

The Value of Dance in Minority Cultures

Vogue and other dance styles



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Vogue- A Contextual Recap

Vogue may have been a single by Madonna, released in 1990, but the track has a large back history worth more than the platinum single.

Vogue was a dance style started by LGBTQ African American and Latino American groups of Harlem in the 1970s, as a way to seek refuge from the poverty, crime and prejudice they faced. It was part of a larger subculture called Ball Culture, or the underground ball scene - this was a subculture started in New York the 1920s, attended mostly by white males and mainly consisted of drag fashion shows. Due to racism and restrictions, black males of the ball culture created their own underground scene, but because of hardships and revolution, the two segregated groups eventually became more inclusive and integrated, leading to a wider range of categories, including vogue.

The subculture featured competitions in which contestants would battle to gain status and recognition, these were said to be an alternative to street fight: arguments were settled through no-contact dancing as opposed to physical fights or crime. These competitions are called 'Balls' and were highly significant for dancers.

Vogue as a dance style was developed from the magazine '**Vogue**'; dancers would imitate the poses of models from covers of magazines or catwalks, displaying their desire to be as glamorous and famous as the cover girls. The whole culture derived from a longing for glamour and fame that, at the time, was extremely difficult for these minority groups to achieve - the ball scene allowed them to live their fantasies which is why the dance was so valuable to this minority culture.

'Balls to us is as close to reality as we're gonna get to all that fame and fortune and stardom and spotlight' (Paris is Burning, 1990)

The scene became a safe space for the youth of marginalised Harlem to be free and expressive in the sense of their personalities and sexualities, away from the mainstream society that constrained their right to be who they wanted to be.



Paris is Burning (1990) Directed by Catherine Hardwicke. [Netflix] Miramax.

Identity

One of the things that dance has created in minority cultures is an identity. Identity in a sense of recognition both of themselves and to others.

A lot of accounts of people in ballroom culture suggest that in the heteronormative environment of the US in the 1970s and 1980, some found it difficult to embrace their sexuality. In *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, J, 1990), the film that documented the ballroom scene of New York in the 80s and 90s, David Xtravaganza told Livingston 'you feel 100% right being gay' in relation to vogue balls. This shows that dance was a way for the community to feel self-assured: seeing people and being with people that likewise didn't conform to heteronormativity and gender normality could dispel any doubts that the way they lived and who they loved was anything less than okay.

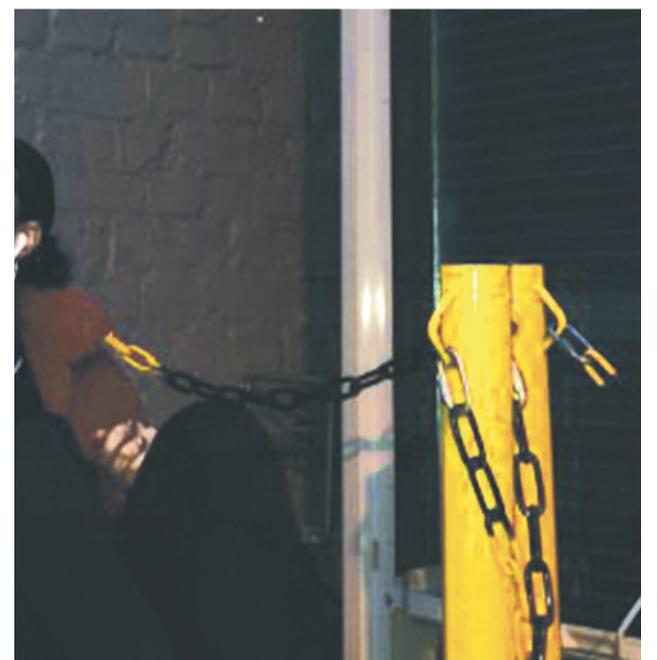
For the youth of South Central Los Angeles, identity came from clowning, now known as Krump. Krump was a dance style created by dancer Tommy Clown in 1992 and was formed as a way to divert energy and aggression away from gang violence and crimes. For them, dance gave identity in the form of a new purpose of life - the black youth of LA were no longer destined to belong to life of crime and rivalry, therefore improving their opportunities to live better, more liberal lives.

