

“I Look Too Good Not to Be Seen”: Bodily Capital and ‘Realness’ in *Pose*

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Abstract: In this article, the pilot of the 2018 show *Pose*, which explores the ballroom scene of the 1980s in New York, will be analyzed. In the show, the life and struggles of transgender, poor, Black, Latinx, or generally marginalized characters are narrated as they navigate their own colorful world but also deal with AIDS, heartbreak and discrimination. As a basis for my reading, I will connect the theory of ‘bodily capital,’ which is an adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu’s work, to the concept of ‘realness,’ which plays an important role in the ballroom scene and LGBTQ culture in general but can also be employed as a theoretical concept. The latter describes the practice of performing gender and racial norms, stemming from the desire to belong, to fit in. Ultimately, I argue that in this episode of *Pose*, the pictured field of 1980s ballroom culture is structured by bodily capital and that realness is depicted as being unavailable to those not possessing the ‘right’ kind of bodily capital.

The FX show *Pose*, which premiered in 2018, delves into the rich, loud, colorful, diverse, and phantasmic world of the ballroom scene of the late 1980s in New York City. The characters that inhabit this world are not, as one most often sees in television series, mostly white, straight, and middle-class, but transgender, gay, poor, Black, or Latinx, and generally marginalized. Even more unusually, the characters are actually portrayed by transgender and gay actors—in fact, the show boasts the largest cast of trans actors up until now (Pollard). *Pose* emerged at a moment in time when LGBTQ culture in general, and ballroom culture more specifically, had already reached a more mainstream audience through increasing representation in media, for instance through the famous reality show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which introduced many viewers to such concepts as ‘houses,’ ‘voguing,’ and ‘realness’ (Crist). *Pose* follows Blanca, a transgender woman who, after being diagnosed with HIV, sets out to build up her own house in order to leave a lasting legacy in this competitive scene. Angel, a transgender sex worker, and Damon, a young man who was kicked out by his parents when they discovered that he is gay, join this family. Together, they navigate the perilous ‘real’ world and the world of the ballroom community.

In the analysis of this show, I will focus solely on the first episode in order to provide a close reading and detailed analysis without exceeding the scope of this article. As a theoretical lens, I will employ the theory of ‘bodily capital.’ This use of theory is mainly based on the article “Bourdieu and the Body” by Connell and Mears, which adapts Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of different kinds of capital but specifically focuses on questions of embodiment and “incorporated history” (562). In addition, it describes how bodies can take on distinct meanings and values in different fields, depending on their individual characteristics and history, and the norms they are expected to adhere to in specific contexts. I will connect this understanding to the concept of realness, which plays an important role in the ballroom scene and LGBTQ culture in general. Bailey defines doing realness as “adherence to certain performances, self-presentations, and embodiments that are believed to capture the authenticity of particular gender and sexual identities” (377). Thus, it describes the practice of performing gender and racial norms, which stems from the desire to belong, to fit in, and even to avoid discrimination and danger.

All in all, I argue that this episode of *Pose* portrays the field of 1980s ballroom culture as generally structured by bodily capital, while realness is depicted as being unavailable to those not possessing the ‘right’ kind of bodily capital. In my analysis, I will start by exploring the concept of the field and by describing two fields that are established in this first episode: the ballroom scene and young urban professional culture (in the show referred to as ‘yuppie’), the latter being mainly connected to Trump Tower. Next, I will discuss the concept of realness, its roots, and the role it plays in the show. Finally, I will turn to bodily capital: first, tracing the concept back to its Bourdieusian roots; second, discussing how it can be related to realness; and lastly, demonstrating how these two concepts are shown to be connected in *Pose*.

FIELDS IN *POSE*

In the first episode of *Pose*, the viewer is introduced to two worlds that could not be more different from each other: the colorful world of New York City’s ballroom culture of the late 1980s and the corporate world of yuppies working in Trump Tower. Following Bourdieu, what can be witnessed here are two very different fields, each with distinct characteristics and values. In this chapter, I will give an overview of Bourdieu’s concept of the field and trace how in *Pose* these two worlds are created visually and through the characters that inhabit them.

According to Elaine M. Power, “[f]ields are structured spaces organized around particular types of capital, consisting of dominant and subordinate positions” (50). Fields are characterized by the struggle for “status and domination” and structured by different kinds of capital people accrue—“economic, cultural, social, and

symbolic capital,” which takes on different forms in specific fields (Morris 54). Thus, what might be considered cultural capital in one field, for example, takes on a different meaning in another. However, fields are not completely independent from external factors—the struggle for dominance within one field is dependent on and influenced by general struggles for power in the larger social field (54).

