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Reading Rent: Interracial Relationships and Racial Hierarchies

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Reading Rent: Interracial Relationships and Racial Hierarchies

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated with love and gratitude to my mother, Irma Cristiana Rosario Perez, with whom I spent hours reading material and discussing racial hierarchies and scholarly articles on musical theater. Although she died before I could complete or defend my thesis, this work remains to honor her legacy of education and pursuit of the arts. I hope to always remember the joy and excitement my mother awakened in me at age 7, when she took me to my first Broadway show: A Chorus Line. It was the first of many musicals and plays our family enjoyed together, culminating in 2022 with Hamilton.

Mommy: I will continue our family legacy with Cristiana, your first grandchild, and namesake.

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I am very blessed to have three loving sisters, Cassandra, Laura, and Katrina, along with a supportive husband and partner in Aaron Field, and a child who I adore. In completing this project, I hope to model the importance of post-secondary education for my beloved Cristiana Fae Field and continue a standard set by mother, Irma Cristiana, and my paternal grandmother.

I would like to honor my feminist father, Dr. Maximo G. Perez, who instilled the importance of education among all his four of his daughters and who kept me sharp through critical debate.

Finally, throughout these years of grief, trauma, and joy, I have been supported by my tribe: Susan, Kelly, Seanna, Victoria, Liezl, Nigel, Cookie, Stuart, Judy, Samantha, Mrs. Gordon, Lauren S., Davina, Brian, Ryan, Lauren D., Heather, Chris H., Malitza, Aubrey, Ellyn, and my maternal grandmother who has sacrificed valuable time with me to complete this life-long goal.

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ABSTRACT

In examining the musical *Rent* by Jonathan Larson (1995) and its film adaptation by Chris Columbus (2005), most scholarly work and analyses have focused on the work's identity as a queer text. I assert that elements of this musical have been overlooked for its depth of racial and class hierarchies. Utilizing sociological theory and interracial relationships, I will examine characters and musical numbers to explore diversity and class positioning.

I will explore *Rent* for themes of racial, gender, and sexual identities and how they are presented through the friendships and romantic relationships of the eight principal characters (alphabetically): Angel, Benny, Collins, Joanne, Mark, Maureen, Mimi, and Roger. Through this exploration, I propose that Larson's work and Columbus' film adaptation are aspirational in the new millennium: envisioning an egalitarian society irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual identity. The ensemble of characters easily intermingles regardless of socio-economic status or social identity as they are united in goals of love and friendship. I submit that the harmony represented in the multicultural community is simultaneously progressive and also traditionalist, as the couples reflect the racial hierarchies and confirm the social mobility through interracial coupling.

While *Rent* is known for its empathetic recognition of individuals with HIV and AIDS both in and out of the homosexual community, the cultural artifact should be examined for other societal aspects as the United States approached the new millennium: including race and social standing. Larson's *Rent* reveals the blurring of social hierarchies through romantic pairings, a

contemporary trend of mixing racial identities, a forecasting of interracial relationships where women of color couple out of race and then up in social position, black men couple out of race, and the burgeoning economic trends for women and people of color. The content confirms the social and racial hierarchy, along with how social positioning can be fluid through status exchange in coupling with someone of a higher or lower social position. None the less, *Rent* promotes a value of utopianism. For the 1990s, *Rent*'s progressive casting redeems the musical. Thus, *Rent* is both aspirational and inspirational, while simultaneously confirming that social hierarchies exist, should be acknowledged, and apply themselves through interracial and interethnic relationships in the United States.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Last year, I was at a club meeting for our university's Pride Alliance, a gay-straight student organization. I advise the members, and I am old enough to be their mother. Considering their youth, I was shocked to find the small executive board knew the songs from *Rent*. As a handful of my Pride undergraduates cleaned up after the meeting, Isaiah, a young Black man, starting singing *Rent*'s "Seasons of Love"¹. Within a few seconds, Rufus, a young Latinx male, had joined Isaiah, and then Nataliya, a white woman of Russian and Israeli citizenship, completed the vocal trio. By the chorus, I, a Latinx, middle-aged woman, had joined the anthem celebrating life and community, marveling at the continued relevance of Jonathan Larson's 1995 musical that spans generations, race, class, and even, sexual identity. *Rent* has always been framed through a queer lens, yet I submit that *Rent* offers context that has been overlooked: the intersection of race and class beyond sexual orientation. Examining this further: It is astonishing that over twenty-five years after *Rent*'s Broadway debut and more than fifteen years after the 2005 Chris Columbus film adaptation, students still love the musical and know the songs as well my sisters and I do! My sisters are ten and twelve years younger than I, and therefore, even within our Latinx family, we understand *Rent* as an inter-generational work. I offer this narrative

¹ Larson, J. *Rent*. Directed by Michael Greif, performance by Diggs, Taye, February 1996, Nederlander, New York City. The musical number "Seasons of Love" is used to open the *Rent* in Act II, Scene I with reprise at end of musical. *Rent* was staged off-Broadway in Theatre season 1994-1995 with its Broadway debut in 1996.

as testimony to the figurative rainbow of admirers and span of generations that *Rent* has garnered; the audience is multiculturalism personified.

Jonathan Larson's *Rent* was originally produced for the stage in 1994 and 1995, debuting on Broadway in February 1996. The musical is set in the 1990's of New York City, in East Greenwich Village with an ensemble cast of fifteen and featuring eight principal cast members. *Rent* opens on Christmas Day with Mark, a filmmaker, who is documenting a trend of evictions in their building and city block and then extends to follow a year in the life of friends as described moment by moment in the lyrics of "Seasons of Love" as, "Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes". The audience learns of *Rent*'s inter-personal and philosophical conflict between art, gentrification, poverty, and economic development as communicated by eight lead characters fighting to enjoy every drop of life: measuring their lives through love. Mark arrives home and learns from his roommate Roger that their heat has been turned off. Each man donates something to build a fire: Roger rips his own concert poster off the wall and Mark throws in screen plays that were never produced. These actions set up their economic circumstances and unfulfilled artistic endeavors. We meet Benny, their former roommate, whose company has purchased the building and is evicting the artists living in the lofts. Each of the eight principal characters are introduced as they relate to each other, and it is revealed that four of them are HIV positive. Their friend Collins arrives but thieves attack him: steal his jacket and backpack, then leave him bleeding in an alley. Angel finds Collins and takes him home to clean and bandage his wounds. Benny has the electricity shut off throughout the building, so Mimi goes up to Mark and Roger's apartment seeking a light for her candle. Maureen, Mark's ex-girlfriend calls him for help with her stage production and he meets Maureen's current girlfriend, Joanne who is an attorney: wholly unprepared for the role of sound and light technician. As the

musical continues, the audience is drawn in by romance, conflict, HIV support groups, a lust for life, and the forty-two musical numbers that depict it all. As Mark states in the lyrics of Larson's "La Vie Boheme"², "The opposite of war, isn't peace...it's creation" (1.25). The friends continue creating art and life.

In exploring the content and themes that have made *Rent* engaging since its debut, U.S. scholars and U.S. audiences hold a common opinion that the musical's central contribution to cultural studies is related to sexual orientation. By contrast, I assert *Rent* holds additional value beyond the inclusion of sexual orientation among prominent characters. *Rent*'s treatment of race within the United States is aspirational of a harmonious multiethnic United States; the principal actors in the original Broadway cast represent white, Black, Latinx, and bi-racial Americans. Although later casts did include Asian actors, Asian characters are not represented in the originating principal cast of *Rent*. These casting decisions contrast with the visible media of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States: homogeneous casting in television shows such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) where the principal actors and characters are Black, *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) principal actors and characters are white and the same year that *Rent* was being produced, in *Friends* (1994-2004), again, the principal actors and characters are white. This societal trend is mirrored in non-revival Broadway musicals of the 1994-1995 season when *Rent* debuted. In order of Broadway opening: *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* had principal characters that are all Latinx, *Victor/Victoria* whose casting are all white, and *Bring in 'Da Noise Bring in 'Da Funk*

² Larson, J. *Rent*. Act II, Scene I. The musical number "La Vie Bohème" reflects spontaneous and joyous dancing among the artistic community, while the song's lyrics reveal bohemian ideals of poetry, sexual freedom, and support for anyone "out of the mainstream" which would appeal to the 'every man' and those audiences who identify as progressive despite having the financial means to purchase a ticket to a Broadway show.

where principal actors and casting are Black. For all three Broadway musicals,³ the principal casting is racially homogeneous. By contrast, in *Rent*, the principal actors are racially heterogeneous. The actors' racial identities are re-cast in Columbus' 2005 film adaptation, therefore, reflecting the importance of diversity in casting and specifically the racial identities of the original principal Broadway cast. Further, *Rent* is predictive of Black social mobility: the three principal cast and characters who are Black are the most educated and affluent of the story. In alphabetical order: Benny, Collins, and Joanne represent the rising Black middle class who are educated and professional⁴. Benny, who married into a wealthy family, is working as a businessman and property developer. Collins, the academic, is a professor at two Ivy League Schools: MIT and Columbia. Joanne is an attorney from a visibly affluent family. Overall, the principal Black characters are educated professionals.

Race may be seen as a social construct and the principal characters within *Rent* as emblematic of racial personifications. As observed by Steven J. Gold, "Race is seen as a social construction, but one that has very real implications in shaping life chances and the distribution and denial of privileges to individuals and groups. Debates about the role of phenotype in

³ *Internet Broadway Database* by The Broadway League. Hauser, Karen (Publisher). <https://www.idbd.com> and *Internet Theatre Database*. Scollick, Keith (Publisher). <https://www.theatredb.com>. I consulted these two internet theatre databases to confirm the musicals debuting the same year as *Rent*. Both internet databases confirmed the non-revival Broadway musicals of the 1994-1995 theatre season: *Internet Broadway Database* by The Broadway League and the *Internet Theatre Database*. Musicals may be separated into Revivals, which refer to a new production and artistic vision of a previously staged musical, and Non-Revivals, referring to an original, newly written musical, not previously staged on Broadway. As *Rent*'s story and characters had not previously been staged on Broadway, at the time of its Broadway debut, *Rent* was considered a non-Revival. Any future products of *Rent* would be considered Revivals.

⁴ Livingston, G. and Brown, A. (2017). "Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 years After Loving v. Virginia". Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (MAY 18, 2017) <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/> The examination includes a burgeoning social trend of interracial relationships between whites and non-white people of color utilizing data by Pew Research Center to reflect burgeoning social trend of interracial relationships between whites and non-white people of color mimicked in *Rent* through the interracial character pairings according to theories of American racial hierarchy.

racialization continue to simmer.”⁵ (953) I argue that *Rent* confirms the social construct of race, through subversively asserting the need for status exchange to balance each couple. “However, while acknowledging exceptions, many scholars maintain that those with European origins still enjoy more privileges than those without them.”⁶ *Rent* (1995) also identifies a burgeoning social trend of interracial relationships between whites and non-white people of color.⁷ In doing so, the casting confirms the sociological theory that racial hierarchies that exist within American social structure, wherein people of color “couple up” or “marry up” with white people, as a means of elevating their social position: Benny with wealthy white Alison, Collins with financially independent Latinx Angel, and Joanne with performance artist white Maureen. I discuss why these characters are personifications of American racial and class hierarchy.

While previous scholars have focused on *Rent*’s humane and graceful portrayal of individuals with HIV and AIDS by a white, heterosexual male playwright and discussed the visionary prevalence of queer identities among principal characters, I contend that *Rent* has other

⁵ Gold, Steven J (2004), “From Jim Crow to racial hegemony: Evolving explanations of racial hierarchy”. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(6), 951–968. Sociologist Gold discusses race as a social construction within American society. I will utilize Gold’s work to support my claim of status exchange as a means of balancing each interracial couple, as envisioned through *Rent*. Without a theory of race as a value within American society and how the element of race is weighted among Americans, there would be no need for status exchange to move up in societal positioning.

⁶ Gold, S.J. (2004). Gold argues that American racial hierarchy favors those individuals of European origins over those without European origins. Therefore, the sociological theory documents the value and weight of white individuals in American society, over those approximating white due to lighter skin complexions, and far over those who have darker complexions or Black. I utilize this weighted argument to explain social positioning in *Rent* due to color and status and how the couples exchange status when an individual is sociologically weighted more due to race and the other partner is sociologically weighted less due to race, but weighted more due to education or socio-economic class.

⁷ Livingston, G. and Brown, A. (2017). “Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 years After Loving v. Virginia”. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (MAY 18, 2017) <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/> Overall increases in intermarriage have been fueled in part by rising intermarriage rates among black newlyweds and among white newlyweds. The share of recently married blacks with a spouse of a different race or ethnicity has more than tripled, from 5% in 1980 to 18% in 2015. Among recently married whites, rates have more than doubled, from 4% up to 11%. At the same time, intermarriage has ticked down among recently married Asians and remained more or less stable among Hispanic newlyweds. Even though intermarriage has not been increasing for these two groups, they remain far more likely than black or white newlyweds to marry someone of a different race or ethnicity. About three-in-ten Asian newlyweds (29%) have a spouse of a different race or ethnicity. The same is true of 27% of Hispanics.

essential societal themes that have been overlooked by scholars. The musical is intersectional through its inclusion of race, class, and queer identities among the characters, while offering historical perspective of Black mobility within the United States as reflected in the three educated or affluent Black characters. Simultaneously, *Rent* presents a picture of interracial relationships that exemplifies certain theoretical discussion of race, while confirming racial hierarchies as a means of social mobility.

Though the characters' racial identities are not scripted, the importance of race and ethnicity is evident in the casting decisions by writer and composer Larson and stage director, Michael Greif, who present a progressive multicultural society with prominent Latinx and Black characters and inclusion of fully accepted interracial couples. I argue that both Larson's (1995) and Columbus' (2005) racial casting in *Rent* reflect progressive American societal values. Per Sociologist Gold, "Theorists of racial inequality generally acknowledge that oppressed groups possess a measure of agency. Therefore, they admit that some members are able to improve their quality of life, education and income."⁸ The inclusive community of Black, Latino, white and bi-racial actors depict how diverse communities can remain cohesive. However, though the four interracial relationships presented within *Rent* idealize interracial harmony, they also simultaneously reinforce American racial hierarchies through colorism: the darker characters amplify their social position through pairing with a partner of lighter skin. While concepts of

⁸ Gold, S.J. (2004). By applying Gold's argument of sociological racial positioning and the possibilities of social mobility (954), I can consider Ralph Richard Banks' examination of interracial coupling in *Is Marriage for White People?* (2011) and extend both theories to discuss a means of improving social status via mobility provided through status exchange. I intend to show that Larson and *Rent*'s Director Michael Greif personify these social theories through casting the original, principal cast, whether the demonstration was done through conscious or unconscious means.

both race and ethnicity are present in *Rent*, my project will focus on race as seen in Larson's musical and Columbus' film adaptation.