The sense of identity also relates to the way dance has created a doorway for these minority cultures into the mainstream American and European society.

In terms of Vogue, a lot of this was through Madonna. She did this through her track '**Vogue**' released in 1990 on the album '**I'm Breathless**'. Madonna discovered vogue in the club '**Sound Factory**' in Chelsea, NY and took dancers from the club for her video and tour. Sources say Madonna liked vogue because of its elegance and vanity and wrote the song in honour of the dance in the underground club scene of the LGBT community. The live performance of '**vogue**' on the 1990 MTV awards was a good representation of the people of Ballroom culture; minority cultures were well portrayed and elements of vogue were used in the performance, which was actually choreographed by Jose Gutierrez and Luis Camacho - two vogue dancers that were established in the vogue scene. Following her blonde ambition tour, the 57 shows in which Madonna and her dancers performed the songs from '**I'm Breathless**' and '**Like a Prayer**', Madonna released a tour video called 'Truth or Dare' which documented the star and her crew's life over the tour. The movie showed the openly gay dancers (5 of the 6 main dancers) in a way that was not often shown to the public, especially in a time of heteronormativity. This movie ended up becoming very influential to the larger LGBT community of the US and Europe.

'Being gay was to be 'the other' and be subversive and perverse and all of a sudden there was this message that you can be gay and happy and successful' (*Strike a Pose*, 2014) - Kevin Stea (one of the dancers) reflecting on the movie's effect in *Strike a Pose*.

Through the song, tour and movie, Madonna created a demand for the dance style and a window into the minority community in the commercial entertainment world; vogue reached Japan and Europe in the 1980s and Malcolm McLaren released the song '**Deep in Vogue**' in 1989, using Willi Ninja as the main dancer in the music video.



This arguably became the beginning of the less hetero- and gender normative environment of our western society today. Vogue can now be found throughout Europe Japan and the US, with European vogue houses, lessons open to anyone and an appearance in most social media forms.

'People in Europe got to know voguing via YouTube; YouTube started in 2005, I returned to Paris in 2006 and by 2007-8 there you were seeing it in European dance competitions.' (Rayner, A, 2017) - Laissandra Ninja.



This was so for dancer and choreographer Benjamin Milan, who discovered the ballroom scene and voguing via youtube in 2009, when the european vogue scene was much smaller. Milan then moved to New York for a year to learn the style from **'the masters of the art form'**.

'I find great value in voguing as it helped me to connect with myself, my sexual identity and to know that it was ok to be different'(Milan, B, 2018)

The style has clearly found a place within commercial dance and entertainment, and so has the minority community along with it, which is not forgotten even now in the 21st century. The identity created is now a way for other people in similar situations and communities to feel the same self-acceptance and confidence, whether directly from ballroom culture and the vogue, or through musicals like **'Everybody's Talking About Jamie'** and movies like **'Saturday Church'**.

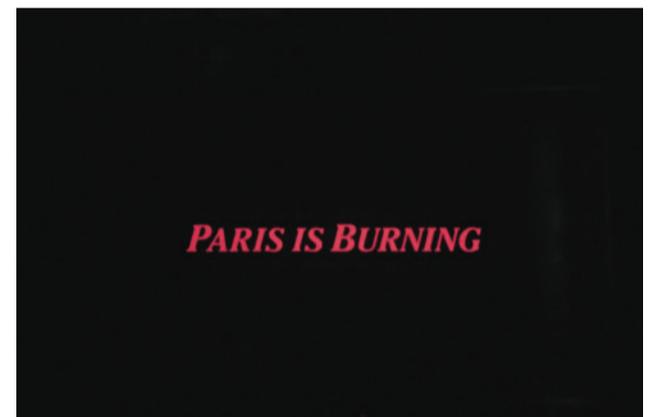
There is some debate however around the use of vogue in the commercial world: British choreographer and founder of House of Suarez, Darren Suarez told me about the annoyance of the 'hierarchy' of voguers as commercial dancers are taking the voguing jobs after just a few masterclasses.