In general, the ballroom world is a community inhabited by Black and Latinx queer and gender nonconforming individuals—cis and transgender women and men of different sexualities and identities (Bailey 367). Although aspects of ballroom culture have been around since the early twentieth century, starting in the 1990s, this world has rapidly expanded. Nowadays, almost every major city has a ballroom scene (368). It functions as a safe space, or as Blanca says in *Pose*: “Balls are a gathering of people who are not welcome to gather anywhere else, a celebration of a life that the rest of the world does not deem worthy of celebration” (00:27:18–00:27:29). Ballroom culture is organized by two structuring elements: houses and balls (Bailey 367). Houses function as substitute families for individuals who are often rejected by their biological families and the world at large (00:26:50). They are led by ‘mothers’ (mostly gay men or transgender women) and/or ‘fathers’ (mostly ‘butch queens’ or transgender men) (Bailey 367). In the pilot, for instance, Blanca leaves the ‘House of Abundance’ to set up her own house in order to provide a home for those cast out by society (00:21:12–00:24:08).

Part of being a member of a house is to participate in the so-called balls, competitions in which the members ‘walk’ in certain ‘categories.’ Thus, they present clothes on a runway, vogue—which is a specific style of dance invented in and popularized by the ballroom world—and give theatrical performances (Bailey 368). These performances are used to imitate gender and social norms, many of which are rooted in white culture, which is reflected in the categories. For instance, members of the ballroom scene can compete as Ivy League students, ‘executives,’ and as members of the military, all the while ‘doing’ performative femininity or masculinity (Butler, *Bodies* 88). Bailey remarks that these performances serve a larger purpose and desire: “Black queer members of the ballroom community use performance to unmark themselves as gender and sexual nonconforming subjects. Unmarking oneself through performance or ‘passing’ is a necessary strategy by which to avoid discrimination and violence in the urban space” (366). The 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*—directed by Jennie Livingston—oftentimes serves as the “primary point of reference” for existing scholarship (368). *Pose* itself was clearly influenced by this depiction of the ballroom world, as evidenced, for instance, by Livingston directing one episode of the show (Dry).

The ballroom field in *Pose* is introduced to the viewer as colorful, joyful, loud, and full of music. To 1980s beats, flashing disco lights, and crowds cheering, drinking, voguing, and approvingly snapping their fingers, members of the

community present costumes in the category of ‘royalty’ while Pray Tell, the announcer of the balls, excitedly either cheers them on or ‘reads’ (makes fun of) them for the outfits they selected (00:06:31–00:10:11). The ballroom itself is decorated with golden streamers, illuminated by pink lighting, and full of people wearing daring and colorful clothing. It seems like a world parallel to and independent of the dark streets of New York; there is an atmosphere of fantasy created in these scenes. This feeling is reinforced even more through the entrance of the members of the House of Abundance, who walk the ball in clothes worn by *real* royalty ‘mopped’ (stolen) from the Museum of Natural History and are awarded scores of ten across the board. Immediately, the value of realness in this field is established.

The juxtaposition between the ‘real’ world and this field is made obvious in the scenes immediately preceding this ball: the House of Abundance stealing these costumes (00:02:30–00:06:17). They walk into the museum already wearing clothes that clearly distinguish them from the average museumgoer: Bright, flashy jackets, fur coats, large sunglasses, and fringe bags visually establish the difference and deviance of the field. This impression is further solidified by the fact that the house presents itself as visually cohesive, which is emphasized by some shots showing them walking in formation with house mother Elektra leading the way (e.g., 00:03:02).

It is made clear that this fantasy-like world—inhabited by self-declared queens, which is emphasized even further through the royalty theme—is judged very differently by the rest of society when the police show up at the end of the ball to arrest the members of the house for stealing. This plot point acts as a larger metaphor—this community seems to be literally policed for their clothes, their activities, and their way of life. Here, another feature of the field is established: It is characterized through deviance, through difference from the larger social field. As Bailey notes,

ballroom members have to live in different worlds. One of these worlds imposes strict prescriptions of gender and sexual meaning and behavior. [...] [T]he world of ballroom and its balls provides a space and occasion for community members to embrace their own gendered and sexual meanings more freely. (377)

The second, very different field being introduced in this episode is 1980s yuppie corporate America. The viewer gets familiar with this world through the character of Stan, who is on his way to a job interview in Trump Tower. Immediately, the differences between the two worlds are highlighted: While the ballroom scene is loud and colorful, in Trump Tower, the dominant color is beige and the camera moves more slowly, mostly presenting square shapes and clear lines (00:32:27–00:34:06). This visual difference can be seen once again later in the episode when Stan takes his wife to the Rainbow Room to celebrate their anniversary (00:57:49–01:00:06). Once more, the color palette in the restaurant is largely based on beige

tones and the whole scene seems to be steeped in sepia light. When Stan has a vision of Angel while dancing with his wife, the lighting changes to a bluish hue along with the music switching from 1950s slow jazz to Kate Bush’s 1980s pop song “Running Up That Hill.” Thus, audiovisually, the two fields are clearly distinguished, with the beige world of Trump Tower presented as safe and slightly boring in contrast to the colorful, diverse, yet unpredictable world of the balls.

