

Depictions of Community in the Musicals *Rent*  
and *In the Heights*

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Tarkastelen pro gradu -tutkielmassani yhteisöllisyyden kuvausta musikaaleissa *Rent* (1996) ja *In the Heights* (2008). Molemmat musikaalit kuvaavat naapurustojen elämää New Yorkissa. Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, millä perusteilla musikaalien hahmot ovat muodostaneet yhteisönsä ja miksi yhteisön muodostaminen on ollut näille ihmisille tarpeellista. Tutkimus painottaa sosiaalista puolta musikaaleissa ja keskittyy yhteisöllisyyteen musikaalien hahmojen keskuudessa.

Tutkielmassani analysoin *Rent*- ja *In the Heights* -musikaalien tekstiä ja lyriikoita. *Rentin* on säveltänyt ja sanoittanut Jonathan Larson. *In the Heights* -musikaalin on säveltänyt ja sanoittanut Lin-Manuel Miranda ja käsikirjoittanut Quiara Alegría Hudes. Teoreettinen aineistoni koostuu sosiologisista ja historiallisista lähteistä sekä kirjallisuusteoriasta musikaaleihin ja Bakhtinin karnevaalin teoriaan liittyen.

Lähden tutkielmassani liikkeelle määrittelemällä, mitä tarkoitetaan käsitteellä yhteisö. Määrittelen yhteisön käsitteen sosiologisen teorian avulla ja analysoin, käyvätkö musikaalien hahmojen muodostamat yhteisöt yhteen tämän määritelmän kanssa. Sen jälkeen erittelen erilaisia yhteiskunnallisia ilmiöitä ja analysoin, miten ne esiintyvät musikaaleissa ja miten ne ovat vaikuttaneet näiden yhteisöjen syntyyn ja toimintaan. Tutkittavat yhteiskunnalliset ilmiöt ovat gentrifikaatio New Yorkissa, amerikkalaisen unelman vaikutus ihmisen elämään ja tavoitteisiin sekä yhteisöjen asenteet valtavirtakulttuuriin. Gentrifikaatiota ja amerikkalaista unelmaa tutkin historiallisten lähteiden kautta ja asenteita valtavirtakulttuuriin tutkin Bakhtinin karnevaalin teorian sekä kapitalismin kuvauksen kautta. Jokainen luku tarkastelee siis yhteisöjen toimintaa eri perspektiivistä.

Tutkimukseni osoittaa, että *Rent*- ja *In the Heights* -musikaalien yhteisöt vastaavat teoreettista käsitystä yhteisöistä. Yhteisöt kuitenkin perustuvat eri asioille. Yhteisö *Rent*-musikaalissa perustuu yhteisiin arvoihin ja yhteisö *In the Heights* -musikaalissa perustuu yhteiseen kulttuuriperintöön. Analyysistäni käy ilmi, että yhteisöt kokevat samankaltaisia haasteita yhteiskunnassa, mutta reagoivat niihin eri tavalla. Gentrifikaatio vaikuttaa molempien yhteisöjen asuinalueisiin, mutta *Rent*issä hahmot protestoivat prosessia avoimesti, kun taas *In the Heights* -musikaalissa se on hyväksytty tosiasia. Tutkimus osoittaa, että amerikkalaisen unelman vaikutus yhteiskuntaan on nähtävissä molemmissa musikaaleissa, mutta sen toteutumisesta annettava kuva on pessimistinen. Yhteisöllisyys nostetaan musikaaleissa amerikkalaisen unelman tavoittelemisen yläpuolelle. Musikaaleissa on piirteitä Bakhtinin karnevaalin teoriasta. Karnevaalia käytetään valtavirtakulttuurin pilkkaamiseen. Tutkimukseni osoittaa myös, että yhteisö tuo tietynasteista suojaa kapitalistisen yhteiskunnan suurimmilta epäkohdilta.

Avainsanat: musikaali, yhteisö, yhteisöllisyyden kuvaus.

