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Never Knew Love Like this Before: Signifyin(g) the Invisibility of Black Death in the 1980s Ballroom Culture

Giuseppe Polise
University of Naples "L'Orientale"
giuseppe.polise91@gmail.com

Ryan Murphy's TV series *Pose* takes the 1980s ballroom culture of NYC centerstage and shows how it turns the obsession of those years for style and fashion into a culture of excess and extravaganza to love and live by. Ideas of beauty and realness are re-worked and exploded, only to become as elusive as the subjects to which they are applied. In the tension between the fear generated by the AIDS epidemic, and a sheer lust for life, the ballroom provides mild consolation and only temporary solace. Assimilating and replicating, in its own terms, the consumeristic logic and the competitive antagonism that regulate the mainstream, the ballroom ultimately borrows from that ugly outside the same discriminatory principles used to annihilate the always unworthy black body.

Focusing on the narrative structure that exasperates the tragic register to a point of absurd comedy in "Never Knew Love Like This Before" (S2E4), this article looks into transwoman Candy's death and funeral as a way to question the naïve idea of the ballroom as a safe space for the black queer subject. In so doing, it posits that the phantoms of – both physical and social – death and racial/sexual prejudice, that seemingly provide just the historical contours to the show, instead fully permeate the ballroom culture and locate the sense of permanent loss inside the very place that was supposed to be a haven. Candy's death indeed proves that, despite the alleged existence of a safety net for "those of her kind", the terms of its inclusion had severe limits, the most relevant being the replication of white capitalistic and misogynoirist paradigms of evaluation exasperated by – and hidden behind – the glitters and flamboyance of black queer irreverence. No matter how hard she tries, in fact, Candy is never deemed worthy *to be seen* by her peers, and it is this denied recognition that will bring her to death.

Giuseppe Polise is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Literary, Linguistic and Comparative Studies of the University of Naples "L'Orientale." His research focuses on the intersections between black diasporic spiritual practices and the female conjuring tradition in the US. As a recipient of the 2019 Fulbright scholarship, Polise spent a semester at the College of Charleston (SC) where he studied the presence of such figure in both traditional and contemporary forms of popular culture. He has presented at both national and international conferences and has authored the article "Black Women Matter: the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, Black Female Singers, and Intersectional Feminism" (*Iperstoria* 9, Spring 2017).

The Ballroom Scene: Between the Affirmation of Black Life and the Inevitability of Death

Lean, work…*Pose.* A world made of dreams, glory, and frivolity, the 1980s ballroom culture portrayed in Ryan Murphy's internationally acclaimed TV series is often read as the representation of a sanctuary where the black LGBT community of those years could seek shelter from the ugliness of the outside. But is it?

There is a proximity to death that surrounds blackness, one that seems to be so pervasive in the history of black American experience that it has come to be understood as ontological. In 1982, Orlando Patterson echoes this proximity in his theorization of social death (Patterson 1982, 38-39). In the context of slavery, Patterson explains how the condition of slaveness[1] drags the black subject to a status of inhumanity, and that as a result of being *thingified* not only were black people unable to ever experience fulfillment, their life was entirely elaborated through and saturated by violence. As such, individuals were constructed as a priori socially dead. Afro-Pessimism expands this notion of slaveness beyond the geographical and temporal borders of the antebellum South, establishing how, in fact, the entire experience of being black in the Americas has been – and still is – affected by patterns of continuous dehumanization. Although formally freed, the black individual is kept chained to comparable structures of physical and psychological violence that characterized slavery. The numerous cases of lynching of the past century and, more recently, of police brutality and the capitalist machine that Michelle Alexander named *prison industrial complex*, all foster the idea that blackness only exists suspended in between the strenuous struggle to survive and the inevitable looming of death (2010). To this extreme, social death operates within the framework of an Afro-Pessimist agenda that distrusts any naïve affirmation of black life and exposes the black subject's coercion to exist in US society only in a death-bound position – that "aporetic zone occupied by bare life, a zone between the status of 'flesh' and that of 'meat', neither quite alive, nor quite dead." Because black life cannot be "social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society" (Sexton 2011, 28), the radical approach of Afro-Pessimist thinkers seriously questions ideas of black futurity. Hinging on the hopes of possibility and agency has very little to no place in a context where social stigma, suffering and death have become integral to the characterization of black existence throughout the African diaspora. In the words of Jared Sexton, blackness is indeed "haunted by this sense of grammar and ghosts, of a structure and a memory of its (still) coming into being through and as violence" (ibid. 32).

For the purpose of this article, I am specifically interested in how the seemingly totalizing effects of Afro-Pessimism are complicated by what seems a very legitimate doubt. As Sexton phrases it: "Does this haunting imply, much less ensure, that there is not and can be no movement of escape […]? Does Afro-Pessimism fail to hear the resonance of Black optimism?" (ibid. 33). Afro-Pessimism provides a theoretical framework that reveals the extent to which black flesh is historically signified as the disposable product of overlapping narratives of white colonial and supremacist agendas. In doing so, it fundamentally shares with queer theory the understanding of the present as suffocating, and, to an extent, the tendency to read the – accordingly

[1] That is, the condition of being a slave. For the occurrence of the word, see Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 68; 99; 183.

black and queer – individual as voided of relationality and sociability.[2] While such an approach boosts critical thinking on how to conceive forms of relationality that do not "take place within the terms of a humanity" from which certain categories are excluded, it has also produced "romance[s] of singularity and negativity" (Munoz 2009, 10) that lack political vision, while obsessing over the dearth of adequate representation in the present. Nonetheless, studies like Munoz's *Cruising Utopias* (2009) do envision possibility for the queer subject of color by locating queerness in a future that is constructed by the hopes of emerging collectives. In particular, he insists on the concept of hope as a hermeneutic, as a critical lens that highlights the capacity of quotidian acts and aesthetics to "signify a lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality" (6) for queer people of color. According to Munoz, "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present," and the realm of the aesthetics, "especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains the blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" (1). From this point of view, instances of black joy, communal celebration, and restructured sociality that Afro-Pessimism would most likely dismiss as a temporary escape from an oppressing reality do represent the undeniable efforts of a culture to preserve, restore, and recreate itself in the face of systemic and systematic oppression. Here, pleasure does not simply come as a result of blind hedonistic efforts; it is a strive towards utopia that, even in the moments of utmost corporeal plentitude, reveals all the melancholia for its present unachievability.

