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Challenging “La Vie Bohème”: Community, Subculture, and Queer Temporality in *Rent*

Eleonora Sammartino

- ¹ At the beginning of 2016, the first BroadwayCon, held from 22-24 January in the heart of New York’s Theatreland, marked a very special occasion for every theatre enthusiast. As demonstrated by the flurry of articles in specialized columns and websites like “Playbill” (“Original *Rent* Cast”) and “Entertainment Weekly” (Derschowitz), blogs such as “Broadway Musical Blog” (Rigsbee), and tweets (“#BroadwayCon”), the convention had a meaningful significance for fans of the musical *Rent*, which celebrated 20 years from its opening off-Broadway during that weekend. More somberly, the festivities were also a chance to remember its creator, Jonathan Larson, who died the night before the first off-Broadway preview. However, the film adaptation of *Rent* (Chris Columbus, 2005) has not enjoyed the same enduring popularity of the stage musical. On the contrary, upon its release, many reviewers were quite critical of the movie, particularly questioning its lack of topicality in comparison to the play, quipping “‘No Day But Today’ feels like yesterday’s news” (Rooney), for example.

In the past 20 years, the stage musical has gained much attention, both by theatre critics and scholars, particularly in the nexus between queer and theatre studies, such as David Román’s analysis in relation to the AIDS epidemic (268-278), or from a urban perspective as proof of the gentrification of New York’s Lower East Side (Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side* 285). The film has instead attracted little interest, particularly as an example of the contemporary musical genre, eclipsed by the success of more popular films like *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) or *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2007), because of their bigger box office grosses, star names, and authorial style. In this article, I will recuperate *Rent* as a contemporary American film musical, reflecting especially on the interdependence between the forms of this genre and the representation of gender in the movie. Since the early 1980s, the American film musical

has been increasingly concerned with subjectivities that escape heteronormative binaries through a performance of gender that asserts more fluid gender positions (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). I argue that this representation is directly connected to a change in the forms of the musical, such as a remapping of its classic chronotopes to reflect this fluidity. Through the analysis of some of the musical numbers of the film, I will show how the focus of *Rent* on a specifically contextualized queer subculture, a group of bohemian friends affected by the AIDS epidemic and the gentrification of the East Village at the end of the 1980s, contributes to the queering of time and space. I will start by considering how a linear, historical temporality, traditionally associated with heteronormative conventions, is replaced by alternative configurations of time, either as an intensified present (Halberstam 1-2) or as a sedimentation of different temporalities (Freeman, *Time Binds* xi). This queering of temporality is connected to a reshaping of space as subcultural place. The emphasis on the community, while typical of the folk musical subgenre as theorized by Altman (274), is here reworked both in relation to the AIDS outbreak and the gentrification of the neighborhood in which the film is set. However, the idyllic community of many classic Hollywood musicals is here conceived only as a utopian response in capitalist terms to the problems posed by society (Dyer 23). Contextualizing the film in a post-9/11 socio-historical landscape, the analysis will demonstrate how this communal spirit could be interpreted in more universalist terms than in the original stage musical, specifically anchored to the moment of its creation between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, and to the ethnically and socially diverse New York neighborhood that inspired his creator and first housed the show. Taking into consideration this contextual shift and the reception of the film, *Rent* could be then interrogated as a text due to its historical significance and, particularly, as a sign of the process of mainstreaming and commodification of queer subculture.

Rent was born through a collaboration between Billy Aronson and Jonathan Larson at the end of the 1980s when Aronson began to update Puccini's *La Bohème* to a modern setting. It was Larson who suggested to set the action in Alphabet City, in the East Village (Istel 16), a neighborhood traditionally associated with immigration and working-class inhabitants, at the time torn by riots in Tompkins Square Park caused by the struggle between gentrifiers and local tenants, about to be evicted and displaced (Abu-Lughod, "Introduction" 5). In the early 1990s, Larson started to develop the musical on his own through workshops at the New York Theatre Workshop, which had recently relocated to the East Village and was looking for a play that would speak to their new neighborhood (Gioia). The show premiered there on January 26, 1996 to generally positive reviews and sold out performances, transferring to Broadway at the Nederlander Theatre the following April, where it stayed until its closing performance on September 7, 2008.

The film reprises the plot of the play, set in Alphabet City between 1989 and 1990, focusing on a group of friends, many of whom are HIV-positive. On Christmas Eve 1989, aspiring filmmaker Mark (Anthony Rapp) and his flatmate, struggling musician Roger (Adam Pascal), are served an eviction notice by their ex-flatmate Benny (Taye Diggs), now representing his father-in-law, a major developer who wants to transform their neighborhood into an arts hub. While Mark tries to document the changes in Alphabet City with his camera, Roger starts a relationship with Mimi (Rosario Dawson), a dancer in a S/M club and heroin addict, although he avoids her at first, not knowing that they are both HIV-positive. Meanwhile, Collins (Jesse L. Martin), a third flatmate,

falls in love with Angel (Wilson Jermaine Heredia), a genderqueer drag queen who saves him after a mugging. The group is completed by Mark's ex-girlfriend, Maureen (Idina Menzel), a performing artist who is now in a relationship with upper middle-class lawyer Joanne (Tracy Thoms). In the year chronicled in the film, the friends have to fight against the gentrification of their neighborhood, go through ups and downs in their relationships, and, most importantly, cope with the loss of Angel and other friends, all dying from AIDS.

