***Pose,* “Pilot” (2018)**

**Background:** *Pose* is a TV drama focused on the 1980s and 1990s "ballroom" scene in New York City, in which primarily Black and Latinx LGBTQ people, organized in "houses," compete for trophies based on fashion and dance performances. Season 1 takes place in 1987. The show was created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals. It was nominated for a number of awards, including the Emmy for Outstanding Drama Series. Billy Porter won the Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series. At least 140 LGBTQ people have worked as part of the *Pose* cast and crew. Janet Mock, one of the series' writers, was the first openly transgender woman of color to write and direct an episode of television.

**Plot summary:** Episode 1 opens by introducing several figures in the House of Abundance, led by house "Mother," Elektra; this opening scene also highlights the tension between Elektra (Dominique Jackson) and her "daughter," Blanca (MJ Rodriguez). The characters steal antique pieces from a New York City museum in order to use them to compete at a ball that night. They perform well, but they are immediately arrested. The episode then cuts to Allentown, PA, where Damon (Ryan Jamaal Swain) has a confrontation with his father over his passion for dance and his homosexuality. He is kicked out of the house and leaves for New York City. Blanca learns that she is HIV positive, and discusses her diagnosis with Pray Tell (Billy Porter), who encourages her to pursue her dreams. Blanca decides to rent her own apartment and start her own house, and leaves the House of Abundance to start the House of Evangelista. She sees Damon dancing in the park, introduces him to the ballroom scene, and encourages him to join her house, which he does after spending several difficult weeks on the street. Meanwhile, Angel (Indya Moore), is a sex worker who meets Stan (Evan Peters), who works in Trump Tower and has a wife and children in the New Jersey suburbs, but cannot help but start falling for Angel. After a series of personal, professional and ballroom disappointments, Angel also decides to leave the House of Abundance for the House of Evangelista. The newly formed house challenges the House of Abundance and loses, but commits to coming back stronger. Blanca helps Damon pursue his dreams and enroll at a dance school.

**Content warnings:** One plotline of this episode and season involves Angel's experiences a sex worker. One scene focuses on her first meeting with a client, although it contains no nudity or sexual contact. This episode also includes physical abuse by a parent and cocaine use. If you are concerned that the content of this episode will pose challenges for your school or classroom, the documentary *Kiki* (2016) may offer opportunities to discuss these readings and the history of ballroom culture.

**Running time:**1 hr, 1 min

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 2: Bailey, Marlon M. "Performance as Intravention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit." *Souls* vol. 11, no. 3, 2009, pp. 254-271.
  + Day 3: Esteban Muñoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* NYU UP, 2009. (Excerpt provided: Chapter 6, "Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative," pp. 97-115)

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scene:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (10-15 min) Student-led scene close-reading and analysis.
3. (3 min) Teacher-led close-reading and analysis. Re-watch scene of the House of Abundance stealing from the art museum (2:32 to 5:35).
4. (10 min) [This prep time is a bit longer since students may need to review Chapter 1 of Muñoz’s text.] Discussion prep. If time, have students share their responses with a partner before whole class discussion.
   1. How does this scene convey the characters’ desires, identities, and personalities? How does it convey the themes of *Pose?* What formal elements of the scene support that characterization and theme development.

* *Camera angles: The scene uses a low angle camera several times, which often zooms in closer, towards the characters. This is noticeable in the shot when the group approaches the largest space and Elektra says, “jackpot.” As the camera remains steady on Elektra, flanked by her children, the low angle conveys the group’s power over the space and control of their surroundings. This is significant because as night falls and the museum closes, the House of Abundance has mastery over a space that is predominantly white and upper class. They are not expected to be in control here, but they insist upon it.*
* *Editing: In a series of shot-reverse-shots that slowly zoom towards the characters’ faces, Elektra, Blanca and Angel all contemplate one particular object in the museum, an object of desire. While Elektra seems taken by the head of a royal figure, Blanca seems struck by the torso of a muscular male figure, and Angel seems moved by the face of a beautiful woman, even reaching out to touch it before drawing her fingers back to her own face in awe. The connections these characters make to these ancient sculptures highlights their dreams and desires for their futures, whether those involve romance, beauty or power.*
* *Props: When the museum closes, the group is seen stuffing every beautiful crown, cape or dress they can grab into enormous black trash bags. The props of the black trash bags highlight the irony of the characters’ actions; just as they touch ancient sculptures and sit on ancient thrones, they stuff these objects into these bags to steal and use as they see fit. The trash bags represent their rejection of the expectations of white, upper class New York, and their mining of resources to create their own world in which they are the center.*
* *Blocking: The group is routinely seen striding confidently through a space; they are not hesitant about taking control of this museum and taking what they want.* 
  1. Review your notes from last week and last week’s text, Chapter 1 of *Cruising Utopia.* What elements of this scene speak to Muñoz’s ideas?
* *In studying the sculptures of the ancient past as a source of their own personal desires and dreams, the House of Abundance is “looking to the no-longer-conscious…these ephemeral traces, flickering illuminations from other times and places…they assist those of us who wish to follow queerness’s promise” (Muñoz 28). As Muñoz explains, “the then that disrupts the tyranny of the now is both past and future” (29).* *In the now, the members of the House of Abundance battle against discrimination, violence, HIV/AIDS, etc. But they are able to mine the “flickering illuminations” they see in these sculptures as a guide to “queerness’s promise,” the queer futurity that they hope to build through their successful competition in the royalty category at the ball that night, in which they themselves are treated like kings and queens.* 
  + *By hiding in the museum, in custodial closets and under displays until the museum closes, they are perhaps “stepping out of straight time” (25), rejecting the conventions of when and how one is supposed to access a museum that is generally only accessible to the privileged. Instead, they follow queerness’s path: “Queerness is…not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now” (28). By refusing the norms of quietly observing the art during appropriate hours, and instead touching it, sitting on it, hiding under it, and ultimately stuffing it into trash bags and stealing it, they reject the present, since it is “impoverished and toxic for queers” (27).*