It is in this tension between an envisageable futurity – its implicit strive for life – and the simultaneous perception of the black subject in a death-bound position that this article reads the ballroom culture of the 1980s as an enclosed space of modernity where the racially-motivated grievances of the present are framed within the counter-hegemonic praxis of historical mourning that Sara Clarke Kaplan defines *diasporic melancholia* (2007).[3] As the episodes go by, the fictional world of the TV show *Pose*

[2] In fact, the Afro-Pessimist approach to the human as death bound and antisocial queer theories do not exactly overlap. As Elizabeth Freeman (2019) explains, "black antisociability and antirelationality is not quite the same political option as white queer antisociability or antirelationality, even if Afropessimism thoroughly vexes the question of relationality: as Wilderston (2010, 18) puts it, 'African, or more precisely Blackness, refers to an individual who is always already void of relationality'[…]. Note that he does not say that blackness means being 'devoid', but 'void' as in 'voided', or canceled by whites form the Middle Passage onward, and as in 'originally bereft', or as unintelligible in humanist terms – rather than, as with queer relationality, intelligible as the pathological inverse of normative sociality. Queers are, it might be said, not entirely void of relationality insofar as even the most damning rhetoric about queerness understands it as a relation to other people, as desire for the same sex must be by definition" (65).

[3] Freud defines melancholia as a failure of mourning that originates in a loss that cannot be fully known or claimed. Revisions of the concept in relation to the process of racial formation in the US have led to theorize the impossibility of closure for major acts of black unfreedom (Middle Passage and Slavery) as a collective counterhegemonic praxis that takes place in the act of remembering the past through the ritual performances of Afro-diasporic religious traditions. In fact, because the inhumanity of slavery is constantly reverberated in "the concomitant processes of racialization initiated through and integral to the production of and persistence of continuing structures of black unfreedom" (Clarke Kaplan 2007, 515) not letting go of the past is understood as a "refusal to declare slavery and continuing systems of black unfreedom over and done, or to perceive them as anything less than a constitutive element of modernity and post-modernity" (515). In this sense, the process of mourning the past that Afro-diasporic rituals performances enact has to be understood in its twofold articulation of reiterated, continual, and always renewed grievances on one side, and in the desire for sentient recognition that accessing spiritual and folkloric traditions provides on the other.

(2018) portrays the ballroom as the physical and social space that turns the obsession of those years for style and fashion into a culture of excess and extravaganza. There, I argue, history has relocated the cathartic mourning for perpetual black loss that Kaplan sustains is embedded in Afro-diasporic rituality.[4] As such, the performances that take place within the contours of the ballroom do not (re)define just the subject's gender and sexuality, but they simultaneously articulate the joy and livelihood inherent in the ball as the terms through which the black individual may react to the production and persistence of continuing structures of discrimination and pain. This involves both the many forms of mistreatment in place for trans people of color and the tragic impact that the AIDS epidemic has had specifically in their life.[5]

With its emphasis on dreams, personal triumph, and frivolousness, the ballroom is usually conceived as a sanctuary, a space where the LGBT community of color of those years could pursue affiliation, status, and find shelter from the marginalization of the outside. Through the contemporary retelling of TV show *Pose*, however, my analysis of the ball sways from unproblematic descriptions of such places as safe havens for the community, and looks instead at how their cultural porosity is reflective of a harsh system of hierarchizing that exposes the absorption of white hegemonic aesthetics and ethics even in those societal structures that are born as a defection to the norm. While acknowledging the potential in terms of life affirmation and sociality for the black queer subject that the event evokes, I insist on the representation that *Pose* gives of the ballroom scene as a place where the anxieties of abuse and death are ever present, both in interracial and intra-racial terms, but also continually dispersed by culturally specific manifestations of black life and communality.

Already disproportionately affected by the AIDS epidemic, queer black and Latinx working class simultaneously experienced forms of social death in their daily marginalization and physical/verbal abuse at the hands of mainstream society. In the emotional suspension that occurred in the individual of color who was both in a state of perpetual fear for one's life and fully cognizant to represent an expendable loss for the community, the ballrooms surely provided a space where its members were not just meant to survive but could fully exist and, in that existence, react to a history of exploitation and erasure. Indeed, there is in the ballroom community a power that draws "from existing traditions of performance in the African diaspora to reconstitute"

[4] Here, I borrow from the notion of "transformation and displacement" that Joseph Roach (1996) uses to describe how certain circum-Atlantic performances are involved in a process of continuous *surrogation*, because of which they never cease to exist, but in fact are reiterated, albeit altered, through time and space (2-7; 25-31).

[5] Barbara Browning (1998) reports the ferocity of this impact both in terms of actual figures and in the further humiliation of the black individual at the hands of society. As for the statistics of HIV infection and AIDS cases in the US, the scholar writes that "currently in the United States, more than 50% of reported AIDS cases are among blacks and hispanics. Among women it is 75%. Here in New York City, 67% of men, 87% of women and 92% of children diagnosed through March, 1997 are or were black or Hispanic. Fifty thousand and thirty-one black or Hispanic men, 17,327 Hispanic or black women, 1,634 black or Hispanic children – in this city alone. These are AIDS cases, not numbers of HIV positives. These numbers are much much higher and by all estimates even more racially disproportioned. Whatever one's position on the reliability of these numbers, it is difficult not to acknowledge two things: too many people are dying; many too many people are dying in the diaspora" (28-29). With regards to the cultural impact of AIDS on people of African descent, Browning explains that HIV emerged as a pathogen that furthered the depiction of black people as virulent and dangerous. With time, the scholar argues, this fostered "an epidemiological AIDS narrative of a vulnerable U.S. penetrated by infectious foreign populations (Haitian, African, or both)" (29).