The values and kinds of capital that govern this field are presented clearly by Stan when his future employer asks him what he wants: “Well, I want to be you. [...] I want what you have. I want a view of the river or the park or both. I want to be able to walk by a shop on Fifth, see something in the window for my wife and just go buy it.” The field seems to be structured by economic capital and the status that money can buy, an ideal referred to in the episode as “the new American Dream” (00:33:24–00:33:49).

This emphasis appears even more significant when considering that in the preceding scene, one of the balls’ categories is ‘executive realness.’ Here, Blanca, who introduces Damon to the ballroom world, talks about how she herself and the members of her community generally do not have access to the American Dream embodied by this specific type—the executive (00:28:00–00:29:31). Stan is depicted as the newcomer to his field, somebody still aspiring to achieve this new American Dream. The difference between him and members of the ballroom community is that he has the capacity and the (bodily) capital needed to achieve it.

‘REALNESS’

One concept that plays a major role over the course of the show in general, and in the ballroom culture at large, is realness. Bailey characterizes realness as the “fundamental performance criteri[on]” in the ballroom world (377), and Butler calls it a “standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories” (*Bodies* 88). Thus, it is an important structuring concept within the field of ballroom culture. Realness means the imitation and embodiment of social, gender, racial, and class norms, trying to approximate an ideal that is perceived to represent a sense of belonging to the ‘real’ world. It represents an attempt to banish any signs of sexual and gender deviance from the body in order to fit into a heteronormative society that is not welcoming or accepting (Bailey 378; Butler, *Bodies* 88).

In the show, the concept is ubiquitous and used in a variety of contexts and ways. Pray Tell, for instance, frequently uses the word when describing a category (e.g., “executive realness” [00:28:00]) or a particularly well-done outfit (“we’re giving realness” [00:08:00]). Here, beyond being a signifier of status in this world, realness seems to be sort of a catchall word. However, it gains a deeper meaning as well, for

instance when Blanca describes the concept to Damon: “Realness is what it’s all about. Being able to fit into the straight, white world, to embody the American Dream. But we don’t have access to that dream” (00:29:04). Realness once more describes the desire to fit in with the world, to not be deviant, to conform to gender, social, and bodily norms, and to be considered as a human in the eyes of the world.

The goal of achieving realness oftentimes extends beyond the actual balls into the everyday lives of members of the ballroom community. Bailey points out that constantly trying to achieve realness is not only a consequence of the desire to belong but also literally a matter of survival, as ‘passing’ (thus, seeming ‘real’) is often a necessary prerequisite in order to avoid discrimination, exclusion, and violence (366). Oftentimes, as Bailey claims, ‘doing’ realness is seen as a way to be visible in the world of balls but invisible in the ‘real’ world (380).

In this context, the concept of passing in connection to realness is productive as well. In *Neo-Passing: Performing Identity After Jim Crow*, Godfrey and Young argue that while passing can be a means of social mobility—giving a person the opportunity to be accepted—“it can also operate as a form of social constraint imposed on another; it functions both as a way that individuals can move between social positions and as a way that society can police or contain their movements” (6). Similarly, doing realness can be regarded as a way of reiterating certain norms and restricting oneself to a conventional, normative way of being. Thus, societal norms that are responsible for the marginalization of people who deviate from the standard indirectly dictate how the same people should or have to live their lives—trying to approximate white middle-class ideals. Similarly, Butler has famously pondered the question whether drag and performative femininity are a sign of subversion or a reiteration of norms, concluding that while it can be both, they first and foremost signify a desire to belong (*Bodies* 85, 91).

Right from the very beginning of *Pose*, it is made clear how the category of realness structures the field of the ballroom world. When the House of Abundance argues over how to present themselves best at the next ball, Elektra steals Blanca’s idea. When Blanca confronts her about it, Elektra exclaims that only a “real mother,” meaning herself, would be able to properly execute this plan. She is supported by other members of the house who chime in saying: “Real, you hear that, cross-dresser?” (00:00:22–00:02:32). It becomes immediately apparent that, in this field, status is measured by realness, achievements connected to that, and certain bodily attributes. By implying that Blanca was not a ‘real woman’ but simply a “cross-dresser,” her existence as a person is called into question.