The socio-historical background against which the action is set, the AIDS outbreak in the late 1980s-early 1990s and the gentrification of the East Village, not only informed the creation of the musical, but is fundamental to understand the reconfiguration of the chronotopes of the genre in relation to gender. In his study of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin defines the chronotope as the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature," which determines genres and their semantic-syntactic elements (84). Drawing from this definition, Michael Dunne analyses the chronotopes of the classical American film musical, noticing a difference in their construction between the narrative and the musical numbers (14-15). Nevertheless, these seemingly conflicting settings are juxtaposed and harmonized, creating an "ideological dialogue between... social representation and romantic escapism" (25).¹

Furthermore, Bakhtin creates a direct connection between the chronotopes and the "image of man," determined by the specific configuration of time-space that particular characters inhabit (85). Similarly, Fredric Jameson shows how a postmodern fragmented subject can no longer coherently conceptualize time and space, which become in turn heterogeneous and fragmented, characterized by a process of "presentification" (27), and by fluid boundaries between the inside and the outside respectively (43-44). Taking into consideration this relationship between subject and chronotopes, the concept could be applied to gender, a specific element of the subject's identity, analyzing its interdependence with the forms of the musical, tracing how they have been reworked in contemporary examples of the genre and how in turn they define the characters' identity.

The specific setting of *Rent*, in particular the AIDS outbreak, is significantly tied with a queer temporality, as Judith Halberstam argues, showing how a time that goes against the heterosexual logic of reproduction and the institution of family emerged particularly in those gay communities most affected by AIDS, manifesting itself as an emphasis on the present (1-2). However, Halberstam stresses how queer time does not only pertain to an experience of looming death, but also to "the potentiality of life unscripted" by heteronormative conventions (2). Thus, queer time could be extended to various subcultures and alternative ways of life that escape the logic of capitalism, with its stress on productivity and reproduction, such as ravers, sex workers, and homeless people, all of whom could be considered queer subjects (10). On the other hand, queer time could be understood in terms of non-sequential forms of time, as theorized by Elizabeth Freeman (*Time Binds* xi), as an alternative to chronornativity, a technique through which institutions impose forms of temporal experience to subjects by making them seem natural (3). Freeman also foregrounds the experience of queer temporalities through erotic pleasure rather than loss and pain, as other queer theorists do (12).

Rent presents queer time both as an emphasis on the present and as non-sequential, particularly in the musical numbers. Furthermore, this experience of time is connected even to those characters who do not identify as queer-gendered, thus queering them. The importance of time in the film is stressed from the opening number, "Seasons of Love." In the play, the song opens Act II as an interlude between the narration of the first and the second act. Set in an empty theatre, in the film the number opens with a fade from black and 8 spotlights slowly raising over the stage. Gradually, as other sources of light are introduced, the main characters emerge under the spotlights, standing still in a frontal medium long shot. As they start singing, the camera tracks in front of them, presenting them one by one. The whole number is filmed intercutting medium close-ups and medium shots of smaller groups, while the camera returns to a medium long shot of the group, this time from behind, in each of the choruses and, circularly, at the end of the number as the lights are dimmed to a fade to black (fig. 1). This cyclical sense of time, conveyed by the repetition of this group shot in the choral moments of the sequence, is strengthened by the lyrics that refer to the succession of minutes, hours, seasons and years. Thus, the number evokes the cyclical rhythm of Nature, which, according to Bakhtin, is characteristic of folklore and myths, connected to space as a little corner of the world, and unified by the presence of different family generations, conveying a sense of temporal boundlessness directly associated with agricultural labour (225-226). Hence, this pre-industrial folkloric temporality escapes the logic of capitalism in an analogous way to the queer time that both Halberstam and Freeman talk about.

Figure 1



The repeated shot of the choral moments in "Seasons of Love" evokes a cyclical temporality.

Nevertheless, the number also conjures up a sense of "time out of joint" (Freeman, *Time Binds* 14) akin to non-sequentiality. As a matter of fact, "Seasons of Love" is not part of the main narrative, which starts straight after this with Mark's film and voice over, giving the exact time coordinates: "December 24, 1989. 9 p.m., Eastern Standard Time." Even more so than on stage, where the same setting is used for all the scenes, there is no indication of when or where this number should be situated in the narrative, literally being out of time as its interchangeable position in the musical also demonstrates. This non-linearity is further supported by the choice of a different ending from the stage musical. On stage, all the friends gather together, with Angel returning to join them. Similarly, in the alternate ending cut from the film (*Rent*), the

tableau in fig. 1 is reprised before Angel comes back. Director Chris Columbus instead chose an ending with all the friends, except Angel and Benny, singing together and watching Mark's film. Thus, the circularity is actually avoided. While Angel's return could have hinted at a sort of afterlife, as the ethereal lighting that surrounds the characters gestures towards, now the number lacks any kind of time-space coordinates. At the same time, the lyrics of the song themselves offer alternatives to measure time, such as cups of coffee, laughter, strife, and love. Therefore, an institutional, abstract way to mark the passing of time is substituted by the materiality of repeated bodily actions and emotions that echoes Freeman's theorization of queer time.