(Bailey 2013, 145) the self, to create it and recreate it in the face of external annihilation, that gives life to an alternative sphere of social possibilities.[6]

While the existence of this world temporarily puts on hold the fear of death – whether it comes in the form of the looming epidemic or direct white-on-transblack violence – it is my contention that by assimilating and replicating, on its own terms, the same consumeristic logic and the same competitive antagonism that has been regulating the mainstream, the ballroom ultimately borrows from the outside the same discriminatory grammar used in wider culture to make the black body always unworthy. From within the black community itself, certain black bodies have been historically targeted as most offensive to blackness in the terms through which "blackness is understood under the veil of respectable whiteness" (Brown Douglas 2012, 170). As a consequence, the idea of the black body as inherently monstrous and inhuman is only displaced by many other monstrous bodies whose rejection occurs due to their failure to comply with heterosexist cultural norms. In the name of black respectability, black queer bodies have become the scapegoat those norms marginalize, and it is black trans womanhood that is most vexed even within the allegedly safe space of the ballrooms. While they walk through the daily abuses knowing that society only sees them as a monstrous fetish, in the ludicrous display of the ball categories, the contours of black trans women are routinely scrutinized, and the possibility to move from a state of Fanonian *to-be-lookedness* to a state of *to-be-seenness* is always depending on how well they perform femininity and "realness."[7]

By focusing on significant moments of the series and especially on the "Never Knew Love Like This Before" episode (S2E4) in which the narrative structure exasperates the tragic register to a point of absurd comedy, the goal is to look into transwoman Candy's death and funeral service as a deeply revelatory moment on different levels. While the transwoman's death is not caused by AIDS, like for the several numbers of friends and connections the protagonists lose over the course of the two seasons, rejection and abjection also characterize her experience in the ball for failing to adhere to certain aesthetic standards. It will be shown later in this article how her murder in a motel room is the direct consequence of intra-community marginalization and excess of culturally specific forms of abuse that will both strongly influence her choices and undermine notions of care and affect upon which the ballroom was built, to the point that only her close friend Lulu knows she worked as a prostitute and no one was ever aware that she had been HIV positive. Not only does this substantiate the skepticism about the idea of the ballroom as a safe space for black queer people, it also makes explicit how the phantoms of – both physical and social – death and racial/sexual prejudice fully permeate the ballroom culture. In doing so, Candy's murder and funerary ritual locate the ball into a state of perpetual in-betweenness, swinging from the Afro-Pessimist sense of loss and continuous proximity to death to a sheer lust for life. Candy's homicide indeed proves that, despite the alleged existence of a safety net for "those of her kind", the terms of its inclusion have limits, the most relevant being the replication of white misogynoirist paradigms

[6] Marlon Bailey (2013) and Barbara Browning (1998, 159-72) make specific reference to the parallel between the sacred and secret performances surrounding the moments of divine possession within Afro-diasporic religious cults and organizing/structuring of the ball and the houses.

[7] For adequate reference on the notion of realness, please check the paragraph "Candy's Articulation of *To-Be*-Seeness" of the present article, which heavily draws on Marlon Bailey's understanding of the matter (2013).

of evaluation exasperated by – and hidden behind – the glitters and flamboyance of black queer verbal and performative irreverence.[8] In the modes and terms through which the show makes Candy's body simultaneously invisible and hypervisible in the episode, one witnesses to a complete dispossession of her agency as a black trans woman and to a very limited acknowledgement of her presence in life. Despite the loudness and wit that still epitomize the character in death and make the tragic event more bearable, the dramatics of her ghostly manifestation ultimately point in the direction of great failure: Candy morphs in fact into the embodiment of other characters' guilt and, later, self-absolution. At a point when external events force everybody to see Candy's body, questions arise as to whether achieving *to-be-seenness* is possible for trans women of color, and the high stakes involved in the process.

In the already gloomy scenario of AIDS-induced anxieties with which the show provocatively stains the image of the glamorous Manhattan, Candy stands as the ultimate metaphor for a compromised black existence. Focusing on her specific struggles as a working-class black transwoman whom society fails to properly see, *Pose* reveals the pervasive workings of mainstream ideology in normalizing a habit of conceiving the black body as always in need of – physical and moral – sanitation.

Candy's Articulations of *To-Be-Seenness*: Counteracting the Ferocity of the African-American Signifyin(g) in the Ballroom

An underground subculture, ballrooms grow out of the urgency of mostly working-class Black and Latinx queer people to inhabit spaces where they can express their non-normative subjectivities in terms of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Non-biological kinship structures form and organize themselves around weekly scheduled ball events, where the "mothers" of each family unit known as "houses" present their protégés so that they strenuously compete "in categories based on the deployment of performative and gender identities, vogue and theatrical performances and the effective presentation of fashion and physical attributes" (Bailey 2013, 5). As such, ballrooms are regarded as sanctuaries that provide certain marginalized social categories with the necessary validation to compensate for and navigate the "homophobic and transphobic violence and abuse, homelessness and hunger, insufficient education, under- and unemployment and general sociocultural dispossession" (Bailey 2013, 7).

Pose introduces the viewer to the joyfulness, excess and extravagance that define the life of ballrooms and of those who participate in them. Set at a time when disco music was gradually falling out of fashion and dance was becoming all the rage, *Pose* tells the stories of several black transwomen as they defined and were defined by ballroom culture of those years. As is expected from such historical moment, immortalized in the show is a fixation with the self, the adorned self, the ostensibly adorned self that emanates from this culture and that reflects a sheer desire for visibility. While, on the one hand, this obsession certainly is the mark of a broader cultural shift in the 1980s where even the body was perceived as a marketable commodity in fashion, in the beauty industry, as well as in music, it simultaneously

[8] Misogynoirist is the adjectivization of the word *misogynoir*. Coined by queer black feminist Moya Bailey in 2010, the latter indicates a type of misogyny specifically directed against black women, where race and gender both play a decisive role in the bias. For a commentary on the issue of authorial erasure despite the growing appreciation and deployment of the concept, see Bailey & Trudy 2018, 762-768.

takes on a different meaning within a community whose members have literally been turned into commodity at the advantage of whites. In the face of loss of one's self, both embracing visual excess and wanting visibility become conscious acts of decision-making that invalidate the mechanism of *thingification* of the black flesh that, as Hortense Spillers famously explained in "Mama's Baby" (1987, 67), invested the black captive body since the Middle Passage. As opposed to the Fanonian moment of to-be-looked-at-ness, I see this condition of *to-be-seenness* as the struggle in the affirmation of black life that comes through the active decision/desire of the individual not to surrender to external definitions nor let anyone or anything else dictate their own reality.