This narrative is reinforced when Elektra learns about Blanca’s intention to form her own house and subsequently continues to unleash her anger upon her: “Look at me. Look at you. I can pass. I can strut down Fifth Avenue when the sun is

sitting high as my cheekbones and be waited on at Bergdorf’s, same as any white woman, while you hide away in the shadows. You’re way ahead of yourself in the game, beast” (00:23:21–00:23:38). Elektra actively ties Blanca’s ability to be a leader in their world to her bodily capacities, to her realness, by citing her own positive attributes, certain *bodily* features. As illustrated above, the body clearly plays an important role in achieving the ideal of realness. Furthermore, the meaning of the concept of realness is made clear: Achieving realness signifies being able to take part in the ‘real’ world, being treated with respect—and the only way this seems to be possible for members of the ballroom community is by passing, by performing gender and racial norms as authentically as possible.

This becomes even clearer in relation to the scene shortly afterwards in which Stan describes his vision of the new American Dream, including the ability to walk down Fifth Avenue buying anything he wants for his wife (00:33:10–00:33:36). For Elektra and other trans women, seemingly, the more pressing dream is simply being able to walk down Fifth Avenue during the day without being discriminated against while shopping. For them, the only way to achieve this is by doing realness, by passing, and, thus, by hiding a part of themselves that is not deemed acceptable by society.

The epitome of what realness means to the characters of *Pose* can be found in a short speech Pray Tell gives at the very beginning of the episode. When announcing the category of ‘royalty,’ in which the House of Abundance walks as well, he exclaims: “Yes. You own everything. Everything is yours. You own your jewels, you own your country, you own your man. You own every motherfucking thing that is there” (00:06:31–00:06:50). These words describe the desire to belong and the pain of being excluded from wealth, relationships, citizenship, and other kinds of capital that govern social fields. Thus, the fantasies that are created and embodied in these balls are all representative of the larger fantasy of being a part of the ‘real’ world.

It is telling to see how realness in the show is specifically connected to capitalist endeavors such as wealth and consumption. In her definition of realness, Elektra immediately evokes the ability to go shopping at a department store. Similarly, Pray Tell’s concept of realness seems to revolve around ownership. This ties together with the second field of the Trump Tower world, juxtaposing the loud, colorful, almost phantasmic ballroom world in that it provides an ideal foil against which all characteristics of this field are emphasized even more clearly. Stan’s world of corporate America is presented as an extreme fantasy version of the ‘real’ world, of realness, in which all of the aspects that seem desirable to the inhabitants of the ballroom field are magnified: wealth and status, belonging, a stereotypical family life. Thus, it acts as a stand-in for the elusive, never identifiable ‘real’ world and the life of realness that Blanca, Damon, Angel, and the other characters dream of. By presenting such an exaggerated version of realness, the show seems to introduce an

ambivalence to the concept as defined by the ballroom world: whether or not the kind of realness displayed in the Trump Tower world even depicts something desirable.

BODILY CAPITAL

The concept of realness in the world of ballroom culture is, as I argue, closely connected to so-called bodily capital, a concept which I will explore in the following chapter. As it can be regarded as a spin-off concept of Bourdieu's theories of the field, capital, and habitus, I will first give an overview of his work before delving into bodily capital, the role it plays in the show, and how it is connected to notions of realness. Finally, I will take a closer look at two of the show's main characters, Angel and Damon, as their story lines in the first episode clearly show the important role that bodily capital plays in their field.

Bourdieu: Field, Capital, and Habitus

As discussed above, Bourdieu's theories are based on the concept of the field, which is structured by struggles for dominance and power through the accumulation of different kinds of capital. Bourdieu describes capital as "accumulated labor," which enables people to harness "social energy" and exists in materialized and embodied forms ("Forms" 15). He distinguishes between three kinds of capital: economic, cultural, and social capital (16). Economic capital is directly transferable into currency or can appear in the institutionalized form of, for instance, property rights (15). For cultural capital, Bourdieu distinguishes three different forms: the embodied state, in which capital appears "in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (17), the objectified state, which takes the form of cultural goods, such as books or pictures, and the institutionalized state, e.g., educational certificates and degrees (17-21).