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# 1 Introduction

This thesis will examine the depictions of community in two American musicals, *Rent* and *In the Heights*. The musicals opened on Broadway in 1996 and 2008, respectively, after first premiering as off-Broadway productions. Both musicals tell the story of communities formed in New York neighbourhoods which are undergoing structural changes due to gentrification. *Rent* takes place in the Lower East Side during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and *In the Heights* in Washington Heights in 2008. Both musicals are written by people who themselves were members of the portrayed communities. *Rent*'s creator Jonathan Larson lived in the East Village (Leacock Hoffman xiii) and *In the Heights*' composer and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda is of Puerto Rican descent and grew up in Washington Heights (Miranda). Searching for a community of one's own is a common human desire which can be tricky in a modern urban environment which can be hectic and change rapidly as addressed in a lyric from *Rent*: "What binds the fabric together / when the raging, shifting winds of change / keep ripping away" (Larson 12). This thesis aims to examine just what binds together the fabric of the communities in these musicals.

Both *Rent* and *In the Heights* tell the stories of marginalized communities through musical theatre which is traditionally considered a very American art form (Greenspan 154). In *Rent* members of the community are marginalised due to their social status and in *In the Heights* due to their immigrant status. Miller describes the musical as an art form by saying that it is a "powerful tool for social and political change" as it is effective in pointing out issues but also "nonthreatening" enough for it to "do its job without its audience noticing" (viii). *Rent*, and to some extent *In the Heights*, also brought people that "Broadway audiences generally don't want to see" onto the stage (Miller 191). The musical had not traditionally celebrated marginalized communities but both *Rent* and *In the Heights* respectively won the Tony Award for best musical in 1996 and 2008 (Tonyawards.com), *Rent* winning also the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1996 (Pulitzer.org) showing

how these musicals were accepted by the Broadway audiences and critics alike. The musicals break from the traditional mode of musical theatre not only in their subject matter but also in their musical styles. *Rent* is characterised as a rock-opera whereas *In the Heights* introduced hip hop into mainstream Broadway productions. This illustrates how these shows about people who the audience “does not want to see” need to be exceptional if they want to make a difference (Miller 23-24). Examining the musicals together is interesting because they combine their innovative social critiques with new formal developments in the musical form.

The thesis focuses on social relationships and social issues with the main focus being on community. The thesis is written around two research questions. Firstly, how are the communities constructed in the musicals? That entails exploring who the members of the community are and who are being excluded. This question is the focus of Chapter 2. Secondly, why are the communities necessary for the characters in the musicals? That entails discussing what societal factors have played a part in forming the communities and what the members of the communities get from said communities that they would not receive otherwise. This is explored in the other chapters through different issues, ideals, and expressions that show how the community works in different situations and thus shows some of the reasons why these people have come together in a community.

The communities in the two musicals are quite different. In *Rent*, the community is a group of bohemians and artists who share the same type of ideals and lifestyle, while in *In the Heights*, the community is formed by Latin American immigrants who share the same culture and language. Even though the communities themselves are different, similar definitions of what makes a community can be applied to both of them and they face similar challenges, such as gentrification. These stories of seemingly different kinds of communities also show how issues like gentrification and ideals like the American Dream affect different kinds of people at different times in varying ways, which shows how these things are quite entrenched in the American experience.

There is a considerable amount of research on *Rent* including some that specifically addresses themes of community. Kristen Smith has written about how community is constructed and Judith Sebesta has examined aspects of Bakhtin's carnival in the piece and how it ties into expression of communal values and unity. Little literary criticism has been written about *In the Heights*, however. Most relevant for my research is Stacy Wolf's book *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, where she discusses *In the Heights* from a feminist point of view but also touches upon issues of community. I was unable to find any research discussing the two musicals together, although some discussions of one of the musicals have alluded to the other briefly in passing. My thesis examines issues similar to Smith's study at more length and shows how the communities are structured in similar ways in both *Rent* and *In the Heights* which makes it relevant to discuss both of the musicals in the same thesis. The idea of carnival is also examined and shown to be one of the main ways in which the musicals express aversion to mainstream American culture. The primary sources for the thesis are the publications of the complete book and lyrics of both *Rent* and *In the Heights*. The publications feature the dialogue and lyrics as they appeared when the musicals' initial Broadway productions premiered. It is to be noted that in the primary sources, spoken lines are set in standard sentence case (mixing upper and lower case letters) while sung lines are written completely in upper case. I have chosen to convert the upper case letters to standard sentence case in all citations for style reasons. The most prominent secondary sources for the thesis are Keller, Sullivan, and Young's respective theories on community, Sites' views on the gentrification of New York City, Cullen and Samuel's respective works on the American Dream, and Bakhtin's views on carnival.