Time is constantly evoked in the musical numbers, a space in-between standstill and accelerated time that opens up to queer temporalities and pleasures (Ellis 197). The intensified present that Halberstam talks about directly emerges through the anthem "No Day But Today," which is first sung in "Life Support," during the first meeting of the HIV support group that Collins and Angel attend. After one of the attendees, Gordon announces that his health has worsened, the music starts, with Gordon seamlessly turning his speech into song. The camera slowly moves circularly, showing the members of the group one by one from outside the circle. Their medium close-ups are intercut halfway through the song with a medium long shot that shows the group together and Mark filming the meeting outside the circle, hidden behind the camera. He lowers it only at the end of the number, connecting with the group. Still, Mark retains a liminal position that often characterizes him as the narrator of the film, neither outside nor inside this group, as, for example, shows the shot with its members in medium close-up that leaves him off screen, but aurally present through the noise of the camera. Thus, the urgency to live in the present is underlined by the context in which the number takes place and further stressed by the feeling of community created by the camerawork. The participation of the whole company to the choral moments produces this effect on stage, which is here visually strengthened by camera movements and editing, connecting the characters and making the audience feel part of the group. The cinematic elements thus mediate the liveness of the performance for the cinema.

The anthem is then reprised by Mimi in response to Roger's request to defer their romance to "Another time, another place" in "Another Day." The repetition of the lyrics and the slow tempo of the anthem echo the meeting and represent an attempt to capture life in contrast to the linearity and refusal of Roger's part of the song (Ellis 199). A sense of community is once again invoked in the final part of the number by the opposition of Roger and Mimi, when the two melodies intertwine. While Roger is alone on the balcony, always shot from a low angle but from different distances, Mimi is shown in the street from a high angle, doubling his shots, at first alone and then supported, vocally and emotionally, by Angel, Collins and Mark, who join her on their way home.

Finally, the anthem is reprised one last time in "Finale B," the medley following Mimi's near-death experience. All the friends are now reunited, singing together in a medium long shot while watching Mark's film, projected on the wall. The anthem becomes a definitive celebration of life, embraced by all the characters. Thus, through the experience of AIDS, loss and death, this form of queer temporality is extended to the heterosexual couple, and to Mark, deeply affected by the epidemic on a personal

level, creating a sense of community, which is most typical of the folk musical, as I will explore later.

On the other hand, queer time as a sedimentation of different temporalities in the present is conveyed both through cinematic elements, and the music and lyrics. According to Altman, the use of dissolves in musicals is particularly relevant in creating connections between different times and places (74). Most often, dissolves are used in the film to signal the passage of time, like daylight to night time, or the succession of days. However, their employment is notable in "One Song Glory," in which Roger, escaped on the roof, reminisces about his dead girlfriend, April.² In this case, dissolves connect both the present to Roger's memory, and the different moments in the past he is remembering, from his first meeting with April to when she found out she was HIV-positive. The subjective recollection of the past then goes to write itself over the present, inevitably affecting it, and giving an insight into Roger's motivations, while determining his future.

Rather than the cinematic elements, the lyrics make past and present converge in "La Vie Bohème," creating a web of connections between these contemporary bohemians and past icons of queer culture. The number starts after Maureen's protest as a subversive provocation directed at Benny and his father-in-law, sitting next to them at the "Life Café," where the friends usually meet. Soon it becomes an anthem of their disenfranchisement from mainstream culture and a further assertion of their community through a fire-rapid list of alternative practices, objects, and names that best represent their Bohemian lifestyle. Among them, Sontag, Sondheim, Ginsberg, Dylan, Cunningham and Cage, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy and Toto appear in the song. Although part of a longer set of names not directly associated with queer culture, this list of queer icons from different cultural fields, like literature, music(al), film, and dance could be considered an attempt to create a cultural archive or historiography and, consequently, a sense of affiliation to previous generations of bohemians and queer subjects that span from the 1900s to their present. However, the continuity in time that generations guarantee is usually connected to chrononormativity and the family institution in a sequential way through biological reproduction (Freeman, *Time Binds* 21). Instead, here the list produces a non-sequential juxtaposition of different historical periods that generates a kinship among the friends in the present, going beyond the heteronormative family, as the repudiation of hated parents in the song signals. This queer genealogy is rendered even more significant by the connection to AIDS. The song evokes the epidemic, activism like ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and encourages the celebration of people who are "living with / not dying from disease." Thus, the continuity with the past creates a sense of belonging to a community in the present and of hopefulness for the future, becoming a survival strategy that displaces the idea of AIDS as certain death (Román xx).

Retrospectively, this evocation of AIDS and activism already represents a form of archival genealogy and memorialization of the past at once. Even though the show debuted in 1996, it documents the socio-historical context in which it was being written, a moment that is already in the past when staged. The association between AIDS and homosexuality in the media in the early 1980s had a negative impact in the response to the outbreak during that decade, as Tamar W. Carroll writes (138). Homophobia and misinformation, paired with the gentrification of poorer areas of New York, often left people with AIDS isolated and without a home, while the closure of gay

bathhouses and clubs by the Koch administration pushed the queer community to the margins (139-140). ACT-UP was founded in 1987 in reaction to this context, pressuring the government to make treatments available to everyone through civil disobedience while giving the gay community positive visibility in mainstream media. Significantly, ACT-UP was very active in Lower Manhattan, where posters were often affixed to construction sites (142), stressing the connection between the disadvantaged life conditions of people with AIDS and gentrification. Whereas ACT-UP turned gradually towards the memorialization of activism after Clinton's election in 1992 (180), the fight against AIDS was still going on in the 1990s. Notably, 1996 represents a turning point in the history of the HIV epidemic, with the introduction of new drugs that could have slowed down the progression of the disease, even though accessible only to few given their high costs (Román 268-269). However, neither AIDS nor activism disappeared. Thus, the show functions as a reminder of a problem that is past and present at once. In 2005, reviewers thought that AIDS was well in the past (Rooney; Rabin) or way too familiar (Feinberg), making the film feel stale. It could be argued that the film functions as a memorialization, celebrating the dead and the activists, leaving this moment in History. Nevertheless, the conflation of different temporalities that informs the film, and this number in particular, would allow us to read this as a reminder of a still present problem and the way it affects people in their everyday life, akin to the survival strategy already mentioned.

