CHOSEN FAMILIES AND FEMINIST MOTHERING IN THE BALLROOM COMMUNITY:

BLANCA EVANGELISTA FROM *POSE*¹

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Chosen Families and Feminist Mothering in the Ballroom Community: Blanca Evangelista from *POSE*.

Abstract: The ballroom community and its subculture present the notion of chosen families as a group of, mainly, Black and Latinx LGBTQ people who gather in a socially configured structure called a house. Ballroom houses are families in which queer mothering is presented as feminist mothering embodied by Black and Latinx trans women in *POSE* (2018–present). Ruddick’s maternal thinking and O’Reilly’s feminist mothering weaken the normative patriarchal discourse of mothering and motherhood and convey new meanings to this practice. This article tackles these concepts as part of Blanca Evangelista’s identity as a woman and as a mother in *POSE*.

Keywords: motherhood, ballroom, identity, family, community, gender studies, trans studies, performativity.

Familias elegidas y maternidad feminista en la comunidad del *ballroom*: Blanca Evangelista en *POSE*.

Resumen: La comunidad del *ballroom* y su subcultura presentan el concepto de familias elegidas como un grupo de, en su mayoría, personas negras y latinas LGTBQ que se juntan en casas, estructuras configuradas socialmente. Las casas del *ballroom* son familias en las cuales la maternidad queer se presenta como feminista representada por mujeres trans negras y latinas en *POSE* (2018–presente). El pensamiento maternal de Ruddick y la maternidad feminista de O’Reilly debilitan el discurso patriarcal normativo de la maternidad y otorga nuevos significados a esta práctica. Este artículo desarrolla estos conceptos como parte de la identidad de Blanca Evangelista como madre y como mujer en *POSE*.

Palabras clave: maternidad, ballroom, identidad, familia, comunidad, estudios de género, estudios trans, performatividad.

1. Introduction

Motherhood and families are often analyzed and conceived through the scope of the biological relationship existent between the members of the families in question. More

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so when trying to introduce the queer subject into the family, and when mothering queerly. While society and scholars “paid significant attention to homo-parental families during the latter part of the twentieth century, the twenty-first century has seen an increased focus on parents who are genderqueer [who] challenge and are challenged by the discourse of ‘motherhood’” (Park 2020: 66). Motherhood, within the ballroom subculture context, is not conceived through the biological scope. The houses that are formed in ballroom constitute families configured socially. Clear representation of these families and this subculture can be found in Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and *POSE* (2018–present), a worldwide acclaimed TV series created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals. This show is considered groundbreaking because, among other reasons, its cast “represents more than half of the trans representation on all of cable” (GLAAD 2019: 10) and “the series broke new ground with centering trans characters and stories at the heart of the show” (ibid). During these past years, the presence of trans people on screen, and behind the scenes, has been essential to achieving trans experiences being portrayed without reflecting stereotyped images or narratives. Agreeing with Galupo (2017) and Otero (2019), as a cisgender researcher, the author of this article acknowledges his privilege regarding the bias that his identity can have when tackling trans experiences and trans representation.

When talking about family, attention must be paid to two different concepts: first, the nuclear family, and second, the alternative family. The pro-family movement of the 1970s, which included right-to-life activists, “helped Reagan to victory and then leveraged its electoral support to influence [his] agenda” (Rodberg 2013: 314). In the late 1970s, anti-ERA activists contributed alongside right-to-life activists to what was called pro-family activism, and these shared a common factor: “their various positions all spoke to the need to protect the two-parent nuclear family” (ibid). This “two-parent nuclear

family” is the traditional structure known to be the foundation of the definition of a family by following the biological imperative and the binary distinctions of society on parenting and motherhood. In addition to this hierarchical structure, pro-family activism was also against sexual education for teenagers and against abortion. The term nuclear family, according to *A Dictionary of Sociology* (2015) “is used to refer to a unit consisting of spouses and their dependent children [emphasizing] the biological imperative underpinning [it]” (Scott and Marshall 2015: 243). Moreover, George P. Murdock states that the “nuclear family’s utility [is] performing tasks necessary to the survival of the species and to social continuity” (Murdock in Scott and Marshall 2015: 243). These definitions fail to acknowledge the different types of family configurations that are equally functional as the so-called nuclear family. When looking into other definitions, sociologists insist “that it is also necessary to examine how the nuclear family is shaped by ideological, political, and economic processes” (Scott & Marshall 2015: 243). Furthermore, and most importantly for the purpose of this article, Scott and Marshall state that the “nuclear family is no longer the norm in either Britain or America” (2015: 244). This reference to the nuclear family not being the norm serves as a supportive statement for the claim of the existence and the need for studying these alternative configurations of families that are more common nowadays. A large amount of research has been carried out recently on mothering queerly and querying motherhood. However, in the ballroom community, and ultimately in *POSE*, mothering cannot strictly follow the analysis of these queer studies, which continue to present the biological bonds between the members of the family because, as has been stated above, in the ballroom subculture the relationships are constructed socially from the very beginning, rather than biologically or legally.