*Rent* and *In the Heights* may seem very different on paper but in reality they share many elements that make studying them in the same thesis very logical. They have similarities in, for instance, subject matter, themes, narration, metaphors, and plot. Both musicals feature more song than speech and both musicals "spread a series of stories and plots across a number of characters,

thus painting a picture of an entire community rather than of one character or a couple” (Wolf 189). This is unusual as musicals tend to typically value and celebrate the individual (Wolf 166). By not focusing on just one character’s personal development the musicals paint a picture of community. The thesis will add depth to the discussions of both *Rent* and *In the Heights* individually by examining them together. Examining the two musicals together will give a wider picture of neighbourhood communities than examining just one of the musicals would provide, as the research shows which parts of the theoretical definition of community apply to both and where they differ. The simultaneous discussion of *Rent* and *In the Heights* will illustrate how the same issues affect different kinds of communities and how they choose to deal with them amongst their own community in their respective time periods. Focusing on the societal issues will provide a view of what societal factors affect the lives of the communities and how the communities choose to combat these issues or if they even choose to do so.

To finish this introduction chapter, two key terms in the thesis must be defined. Firstly, community. As a disclaimer, it must be noted that the term “community” can be used in many forms today, often even quite loosely, such as simply describing a housing development, but in this thesis, the communities are quite clearly defined according to the theories introduced in Chapter 2 and that is what is meant when the thesis refers to a “community”. People who make up a community “have shared territory, ideals, allegiances, and collective frameworks” (Smith 229). The members of the community form a sense of communality from these attributes and from a common purpose (Sullivan 136). Communities value the interests of the whole group above a person’s individual self-interest (Sullivan 136). Secondly, culture. The term culture in this thesis refers to “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time” (Dictionary.Cambridge.org). The “general customs and beliefs” relevant to the thesis include American mass culture, Latin American culture and alternative bohemian culture. The “particular time” relevant for the thesis are the first decades before and after the millennium.

## **2 Community: Construction and Dynamic**

In this chapter, the concept of community is examined through theory and analysis of the musicals, *Rent* and *In the Heights*. First the communities in the musicals are introduced briefly alongside with the basic definition of the term community. Then the concept of community is examined from a variety of theoretical perspectives and how these perspectives relate to the musicals is analysed. The neighbourhoods that function as the communities' territories are also introduced and their significance within the musicals is discussed. Finally, the significance of the ensemble number in musicals and how it relates to the concept of community is examined.

### **2.1 The Communities in *Rent* and *In the Heights***

Simply put, a community is formed by a group of people who “have shared territory, ideals, allegiances, and collective frameworks” (Smith 229). It is useful to define the communities in the two musicals first broadly by using this definition to get an overview on who the community members are and what they are about before going into deeper analysis on the subject. There are several communities featured in *Rent*, such as the bohemian artist community and the AIDS community. The bohemian artist community is the main one discussed in this thesis but it does overlap with the other communities to some extent, mainly the aforementioned AIDS community. The community's shared territory is the Lower East Side, more specifically Alphabet City, in New York City. Their shared ideals are that of a self-proclaimed “bohemian lifestyle” which for them means rejecting mainstream culture, and aiming for artistic integrity and freedom of expression with the loss of financial security. They share allegiance to the struggling people living in Alphabet City and fight against the businessmen who aspire to build businesses and housing in the area with the cost of driving out the existing residents. The collective framework is that artistic integrity is more important than making money, or “selling out”. In *In the Heights*, the community is formed by

Latino<sup>1</sup> people living in the same neighbourhood in Washington Heights in New York City. That Washington Heights neighbourhood is naturally the community's shared territory. The community is not mainly based on ideals, but the ideal of preserving your heritage could be considered as the community's shared ideal. Their shared allegiance is to the local owned businesses against the big businesses trying to acquire them. The collective framework is working hard and looking after your people.