The sedimentation of different temporalities and of a queer genealogy in “La Vie Bohème” is further strengthened by its location. The “Life Café” is a reference to an actual restaurant that used to exist in Alphabet City, but also roots the contemporary queer subculture to a geographically situated queer history. As George Chauncey documents, in the first part of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1920s-1930s, cafeteria society represented an important feature of gay subculture in New York, where restaurants and cafes were appropriated by queer communities as places of socialization, as alternatives to dominant culture (163). One of the most popular spots in town was the “Life Cafeteria” in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood adjacent to the East Village, where bohemians and gays could meet openly and socialize (167). Furthermore, cafeteria society continued a tradition already established in the Bowery at the turn of the century, when it was a centre of commercial vice, working-class culture and gay clubs, quite popular with the middle-classes as well (34). Therefore, the queer legacy of the Lower East Side informs the “Life Café” itself, giving even more resonance to the icons of queer culture mentioned in the song. While the lyrics create an archive encompassing culture and activism, the setting situates the community in a local tradition; both juxtaposed with the present and still living through the non-heteronormative kinship relations between the friends.

The coalescence of different temporalities is even more evident through the use of Mark's documentary, *Today 4 U: Proof Positive*. Mark's voice over narration and the images he has shot introduce the audience to the narrative at the beginning of the film. New York's landmarks, like the Radio City Music Hall, are intercut with depictions of poverty, symbolized by the homeless, mostly African-Americans and Hispanics. Both color and black and white images appear, but the stock and framing are different from the rest of the film, as the gradual passage from Mark's shoot to *Rent* clearly shows. Throughout the film, the characters are often shot from Mark's perspective behind the camera, such as during Maureen's protest or the New Year's Eve celebration. The shoot also features in two montages. The first signals a passage of time between “La Vie

Bohème" and New Year's Eve. Over the reprise "Seasons of Love B," images of New York are once again intercut with those of homeless people, this time alternated with shots of Mark's friends, caught in spontaneous moments or responding to the solicitation of the camera. However, the lyrics now evoke images of poverty and illness, framed by capitalism as in the verse "In contracts, dollars," thus foreshadowing the conflictual relationship between bohemians and the homeless.

The complete film is then shown during the final number, "Finale B." While they are singing the medley, Mark goes to the projector and starts screening the documentary. Shots of the group, immersed in the bright white light of the projector, are alternated with the images of the documentary, which reprise the previous montage, until *Rent* becomes *Today 4 U* once again. The very fast editing portraying the friends ends on a slow motion image of Angel, making a gesture as if to conclude the story, before the final fade to black. Freeman argues that photography and film have been traditionally connected in their domestic use to the heteronormative discourse of family (Freeman, *Time Binds* 21). The family immortalized here by Mark's camera instead escapes this conventional discourse. He also creates a connection between them and the homeless, who could be considered queer subjects for their alternative lifestyle, as already mentioned (Halberstam 12). However, there is a distance between the bohemians and the homeless, who are doubly disenfranchised by the process of gentrification of the neighborhood, as it will be highlighted later on. This is particularly evident during a short scene in which Mark films a homeless woman being harassed by the police, but then receives a very hostile treatment from her as she thinks bohemians like him are just trying to exploit people like her to assuage their guilt. Therefore, while bohemians and the homeless could represent a united front against the dominant, heteronormative society, there are still differences between them, reflected in their negotiation of space.

The use of the camera in itself, stressed throughout the film in many shots that portray Mark holding it, filming and, often, partly covered by it as if he were one with it, evoke a haptic experience, an indexicality that contributes to "alternative modes of affiliation across time" (Freeman, *Time Binds* 123). This haptic relation that film privileges is most evident in the cinematographic process itself, as Freeman stresses drawing on Benjamin's conceptualization of mimesis (125). The light has to touch the object to capture it on film, but what we see is just a trace of the object in the past that is no more, which could be recuperated through the repressed tactile experience of the body. This relationship between light-object-film is most evident in the finale. The use of Angel's medium close up to conclude *Rent* and *Today 4 U* is significant as it shows the survival in the present, through film, of someone who has passed away, symbolically hinting at her persistence in her friends' lives. The past and the present converge in the same moment thanks to the character that has acted as the emotional core throughout the film. The rest of the group is directly involved in this haptic relation too. Completely immersed in the bright light of the projector, echoing Mimi's retelling of her near-death experience, they become quite ghostly manifestations, present doubles of their past selves in the film projected on the wall and, potentially, a past that might not be any more in the future, just like Angel (fig. 2). The use of an obsolete camera and the different materiality of Mark's film, already corrupted, suggest that the film itself will fade away sometime in the future, destined to the same ephemerality of life. However, while *Today 4 U* and the subculture it represents seem to be destined to this gradual dissolve, *Rent*'s clear and sleek images gesture towards a more lasting life

that could, quite paradoxically in a meta-cinematographic way, hint at a survival of this subculture in the mainstream.

Figure 2



The haptic relation between the light of the projector and the bodies of the protagonists conflates different temporalities in "Finale B."

