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Performing Oral History, Reimagining Public History: Collaborative knowledge production with Baltimore's ballroom scene

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Performing Oral History, Reimagining Public History: Collaborative knowledge production with Baltimore's ballroom scene

Joseph Plaster

This essay examines the role of oral history in co-curating the Peabody Ballroom Experience, an arts and humanities collaboration between Johns Hopkins University and Baltimore's ballroom scene—a performance-based culture rooted in the creative practices of black queer and trans communities. Through a partnership between faculty, students, activists, and performers, the project facilitates an exchange of knowledge that challenges traditional boundaries between the university and community-based expertise. By centering oral history as both methodology and praxis, this study argues that public history initiatives can move beyond top-down, charity-based models of engagement to embrace co-creative, reciprocal approaches. Moreover, by recognizing performance as a critical repository of historical knowledge, the Peabody Ballroom Experience expands conventional academic understandings of oral and public history. Drawing on interviews with ballroom leaders, this analysis demonstrates how oral history not only documents personal narratives but also affirms the significance of intergenerational storytelling, community memory, and the ongoing struggle for power and restorative justice.

The ballroom scene is a nearly century-old performance-based culture composed primarily of queer, trans, and gender non-conforming artists of color. Ballroom consists of chosen families,

also called houses, and the opulent performance competitions they produce. Ball competitions are more than spectacles of creativity and fabulousness; they are rituals that call forth and renew black LGBTQ cultural traditions. The electronic music derives from modern progressions of the African drum, and is influenced by blues, jazz, gospel, and funk. Voguing, an improvised dance form, is influenced by a variety of black diasporic movement practices. The gender-bending costumes stem from the extravagant drag balls staged in U.S. cities as early as the 1890s. Ball commentators, or masters of ceremony, are griots: the living archives of the community's cultural knowledge. The ballroom scene mobilizes performance as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, referencing the past to renew a queer, anti-racist public in the present.

As Curator in Public Humanities for the Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries & University Museums, I worked with ballroom artists to launch the Peabody Ballroom Experience in 2018. My philosophy of community engagement was influenced by the most recent "public turn" in the academy, which is renewing interest in participatory action research, community-based learning, and collaborative approaches to knowledge creation.[1] There has been a shift in academic research "from knowing *about* to knowing *with,*" as communities become "partners in research and not simply objects of study."[2] As project coordinator, I mobilize my positionality as a white, queer person with institutional privilege to redistribute resources from inside the university to outside of it; to act as a mediator between two publics with radically different levels of access to power and resources; and to advocate for the value of knowledge produced through performance.

When I launched the project, Hopkins, like many elite educational institutions, tended to vacillate between viewing its black neighbors as potential dangers to be policed and, at times, as the beneficiaries of charity. Faculty and staff often deployed public history as a form of intellectual charity: they created knowledge in the academy and then bestowed it on those outside the university walls who, it was implied, did not have valuable knowledge of their own. I took a different approach by cultivating an exchange of knowledge between Hopkins and the ballroom scene, bringing together faculty, students, and Baltimore-based artists as partners in

[1] On the public turn, see Liz Miller, Edward Little, and Steven High, *Going Public: The Art of Participatory Practice* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017); George Lipsitz, "Breaking the Chains and Steering the Ship," in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 88–114.
[2] Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 29.

research and education. When I began reaching out to local ballroom leaders, I acknowledged that Hopkins' historic relationship with black Baltimore has been one of exploitation and dispossession.[3] I told ballroom leaders that I intended to design a project that would not perpetuate these dynamics. This meant, above all, that ballroom would be in control of the project's shape from its inception, and that any participants would be financially compensated for their expertise and labor.

I brought together and paid a core planning group made up of leaders from Baltimore's ballroom scene and hired Marquis Revlon, a local vogue Icon, to lead workshops for students in the Peabody Dance department. I worked with students and faculty in the JHU Film Department to co-produce documentary films starring ballroom leaders. Finally, I enlisted curators from the Sheridan Libraries, who shared rare books and special collections materials with ballroom artists who wrote ball competition categories inspired by the materials. Since 2018, students, ballroom artists, and university curators have recorded more than a dozen oral histories; archived ballroom ephemera; produced three documentary films; held film screenings and dance workshops; and co-taught undergraduate courses, including Queer Oral History and Queer Performativity.