Social capital, the third kind of capital Bourdieu defines, is especially interesting for this article, because the ballroom scene depicted in *Pose* seems to be heavily structured by this specific kind of capital. Social capital can be defined as the resources afforded to a person by being connected to a group of people; it is collectively shared profits or credentials (21). Bourdieu describes certain characteristics these groups often share, for instance a common name and usually a small group or single person, a leader, who the totality of social capital is concentrated on, and who is a representative for the group (21, 23).

The ballroom world in *Pose* is structured by groups, called houses, that afford their members social capital, give them their name, and are led by figures that

embody the standing of the group in society in general—the house mothers. When Blanca explains to Damon how her world works, he asks if there is money to be made at the balls and she replies: “[b]etter than money. You can actually make a name for yourself by winning a trophy or two. And in our community, the glory of your name is everything” (00:27:21–00:27:57). Members of the ballroom community live in a world in which they are not permitted to accrue economic, cultural, or social capital. In their own field, however, they can ‘make a name’ for themselves and earn social capital. For instance, Blanca was called Blanca Abundance at the beginning of the show—after founding her own house, she is known as Blanca Evangelista.

Another clue at the important structuring instrument of social capital in the ballroom world of this show is given when Blanca explains to Elektra why she wants to set up her own house in the first place. She explains: “Because in our world there is only one way to leave something behind, proof that I was here: building a legendary house my way with my ideas” (00:22:19–00:22:36). With every other kind of capital unavailable to Blanca and her recent HIV diagnosis pointing at the probability of a short life, she wants to solidify her place and legacy in her world by having her own name and group and using it to gain social capital. Part of the glory a group can achieve, and therefore the social capital available, is gained through displays of realness and the ‘right’ bodily characteristics.

The concept of habitus, connected to field and capital, aims to explain behavior and dispositions connected to social structures, such as gender, class, and race, without claiming to be deterministic (Power 48). As Bourdieu explains: “The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (principium divisionis) of these practices” (*Distinction* 170). He claims that embodied characteristics such as clothing, speech, posture, and manners are all influenced by a person’s upbringing and background. However, the behavior of a person is not entirely predetermined but guided and structured by their habitus (Power 49). Bourdieu mostly uses this concept to explain differences between social classes and explains that the upper classes always try to distinguish themselves from the middle and lower classes in their habitus. Attempts to imitate habits, manners, and styles of those on top of the social order, he claims, will never be considered more than a bluff, imitation, or foil, and will only cause the upper classes to develop new methods of distinction (*Distinction* 251–52).

When connecting this theory to the concept of realness, one could argue that in the eyes of the larger public, the quest to achieve the ideal of being ‘real,’ and to belong, might only remain a dream. In *Pose*, the characters try to pass; they thus try to hide the deviance of their bodies in order to fit into the ‘real’ world. However, these attempts fail, for instance when Angel tries to get a job at Trump Tower and is rejected because she is ‘clocked’ (they notice that she is a transgender woman)

(00:45:38-00:46:43). Her effort of trying to pass, and thus trying to assume the habitus of those inhabiting what she imagines as the ‘real’ world, is seen by them as nothing more than an imitation.

Bodily Capital: An Overview

Bourdieu’s theories have proven to be quite productive over the years, and many scholars have taken his work as a starting point for theorizing new concepts, especially to define different kinds of capital. There have been a number of different theories, for instance, regarding the body and physicality, as Bourdieu’s work is explicitly conceived to build a bridge between the physical and the mental. For example, there have been notions of erotic capital (Green; Hakim) and physical capital (Shilling), but one of the most important spin-off concepts is that of bodily capital. The concept was introduced by Waquant in 1995 in an essay about the role of the body in boxing milieus, and since then a number of authors have used it to examine the role of the body in different contexts, like in the modeling industry (Mears and Finlay) or in regards to aging (Antoninetti and Garrett).

In an essay from 2018, which serves as the basis for this article’s understanding of bodily capital, Connell and Mears collect all of these different notions, unite them, and suggest new approaches. They view bodily capital as “embodied cultural capital,” thus as “incorporated history,” which they theorize could be either an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on what kind of history is sedimented on the body (563). Therefore, depending on the field where people find themselves, certain bodily features or certain movements might be considered as either a resource or an impediment. As a way forward, Connell and Mears suggest to queer the concept of bodily capital “by resisting and subverting traditional valuation of normative bodies,” as a starting point for which they take fat, disability, and queer studies (562). Oftentimes, those bodies that are not deemed ‘normal,’ such as fat, queer, or disabled bodies, and therefore do not possess the ‘right’ kind of bodily capital, are penalized and stigmatized (568). The authors also resist a neoliberal interpretation of bodily capital that assumes that bodies are nothing more than assets in which one has to invest. Instead, they propose that bodily capital must always be seen in the context of social hierarchies and hegemonic power structures, as such an approach inevitably marginalizes those who might not be able to, or want to, change their ‘unruly’ bodies (569). They suggest subverting dominant interpretations of the concept by concentrating on analyzing “those bodies that are positioned as the most marginal, devalued, and ‘queer’ within dominant fields of power” (570).