Thus past, present, and future are sedimented in the same moment here and now thanks to Mark's film, offering an example of what Carla Freccero calls "queer spectrality," a "phantasmic relation to historicity" dependent on a desire that comes from the past (qtd. in Freeman, "Introduction" 163-64). Being haunted by these past presences means being open to the possibility of the return of the past and being inhabited by it, implying a traumatic pain (Freccero 80). Still, this interpenetration of past and present, and subject and object could stimulate queer jouissance as well (99). While in "One Song Glory" Roger is still haunted and inhabited by April's presence, reliving the suppressed trauma of her death, "Finale B" presents an example of spectrality in which the past informs present and future in a positive way. Therefore, the use of dissolves and the meta-reflection on the cinema medium through the use of Mark's camera and film more clearly foreground this spectrality in the text, allowing for a sedimentation of time and fostering of kinship relations that is only implied in the music and lyrics in the play, as seen in the analysis of "La Vie Bohème."

Judith Butler reads this queer temporality from a psychoanalytical perspective as a melancholic incorporation in the present of a lost object that constitutes the gendered subject (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* 132-33). Still, Butler argues that society has not been able to deal with the grief for the loss of homosexual attachments because of AIDS (138), often responding with a politicization of grief itself and with "collective institutions for grieving... crucial to survival, to reassembling community, to rearticulating kinship, to reweaving sustaining relations" (148). Hence, queer temporality thus articulated further contributes to the establishment of kin relations among the friends in light of their common loss. The Life Support group, a topos of AIDS theatre (Román 278) reprised in the film, could be considered as another example of this. The last number that involves the group, "Without You," links queer time and community more clearly. The song starts as a solo for Mimi and then becomes a duet with Roger, covering several months through a montage, from one of their arguments to Angel's death, passing through Mimi and Roger's split because of her abuse of heroin. In the play, the number is clearly a romantic duet ending with a reconciliation of the various couples, whereas Angel's death and the break ups happen in the sexually

charged dance number "Contact" that equates sex with death. Here, "Without You" is actually a song that mourns the loss of friends slowly dying, including the members of Life Support, stressing the feel of community. Dissolves connect the various moments in time, while the use of slow motion heightens the dramatic suspense, further subverting the linearity of time. Two shots of the group appear in the montage, intercut between those of Mimi using heroin and feeling sick. In the first one, a circular camera movement is employed once again to portray the members in slow motion, starting from Gordon. The movement is reprised in the second shot from where it left off. As the camera moves around, some of the friends gradually dissolve, fading away from the image to symbolize their death. So the spectral image in the present, as in "Finale B," already contains past and future, playing with time and rhythms, while the camerawork contributes to create a sense of community with its movement. Time and space are thus connected, creating a community constituted on shared loss, an alternative mode of affiliation typical of subcultures (Halberstam 154).

The emphasis on community in *Rent* directly connects the film to the folk musical subgenre. In Altman's definition, this subgenre realizes a kind of make-believe related to the wish to be in another time, most often a mythical Americana in the classic Hollywood musical (127). At the centre of the folk subgenre, particularly after *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944), there is usually a close-knit community as a traditional family unit, whose stability is symbolized by the family house, situated in a small town or in a city neighborhood in a time when everyone still knew everybody else (274-75). However, later examples like *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975) offer a more realist vision of the world rather than a mythical one (273).

Rent continues this trend of post-classical folk musical, perpetuating some of its traditional elements while updating some others to the contemporary context in a break with the classic forms. Rather than the traditionally heteronormative family unit, here we find an alternative family whose kin relations are established through common loss, as already seen. The relationships of the main characters with their own families are portrayed as strained, as for example in Mark's case. Even though never seen in the film, Mark's parents are heard twice in voicemails, where they leave long messages that Mark listens to, but never actually answers. Thus, traditional family is substituted with a web of friends who support each other, with Angel caring for everyone both emotionally and economically.

The traditional family home becomes then Mark and Roger's loft, where most of the action takes place. However, here the house itself is in danger, threatened by the gentrification process embodied by Benny. This threat creates a bond between them and their neighbors, also allowing Roger and Mimi's meeting, as shown in "Rent." The number is a passed-along-song, starting with Mark cycling back home and bringing the news of the eviction notice. Then it is picked up in turn by Roger, Collins, Mimi, Benny, and the whole neighborhood. Hence, the song establishes a connection between the main characters, and between the neighbors, all united in the chorus against Benny. The lyrics themselves question the ways people connect in an age of distrust as the one they are living in, linking housing problems and illness as well: "How do you connect in an age / When strangers, landlords, lovers / Your own blood cells betray?"

The setting in Alphabet City is fundamental in the musical. The first impression is that of a small neighborhood as in the classical period. This is further confirmed in the rest of the film as the action mainly takes place in this area while the rest of New

York appears only through some iconic landmarks like the Empire State Building. This focus then helps to create a sense of inclusiveness in a neighborhood where a queer subculture is strong.