It is useful to note the difference between society and community, which are often mistakenly talked about interchangeably, because both terms are included in the discussion in the thesis and it could be confusing not to understand the distinctions and connections between the terms. A society is considered in this thesis as “an overarching system of social, political, and cultural arrangements that encompass the totality” whose “practices are formalized and abstract” (Keller 11). Society functions on a level that is not personal whereas the concept of community on the other hand, is inextricably linked to the personal (Keller 11). Community is something that people are aware of on a personal level and is based on direct contact (Keller 11). Nonetheless, community is a vital part of society. According to Keller, without a sense of community “society tends to become rigid, ritualistic, lifeless”. She claims that without a sense of community, society lacks trust and people become indifferent. Thus, communities, no matter how small, complement the society at large (Keller 11). In addition, society naturally affects the community because communities exist within the society. Communities give the individual something that the society by itself cannot offer and that is part of the attraction of communities which will be further examined in the next section.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite criticism that the term “Latino” was not created by the people it is used to refer to, and that it falsely combines together different cultures, histories and languages (Wolf 191), “Latino” is used throughout the thesis to refer to people with Latin American origin because it is the term the musical *In the Heights* itself uses.

## 2.2 The Attraction of Communities

According to Bauman, people are attracted to the idea of community because it “feels good”. He says that this is because a community is something we imagine and we imagine it as “a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place. It’s like a roof under which we shelter” (qtd. in Sullivan 137). Sullivan claims that a community is a place where a person feels and expects to be safe in contrast to the “world outside” which can seem threatening, strange, or vicious. According to this viewpoint, community is presented as “a source of strength, a safe place you share with others like you, a ‘home’” (Sullivan 137). While of course certain communities might be formed around an embrace of danger, such as skydiving or other forms of “sensation seeking”, they still have a sense of mutual understanding and support that corresponds to the idea of safety. This idea of safety in *Rent* and *In the Heights* is also what the following paragraph will emphasise.

Bauman and Sullivan’s respective ideas about community as a safe space can be seen in both *Rent* and *In the Heights*. Not only do the characters experience anxiety caused by the gentrification process in their neighbourhoods but also the threat of actual violence. In *Rent*, violence is present already in the opening scene when Collins is mugged and beaten outside his friends’ building. He is trying to return to his community members but this is hindered by street violence which he summarizes by singing “on every street it’s ‘trick or treat’ / (and tonight it’s ‘trick’)” (Larson 10). Later, Angel helps Collins off the street and becomes a community member through this kind act that provides the sense of safety (Larson 14).

In *In the Heights*, violence presented in a different light on purpose. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the composer and lyricist of *In the Heights*, has said that he made a conscious decision not to show any street violence in the musical because earlier depictions of Latinos in musicals had been exclusively linked to violence (Low). However, even if actual violence is not show, the threat of violence does exist in the musical and it becomes very prominent when New York City experiences a blackout. Sonny desperately tries to protect the family owned corner shop when Graffiti Pete urges him to

seek safety by saying: “people lootin’ and shootin’ / Sonny, they wanna see a robbery / we gotta keep movin’” (Hudes and Miranda 89). The next morning the shop’s “awning is slashed, the window is broken” and the register has been stolen. Daniela remarks “Whoever did that, I’m gonna put a jinx on their head” attempting to place the perpetrators outside the community all the while acknowledging that they are people the community members are likely in contact with, that is, people who live in the neighbourhood (Hudes and Miranda 101-102). This shows how the community is united against the violence that may lie around it but also that not everybody in the neighbourhood is a member of this safe community and may even be threats to the community members. This shows that the community seems to be reluctant in acknowledging the problems within their neighbourhood and even community. Violence and crime surely exist there, as this incident shows, but they do not want to explore the problem further but rather quietly accept it.