'Most dancers want to learn it because it's very current at the moment. There is no time to envelope yourself in it, to go and become enriched in it' (Suarez, D, 2018)



Suarez spoke of the way vogue has evolved but has also become disjointed over time, due to its popularity; its up rise has encouraged the community to grow but has also meant the dance style has been exploited for commercialised dancers and choreographers to gain 'originality' without the correct knowledge of the style's background.

There is some vexation at the exploitation of the style by mainstream dancers for their own commercial ventures. Vogue's exposure to the public has allowed it to develop and evolve in a way that the culture it represents, becomes more interlaced with the mainstream western society and pop culture. Masterclasses and professional voguers often define the dance style's past and background, as a way to inform dancers and to pay tribute to the minority culture the dance style came from.



Strike a Pose (2014) Directed by Ester Gould and Reijer Zwaan. [Netflix] CTM Docs.Greetham, D (2018) Email Interview with Benjamin Milan.Greetham, D (2018) Phone Interview with Darren Suarez

Community

There is evidence that dance can be used to create and build community. This has been the case with many minority cultures in places like Northern England in the 60s (Northern Soul) and LA in the 90s and early 2000s (Krump).

Historically, social dances have been a way to create community, continuing throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The category relates to sociability and socialising, as well as forming a place for people to meet and connect.

With vogue, these dancers of Harlem were not only LGBTQ in a heteronormative America, they were also victims of social exclusion and marginalisation. In the same way that this group had created an identity, they also created a community for themselves in which they could have support and protection.

The (somewhat) schools that dancers represented and trained with were called houses and the leaders were called mothers and fathers. This metaphor in the context of the struggle these people faced was not a coincidence: for a lot of them, their actual parents had rejected them because of their way of living, and so the men and women who took on caring roles as leaders of their houses, were a way of filling the void. In **Paris is Burning** (1990), Pepper LaBeija explains the extent of rejection these 'children' experienced:

'A lot of these kids that are in the balls, they don't have two of nothing, some of them don't even eat' (1990)

Many dancers involved in ball culture earned money from escorting and stealing in order to pay for outfits and food, as some admitted in Livingston's documentary. But still homeless and penniless, these groups provided support and companionship as well as protection from racism and homophobia that was common in New York in the 70s and 80s.

Like krump, the dance style and competitions also acted as an alternative to violence; instead of fighting on the streets, members of houses could battle through 'throwing shade' in which dancers would battle in a category with no contact allowed, in order to settle arguments. In *Paris is Burning*, the houses were described as 'gay street gangs' and there are similarities between vogue balls and houses and typical gang culture that convey this point; poverty, violence and broken homes are three factors that lead to gang culture and crime and by solving these issues in a format that also protects their way of life and creativity, a better outcome is created.

Krump was a style specifically adapted to create community and diversions from poverty and violence. Dancers Tight Eyez and Miss Prissy softened the dance style of clowning which mirrored fighting and anger to make krumping. The founders themselves admitted that without krump, they would have most likely fallen victim to the violence and crime of the marginalised area of LA. Krump also has links to Christianity - some of the style resembles religious ritual dances originating in the west indies and many krump dance crews were led by reverends and members of churches. In terms of this dance style, its main purpose was to create and develop the community of the area and did so successfully, proving how valuable dance can be in solving political and social issues among groups of people. The style has progressed into a worldwide phenomenon, becoming quite a stylish dance style in the UK and the rest of the US, while also being used as it was in LA as an alternative to violence.