While *Rent* may be hopeful about racial harmony, its espousal of interracial relationships is problematic. I argue that both Larson and Columbus' projection of interracial relationships may ameliorate the societal taboo, but in doing so, both unwittingly expose and promote a societal imbalance. People of color should not need external race relations to increase their social acceptability. Given the multicultural egalitarian vision promoted by *Rent*, it must be determined that this contradiction, a confirmation of an inequitable social hierarchy, reflects persistent racial stereotypes in the United States. "The fact that minority groups include members who can maintain a middle-class existence does not mean, however, that they are free from racial oppression (even though advocates of colourblindness may make such an argument)."⁹ It is possible that *Rent* is being moderately subversive with its presentation of taboo interracial romance, while simultaneously acknowledging the racial hierarchy where whiter or lighter skin is preferred. I argue that race is a social identity, as are skin color and features that approximate European beauty of straight hair and thin(ner) noses. In doing so, American audiences would not feel their status was being challenged, and socially liberal audiences feel aligned with progressive status. Despite confirming American racial and social positioning, *Rent* is progressive for 1990s through its casting and as an art form, espouses utopian values of joy, authenticity, transparency, and egalitarianism.

⁹ Gold, S.J. (2004). As a sociologist, Gold seeks to clarify that people of color, who are minorities in our American society, may be assigned a middle-class caste due to education or income, they may still be the subject of racial prejudice. In doing so, I posit that would explain why *Rent*'s characters of Benny and Joanne, would still seek to improve their social positioning through status exchange with a white character.

As seen through Columbus' filmmaking, I will argue that race, as represented in the characters in *Rent*, conform to a theory that racial hierarchy is entrenched in American society: white citizens have the most power and privilege, Latinx are lower, and Blacks constitute the lowest racial strata. Depending on the social metric, Asians may be above or below whites, but there are no Asian actors cast in lead roles within *Rent* 1995 or 2005, nor are there Native American peoples in primary roles in either the original Broadway play or its film adaptation. Employing quantitative data will support claims of American racial hierarchy through income, wealth/assets, education level, laws/policy, and social visibility like representation of people of color in films, television shows, plays, and media. Complicating the social hierarchy are sexual and gender identity, as they intersect with race. My examination of how the characters romantically couple, respective to their race and sexual identity, reflect the future trend of marrying up by women of color. Through the characters' actions, *Rent* confirms American racial and social hierarchies.

The racial identities represented in *Rent* are personified through the actors of color, a multi-racial octet, living harmoniously, and therefore, representing an aspirational view of the United States. If racial identity were not a significant factor in American society, the majority of the original, principal, cast would not be actors of color, nor would Columbus have continued the same racial identities by casting six of the eight original Broadway cast members in reprised roles. I contend that the ensemble cast is visionary for 1995 and 2005, atypical of media of the time, and still uncommon today, making the multicultural cast appealing to generations of young audience members. Larson's prediction of a congenial diverse community is hopeful: five characters are people of color, three are women, and one is gender-fluid in addition to being a person of color. Only three of the eight characters are White; this should be mentioned as an

anomaly for the media of both decades: 1990s and 2000s. As neither Larson, nor Columbus cast Asian or indigenous peoples in the principal eight roles, *Rent* is not fully representative of race in the United States population, but its cast includes most of our racial categories and the people of color are not relegated to mere sub-plots or minor character arcs. The ensemble cast and focus on diversity in *Rent* continues to be rare in its dedication to multiculturalism; Larson's inclusive visualization has become reality for many educated American youth.¹⁰

I examine Larson's *Rent* (1995) for its significant movement within racial hierarchies, as characters move up and down due to their race or their partner's race. Several factors are also intersecting with social class: romantic pairings, a contemporary trend of mixing racial identities, a forecasting of interracial relationships where women of color couple out of race and then move up in social position, Black men couple out of race and similarly move up in social standing, and the burgeoning economic trends for women and people of color. I cite data¹¹ to reflect the rise of interracial marriages that can be personified through *Rent*'s romantic pairs. Economic mobility for people of color can be documented through increased median income, which is visible in some of *Rent*'s characters. Data of educational trends will reflect larger number of Black individuals, particularly Black women, gaining educational status.¹² While these gains have been impactful, people of color are still marrying out of their race. I argue that education and financial strides facilitate an increased mobility allowing white approximation. *Rent*'s interracial coupling

¹⁰ As a student advisor and university administrator, within my microcosm of post-secondary educational environment, it appears that American youth have become fully de-segregated and harmonious in multicultural groups. While other demographics may divide Americans, race is no longer the prominent factor separating today's youth, as seen on a large, urban college campus.

¹¹ Livingston, G. and Brown, A. (2017). "Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 years After Loving v. Virginia". Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (MAY 18, 2017) <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/>

¹² Lopez, Mark Hugo and Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana (2014). Women's college enrollment gains leave men behind." The Pew Research Center Banks' study of Black female achievement. This article supports Banks' statements on Black women graduating at higher rates with undergraduate and graduate degrees, thereby making Black women of higher education and socio-economic status than Black men.

seems to underpin this societal trend. *Rent*'s content confirms the social and racial hierarchy, along with how social positioning can help a person of color attain mobility through romantic, sexual pairing with someone of a higher class, whether married or otherwise. Although *Rent* reflects Larson's reality and personal experience living in the microcosm of an ensemble in East Greenwich Village, I suspect that Larson was imagining that the community's societal trends would replicate nationwide. He was astute and correct.

Both the theatre staging (1995) and film version (2005) of *Rent* depict a harmonious melding of racial identities into one community, visibility of interracial couples within the United States, along with a cultural examination of how racial positioning, socio-economic class, and educational level impact social hierarchy within relationships. In examining interracial romance and themes of racial hierarchy in *Rent*, I will use a both a feminist lens and application of sociological race theory. *Rent*'s women of color all connect with partners that provide more social prominence through coupling out of race. Using ideas presented through ideas of colorism, racial bias, and status exchange, I explore why their romances are notable from a position of race and class, and how their romances are both controversial for the time yet reflect a tension as they confirm the racial hierarchy in the United States. Utilizing a film theory infused with Freudian psychoanalysis, I will analyze the bi-racial and socially dominant relationship presented through two of Columbus' filmed musical numbers¹³: the romantic "I'll Cover You" (2005) and a dream sequence in "The Tango Maureen" (2005) that explores psychological excision of a relationship and an acceptance of self-identity. In "The Tango Maureen" Mark confronts his toxic

¹³ Columbus, Chris. (Director). (2005). *Rent* [Film]. Sony Pictures. Columbus' film adaption was released at the 10th anniversary of Larson's musical and provided additional exploration film theory. I will utilize the setting, costuming, and music in "Today 4 U, Tomorrow for me", "The Tango Maureen", "I'll cover You", and "Take Me or Leave Me".

relationship with Maureen and leaves it behind. Through Jane Feuer's "Dream Worlds"¹⁴ I will discuss *Rent* as a community musical and review the spontaneous choreography and diegetic music in "Today 4 U, Tomorrow for Me" and the unifying number, "Seasons of Love".

While *Rent* is known for its recognition of individuals with HIV and AIDS both in and out of the homosexual community, the cultural artifact should be examined for other societal aspects as the United States approached the new millennium: the fluid intersection of race and social standing. My thesis focuses on *Rent*'s societal and cultural implications of racial positioning. Progressive casting affirms the importance of people of color within our society; Larson's characters of color are the most admirable, generous, and passionate characters of the principal cast. To further consider racial cultural positioning, I will employ Ralph Richard Banks' sociological studies of Black Americans in *Is Marriage for white People?* (2011)¹⁵ The book can be applied to *Rent* through Banks' study of Black female achievement and his documentation of Black males who choose to marry up and couple out of their race. *Rent*'s characters of color reaffirm social and cultural hierarchies within the interracial relationships, class mobility and marrying up according to Black Americans' rise in education and affluence, along with interracial marriages that are more accepted and visible in society. *Rent* personifies an American trend of interracial relationships that has gained prevalence and, despite its creativity, reaffirms racial hierarchies discussed through sociologist Gold.

¹⁴ Feuer, Jane. (1980). *Hollywood Musicals: Dream Worlds and Dream Stages*. 67-87. Feuer discusses the element of the subconscious in dreamy musical numbers. I assert that these aspects can be realized through two musical numbers in Columbus' film adaptation.

¹⁵ Banks, R. R. (2011). *Is Marriage for white People?* 2nd ed. East Rutherford: Penguin Publishing Group. A sociological study of Black Americans in relationships, as seen through race, class, and education. Banks combines anecdotal interviews with quantitative data published by Pew Research Center to support the rising class of Black women and their existing relationship status without partners due to a number of factors.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT

Larson's *Rent* (2005) draws on two previous works: a novel called Scènes de la vie de Bohème /Bohemians of the Latin Quarter by Henry Murger (1888) and Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896), which Puccini based on Murger's novel. Ian Nisbet, a musical theatre scholar, studied the differences between both written and musical source material, as compared with Larson's *Rent*. "Murger's own friends – and models for his characters – died of consumption and starvation. Puccini's friends died from tuberculosis and Larson's friends died from complications due to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome)"¹⁶. Per Nisbet, "Their works represent an attempt on the behalf of the composer to allow their friends to live and be remembered."¹⁷ (226) This can be seen in *Rent* through the life support group meetings for those with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The individuals who stand and give their names in the group support scene are all friends of Larson's that had died from AIDS.¹⁸ Puccini's *La Bohème* opened¹⁹ February 1, 1896, and one hundred years later, Larson's *Rent* opened February 13,

¹⁶ Nisbet, I. (2011). "Transposition in Jonathan Larson's *Rent*". *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 5(3), 225–244. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/10.1386/smt.5.3.225_1. Nisbet compares Librettos as a musicologist and literary themes for meaning.

¹⁷ Nisbet, I. (2011). Nisbet discusses *La Bohème* as source material and inspiration for Jonathan Larson's vision for a modern era rock opera. I will utilize Nisbet's examination to discuss the context of Larson's work.

¹⁸ Milzoff, R. (2016). *Rent: The Oral History*; Twenty years after Jonathan Larson's posthumous triumph arrived at the Nederlander Theatre, key members of the cast and creative team relive the rise of a musical that changed Broadway. In New York (1968) (Vol. 49, Issue 9). New York Media. Journalist Rebecca Milzoff interviewed Julie Larson, sister of Jonathan Larson (deceased), composer of *Rent*. Jonathan Larson could not be interviewed due to his death. Julie shared Jonathan's personal history, stating that her brother's goal was to immortalize Jonathan's departed friends.

¹⁹ Puccini, G., Fisher, B. D., Giacosa, G., Illica, L., & Murger, H. (2001). Puccini's *La Bohème*. Opera Journeys Pub.

Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Bohème* opened February 1, 1896. I reference the opera and date to provide a comparison with Larson's source material and context as to the longevity of the story, although it can be updated with contemporary elements to provide relevance to the audience at the time of production.

1996. Larson used Puccini's libretto, musical themes, and characters. "The similarities between *La Bohème* and *Rent* appear the moment a programme from either work is opened - the setting, storyline, characters, and issues are almost identical." (Nisbet 227) The opera revolves around a Tuberculosis epidemic vs. the Broadway musical's AIDS epidemic. Larson modified the characters' names and professions to be modern and American²⁰, but they are recognizable. Marcello the painter becomes Mark the filmmaker. Rodolfo the poet becomes Roger the musician, Mimi remains Mimi, Musetta, Marcello's ex-lover, becomes Maureen, Mark's ex-lover, and Benoit the landlord becomes Benny the landlord (Nisbet 228). Larson refers to "Musetta's waltz"²¹ (*La Bohème* Act II) as a touchstone for Roger musically; as he tries to write his one great American's rock song, he keeps producing variations on Musetta's waltz in *Rent*²²(1:23). The most striking contrast between *La Bohème* and *Rent* is the ending: Larson wanted his modern Mimi to live.²³ In Milzoff's article, Producer Jeffrey Seller recounts how Jonathan Larson told him about his "idea to make *La Bohème* in the East Village where tuberculosis is replaced by AIDS."²⁴ (72). The New York Times theater review written for *Rent*'s debut framed

²⁰ Per Nisbet (2011), Larson modified the specific content from Puccini's *La Bohème*, particularly characters' names and professions, to be modern and American, but they are recognizable. Nisbet documents the correlation between Puccini's and Larson's characters. I will include both Puccini's and Larson's characters, to demonstrate the similarities and reflect how faithful Larson was to source material, while modernizing names for correlation to a contemporary audience.

²¹ Larson, J. *Rent*. Larson includes references to "Musetta's waltz" in both Acts I and II in relation to his musician, Roger. I would like to highlight these aspects, not only as another comparison to Puccini's opera as Larson's inspiration, but to reflect the turmoil of creating art. As Roger's creative goal is to write a seminal rock song that will be remembered, his inability to create an original song not reminiscent of Musetta's waltz is a critical artistic conflict in Larson's story.

²² Larson, J. *Rent*. In Puccini's *La Bohème*, Musetta is the central female character. Rodolfo, Puccini's poet, is inspired by Musetta. In *Rent*, Larson's Musetta character is named Mimi and Rodolfo is Roger.

²³ Nisbet discusses *La Bohème* as source material and inspiration for Jonathan Larson's vision for a modern era rock opera.