However, Alphabet City is far from peaceful. While studio-era New York neighborhood musicals reacted against the anxieties produced by the contemporary socio-economic urban context with a sense of harmonious community (Shearer 451), the tensions are on the surface in *Rent*. Although essential to the fostering of their kin relationships, Alphabet City is depicted as a tough area, reflecting the socio-historical context of the 1980s. The Lower East Side, the area south of 14th Street, north of Houston Street and East of 4th Avenue, has always been a highly contested neighborhood, as the different names associated with it, i.e., Lower East Side, East Village, Loisaida, and Alphabet City demonstrate, referring to different social groups as Christopher Mele shows (*Selling the Lower East Side* x). Lower East Side is traceable to the second half of the nineteenth century when the area developed, inhabited by immigrants from Ireland and Germany first, and then from the south and east of Europe, mainly workers at the nearby docks and in the local manufacturing industries (x). Loisaida is the name used by the Puerto Rican population that emigrated there mostly in the 1950s-1960s, settling on the eastern part of it, between Avenue A and D (xi). The hippies and counterculture followed in the late 1960s, renaming it East Village while Alphabet City, which corresponds to Loisaida as it also appears in signboards in the film, was named so from the late 1970s by the artists who moved there (xi). Such a variegated social landscape has always required a negotiation of space (Abu-Lughod "Welcome to the Neighbourhood" 29). However, the situation became explosive between the late 1970s and the 1980s when developers became interested in the area to build new residences and commercial spaces for the middle-class and the yuppies, displacing the poorer existing residents (Abu-Lughod, "Introduction" 1-5). The process of gentrification gradually moved eastward; Avenue A, where the film is set, became a frontier, with Tompkins Square Park as the main battlefield (Abu-Lughod, "Welcome to the Neighbourhood" 25-26). Gentrification led to the displacement of the residents, and often to homelessness, while crime and drug traffic increased, partly favored by landlords wanting to scare tenants away in order to upgrade the buildings for the market (Mele, "The Process of Gentrification" 171), as hinted by Mimi's addiction and subsequent homelessness, further making the connection between AIDS and gentrification explicit in the film. Tensions between residents from different backgrounds and diverging interests emerged even more painfully after the 1988 riot in Tompkins Square Park, particularly around the issues of the homeless and the squatters, many of whom took residence around Avenue D, battling over the space as is alluded through the presence of "Tent City" in the film, set in the period after the riot when the city, developers and neighborhood were still fighting over the park (Abu-Lughod, "The Battle for Tompkins Square Park" 251).

In opposition to this harsh reality, the concept of the "valley" emerges in *Rent*, symbolized by Santa Fe. In reference to classical musicals, the valley has been defined as "a realm of fantasy" (Feuer 73), a mythic place where things can only happen there (Dunne 93). It is a utopian place that Altman directly associates to the formation of the heterosexual couple, allowing the characters to find their true selves and share the other's desires (86). It can take different forms, such as the homestead, a European realm, the Hollywood lot or an imaginary place like Oz (86). This concept also echoes many differently named, yearned for utopian places, whose opposition to the reality

the characters live in is structurally central to the genre. Santa Fe becomes *Rent*'s valley, first evoked by Collins and Angel halfway through the film. After the encounter with the homeless woman, they take the subway with Roger and Mark. While entering the station and then hopping on the carriage, Angel starts singing the song, then picked up by Collins, who sings a solo and dances in the middle of the carriage, occasionally joined by Angel, while Mark films everything and Roger observes them. The contrast between New York, symbolized by the dirty subway carriage, and Santa Fe as a dreamlike place where life would be good, with a restaurant, a salary, and free time to spend thinking about philosophy is echoed by the posters behind Collins's head. On the one hand, a dreamy sunset picture of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge publicizing Fort Hamilton Park. On the other, a poster reminding people about health insurance, echoing the threat of AIDS.

Santa Fe seems to be momentarily seized in the following number, "I'll Cover You," a love duet sung by Collins and Angel while dancing in the sunny streets of their neighborhood. But it is only towards the end of the film, after Angel's death, that Santa Fe is concretized in "What You Own" when Roger moves there to forget Mimi. Subverting the logic of the classical musical, the number is not a duet between the heterosexual couple, but between Roger and Mark, in which they both realize what they need to do, with parallels and oppositions between Roger in Santa Fe and Mark in New York. The shots of Roger driving towards Santa Fe and then in the town are characterized by warm tones, the yellow and light brown of the desert, and by the bright sunny light, whereas December in New York is depicted through the cold grey of the cement, the white snow, and the typical light of a cloudy day. While Roger and Mark are often seen from a similar distance, their shots, juxtaposed by the editing, are complementary in the composition, with Roger often occupying the left of the shot while Mark is on the right. It is only at the end that they finally reunite embracing each other on the roof.

Therefore, the valley is not the place where the heterosexual couple comes to be any more. At first, Santa Fe is a potential dream for a homosexual couple; then it becomes a place of self-realization for two male friends. Through the kinship relationship, the valley becomes a shared place instead of being exclusively tied to the heterosexual couple. Nonetheless, Santa Fe reveals itself to be a false utopia, somewhere where happiness is not found as Roger's experience shows. Then what is actually the valley in *Rent*? A hint could be found at the end of "What You Own," where it is suggested that people like Mark and Roger are not alone when dying in capitalist America at the end of the millennium. The answer then can be found in "Finale B" once again: the valley is actually the community they create together.

As Richard Dyer writes, community is the utopian solution to a fragmentation in the musical, which could be meant as rehousing and development issues, for instance (26). When the neighborhood is in danger because of gentrification and everyone is dying because of the AIDS epidemic, community becomes the only utopian (capitalist) solution to capitalist problems (23). As a matter of fact, the community of artists seems to be part of the gentrification process itself, as suggested by the relationship between Mark and the homeless. Bohemians were variously associated with different groups in Alphabet City. On the one hand, wealthier artists were connected with the process of gentrification itself, striking alliances with developers, as it had already happened in the Village and SoHo (Sites 201). On the other, many less affluent artists and bohemians

were involved in anti-gentrification activism, variously identified with countercultural groups, the squatters or the homeless themselves (Abu-Lughod, "The Battle for Tompkins Square Park" 258; Van Kleunen 294). According to Neil Smith, artists contributed to the gentrification of the area and the displacement of existing residents in the 1980s, even though they became victims of this process themselves at the end of the decade, turning to activism (19). Moreover, they reinforced the image of Alphabet City as a subversive, alternative place, which was actually used by the gentrifiers to sell the East Village to the upper-classes (Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side* 285).