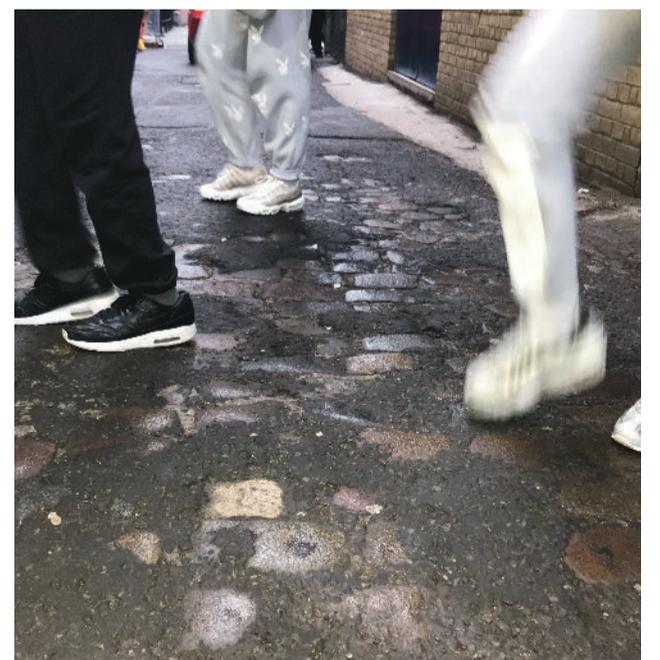
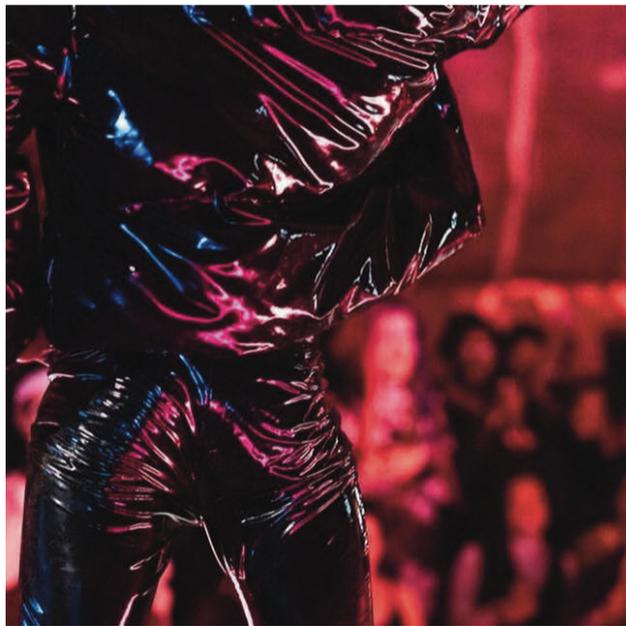
As these dance styles have become more known and common, they still act as a source of community for dancers - communities with the same values, as well as more creative values too.

Benjamin Milan told me '**Vogue helped me find a community of like minded people where I felt creatively challenged and inspired**' (2018)

Now, people still use the community of balls and houses as a way to artistically express themselves, to belong to a like minded group and to get away from the constraints of society that have not yet cleared all together. But they also use these competitions and houses as a source of inspiration and creative development, many dancers and choreographers like Milan then interpret the style and present it in their works, therefore spreading the dance styles further and developing them.



BALL



Issues: Marginalisation and prejudice

New York in the 70s and 80s was hardly a place of orthodox views, but even with the growing immigration and the slow transition into a less segregated environment, the wider latino and african american groups of New York were marginalised. The western society still prized '**Straightness, whiteness and wealth**' (Maciejowska, K, 2017) and thus immigrant and working-class communities suffered, struggling to thrive and develop in terms of education, occupation and money.

The LGBTQ community was also struggling around this time. Although the American pop culture started to become less hetero-fascist, the nation was still not completely open to homo- and transexuality especially with a largely religious population, hence there was a lot of prejudice and lack of respect for people of the LGBTQ community. Family difficulties were also an issue when it came to the LGBTQ community, some families frowned upon these lifestyles and sexualities, thus people of the community found no support or respect from their families.