²⁴ Milzoff, R. (2016). *Rent: The Oral History*; Twenty years after Jonathan Larson's posthumous triumph arrived at the Nederlander Theatre, key members of the cast and creative team relive the rise of a musical that changed Broadway. In New York (1968) (Vol. 49, Issue 9). New York Media. I utilize this material to provide additional support to Larson's artistic goal and source, while simultaneously reflecting that *Rent* continued to provide relevance in 2016, twenty years after *Rent*'s Broadway debut.

the musical as a contemporary answer to " *La Bohème*" ²⁵ (Brantley). Larson simply updated *La Bohème* with the contemporary new disease and added the Latin flavor of Murger's novel by selecting "Marquez" as Mimi's (Musetta's) last name and substituting "Musetta's Waltz" for the Latin-flavored dance "Tango Maureen". *La Bohème* is set in Paris, a multicultural city of artists; whereas, *Rent* is set in New York City in a multicultural community of artists.

In its Broadway debut, *Rent* was well-received by critics and audiences. *Rent* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and The American Theatre Wing awarded *Rent* four Antoinette Perry "Tony" Awards for Excellence in Broadway Theatre, including Best Book of a Musical for Jonathan Larson, Best Choreography, Best Direction, and Best Lighting Design²⁶. Stephanie Coen, a theater critic at the time of *Rent*'s Broadway debut, Larson was considered by most critics to be "a gifted composer and lyricist"²⁷. In musical theater terms, the book, also known as a libretto, is the script that contains the narrative structure that keeps the score from being nothing more than a disjointed medley of songs. Larson's book, with its inclusion of interracial couples continues to engage audiences, making the lyrics, music, and characters captivating to younger audiences in the present-day. The Broadway production ran for twelve years and grossed over \$280 million²⁸. During this period, national tours were also mounted. There was an

²⁵ Brantley, B. (1996). "Theater Review; Rock Opera A la Boheme" And Hair." *The New York Times*. I include Brantley's review to reflect a contemporary analysis and examination of the Broadway musical at the time of its 1996 debut.

²⁶ Broadway's Tony Winners for 1996. (1996, June 4). *New York Times*.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A150513438/AONE?u=tamp44898&sid=bookmark-AONE&id=a3d9ff9a>
1996. I am including the awards garnered by *Rent* at its Broadway debut as a non-Revival musical to reveal the musical's critical acclaim.

²⁷ Coen, S. (1996). "Not out of nowhere: a breakthrough musical's developmental odyssey." *American Theatre*, 13, 15. Coen's review of *Rent* supports an assertion of positive critical reception at Jonathan Larson as a composer and of *Rent* as a new musical. The article is timed with *Rent*'s Broadway debut.

²⁸ Financial success of *Rent*, as defined through Box office sales and documented in Time Magazine, March 10, 2008 issue, p. 66. *Time* American news magazine is based in New York City. It was first published in New York City on March 3, 1923. I will utilize *Time* as a periodical as it is recognized for reputation and accuracy. The box office gross reflects that Larson' *Rent* was both a critical and a financial success. Many critics felt that *Rent* revitalized Broadway by bringing in younger audiences due to contemporary setting, rock music, cast diversity, and applicability to youth of the day.

off-Broadway revival in 2011 and a national twentieth-anniversary tour in 2016. *Rent* was also adapted for other media: two films and live television. In addition to Columbus' 2005 movie adaptation, a film version of the final Broadway performance was created in 2008, and a live television version aired in 2019.²⁹ *Rent* has been performed in twenty-five languages, and world-wide tours included these countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Greece, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Panama, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Russia, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, South Africa, Australia, Guam, New Zealand, Israel, Puerto Rico, Austria, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Czech Republic and Guatemala³⁰. Even in developing nations, the community of friendship and romantic relationships presented in *Rent* reflects societal aspirations for American egalitarianism and harmony; a celebration of love regardless of race, education, or socio-economic status.

Larson's *Rent* (1995) is usually seen as chronicling the rise of HIV and AIDS in the U.S., particularly indicative of the virus' occurrence outside of the male Gay community. For most critics, the musical was recognized as fresh and engaging, as represented by theatre critic Brantley in the following examples: "Larson gives refreshingly melodic life to sentiments (of struggle, death and poverty) with a score of breathtaking eclecticism."³¹ Its humane treatment of individuals with HIV or AIDS was lauded, "...finds a transfixing brightness in characters living in the shadow of AIDS". The musical's documentation of the virus as impacting more than just

²⁹ Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rent_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rent_(musical)). Wikipedia is used as a tertiary source to document the history of *Rent*'s American tours and adaptation as viewed in the 2020s.

³⁰ Wikipedia was used to document the breadth of *Rent*'s international tours and global reach and impact.

³¹ Brantley, B. (1996). Theater Review; Rock Opera A la "Boheme" And "Hair." *The New York Times*. I employ Brantley's theater review to summarize the many reviews published at the time of *Rent*'s 1996 Broadway debut which were overwhelmingly positive. Further, Brantley discusses the focus on Larson's subject matter and diversity of characters.

Gay men was noted, and, further, of its portrayal and view leading to the ‘normalizing’ of a multicultural community of friends. Critic Istel’s review further supports Brantley’s analysis, “It takes the very people whom politicians now turn into scapegoats for our woes - the multicultural, the multisexual, the homeless, the sick - and without sentimentalizing them or turning them into ideological symbols or victims, lets them revel in their joy, their capacity for love.”³². Although a central theme of *Rent* focuses on celebrating life and love despite illness and poverty, I will analyze different aspects of Larson’s characters and music, along with Columbus’ casting, cinematography, and costuming. Columbus’ film adaptation of *Rent* (2005), continues these themes with minimal changes and extends the same racial casting choices, including re-casting most of the originating Broadway cast. Therefore, the six reprising actors’ races remain the same from 1995 principal Broadway original cast to the principal cast of the 2005 film version. Only the central characters of Joanne and young Mimi are played by different actors in the 2005 film version and these two characters are cast along the same racial lines as the original Broadway cast. Although most critics felt *Rent* was visionary and deserved the four “Tony” awards and Pulitzer Prize it was awarded, Judith Sebesta documents that a minority of critics felt that *Rent* (1995) was an oversimplification of Gay and Lesbian characters and that their lives, as Gay or Lesbian, are unexamined³³, as is life with HIV or AIDS which is exploited in the

³² Istel, John. (1996). “‘Rent’ check”. *American Theatre*, 13(6), 12. Istel’s review at *Rent*’ Broadway debut further reflects the many positive reviews such as Brantley’s. Further, it discusses the contemporary subject matter of illness while elevating the characters as authentic characterizations. I selected Istel’s quote to indicate the inspirational joy at the heart of Larson’s musical.

³³ Sebesta, Judith. (2006). “Of fire, death, and desire: Transgression and carnival in Jonathan Larson’s *rent*”. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 16(4), 419–438. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/10.1080/10486800600923960>. I included Sebesta’s analysis as it exposes the minority of critics’ opinions who felt that Larson’s *Rent* (1995) was an oversimplification of Gay and Lesbian characters and that their lives, as Gay or Lesbian, are unexamined. Further, Sebesta reveals a source (Shulman) that claims Larson plagiarized some material, such as the authentic detail of taking AZT as a treatment for HIV and setting watches to note when it was time for medication. Both elements are noted as common among Shulman’s group of friends in the East Village. In addition, Sebesta cites Brustein as an example of a critic who felt Larson, as a heterosexual man, was appropriating lives of Gay and Lesbians.

musical.³⁴ Sebesta signals that composer Larson, who was neither Gay, nor HIV positive, was appropriating people's lives for art and fame. Sebesta's analysis includes a few critics of Columbus' film (2005) felt that the original music was now outdated as "hair rock" from the 1980s and 1990s. I will assert that *Rent*'s inclusion of and normalization of queer characters is just a portion of Larson's focus, which is a celebration of life and love, while examining American societal make-up. Further, Larson's inclusion of central Gay and Lesbian characters is innovative for the time. In the mid-1990s, ensemble casts included television shows like: "Friends", "Seinfeld", "Full House", "The Simpsons", "Beverly Hills 90210" and "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air". All are racially homogeneous casts, and none feature Gay and Lesbian characters. All are white casts, except "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" which is a fully Black cast. Like *Rent*, "Friends", "Seinfeld" and "Beverly Hills 90210" include Jewish characters, but unlike *Rent* they are not diverse beyond that characterization. *Rent* reflects a truly inclusive and diverse community in bohemian New York.

As seen through the filmmaking, I will argue that race, as represented in the characters in *Rent*, conform to a racial hierarchy entrenched in American society: white citizens receive the most privilege, Latinx are lower, then Black as the lowest racial strata. One sociological theory of racial hierarchy is called the Black-White or bipolar model and is discussed by sociologist Steven J. Gold, "In view of recent challenges to our understanding of racial inequality, this article explores the current viability of the most influential approach to racial hierarchy: the Black-White or bipolar model."³⁵ Gold posits that hierarchies occur as groups arrive into the

³⁴ Sebesta, J. (2006). Sebesta also documents that some critics felt that Larson, who had neither HIV, nor AIDS, was exploiting intimate details of life with the virus to elicit sympathy or for commercial gain.

³⁵ Gold, S.J. (2004). Sociologist Gold explores a theory of racial hierarchy in the United States and posits that some Americans are able to improve their social status through education and income. My analysis employs the bipolar or Black-White model of sociological theory discussed by Gold through two of the four couples present in *Rent*.

work force marketplace, and therefore, experience entry into various aspects of society. “The Black-White model offers an explanation for patterns of racial/ethnic inequality and suggests a vertical location of racialized groups within a system of stratification.”³⁶ The inter-race pairings of both Angel and Collins, in addition to Joanne and Maureen personify the Black-White model as Angel and Joanne couple up with partners that have more social positioning. Boldly personifying of future multiculturalism, *Rent* (1995) includes white, Latinx, and Black characters that are Heterosexual, Bi-sexual, Lesbian, and Cis-gender. Examining how the characters romantically couple-up as individuals, respective to their race and sexual identity, reflects the future trend of marrying up by women of color as seen through: Angel, Joanne, and Mimi. Racial hierarchy can be considered through intermarriage and exchange theories as noted by Gold, “this hypothesis has been applied to several different pairs of vertically ordered characteristics, such as education and physical attractiveness, occupation and education, and parental occupational status and own occupational status.” As a hypothesis, these are variables that contribute to the values one may find attractive in selecting a mate.

I will examine Larson’s *Rent* (1995) for its significant blurring of social hierarchies through romantic pairings, a contemporary trend of mixing racial identities, a forecasting of interracial relationships where women of color couple out of race and then move up in social position: Black men who couple out of race and similarly move up in social standing, and the burgeoning economic trends for women and people of color, which are also reflected through impact on class. These romantic pairings reflect a theory of status exchange. Theories of status exchange within the relationship marketplace argue that persons who have a lower status than

³⁶Gold, S.J. (2004). I will apply Gold’s theoretical foundation to support my claim of status exchange among *Rent*’s four couples as cast through interracial partners. See footnote 6.

their partner in one respect tend to have a higher status than their partner in another. A perceived social disadvantage in one domain is ‘exchanged’ for a relative advantage in another domain.”³⁷ *Rent*’s content confirms the social and racial hierarchy, along with how social positioning can attain mobility through pairing with someone of a higher social position. Although *Rent* reflects Larson’s reality while living in the microcosm of an ensemble in East Greenwich Village, I assert that Larson is hopefully predicting that the community’s societal trends in the United States would replicate.

To analyze the character relationships in *Rent*, I will use a sociological approach to interracial relationships discussed by legal theorist and sociologist Ralph Richard Banks. In Banks’ *Is Marriage Only for White People?* (2011), Banks explores cultural concepts of marriage and relationships through race and inequality, researching the cultural structure of marriage for all Americans. He then focuses on Black Americans as the least-married of all American populations, further documenting that marriage rates have declined for Black Americans, particularly Black Women, and investigating potential causes and solutions for the decrease. Through his examination, he discusses the marriage “marketplace” and the factors that Americans consider in selecting a romantic partner. He notably refers to the race as “Black” versus “African American” to include those who are Black, but whose lineage may not be from Africa, such as those Black people whose cultural heritage is from Central America or the Caribbean.

³⁷ Gold, S.J. (2004) Gold illustrates a hypothesis of vertically ordered sociological characteristics. I assert this model of racial hierarchal theory may be applied to status exchange within the relationship market, as seen through *Rent*’s four interracial couples as cast in the 1995 musical and the 2005 film.

Banks' study discusses the phenomenon of "outmarrying" within Black communities.³⁸ The author defines outmarrying as marriage that is outside of one's race exclusive of social class. He examines the higher rate of outmarrying among the Black male community and discusses how Black women are much less likely to marry outside of their race. The author argues this is due to several factors including colorism, white beauty standards, and lack of available or comparable candidate pool with Black men.³⁹ Banks cites data of Black women graduating at higher rates from post-secondary education and placement within professional positions of authority.⁴⁰ Banks' research reveals that there are fewer Black men with similar education, employment, or socio-economic status. He describes the lopsided ratio with Black women as "imbalance", noting that this trend "hits professional Black women especially hard, because the Black men they might regard as the most desirable – college graduates with good jobs – are also the most likely to marry interracial"⁴¹ (Banks 34). The Black male candidate pool is further decreased: citing high rates of institutional racism leading to violence and incarceration. Banks finds that Black women are among the least likely of all groups to marry across racial lines. "According to recent data, roughly one in twenty black wives is married to someone of another race."⁴² (Banks 116) He goes on to expound, "Recent marriages are more likely to be interracial,

³⁸ Banks, R. R. (2011) explains the sociological term outmarrying as marrying outside of one's race. I will apply the sociological theory and term to describe seven of the eight principal characters as cast by Larson and Grief (1995).

³⁹ Banks, R. R. (2011). Banks' research reveals that there are fewer Black men with similar education, employment, or socio-economic status as compared to Black women. Banks discusses the relationship and marriage marketplace for Black women and lack of Black men in comparable professional or financial status.

⁴⁰ Banks, R. R. (2011). Sociologist Banks cites data of Black women graduating at higher rates from undergraduate institutions to contrast the difference in professional and socio-economic status between Black women and Black men. This data reveals why Banks concludes that Black women will likely have to marry down to stay within their race.