Sullivan compared the effect that the feeling of community has on a person to the idea of “home” (Sullivan 137). The concept of home and belonging in a certain place, a “shared territory” with your community, if you will, is explored in both *Rent* and *In the Heights*. In *In the Heights*, home is actually one of the major themes of the story. According to Huerta, this is typical of plays written by Latinos as they often explore conflicts of identity and the concept of home (464). Usnavi has lived his whole life in New York City but talks about returning to the Dominican Republic and finding his “island” there throughout the musical (Hudes and Miranda 107). He sets out to do just that with the lottery money in the second act of the musical. In the end, he realises the need to stay in the barrio to maintain the memory of Abuela Claudia and other people who lived their life and made an impact there. He vocalises this by saying: “And if not me, who keeps our legacies?” (Hudes and Miranda 152). A few lines later, he has finally found the feeling of home in New York and says: “I found my island / I’ve been on it this whole time. / I’m home!” (Hudes and Miranda 152). The declaration of home is also how the musical ends as Usnavi and the rest of the cast simultaneously sing “I’m home!” and “Home!” (Hudes and Miranda 153). In *Rent*, several

characters entertain the idea of leaving New York and starting over somewhere else. The song “Santa Fe” presents a fantasy of opening a restaurant in Santa Fe and forgetting “this cold bohemian hell” that is New York City (Larson 51). The problems of the characters are presented as specific to New York in the beginning of the song when Angel sings (Larson 49):

It’s a comfort to know  
when you’re singing the hit-the-road blues  
that anywhere else you could possibly go  
after New York would be a pleasure cruise.

Roger attempts to utilize this Santa Fe dream as an escape method later after Angel’s death (Larson 119) but quickly returns to New York and sums up the experience by stating “but you’d miss New York before you could unpack” when Collins mentions the fantasy about Santa Fe again near the end of the musical (Larson 135). Both of these changes of heart of the characters wanting to leave showcase how the community is really the thing that makes a place feel like home to a person just as Sullivan’s theory suggested.

### **2.3 A Shared Identity**

Community membership can be seen as forming a shared identity that stems from the common ideals and aspirations of the community members (Sullivan 136). This communal identity is often idealized as a “sense of harmony” which might be perceived as a natural development within the community but in fact, it can be, and often is, something that is developed artificially among the community members (Sullivan 136). This sense of a deep connection to one community might be problematic for individuals who feel like they need to exclude other vital elements of their own self and perhaps even distance themselves from one community in order to remain a part of another one (Sullivan 137-138). For example, a queer-person of colour might feel pressure to align themselves according to their sexuality and disregard issues relating to race. This sense of strong unity with one

group with the need to suppress another can often lead to great conflict if and when the suppressed issues surface (Sullivan 139).

The idea presented by Sullivan that an individual might feel the need to exclude vital elements of their own identity in order to stay a part of a community can be seen as present in *Rent* and *In the Heights* but it is not made into a vital theme in either of the musicals (Sullivan 137-138). However, the existence of the feelings of wanting to leave New York presented in the previous subchapter show some conflicts within the communities that could be the manifestations of these identity conflicts. Clearly something within the community is frustrating its members when they actively entertain the idea of leaving it all behind. In *In the Heights*, the conflict of possible identities can be seen as one of the reasons that the community members identify themselves through their Latin American heritage and do not really regard themselves as “Americans” in the sense of being from and living in the United States. In *Rent*, this is explored in a type of contrast to Sullivan’s theory, as Mark seems to be troubled by his lack of inclusion in another community, the AIDS community. He is HIV negative but attends the support group meetings for AIDS patients and documents them. Mark later explains this need to document when he sings, “Perhaps it’s because I’m the one of us to survive” (Larson 124). Roger calls him out on this and in anger places Mark outside of the core community: “For someone who longs for a community of his own / who’s with his camera, alone?” (Larson 125).

Through their community, the characters in *Rent* feel comfortable enough to live according to their ideals and desired way of expression. The “sense of harmony” (Sullivan 136) seems to be a very unstable thing among the community members as they are often in conflict over personal relationships and the idea of “selling out”. In *In the Heights*, the sense of harmony is also easily broken by Kevin’s decision to sell his business. It seems that even if the sense of harmony is not a perfect one, the fleeting moments of harmony are enough for the members to choose community over other things and identities because it is something that is at least in theory a stable thing in

their lives, which are being made unstable by gentrification, financial insecurity, and death. They want to make the community work and as such do not wish jeopardize it by bringing forth their identity conflicts. But as the harmony between the community members is not a perfect one, other factors are also bringing them together, as the next subchapter shows.