Even though the traditional family structure and its values have proven to be a crucial part of both political and private spheres, it is undeniable that the definition of family has been changing rapidly during recent years. The kind of family that we find in the ballroom community houses is not a typical, nor traditional, nuclear family. However, it might preserve some of the values present in traditional families such as, for example, the educational system and supporting strategies within the family sphere. According to Klitgård, “mirroring the traditional family institution, [ballroom] houses not only become a source of protection, care, trust, and knowledge; their very structure, [he argues], induces a queer repro-generational time” (2019: 108). In Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, Dorian Corey, an experienced ballroom member, states the following when being asked about what a house is: “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” (24:20). If we recall that ballroom community members suffered from the homophobic and transphobic rejection coming from their nuclear families in addition to the systematic racism and sexism from society, it is clear why they had the urge to create alternative forms of families in which to care and trust one another. As Corey states, this new meaning of family accounts for the lack of biological relationship among its members, however, the essential meaning of a family is implied in those houses built within the ballroom community. The houses constitute the smallest part of the ballroom community, through these we see how a new meaning is given to those houses, which is that of a chosen family (Klitgård 2019: 110). The house, or family, is at the core of the ballroom community and it constitutes a new meaning for what can be understood as such.

Thus, new implications come with the configuration of families within the ballroom culture and its community. These can be called, as Klitgård stated, chosen families since the meaning that they carry is one which perpetuates the need for a family as a socially

configured environment free of discrimination and judgement where individuals can grow, receive support, and develop their identities, their education, and their living conditions. Often, the members of these families have previously been rejected by their traditional nuclear and biological families due to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Furthermore, “rejection from families of origin was endorsed as a major factor leading to homelessness for LGBTQ youth” (Choi et al. 2015: 20). Blanca and Damon (Ryan Jamaal Swain) are two clear examples of this in *POSE* and they illustrate a reality, and an experience, of LGBTQ lives in the past and present-day.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the alternative form of family that exists within the ballroom community and the ballroom subculture; to delve into trans motherhood and feminist mothering by focusing on Blanca Evangelista as one of the main mothers of the series and in contrast with Elektra Abundance; to analyze how Blanca understands motherhood and how she envisions a functional family; to denounce the importance of motherhood and a familiar structure in a community which has been rejected by their biological counterparts, and to see the results of this motherhood and the chosen family structure in the lives of the members that constitute the ballroom communities.

This article relies on queer theory’s theoretical framework of gender performativity and the embodiment of identity seen in Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender* (2004) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). As Butler states, “performativity is not just about speech acts. It is also about bodily acts” (1993: 198). Moreover, “through performativity, dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized” (209) and “some of those performative accomplishments claim the place of nature or claim the place of symbolic necessity, and they do this only by occluding the ways in which they are performatively established” (ibid). For an overview on queer families and motherhood, I will attend to *Mothering*

Queerly, Queering Motherhood (2013), *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives* (2014) and, ultimately, to the recently published *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood* (2020).

Certainly, according to psychoanalysis, the mother, and the father, following Butler's *Undoing Gender*, "do not have to actually exist; they can be positions or imaginary figures, but they have to figure structurally in some way" (119), which is what is developed in Blanca's House of Evangelista. In other words, the House of Evangelista presents a mother figure structured by the embodiment and performativity of Blanca as a queer mother in a queer community. In the *Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, when attending to queer motherhood and mothering queerly, we observe "motherhood as a relationship exceeding biology and law" (Park 2020: 68), which is exactly what this article will present when analyzing Blanca as a mother, and her house as a family which exceeds these biological and law-related structures by constructing these relationships on alternative sociological grounds.