⁴¹ Banks, R. R. (2011). Banks discusses the sociological trend of desirable black men's likelihood to outmarry and marry interracial. (34) Desirability is defined in terms of professional status, college education, and earning capability as a determination for socio-economic status. My examination of Rent personifies Banks' analysis through the characters Benny, Collins, and Joanne via 1995 casting by Black actors.

⁴² Banks, R. R. (2011). Banks utilizes data from Pew Research Org to support a finding in 2010 that one-in-seven U.S. marriages is interracial or interethnic. Upon further examining Banks' source, "Rates of intermarriages among

but even Black women who have wed recently are unlikely to have a nonblack husband.” (Banks 116). Rather than outmarry, Black women are more likely to marry someone of a lower socioeconomic class which the author calls “marrying down”⁴³. Likewise, they are more likely to remain single and childless, by choice, rather than outmarry. “Black women are also less likely to intermarry than are other minority groups. Asians and Latinos are as much as three times as likely as Black women to wed across group lines.” (117). “In 2008, fewer than one in ten Black female newlyweds married across racial lines, which makes less than half as likely as Black men to marry someone of a different race.” (117). This research includes the time period of Columbus’ film adaptation of *Rent* in 2005.

The author writes this book as an examination to save Black women and facilitate the life they envisioned. Banks’ *Is Marriage for White People?* (2011) evaluates the status of marriage among Black communities including: looking for a partner, what is important in a life mate, class systems including socioeconomic class, education, and incarceration to better understand how marriage functions and who benefits from the institution. The author interviews Black women, both coupled and uncoupled, to understand the unique relationship journey they have travelled and interweave their life stories into his book. The anecdotes create a captivating narrative and sociological study in modern Black womanhood.

In his examination of the marriage marketplace, Banks focuses specifically on the challenges facing African American women as they compete against physical beauty standards

newlyweds in the U.S. more than doubled between 1980 (6.7%) and 2008 (14.6%). However, different groups experienced different trends. Rates more than doubled among whites and nearly tripled among blacks. But for both Hispanics and Asians, rates were nearly identical in 2008 and 1980.” Banks cites Jeffrey Passel, Wendy Wang, and Paul Taylor. <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2010/10/755-marrying-out.pdf>

⁴³ Banks, R. R. (2011). Banks’ quantitative findings are supported by his anecdotal evidence. He determines that Black women are more likely to marry someone of a lower socioeconomic class which the author calls marrying down versus marrying out.

and psychological motives to “in marry” meaning to marry a man within the same race.⁴⁴ His work sociologically chronicles the lives of Black women who rarely marry outside of their race, juxtaposing this against the prevalence of Black men’s willingness to “outmarry” across cultural and racial lines. “Black men now intermarry more than twice as frequently as Black women, but that gender gap is not long-standing. It developed during the same period as the racial gap in marriage.” (117). The author goes on to say that interracial relationships are more prevalent and visible in 2010 than in the past; this is likely due to increasing rates of Black men marrying out of their race.

According to Banks, “social scientists have considered a number of reasons why nonblack men might be disinclined to partner with Black women. The explanations have to do with group status, stereotypes, and the white standard of beauty.” (121) The “group status” argument is that African Americans are disfavored as potential spouses because Black Americans as a group are devalued in American society. As a sociologist and attorney, he documents the benchmark that should have signaled a change for Black women to “outmarry” with the Supreme Court’s 1967 decision on *Loving v. Virginia*. Banks describes the landmark case as involving, “the marriage of a Black woman to a white man – invalidated the prohibitions of interracial marriage that remained on the books in more than a dozen states.” (118) During his research, he highlights the existence of a rising Black middle class which is comprised of mostly Black women. These women are graduating from university with both undergraduate and graduate degrees at a higher rate than their Black male counterparts.⁴⁵ However, Black men, are

⁴⁴ Banks, R. R. (2011). Sociologist and legal theorist Banks defines “in marry” as marrying within the same race. Although, I do not feel that “in marry” applies to any of the principal characters in the 1995 or 2005 versions of *Rent* that I am examining, I assert that it is important to understand the contrast when discussing the intersection of race and marriage.

⁴⁵ Lopez, Mark Hugo and Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana (2014). Women’s college enrollment gains leave men behind.” The Pew Research Center Banks’ study of Black female achievement. This article supports Banks’ statements on

typically being left out of this burgeoning middle class not only because of graduation rates, but also due to other economic factors including, but not limited to, incarceration and violence. With these considerations, the author argues that Black women are remaining single and childless for longer as they are unwilling to outmarry or to assume single parenthood.

Banks explains the sociological term outmarrying as marrying outside of one's race and this is exclusive of class constraints. He explains that the resistance to outmarrying is tied to Black women rejecting and fighting white beauty standards and colorism. In Banks' research, he examines how interracial relationships where Black men have outmarried with white women may be both emotionally and intellectually challenging for Black women. When an educated Black man outmarries, there is supposition that rather than marry a Black woman equal in education or socio-economic status, they marry a white woman who is lesser in these areas. Banks clarifies this for readers, "Sociologists explain such relationships as a "status exchange" in which the Black man benefits from the woman's Whiteness, and the woman gains from the man's educational and professional accomplishments."⁴⁶ (34) Therefore, in Banks' findings, "...some Black women think the successful Black men often wed white women who don't have much going for them." (Banks 34). The white women are not equal to the Black male in terms of education and/or class, but they have elevated social status due to their race.

In considering this sociological theory, when a Black individual is outmarrying a white person who is from a lesser educational or socio-economic stratum, the Black partner is thought to be "marrying up" despite the difference in professional or financial status. This is considered a

Black women graduating at higher rates with undergraduate and graduate degrees, thereby making Black women of higher education and socio-economic status than Black men.

⁴⁶ Banks, R. R. (2011). _Sociologist Banks defines the terms "status exchange" and "marrying up" and discusses both sociological aspects' practical application among American society. Further, Banks places these phenomena in context to assist the reader with understanding. I assert that Banks' terminology (34) may be applied to all four of the interracial couples as cast in *Rent* 1995 and 2005.

status exchange: Black men who marry out with white women receive a status boost; they are perceived by society as more desirable because they are wanted and accepted by a white person. The Black partner receives a boost in social positioning in racial hierarchy and possibly in social circles. Further, their children may be of a lighter-complexion and white-approximating in a society that values White, Euro-centric beauty as a standard. In this hierarchal theory, these values can be exchanged to receive a more elevated status in theorized racial hierarchy. Physical beauty is one such value. Banks notes, “the idea here is that the characteristics that make women beautiful, and hence more desirable in the relationship market, are features associated with white women: light complexion, narrow noses, long straight hair.” When your partner or spouse is more valued by society, you, by association, have more societal value. Per Banks, “the suspicion is that well-educated, high earning Black men are so enamored of the idea of having a white spouse that they often marry white women who are less educated and of lower status in every way except race.” However, for a white woman to marry a Black man, he must be societally perceived to be exceptional in some way: professionally, academically, financially, or athletically. In this sociological theory, there must be a reason why the white partner would be willing to “marry down” with an individual of lesser race. The theory of status exchange, along with Banks’ revelations of status exchange among an interracial couple, is evident in the 1968 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*⁴⁷ In order for this interracial relationship to be societally accepted, Sidney Poitier’s character has to be extraordinary: “He is morally virtuous, wealthy, exceptionally well-educated, an accomplished physician, with an international reputation, a job

⁴⁷ Kramer, S., Kramer, S., Rose, W., Tracy, S., Poitier, S., Hepburn, K., & Houghton, K. (2008). *Guess who’s coming to dinner* (40th anniversary ed.). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. 1968 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*

in Switzerland, and accolades a mile long.”⁴⁸ (Sadler) Only his elevated status makes him a potentially acceptable partner; without that his likely in-laws would not have considered blessing an interracial marriage. “What one partner gains in terms of race relations (marrying up in the racial hierarchy), the other partner gains in terms of socio-economic status (marrying up in the class hierarchy).” When a successful Black person outmarries with a white or lighter person, they exchange status: financial security or professional strata in exchange for white beauty standard or approximation of white beauty. “In order to accept a partner lower on the racial hierarchy, the partner must bring socio-economic advantages.”⁴⁹ What is evident in interracial marriage is the exchange of status in both race and class. In this theory, there are two main types of societal status: race and class. In an interracial marriage, these statuses must be "exchanged" so that each partner benefits as a result. The culmination is an elevated status for each member of the couple; each is elevated socially by the other's exceptionalism in racial hierarchy, social position, educational prominence, or financial security.

In his sociological study, *Is Marriage for white People?* (2011) Banks posits that Black women who may want to marry or have children should be equally open to marrying out of race to expand their candidate pool. Black women are outpacing their Black male classmates in graduating with undergraduate degrees and graduate, professional degrees.⁵⁰ Further, Black

⁴⁸ Brook Sadler's examination of status exchange in *Guess Who's coming to Dinner?* During a lecture and included with permission to further elaborate the status exchange when one partner of lower race positioning must have some socially valuable element to trade with the partner of higher race positioning. Further, to reflect the distinction that the partner of higher race position, may be less educated or affluent, but is socially considered to be marrying down when coupling with a partner of lower race position, despite exceptional value in other social areas.

⁴⁹ Gold, S.J. (2004). I apply sociologist Gold's instruction on a bipolar model of characteristics and racial hierarchy to further solidify the formula of status exchange and how one partner ascends in social positioning, while the other partner must descend in social positioning to balance the couple in racial hierarchy.

⁵⁰ Parker, Kim. “What's Behind the Growing Gap Behind Men and Women in College Completion?” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (NOVEMBER 8, 2021). <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-hyphen-reads/2021/11/08/whats-behind-the-growing-gap-behind-men-and-women-in-college-completion/> The Pew Research Center documents achievement of Blacks for economic and educational measures, thereby supporting Banks' analysis as to one reason why there are fewer Black male counterparts.

women are more easily promoted into leadership positions than white women or Black men, therefore, they are financially ahead and professionally above their counterparts. Banks explores several reasons why there are fewer Black males available to Black women, including documenting rates of incarceration, declining graduation rates, and the existing societal trend of Black men marrying out of their race for social status exchange.

Ultimately, however, the author opines a resolution for Black women to have the more choice in the marriage market would be to consider “out marriage” like their Black male counterparts. It is important to recognize that the author espouses and advocates for addressing the systemic issues such as colorism, institutional racism, violence, and Eurocentric beauty standards to elevate members of the Black community. Banks genuinely wants to see happily thriving Black women who have the partners and/or a child, if they so desire. To achieve this, he advocates for expansive dating pools, but also the dismantling of systems that have helped put the candidate limitations in place. Banks recommends that Black women face the fears and self-consciousness that arise with dating out of race, assuring readers that Black women can be desired in the contemporary marriage market.

Ralph Richard Banks’ sociological studies of Black Americans in *Is Marriage for White People?* (2011) are reflected by the interracial coupling of *Rent*’s two Black male characters Benny and Collins who choose to marry and couple up both out of their race and with more affluent partners. The Pew Research Center aligns with Banks’ study of Black female achievement and both quantitative data sets⁵¹ are reflected in Joanne, an educated young professional who is an assertive leader, yet she pairs with a white woman of lesser education and

⁵¹ Lopez, Mark Hugo and Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana (2014). Women’s college enrollment gains leave men behind.” The Pew Research Center Banks’ study of Black female achievement. This article supports Banks’ statements on Black women graduating at higher rates with undergraduate and graduate degrees, thereby making Black women of higher education and socio-economic status than Black men.

socio-economic status. As Banks noted, “Today’s high-achieving women are already more likely than ever to marry men who are either lower earning or less educated than they are.”⁵² Further, Joanne’s coupling and engagement with Maureen, may also be seen as parallel to Benny and Collins’ decision as a Black male. Joanne is a Lesbian. She takes on the dominant male role during the “Tango Maureen” with Mark. I argue that Joanne proves Bank’s analysis as both a Black woman who must marry out race and as a dominant Black male persona who prefers to marry out of her race. Although Joanne is a professional, she accepts a less dominant role by acting as Maureen’s stage production manager and roadie. Joanne is an attorney, who is not trained as an audio-visual technician, nor does she have experience in packing musical equipment, yet she assumes this *unpaid* role to support her partner. Joanne’s submissive actions are similar to Banks’ documenting of Black women assuming lesser roles so as not to challenge their less professional partners. The status exchange here is that Joanne is moving up in social positioning through her association with Maureen. Like Sidney Poitier’s character in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* Joanne is exceptional: professional, affluent, and cultured. By contrast, Maureen is “marrying down” according to the theoretical racial hierarchy. All three Black characters reaffirm social and racial hierarchies within their interracial relationships through class mobility and marrying up according to Black Americans’ rise in education and affluence, along with interracial marriages that are more accepted and visible in society.

⁵² Banks, R. R. (2011). Banks make a point of supporting a social phenomenon of women, including Black women, graduating with undergraduate and advanced degrees at a higher rate than male counterparts, therefore, he posits that more women than ever will be marrying men who are less educated, professional, or affluent. I will assert that Banks findings are important because in theory more women would be marrying down, but that would depend on if the women are Black. Black women would be marrying down if marrying in, however, if a Black woman is marrying out, they are likely to be marrying up. Their partner would in theory be lighter and have a superior social positioning, if the partner is less educated or financially secure. This elements are realized through Joanne.

I will argue that from the point of view of women of color, *Rent* confirms and depicts Banks' sociological treatise that Black women who want to marry, or marry up, will likely have to consider marrying out of their race. Although Banks analyzes specifically Black women, *Rent* personifies Banks' thesis through the three women of color featured. Joanne (Black), Mimi (Latina), and Angel (cast as non-white Latina and possibly Black Latina or Bi-racial Latina) have all coupled up with partners outside of their race and who are, theoretically, above them in sociological hierarchy. The respective partners Maureen (white), Roger (white), and Collins (Black, but well-educated, employed, and cisgender) all reflect a societal rise in social prominence due to race or mainstream sexual status. Their respective partners are all extraordinary to be worthy of coupling out of race: Joanne (affluent, professional), Mimi (beautiful and gainfully employed), and Angel (loved and financially solvent). Maureen, Roger, and Collins are all coupling down on the racial hierarchy, as they couple with their respective partner: Black, Latina, and Transgender.