In this sense, the juxtaposition of the joyfulness and extravagance of the ball event with the anxieties, the rage, and the despair of working-class queer people of color produce a perception of ballroom culture as a safe space for the LGBT community away from the homo-transphobia and mysoginoir of larger society. As the protagonists differently respond to those crises, one observes how stories such as Pray Tell's positivity to the HIV virus, Angel's sexual compromises on her way to becoming a model, Blanca's exclusion from her mother's funeral and discrimination on the workplace, and Candy's homicide, all create a unifying narrative of victimization that sheds light on the show's interest in delving into the traumatic realities of queer people of color.

At the same time, however, *Pose* depicts cases of intra-community antagonism and competitiveness – which constitute the very backbone of ballroom culture – in a way that one cannot but notice how verbal and non-verbal communication among members at times exceeds the realm of fair play and results into acts of violence towards the most vulnerable subjects within the community. Under such circumstances, the credibility of any unitary narrative of black communality is undermined, and with it the notion that *all* individuals in the ballroom are instinctively protected. In fact, it would be more appropriate to say that *some* black queer subjects in their individuality are what the ballroom allows to express and thrive at the expense of others.

Set in the early spring of 1990, the episode of Candy's murder represents a watershed marking the "burial" of the previous decade and the beginning of the new one. It arrives at a point in the show where the characters all have grown anesthetized to the occurrence of death. While describing how the HIV virus is spreading with more severe repercussions on black LGBT people, *Pose* simultaneously captures their adjustment to that reality and how they manage to live in symbiosis with the looming presence of death by turning tragic settings such as run-down hospital wards and funeral parlors into places of homosocial opportunity. Contrary to this process of adjustment, the loss of Candy imposes a halt on many levels. Not only is the viewer allowed an in-depth vicarious experience of white brutality against queer people of color, but characters are forced to acknowledge the emotional complexity of their grief, which includes dealing with a great dose of guilt. Insisting on a history of hostility that characterizes Candy's relationship with her chosen kin, the episode reveals a pattern of dehumanization of black transgender women that affects them from the inside of the ballroom system through forms of abuse, marginalization and hierarchy that expose the deep level of internalization of white heteronormative aesthetics. In the coalescence of this ballroom-emanating violence surplus, and the external anxieties from both the national health crisis and the ongoing racism and homo-transphobia, this article understands Candy as the scapegoat of overlapping

injustices that occur because of her many-sided vulnerability. Indeed, more than any other character in the show, Candy symbolizes "de mule uh de world" (Hurston [1937] 2003, 14).

As the episode starts with the scene of a "Lofting" category where members are invited to show off their voguing moves, speaker Pray Tell is accused by Candy to "always read [her] to riot", that is, to always be excessively judgmental when it comes to her. While she is convinced that she has something to contribute to her community in terms of broader recognition, both the speaker and the jury deem her unfit to compete due to the blatant lack of real talent whatsoever. Relentless, Candy is of a different opinion, and keeps performing her moves in front of an entertained audience until she gets a low score and leaves. Not long after the incident, Pray Tell is seen walking down the city in his flamboyant attire towards a diner, where he meets with the other patrons and organizers of the balls for their periodical council. Among other things, they quickly jump from discussing how to cut down the moments of respectful silence for those who have lost their life to AIDS, to what new categories could be introduced to modernize the events. When Candy shows up with what seems a detail prospect about the advantages of launching a lip-synching category, no one takes her seriously. On the contrary, they all give her patronizing looks, and admittedly restrict the woman's possibilities of expression to the very femme features on her face. As one member of the council remarks before partaking in the general excitement of Pray Tell's reads: "Candy, what is your problem? You snatch trophies every time you walk the face category." Within the safety net of her community, the black trans woman is in many ways pigeonholed on her appearance. While it is a fact that careful cultivation of aesthetics represents a crucial point that enables black queer subjectivities to re-define their identity, – what Marlon Bailey calls *performance labor* (2013, 17) –[9] I see this "reduction to one's looks" as referring to the action of invalidating the very power that exteriority has in expressing the inside. As the brunch scene demonstrates, Candy's presence is acknowledged by others only within the terms of her acceptance of the status-quo that permeates the ballroom and that ultimately requires her flesh to always be scrutinized and judged. In that sense, Candy's performance labor is erased, and so is her effort *to be seen*. By means of an abundant use of reading and shading, the members of the council categorically refuse that Candy actively participate in a decision-making process that appears to belong to very few individuals; in the hierarchical construction of the ballroom culture, she is never allowed to be a patron because the community is not able to accept this change yet. While the show does not provide sufficient elements to suggest that some oligarchical structure is always in place when it comes to the life of the ball, it is the very lack of representation within the council that constitutes a problem in itself, when the sociality and relationality of the LGBT community only depends on the limited views of a group of mature cisgender gay males. Here, as in the voguing scene, I argue that Candy is subjected to a Fanonian moment of *to-be-looked-at-ness*: she is dispossessed of her agency, she is turned into a display of voided flesh, she is made the object of external inspection and – most importantly – rewriting of several overlapping narratives: in short, she is completely othered and made a living, yet silent, text in the development of the show.

[9] By the term *performance labor* Bailey indicates that continuous work the African-American and Latinx community of the ballroom does in constructing gender identities by way of engaging in pleasure, play, and fashion statements in order to survive the social, political, and economic discrimination that they face in everyday society.

What is relevant about these two scenes is not so much Candy's actual capability to perform the dance routine, or even her foresightedness in the organization of the balls, but the reiterated move to limit access and agency that comes from a hierarchized environment. Theorizing on the efforts that ballroom members make in re-fashioning their identities in the face of white heterosexist social patterns, Marlon Bailey acknowledges at several points in his study tangible limitations and setbacks of ballroom culture in the certain degree of fixity that operates within the ball categories, which strongly mirror majoritarian constructions of gender and sex. Most importantly, there is the clear understanding that "ballroom members do not reject dominant gender norms entirely, nor they wish to do so" (Bailey 2013, 35); on the contrary, they agree to move and operate within boundaries that reflect a degree of complicity with "gender and sexual normativity that is racialized and seeks to police and discipline black gendered bodies, identities and practices both inside and outside the community" (ibid. 57). To put it differently, the ballroom culture still reiterates a practice of ranking black queer subjectivities based on "how they are seen by and within the optic lens of white supremacy on the one hand, and black heteronormativity on the other" (ibid. 65).

