

Ballroom and the endless quest for belonging

Vanessa Kisuule

We each of us need a church, inherited or chosen, and mine is ballroom. It has its fair share of acolytes and martyrs, a teeming list of heathen prophets. On this particular Wednesday, the prophet is a butch queen called G. G wears a shaggy bronze wig reminiscent of eighties-era Tina Turner. Already tall, his five-inch, thigh-high boots make him a tower. As the beat builds from the speakers, he bounces on his toes like a boxer. Then he surges down the runway, hands scooping circles from the air, hips swivelling like a pepper mill. We slant and shimmer beneath unflattering strip lights, testify with finger clicks and foot stomps.

G and I are very different. His Scouse accent is strong, his temper quick. I often feel on edge around him, aware that any errant phrase or light tease might land wrong. His wrath is the subtle kind, delivered in sharp glances and catty asides. I resent his volatile moods, admire and covet his talent. 'Like' is not quite the word for how I feel about him. Ours is the complex dynamic of squabbling siblings who would, despite everything, go to bat for each other if needed. I value G, and know he feels the same about me – regardless of the specific friction in our dynamic, I know the space would be less special, less thrilling without him in it. It's how he

tells jokes that make the room crackle with manic laughter, how he charges across the floor on those impossibly long legs. Once, they kicked so high the lightbulb in the studio fell to the floor like scattered hail. We screamed in shock, then kept vogueing in the dark as the glass turned to sand under our shoes.

In ballroom, I feel legible in ways I am not, or feel I am not, elsewhere. Traits that too often make me a spectacle or hindrance *out there* are welcomed *in here*. I wear my loudest clothes, draw bright, abstract shapes on my face. Free from the inhibiting leer of straight men, I walk through a packed room in a tiny thong and sparkly bra. Others dress as space-dwelling goths, y2k pop stars, club kid freaks. There is no career ladder to climb, little but homemade trophies and inner circle clout to win. We repurpose the world's ambivalence and disdain, we glorify what they ignore or fetishise. We've assembled our own sky and named each other's stars.

Ballroom's brightness casts a long shadow over life outside. The dance studio coughs us back out into the street, where buses wheeze down the road and faces veil themselves under a rash of black umbrellas. Us ballroom girls joke about this jarring shift, something like the *The Wizard of Oz* in reverse. The trick is to chip off a piece of the feeling ballroom gives you and carry it through the countless dull hours. Secrets can be ruinous or delicious, and this one, for me, is delicious. It pleases me to be alive to the undetectable lives of others, their hidden whimsies and transgressions.

Ballroom is now integral to the shape of my week, to the incidental movements of my body. All other commitments are adjusted so I can get to sessions at least twice

a week. Studio sessions spill into drinks at the pub and picnics in the park. I probably couldn't indulge such things if I worked a 9 to 5 office job or had a family at home. Sad, isn't it, that these ties born of niche hobbies are mostly the preserve of the young and untethered? It's the natural cycle of things, I suppose, a choice of one focus over another, that I've formed a life around my passion, rather than reducing it to a mere diversion at the weekend. Yet it feels like something I should qualify or even apologise for.

As I entered my thirties, I felt growing pressure to pledge allegiance to the cult of the nuclear family. The script goes thus: school and university are the time for friendships; as you leave education, these friendships are pushed to the fringes in favour of a spouse and children. If this set up eludes or disinterests you, it's hard to find an alternate anchor, a gathering of persons to whom you are necessary and familiar – valued when you are present, missed when you are absent.

More than the music, the voguing or the fashion, the thing that moves me most about ballroom is walking into a session and being met with smiles of recognition. To choose friendship as the organising principle of your days is, however, to risk emotional and social neglect. Whilst others centre their blood relations and live-in partners, it can feel that you are no one's priority or focus. Nevertheless, I strive to build a life in which friendships are robust enough to hold me and anyone else who chooses this path, even if our models for such a life are scant.

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When ballroom began in the late 60s in downtown New York, it was born of defiance. Even within the queer drag and pageantry scene, black, brown and poor

people were pushed to the peripheries. And so, a new ballroom space was made, one that both borrowed from and lampooned the status quo. Ballroom's ingenuity is intrinsically linked with its limitations. What it lacked in money and mainstream acceptance it more than compensated for with playfulness, vitality and a robust community ethos. If beautiful clothes couldn't be bought, they were painstakingly made, borrowed or stolen. Transgender women swapped tips on getting the surgical treatments they desired, sometimes through risky back alley procedures. Queer people who had been exiled from their family homes could seek refuge in the community with house mothers and fathers. This was community born of necessity first and aesthetics second.