Most dramatically, we have staged three epic ball competitions at Hopkins' opulent George Peabody Library. At these events, ballroom artists interpret and reimagine the Library's historic collections through costume and stylized performance. Opened in 1878, the "Cathedral of Books" features five tiers of ornamental cast-iron balconies rising dramatically to a massive skylight sixty feet above the floor. The pairing of ballroom and the Library may at first seem incongruous; most of the book collection was acquired by Baltimore's white male elite in the late 1800s and reflects their Eurocentric worldview. But one of the most powerful aspects of ballroom is its ability to adopt elements of mainstream culture and reinterpret them as life-affirming for the queer and transgender people of color who make up this social world. Many ballroom artists feel that they are making a political statement by staging a meaningful

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[3] Hopkins has a well-known history of predatory research practices with respect to black communities. The case of Henrietta Lacks or the Kennedy Krieger lead studies are just two examples. See Siddhartha Mitter, "Gentrify or Die? Inside a University's Controversial Plan for Baltimore," *The Guardian*, April 18, 2018; David R. Buchanan and Franklin G. Miller, "Justice and Fairness in the Kennedy Krieger Institute Lead Paint Study: The Ethics of Public Health Research on Less Expensive, Less Effective Interventions," *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 5 (2006): 781–787.

ritual—one created to insist on the value of queer and trans people of color—in a historically white-dominated space.

Oral History and "Shared Authority"

I drew on oral history as a method for resisting a top-down, paternalistic approach to public history. Ever since Michael Frisch coined the phrase "shared authority" in 1990, it has been foundational for the field of oral history and public history. Shared authority refers to a commitment to promoting "a more democratized and widely shared historical consciousness" through public historians' attempts to "respect, understand, invoke, and involve the very real authority their audiences bring."[4] Just as an oral history interview should be "a collaboration in the literal sense of laboring together," public history projects committed to shared authority should be a partnership between groups with different knowledges, whether "grounded in culture and experience [or] academic expertise.[5] Oral historians often regard the method as an exercise in "shared authority" in which a narrator and interviewer collaborate to produce new forms of knowledge.[6]

Conducting oral histories with ballroom artists helped me understand what is unique about Baltimore's ballroom scene and illuminated how the community approaches performance as a repository of history and knowledge. It helped me forge relationships with ballroom leaders, many of whom later served on the project advisory and planning committee. Finally, it enabled me to think with ballroom artists about the collaboration between ballroom and Johns Hopkins University. Their feedback shaped the project architecture from the very beginning. One of my takeaways was that most artists were not against the "mainstreaming" of ballroom at the Peabody Library; they simply want to oversee the shape of that mainstreaming. If I organized the project

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[4] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xxii.

[5] Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky, "When Is an Interview an Interview? Notes from Listening to Holocaust Survivors," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 439, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-012; Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, xxii.

[6] A recognition of shared authority, Michael Frisch argues, can "redefine and redistribute intellectual authority." Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), xx.

without centering the ballroom community, Marquis Clanton said, "it would have felt like somebody else trying to take from ballroom or somebody else saying that this is what's popular and let me get a piece of it. But when you use people who are a part of the scene to bring it, then it's kind of like, 'Okay, let's make this work,' because everybody wants it to work.'"

I conducted most oral histories at the George Peabody Library, which gave ballroom artists a chance to experience the space, usually for the first time. Their eyes inevitably lit up when they walked into the grand atrium. Many claimed it as an ideal venue for a ball. The Library

> "is a grand scale," Baltimore-based voguer Grey Mizrahi told me during his oral history. "Ballroom is a grand scale. Ballroom is a lot to see. The looks is very over the top and the dance itself is very over the top and walking runway is very over the top. . . . So [the Library] is deserving of ballroom. Ballroom is deserving of it."

Others viewed the Peabody's "opulence" through the history of ballroom. Sebastian Latta told me ballroom has "always been a place of opulence." The purpose of ballroom is to "create a place where it was just like a Garden of Eden," he said during our oral history. "No matter how bad your life was . . . when you came into this place, it just reminds you of this is where I want to be."