Rent also documents the rise of Blacks in American society in terms of education and socio-economic status. Pew Research Center documents achievement of Blacks for economic and educational measures.⁵³ These data points are impactful as they demonstrate the racial and socioeconomic trends explored by both Larson and Columbus; further, they indicate that despite these economic trends, American people of color are still motivated to couple out of race. The two educated characters, Joanne and Collins, are both Black and obtained graduate degrees. Benny, the only affluent character, is also Black. Roger, Maureen, and Mark, the white

⁵³ Livingston, G. and Brown, A. (2017). "Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 years After Loving v. Virginia". Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (MAY 18, 2017) <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/> Pew Research Center documents achievement of Blacks for economic and educational measures, thereby supporting Banks' analysis. Among black newlyweds, the gender gap in intermarriage increases with education: For those with a high school diploma or less, 17% of men vs. 10% of women are intermarried, while among those with a bachelor's degree, black men are more than twice as likely as black women to intermarry (30% vs. 13%).

characters are unemployed artists and financially struggling. The two Latinx and Bi-racial characters Angel and Mimi, are economically self-sufficient and although not affluent, they each have a funding source; their careers are documented through dialogue or in certain scenes. In this way, *Rent* reflects the resourcefulness and ingenuity of people of color.

While only one of the four couples in *Rent* are married, the demographics of the couples reflect the shifting of American values. Banks refers to the importance of economic stability for women. Although his study is primarily of Black women, Banks also addresses Black men marrying out of their race. These phenomena are represented through characters Benny and Collins, both Black men, both of whom seek partners who are affluent or more financially solvent. In order to obtain this financial access, they have both coupled outside of their race, something Banks urges Black women to do and, further, notes that Black men have been coupling outside their race for some time. Banks discusses the need for Black women to expand their dating demographic to find fulfilling companionship; this is depicted by Joanne, who dates out of her race with Maureen. Further, Banks discusses the dynamic of marrying up. *Rent* personifies this concept, by applying interracial relationships to seven of the eight central characters: Latinx Mimi coupling with white Roger, Bi-racial gender-fluid Angel coupling with educated Black Cis-gender academic Collins, and Benny, a Black man, marrying the wealthy and refined white Allison. Joanne is a lawyer, and although an educated professional, she couples with white avant-garde performance artist Maureen. Through their interracial coupling, four of *Rent's* principal characters are confirming our existing American racial hierarchy and conforming to the racial hierarchy by moving up the socio-economic strata, while the other half move down in social positioning.

As a cultural text, *Rent* reflects interracial dating trends. Quantitative data from Pew Research Center ⁵⁴ reflects attitudes toward interracial dating. Racial identities of married couples as noted in the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census between whites and non-whites become more visible after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down miscegenation laws banning interracial marriage in 1967 through *Loving v. Virginia*, allowing white people to marry non-white people.⁵⁵ Progressively, individuals in the U.S. began to acknowledge interracial marriage more than before and oppose such interracial marriages less.⁵⁶

Rent illustrates this as a possibility through Joanne, who does couple up out of race with Maureen, with intent to be committed and marry. After their appointment with a tabloid television show, Joanne asks Maureen to marry her and Maureen accepts. Banks explores the already-present intermarriage between Black men marrying outside their race. He notes this usually occurs with women who are closer in white approximation. The trend of Black men marrying out of race is evidenced through Benny and Collins, both of whom couple up with lighter-skinned women. Benny marries Alison, whose father in the 2005 film is played by a white actor, therefore Alison is not Black. Although we never see Alison, one can conclude based on her father's representation, that Alison is either white or Bi-racial; either way Alison can be read as closer to approximating white than Benny. Collins is with Angel, who is lighter-

⁵⁴ Parker, K., Menasce Horowitz, JI, Morin, R. and Lopez, M.H. "Race and Multiracial American in the U.S. Census (JUNE 11, 2015). Pew Research Center. <https://pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/06/11/chapter-1-race-and-multiracial-american-in-the-u-s-census/> This data from Pew Research Center reflects attitudes toward interracial dating. Racial identities of married couples as noted in the 1990 and 2000 U.S.

⁵⁵ In 2016, Pew Research Center examined intermarriage in the U.S. 50 years after *Loving v. Virginia*. Survey results reflected a dive in share of nonblacks who would opposes an adult relative marrying a black person. In 1990. 63% of those polled would oppose a relative marrying a black person. By contrast in 2016, only 14% would oppose a relative marrying a black person. Opposition to a relative marrying a Hispanic, Asian or White, decreased very slightly, but the numbers were already 21% or less. This data reflects the change in American attitudes toward intermarriage with a Black person and supports a view that Larson's interracial couples were aspirational. The vision of increased interracial partners has been manifested from 1994 when Larson and Greif staged *Rent*.

⁵⁶ Pew Research Center analysis of 2008-2015 American Community Survey and 1980 decennial census (IPUMS). "Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 Years After *Loving v. Virginia*"

skinned. In both examples, Benny and Collins are with women who elevate their financial circumstances. Further, both Benny and Collins are professional men, which adds to their social ability to marry or couple-up and out of their race. As educated Black men, they each have something to offer as status exchange, which allow them to outmarry. In Banks' research of Black men, "if the men marry outside of their racial group ("outmarry"), it is at three time the rate of the women.". Both of *Rent*'s Black men, Benny and Collins, outmarry, as does Joanne, the lone Black woman. However, one might argue that Joanne exudes and functions as a Black masculine identity that positions her closer to a Black male in terms of social status. Given Joanne's actions and costuming in vests, ties, and suits, Joanne, can be seen in the masculine role, reaffirming the trend of Black men outmarrying. Pew's study of intermarriage since *Loving v. Virginia* found "The most dramatic increases in intermarriage have occurred among black newlyweds. Since 1980, the share who married someone of a different race or ethnicity has more than tripled from 5% to 18%. White newlyweds, too, have experienced a rapid increase in intermarriage, with rates rising from 4% to 11%."⁵⁷ The Pew Research Center documents a rise in intermarriage for those that with at least some college experience. In 1980, 8% of intermarried newlyweds had some college experience. In 2015, 19% of intermarried newlyweds had a bachelor's degree. Intermarriage is also slightly more common among black newlyweds with a bachelor's degree (21%) than those with some college (17%) or a high school diploma or less (15%).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Pew found despite this increase, white newlyweds remain the least likely of all major racial or ethnic groups to marry someone of a different race or ethnicity. Asian and Hispanic newlyweds are by far the most likely to intermarry in the U.S. This is modestly seen in *Rent* 1995 and 2005 through both the Hispanic characters of Angel and Mimi, however, as previously stated, all eight of the main characters in these two version couple interracially.

⁵⁸ "Intermarriage somewhat more common among the college educated" Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/intermarriage-in-the-u-s-50-years-after-loving-v-virginia/>. This trend, too, is seen in *Rent* as Benny, Collins, and Joanne are all college-educated. As previously mentioned, all

The 2005 film documents the continuation of these societal trends, as interracial marriage is more prevalent in 2005 than in 1995. According to the Pew Research Center, there has been a steady increase in intermarriage between whites and Non-whites since 1967. In 1967 Pew estimates 3% of newlyweds are intermarried. By contrast, in 1980 Pew documents 5% of newlyweds are intermarried up to 17% in 2015. According to the study documenting a steady increase in U.S. intermarriage, “More broadly, one-in-ten married people in 2015 – not just those who recently married – had a spouse of a different race or ethnicity. This translates into 11 million people who were intermarried.”⁵⁹

Rent confirms the American racial and social hierarchies, through the characters’ actions. Further, *Rent*’s casting is aspirational of integrated racial communities. Although *Rent*’s inclusive casting is reality in the East Village of New York City, it is projected as achievable and desirable for other American communities, as these diverse friends are portrayed with joviality. In an interview for *The Advocate* timed with the 2005 film, actor Idina Menzel, who originated the character of *Rent*’s Maureen, explains, “We as New Yorkers – been there, done that. But the rest of the world needs to see people of different ethnicities, women loving women, men loving men. The movie is still extremely relevant because a lot of people still need to be educated.”⁶⁰

characters couple interracially, therefore, this element is not fully examined as no characters in 1995 or 2005 are not marrying out, whether they are college educated or not educated at university.

⁵⁹ Pew attributes this rise to the growth in intermarriage has coincided with shifting societal norms as Americans have become more accepting of marriages involving spouses of different races and ethnicities, even within their own families. This shift therefore supports the idea that Larson and Grief’s view of interracial coupling and diverse groups was foreshadowing or aspirational in 1995. Pew’s research twenty years after *Rent*’s debut reveals that interracial coupling is far more prevalent and accepted.

⁶⁰ Giltz, Michael. (2005). “Rent gets real”. *The Advocate*, 950, 49–. Pride Publishing Inc. Gindt, D. (2014). Queer Embodied Absence: HIV/AIDS and the Creation of Cultural Memory in Gordon Armstrong’s *Blue Dragons* and Daniel MacIvor’s *The Soldier Dreams*. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 48(2), 122–145. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/10.3138/jcs.48.2.122>. Giltz wrote a 2005 profile of *Rent* to coincide with Columbus’ 2005 film adaptation. The article focuses on the societal environment at *Rent*’s inception and why the subject matter is still sociologically relevant ten years after its Broadway debut. (50). Giltz’s interviews with originating cast members reinforce the importance of providing an artistic vision of egalitarianism.

Rent attempts to reveal that, while perhaps unorthodox or unknown to many audiences, these social formations and relationships are worthy and attainable.

Rent and Musical Theater

When *Rent* debuted, the work was heralded as innovative. Milzoff asserts that *Rent's* “rave” reviews confirmed playwright Larson’s belief that “*Rent* was going to revolutionize the musical theater of its era”.⁶¹ As Feuer remarks, citing Rick Altman, in a capitalist society, “The musical has to reach a new audience – young people – rather than a family audience”⁶² for marketing and exploitation of consumers. *Rent* does so through its blend of youthful casting and contemporary discourse on topics like integration, interracial romance, HIV, and bohemian ideals. Larson’s ability to write rock operas is also part of the appeal to a younger generation of theatregoers; it was an era of grandiose rock anthems. Milzoff cited Larson’s grant application, “I believe theatre should again be a source of pop music, which would attract a new audience.”. Larson and Greif carefully selected the cast to be young, passionate, and appealing to young audiences. The character of Roger, a rock musician, was cast with Adam Paschal, an acting novice but an actual frontman for rock groups. In addition, Idina Menzel was selected to portray the character of Maureen, the performance artist; Menzel had previously led wedding bands prior to being cast in *Rent*. These casting choices were pivotal to exhibiting a genuine rock depiction.

When Columbus’ film adaptation was released in 2005, *Rent* was still visionary. Further, more than twenty years after *Rent's* Broadway debut, the work is acknowledged as

⁶¹ Milzoff, R (2016). As a journalist, Milzoff’s historical introspective reveals additional context of how *Rent* was considered at the time of its debut and supports my finding of a majority positive attitude from the creative community. In addition, Milzoff illustrates that Larson was cognizant of need for financial success, indeed he craved it, and the playwright intentionally sought to bring younger audiences to Broadway through his musical score and youthful characters.

⁶² Feuer, J. (1993). *The Hollywood musical* (2nd ed.). Macmillan. (130) Discusses the need for artistic endeavors to be financially successful in a capitalist society, including finding new markets and growing future audiences.

revolutionary. In 2016, journalist Rebecca Milzoff reviewed *Rent* from inception through the musical's twentieth anniversary, including interviews with Julie Larson, the playwright's sister, Michael Greif, the stage Director, and original cast members. Milzoff outlines *Rent*'s impact between its off-Broadway opening and its Broadway debut as generating, "a buzz rarely seen in theater and not truly replicated until *Hamilton*."⁶³ Twenty years after *Rent*'s triumphant debut, Milzoff examined the musical's impact by talking to the original Broadway cast of *Rent*, creative team, and other well-known actors. Actor Leslie Odom Jr., known for originating the role of Aaron Burr in the contemporary musical *Hamilton*, highlighted *Rent*'s impact at the time of its Broadway acclaim, "I went to my local HMV – the cast recording had just come out – and I thought I'd listen to part of the album at one of the listening stations. I put it on, and I couldn't move – I listened to the whole thing. There wasn't a whole lot of art that looked like me and my friends." According to Milzoff, Odom Jr.'s remarks substantiate *Rent*'s impact on the diversity of future musicals: "Lin-Manuel Miranda jokes that *Rent* is responsible for giving more actors of color their Equity card than any other show. It is the precursor to *Hamilton*." Therefore, playwrights, actors, critics, scholars and theatregoers have lauded the landmark diverse casting present in Larson and Greif's *Rent*. However, very few individuals have examined the societal factor of race or class in these on-stage couples. As such, the intersection of race and class as interracial couples has gone unexamined. Few scholars have discussed if the interracial coupling within the work confirms or challenges racial hierarchies.

⁶³ Milzoff, R (2016). As a more recent analysis of *Rent* (1995), Milzoff's work is valuable because it provides context for a more recent Broadway success of *Hamilton*. The revealing interview reflect how Larson's work energized and inspired young actors and playwrights of color, documenting *Rent*'s legacy far after its 1995 debut.

Rent and Film Theory

Rent reflects an urban environment of poverty, hunger, homelessness, crime, and scarcity. Yet, in the midst of this desolate social structure, the cadre of friends are undaunted, festive, interconnected, and triumphant in their relationships. Despite their lives' inadequacies of heat, food, and security they choose to celebrate daily life and love. In fact, in musical number, "Seasons of Love" and deed, the characters elect to celebrate 'seasons of love' throughout the year. In doing so, the audience is transported into the characters' lives, feeling fear, sadness, infatuation, and ultimately happiness in living another day. *Rent*'s audiences leave the theater grateful, appreciative, and inspired to live their lives in joy. In "Entertainment and Utopia", Richard Dyer discusses the ability of entertainment, and specifically film musicals, to inspire utopian feelings in the audience. He describes the role of entertainment, within a system of patriarchal capitalism, as providing both an "escape" and "wish fulfillment" ⁶⁴. Through his analysis of the utopian goals within cultural production, he organizes the system through representational and non-representational signs within musicals.