## **2.4 Communities Based on Ethnicity, Choice, or Opposition**

According to Young, the concept of community “also carries connotations of ethnicity or race”. She claims that for the majority of the US population, a community is a group that “shares a specific heritage, a common self-identification, a common culture and set of norms” (244). This points to the assumption that most communities are formed by people who share similar backgrounds and even ethnicities and thus communities are formed almost “naturally” with the people around us. However, Keller emphasizes that merely sharing a social categorization due to race or ethnicity does not automatically make a group of people a community. This social categorization must lead into “a consciousness of kind, a sense of belonging, and a shared destiny past or future” in order for it to form a community (Keller 8).

The “connotations of ethnicity or race” of community that Young presented are not strongly emphasised in *Rent*. *Rent* has been traditionally cast to feature many actors of colour following the original Broadway cast in which five out of the eight principal characters were played by actors of colour<sup>2</sup>. However, the only apparent allusion to ethnicity in the script itself is in relation to the character of Mimi Marquez who sings that New York feels “too damn much like home / when the Spanish babies cry” (Larson 42) and later her mother leaves her a voicemail in Spanish (Larson 131).

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<sup>2</sup> Including Jesse L. Martin as Tom Collins, Taye Diggs as Benjamin Coffin III, Fredi Walker as Joanne Jefferson, Wilson Jermaine Heredia as Angel Dumott Schunard and Daphne Rubin-Vega as Mimi Marquez.

Young's theory about community being a group that "shares a specific heritage, a common self-identification" is very relevant to *In the Heights*, however (244). The community in *In the Heights* is formed by people with Latin American heritage who speak Spanish. The countries of origin for the characters that are named in the musical include the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Chile and Puerto Rico<sup>3</sup>. The sense of community of people who came as "outsiders" to the US is presented already in the first musical number "In the Heights" where the neighbourhood is presented to the audience through Usnavi's morning routine at his shop. He begins by introducing the location of Washington Heights, then the main characters (except for Nina) are introduced, and finally ending with the declaration of the aspirations of the community members and the challenges the community faces. What makes the community is briefly defined in these lines towards the end of the song (Hudes and Miranda 12):

**ENSEMBLE (DANIELA/CARLA/PIRAGUA GUY/OTHERS)**

In the heights I hang my flag up on display.

**USNAVI**

We came to work and to live here and we got a lot in common.

**ENSEMBLE + CAMILA/VANESSA/SONNY/KEVIN**

It reminds me that I came from miles away.

**USNAVI**

D.R., P.R., we are not stoppin'.

This shows how one of the defining characteristics of the community alongside their heritage is relocation. The community members have moved far away from their homes and the sense of wanting to preserve their national identities brings them together into this wider pan-Latino community.

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<sup>3</sup> The musical's homogenized community of people with distinctive backgrounds from different Spanish-speaking countries has been criticised as creating an untrue picture, a "pan-Latino utopia", of the neighbourhood (Wolf 191). In this thesis, the community will be nonetheless examined as it is presented in the musical without speculating about the accuracy of the portrayal.

The sense of national pride also shows in how the characters acknowledge that they may have better opportunities in the United States but that does not mean that the new country is better than the old in every way. This is especially apparent in the song “Paciencia y Fe” where Abuela Claudia thinks back on her life and how she came to the United States. She immigrated to the US as a child from the neighborhood of La Víbora in Havana, Cuba which she describes as “a crowded city of faces the same as mine” which illustrates how she felt like she fitted in there (Hudes and Miranda 61). It is not directly said that she does not feel like she fits in in New York but this strongly suggests so. Nina also expresses the dream of having grown up in Puerto Rico instead of New York (Hudes and Miranda 70):

When I was younger, I'd imagine what would happen  
if my parents had stayed in Puerto Rico.  
Who would I be if I had never seen Manhattan,  
if I lived in Puerto Rico with my people.  
My people?