POSE is a North American drama set in New York City that reflects the ballroom culture scene of the 1980s, which focused on African American and Latinx LGBTQ people and their experiences of gender and identity among other important issues. This show was created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals, and it was first aired on FX June 3rd, 2018. Now, due to its addition to international streaming services such as Netflix and HBO, his audience has grown enormously. The series features the largest cast of transgender actors in regular roles in TV history, as well as the largest recurring cast of LGBTQ actors ever for a scripted series (Andreeva 2017; Goldberg 2017). This shows the efforts of those involved in the creation and production of *POSE* to recreate New York City's ballroom culture as real as possible. In addition to this, the team also has two usual screenplay writers and producers –Janet Mock and Our Lady J–

who are trans women, too. Janet Mock directs episode six of season one, *Love Is the Message* and, among other episodes, writes episode seven of season two, which is directed by Jennie Livingston. This supports the idea that *POSE* is inspired by Livingston's documentary, *Paris Is Burning*, and navigates between some of the narratives presented in it further extending them in *POSE*. The reason why *POSE* is different to other cultural products with trans representation, and why the critical reception of the show was majorly positive, is that the trans community is not represented by stereotypical and negative portraits of trans people which do not reflect the reality of trans people's experiences. Thus, following Otero's work, *POSE* has been positioned as avant-garde and forward-looking in terms of trans representation and the relevance of these trans experiences for trans people in the present day, as well as the sociocultural impact of the show (2019: 8).

POSE does not only offer deep insight on the 1980s ballroom culture, or the lives of transgender women who were living on the margins of society at that time, the series also tackles a gay boy, Damon, who has been harshly rejected by his nuclear family after finding out about his sexual orientation. Blanca finds him dancing in a park to try getting some change for food and shelter. Elektra Abundance (Dominique Jackson) and Angel Evangelista (Indya Moore) are also two fundamental characters in the representation of trans experiences in *POSE*. I agree with Otero when she states that even though *POSE* is set in the 80s, the issues that the show tackles are still relevant to the trans community in the present day as, for example, social discrimination, family rejection, transphobia within the LGBTQ community, and violence (2019: 74). These are some of the topics that can be seen in some chapters of the show that continue to be problematic and common in our present-day society.

2. Performativity of Motherhood in POSE

2.1. Blanca and the House of Evangelista

Shelley M. Park, in “Queering and Querying Motherhood”, states that motherhood “has frequently been idealized as a feminine embodiment of moral purity” (2019: 63) and not only that “mothers with queer gender identities further trouble cultural ideals of motherhood by troubling the father/mother dichotomy itself” (ibid), but also that “queer mothers provide a valuable vantage point from which to interrogate harmful constructions of mothers as self-sacrificing asexual women who practice heterosexual monogamy as a matter of reproductive duty” (ibid). To mother queerly is understood to be a kind of motherhood that deviates from standard practices and, implicitly and explicitly, challenges prevailing notions of what is understood as good mothering (Hallstein, O’Reilly & Vandelbeld 2020: 4) Blanca is a black trans heterosexual woman who, after finding out that she is HIV/AIDS positive, she decides to form a family of her own. Since *POSE* is set in the 80s, the presence of HIV/AIDS in their community is inevitable because these were the years when activism began to emerge regarding Reagan’s administration. However, the HIV/AIDS narrative is not treated as central to Blanca’s identity, since her narrative is focused upon her role as a mother in the House of Evangelista and the difficulties and the struggles that come with child-rearing. Park further states that queer mothers are “stigmatized as morally unfit to raise children” (2019: 63) due to their queerness. Despite this, and the conception that women need to become mothers, house mothers become essential to those members from the LGBTQ community (Higgins 2018). In fact, house mothers “establish community, instill knowledge, shed

tears, evoke laughter and at time go into their own pockets to help out those who are less fortunate” (Brock 2012).

Simone de Beauvoir stated that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (2011: 357), and also that “it is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her psychological destiny; that is her ‘natural’ vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species” (646). Blanca becomes both a woman and a mother through a process of embodiment and the continuous construction of her identity by gender and motherhood performativity. Her biological mother rejected her, and her adoptive mother, Elektra Abundance, does not support her when she decides to start her own house. Blanca’s possible referents in motherhood, one in the traditional sense, and the other in the queer sense are both rejecting Blanca as a woman and as a mother while Blanca rejects these models in favor of her beliefs of what a mother should be and what a family should imply. She constructs her motherhood in response to these rejections and builds something completely different. If one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, one is not born but rather becomes, mother, too. It can also be argued that Blanca does not want to become a mother to achieve any psychological destiny nor to perpetuate the species. Blanca’s willingness to become a mother is based on the necessity for help in her community and her desire to educate, support, and reach out to LGBTQ people in need.

The sacrificial mother, or sacrificial motherhood, “emerged as the dominant view of good mothering in the post-war period” (O’Reilly 2020: 23). Following O’Reilly’s work, three features characterize sacrificial motherhood: first, mothering is described as “natural to women and essential to their being” (ibid); second, “the mother is to be the central caregiver of her biological children” (ibid); and third, “children require full-time mothering [and] must always come before the job” (24). In that sense, this is where the stereotypical conception of the sacrificial mother is important since Blanca can be

sacrificial in terms of looking after her children, and as a woman who fights to achieve a better lifestyle for her community. However, she rather constructs a discourse of activism against the marginalization and discrimination of black trans women within and outside the LGBTQ community. Moreover, Blanca's relationship with her children is not biological and she has to work to sustain the needs of housing, food, etc.