Thus, this community represents an alternative to dominant culture but still part of capitalism. As noticed in the "New York Times" review, this idea of Bohemia is utopian in believing that friendship and emotions could be more important than money and profit in the present world (Scott). It might sound cynical, but it actually reflects the shifting context in which the play and the film were produced and came to fruition. From an off-Broadway musical born out of experiences very familiar to the creatives involved (Tommasini), through the 12 years run on Broadway, *Rent* has become a film with a considerable budget, produced by Robert De Niro among others, and intended for a wide international release, through a process that is paradigmatic of the entrance of this cultural text into the mainstream, reflecting a different socio-historical context and the mainstreaming of queer subculture itself.

As already mentioned, many of the reviewers of *Rent* felt that the film lacks urgency because the AIDS epidemic has been contained and the East Village has long since been gentrified (Scott; Rooney; Rabin). Whereas Janet Abu-Lughod chronicled a process of gentrification still in act in 1994, with different forces dividing the neighborhood and trying to transform it (Abu-Lughod, "Conclusions and Implications" 346); the picture painted by Judith Halasz in 2015 definitely mourns the death of the East Village of yesteryear, describing the Lower East Side as a "bohemian theme park" where bohemian culture has been commodified, reduced to fashion, and co-opted by the mainstream (184-185). This marketing of an authentic alternative way of life is echoed by Sharon Zukin, who talks about "lifestyle shopping" in relation to the transformation of the East Village between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s (111). It could be argued that, through the representation of the beginning of this process, *Rent* addresses an issue that is still a source of conflict in 2005, even in other New York neighborhoods like Williamsburg, where a similar commodification of bohemian life started in the 1990s (Zukin 45). This seems to confirm what writer Sarah Schulman predicted in the 1990s: the death of the East Village's bohemia because of AIDS and a betrayal between bohemians, which she thought *Rent* exemplified (Chisholm 243-244). Schulman, who claims that many plot points of the musical plagiarize her book *People in Trouble*, sees *Rent* as an exploitation of queer subculture in the mainstream, particularly for the erasure of the role of lesbian activism and authorship (Chisholm 196-197).

Still, Schulman was already pointing in the 1990s to a process of entrance into the mainstream of queer culture, which has become more and more evident through that decade and in the new millennium. On the one hand, queer representation has increased in media and popular culture since then. According to Eaklor, the AIDS epidemic has represented a turning point in queer activism and visibility (289), leading to important steps forward in the representation of queer identity in the media, such as the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres in 1997, both in reality in an interview on Oprah and in fiction on her sitcom *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-1998) (286), or series like *Will and Grace* (NBC,

1998-2006) which featured gay characters among its protagonists. American TV has been particularly perceptive in registering the shifts in gender politics and society, as the increased presence of queer celebrities and characters demonstrates. In recent years, shows like *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) have "normalized" gay characters, presenting a homosexual couple with an adopted daughter as less dysfunctional than the rest of the enlarged family. Moreover, the representation of queer identities on the small screen is starting to be more inclusive, as seen for example through the popularity of *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-present) and particularly of transgender actress Laverne Cox, who has been nominated for an Emmy for the show. Nevertheless, an increased visibility, at least in numbers, does not necessarily equate a complex and in-depth representation of queer identity. As Eaklor cautions, only the lack of exploitation of non-heterosexuality by dominant culture would be a positive sign (296). Episodes like the recent coerced outing of transgender director Lilly Wachowski, who talked about her transition to the "Windy City Times" after being pressured by a "Daily Mail" journalist (Baim), show that Western culture has not yet reached that point yet. Similarly, New Queer Cinema has been co-opted into the mainstream as a niche market, as B. Ruby Rich, who first coined the term, lamented in 2001 (Morrison 135).

On the other hand, these changes in popular culture reflect those in the socio-cultural context and politics. What Lisa Duggan defines "new homonormativity" (Duggan 179) could represent this mainstreaming of queer culture through a political agenda that draws from neo-liberalism, supporting "dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions" while foregrounding a "depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (179). Thus, such a political position goes against the right to publicly express one's sexuality, for which LGBTQ+ activists and advocates have been fighting since the late 1960s (181).

Therefore, we can understand *Rent* as symptomatic of this process itself. Although still rooted in queer subculture, as the analysis has shown, the film has made it safe for the mainstream (Gleiberman). Back in 1996, Istel wondered whether the show would have been so successful if Larson had not died and if it would have survived in popular culture (14). Similarly, reviewers who pointed out the pastness of the film's themes were still interrogating *Rent* as a cultural text vis-à-vis the historical context, reflecting on its relevance. Although queer subculture might have entered fully into the mainstream, the concept of community still resonates with significance in a post-9/11 America. One of the few popular New York landmarks used in the film is a very brief image of the Twin Towers (fig. 3), employed to signal the passage from day to night between "I'll Cover You" and Maureen's protest. The image itself seems to have a spectral quality to it, a tear in the texture of the plot, evoking something that is no more but still has a very lasting effect in 2005 and affects the future of the city.

Figure 3



The image of the Twin Towers as a form of memorialization and sedimentation of different temporalities.