Narrators told me that Baltimore, often associated with television shows like *The Wire*, is perceived as the "underdog" of the ballroom world. "We've always been considered the underdogs," Sandy Dior said, "but we always rose to the occasion. Baltimore is a city, to me, with the most realest female figures, with the most talented voguers, with the most beautiful faces, and our runway in 'realness with a twist' is just off the chain." Monique Carter echoed this statement. "We can go to any city and we can beat those people in their city, but . . . we don't have all of the luxuries that they have." Baltimore is "the underdog city, so we have to work hard. . . . When you have to work harder, you have a stronger drive." New York and Washington DC, Sebastian Escada told me, "swallow Baltimore up because it's in the middle . . . but Baltimore is always holding down ballroom." Many told me there had not been a major ball in Baltimore for years. Some saw the Peabody ball as a chance to jumpstart the local scene.

Father James Icon appreciated the pairing of the Library and ballroom as two repositories of history and knowledge.

> "The Peabody is a library, a source of information, a source of history, right? So why not combine the two? Ballroom is a place of history. There's history in ballroom. There's knowledge in ballroom. So to combine the two was a great idea, and it was a successful idea because it emulated what ballroom is."

The pairing, in his view, "opens a person's mind up to anything is possible. Who would think that you would have a ball in a library? We're used to gymnasiums and halls." Ballroom artist Keith Holt appreciated the collaboration between the Peabody Institute, an internationally known conservatory, and ballroom, an underground artform "created out of stigma." The collaboration, Holt told me, was an opportunity for JHU to show its commitment to the queer and trans people of color who make up the local community.

Oral history narrators also confirmed what I learned from my secondary research, that gender and sexual identification in ballroom, as Marlon Bailey argues, "are understood as performative processes rather than immutable biological facts."[7] Many trans women told me ballroom enabled them to express a nonnormative gender identity. For Monique Carter, who was assigned male at birth, vogue was a revelation. "I found a way to express my inner femininity that nobody really knew about," she said. She felt that ballroom artists celebrated her gender identity. "It was the best feeling in the world because you get to really praise being feminine. You get to swing your hair. You got the nails, the bracelets. All the stuff that you enjoy about being a woman you get to bring to the floor and you praised for it." Ballroom, Carter told me, "is the reason why I found out who I was."

Narrators also taught me about the non-biological families they fashioned. Marquis Revlon Clanton's ballroom house "became my family outside of my family, certain stuff that I couldn't have a conversation with my mother or my father about, I could have with my Revlon family." Lisa Revlon told me of her house, "They became my extended family. And I don't wanna use the word 'extended,' because they *are* family. Mothers, grandmothers." Ballroom transmits

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[7] Marlon M. Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 371.

knowledge through kinship networks. "It just passes down," Monique Carter told me. "That's why I say in some kind of way we're like one, big, large family." Sebastian Escada told me that the kinship networks provided economic and affective support.

> "Ballroom helps to bring [together] people together dealing with different crises in their lives. There are people in ballroom that may have been suicidal. There may have been people in ballroom who were homeless. But when they join these houses, 99 percent of the time, the leaders of the houses connect them with different things outside of ballroom that will help them along with having a productive life."

Other narrators told me that ballroom performance allowed them to gain confidence and test the limits of what they thought was possible. "It gives you opportunities to, like, push the boundaries of who you are," Grey Mizrahi told me. "Like when you're dancing—I know I could do a thing that I was not even planning to do and I'll be like, 'Oh bitch, you just ate that.'" He laughed and continued:

> "Like, okay, keep going. . . . I know times where I've been, like, hurting, like what you can do physically, what your mind can do mentally, it pushes you to a place of, like, how did I just do that? Because I've seen people, like, get—be—literally have broken legs, like literally have broken, like, a knee and still be voguing down, and then after everything's done they're like, 'Girl, you gotta take me to the hospital; I think I just broke something.' I, like, messed my knee up so bad and I still was voguing, I still was voguing. It pushes you. It takes you somewhere past where you think you could go."