Under such circumstances, Pray Tell's history of verbal altercations with Candy cannot be dismissed as innocuous because they exceed the playful enactments of intra-communitarian, culturally-specific modes of black interaction. While, in fact, the direct and undirect forms of verbal dueling of shading and reading – which Henry L. Gates ([1987] 2014) and Patrick Johnson (1995) exhaustively describe as part of the larger category of African-American Signifyin(g) –[10] represent a quintessential expressive modality through which ballroom members of color interact and affirm their place, the series shows that the assertion of dominance over other individuals is established by way of assimilated and normalized white aesthetics. Because the implicit rules that regulate relationality at the balls are modelled after dominant heterosexist categories of thought, the forms of verbal and non-verbal exchange that characterize black culture in the ballroom implicitly admit to a certain degree of violence and abuse that permeates the queer community of color.

One such case of mainstream worldview that strongly influences ballroom culture is the perception and the worshipping of "realness." As Bailey reiteratively explains in his study (2013), realness is a criterion for self-presentation that responds to one's need to blend into the larger heteronormative society to avoid discrimination, exclusion, violence, and death. However, it simultaneously becomes a standard that requires strict adherence to certain performances that are believed to capture the authenticity of particular gender and sexual identities. Because such requirements are shaped after the white heteronormative ideas of beauty, gender and sex as those categories were universalized in the 1970s and 1980s, the way in which ballroom

[10] Henry L. Gates ([1988] 2014) conceptualizes the rhetorical art of Signifyin(g) as "the black person's use of figurative modes of language use," which strongly depends on verbal indirection (81). It is, the scholar continues, "the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning…Finally, Signifyin(g) presupposes an encoded intention to say one thing but to mean quite another" (89). As such, it also becomes a convenient umbrella term to point at several rhetorical strategies that recognize indirectness as their source of action. Among them, Gates lists: "*talking shit, woofing, spouting, muckty muck, boogerbang, beating your gums, talking smart, putting down, putting on, playing, sounding, telling lies, shag-lag, marking, shucking, jiving, jitterbugging, bugging, mounting, charging, cracking, harping, rapping, bookooing, low-rating, hoorawing, sweet-talking, smart-talking…*"(85); For more information on *reading* as a form of Signifyin(g), see Johnson 1995, 125-26.

members enact realness to create the illusion of normativity also determines extreme pressure on the whole community that is tangible both in the strict evaluations of the judges at the balls, and within the number of derogatory comments that makes a great deal of peer interaction (55-8). In the "Mother's Day" episode (S1E4) for instance, Pray Tell denies Candy access to a body category because she does not meet the necessary requirements to compete. Candy's face is indeed deemed unquestionably feminine, but her body is extremely thin and does not conform to the idea of appealing womanhood that the mainstream society of the time has been dictating – that is plump, and bodacious. Routinely throughout the episode, the viewer is made aware of how a prosperous breast size, a whittled waist and curvy hips have become the epitome of beauty and, consequently, how deeply women – and that includes black trans women – who do not naturally possess those features can experience the sheer pressure to conform.

Regardless of Elektra's warnings not to walk on the runway because "body categories are about tits and asses out to here" (she draws an arch in the air to emphasize the mandatory size), Candy still demands her "statuesque" body to be acknowledged. To her audacity, however, Pray Tell responds with a read that makes everyone in the room burst out with laughter:

> This is a body category…Body, sugar!… And where's the lusciousness? Where's the juice? If I squeezed you, I wouldn't be able to get enough out of you to fill a Dixie cup of lemonade!

Upon a second effort to get the floor's attention, Candy resorts to paddings to temporarily enhance her features, but she only receives an even stronger read by Pray Tell, and a harsh criticism by Elektra. Claiming how ball categories were born to realize people's fantasies, Candy defends her right to a self-presentation on the runway that is the reflection of how she perceives her image. But this, according to Elektra, has limitations: while it appears that surgical enhancements are the admitted tools in the art of making oneself look real, it is imperative that those enhancements "must be suited to the individual, must be streamlined and flattering." Those paddings, Electra insists, only projected an idea of the self that was "shattered and distorted", and that would not be able to persuade any "skeptical audience in search for falsities." Predictably, she was right: as soon as Candy walks the floor, she is met with hissings, derision, and even spanked on the butt by another transwoman for some strong reality check. After Pray Tell's final read, she has no choice but to leave the building in shame. In order to receive the recognition that she craves from her community, Candy goes to extreme lengths and, due to the limits of her financial possibilities, she agrees on having contraband silicone from Honduras implanted in her breasts and buttocks. While it is true that the transwoman finally gets her long awaited "ten across the board,"[11] she does not even get to enjoy the moment of communal celebration as she passes out due to a high fever caused from a plausible internal infection.

In terms of filmic strategies and narrative choices, it is understandable that the episode saves most of the dramatic tension for the moment Candy has to face the consequences of buying cheap, unsafe materials. This, in fact, clearly ensures visibility

[11] It is significant that the woman gets praised for having put her life in jeopardy. In other words, as the panel – and the entire community with it – unanimously agrees on the introjected feeling of not being enough, the result is that all attempts to achieve absurd standards imposed from the outside are admitted.

on a marginalized demographic and encourages in-depth reflection on how resorting to illegal practices was sadly inevitable for many trans women who could not afford first-class treatment, nor were implants and hormones covered by the scant public health care. While Elektra can count on the monthly allowance as the mistress of a white rich businessman to partly cover for her penectomy, other girls like Candy and Angel do not have the financial resources to grant themselves regular, safer, surgeries.

However effective it might be to point at the socioeconomic issue that is clearly accentuated with the characters' ethnic belonging, the psychological implications of Pray Tell's – as well as other ballroom members' – reiterated verbal offenses and confrontational attitude are somehow overlooked and temporarily postponed to prioritize a focus on the threat posed by the outside world. In other words, the show repeatedly displaces the viewer's attention from the complications of intraracial abuse to forms of violence that easily serve an "us versus them narrative" by uncritically framing black queer people as victims. Of course, it is important to recognize the empowering effect that black queer lingo possesses in its simultaneous display of provocative humor and irreverence. Still, there is also a need to acknowledge the harmful potential of that lingo when it is weaponized at the expense of individuals who represent a minority within an already marginalized group. When hinging on white-inflected notions of beauty and femininity, intra-community tactics like reading and shading may promote a culture of shame and a normalization of verbal abuse that produce tangible damage to the psyche of the individuals who defy those norms. As Candy's case shows, the derision and confrontational behavior that permeates the ball and that manifests itself specifically through her interactions with Pray Tell and Elektra are the expression of complex intraracial dynamics where wit and humor function as a structural strategy in the articulation of one's *to-be-seenness*. At the same time, however, it is clear that this particular inflection of the Signifyin(g) culture also contributes to crystalizing the divide between individuals like Candy and those who speak from unequivocal positions of power and privilege, both in terms of gender and in terms of social and economic access.