Dyer clarifies that role between entertainment and audience perception should be considered through how entertainment forms develop an emotional significance, "by acquiring their signification in relation to the complex meanings in the socio-cultural situation in which they are produced" ⁶⁵. Dyer's discussion of the utopian sensibilities seen through film and,

⁶⁴ Dyer, Richard. W. (2002). "Entertainment and Utopia." *In Hollywood musicals: The film reader*. Routledge. Dyer posits a goal of creative entertainment to respond to audience's needs for escapism in a capitalist society. I would like to point out that Larson wanted to be successful in a capitalist society, therefore he acknowledged both our American capitalist environment and its pressures, while simultaneously providing an esoteric escape from illness, poverty, and sadness. The elevated lyrics in "Season of Love" are emblematic of Dyer's recommendations to facilitate escape and wish fulfillment.

⁶⁵ Dyer, R. W. (2002). (21) In considering Dyer's suggestion that art should develop and consider the emotional significance between subject matter and audience, Larson's central thesis of "no day but today" amidst the HIV and AIDS crises of the 1990s, evokes the emotional significance between the richness of life and the hovering presence of death.

specifically musicals, shows the “capacity of entertainment to present either complex or unpleasant feelings (e.g. involvement in personal or political events; jealousy, loss of love, defeat) in a way that makes them seem uncomplicated, direct and vivid, not qualified or ambiguous as day-to-day life makes them without intimations of self-deception and pretence”.⁶⁶

Mark, the filmmaker, is the first character we meet in *Rent*. He observes and documents the year among the friends, community, and all that transpires from romances to conflict, from illness to celebrations. At the beginning of *Rent*, we are repeatedly informed that Maureen is his ex-girlfriend and that she is now dating a woman named Joanne. Benny, then Collins, ask about the status of Mark’s relationship with Maureen and ultimately laugh or snicker that she not only “dumped” Mark, but is now dating a woman. We see posters of Maureen’s upcoming performance, with her likeness, on every wall. Benny attempts to bribe Mark and Roger into convincing Maureen to stop her “protest show” in exchange for free rent. By contrast, instead of trying to leverage Maureen, or declining to help considering their break-up, Mark agrees to help her with production when Maureen calls begging for help. In the loft, during the telephone call, and as Mark helps Joanne prepare for Maureen’s performance, he maintains the ideals Dyer refers to: love, jealousy, honesty, and loyalty in a complex emotional, financial, and political situation. Mark’s attachment to Maureen remains sincere. Further, as an artist, Mark remains steadfast to supporting her political protest and performance art.

The central character of Angel depicts ideals of transparency, passion, and generosity. She is the group’s touchstone: everyone’s friend and emotional support for all. Angel is the soul of *Rent*; the character who inspires the rest of the cast to live each day to the fullest and

⁶⁶ Dyer, R. W. (2002). (25) Larson’s treatment of addiction, jealousy, illness, and poverty allow the characters’ lives to be presented authentically, yet without overly melodramatic treatment. These circumstances are fact among the characters in the East Village.

appreciate life. Angel is introduced as the street musician who rescues Collins as a man, but who is later seen as a woman when she provides Collins, Mark, and Roger with cash and Christmas cocktails. Angel is generous of spirit; this is evident through Act I when Angel gently reprimands Roger that the Life Support group is important even on Christmas Eve, “some people have nowhere else to go”.⁶⁷ Further, she is financially giving, buying Collins a replacement winter jacket during “I’ll Cover You” and the entire group their dinner after Maureen’s aborted performance in the celebratory “La Vie Boheme”. Angel is authentically herself, moving freely between female and male personas, alternating throughout *Rent*’s scenes, without issue. The character of Angel represents a moment in the United States where we didn’t have words for transgender or gender-fluid. In the 1990s the character of Angel is considered a Drag Queen⁶⁸; a man dressed as a woman. This is markedly different from the lexicon we have in the 2020s of transgender, an individual born as one sex, yet orientating to another sex, or gender-fluid, an individual whose orientation is both male and female. Collins refers to Angel as “she”, thus, I will use feminine pronouns in my description of her. Angel wears her heart on her sleeve with Collins and she is unabashedly affectionate with each member of the principal cast. Neither Mark nor Angel indulges in self-deception, nor pretense.

Dyer (25) proposes that we see utopian categories of intensity and transparency as “temporary answers to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped from through entertainment”⁶⁹. The theorist provided pointed commentary (26) that although the categories of

⁶⁷ Larson, J. *Rent* (1995). Act I opens on Christmas Eve.

⁶⁸ Giltz, 2005 (49) and Milzoff, Rebecca (74) both refer to Angel as Drag Queen; referring to how the character was thought of in the 1990s. Angel is characterized as a male, who dresses in some scenes as a female with a bobbed wig, skirts, high heels, and full facial make-up including eye shadow and lipstick.

⁶⁹ Dyer, R. W. (2002). (25) Larson’s work fulfills these goals through providing a temporary respite from daily societal pressures.

“utopian sensibility are related to specific inadequacies in society”⁷⁰ previous theorists do not mention “class, race, or patriarchy”, nor “sexual caste”. In *Rent*’s initial Life Support scene, Angel presents as both masculine and feminine in the same scene: entering as female, removing their wig, and participating as male. These actions are the ultimate in transparency, not only showing all gender identities, but exposing that Angel lives as both male and female genders. Per Mimi at Angel’s funeral, Angel informed some street thugs, “I’m more man than you’ll ever be and more woman than you’ll ever get”. This statement, although delivered posthumously, informs the audience that Angel considers themselves to be both sexes. Although Angel appears female through much of the film, in the three subsequent Life support scenes of Act II⁷¹ Angel sits in his male persona, without wig, short-cropped close hair in subdued colors and non-flamboyant dress. The actions reveal two societal inadequacies: not everyone is the gender identified by their sex and second, the shortcoming that society expects Angel to choose one gender. Another example of authenticity and reflection of societal challenge is visible during “The Tango Maureen”,⁷² Maureen, the performance artist, conducts herself with full intensity in her visually arresting red halter dress with black piping. She celebrates her sexuality, while being fully transparent regarding her promiscuity and bisexuality by dancing with more than one partner and more than one gender. During her performance number, “Jump Over the Moon”, she applies various mediums: vocals, spoken word, vocoder, loop pedal, televisions, lighting kits, and set design. Her number highlights the constraints of capitalism, that will leave humans literally and figuratively parched. Maureen embodies the utopian sensibilities of passion, love, and creativity.

⁷⁰ Dyer, R. W. (2002). (26) Larson’s “La Vie Boheme” is a direct answer to promoting utopian sensibility of life, love, and passion.

⁷¹ Larson, J. *Rent* (2005) Act II and Columbus, C (2005) scenes 0:51:58, 1:42:20 and 1:43:02.

⁷² Larson, J. *Rent* (2005) Act I and Columbus, C (2005)

Rent responds to the audiences' needs to be elevated by love and passion, to feel invincible and immortal. Dyer's treatise concludes that entertainment attempts to respond to the real needs of the audience, but not considering all "legitimate needs of people in this society"⁷³; film is not addressing some elements of society that impact audience's perception or reality of their everyday challenges. *Rent* advances the beauty of creativity through Mark's documentary, Roger's song-writing, Angel's street percussion, and Maureen's performance art—all are examples of how people can rise above scarcity and illness to celebrate life every day. As Mark announces during "La Vie Boheme": "The opposite of war isn't peace; it's creation."⁷⁴ Celebrating music, performance, and art within the theater is a self-reflexive action in film to celebrate and value art.

In "Postscript for the Nineties", Jane Feuer examines the genre of musicals that have sub-genres of community and folk musicals with a fairy tale story.⁷⁵ For Feuer, these reconfigured elements include: non-diegetic rock music as the performers re-create daily life while we hear music, the characters lip synch, or characters dance. Further, the revised musical of the 1990s applies elements of classic Hollywood musicals: the reflexive show, ending the musical with a classic song and performance by central characters, elevating the importance of musical and choreographic performance. The folk musical, "is present in the semantics of the emphasis on the nuclear family and the nostalgic locale of a real American ethnic setting"⁷⁶. *Rent* is about creating a family - the family you choose. As Columbus' film was distributed, Giltz wrote a

⁷³ Dyer, R. W. (2002). (26) *Rent* addresses the audience's need to be inspired and to hope for a better world.

⁷⁴ Larson, J. *Rent* (2005) Act I and Columbus, C (2005). Through the script, Larson elevates the creation of art as the ultimate act. (1:24:01)

⁷⁵ Feuer, J. (1980). Hollywood Musicals: Postscript for the Nineties, 123-146. In *Rent*, Mimi's ability to overcome addiction and hypothermia to live and be reunited with Roger, satisfies one aspect of a fairytale element.

⁷⁶ Feuer, J. (1980). Hollywood Musicals: Postscript for the Nineties. (130) The eight principal cast create a utopian family that may exhibit pathos, but ultimately is united and whole.

cover story for “The Advocate” examining the original Broadway play, the impact it had on the community and the original eight-member cast, many of whom continued to enjoy successful, professional careers and six of whom were re-cast in the 2005 film. Giltz had the returning cast reflect upon *Rent* in 1995 (staged musical) and 2005 (film adaptation). Summarizing the exceptional success of *Rent*, Giltz determined “[*Rent*] brought onto the mainstream stage the world of the lower east side in New York City – a universe populated with homeless people, drug addicts, aspiring performers, drag queens, and would-be filmmakers living on the streets or in dodgy lofts with no heat. In short, outcasts, But outcasts who had found their own sense of family, their own idea of home.”⁷⁷ As original cast member Wilson Heredia who originated the character of “Angel” states, “*Rent* is the same thing. It’s not about AIDS, it’s not about homosexuality, it’s not about homelessness – it’s about family”⁷⁸ The themes that Heredia says do *not* represent *Rent* suggest that what the musical achieves in connection to the audience goes beyond its evident content. The musical speaks to an American longing for “family”, says Heredia, but re-envisioned that family in a “utopian” fashion as multi-racial, gender fluid, and “chosen” rather than biological. It also challenges the centrality of the nuclear family.

Feuer also discusses “the fairytale syntax” and references Altman’s fairytale musical⁷⁹ as reflecting class or ethnic differences between the main couple, but in folk musical fashion their union is resolved through a musical number, usually at the end of the show. The resolution allows for a happy ending for the main couple. In *Rent*, there are four couples with class and ethnic differences, but also differences in race. Although Mimi and Roger may be considered the

⁷⁷ Giltz, profile of *Rent* in 2005. (49) These comments also echo Feuer’s theories on creating a whole and nuclear family as an escape from the disenfranchisement of the 1990s.

⁷⁸ Giltz, profile of *Rent* in 2005. (51) The actor’s responses further situate *Rent* as a vehicle to support utopian goals of family to counteract loneliness, isolation and disenfranchisement in the United States during the 1990s.

⁷⁹ Feuer, J. (1980). *Hollywood Musicals: Postscript for the Nineties*. (130). Feuer’s analysis further supports my argument that *Rent*’s diverse egalitarianism inspire the audience, while transporting them with joy.

lead couple, Angel and Collins, Alison and Benny, and Joanne and Maureen also fit this formula. Each couple's members have different race, ethnic and class backgrounds. At the end of *Rent*, Mimi and Roger are successfully reunited; Roger has returned to New York City and Mimi chooses to return to Roger's loft apartment while being near death. Unlike the opera *La Bohème*, Larson's central Mimi character lives. The culminating community musical song is replaced by Roger's successful creation "Your Eyes," which unites the characters present at Mark and Roger's loft as they will Mimi to live. The other principal characters and couples experience resolution. Although Angel dies, the love between Angel and Collins lives on. Joanne and Maureen, united in trying to locate the missing Mimi, are no longer in conflict and look at each other with love in the final loft scenes. Despite the status of Alison and Benny's interracial marriage being unknown by the end of *Rent*, there is a different resolution as Benny is participating with the community: grieving for Angel at her funeral, financially supporting Mimi's recovery through paying for a rehabilitation center and joining in the search for Mimi.

As discussed by both Feuer and Altman, folk musicals include a real or ethnic setting; *Rent* is set in New York City's Greenwich Village. Jim Nicola, New York Theatre Workshop's artistic director affirms, "It couldn't be an all-White group, because that wasn't the East Village."⁸⁰ Further, as cited in Milzoff's interview, press agent Don Summa attributes the interracial casting to the need for representing a multicultural community such as, the creative team all lived in, stating, "There weren't really musicals written about people who are gay and in interracial relationships. But Michael Greif's direction never underline that there was a black woman and white woman singing a love duet "Take Me or Leave Me", or that there was a black

⁸⁰ Milzoff, R. (74). These quotes documents that *Rent*'s diverse racial casting is intentional, as it was representative of the community mirrored in the work.

guy, Collins, with Angel, his gay Latina drag-queen boyfriend – it just was.” This casting and subliminal direction suggests several elements of multiculturalism. First, the intertwining of races in the East Village is commonplace and the staging reflects the surrounding community. Second, Greif could be intentionally modeling a multicultural integrity egalitarian society to be unknowingly internalized by its audience. Third, equality can be observed by the audience from a safe distance without threatening white privilege or affluence. Fourth, hearing jubilant melodies and harmonious characters is inspiring. Feel-good musicals may be more lucrative. Theatregoers share their positive reviews and return to see shows more than once. Although this view is cynical, marketing and box office returns are a reality for Broadway shows; it was previously noted that Larson wanted to bring younger audiences back to Broadway by revolutionizing the Broadway Musical. Ultimately, Greif’s direction confirms a position that the diversity present in *Rent*’s original casting should be examined.

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL NUMBERS

Today 4 U, Tomorrow for Me

Within the first 30 minutes of *Rent*, the exuberant number “Today 4 U, Tomorrow for Me” communicates all racial elements that my thesis explores: racial diversity is melodious in Act I of Larson’s play. Blacks have accomplished social mobility, the harmony of an interracial couple, the romantic partner with lower social prominence couples with one of higher social rank to elevate their social prominence, Larson’s characters exemplify American racial and class hierarchy, representing a trend of women of color coupling outside their race and moving up in social prominence. As a couple, the individuals complement each other: one brings capital infusion, the other social prominence through racial hierarchy. Columbus’ establishing shot of Mark and Roger’s home reveals an urban loft on the top floor. The interior includes exposed brick and concert posters. Record albums and books are everywhere the camera looks. The scene signals an urban environment with classic architecture, and the prevalence of cultural items reveals the importance of the performing arts, music, and literature; all cultural elements of revered bohemian ideals.