Similarly, in her early work, Judith Butler claims that bodies who fail to ‘do’ gender right are punished in our society and that adhering to the gender binary

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“humanizes” individuals by forming them into subjects (*Gender* 178). She defines sex as a regulatory practice, a norm through which a body can qualify itself “for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (*Bodies* xii). Those who do not qualify are banished into an “uninhabitable’ zone,” and are used to constitute those who ‘do’ sex and gender ‘right’ as subjects (xiii). Meanwhile, they are denied that very status, and consequently their very humanity is called into question (xvii). Ultimately, these “bodies which fail to materialize provide the necessary ‘outside,’ if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter” (xxiv).

When connecting these notions to the concept of bodily capital, it becomes clear that bodies that fail to adhere to societal norms lack the ‘right’ kind of bodily capital and, as is depicted in *Pose*, are therefore denied access to other kinds of capital as well as to the larger social field. Therefore, it is not surprising that members of the ballroom community strive for realness, for a sense of belonging, and, in some cases, for bodies that adhere to the norms that society imposes upon us all.

Bodily Capital in *Pose*

In the first episode of *Pose*, it becomes clear that the body and bodily capital play a central role for the characters in this field. The show begins with shots that are focused on the body and its movements: They show the members of House Abundance voguing, looking in mirrors, and zooms in on specific body parts, for instance the lips (00:00:25-00:00:47). From the outset, the focus on these bodies provides the basis for the premise of the entire first episode and the show in general: The worth of these characters in their field and to the outside world is largely determined by their bodies. This can also be seen by the way that the houses and individuals fight for status in this field: by ‘walking’ in balls, moving their bodies—voguing—to fight for dominance and status (e.g., 01:02:26-01:04:49), and generally presenting their physicality.

Within this field, the characters’ bodies are their capital, but in the ‘real’ world, they become a hazard—a large part of the reason why they are excluded and penalized. Elektra summarizes this dilemma at the very beginning of the episode when trying to break out of the museum she is locked in along with her children: “I look too good not to be seen” (00:05:31). Within her field, her beauty and her body are what make her seen, and she has a desire to be admired by the rest of the world. But the very aspect of her that proves an asset in one field—her body—is the reason why she has to try to be invisible in general society. The characters in *Pose* constantly strive to prove their realness to the different fields they inhabit, that of the ballroom and the ‘real’ world they dream of being part of. By wielding their

bodily capital, they try to prove that their bodies are ‘real,’ conforming to the norms deemed important and necessary by society generally and the different fields they inhabit specifically.

I will now focus on two of the main characters of the show, Angel and Damon, who demonstrate through their distinct stories the role of bodily capital and its connection to realness in *Pose* particularly well. Angel, a transgender Latina sex worker, navigates between two different worlds, that of the ballroom scene and that of the yuppie Trump Tower sphere. She meets Stan, who, after getting a job at Trump Tower, celebrates by driving down to the docks and picking her up (00:34:10–00:35:49). To him, she represents adventure, difference, and an escape from his increasingly corporate life. Her deviant body, one that society considers to be neither male nor female, *is* her capital in his eyes and presumably in the eyes of her customers in general. Therefore, the body that leads to her being excluded and marginalized in the ‘real’ world here becomes her capital—something she can exchange for money, thus making it her economic capital.

The show clearly highlights that Stan is interested in Angel and her body precisely because it is different: When they get to the hotel room he rented for the occasion, Angel asks him to simply tell her what he wants, and he immediately requests that she takes off her skirt and underwear. While she does so, the camera keeps the focus on his face, displaying an expression of longing. When Angel remarks that she is saving up to get her “little friend” removed, he quips: “It’s not that little” (00:37:00–00:38:30). Thus, he seems to be fixated on the very part of her body that encapsulates her deviance in the eyes of society.

Their different life circumstances become even clearer when Angel asks Stan whether there are any parts of his body that he would like to get rid of. He answers: “Yeah, I guess mine are all on the inside, though” (00:39:28–00:39:35). Shilling’s theory of physical capital states that for the lower classes, the body represents a means to an end, but for the upper classes, an end in itself (655). As a well-off white man, Stan has the luxury of not having to worry about his body and the capital it might represent; bodily capital does not play as big a role in his field as it does in hers. For Angel, her body represents conflicts of gender identity, her means of survival, and, at the same time, an impediment and danger.