The result of complex dynamics that are both inside and outside the queer community of color, violence is instead completely "externalized" in the narration, which frames the black transgender woman as the victim *par excellance*. Candy's death occurs at the hands of some unknown man in a shabby motel room of the Bronx, where we learn from her house co-mother Lulu that she became a regular guest to carry out her activity as sex-worker. What leads Candy to such violent death, however, is much more than the single event in itself and can be fully understood when it is read through a pattern of violence and abuse that makes both society at large and infra-community dynamics accountable for the marginalization of certain individuals. At several moments, *Pose* makes very clear that sex work in its many forms is one of the few options that trans women could afford to get a living, and that particularly extends to trans women of color due to the intersectional workings of race and gender discrimination. Candy is certainly not a unicum in the series: cases such as that of Angel, who works as a prostitute and as a strip-teaser extends the normalization of a New World libidinal economy to the fetishized black transgender body that speaks to a long established history of dispossession of female sexual

agency.[12] Even before her position as a BDSM dominatrix would force her to hide the corpse of a white slave in her own closet to avoid being accused of his murder, Elektra herself experienced the lengths to which this normalization occurs in society through her relationships with various white businessmen from the city. While mastering realness and femininity in the way these categories are understood through a white lens ensured the transwoman fame, status, and respect in the ballroom, the stable financial position that she manages to secure for herself comes from agreeing to the implicit pact of adherence to an exaggerated performance of dignified wealthy womanhood and a simultaneous preservation of manhood. In all her entanglements, in fact, the nature of the relationship is strictly contractual and the related benefits strongly dependent on the transwoman's performance of transfemininity as a most valuable form of currency, with specific emphasis on her penis in bed. In other words, Elektra consciously takes part – at least until her long awaited penectomy – in a culture of objectification where the black transwoman is explicitly required to maintain the rupture between her sex and gender identity for the purpose of fulfilling the desires of her counterparts. This means that, despite the material compensation and the economic independence that she develops compared to many other transwomen, her existence is equally codified and made intelligible only via the contrasting fantasies that powerful white men inscribe on her flesh as the simultaneous site of hyper-femininity and masculinity. Ultimately, like Candy, Elektra is never really seen, but she also has no initial desire in it because that would cost her the advantages that her abidance to white-inflected aesthetics brings. By embracing scripted performances of identity and making them mandatory for all her children, Elektra chooses to prioritize her self-interest in a world of sanctioned black violence, but she also contributes to keeping alive a system of hierarchization of black bodies that are made more expendable the less they integrate in the mainstream. In this sense, she embodies a tendency towards human categorization in the life of the ball that reveals a deep interest in the status quo where several forms of exclusion take place in order to maintain dominance. Even though ballrooms undermine the validity of any binary system by revealing "the unstable and fluid nature of socially produced performances of gender categories" (Bailey 2013, 35), these theatrical performances still occur along the axes of pre-scripted tropes of racial masculinity and femininity that saturate the ballroom and foster intracommunity discriminatory attitudes.

Unlike Elektra, who finds safety in the pleasure that a white rich middle-class has in portraying themselves as a civil and respectable social milieu, Candy's sources of income do not extend beyond the nightclubs and the piers of the Bronx, which considerably increases her chances of being exposed to violence. Problematic as it is, the exploitation of Elektra's body under the pretense of a collectively acknowledged respectability still allows for a degree of mobility that would be unthinkable in the

[12] Joseph Roach (1996) frames the black female body as it temporally moves from the 1830s slave auction blocks to the 1900s brothels of New Orleans in a never-changing "violent, triangular conjunction of money, propriety, and flesh" (215). In this sense, "the centrality of naked flesh [in this circum-Atlantic economy] signifies the abundant availability of all commodities: *everything* can be put up for sale, and everything can be examined and handled even by those who are just looking. In the staging of New Orleans slave auctions, there is a fiercely laminating adhesion of bodies and objects, the individual desire for pleasure, and the collective desire to compete for possession. […] As a theatrical spectacle, they materialize the most intense of symbolic transactions in circum-Atlantic culture: money transforms flesh into property; property transforms flesh into money; flesh transforms money into property" (215, italics in the original).

social realities outside rich white Manhattan. As a matter of fact, Candy's position as black poor working-class transwoman shows the truth of being the object of desire and rejection in settings that preclude any form of protection. Even if Candy is brutally murdered, the normalization of black queer bodies as inherently deviant produces an anesthetization to their disposability that makes disappearances like those of Candy an ordinary event in her profession. Much like the multitude of unnamed coffins of black AIDS victims piling up at Hart Island,[13] Candy is reduced to an undistinguished mass of black flesh marked by the "lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, raptures, lesions, rendings [and] punctures" of mainstream society (Spillers 1987, 67).

Sacrificing Candy so the Culture May Live: The Transwoman's Invisibility in Death

Sitting at the junction of race, gender, and class discriminations, Candy embodies the notion of *cultural vestibularity* that Hortense Spillers theorized to convey a vivid idea of the distance put between black enslaved people and humans (Spillers 1987, 67). In the process of white supremacist affirmation, the former were used to mark the divide between dominated bestiality and civilization. As such, they were conceptually coerced into a space of sanctioned violence – the vestibule – that constituted an antechamber to the category of the human, and where the laws of civilization did not apply. In the words of Joseph Pugliese (2013) "once held captive in the vestibule, the slave [could] be exposed to a range of violent and fatal practices that [were] informed by the slave owner's knowledge that such practices [could] be exercised with absolute impunity" (45). More explicitly than with her fellow transwomen Elektra and Angel, *Pose* frames Candy's body as the site where both interracial perversions and interracial/intraracial anxieties overlap, from the white-on-transblack fetishization and hatred to the black-on-transblack hierarchy-affirming modalities of exchange. In terms that fluctuate from the metaphorical to a strictly physical standpoint, Candy's flesh becomes the ultimate antechamber to culture because the extent to which the violence occurs is determined – in fact, it is enabled – by the transwoman's position of economic powerlessness and social isolation. In other words, whomever committed the murder walked out of the motel door undisturbed and back into society with the complete awareness that, to use Elektra's wordings, "the NYPD doesn't care about a murdered transexual" (S2 E6).