Dyer’s central thesis that entertainment can address patriarchal capitalism where the audience may feel underfed literally and figuratively: isolated, alone and used, has direct application to *Rent*. For the New York City Greenwich Village community of artists represented in *Rent*, individuals are food and financially insecure as seen through Act I: Mimi discusses not

eating much that day in the “Will you Light My Candle” number. When Mark is invited out to eat, he responds “Zoom in on my empty wallet”. Collins has experienced isolation as indicative through his explanation of returning to New York City after seven months, “MIT kicked me out because of my theory of Actual Reality”; in the “La Vie Boheme” number, we learn that Actual Reality is “Act Up! Fight AIDS”, thus a theory grounded in rejection of illness was precluded. Roger feels alone in his HIV positive status: he declines to go a Life Support meeting and rejects Mimi because of his status; he enters fully into the relationship after he learns of Mimi’s equivalent HIV status, when they both take an “AZT break” to take medicine. Dyer’s application of utopian sensibilities through film asserts that musicals address the way things could be to facilitate escapism by the audience. However, there is a tension here: does *Rent* represent things to be escaped from like HIV and poverty or is it providing a vision of Utopia with its desegregated, racially heterogeneous community, harmonious interracial relationships, and inclusion of various sexual identities? Further, *Rent* also elevates aspirational ideals that are representational themes as defined by Dyer: abundance, life, love, and health.⁸¹ *Rent* communicates the environment to escape from through settings like the squalid building Mark, Mimi, and Roger live in without heat or electricity.

During these initial scenes, Roger plays the guitar and Mark is filming him for a documentary. Mark’s parents call and leave an answering machine message with holiday wishes and support, including the revelation of a recent break-up between Mark and Maureen. These few minutes expose that Mark is avoiding his parents, yet also show that he has parental

⁸¹ Dyer, R. W. (2002). “Entertainment and Utopia.” These utopian ideals are clearly goals for *Rent*’s characters as they strive to overcome poverty and illness.

emotional support. Next, we witness a conversation between Mark and Roger, two white male characters. The costuming reflects a relaxed, youthful attitude and urban attire all indicative of the middle class: Mark wears a zip up jacket, plaid shirt, and jeans, while Roger wears running pants and casual hooded jacket. After his parents hang up, Mark states, “there are times when we’re dirt broke, hungry, freezing, and I ask myself, ‘why the hell am I still living here...and then they call.’” Mark’s statement suggests he and Roger live in poverty, with consistent hunger, but his statement indicates desire and need for independence.

At this point in Act I, a third character is introduced; Mark and Roger enthusiastically greet “Collins!”. Collins is Black. Larson’s Act I dialogue reveals Collins’ post-secondary educational level. As Collins pours alcohol into disposable cups for Mark and Roger, they exclaim, “You struck gold at MIT.” Collins’ resolutely responds, “No. They expelled me for my theory of Actual Reality. So I came back home. I got a teaching gig at NYU.”. Therefore, Collins is an academic and an intellectual; a philosophy professor working within elite schools. Collins is indicative of the rising Black social mobility within the United States; an educated Black man. Within moments, we meet the pivotal character of Angel Dumott Schunard, a street musician. Playwright Larson, through character of Collins, immediately positions Angel as someone who is financially stable and generous, as “our benefactor” and through naming the character “Angel” as a sign of grace and kindness. Larson’s insight leads to naming “Angel” which is a name that is understood in both Spanish and English, and further, is a name that gender-neutral, used by both men and women. However, Collins introduces Angel as a woman, referring to Angel with the female pronouns “she” and “her” when lauding her “whose generosity is only matched by her talent, I must say.” Therefore, when examining Angel’s social positioning, I will consider her a female person of color in accordance with current (2020s) understanding of sex assigned at birth

versus gender identity. Angel, Joanne, and Mimi are all women of color whose characters reflect generosity and support of their partners.

Angel enters to non-diegetic harp music and twirls, costumed in a red coat trimmed with white fur and zebra striped belts and tights. Her outfit is reminiscent of Santa Claus, and she appropriately provides her audience with gifts. She fans dollar bills into their hands as she exclaims, “Today 4 U, Tomorrow for me!” and the percussion starts. Angel begins a spontaneous dance using drumsticks as props, which become an extension of Angel’s body. She leaps on and off the table, and then jumps into a back flip somersault off the wall despite wearing high-heeled, platform lace up boots, all while dancing to a blend of diegetic and non-diegetic music. The scene appears to use Angel’s own percussion as rhythmic beats.

In “Mass Art as Folk Art”, Feuer, like Dyer, addresses how the film genre works within the framework of patriarchal capitalism. Feuer believes that a motivation for the Hollywood musical is to address a “gap between producer and consumer, the breakdown of community designated by the very distinction between performer and audience”⁸² through creating “humanistic folk relations”⁸³ within the contradictory mass-produced art. Feuer defines four elements of the musical’s folk relations including: prioritizing spontaneous over engineered effects, masking of choreography and rehearsals, creation of amateur entertainment to cancel

⁸² Feuer, J. (1980). Hollywood Musicals: Mass Art as Folk Art. *Jump Cut*, 23, 23–. Feuer examines film genre in relation to patriarchal capitalism. Feuer’s analysis discusses the need for community to combat societal alienation and how musicals facilitate a sense of community among the audience. Therefore, film, and works such as *Rent* must work to create and extend a perception of family, as needed to combat disenfranchisement and loneliness among Americans. Angel creates a family among the characters, beginning with Collins and culminating with Mimi. Further, Angel’s infectious spirit envelopes the audience and designing an extended family among the audience.

⁸³ Feuer, J. (1980). In considering Feuer’s reference to humanistic folk relations, Angel’s authenticity and transparency is critical to engendering feelings of a relational family.

professionalism, and creation of communities both offstage and backstage⁸⁴. Feuer's analysis is community is an ideal concept within the genre that will negate audience alienation.

Rent fulfills three of four Feuer's elements, therefore the moniker of community musical applies. All numbers, with the exception of Maureen's heavily produced 'Jump Over the Moon', are treated as spontaneous, particularly, Angel's "Today for You, Tomorrow for Me"⁸⁵ which features Angel utilizing both a table and the ceiling pipes for percussion and disguises the need for rehearsed choreography when Angel uses the wall as a prop for an aerobatic somersault.

Finally, the setting is a folk community within New York City, the East Village. In addition, per Dyer, *Rent* reflects a musical's key characteristic: it is reflexive and elevates itself through glorification of creating music and performance. This is seen through the emphasis on the production and performance in Maureen's show, as well as *Rent*'s focus on the creation of Mark's documentary and Roger's struggle to write his hit song; all three works reflect the importance of creative production for art itself. *Rent* opens with discussion between performer and audience for both Mark and Roger's efforts, and by the end, both artistic endeavors successfully culminate, signaling the end of the musical; the parallel trajectories of Mark's and Roger's work are in lieu of a typical culminating communal musical ending by the characters.

In the final part of the scene, Angel's Latinx heritage is disclosed to the audience. When Collins asks about "drama queen" Maureen, Mark reveals to the group, "She dumped me for a lawyer named Joanne." Joanne's race is not revealed until the following scene. Aptly-timed, Maureen interrupts the scene with a call for production help and Mark agrees. When he leaves,

⁸⁴ Feuer, J. (1980). Although we have discussed the creation of a family on stage, Larson also creates communities offstage as seen through the spontaneous group performance in "La Vie Boheme" and backstage through the supportive production work accomplished by Mark and Joanne for Maureen's performance at the vacant lot.

⁸⁵ Larson, J. Two musical numbers from Act I of *Rent* (1995).

Angel remarks in fluent Spanish, “Bueno. Ese huevo si quieres sal.” In translation, Angel’s sentence implies that Mark is still in love with Maureen. Angel’s observation is pivotal because Mark is released from this attraction and toxic relationship in the next scene. “Today 4 U, Tomorrow 4 Me” also indicates Larson’s observation of Latinx women through Angel and Mimi’s actions. Later in *Rent*, Mimi offers Roger a Christmas brunch. Both Latina women are working, whereas their respective men are not. The Latinas have income, are independent, yet supportive. As they are the only two Latinx characters, Larson indicates this work ethic and financial generosity as integral to the Latinx culture.

The Tango Maureen

In Act I’s “The Tango Maureen” we witness the psychological interplay between white Mark, Black Joanne, and white Maureen and the number’s setting mimics interracial romance. During “The Tango Maureen,” Mark, our filmmaker, meets his ex-girlfriend Maureen’s new love interest Joanne for the first time and through his eyes, we see that Joanne is Black. We were already informed that Joanne is an attorney, therefore, like Collins, she personifies the rising Black class of educated professionals. Again, Larson and Columbus draw attention to the urban, impoverished environment. The warehouse walls are covered in graffiti and paintings and assorted junk is scattered. People who are seemingly homeless are visible in the background. Joanne is wearing professional attire that includes a long coat and tie, in direct contrast to Mark’s casual attire of jeans; the dress personifies the distinctions in their professions. While non-diegetic music begins, Mark shares his unsavory experiences of dating Maureen. Joanne asserts that Maureen acts differently with her: no flirting or cheating with others. She then removes her professional coat to dance, revealing suspenders, an extension of male-adjacent attire. Non-diegetic guitar matador music begins to play as Mark and Joanne face off as rivals. Mark tosses

his coat like a matador and waves his red “towel”. Joanne responds by tossing her coat and mirroring Mark’s action. The gauntlet is thrown and the tango music begins, as does the emotional maneuvering between the two dancers.

Larson’s selection of the Tango, as featured dance, is revealing. It is not only a choreographed dance where both partners have an opportunity to lead, the dance is known for connotations of romance and drama with its intense movements of extended arms, clasped hands, flourishing heel kicks, and pointed facial gestures. Per Marilyn Miller (10) “In an essay published in 1926, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges distinguished between a “contemporary” picturesque tango and a more genuine “primordial” tango built of “pure insolence, pure shamelessness, pure happiness in bravery”.⁸⁶ The elements of Tango reflect the drama of Mark and Maureen’s relationship: Maureen flirted, touched, and cheated with other people. The dance also foreshadows Maureen and Joanne’s turbulent relationship. Miller (10) documents how the dance personifies emotions, “Descriptions of tango as an escape valve highlight its propensity for lament, complaint, or confrontation, and frustrate the characterization of sentimentality that typically accompanies the stock images of tango in its globalized forms.” In this scene, the dance allows Mark, Maureen’s former lover, to confront Joanne, Maureen’s current lover. In their first pass, Joanne and Mark discuss how each learned to dance Tango, which reveals the difference in their socio-economic status. Joanne learned “with the French ambassadors’ daughter in her dorm room at Miss Porters”, therefore a boarding school for the affluent. Mark responds, “with Nanette Himmelfarb, the Rabbi’s daughter and the Scarsdale Jewish Community Center” which reflects a middle-class upbringing. Joanne’s affluence will be

⁸⁶ Miller, Marilyn. (2014). *Tango Lessons: Movement, Sound, Image, and Text in Contemporary Practice: Vol. [Open access version]*. Duke University Press Books.

examined further in discussion of “Take Me or Leave Me”. When Joanne initially assumes the dominant partner role in “The Tango Maureen” and Mark dances backward, he trips and hits his head initiating a dream sequence.

Dyer discusses how musicals can promote utopian elements of transparency and authenticity. Transparency is communicated through non-representational costuming in the initial Life Support HIV group support scene where Angel walks in wearing feminine attire but sits down and removes his wig and presents as male while stating his name. Dyer’s authenticity and transparency are also seen in Larson’s Act I number, “The Tango Maureen” when Maureen dances in a vivid red dress, contrasting against the other characters all in black, therein communicating her authenticity and willingness to be unique; the only standout in a crowd and her desire to attract attention. Through that single red dress, in a room of black-tie, the costuming demonstrates, “...how tango can function as a predictable performance of standardized elements as well as an outlet for local expressivity.”⁸⁷. The selection of the Tango as dance form, is also non-representational according to Dyer’s classifications and exemplifies Dyer’s categorization as “tactile and sensuous”. The set design of black and white, with only one focal point of red contributes to the aesthetic.

Feuer’s unrehearsed aspects of a community musical is evident in this number. “The Tango Maureen” appears unplanned, as it occurs after Mark hits his head and seems to be a dream: both Joanne and Mark talk their way through the tango. Joanne and Mark find themselves transported out of the warehouse into a ballroom, where others, including Maureen,

⁸⁷ Miller, M. Miller’s description of Tango as a vehicle of creativity and expressivity reinforce Larson’s intentional application of Tango as means to illustrate the passion exuding from Mimi, Joanne, and initially from Mark as the jilted ex-lover.

are in the camera frame. The set design of black and white checkered ballroom floor is symbolic of interracial relationships: representative of Joanne, a Black woman, and Maureen, a white woman. All dancers in the dream sequence are in formal black evening wear. Joanne is now wearing a black dress, where she previously wore professional attire of suit, vest, and pants. Maureen is the only exception to the black formal wear: she is dancing in a striking red halter dress which is sensual and stands among the all-black costuming. Maureen is dancing with a man yet looks back at Joanne and smiles, diverting her attention from her dance partner. Joanne then confesses to Mark, “Maureen cheated.” The fact that Joanne labels the action “cheating” implies that she thought their relationship was exclusive and that she feels Maureen was dishonest. Joanne admits, “I’d fall for her still anyhow” which mimics Mark’s continuing loyalty despite having been cuckolded by Maureen. In addition, it communicates Joanne’s honesty, passion, and love for Maureen.

