trying to tell and that can help others feel identified as well.

7. Conclusion

Pose is a series that has broken a major barrier by reintroducing to the world people that society preferred to keep in obscurity because of their queerness or mock them through inaccurate representation in movies and television shows. It has done so by reminding the audience of the extravagance of the ballroom scene from which mainstream appropriated voguing and drag but turned a blind eye to AIDS and hate crimes; “[Pose] is defined by two diametrically opposed trends: the boom of interest in the ball scene as the result of “Vogue,” and the rising death tide in the community from the AIDS crisis.”³⁷ However, while the show did not aim at masking the issues that plagued LGBTQ members during this era, Murphy wanted to tell “something hopeful and “aspirational,””³⁸ and as Sepinwall (2019) stated “*Pose* is at its best when it’s telling the kinds of stories no other show can, and with a bittersweet, but largely optimistic worldview others seem afraid to adopt.”³⁹ *Pose* at its core, aimed at accurately representing the LGBTQ community while simultaneously raising awareness and giving hope to those that have experienced the same as those from the ball room scene and House Evangelista.

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