Their two worlds clash further when, in an attempt to start a conversation, Stan asks Angel what she wants, mirroring her request from before. She answers: “No one’s ever asked me that before. I want a home of my own. I want a family. I wanna take care of someone. And I want someone to take care of me. I want to be treated like any other woman. That’s my dream” (00:40:37–00:41:30). While she tells him of her vision for a better future, the camera cuts to shots of Stan returning home to his wife and kids, having achieved all of the things Angel describes. What she dreams of is her own interpretation of realness, of belonging, of normalcy—but for her it is

out of reach. At this point in the episode, Stan has already professed his own desire for the ‘new’ American Dream—what he has does not seem to be enough for him. It becomes clear that, while they are both discontent with their lives, Angel does not have access to the realness that he seems to reject. This is mostly due to her skin color and, most importantly, because of her deviant body. After her encounter with Stan, it becomes clear that her dream of realness is out of reach due to her lack of ‘right’ bodily capital—she is a transgender woman of color trying to gain access to a white, heteronormative world. Angel attempts to become a part of this ‘real’ world, his world, by trying to get a job at one of the shops in Trump Tower, but she is immediately rejected. Hurt, she asks: “What’s the problem, I’m too much woman for you?” (00:45:38–00:46:43). This rejection from realness is emphasized afterwards when she waits for Stan in front of the building and he rebuffs her. He asks her to go away and adds: “I have a wife. And kids. You’re not somebody I can be with” (00:47:18–00:47:35). While she has the ‘right’ kind of bodily capital for him to live out a fantasy and escape his daily life, she has the ‘wrong’ kind of capital for him to be with, or even be seen with, in his field.

Her string of rejections continues in the field of the ballroom scene. Upset from what transpired earlier in the day, that evening Angel spontaneously decides to walk in the category of ‘high fashion evening wear’ and gets ‘read’ for her outfit. After she is done, Pray Tell demands: “Anyone else who’s real please?” (00:49:34–00:50:32). Even in her own world she is rejected, denied the status of realness, does not belong. This is emphasized even further by a later scene in which Stan and his wife eat at an expensive restaurant, wearing exactly the kind of high-fashion evening wear members of the ballroom scene try to emulate (00:57:49–01:00:06). Here, once more, the show emphasizes the different opportunities for realness, awarded to people with and without deviant bodies. Ultimately, in each of these scenes, Angel is denied access to a community because her body is deemed deviant, because of the lack of ‘right’ bodily capital.

Throughout these scenes, it becomes clear that Angel is in an impossible position: While she tries to display her bodily capital in different fields, each one demands a different kind of bodily capital in order for her to be seen as ‘real,’ which she never attains. The very deviance of her body with which she is able to earn money in certain spaces prevents her from attaining a life that she deems to be ‘real,’ that society pronounces to be acceptable. Similarly, the realness she is supposed to display in the loud, colorful, over-the-top ballroom world, which always carries an element of fantasy, is different from the realness which is required for her to take part in the ‘real’ world. There, she is expected to blend in, to display normalcy, not to deviate from the norm—she is expected to pass. Thus, she has to live in a constant state of contradiction.

In this next section, I will focus on Damon, whose life is differently structured by bodily capital. While Damon is cast out of his parent's house—and, therefore, out of 'real' life—and as a Black, gay man is considered deviant by the world in general, in contrast to Angel he does have the opportunity to leverage his bodily capital, his ability to dance, into a better life. While Angel is marginalized because of her body, Damon has the opportunity to use his body to improve his situation.

From the very beginning, Damon's aspirations as a dancer are clearly depicted and represented through his visit to The New School of contemporary dance, led by a Black woman. When he arrives in New York, he immediately visits their site and watches, mesmerized, the strong bodies of the dancers swirling through the air and performing impressive skills—bodies that look like his (00:25:01-00:25:36). He sees that these people leveraged their bodily capital into an education. He acts on this realization by dancing in the same park where he had been sleeping on a bench, trying to earn money and thus attempting to convert his bodily capital into economic capital. At this moment, Blanca walks by and notices him, inviting him to become a part of her newly founded house and offering him a place to stay. Therefore, through his talent as a dancer (i.e., his bodily capital), the show depicts him as moving up in the world and gaining value. His reaction, declining the offer, reveals the way he sees himself: "I'm not like you, I'm sorry. My dreams are real" (00:25:43-00:27:19). Judging her by her appearance, he concludes that she cannot be a part of the 'real' world. He, on the other hand, has enough 'right' bodily capital because of his talent and lack of deviancy to make it in the general social field. It is not enough for him to dance at balls, he wants to dance in the 'real' world and become a star. He, as a Black, gay man, may be marginalized in the world, but as he considers himself and his body to be 'real'—unlike Blanca, who is a transgender woman and therefore not 'real'—he also categorizes his own aspirations as 'real' in contrast to hers. His conclusion seems to be that he has a chance of taking part in the 'real' world, but she does not. A distinction is thus made between members of the community that identify with their assigned gender and those who do not. Realness remains an aspirational ideal for the entire field, but some are more likely to be included in the 'real' world than others.