Mizrahi was articulating what many dance theorists claim about the political power of dance. Sally Ann Ness, for example, argues that gesture is a way bodies "exert agency by drawing on the kinetic energies of a moving self." Movement, she writes, opens up "new possibilities for human thought, action, and existence."[8]

Narrators taught me that ball competitions are designed to open up opportunities for creativity. Sandy Dior, for example, recalled one ball with an "under the sea" concept. "There's so many

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[8] Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness, eds,. *Migrations of Gesture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvii.

different realms that's under the sea," she told me, "and your mind can just *go*." Each competition category is tied to the theme. Peanut Revlon recalled a category at an under-the-sea ball that required competitors to dress and perform as mermaids. He remembers a trans woman, elaborately dressed from head to prosthetic fin, who competed while submerged in an oversized tank. Several of her house members wheeled the tank onto the runway. "She had every fish you could name inside this fish tank," Revlon told me, "and her hair was so long, it came out the fish tank all the way on the floor. . . . To have a person inside of a fish tank, with all this water, crabs, and lobsters . . . it's like, 'Wait a minute. What is going on here?' People still talk about [that] ball."

As this anecdote suggests, a ball opens up space for transformation and world-making. Marco Blahnik told me a ball "is about creating a fantasy and living it for that night." Keith Holt echoed this statement: "You can be anything you want to be in ballroom." Performance studies scholars are drawn precisely to the capacity for transformation via performance: the "startling ability," Richard Schechner writes, "of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become—for worse or better—what they ordinarily are not."[9] José Esteban Muñoz argues that performances—both theatrical events and everyday rituals—"have the ability to establish alternative views of the world." These are more than individual viewpoints; "they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate minoritarian people."[10]

Finally, narrators taught me about the ways historical memory operates in ballroom. I learned that ball "commentators," or masters of ceremonies, are ballroom's historians. A commentator, as Sandy Dior told me, "is a person who controls the ball, is the person that narrates the whole thing. When they go around to different states to states, city to cities, country to country, the people that stood out . . . get acknowledged for their accolades and for what they do." Monique Carter told me that commentators "have to do their research and keep up on who walks what [category] and remember who won what." During a ball, commentators may also tell a story about a past performance. "They just take you back in stories they know or remembering

[9] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.
[10] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 195.

moments of certain people," Peanut Revlon told me. "What [commentators] do is they just put everybody on point of your history."

A commentator might also ask performers to call forth or embody a past performance. Sebastian Escada told me a commentator may say, "I remember this night. It was a night like this where Octavia, she came from the ceiling. Let's try to make it a night like that." Or they might say, "Bring it like Octavia St. Laurent on the same night when she brought in a gown." A performer might pay homage to a past performer by walking the runway in the style of that performer. The commentator will reference history "to make you feel that same energy that happened back then." They are ballroom's "true historians, because they have the stories of all the things that have happened at balls."

Commentators are ballroom's griots, keepers of culture who pass knowledge and values from one generation to the next. It was the responsibility of the griot in many African cultures to keep and pass down information about the ancestors—stories about the mothers, fathers, grandparents, and their lineages.[11] Commentators tell stories at ball competitions about the mothers, Legends, and Icons who have made a mark on the scene.

Because of the emphasis placed on cultural memory, it is vital for performers to create lasting memories—or "moments," in the parlance of ballroom. "A moment," Rhonda Icon told me, "is something that stops time and awes the whole crowd. You have all the judges standing on their feet. It's something that's like, 'Okay, this is outside of the norm.' It's something that people will always remember." A "moment," Monique West told me, is a performance that "lasts for years and years to come." She recalled a "femme queen realness" category that asked competitors to perform as their favorite female hip-hop artist.

> "Someone comes out and they have their whole house bringing them out in a Barbie doll box. They wheel them out and bring them to the runway, and they're like Nicki Minaj in full character. And they roll them up to the judges, and they just upset the ball. That's a moment. So years down the line they'll be like, 'Do you remember when such-and-such brought Nicki Minaj in the Barbie box?'"

[11] D. Kouyate, "The Role of the Griot," in *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*, ed. Linda Goss and Marian E. Barnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 182.

When people create a moment—a performance that "stops time" or "upset[s] the ball"—it ruptures the everyday. "Moments" are so exceptional that artists may evoke, cite, and perform them in the future.