Following Irene Oh's "Performativity of Motherhood: Embodying Theology and Political Agency" (2009) we can observe how "motherhood as performative emphasizes mother's agency by focusing upon what mothers self-consciously do rather than what mothers biologically are" (4), therefore performativity as a concept "offers a robust account of maternal identity" (ibid). Oh further states that "women who willingly become mothers and assume the care of children, in other words, need not necessarily be seen as succumbing to patriarchal stereotypes of domestic femininity" (ibid). Furthermore, "according to Butler, mothers are defined not primarily by biological function but by their culturally encoded lived realities" (Butler in Oh 2009: 5). Now, Blanca is not only known as "the heart of the show" (James 2019: 218) but also her role is clearly defined from the very beginning of the narrative in *POSE* as a trans woman with HIV/AIDS who wants to be a mother and have a legacy. Blanca's motivation for becoming a mother is born from her own experience as a daughter: "When I got kicked out, I was a 17-year-old kid who did not understand who I was, if I was gonna die in the cold or from starvation. You found me, took care of me. You helped me understand. It's time I pass that kindness on" (Pilot, 22:20–22:34). She understands motherhood as caring, helping, and protecting people who, like her, were rejected by their biological families and do not understand why or who they are. Furthermore, research on motherhood and work on mothering "focusses on the person who does the relational and logistical work of child rearing" (Arendell 2000: 1192) and understand motherhood as "the social practices of nurturing and caring for

dependent children” (ibid). However, it is important to realize that Blanca’s children are not dependent on her in terms of rearing due to their age.

Before delving into more details on Blanca’s own house and chosen family, it is necessary to illustrate Blanca’s relationship with her biological mother since “the experience of being a mother is affected by a woman’s personal history, by the position she holds in her society, and by the social and economic forces operating in her culture” (Beverly Birns & Dale F. Hay 1988: 1). Moreover, Blanca’s motherhood will also be affected, as any other mother, by “the quality of her relationships with family and friends, and, not least important, by the unique characteristics of her children” (ibid). To begin with Blanca’s analysis attention must be paid to episode five, Mother’s Day, of season one, when Blanca receives a call during which she finds out her biological mother has died. The immediate reaction from Blanca is visiting her biological sister, Carmen, only to find her constantly misgendering her and further disrespecting her: “Whatever you’re calling yourself, this ain’t the time for your confusion. Mami suffered enough. [...] I don’t know what you are. Tell me how to explain to a ten-year-old that her uncle is gay and runs around in women’s clothes” (Mother’s Day 10:38–11:14). To which Blanca fiercely replies: “You tell her the truth. You tell her that I am a woman” (ibid). This is a clear example not only of the lack of education and understanding of trans people and their identities from within their nuclear/biological families who rejected them but also of Blanca’s identity and empowerment as a black trans woman who denounces her oppression.

After this encounter, the members of the House of Evangelista, which constitute Blanca’s chosen family, accompany her to her biological mother’s funeral, which is a turning point for the understanding of Blanca as a mother herself. During her internal

monologue in front of her biological mother's opened coffin, after a violent sequence, Blanca can partially heal and relieve the wound and the pain remanent from her rejection:

I'm a mother now. I got a house of kids. [...] So I hope, finally, you're proud of me, wherever you are. I said some messed up things the last time we spoke. And I hope you know that I'll always love you. I know you didn't know how to raise a child like me. You tried your best, and I want you to know that I forgive you and I love you (Mother's Day, 30:45–31:33).

In this sequence, it is shown how Blanca forgives her biological mother for not understanding or not knowing how to accept Blanca's identity. Moreover, Blanca herself expresses how the burden that she has been carrying since this rejection when stating that she hopes she is proud of her. The fact that the first thing that Blanca would tell her mother after all those years is that she has become a mother herself proves that she had needed that love, acceptance, and support from her mother. This internal monologue, though late in Blanca's life, is what results in Blanca's peace and resolution with herself and her biological mother being achieved. In Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender*, she states that "every child should be wanted, should have a chance at a livable life, and that there are conditions for life, which must first be met" (225), as well as that "the mother must be well; there must be a good chance of feeding the child; there must be some chance of a future, a viable and enduring future since a human life with no futurity loses its humanness and stands a chance of losing its life as well" (ibid). Moreover, "mothering is learned in the process of interaction with the individual mothered" (Barnard & Martell 1995: 22) and also is situated within "specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender" (Collins 1994: 56). First, Blanca was not wanted nor was provided good life conditions from her biological mother or family; second, Elektra's family was not offering Blanca the future that she envisioned for herself; and third, the performativity of motherhood in Blanca is constructed and enacted after her experience

with both mothers from whom she learns how to build her motherhood concerning not only herself, but also those whom she is mothering, which present a specific context in terms of race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Even though as it has been stated, sacrificial motherhood required the positioning of the children's needs first, this analysis portrays Blanca as an example of empowered mothering, which allows "mothers both their selfhood and power" (O'Reilly 2020: 28).