For LGBTQ+ people of minority cultures, vogue became a source of respectability and love; dancers could be respected and admired by the audience of the ball scene in a way they couldn't in the outside world of America's greater nation. In the modern ball scene of the 70s and 80s there was more integration of races and most were of a minority culture, thus racism was very rare and frowned upon. Vogue induced a community of positivity and belonging, which did not conform to any racism, hetero-facism, prejudice or poverty.

Matiejowska, K (2017) 'A short history of voguing- an art, a sport, a way of life', The Spectator, 15 July [online] Available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/07/how-voguing-came-back-in-vogue/> (accessed 8th of November)





HIV/AIDS' correlation with the Voguecommunity

Among the issues that most minority cultures faced, The LGBTQ community involved in vogue also faced another major threat - this one however was less opinionated.

Homosexual sexual activity (male-to-male sex) was the outstanding mode of AIDS cases between 1981 and 2000, with a peak of over 10,000 cases in 1993 (U.S.A, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001)

The epidemic of HIV and AIDS in the US first began in the early 1980s, predominantly in homosexual men, first reported in LA and New York. This epidemic grew rapidly in the decade causing the deaths of many LGBTQ people in the public eye including Rock Hudson and Liberace, as well many vogue dancers.

This took a toll on the vogue scene, especially having a demographic that was characteristically LGBTQ. But in this way vogue became a coping mechanism as it had for other issues that were common in this particular scene.

Similarly, Madonna stood out once again as an evident fighter for people with AIDS and as a campaigner against AIDS. While in New Jersey, on her Blond Ambition tour, Madonna spoke about AIDS and the LGBTQ community, as well as mentioning her friend Keith Haring, who died of HIV IN 1990.

'AIDS does not know if we are Gay or Straight' she told the audience in footage shown in Strike a Pose (2014), as she stood alongside her dancers, 3 of which eventually contracted HIV. Madonna also showed a clear message favouring the use of protection in the difficult time for America's sexual health, especially appealing to her audience demographic of young adults of all races and sexualities.

As vogue became a mechanism for support, the dance was also used to campaign and fundraise for AIDS care and preventative education. In 1989, a ball was organised to fundraise for research and support. The Love Ball was the first large fundraiser for the cause, and in the year that the number of people with HIV reached over 750,000, the campaign raised \$400,000 (W, Hochswender, 1989). The event was also covered by the New York Times, proving New York's awareness of both the issue and the dance style at the time.

Hochswender, W (1989) Vogueing Against AIDS: a Quest for 'Overness', The New York Times Archives, Accessed: 14 January 19 [online] available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/12/nyregion/vogueing-against-aids-a-quest-for-overness.html>

U.S.A, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2001) HIV and AIDS --- United States, 1981-2000, accessed: 26 January 19 [online] available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm>



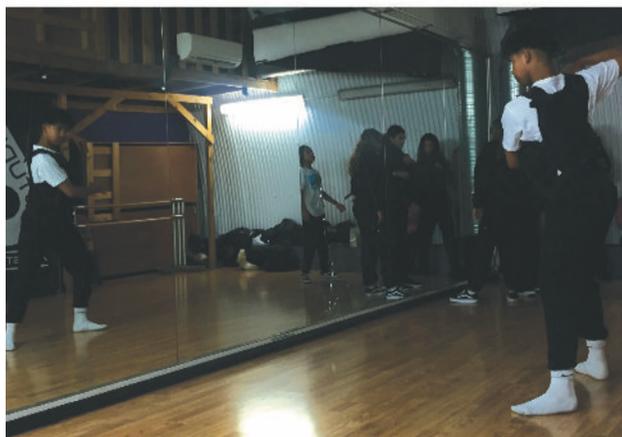
Darren Suarez, founder of House of Suarez

An Interview With Darren Suarez

Darren Suarez trained in classical and contemporary dance and has worked commercially for clients including Adidas and Stella Sports. He has experience of teaching the cast of Billy Elliot, Matthew Bourne's New Adventures and on 'Dance Mums' for UK television. He is currently teaching and lecturing on contemporary and jazz on the BA (Hons.) dance course at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA).