The emphasis on "moments" helped me understand the importance of recording and archiving the Peabody Ballroom project. Many artists told me they were drawn to the project because their oral histories would be transcribed and added to the "best of human knowledge" in the Library stacks. "What I like about it so much is that it's gonna be documented," Monique Carter told me. "So years down the line you'll be able to tell people, 'If you want to learn about ballroom, you can go the Peabody Library and find out about it.'" For Carter, this archiving makes ballroom history "just as important as everything else that's in the library." As such, ballroom performers were not only drawn to the "archive," but felt a good deal of satisfaction in knowing that their words were being transcribed to be included in Johns Hopkins University Libraries and archival collection. While I was originally apprehensive about video documentation, I decided to partner with the Johns Hopkins MFA film program after learning from the local ballroom scene the importance they attributed to documentation. Students filmed the planning events, the dance workshops, and the ball, eventually producing a short documentary.[12]

Performing the Library

I worked with the advisory committee to create a theme for the ball and co-curate the competition categories. The committee decided that the ball theme and competition categories would be based on the historic collections. Performers, Keith Holt told me, "can take different stories or different books . . . and bring them to life. You can be anything in the library that you want to be." Library curator Paul Espinosa began by presenting a selection of the collections to the advisory committee, usually over dinner. These included Edward Muybridge's 1887 *Animal Locomotion,* a pioneering work in photographic studies of motion; *The Nuremberg Chronicle*, an illustrated 1493 history of the world; and fore-edge books, examples of an art form in which delicate watercolors are painted on the edges of the leaves of a book, concealed under gilded fore-edges and revealed when fanned.

[12] The documentary film is currently available on YouTube: George Peabody Library, "The Peabody Ballroom Experience," September 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfzluN2RKns.

The ballroom advisory committee discussed how to interpret the Library collection through ballroom performance conventions and ultimately created twelve runway, vogue, and realness categories. We advertised the categories on a Facebook event page, on the project webpage, on several Facebook Live videos, and through word of mouth. Competitors then researched the books related to their category to prepare their costumes and performances for the ball. This approach built on existing ballroom conventions, which often require competitors to "do their research" in order to compete.[13] Advisory committee member Enrique St. Laurent appreciated that people "have to do research" to prepare for Peabody categories. "So, when you're researching, you're doing what? You're reading the book. . . . When you're reading, you're learning—but by accident, so to speak."

I also worked with the advisory committee to ensure that the ball remained a ritual performance—and not a spectacle—within the George Peabody Library. We created a door policy that prioritized ballroom artists, advertising the event as "a private, free ball for members of the ballroom community only." I hired respected ballroom leaders to provide security, instead of engaging Hopkins security or Baltimore police.[14] Finally, the advisory committee dictated the spatial arrangement of the ball—everything from the location of the T-shaped runway to the position of the judges on the second-floor library stacks.

The evening of our first ball, held on April 13, 2019, was electric with anticipation. Ballroom artists competed in categories designed specifically for the event, each drawing inspiration from rare books and the history of the Peabody Library. I wanted to integrate oral histories into the ball in a way that would resonate with the performers and honor their narratives. To do this, I created an audio piece that blended excerpts from the oral history interviews I had recorded with a ballroom track by Vjuan Allure, a renowned DJ who also performed at the event. As guests began arriving, the audio played over the loudspeakers, filling the historic library with the voices and sounds of ballroom culture. The response was immediate—people were thrilled to hear their

[13] The 2019 "Love Sex Play" ball, for example, featured the following category for Female Figure Sex Siren: "According to Zohar and the Alphabet of Ben Sira, Lilith was Adam's first wife. / Let the story be told, she left him for Samuel, an archangel, protector of life. / She became a succubus, appearing in men's dreams, tempting them with sex and lore. / A seductress, a demon, all wrapped up in one, tonight we want to see more. (Bring the look of a succubus. . . . DO YOUR RESEARCH)." See Love Sex Play, "Ball Categories," http://lovesexplay.thegarcons.com/all-categories#1531329763767-87c56566-4a44, accessed March 21, 2020.

[14] See, for example, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Baltimore's 'Broken Relationship' with Police," *New York Times*, April 24, 2015.

own stories animating a space so often associated with elite academic knowledge, transforming it into a living archive of black queer and trans history.