The House of Evangelista is built mirroring its head, Blanca, who defines a house as "a family you get to choose" (Pilot, 26:37). She further states, "I'm a house mother. I provide a support system for my children and housing if you need it" (26:47). Later, she will set several rules that her children must follow if they want to be part of her family. These are, on her own words: "Education is key if you want to get ahead in this world [...], you need to be safe [...], I want you to be healthy [and] I need you to be available to walk any of the balls. Those are Mother's rules. I know they're harder than most, but I got to be tougher on y'all than the world will be" (52:35–53:07). Blanca is aware of the struggle that Damon is going through after being rejected by his family and being homeless. She does not only consider education as the only way to improve their social situation but also acknowledges the dangers of the lack of sexual education regarding HIV/AIDS. These rules demonstrate that her performativity of motherhood and, in the end, her mothering experience "can confer both maternal power and an immense burden of responsibility" (Oberman & Josselson 1996: 344). In fact, "there are numerous examples in which the audience can identify with Blanca as she navigates the world of child-rearing" (James 2019: 218) as she represents middle-class values, punishes Damon when he skips some classes at his dance school and tries setting traditions with her children during Christmas following those she might have had with her own biological family as a child.

Now, Blanca's mothering and her house are seen as ideal by the ballroom community in the series. In fact, she wins the Mother of the Year Award, which is preceded by a speech in which the ideal mother is defined as someone who "provide[s] moral and social support to her children, [...] taught them what it means to move through life with grace and humility" (Mother of the Year, 00:51:21). Moreover, referring to Blanca during this preceding speech, before announcing she won the award, Pray Tell (Billy Porter) states that the "recipient has taught [them] that a house is much more than a home. It's a family" (Mother of the Year, 00:52), and he finishes his speech by affirming that Blanca "saved many a soul lost in darkness simply by shining her light" (Mother of the Year, 00:54:05). If "mothers are identified not by what they feel but by what they try to do" (Ruddick 1994: 34), Blanca's mothering provides guidance and education to her children and in the end, creates a sentiment of unity as a strategy for survival against LGBTQ discrimination. Through the repetition of her values and beliefs in her actions and words, the performativity of motherhood within the ballroom subculture embodied by Blanca acquires a new meaning and new connotations inherent to this community. This meaning and these connotations were unique and exclusive for house mothers, since at the time, as has been previously mentioned, most LGBTQ youths were rejected by their biological families and lacked education on queer sexuality and gender identity. This education, alongside the system of support and intervention that the houses constituted, could only be received within the ballroom subculture at a time in which being trans was still diagnosed as a mental disorder.

Blanca is defined as caring, loyal, and inspiring. However, the main argument for her as the ideal house mother is that she acknowledges that a house is a family from the very beginning of her experience in ballroom. How she achieves so, is by her empowered and feminist mothering, and the embodiment of her own identity as a woman and a

mother. In addition to being defined as the ideal house mother, taking into account that “feminist mothering is concerned with uncovering and challenging the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood, including the ideologies of intensive and sacrificial mothering” (O’Reilly in Green 2020: 39) and that “feminist mothering is understood to be political and to have cultural significance” (Green 2011: 160), Blanca’s mothering counters the discourse and the ideology of the time by forming her house on her own to create a safe community space where LGBTQ youth can express and develop their identities with the political and cultural connotations regarding the situation of the LGBTQ community outside that safe space. This way, feminist mothering understood as “a conscious and politically engaged endeavor with the purpose of effecting positive cultural and political change through feminist modes of mothering” (Green and O’Reilly in Green 2020: 39) is clearly embodied by Blanca.

