Concerning the Series *Pose*

Being gay is hard. Being black and gay is even harder. Being black, gay, and poor is harder still. When people possess all three of these traits, the oppressions and abuses set aside for each are compounded by one another. These oppressions and abuses create the need for a specific language, a common cultural tongue between members of this marginalized community. I will be examining the linguistic character presented in the FX show *Pose*. *Pose* presents the story of black, gay, and poor New Yorkers in the 1980’s and their experience in the ballroom community of Harlem.

To understand the ballroom scene and the way its participants speak, one must first have a firm understanding of privilege. In the 1980’s depictions of wealth were everywhere. Shows like *Dynasty* and magazines like *Vogue* were ubiquitous with opulence and glamour. Naturally, media like this attracted a queer audience. Beyond assumptions of latent femininity, however, this following can be attributed to economics. Visibly gay and trans people could not hope to achieve the levels of fame, success, and financial excess that saturated the media, on account of their queerness in a society that was not ready for them. On top of this, being black, being Dominican, being HIV+, being a sex worker all prevented people belonging to this underclass from ever being able to ascend to the ranks of “the privileged”. This aspiration to be wealthy manifests in the linguistic nuances of the ballroom language. When character’s feel pretty, they feel “expensive”. When they feel powerful, they “own everything”. When they want to talk down to a fellow voguer, they are “opulence” and you are “trailer trash”. The differences between participants is coded into the imaginary monetary divide between “us” and “them”. Designer Michael Kors referred to ballroom and its financial attitude in a 1999 LA Times interview: “These kids didn’t grow up wearing expensive clothes, but they have a sense of what it means” (Kors blah blah blah). The “sense” of what it means to be wealthy is what manifests into the community’s language. The downtrodden characters of *Pose* are infinitely aware of their economic subservience to economic pressure and demonstrate this by linguistically “feeling the fantasy” of economic success.

The performance of gender on *Pose* is another rich point for critique. While one would understandably assume that gender is inconsequential to the language of the ballroom, this is a misunderstanding. Gender is at times, a play thing to be toyed with, as members of the community interchangeably refer to themselves and each other with masculine and feminine pronouns. But when the trans characters are engaging with gender, the binary becomes doubly important. The linguistic affirmation of a gendered identity serves a useful purpose. To be told you are “serving fish” is the upmost compliment. Other phrases heard often are that one is “a real woman”, they possess “realness”, and she is my “Mother”. Sometimes, the gender performance is stripped bare to its wholly anatomical parts. Characters are “serving pussy” or “feeling like cunt”. These marginalized individuals must fall back on gender stereotypes and performativity as a way of validating their gender in the eyes of a culture that relies on such a binary. The only hope to feel culturally, socially, and relationally a woman is to be treated as a woman is treated in America. This is reflected in the language of the ballroom.

Finally, family dynamics are explored and reinforced through the language of *Pose*. In the 1980’s, it was even more common than it is now for families to disown or abuse their gay, trans, or otherwise queer children. They are thrown out of the home, left on the streets to fend for themselves. This shared experience of abandonment among the characters of *Pose* manifests into their linguacultural. All participants in the ball belong to a “house” that they are adopted into when they join the community. This house is presided over by a “mother”, a matriarchal figure who provides motherly support and attention to her “daughters”. Adjacent members of a house refer to one another as their “sisters”. As a consequence of losing their families, the characters of *Pose* forge new familial ties through their linguistic attachment to one another. This is critical to the establishment of a sense of community among people who are so often denied community and denied camaraderie.

The linguistic world of *Pose* is complex and full of nuance. It is not easily understood by those who do not share in the oppressions that breed it. The negative cultural attitude towards one identity is fundamental to the development of such terms and phrases. Members crave to be wealthy, to be respected, to be seen as the gender they identify as, to be loved by their family. In truth, the innermost desires of the characters are linguistically worn on their sleeve. The world of ballroom, vogue, and *Pose* is a ripe place for the study of language and culture as they intersect and correlate to one another.