Damon's aspirations to use his bodily capital as a way out of his current situation are further emphasized when Blanca explains the concept of realness to him and asks: "I mean, isn't that what you're trying to do? Dance your way into that world? The world of acceptability?" (00:29:21-00:29:30). Here, the show specifically spells out Damon's story line: He plans to achieve realness through leveraging his bodily capital. In this first episode, he takes the first step towards that goal when, with the help of Blanca, he gets to audition for, and is later accepted to, The New School (01:09:54-01:14:38). To Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance With Somebody," he expresses himself through his body, incorporating dance moves ranging from

classical ballet to voguing. His audition is an unusually long scene: By showing him dancing to the entire song, the episode gets the chance to display his body and to express his journey through his movements. While he starts out shy, rethinking certain dance moves, using his whole body to show his frustration, he ultimately seems to find his joy and confidence and triumphs. This underscores his struggles while at the same time representing his journey up to this point, and it ultimately reinforces the idea that, while it might be a difficult process, he can triumph through his bodily capital.

All in all, Damon’s story is very different from that of Angel or other transgender characters in that it is clearly shown in this first episode that he can use his talents, his bodily capital, as a way into realness. In contrast, their lack of ‘right’ bodily capital is the very reason they are not able to do the same. Their only option is to try to get access to the ‘real’ world by passing, pretending to adhere to society’s bodily norms, while he can use his ‘real’ body and simply be himself.

CONCLUSION

In the first episode of *Pose*, the concept of realness, which plays an important part in the show’s exploration of the ballroom world of late 1980s New York, is shown to be intricately connected to bodily capital. The field of the New York ballroom space is depicted as being structured by bodily capital, as status can only be achieved through one’s body, by walking and voguing in the balls, and, most importantly, by displaying a body conforming to societal norms, thus always approximating realness. However, bodily capital plays an important role not only within the ballroom field. The characters’ perceived lack of ‘right’ bodily capital, due to their ‘unruly’ bodies, is shown to be the reason for their marginalization and for the fact that they are denied access to other kinds of capital. The queer bodies portrayed in the show are excluded from the realness they strive for.

In contrast, the other field the show focuses on, the New York yuppie world that the viewer gets to know through the eyes of Stan, is used as a foil to embody this aspirational ideal of realness and to simultaneously deconstruct it. Stan is not happy in his life, despite his financial security and traditional family structure. It is through Angel’s character that the show portrays the different kinds of value a body can have within the worlds that are created here: While her body represents adventure and a departure from Stan’s daily life, her lack of ‘right’ bodily capital—realness—prevents him from letting her into his world. In her own field, on the other hand, her value is dependent on her performance of realness in the balls she attends and in her daily life.

Through Damon’s character, the show once more emphasizes the value of bodily capital in this world. But it also seems to convey that Damon’s body, while gay and

Black, is still perceived to be less deviant than Angel's, because he is able to leverage his bodily capital, which is defined by his talent for dancing, into a better life. His body is still seen as 'real' by society and thus has more of a chance to be successful outside of the ballroom field. *Pose*, through emphasizing the different experiences within the queer community, aims to criticize the injustices that transgender members face both inside and outside the LGBTQ world.

The show is set in the late 1980s, in which gay and transgender people were marginalized and often treated with contempt and cruelty. It is important to note, however, that this show is significant in today's society precisely because these problems have by no means disappeared. Therefore, visibility and representation are vitally important, and *Pose*, through its many-faceted portrayal of trans characters and through its casting of trans actors, contributes to these goals. Similarly, paying attention to shows such as this in scholarship is another step that I deem necessary to take in order to increase visibility for people and bodies that are usually marginalized and disregarded. From a theoretical standpoint, analyzing this show by queering a concept such as bodily capital and by showing how well it connects to and interacts with the concept of realness, which is rooted in LGBTQ culture, therefore is a worthwhile endeavor—and something upon which future projects can build.

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