1. (25 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. How does this scene convey the characters’ desires, identities, and personalities? How does it convey the themes of *Pose?* What formal elements of the scene support that characterization and theme development.
      1. **Additional questions, if necessary:** Consider the sequence in which Elektra, Blanca and Angel all spend time individually contemplating an object in the museum. What formal techniques are used in this moment? How do those techniques underscore the themes of this scene or this episode?
      2. Consider the moment when the group approaches the main hall and Elektra says, “jackpot.” What formal techniques do you notice in this moment? How do those techniques underscore the themes of this episode?
      3. How do the characters’ movements throughout the museum convey meaning?
      4. How do the props used in this scene, such as the trash bags they carry, convey meaning?
   2. Review your notes from last week and last week’s text, Chapter 1 of *Cruising Utopia.* What elements of this scene speak to Muñoz’s ideas?
      1. Consider the sequence in which Elektra, Blanca and Angel all spend time individually contemplating an object in the museum. How might this contemplation of ancient sculpture relate to Muñoz’s ideas?
      2. Consider the sequence in which the characters hide while the museum closes and turns off the lights, before emerging again to steal these artifacts. How does this relate to Muñoz’s chapter?
   3. **Extension question:** Do you think this sequence is realistic (or as realistic as the rest of this episode?) Why or why not? Later in the episode, Lulu explains that the museum isn’t pressing charges because news of the break-in would be harmful to the museum’s reputation, given that “a bunch of queens” broke in. Do you think that explanation is realistic or fantastical? If realistic, why? If fantastical, why do you think *Pose* would include this storyline?

**Lesson 2: Examining *Pose* Alongside Marlon M. Bailey’s “Performance as Intravention”**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Choose one of the following questions to answer:
   1. Did you enjoy watching *Pose?* Why or why not?
   2. Had you heard of ballroom culture before? In what context? Did anything surprise you about learning about it through this episode of *Pose?*
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (4 min) Re-watch today’s clips (dancing at the piers, 56:00-57:37; Li’l Papi joins the House of Evangelista, 1:04:48-1:06:35).
4. Discussion prep.
   1. Summarize Bailey’s key points, using evidence from the text.