Darren Suarez formed the award-winning House of Suarez in 2006 and he produces an annual Vogue ball, as well as being credited with creating '**Vogueography**', a style of Vogue which incorporates other different dance styles into the art form. '**Liverpool is Burning**', was a vogue ball developed for Liverpool's European Capital of Culture year in 2008. The Ball has since grown to be one of the largest in Europe. House of Suarez has gone on to run other events and festivals in Liverpool and Manchester many through Arts Council funding.

In 2014 Darren Suarez, was given the title 'Legendary'. This is an official title given by the international vogue dance community for '**exceptional talent in and promotion of the art form**'. At the Museum of Liverpool the House of Suarez Vogue Ball trophy, the logo and original '**Liverpool is Burning**' flyer are on display in the Tales from the city an exhibition. Running until the 31 March, it uses objects to help reflect on how the lives and experiences of Liverpool's LGBT + community have changed from 1967 to 2017.



How Did You Discover Vogue?

I discovered vogue in 1988 through the gay scene in Liverpool through the gay clubs. I came out on the gay scene in 1988, vogue came to Liverpool in 1987 from London.

What Is its Value to You?

50% of my identity is known through my voguing, so I would say it's a pretty big chunk of my life has been dedicated to the development of it, through choreographic process or through a lifestyle (or whatever you want to call it). It's actually infused a lot of what I want to do as far as my legacy is concerned.

Have You Seen it Change Since you First Knew it?

I think it took a while to develop I think the house of Suarez was one of the first revolutionary companies that started to try and fuse it with classical works like contemporary and ballet back in 2006. I think that was one of the first evolutionary steps for that style to develop and then over the past 5 years we've seen it grow quite rapidly especially around Europe and the UK lastly getting on to it (the trend) and on the femme styles, which is very current commercially. I think in the UK there's not very many people who have taken it on as a way of life because of people's lifestyles being so vast.

On top of that, how vogue is classed as a dance style, most dancers want to learn it because it is very current at the moment it's a very popular culture. There is no time (sort of) to involve yourself in it, to go and become enriched in it.

There is a debate that the hierarchy of the voguers are getting p*ssed off that these dancers are coming in and taking the voguing jobs but they're just going in to do a few masterclasses and just learning the skills. I think that where the evolution has happened it's very disjointed because it's very popular (you know), you've got your icons coming back out, you've got your legendary houses making statements about stuff now, you've also got your mainstream dancers that are learning the style for their own commercial ventures.





Conclusion

Using the LGBTQ community of 1980s Harlem as an example, Dance has become a vessel for culture, community and social escape. Dancing has aided the rise and creation of music genres, fashion and overall culture many times and allows marginalised people to be accepted where they are a minority.

Dance has been used as a support system, providing a sense of belonging and a distraction from social injustice and crisis. It has also supported participants of subculture, by giving a voice and sense of place in society, as mainstream culture slowly embraces their art.

The globalisation of such styles influences commercial art and dance thus intertwining subcultures into the commercial western art scene. Some may believe that the influence of the art of minority cultures on mainstream western society is stealing, as sometimes the art is used, repeated and globalised and the subculture or minority culture is forgotten and those who participated in or created the genre reap little financial gain.

Subculture is however, always evolving and the communities and support mechanisms created for the fringes of society can still find the same values through dance, club culture and developing improvement and regeneration schemes. Dance remains an alternative means of escapism and a way to cope with hardships, as opposed to more harmful, less developing distractions such as crime and drug abuse.

In summary, dance holds value and opportunity for minority cultures that other means of support do not through a sense of identity and community.



Images photographed from Paris is Burning