Blanca’s chosen name, Evangelista, has clear religious and spiritual connotations that are supported by Pray Tell’s speech and the reference to Blanca having saved the souls of many present. Blanca has built a maternal role clearly defined. She has constructed her own identity around her performativity of motherhood as a sacrificial, but tough, mother in contrast to her own experience related to motherly roles such as Elektra’s matriarchy or her biological mother’s rejection. In the end, the House of Evangelista functions as a mirror of how Blanca conceives motherhood, ballroom, houses, and family. In a patriarchal society, women are expected “to remain pure and chaste virgins until called on by a man [...] to bear his babies and continue on his lineage” (Reimer 2013: 164). This would be related to the conception of the Virgin Mary and the sacrificial mother role, but that is not Blanca’s case. To illustrate on the Christian sacrificial mother conception, “the paradox central to Christian attitudes towards women is that it attempted to reinstate women by removing conditions that stamped them as inferior and kept them

servitude” (Warner 2013: 75). Furthermore, the sacrificial mother is typically envisioned as “a woman who has submerged her true self so deeply, for so long, that it has nearly vanished” (Rubenstein 1999: 11) and following Warner’s work, “the virgin in the Catholic Church represents motherhood in its fullness and perfection. Yet the Virgin as a mother is exempt by special privilege from intercourse, from labor, and from other physical processes of ordinary childbearing” (2013: 195). Despite this, Blanca’s religious connotations and similarities with the sacrificial mother role in terms of dedication and in some cases self-sacrifice, she does not fulfill the Christian ideal. As mentioned before, her motherhood is one that acquires new connotations exclusive to the ballroom subculture and the LGBTQ community, more specifically black trans women and homosexual men. Blanca’s mothering is feminist. She has “independence of mind and the courage to stand up to dominant values” and also remains “truthful about motherhood and [to herself] in motherhood” (Butterfield in O’Reilly 2020: 30), which are characteristics of feminist mothering. By being a black trans woman, she is a mother who challenges the patriarchal structure around motherhood while, through her feminist mothering, it is fundamental for her to educate her children against it. According to Otero, Blanca closely represents the experience of a racialized trans woman that can also be seen in the present-day reality and experience of many trans women (2019: 47). Moreover, Blanca’s relationship with her Black and Latinx community is reduced to the ballroom context, where competition usually comes before friendship as it is the case for Candy (Angelica Ross) and Lulu (Hailie Sahar). This is also different in the House of Evangelista, where emotional bonds, personal relationships, and support come before the competition of the balls.

2.2. Two faces of motherhood in *POSE*: Blanca Evangelista and Elektra Abundance

Ballroom houses, and house mothers, constitute communities within the ballroom subculture. Community “is not the space of the ego-subjects. [...] Community is not a communion that fuses the egos into a big Ego–Superego or a higher We” (Wróbel 2016: 236). Blanchot’s definition of the unavowable community “envision[s] a community that is not organized as a hierarchical system [...] but is rather like a network through which power flows from point to point without concentrating itself at any one site” (Bruns 2014: 283). This type of community would be represented in the House of Evangelista, where Blanca is not elevating herself nor her ego in contrast to Elektra as head of the House of Abundance. Blanca’s community is built as a place through others and for others. The theory of community put together by Jean-Luc Nancy fits quite well in this discussion when by the inoperative community, “Nancy does not mean dysfunctional or failing, but rather a spontaneous or ‘unworked’ inclination to come together” (Buchanan 2018: 247). In addition to this, we could argue that Nancy understands the coming together not being motivated by collective insecurity nor by an individual desire, but by a will for sharing. It is true that in the ballroom community they have a passion for sharing the space, beliefs, and identities. However, it can be argued that they are motivated to come together due to the collective insecurity suffered from the discrimination upon LGBTQ people mentioned before.

Blanca and Elektra both choose not to emulate nuclear family forms as empowered mothers of a house within the ballroom subculture. Some “authentic, trans/lesbian/queer, radical, and gynocentric mothering are other examples of how empowered mothers are inspired to parent in their own female-defined and woman-centered vision of mothering”

(Green 2020: 42) like Blanca and Elektra. Even though they have different conceptions regarding the ruling of the house, both establish themselves as empowered mothers, meaning mothering “in family forms that differ from, and thus counter, normalized patriarchal family structures” (ibid). By building these families on alternative means and characteristics, “empowered mothering weakens the authority that normative patriarchal discourse claims on the meaning and practice of mothering” (ibid).

An essential sequence to understand Blanca’s identity is in Mother’s Day, episode five, where we can see Blanca’s first walk at a ball in 1982, which she does not win. However, she meets Elektra who is known to be a legendary mother, which accounts for the head of a house which has won many trophies at balls (Susman 2000: 118). Furthermore, Elektra tells Blanca the following before accepting her as one of her daughters: “You have something rarer than beauty, though. You have heart and you’re not afraid to lead with it. That quality will get you everything” (Mother’s Day, 05:34–06:04). From that moment onwards, until Blanca decides to form her own house, Elektra becomes Blanca’s mother and Blanca officially starts her journey in the ballroom community alongside and under Elektra’s support as her mother.