The last line can be interpreted as doubt whether her people would really rather be found in Puerto Rico than in the United States. This also shows how even though she is a member of this pan-Latino community she does not regard them as her “people” in the same way that she would just Puerto Ricans. This relationship between the “old country” and the United States will be discussed further in Chapter 4 in relation to the American Dream.

The rejection of Benny as a full community member also displays how the community’s construction is firmly based on shared ethnicity. This is clearly exemplified by Kevin who continually alludes to how Benny does not share their heritage and uses it as a reason for his daughter not to date Benny. Before Nina and Benny’s romance becomes apparent, Kevin is friendly with Benny but still keeps him aware that he is different. When Benny offers to cover the radio at the taxi service, Kevin first rejects his offer by stating that “You don’t speak Spanish”. When Benny insists that having spent five years in the business with the Spanish-speaking drivers has taught him enough, Kevin responds “You’re not latino” (Hudes and Miranda 21-22). Whether Benny is Latino

or not should have no influence on how well he could service a taxi service radio so Kevin's comment on that can only be seen as a way for him to distance Benny from the community. Kevin's actions are clear to Benny who later tells Nina how Kevin "loves to remind me that I'll never be good enough for your family. For you." (Hudes and Miranda 84). The language barrier to full community membership can also be seen in how Nina teaches Benny Spanish in an effort to bring him closer to the community after they have fully begun their love affair in the song "Sunrise" (Hudes and Miranda 95-101). Later when Kevin learns of the new relationship he rejects Benny again by saying "You know nothing about our culture!" By this time Benny gives up the effort to please Kevin and responds with "This bullshit again?" and exits moments later saying "Why learn the language if they still won't hear you?" showing how he has realized that since he cannot change his ethnicity he will never be accepted by Kevin into the community (Hudes and Miranda 110).

The neighborhood community in *In the Heights* is not of course merely based on ethnicity. The community members have a "shared destiny past or future", befitting Keller's definition (8). The community members in *In the Heights* have a shared destiny of relocation, which applies for both their past and their present. The community members or their parents have relocated to Washington Heights from Latin America and now they are being forced to relocate from the barrio due to gentrification. In the final number of the musical, Usnavi has a change of heart and decides to stay in Washington Heights despite being very pessimistic in the beginning of the number and saying for instance: "In five years, when this whole city's rich folks and hipsters, who's gonna miss this raggedy little business?" (Hudes and Miranda 150). This earlier pessimistic idea does seem like the more likely future for the neighborhood though. By the end of the musical Nina, Vanessa, Daniela and Carla have already relocated. Wolf points out that it has traditionally been the role of the woman to function as "'cultural preservers' in ethnic communities" but in *In the Heights* it is the men who take on this responsibility which, according to her, "challenges traditional gender roles" (192).

In addition to communities that a person is, in a manner of speaking, “born into”, such as the aforementioned communities that are based on a common ethnicity or heritage, communities can also be something that an individual “consciously chooses” to join. Phelan categorizes these communities as “nonascriptive communities”. She argues that these communities are “most often formed in order to create and maintain non-hegemonic or non-heteronormative identities and lifestyles.” Communities such as these define and consider themselves as opposing the mainstream culture and autonomous from it (qtd. in Sullivan 139).

The community in *Rent* represents a nonascriptive community. Many of the principal characters receive phone messages from their concerned parents, which alludes that they were not driven to the streets out of necessity. This is also joked about early on in the musical when Mark sings “And we’re hungry and frozen” to which Roger replies to with “Some life that we’ve chosen” (Larson 8). Miller supports this too and adds that “[Roger and Mark’s] self-identification with the *real* homeless people seems artificial, and perhaps even a bit offensive.” (192, emphasis original). The view that the life of struggles is something that the characters have chosen is also supported by the fact that Benny has withdrawn from community membership despite still being in regular contact with the community itself. The change in him is vocalised by Roger when he sings: “What happened to Benny / What happened to his heart / And the ideals he once pursued” (Larson 29). This lyric shows how the shared ideals are the cornerstone of the community. The allure of these ideals and the lifestyle they have built around them seems to be important enough for the characters to deliberately choose to struggle if it means they can live by their ideals. This suggests that living by those ideals is not possible outside the accepting and like-minded community which might be why they choose live as they do despite the struggle.