Being Candy's murder the dramatic highlight of the episode, it is very significant that the directing choice is not to show the details of the incident. After we see Candy at the diner where Pray Tell rejects her idea of a lip-synching category, there is no footage of her meeting her client at the motel, nor is the viewer allowed to participate in the transwoman's last moments of life. As we are blocked out of an arguably pivotal scene, so is an entire range of emotions and articulations of thoughts that would have complexified Candy's character and further drawn the line between her coming to terms with a condition of *to-be-looked-at-ness* and her demand to be seen. Instead, by showing her lifeless martyrized body hidden in the closet, the episode makes a critical move into the visual definition of a trajectory of powerlessness that is specific to the category of the poor black transwoman. Crucial to this representation, as has been

[13] While the show does not explicitly refer to the ethnic origin of the bodies in those coffins, it does portray the countless number of funerals of the ballroom members who die of AIDS, and to whom the coffins buried in Hart Island likely belong. Moreover, my assumption heavily builds on Browning's data on AIDS victims, reported in note 6 of the current article.

discussed, is the way intra-community verbal abuse hides behind the African-American culture of the Signifyin(g). As characters like Elektra and Pray Tell repeatedly pick on Candy for the most diverse reasons, the cheeky humor they entice produces a level of entertainment that makes the viewer complicit in the distance put between the former and the individuals with whom they are interacting. In other words, by taking pleasure in Pray Tell's reading and shading, the audience is made blind to and unwittingly complicit in the subtle forms of black-on-black violence that take place in the ballroom. All the while, we participate in a culture of dehumanization as we fail to recognize the black transwoman's emotional depth and eventually grow more attached to the idea of Candy as a punchbag for comic purposes than to Candy as a human being.

As opposed to this co-produced and co-maintained state of neglect, the funeral service takes the issue of the black transwoman's visibility further, with a level of excess in the aesthetics of the location, the verbal register of the guests, and the overall tones of the storyline spanning from the comical to the tragic in a matter of seconds, and often blurring the line between the two.

In the modes and terms through which the show makes Candy's body simultaneously invisible and hypervisible at the funeral, one witnesses to a complete dispossession of her agency, which reverberates the Afro-Pessimist conception of the black subject in a never-ending position of unfreedom. One way this aggressive dispossession occurs is through the unacknowledgment of the subject's identity as a fully autonomous sexual being. Although it was generous of the funeral house owner to cover for the expenses of the service, in preparing Candy's body for the viewing he seemed still uncapable to go beyond the stereotyped image of unrealistic pristine black femininity that was imposed on women as a result of last century's politics of respectability. After informing her friends that he had taken care of the embalmment himself, a close-up on the open casket reveals a deep distortion of Candy's looks that is operated via the erasure of those aesthetics that bespoke the black woman's open sexuality and desirability. Wearing a short, wavy, caramel-blond wig, very heavy make-up on the cheeks and the eyebrows, a long red coat, and black lace gloves, miss Candy Ferocity as we know her is completely removed from the scene, and tentatively replaced with the only black body that appears to be acceptable in a public setting: that of a middle-aged, modest church lady, dignified by her very de-sexualization. In view of this, Blanca, Elektra, and Angel's intrusion as improvised make-up artists offers more than simple comic relief from the somber tones of the episode. While Elektra's moment of grief is interrupted by a spontaneous reaction of repulsion, Angel's ironic comment on Candy's appearance as reminding her of her old aunt is strictly functional to the need – shortly after expressed – not to let her be buried in that way: "We can't let her go in the ground looking like my aunt Carol…she would come back and haunt us to the end of our days", says Angel fumbling for the make-up in her purse. Indeed, hilarious as it is to watch this surreal exchange, their overstepping the boundary of respectful observance by personally intervening on the corpse is more than a moment of entertainment: it is a coming together reaction to a moment of crisis in the attempt to return their friend an image that was stolen, and let her be really seen at least in death.

A second – more subtle and more finite – level of dispossession occurs as the show fully plunges into the absurd with the corporealization of Candy's spirit and her interaction with the guests at the funeral. Halfway through the service, after asking for a collective moment of respectful silence, Pray Tell sits to recollect his thoughts when

he suddenly hears the words "I forgive you." Alarmed, Tell opens his eyes in evident confusion as the spirit of the dead is standing next to her motionless body while putting out a cigarette and repeating once more "Bitch, I said I forgive you." Similarly to the case of the three transwomen who correct the mistakes of the mortician with their beauticians' skills, Candy's loudness, wit and irreverence become functional to a level of surreal comedy that makes the tragic event more bearable. As a matter of fact, it takes Pray Tell and the other people who in turn see Candy less than a moment to pass from a state of shock to one of natural participation in this paradoxical event. However, if it is undeniable that these were Candy's signature qualities throughout her life, all the dramatics surrounding her ghostly manifestation also seem to point in the direction of great failure in terms of access to proper visibility: as much as Candy seems to preserve her cheeky tongue and her bitchiness in death, what seems the truthful portrayal of her character is, in fact, yet another deception that makes any claim of real representation of black transfemininity quite impossible to believe. While the episode builds on the comforting idea that the characters are somehow in the presence of Candy's spirit, and that they evolve into the better version of themselves as a result of a final interaction with the ghost, once again the perception of Candy's emotional multi-angularity is invalidated as she is transformed into the embodiment of other characters' guilt and predictable self-absolution. In other words, at a point when external events force everybody to see Candy's body as it is, she is made into existence only as somebody else's needs are prioritized.