* *Thesis: Bailey explains “three core dimensions of the Ballroom community: the gender and sexual identity system, the kinship structure, and the performances at the ball” (255). He also argues that public health HIV/AIDS discourse ignores “the organic practices and strategies of prevention that emerge from within” the Ballroom community, which he terms “intravention” practices as opposed to “intervention,” which are “practices and processes within at-risk communities themselves.” He advocates for looking at Ballroom communities as “communities of support rather than simply communities of risk” (255).*
* *Social knowledge: Bailey points to the social knowledge within Ballroom; the understandings and strategies within the Ballroom community that help to sustain the individuals and communities within it:: “social knowledge in the Ballroom community views gender and sexuality as fluid and mutable, kinship/family as not necessarily biological, and performance as integral to community affirmation and preservation” (266).*
* *Kinship: Bailey argues that the kinship system is critical to HIV/AIDS prevention as well as other forms of health and safety, since “House mothers and fathers…provide daily parental guidance for Ballroom kids on issues such as intimate/romantic relationships, sex, gender, and sexual identities, health, hormonal therapy, and body presentation” (267). He quotes an interviewee who explains “The structure of the Ballroom community already allows for familial prevention work” (267).*
* *Balls: Bailey illustrates how HIV/AIDS prevention balls make use of pre-existing social norms around competition and trophies to educate the community: “Competitive performance, image and status are used to disseminate and promote messages about HIV risk reduction among Ballroom members” (268). He argues that through HIV/AIDS prevention balls, “members of the Ballroom community were exposed to knowledge about safe sex without individuals being singled out and stigmatized” (270).*
  1. How does *Pose* illustrate Bailey’s claims, in the scenes we just reviewed or other scenes from this episode?
* *Piers scene – communities of support, competition, and kinship networks:* 
  + *This scene opens with an establishing shot that shows many dancers all over the piers, challenging each other and observing the competition among different groups. It ends with a similar shot that showcases the size of the group and the energy within it. While other depictions of this community might focus on sex work, homelessness, drug use, etc. when depicting a space like this one where LGBTQ youth convene, this scene emphasizes the talent and community connection occurring in this space, rather than the suffering. In this way, this shot takes up Bailey’s point that Ballroom is not only “a community of risk,” but a “community of support” (259), and presents a “counterdiscourse” to mainstream narratives about “at-risk” LGBTQ youth.*
  + *The scene on the piers illustrates Bailey’s claim that “there are no balls without houses and there are no houses without balls” and that these structures are “mutually constitutive” (261). As different houses challenge each other, the energy in the dance is collaborative and competitive; the choreography highlights the intimacy of the members of a house while also showing the rivalry between houses.*
  + *As Praytell steps between two warring groups when they begin physically threatening each other, the respect they have for him as an elder in the community is evident.*
  + *The formal elements of this scene emphasize the power dynamics at play. While most of the dancers wear bright red or blue windbreakers, Praytell’s white trenchcoat makes him stand out in contrast to the younger members. When he steps between them to separate the groups, the two warring members closest to him get low to the ground, acknowledging his power over them and his ability to call a truce.*
  + *A reaction shot of Blanca and Damon, as Damon looks surprised and impressed, illustrates Damon learning that Praytell and other older members have the power to intervene in these conflicts.*
  + *After the two houses return to dancing, the camera quickly pans between them, illustrating the significance of their rivalry.* *This moment illustrates Bailey’s point that the competitive nature of Ballroom is a critical element of its functioning.*
* *Kinship networks - Li’l Papi joining the House of Evangelista:*
  + *Blanca tells Li’l Papi, “The House of Evangelista welcomes any lost soul.” At this moment, soft, emotional piano music begins in the score. As Papi runs to get his things, Praytell says, “You want a reason to keep going after tonight? There it go right there. Houses are homes to all the little boys and girls that never had one. And they keep coming every day, just as sure as the sun rises.” This is perhaps a central argument of the series and a significant motivator for Blanca and Praytell’s actions throughout the series. “Pull up, work harder, triumph! If not today, maybe tomorrow.” Praytell urges Blanca. In this moment, he highlights Bailey’s point that balls and houses are mutually constitutive, and that the competitive spirit of ballroom is intertwined with the support networks provided by houses.*
* *Kinship networks in other scenes: Throughout the episode, as Blanca takes Damon and Angel on as her children, she provides them guidance and support, highlighting the significance of the kinship structure as a form of support and “familial prevention work.” Damon tells her that if it wasn’t for her support, he would have “gone with anyone, done anything,” illustrating how essential these networks can be for harm reduction. Blanca sets rules for Damon and Angel, such as pursuing education and being attentive to their health. Blanca tells Angel, “you need to be safe, so leave them white boys alone.” Angel responds, “no.” Blanca does not stigmatize or reject Angel because of her involvement in sex work, but encourages her to limit her risk, which becomes an ongoing element of their relationship.*

1. Whole class discussion.
   1. Summarize Bailey’s key points, using evidence from the text.
      1. **Additional questions, if needed:** Let’s review p. 255. How does Bailey summarize his claim here?
      2. Let’s review p. 266. What does Bailey argue about social knowledge within the Ballroom community?
      3. Let’s review p. 267. What does Bailey argue about kinship networks?
      4. Let’s review p. 268. What does Bailey argue about competition and the balls themselves?
   2. How does *Pose* illustrate Bailey’s claims, in the scenes we just reviewed or other scenes from this episode?
2. Consider the scene at the piers – how do the costumes, framing, blocking, and editing highlight elements within this scene? How do those elements relate to Bailey’s claims?
3. Consider the scene in which Li’l Papi joins the House of Evangelista. How does the score develop this scene? How does the dialogue relate to Bailey’s claims?

**Lesson 3: Examining *Pose* Alongside Jose Esteban Muñoz’ *Cruising Utopia* (Chapter 6)*:***

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast:
2. Compare “San Junipero” to another film we’ve studied in this course. Consider the narrative, characters, mise-en-scene, themes, etc. What similarities or differences do you notice?
3. (5 min) Discuss.
4. (4 min) Re-watch today’s clip (Blanca takes Damon to a ball, 25:46-29:48).
5. (15 min) Study groups. Groups will work on the following questions.
6. What key points does Muñoz make? What terms does he use repeatedly that are important to his claims?
7. How do these key points relate to the final scene of “San Junipero?” Reference specific details from the scene and specific lines from the text in your response.
8. (20 min) Whole group discussion.
   1. Summarize Bailey’s key points, using evidence from the text.
      1. Additional questions, if needed: