

THST 380: History of Dance
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Eliza Robertson

Dancing with Knives: Voguing and Black Vernacular Dance
by Eliza Robertson

“Get off the floor. Get off the floor. Learn it and learn it well.”

The dance floor of a crowded club empties, making room for *her*. She stands still, head held high, her dark sunglasses giving off an air of too-good-for-you indifference. She takes a cool step forward, causing her extravagant gold garment to glitter in the dim light: a mermaid-cut gown adorned with massive donut-shaped shoulder pieces and topped with a feathered fascinator. With every step her shoulders jerk back and forth, making her sequins flash. She lifts her black-gloved hands as far as her shoulder donuts will allow and begins to vogue.

So opens *Paris is Burning*, a 1990 documentary about the Harlem drag ball scene of the mid-to-late 1980s. She is Pepper LaBeija, drag daughter of the infamous Crystal LaBeija and the mother of the the drag family that bears her name. The LaBeijas are one of New York City’s biggest drag families. Crystal herself invented the term, which refers to an adopted cohort of drag performers who perform together in the many competitions across the city. These competitions are called drag balls; each features many categories, ranging from “executive realness” (an exaggerated performance of corporate swagger) to “giving face” (as it sounds). One competes in a category by “walking,” which can mean anything from literally walking the stage like a runway to voguing, the angular dance style that now reigns in the ball scene.

“I’ve got more grand prizes than all the rest,” Pepper LaBeija says, referring to the many victories she’s claimed by competing in drag balls. It shows. Her comportment is one of royalty: she seems to reign over a grand kingdom, even from the dark corner of the dingy room where

she is later interviewed. “A ball is a fantasy,” she says, reclining in a worn easy chair and waving her nicotine-stained fingers. “Whatever you want to be, you be.”

Most historians place the origin of drag balls in the gay scene in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s. In *There’s No Place Like Home*, an account of the history of ball culture, writer and activist Frank Leon Roberts claims that the first proto-balls were elaborate pageants orchestrated by the White gay elite. Although run by White men and held in White spaces, these pageants were attended by the greatest minds the Harlem Renaissance had to offer: Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and more.

In his landmark book *Gay New York*, historian George Chauncey describes these events as nights of masquerade, inversion, and celebration of membership in the gay community. They featured extravagant costumes, fiercely competitive beauty pageants, and carnivalesque displays of broken gender norms. As the decades progressed, these pageants evolved directly into the gay balls of the 1970s and 1980s—the same ones attended by Pepper LaBeija and her compatriots in *Paris is Burning*.

That’s the story, anyway. But there may be more to it than that. In the same decades that the White gay elite of New York were putting on extravagant displays of gender-bending glamour, Black people across the country were dancing in ways eerily similar to Pepper LaBeija and her competitors. Those similarities are too striking to ignore.

First, Isolation.

Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker appears more marionette than man. His body bends and buckles like a push puppet: hips thrust to the right, torso collapsing to the left, each muscle and

bone seeming to move independently of the others. His movement is shocking, even unsettling; it's hard not to think that people aren't supposed to move like that.

Decades later, Willi Ninja appears on a dingy dance hall stage in a bright yellow jumpsuit to show them how it's done. His arms fly up, down, up again, to the floor, between his legs, each limb seeming to move completely independently from the others. His knees buckle inward and he drops to the floor. His legs shoot out again and suddenly he's in the splits, arms out, one leg over his head, contorted impossibly. "It's about perfect lines in the body," Ninja says in voiceover, "awkward positions." It's hard to imagine positions more awkward than these.

Ninja's stances are more angular than those of Snake Hips, his movement less like flowing water, but the same broken-boned strangeness haunts both men's dances. Separated by forty years of history, two torsos twist, four knees buckle inwards, two bodies drop to the ground and rise up again. As they dance in parallel across the decades, Snake Hips seems to peer over Ninja's shoulder, dancing ghost-like in the shadows.

Next, camp.

In thinking about drag, the first image that comes to mind for most people is extravagant absurdity. Pepper LaBeija in her glittering gold gown with the massive donut shoulders exemplifies this in the tamer end of the spectrum; Tom Rubnitz's *Pickle Surprise*, released the year before *Paris is Burning* and featuring famed drag queens RuPaul, Lady Bunny, and a man dressed as a giant pickle, is much more bizarre. Camp is part of what LaBeija calls the "fantasy" of the drag ball. We're not in the world as we know it, and the rules we're accustomed to don't apply here—in the strangest, most delightful way possible.