The first competition category was "Sex Siren." When a competitor walks this category, the object is to hit the runway and perform sex appeal. The goal is to bring together props, costume, and body in a way that entices everyone, including the judges. As cultural critic madison moore argues, the category can complicate and contest Eurocentric conceptions of beauty. "When done by marginalized bodies, the performance of sex appeal in the safe space of the ballroom scene is critical," moore writes, because they are at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy "in media representations of beauty."[15]

The category, Rhonda Icon told me, also enables some trans women to celebrate their transitions and the modifications they have made to their bodies:

> "You see all types of women on *Essence*. They're models. They're bathing suit models and things like that. But for a male to transition from a male to female and to still have a sexy body, where it's very feminine, very soft, that was something to me because I hold it to my heart. Because not only am I real, I took it a step further and was able to come out of my clothes and still look feminine."

For a trans woman, she told me, performing in the Sex Siren category

> "is hard, because you're dealing with different things. We all have different biological growths. We may not have a small back. We may not have a small stomach. We may be ill built for a woman in the beginning, before your hormones start to work. But for me, to be a slim girl and to take hormones and to get a little fleshy in certain areas and not other areas, that was great to me because it was something that stood out amongst other trans women."

The group curating the Peabody ball categories—including myself, Peabody curator Paul Espinosa, and the five ballroom leaders who made up the advisory group—had no trouble deciding on a library collection for our category. Because "Sex Siren" takes its name from the sirens of Greek myth, we decided our category would take as its inspiration Homer's *Odyssey*.

[15] mMoore, madison. Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric. New York: Yale University Press, 2018, 207.

Espinosa pulled a first edition of *Griechische vasenmalerei* (Greek vase painting) from the Library stacks. The book features an image of a "Siren Vase," created circa 480 b.c. and now part of the British Museum collection. Keith Holt wrote the performance category description: "Odysseus, who is known for his brains, believes he may have found a route home, but he first must pass the most beautiful ladies of the sea. Let's see who will win this epic battle of the sexes." The "male figure" competitors were instructed to "bring it" like "Odysseus lost at sea." The "female figure" competitors were instructed to perform like "the seductive sirens luring all men to their death." We posted the category text, along with an image of the "Siren Vase" on the event Facebook page.

At the ball competition, butch queens (gay men) performed sex appeal as Odysseus. One man wore a harness of rope over his bare chest, as though he were Odysseus bound to the mast of the ship. Trans women performed as the sirens as pictured on the Greek vase. One competitor wore a blue wig and boa to evoke the sea. We projected an image of the "Siren Vase" on a screen behind the elevated runway as they competed. As such, ballroom artists reinterpreted the Odysseus myth, ostensibly a story of heterosexual seduction, as a story about Black queer eroticism and transgender cultural labor.

The performance bridged the "archive" and the "repertoire," and did so in a way that audiences may have originally experienced the *Odyssey*. Before the poems attributed to Homer were written down, they were performed orally, usually by "rhapsodes"—singers or reciters—who might have traveled from city to city or enjoyed a position in a wealthy household. Even after the poems were committed to writing, rhapsodes performed the poems at festivals, often competing against each other for prizes.[16] Espinosa had what he later called a "moment of epiphany" when he saw the category. "We tend to forget," he said after the ball, "that books used to be part of people's everyday lives. Hearing stories, or hearing poems read aloud, or put to music" was commonplace in ancient Greece. Many of these elements were on display at the Peabody. "And that's how I saw these books taking on new life because of the ball," said Espinosa.

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[16] See Jonathan L. Ready and Christos Tsagalis, eds., *Homer in Performance: Rhapsodes, Narrators, and Characters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018); Martin L. West, "Rhapsodes at Festivals," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 173 (2010): 1–13.

Baltimore Beautiful Symbols

More recently, history and performance collided on Saturday, April 15, 2023, when more than three hundred ballroom artists and guests gathered for our third ball competition. Titled "Baltimore Beautiful Symbols," the ball honored "the trailblazers and blueprints—the 'royalty'—who paved the way for Baltimore's ballroom scene." For months leading up to the event, I collaborated with four ballroom leaders—Legendary Rhonda Carr, Icon Enrique St. Laurent, Legendary Marco West, and Icon Sebastian Escada—to curate more than a dozen competition categories that showcased Baltimore's ballroom history while also drawing inspiration from the George Peabody Library's historic collections. We asked competitors to pay homage to Baltimore's Legends and Icons as they brought to life a selection of the Library's rare books. The Library itself—with its soaring atrium, tiers of cast-iron balconies and black-and-white marble floor—was a fitting backdrop for an eye-popping history lesson about Baltimore's ballroom scene.

