

# Ballroom Freedom School

## *A Vogue'ology Collective Project<sup>1\*</sup>*

Proposed by Michael Roberson (House of Garçon) and Robert Sember (Ultra-red)

### **Background: The House | Ballroom Scene and the Vogue'ology Collective**

Transgender, lesbian, bisexual and gay African-American men and women must overcome complex challenges to establish and secure welcoming and nourishing communities. While we are already connected with multiple social groups, ranging from religious congregations to movements in support of racial and ethnic minorities, our membership in these groups is almost always conditional and tenuous. This marginalization sustains the LGBT community's burdens of stigma, violence, housing insecurity, and HIV infection rates, estimated to be among the highest of any population in the U.S. One response to this marginalization has been the formation of self-sustaining social networks and cultural groups, such as the House | Ballroom scene, an artistic collective and intentional kinship system that has grown over the past 50 years into a crucial social movement for LGBT persons of color.

The origins of the House | Ballroom scene are in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century "faerie balls" and cross-dressing pageants made popular during the Harlem Renaissance. The modern Ballroom scene was established in 1968 in response to racism within New York's LGBT community. In that year Crystal LaBeija, a star of the city's cross-dressing competitions and pageants, broke publicly with the white gay male dominated scene and established a separate ballroom circuit for black and Latino gay men, lesbians and transgendered persons. A year later Crystal formed the House of LaBeija, a team of black and Latino performers who competed in cross-dressing events. The rival House of Ebony, made up predominantly of black members, was formed shortly thereafter. While the reference was to the conventions of haut couture, the class conditions that actually defined the scene were those of poverty, racism, homophobia and transphobia. To survive, the Ballroom "houses" had to become a source of support and protection. Thus, the house of fashion became a home and the members constituted new families. The leaders of these houses became known as "mothers" and "fathers" and members referred to as "children." This is the Ballroom scene that exists today.

In 2009, members of the Ballroom community and the sound-art collective, Ultra-red, initiated Vogue'ology, a collaborative project to build greater political literacy within the community and to help organize further the autonomous, indigenous processes created by the community to protect against homophobia, transphobia, racism, class oppression, and the HIV/AIDS crisis. Vogue'ology builds on the scene's long history of

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<sup>1\*</sup> The Vogue'ology collective includes members of the House | Ballroom scene and the sound-art collective, Ultra-red. It runs the Arbert Santana Ballroom Archive and Oral History Project among other initiatives.

autonomous, self-organized struggle and brings those practices into dialogue with the history of African-American and Latino anti-racist struggles. We also draw from feminist practices of consciousness raising and the popular education strategies that arose from anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in Africa and Latin America. These strategies are employed to deepen the critical historical awareness of members of the Ballroom scene, and to codify the scene's performative investigations of gender, sexuality and class. Our work has led to the formation of the Arbert Santana Ballroom Archive and Oral History Project. We have taught classes on the Ballroom scene, produced art installations and run workshops. The next step in our work is to establish the Ballroom Freedom School, a venue within which to implement a program of educational and social support programs. The school will be a resource for the community to create, learn and organize. It will also ally itself with other social movements and art collectives undertaking anti-racist and anti-poverty initiatives and working to combat gender oppression and discrimination against lesbian, bisexual and gay individuals.

The most recent Vogue'ology project, a collaboration with the Scottish experimental music producers, Arika, investigated the concepts and practices of freedom within the Ballroom scene and other anti-racist movements. It culminated in five days of public sessions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in which artist-organizers<sup>2\*</sup> from different anti-racist struggles shared procedures for collective investigations of concepts and practices of freedom. These investigations continue as part of the consultation phase for the *Ballroom Freedom School*. The goal of this phase of work is to produce a detailed and comprehensive proposal for the *Ballroom Freedom School*.

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<sup>2\*</sup> Social justice visionary and Ballroom leader, Michael Roberson, the jazz composer and writer, George Lewis, the poet and scholar, Fred Moten, the playwright and community organizer, Nancy Nevarez, and the sound-art collective, Ultra-red