Flash back a few decades. The Nicholas Brothers are at the end of their charming brother-and-brother tap routine *Pie Pie Blackbird*. They've been dancing, inexplicably, in front of a giant pie for the last few minutes. As their choreography reaches its furious conclusion, an explosion erupts across the screen. When it passes, it reveals the absurd image of two Nicholas Brothers-sized skeletons dangling from the ceiling. The skeletons jerk up and down as if continuing to dance. Behind them, in the remains of the exploded pie shell, a skeletal band still plays its jaunty song. It's delightful, strange, and in terrible taste. Camp at its finest.

Finally, competition.

In *Barbershop Blues*, the Four Step Brothers dance cheerfully behind barber's chairs. One falls back, leaping through a steady tap routine. Another jumps in front of him, arms flying even more wildly and feet tapping at double time. A third steps up from the back, feet tapping even faster, upper body steady. Finally, the fourth breaks out an exhausting up-and-down step, jumping back and forth from a squatting position while keeping the rhythm in his feet. Each dance is more elaborate, more exhausting, more impressive than the last. *Barbershop Blues* is a poker game, each dancer's performance seen and raised by the next.

Likewise, the performance in *Paris is Burning* is all about competition. Three men in loudly-patterned suits vogue across the dance floor, each trying to be wilder and more impressive than the others. Pepper LaBeija reaches her position as house mother by winning category after category at balls; her drag mother Crystal LaBeija is now infamous for her furious rant about coming in second at one such contest. Dorian Corey, another drag queen featured in the *Paris is Burning*, likens walking in drag balls to street fighting. If you wanted to show you were better than someone, she explains, you didn't beat them in an alley; you beat them in a ball.

Willi Ninja's commentary on one-upmanship is compelling. "Voguing comes from shade [the art of insult]," he says. "Instead of fighting, you would dance it out on the dance floor, and whoever did the better moves was throwing the best shade... *voguing is the same thing as taking two knives and cutting each other up.*" It's a haunting image.

In this context, the angles of vogue come into sharper, more dangerous relief. Ninja mimes putting makeup on his face, his movements exaggerated in typical vogue style; next he turns to you, sitting in the audience, and mimes dabbing makeup onto yours. Is it sweet, charming, helpful? Maybe. But it might be a sharp jab, too: an insinuation that your face isn't fit to be seen in public, and that Ninja has to fix it himself. Shade. The knife hits home.

Zora Neale Hurston, who herself attended many of the gay pageants of the earlier decades, describes Black dance of the era in her essay *The Characteristics of Negro Expression*. "Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion," she writes. "No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more." Likewise, the competitive one-upmanship of the drag ball is all insinuation. The performer may not take two knives and cut you up, but their dance will suggest it; they'll show you exactly what they mean through movement.

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Black American vernacular dance in the early 20th century parallels the type of movement seen in *Paris is Burning* in ways that are too striking to ignore. Historians such as George Chauncy and Frank Leon Roberts separate Black history and gay history into two distinct

narratives, but that differentiation misses the rich cross-pollination that's visible when history is viewed intersectionally. Nowhere is that clearer than in the case of the vogue. The history of voguing as it's typically told is woefully incomplete; we must look to the dances of Snake Hips, The Four Step Brothers, the Nicholas Brothers, and the like to get the full story.

"Alright, Miss Pepper! Alriiiight!"

The gathered crowd goes wild for Pepper LaBeija. As she vogues across the dance floor in her golden dress, her hands move independently from her wrists with a level of isolated movement that would make Snake Hips proud. She removes one of her massive shoulder donuts with a deliciously campy flair, tossing it aside as if it's no more valuable than an exploded pie. No one dares leap in front of her; she is the undisputed winner of this *Barbershop Blues*-style poker game.

She glances to her left, directly into the camera, and regards it for a moment. It's as if she's sizing you up. Then she turns away, revealing only the hint of a smile before passing out of view.

It's the smile of a woman with both the knives.