Joanne reaches for Maureen, but Maureen is consumed anew with her male partner and Mark leads Joanne away from Maureen. Maureen, then, begins dancing with a woman and now has two partners; this is conspicuous because the Tango is choreographed for two dancers, not three, but Maureen is always willing to be atypical. The woman kisses Maureen, even while Maureen is holding hands with her male partner. Maureen looks back at Joanne and leaves the ballroom with both dancers holding her hands and the trio dances off. At the end of the “The Tango Maureen” number, Mark has exorcised his love for Maureen, stating with verve, “Actually, I feel great.”⁸⁸ Therefore, through the dance, they have transferred places: Joanne, Maureen’s new partner in life, exclaims she feels “lousy” and Mark is free. It’s revealing that

⁸⁸ Columbus (2005) film adaptation (0:37:23-27). Signaling the end of Mark’s Tango Maureen, the scene reflects the transference of unhealthy obsession, a psychological excision for Mark, and the expressivity symbolic in tango.

Joanne continues to pursue and have faith in Maureen, despite feeling unhappy and betrayed. Maureen is desirable; I submit part of that attraction is that Maureen raises Joanne's social prominence. Maureen is White, beautiful, admired, and in-demand by all genders; if Joanne is on her arm, by extension, Joanne has celebrity and elevated social hierarchal presence.

I'll Cover You

Street scene number, "I'll Cover You" shows a harmonious and complementary interracial relationship of Collins and Angel. The couple is the personification of loving, generous support. While walking on the streets of New York City, Collins remarks, "it's cold" and Angel replies, "come on", leading him to a street vendor to buy him a long, black leather coat while non-diegetic music plays. As with "Today 4 U, Tomorrow 4 Me", Angel is once again in the role of benefactor, and she executes this role without hesitation: one of two financially-able Latinx characters. Costuming for both people of color is reminiscent of vibrant colors worn by the Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story*⁸⁹. Collins is wearing a bright green shirt, yellow vest, red flannel shirt, using a denim shirt as a jacket, and black pants. Angel wears a bright green blouse with a high frilly neck, a red jacket, a white miniskirt with pastel flowers, and yellow and green patterned leggings with platform black high heels. Their color palettes mimic each other, reflecting how they think alike and complement each other in the most elemental of ways. Lauren Davine examines color and race in *West Side Story*, in "Could We Not Dye It Red at

⁸⁹ Lehman, E., Wise, R., Robbins, J., Wood, N., Beymer, R., Tamblyn, R., Moreno, R., Chakiris, G., Fapp, D., Stanford, T., Bernstein, L., Sondheim, S., Sharaff, I., Leven, B., Laurents, A., & Shakespeare, W. (2003). *West Side Story* (Collectors set, Special ed. ; widescreen version.). MGM Home Entertainment. My argument includes a comparison to *West Side Story* due to shared setting of New York City, shared elements of diversity between white Americans, and characters of color, and the family groups represented by the Jets and the Sharks as a folk musical, and the central love story between character of different ethnicities: one white, one Latina, just as in *Rent*.

Least?”⁹⁰. Davine states, “The function of color is further reinforced by the “color-coordinated costumes”⁹¹. Therefore, I assert that color coordinated costuming in “Today 4 U, Tomorrow 4 Me” executes a similar function by illustrating Angel and Collins’ harmony. By applying a biography of Jerome Robbins, *West Side Story*’s acclaimed choreographer, Davine reveals a vision of producer Robert Wise, “color plays a central role in sustaining the “organic unity” of the musical.” Per Davine, Robbins expressed his dislike for *West Side Story*’s ostentatious use of color in a letter to friend and dance critic, Richard Buckle, as Robbins, “sees color as well as other cinematic elements (lighting, stereophonic sound) as secondary to the theatrically derived (and higher art) elements of music and dance.”⁹² In *West Side Story*, Davine points the use of color to differentiate between the muted and “cool” color palette of “...the Jets wear variations and gradations of muted browns, mauves, yellows, beiges, blues, and grays.”⁹³ In Davine’s analysis, these reserved colors are in stark contrast to “the burst of reds and deeper purples that characterize the Sharks.” The vibrancy of colors are recreated in *Rent*’s “Today 4 U, Tomorrow 4 Me”. In Davine’s summation of use of color in *West Side Story*, “it is no coincidence that the most colorful sequences in the film are ones that showcase Puerto Rican subjects.” In similar fashion, *Rent* utilizes the colorful sequence of “Today 4 U, Tomorrow 4 Me” for people of color who are outwardly and publicly passionate.

⁹⁰ Davine, L. (2016). “Could We Not Dye It Red at Least?”: Color and Race in *West Side Story*. *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 44(3), 139–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2016.1161585>. I assert that color and race are also employed in *Rent*, as in *West Side Story*: the use of color is applied for the characters of color.

⁹¹ Davine, L. (2016). In discussing color-coordinated costuming in *West Side Story*, I see a shared element to reflect harmony through color-coordination in *Rent*’s characters Angel and Collins.

⁹² Davine, L. (2016). The quote referenced (142) exposes that the use of color was seen as tertiary in *West Side Story*. By contrast, there is no indication that *Rent* considered the use of color in the same way. However, this may be due to forty years of cinematic application of color, which became mainstream in costuming.

⁹³ Davine, L. (2016). The author’s analysis of color in *West Side Story* reflects that color was seen as way to differentiate the white characters from the people of color. The warm tones are reserved for the passion of ethnic characters. I will submit that warm tones are used similarly in *Rent* to symbolize passionate characters. Like the cool palette Davine describes for the Jets, the white gang, Roger, who avoids romance, Mark, the objective filmmaker, and Joanne, who is calm and logical compared to Maureen, all appear in stark colors of black and white.

In addition to the use of color to represent unity and passion, *Rent* also elevates aspirational ideals that are representational themes as defined by Dyer: abundance, life, love, and health. *Rent* communicates the environment to escape from through settings like the building Mark, Mimi, and Roger live in without heat or electricity, yet also uses settings to communicate the aspirational through community support at the Life Support meeting or on the New York streets in the “I’ll Cover You” number where Angel buys Collins a new coat from a street vendor.

Through this number, non-diegetic melodious music plays while Angel and Collins move down the city street, holding hands, skipping, and dancing closely on the sidewalk. While singing, they lovingly refer to each other as each other’s homes. Angel’s vocals are emblematic of her intrinsic generosity of spirit “Live in my house, I’ll be your shelter, just pay me back with one thousand kisses. Be my lover, and I’ll cover you.” Collins’ return reveals his comparative affection, “Open your door, I’ll be your tenant. Don’t got much baggage to lay at your feet...But sweet kisses I’ve got to spare. I’ll be there and I’ll cover you.” Despite Collins being an academic, Angel is more financially secure: she funded the alcohol the group enjoyed when we met her the loft, bought Collins a coat, and after Mimi’s performance, Angel paid for the whole group to eat at the local Café. In addition, to regularly having a funding source, Angel is Latinx, and lighter-skinned than Collins, so on the surface, Angel, who is of lighter complexion, and closer to white, is higher on the social hierarchy. If Angel was heterosexual, dating Collins would be a step down, but as Angel presents as both male and female, alternating genders in different scenes, her social cache is complex and lower than the economic, colorism, and cultural criteria would indicate. Whether Angel is a Drag Queen (in the social lexicon of 1990s), transgender, or gender fluid (in the nomenclature of 2020s), all societal representations would be lower in social

positioning. Angel's relationship with Collins, a Black academic, who does not outwardly present as an effeminate homosexual, elevates Angel in social acceptance. As a unit, they are balanced and representative of a loving, secure couple. Of the four couples presented in *Rent*, Angel and Collins are the most loving, balanced, and in synchronization.

Take Me or Leave Me

The interracial relationship of Joanne and Maureen is not harmonious and exposes challenges when there is a conflict of class as seen through Act II's "Take Me or Leave Me". The establishing shot of this number takes place at Greenwich Hills Country Club with an elegant calligraphy placard that reads, "Today in the main ballroom: An engagement reception. Hosted by Mr. & Mrs. Howard Jefferson for their daughter Joanne Jefferson and her companion Maureen Johnson."⁹⁴ Hors d'oeuvres, cocktails, followed by luncheon dinner and dancing." The audience then sees the elegant reception with servers circulating and guests in refined dress. There is a harp player, a grand piano, tastefully covered tables with centerpieces and table settings, shimmering chandeliers, and a bar. As Joanne's parents are hosting this elegant affair, their socio-economic status is revealed: affluent, refined, and cultured.

Dyer pointedly states that class is rarely addressed in entertainment, therefore, *Rent* is atypical as it addresses class in multiple ways: Mark's support from his family, young dancer Mimi's low socioeconomic class in her "Out Tonight" number, confessing, "feels too damned much like home, when Spanish babies cry", references to Benny's having married up to a wealthy "daughter of the revolution" in both the opening scene and in Maureen's "Jump Over

⁹⁴ Columbus, C (2005). I select this scene to illustrate the affluence of Joanne and her family, given the setting of the engagement reception.

the Moon” number, and in the costuming of Maureen and Joanne’s engagement party, where Maureen wears figure-hugging leather pants and a T-shirt versus Joanne and her parents’ more festive dress.

“Take Me or Leave Me” illustrates the status exchange of interracial coupling. Joanne’s affluent, educated, Black parents host Joanne and Maureen’s engagement reception. Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson welcome Maureen, despite her casual attire of black leather pants and T-shirt, along with the visibly less affluent Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. The Jeffersons are welcoming because Maureen and the Johnsons are white, therefore, their lack of polish or financial means can be forgiven; Joanne is marrying up in the racial and social hierarchies with a white woman. Further, Joanne is Lesbian and Maureen Bi-sexual. It may be considered that Maureen’s sexual status is more socially acceptable because she can “pass” as straight/heterosexual.

The environment is accentuated by the Jeffersons’ polished welcome to their guests. As Mr. Jefferson taps his champagne glass and says, “I would like to welcome everyone and congratulate my daughter, Joanne, on her wonderful choice of a life partner, Maureen Johnson.”

⁹⁵ We see that Joanne’s family has no hesitation about Maureen’s non-professional career as a performance artist. Further, Mrs. Jefferson adds, “My husband and I would also like to welcome Maureen’s parents, Eddie and Nancy Johnson, into our family.” Maureen’s parents are sharing a table with Maureen and Joanne. Maureen is wearing figure-hugging leather pants, a rock music racerback t-shirt with a colorful snake, thigh-high boots with high heels, and a long red velvet

⁹⁵ Columbus, C. (2005) film adaptation. (1:33:18). It can be argued that the Jefferson’s speech reflects an understanding of Joanne moving up in social hierarchical position through marriage to a white woman, despite her profession and dress. As with “The Tango Maureen”, Maureen is costumed again in a hue of red revealing her authenticity, passion, and desire to stand out among a crowd of well-dressed individuals.

jacket; distinctly not dressed for a catered reception at a country club. By contrast, Joanne is in a cream suit with a vest, which is more reflective of the appropriate dress code in this venue. Joanne sees Maureen talking to the bartender and pulls her away. Maureen says, “You know what Miss Ivy League?!” which reveals her disdain for the privileged education her fiancée earned. This contentious scene leads into the start of musical number “Take me or Leave Me.”. The lead-in to the song highlights the pair’s class differences: Maureen is a bohemian, free-spirited woman and Joanne is a conservative, traditional woman. This stanza exhibits the chasm between their life experiences: Maureen exclaims, “I didn’t pierce my nipples because it grossed you out. I didn’t stay at the Kink Club last night because you wanted to go home.” Joanne replies, “You were flirting with a woman in rubber!” and Maureen shoots back, “There will always be women in rubber.” Maureen later calls Joanne a “snob, over-attentive. A loveable droll geek and anal retentive.”

Although, the fairytale aspect is personified most prominently through Latinx Mimi, who is lower socio-economic and struggling with addiction, but has a romantic connection with Roger who is white and a higher social caste. Through Roger’s “emotional rescue” and love from the cast, Mimi is saved from addiction and lives. In addition to the ethnic differences between Mimi and Roger, *Rent* reflects the differences in race and class between Maureen and Joanne. Joanne is the worthy fairy princess who is elevated by her association with Maureen; Although Joanne would be seen as marrying up, she is in fact rescuing the damaged Maureen. As with the other interracial couples in *Rent*, the racial differences do not present a challenge to each couple’s fluidity. Maureen and Joanne are torn apart by values, not by race.

The successful culmination of the show reflects the reunification of both Mimi and Roger, along with Joanne and Maureen. Benny is rehabilitated as he has returned furniture and

paid for Mimi's therapy to recover from addiction. Roger has written his emotionally drenched love song. Mark is triumphant in presenting his finished film to his friends. As seen in both fairytale and folk musicals, the community is rejuvenated. As a folk musical, the element of community is paramount. In *Rent*, the cohesion of the seven remaining principal cast members create their own nuclear family. Although we do not have a full cast final number, we do have Roger's song "Your Eyes" and the central cast of Roger, Collins, Maureen, Joanne, Mark, and Mimi passionately participate in the delivery of Roger's seminal work. These final scenes are reflective and triumphant in presenting the importance of art in our capitalistic American society through Mark's documentary and Roger's masterpiece. *Rent* closes with Mark's film in focus and Angel on the screen, with the understanding that she is present with her comrades in spirit.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Investigating the musical *Rent* through a sociological lens for race and class, elevates the classic work to reflect additional layers. By moving beyond analysis as a queer work, we can see that *Rent* is reflective of existing society with status exchange and interracial marriage, while simultaneously espousing a just societal goal of egalitarianism. The additional facets revealed in a more expansive examination support the critical and intergenerational success that *Rent* has enjoyed for over twenty-five years throughout the world. While I agree that *Rent* is valuable for its empathetic visibility of queer characters, considering the characters' intermingling as friends and lovers regardless of race has additional merit.

There are several societal problems presented in *Rent* that have yet to be fully addressed by our country. As we strive to form a more perfect union, a just goal would be the right of people of color to be fully recognized with their own social cache irrespective of status exchange. If Black men choose to marry within their race and if Black women choose to marry out of their race, racial hierarchy should not be part of the equation. *Rent* begins a discourse on homelessness and lack of affordable housing as exacerbated through property development and their subsequent impact on people of color and queer identities. As we continue to have people of color marginalized, and the economic disparity gap widens with increasing quantity of people of color left behind, we must hope that the social visibility of people of color and queer individuals in theatre, film, and media, will be a beacon of promise toward the unity, community and multicultural society that *Rent* illustrates and as an ambitious model of future America.

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