Why is it that I, a straight woman, feel pulled into this world? I like to think it emits a particular call to those who know displacement of some kind: the awkward, misshapen and abused, the migrant and the sex worker, the dark of skin and outlook, the unlovely and perennially broke. We've been told to force ourselves into pleasing shapes, familiar moulds. I am, for better and for worse, a gifted shapeshifter, able to adjust myself to the rules of almost any environment. But what once felt like a seamless reflex is increasingly burdensome. I'm tired of shrinking. I wish to be with the unruly people, to have intimacy that doesn't involve government bureaucracy or the blood pact of reproduction. If, as some theorists state, queerness is as much about deviation from prescriptive ways of living and loving as about sexual orientation, then to queerness I choose to belong, and I hope it might belong to me in turn.

And yet! Belonging is a fairy tale. This stubborn belief has troubled me from the moment I began typing. Belonging strikes me as a tempting yet treacherous

fantasy of stasis, a far too loose term in need of whittling down. When I say I belong at a ball, what I mean is that there I can comfortably express certain, neglected parts of myself. But then it would be a lie to say that I can be all of me, all the time. A certain amount of self-negation seems to be the price of group cohesion, and we each must decide when this is a price worth paying, and for whom we are willing to cough up. Sometimes, I wonder if others simply do not feel this tension. Do these lucky people find their tribe and settle happily, untroubled by feelings of fraudulence, the cost of self-contortion? Or is everyone doing what I do to some degree, standing over the monitor of themselves, constantly dialling knobs and adjusting meters?

It is no bad thing to regulate ourselves for the sake of others. We are mimetic creatures, hard-wired to serve the safety of the group over our more selfish impulses. Arguably, our rash of individualist thinking has caused huge damage to this social contract, rendering us increasingly intolerant and unsympathetic to each other. Belonging as a *feeling* and belonging as an *ethos* are two different things. In any given context, I am in simultaneous states of belonging and not-belonging, toggling between assimilation and retreat. I don't think it's possible to belong wholly to any one place, thing, or person, not even myself. Belonging as a practice is not about feeling wholly appeased or indulged by those we love. It's the choice we make to weather our differences and clashing needs for the sake of what Joan Didion aptly called 'the possibility of larger, even intangible, comforts'.

I have been part of ballroom for over a year now. The initial flush of novelty has worn off. Gnarly group dynamics make themselves known – the rivalries, pecking orders and grievances that no community can avoid. Some members grow so

frustrated they defect entirely. The question of who should be in charge comes up often, though the desire for more horizontal leadership is far beyond our capacity to execute such a system. Initially, these moments of discord felt like a promise broken. I've had to learn that shared principles are hard to agree on and almost impossible to enact.

The task, then, is not to find a place of permanent, unthreatened ease, but to know the places where these tensions are least fraught and the collective gains can outweigh the strain of compromise. Some environments require more self-betrayal than others. What that looks like is different for each of us, and it's a lifetime's work to gauge our own private limits. Even in our discord, we belong to each other. *Especially* then. We owe each other not just joy in the good times but patience in the trying ones.

The true beauty of a community like ballroom is that we instinctively come together through our chosen mode of expression, even when there are fractures in our interpersonal bonds. Many times, I have seen two people who have very little to say to each other join forces on the runway, their bodies communicating some joint sensibility that language cannot. And this is what ballroom does; it transforms, it forgives and redeems. Even when we feel sad, hopeless or intractably unlovable, we can come to a function in our gladdest rags and dance, cheer, preen and flirt, throw shade and sneak gulps of spirit from our hidden hipflasks. Yes, it's hedonism, but also ritual, an ancestral passage. It's a tradition passed down through generations of queers who also had their pains to bear yet refused to be robbed of their poise, their spite, their style. This is what belonging means to me. It's neither an obligation nor a naive hope for frictionless kinship,

but an ethic, something you choose and practice. And you might as well look fabulous whilst you're doing it. Let the church say *amen*.

Vanessa Kisuule

Vanessa Kisuule is a writer and performer based in Bristol. She has won more than ten slam titles including the Roundhouse Slam 2014, Hammer and Tongue National Slam 2014 and the Nuyorican Poetry Slam. Her poem on the historic toppling of Edward Colston's statue, 'Hollow', went viral in the summer of 2020. She has two poetry collections published by Burning Eye Books and her work was highly commended in the Forward Poetry Prize Anthology 2019. She was the Bristol City Poet for 2018-2020 and is currently working on her debut novel.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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