Under such circumstances, questions arise as to whether achieving *to-be-seenness* is ever possible for the trans woman struggling for a place in the competitive world of the ballroom. As her spirit asks about the reasons why Pray Tell would never recognize her worth, his answer is open and telling: "Maybe I didn't want to look at you. You are unapologetic, loud, femme…all the things I tried to hide about myself when I go out into the real world." In the space of a couple lines, Pray Tell lets us into the reality of a community that, despite being made of misfits who operate at the margins of mainstream society, is still always defined by the looming presence of the powerful over the powerless, and where the former still hold the authority to determine to what extent certain non-normative behaviors can be normalized or, conversely, kept taboo. Although Pray Tell justifies his poor behavior as a way to warn Candy against the dangers that could await for living her truth, what he does in fact is get in the way of the woman's attempts to be visible inside the ballroom, thus contributing to her experience of failure as a human being. It is clear from his confession to Candy's spirit that his ability to exert such an obstruction comes from a position of privilege in terms of gender, sex, and social positioning granted by a certain level of conformity to the rules of the mainstream. At the same time, it is exactly because of the necessity to preserve such position within the social microcosm of the ball and the related fear of losing agency and access outside of it that Pray Tell consents to keep in place a rigidly hierarchical structuring of the community. However, this is not only detrimental to the characters that the show chooses to depict as victims, but also happens at the cost of great internal conflict for those who sit at the top: despite his open homosexuality, the deep desire and the possibility to fit into the mainstream require of him to still be dependent on a normative idea of masculinity and respectability that make the black excess of the ballroom confusingly pathological. In other words, Pray Tell's attempts to undermine Candy's unapologeticness, loudness, and *femme-ininity* are rooted in his fear to live those qualities in what he defines "the real world", the fear to embrace black excess outside the ball – now turned

into a space self-containment. By way of accepting and reiterating white-inflected codes of behavior, Pray Tell is not only jeopardizing Candy's happiness, he is dangerously contributing to confining the reality of his community to the realm of the fantastic and, as such, making it immaterial, inconsequential. As the ball's recreational properties are mostly made conceivable through what appears a shared understanding of this world as a temporarily sanctioned diversion from the norm, the introjected self-inadequacy that transpires from Pray Tell's behavior and that extends to the ball world translates into an intermitted failure to grasp the potential of black queer aesthetics and truly envision black futurity for LGBT people of color outside a comfort zone.

It is my contention that the last scenes from the episode enable the strongest form of critique towards ballroom culture by further delving into the domain of the surreal and magnifying the absurdity of Candy's presence at her own funeral in what the episode suggests is a pseudo after-life sequence. After the absolution that Pray Tell, Lulu, Angel and Blanca give themselves, every pretense of plausibility is completely abandoned as the woman's coffin is chaperoned back into the ballroom through a door that materializes on the wall of the funeral house. There, Candy emerges from the coffin and, in awe, witnesses to a multitude of people shouting her name and asking for her to perform. The background music starts, and Candy lip-synchs to the notes of the 1980 track "Never Knew Love like this Before" by Stephanie Mills. As the new category is introduced and named after her, Candy's suggestions seem to have been finally heard. While this sentimental, musical-like arrangement meets the audience's expectation for a happy ending in finally allowing for plentitude and recognition to come Candy's way, what is an extreme deferral of black joy on the screen cannot be at all intended as separate from its condition of actual non-existence and non-attainability.

The ballroom undoubtedly spatializes black queer sociality through a pattern of ludicrous joy and excess. However, the fact that Candy's self-actualization becomes imaginable only within the framework of an oneiric-like state speaks to the threat that any vision of black existence – both in the present and the future – faces when it is not, at least in part, dependent on the validation of an external white, male, heterosexual gaze. In fact, while constituting a strategic choice for the narrative resolution of the episode, the moment that Candy's coffin transitions from the funeral house to the ballroom, and the following theatrical parade of elated multitudes of black bodies provides only a pretense of hope for sociality and relationality: if anything, this fictive continuum between the two physical spaces is exactly the indication of the proximity between black life and black erasure; it corporealizes the tension between black sheer lust for life and the inevitable looming of death, while relegating the fulfillment of communal and individual desires to the realm of the impossible.

From this perspective, Candy's lip-synching performance represents a crucial metanarrative moment that relies on the rhetorical *indirectness* of the African-American Signifyin(g) to provocatively sell the audience the plausibility of that hope, while simultaneously pointing at its implausibility. As she moves her lips to mimic lyrics that express satisfaction for having found a long-awaited love, Candy is made the agent of a formal repetition that, in accordance with the tradition of black Signification, repeats itself with a difference. In this case, the ultimate sign of this difference between the song and the performance rests precisely in the brutal reality of the fact that Candy has long ceased to physically exist, and all the colorful charade

that comes after her murder is, in fact, the visual expression of her community's self-absolution and coping mechanism. By expanding the traditional modes of the Signifyin(g) outside of the dialogical and dialectical dynamics between characters within the storyline, Candy brings this rhetorical model to an extra-textual level and applies it to the relationship that exists between the scene and the audience themselves. Candy is indeed pretending to sing a song about being loved and seen, but she is also inhabiting those lyrics with the tragic experience of having never gotten to knowing that warmth and affection first-hand; and a love that has no physical addressee is otherwise known as grief.

If we read beyond Candy's enactment of the Signifyin(g), the ballroom that *Pose* portrays reveals itself as a crucible of (post)modernity where several memories of African-American matrix overlap, often echoing compelling, yet contrasting desires that do not allow all ballroom members to articulate agency. There, as individuals like Miss Candy see their attempts to show how beautifully they inhabit their own skin invalidated by ongoing, white-assimilated forms of misrecognition and marginalization, the ball ceases to be a haven where all members of the community instinctively find happiness. However, just as the Monkey of the African-American tradition brilliantly plays its rhetorical tricks on the Lion and the Elephant,[14] so are we – the audience – in the same position of being "played" and "fooled," by swallowing and carrying on the lie.

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[14] In the African-American folk tradition, the Signifying Monkey stands as the rhetorical principle in vernacular discourse, and its presence fills hundreds of allegorical tales that have their origin in slavery and have been recorded since the early twentieth century (Gates 2014 [1988], 57). In many of them, the Monkey appears along with two stock characters: the Lion and the Elephant. All three of them, Gates explains, "are bound together in a trinary relationship [where the] Monkey –a trickster figure, like Esu [Elegbara,] who is full of guile, who tell lies, and who is a rhetorical genius – is intent on demystifying the Lion's self-imposed status as King of the Jungle. The Monkey, clearly, is no match for the Lion's physical prowess; the Elephant is, however. The Monkey's task, then, is to trick the Lion into tangling with the Elephant who is the true King of the Jungle for everyone else in the animal kingdom. This, the Monkey does with a rhetorical trick, a trick of mediation, […] a play on language use [that ultimately] succeeds in reversing the Lion's status" (61).

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