Despite their similarities, Elektra and Blanca represent two different ways of being a mother in the ballroom community. On the one hand, Elektra is a diva, a femme fatale whose beauty and sensuality are extraordinary. Her life spins around herself and she treats the members of her house with scorn and as servants rather than as equals. Moreover, her wealth depends on a man, a benefactor, who offers her money and status in exchange for sex. On the other hand, Blanca is a selfless and sacrificed mother who looks after the well-being of her children before her own’s and needs to work to maintain her family’s wellbeing. Blanca, thanks to her work at a nail salon, is self-sufficient and contributes to providing for the members of her house. She gives comfort and affection while she

receives it back. In the House of Abundance, it must be accepted that there is a hierarchical structure in which Elektra is at the top as the matriarch. She expects her children to bow down to her and pay her homage. The negative effects of this kind of mothering can be seen after Elektra's sex reassignment surgery when only Blanca visits her:

This whole room should be filled with laughing girls and balloons and children doing their mother's hair. [...] You're a terrible mother. And that's exactly what you get. [...] You are not kind. You don't care for them, Elektra. You're not walking the walk in our community. You're rich. You're beautiful. You pass. You think that makes you better than us. [...] I'm here because in my life I've had two mothers. [...] You're the only mother I have left. You may be a terrible mother, but that don't mean I can't be the loving daughter I want to be. (Mother's Day, 25:43–27:44)

Here, what Blanca does is remembering Elektra about the true and honest meaning of ballroom culture. Blanca will always be thankful to Elektra for saving her the same way that Damon is to Blanca. She loves Elektra and truly thinks of her as a mother. This sequence demonstrates how Blanca understands motherhood and that her mothering is not only a feminist one, but also that she fulfills the requirements for maternal thinking established by Sara Ruddick in 1989 in terms of commitment to the care and bearing of children by “preserving their lives, nurturing their developmental growth, and teaching them appropriate social norms allowing them to be socially accepted.” (Ruddick in Green 2020: 45). Ruddick states that maternal thinking can be applied to anyone who considers mothering as an essential part of their lives (*ibid*). Moreover, and most importantly for the analysis of this article, Ruddick also constitutes maternal thinking as not being related to biology or gender and emphasizes the commitment to preservative love, nurturance, and training (*ibid*).

Illustrating how Blanca's mothering affects Elektra demonstrates her impact among fellow members of her community and reinforces the identity that has previously been analyzed. After recovering, Elektra tells Blanca the following: "You taught me what a real mother is. I know I haven't always been warm, but I'd like to be now, and, out of respect for you and the House of Evangelista, offer my services. [...] Blanca, you've always been my heart" (Mother of the Year, 32:02–33:23). Elektra associating Blanca with her heart, given what the first positive thing Elektra told Blanca was also related to Blanca not being afraid to lead with her heart, may suggest that motherhood, within the context of the ballroom houses, implies being able to partially heal the psychological wounds of the members of the ballroom community who were rejected by their nuclear/biological families and that had to choose the alternative family structure that ballroom provided.

Another example of Blanca's feminist motherhood can be observed in Damon's attitude and evolution throughout the first season. Blanca, saying she is Damon's "real" mother, gets Damon to submit his application for the New School of Dance in New York City as the first step to follow her house rules. It can be argued that, as it was stated at the beginning of this article, if Damon would not have gone with Blanca, he could have ended up homeless and getting HIV/AIDS. Therefore, Blanca is not only adopting the role of a mother but also of a savior, which puts her in the kind of religious role that was suggested earlier. Her powerful presence can be felt when watching her speak to the Head of Admissions, Helena St. Rogers (Charlayne Woodard), after finding out that Damon, without any self-esteem, has not handed in his paperwork:

Do you know what the greatest pain a person can feel is? The greatest tragedy a life can experience? It is having a truth inside of you, and you not being able to share it. It is having a great beauty, and no one there to see it. This young boy has been

discarded, and he is so young, he believes that it has something to do with who he is. It's like cancer. It is going to eat at him from the inside until he starts to resent even the best parts of himself. (Pilot, 01:07:48–01:08:24)

“I’d be dead if it weren’t for you. Another day in the park, and I would have went with anybody for some food, done anything” (Pilot, 01:14:38–01:14:58) says Damon to Blanca after passing the audition that Blanca got for him. Damon’s achievement supports the ideas explained before of ballroom culture serving as intervention, as a functional familial alternative, and a community of support. Moreover, in another sequence, Blanca’s response to Damon’s previous lack of proper sexual education for a gay boy shows how important it is to also explain and educate on non-heterosexual practices since misinformation within the LGBTQ community could lead to more people having unprotected sex and getting HIV/AIDS amid such crisis. Blanca takes up the parental work that Damon’s biological parents were unwilling, or unable, to provide him. Thus, “the kin labor undertaken in houses and among the larger memberships in the ballroom community sustains the community and adds value to the members’ lives” (Bailey 2011: 368) as illustrated with Blanca’s efforts towards Damon’s education and future.