The terrorist attacks at the heart of New York have partly accelerated economic processes like the decentralization of jobs (Marcuse 264), but most importantly have affected the everyday lives of individuals, such as traumatized survivors, the unemployed, and the increasing number of homeless people (Sorkin 258-59). Then, one of the lines Gordon speaks during the first Life Support meeting assumes a completely different meaning: "I'm a New Yorker. Fear's my life." According to Sorkin, images of the dead, particularly tied to the commemorations around Ground Zero, contribute to the creation of anxiety while being weapons in the War on Terror (258). It could be argued that this fleeting image of the Twin Towers works as a memorialization that evokes the same anxiety people live with. Nevertheless, the community once again represents an answer, as clearly shown by the response of New Yorkers after 9/11 through a "crisis conviviality" that pushed people to get into the streets and socialize (252). This great emotionality in the city was mirrored by solidarity at a national level (Smelser 268), and the immediate recognition of 9/11 as cultural trauma, marking a group of people in their consciousness, identity, memories and future (265).

And yet, the haunting that this caesura represents brings to question how to make sense of 9/11. Various dissonant meanings have been attributed to the image of the Twin Towers, from a symbol of home to a monument to global capitalism (Huyssen 159-160). However, their presence, like many other representations of 9/11 analyzed by Engle, stands for an absence, that of the missing bodies of unnamed victims, condensing different temporalities in the same frame (18). Thus, this image could operate as a form of public and shared memorialization to counteract "the paradox of amnesia" generated by a saturated media landscape (Huyssen 17-18). Even more, the shot of the Twin Towers here speaks of a mourning process that has not been completed yet, a work that binds communities but also defies the utilitarian conventions of modern capitalism as antiwork, being a non-productive activity (Engle 115-117). Mourning is inside and beyond capitalism at once, similarly to the subcultural community represented in *Rent*. Therefore, on the one hand, this image echoes a more universal, even simplistic conceptualization of community in a post-9/11 context, which reflects the process of mainstreaming of queer subculture. On the other, it could also suggest an alternative, still capitalist experience to the divided heteronormative response that has dominated the media in the aftermath of the attack, presenting conventional models of Cold War masculinity and domesticated femininity (Faludi 3-4).

As queer subculture moves more and more into the mainstream, often being commodified, and queer identity becomes more visible, *Rent* emerges as symptomatic of this process itself as a cultural text where 30 years of American queer history are sedimented through its various media incarnations. From an alternative to dominant ideologies, firmly anchored to the historical and local context in which the musical was born in its first off-Broadway appearance, queer subculture has been co-opted and fully embedded into the mainstream in the film, where it assumes a more universal and yet alternative meaning in the post-9/11 period. Thus, community is still presented as utopian, but part of capitalism itself, reflecting the trajectory of queer subculture. Nevertheless, the film also offers itself as an archive, a memorialization of queer history, fully informed by a queer temporality in its own structure. The loss of Angel and other friends because of AIDS, and gentrification, queers the whole group of friends, tied by kin relations as alternative to a heteronormative family unit. Consequently, time and space, which are interdependent with gender, are characterised as queer in the film too. On the one hand, time is presented as an intensified present in response to the socio-historical context depicted through music and lyrics, and camerawork. On the other, a linear temporality is replaced by a sedimentation of different temporalities in the present thanks to editing techniques and, again, the musical numbers. The reconfiguration of time is closely connected to that of space through the evocation of local history that shapes the community of the folk musical. Thus, *Rent* becomes an act of memorialization in itself, looking back to AIDS activism, the gentrification of a neighborhood, queer nightlife, up to 9/11, showing how these socio-historical events are not left in the past, but actively survive and affect the present and the future. Again and again, the film offers itself to be interrogated for its historical value until that very last image of Angel, a past in the present, an indication of the future, and the tie that binds the community.

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NOTES

1. Dunne uses "setting" as a synonym of chronotope, as it indicates the time and place where the action takes place, the environment of the characters, and their way of life (87).
2. While Mark explicitly states that April, unable to cope with HIV, committed suicide in his introduction to "One Song Glory" on stage; in the film no explanation is given for her death, leading the audience to believe she died from AIDS. All analysis of the stage version refers to *Rent: The Final Performance*.

ABSTRACTS

Since the 1980s, American film musicals have been increasingly concerned with subjectivities that escape heteronormative categorizations, asserting their gender through a performance that gestures to a major fluidity between gender positions. *Rent* (Chris Columbus, 2005), adapted from the 1996 cult stage musical by Jonathan Larson, is a paradigmatic example of how this representation of gender is interdependent with the remapping of the chronotopes of the genre to reflect this fluidity. The focus of the film on a group of HIV-positive queer friends in New York in 1989-1990, affected by the loss of loved ones because of the AIDS epidemic and by the on-going gentrification of the Lower East Side, is key to the queering of classical chronotopes. The analysis of some of the musical numbers of the film will show how a linear, historical and essentially heteronormative temporality is substituted by queer alternatives: time is constructed both as an intensified present in response to the AIDS outbreak, and as a sedimentation of different

temporalities in connection to non-heteronormative kin relationships. This configuration of time contributes to the shaping of space as a subcultural place where the community is central, conceived as a utopian capitalist solution to the social problems represented in the musical, from the AIDS epidemic in the stage version, closely connected to the local context of the gentrification of the ethnically and socially diverse Alphabet City, to the more universalist solution to the post-9/11 trauma in 2005. The film could be then used as a springboard to critically reflect on the commodification of queer (sub)culture through a process that has brought *Rent* into the mainstream, in connection to the socio-cultural context of its production and reception.

INDEX

Keywords: AIDS activism, American film musical, Lower East Side, post-9/11 trauma, queer subculture, queer temporalities, *Rent*, urban gentrification

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