For over three hours, performers embodied the Legends and Icons who paved the way for those gathered in the Library. For the category "Femme Queen Perfect 10," trans women competed for prizes in a category Rhonda Carr titled "Cleopatra" in honor of Baltimore ballroom legend Sabrina Icon: "a queen much like Cleopatra." In instructions circulated before the ball, Carr asked performers to "compel the judges" by "embodying" both Cleopatra and Sabrina Icon. As they competed, vintage YouTube videos of Sabrina Icon played on a screen behind the runway while the event commentators recounted her contributions and past performances, often chanting in sync with the DJ's signature beats. Another category, written by Enrique St. Laurent, required dancers to perform in the style of Baltimore legend Ricky Allure, embodying his "grace, antics and clever stunts." They were required to dress "as a mystical fairy," inspired by the Peabody Library's copy of Michael Drayton's *Nymphidia: the Court of Fairy* (1814). Every moment was referential, as performers embodied historical figures and fashion, putting modern takes on everything from the "Blood of our Ancestors" to the "Amazons." From the categories to the costumes to the rare books that lined the stacks, history suffused the event.

Among the non-ballroom attendees were roughly twenty-five Hopkins undergraduates who learned about ballroom history, culture, and dance for weeks before the event. Marquis Clanton, an Icon in Baltimore's ballroom scene, led five vogue workshops for students in the Peabody BFA Dance Program, beginning with the "history behind the movements." Clanton and students kicked off the ball with a gorgeous, choreographed performance. Students in my course "Queer Performativity" studied ballroom history for three weeks and attended a class session co-taught by Legendary Marco West. One student wrote that she appreciated the "deep past" that was on display at the ball. "It did not feel like a simple, one night event," she reflected. "It was part of a legacy of the many balls and performers that have taken stage in nights just like this." Another student reported that the ball "put all the things I've learned in class about the history of ball and its transformative power for the queer community into perspective." Being able to immerse herself in the experience "helped shape my understanding of the beauty of ball culture…and the work that goes into queer of color worldmaking."

Studying ballroom history provided students with the context necessary to engage with the ball not as passive spectators, but as informed participants, attuned to the cultural significance of the performances and the histories they embody. Rather than viewing ballroom as mere entertainment, students came to understand it as a complex system of knowledge production, transmission, and preservation—one rooted in movement and intergenerational exchange. As part of my Spring 2022 course, Queer Oral History, students applied these insights by conducting oral histories with ballroom leaders and other members of Baltimore's LGBTQ community. Grounded in queer studies and oral history theory, the course guided students through the ethical and methodological considerations of oral history practice, from interview preparation to the co-creation of narratives. Over the semester, students conducted and transcribed interviews with more than fifteen queer and trans Baltimore residents, capturing histories that might otherwise go unrecorded. These interviews now archived at Johns Hopkins, reinforcing the significance of queer history and community-driven archival practices.

Conclusion

Oral history is not merely a tool for documenting the past; it can actively shape how histories are constructed and who has the authority to tell them. The narratives of Baltimore's ballroom leaders illuminate how queer and trans people of color have forged alternative kinship structures, resisted systemic oppression, and cultivated spaces of belonging. These histories complicate institutional archives that have long excluded or misrepresented marginalized voices, underscoring the importance of community-driven storytelling. As both a methodology and a form of activism, oral history provides a means of reclaiming historical narratives on the terms of those who lived them.

In the Peabody Ballroom Experience, oral history has facilitated a process of shared authority between scholars and ballroom practitioners, reinforcing the significance of recording and archiving personal and collective histories. For many ballroom artists, the project has offered an opportunity to create a lasting record of their lives and contributions. While it has not dismantled the structural inequities between a predominantly white, wealthy university and a majority-black city, it challenges a charity-based model of public history by affirming the intellectual and cultural significance of ballroom history. In doing so, it asserts the worth of black queer and trans knowledge in a city shaped by the enduring legacies of segregation and white supremacy.

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