It is important to acknowledge how *POSE* is groundbreaking for having Helena, Damon’s teacher, a cisheterosexual woman, understand and congratulate Blanca’s mothering: “you [...] have given Damon something that will allow him to soar in this world: self-worth” (Mother of the Year 10:10). Helena is proud of both Damon, as a student, and Blanca, as a mother who knew how to give him exactly what he needed. Here, Helena is not only remarking Damon’s effort to improve his dancing skills and his dedication, but also Blanca’s work and effort as his mother. At the beginning of the story, we see Damon in a passive position, hiding his identity from his nuclear family, and living on the streets. He had no self-worth, determination, or confidence in himself. Blanca’s

view of mothering, as feminist mothering and empowered mothering suggest, constitute her identity as a mother who resembles “a site of empowerment and political activism that has the ability to disrupt and subvert the patriarchal notions of motherhood and ways of mothering” (O’Riley in Green 2020: 39).

3. Conclusions

Blanca, alongside with the rest of trans women in *POSE*, are not depicted following stereotypical trans characters present in other cultural products such as those “dominant filmic images of transgender from 1950s to the end of the 1990s [which] have in the end tended to reinforce stereotypical thinking on the subject” (Phillips in McLaren 2018: 20). In fact, *POSE* has had an impact on the current ballroom culture as Bratton illustrates when saying that “in terms of representation for people like [her], there has never been a moment like this” (Bratton in Bernstein 2018) and further states that “nothing like this has ever happened in the history of American television where [their] demographic can see [themselves] for six months straight as the lead characters on national television” (ibid). The socio-cultural and political impact of *POSE* does not only refer to the reflection of the ballroom culture to its audience but also implies the reenactment of trans racialized women in the fight for LGBTQ rights. The issues and the community in *POSE* account for trans people and their troubles in the sociohistorical context of the 80s, which are not far away from those that they face in the present-day. MJ Rodríguez states that “the show comes at a time where the stakes are high again and our rights are at risk” (Rodríguez in Real 2018) when referring to why *POSE* is a form of activism since it is set in a context where the sociopolitical environment regarding trans people was of

discrimination, hatred, and violence still similar to nowadays situation regarding trans rights and racism.

This article and its analysis are focused on motherhood within the ballroom subculture through its representation in *POSE* and tackles the definition of chosen families and the type of mothering embodied by Blanca Evangelista. Blanca's mothering is not only queer because she is a trans woman, but also feminist and empowered by the counter-discourse that it represents against the patriarchal traditional sense of the nuclear family and the sacrificial mother role inherent to those theories which hold that motherhood is essential in women. Moreover, it has been observed how Blanca's mothering, in contrast with Elektra's, represents the ideal mother for her community. How Blanca understands motherhood and family becomes essential to *POSE* and all the characters in it the same way that real houses from the real ballrooms represent a safe space, a strategy for survival, a system of support, and a place of intervention and education on issues that otherwise would not be available to LGBTQ youth, more specifically, to Black and Latinx members of the LGBTQ community. Empowered mothering and feminist mothering's importance rely, in the case of *POSE*, in denouncing the importance of motherhood and a familiar structure in a community which has been rejected by their biological counterparts and to see the results of this motherhood and the chosen family structure in the lives of the members that constitute the ballroom communities. The weight of a family and the consequences that feminist mothering has on Blanca's identity, and those who surround her, correspond to two essential aspects of the analysis presented. Chosen families in the ballroom community stand for a place where LGBTQ people can gather to share their passion on the ballroom subculture, provide help and support to one another, and, in the end, function as a traditional family. This is the case for the House of Evangelista, which under Blanca's feminist and

empowered mothering, also intervenes and advocates for the fight for LGBTQ rights and the fight against racism in the 80s since Blanca is involved in more than one situation where these civil rights movements are reflected.

If Livingston's documentary constitutes a work that helped to bring ballroom culture closer to academic studies and the public eye, *POSE* is crucial in terms of complex trans representation in mass media by not centering the narrative on the HIV/AIDS condition of some of its principal characters and by not falling into the previous stereotyped representations of trans characters and narratives on screen. This article has explored how ballroom families are configured socially and the alternative connotations that mothering queerly acquire within the ballroom subculture context. Blanca is seen as the ideal house mother since she is a nurturing presence empty of judgement who provides moral and social support to her children and intervenes and teaches on queer life's struggles resulting in a more satisfactory development of her children's identities and life conditions.

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