The community in *Rent* also fits Phelan’s assessment of nonascriptive communities being “formed in order to create and maintain non-hegemonic or non-heteronormative identities and lifestyles” (qtd. in Sullivan 139). This seems to be true as the community in *Rent* features two gay

couples and the character of Angel who is gender fluid, while the community members in general position themselves as anti-establishment and anti-mainstream, which will be further examined in in Chapter 5.

In addition to all these aforementioned things that members of a community have in common, a community can be formed in opposition to something. A community can be formed through the fear or devaluation of another group (Young 244). This creates a sense of “us against them” mentality where one community is formed so that they will not be taken over by another community that they fear or otherwise detest (Young 244). These can be communities based on ethnicity or nonascriptive communities (Young 244). For example, a high-income black person might have little to do with a black person living on societal benefits in their daily life, but these two individuals can be joined together into a community in their fear against police brutality.

The communities in *Rent* and *In the Heights* are also partly formed in opposition to something, corresponding to Young’s theory (244). The common enemy in the musicals is the people who are driving forth the gentrification process in the communities’ respective territories. In *Rent*, the character of Benny represents the gentrification process and in *In the Heights*, as expressed by Wolf, “the ‘enemy’ is the not-represented but implicitly white gentrifier of the neighbourhood” (191). In *Rent*, the resistance is more explicit through protests, riots and squatting whereas in *In the Heights* the mentality of most of the characters in this issue is that of quiet acceptance. The character of Sonny is the only one who verbalises the threat of gentrification and ways to fight it (Hudes and Miranda 51-53) but his ideas are met with dismissive remarks due to his age of merely 16 (Hudes and Miranda xv). The issue of gentrification in the musicals will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

## 2.5 Community versus Individualism

The relationship between community and individualism needs to be examined as well. The sense of community can be seen as diluting a person's individuality and the concepts of community and individuality are often seen as opposites. How strongly this opposition is viewed depends on the definition of individuality. Keller presents two possible definitions for the term. According to her, individuality in a contemporary context focuses on the individual and emphasizes their "anonymity and separation from others". She claims that in earlier societies, the idea of individuality was inextricably linked to the community and how the individual related to it. Therefore, the ideas of community and individuality were completely compatible (Keller 11). According to Sullivan, the idea of community as "an ethical and political ideal" is traditionally posed against individualism and liberalism. She argues that the sense of community entitles "a sense of obligation" to the community. The needs of the community at large are regarded as being of higher value than the needs of an individual (Sullivan 136-137).

The relationship of community and individuality is explored in both of the musicals, particularly through one character. Although *Rent* represents a contemporary community, the community is that of artists whose individuality is interchangeably linked to the community itself, which makes the community meet more the older definition of the relationship between community and individuality defined by Keller. Mark, however, is representative of the contemporary definition as he is defined more through his "anonymity and separation from others" (Keller 11). He documents more than acts and is the narrator of the story which makes him stand out from the others. He even addresses this passivity, for example, when he narrates the lives of the others and in regards to himself only says "Me? I'm here. Nowhere." (Larson 102). Mark's detachment later leads into a confrontation with Roger (Larson 124):

**ROGER**

Who are you to tell me what I know, what to do.

**MARK**

A friend.

**ROGER**

But who, Mark are you?  
 “Mark has got his work”  
 they say  
 “Mark lives for his work”  
 and “Mark’s in love with his work”  
 Mark hides in his work.

**MARK**

From what?

**ROGER**

Facing your failure, facing your loneliness  
 facing the fact you live a lie.  
 Yes, you live a lie – tell you why.  
 You’re always preaching not to be numb  
 when that’s how you thrive.  
 You pretend to create and observe  
 when you really detach from feeling alive.

This outburst illustrates how Mark’s behaviour has not gone unnoticed within the community and how this individuality stands in contrast with the community. In *In the Heights*, the individual standing apart from the community is not the narrator character, Usnavi, but Nina. From her first appearance on stage, she is being raised above and set apart from the other characters in the story. Wolf characterises her stance in the community as an “outsider-insider” (192). She is praised for her intellect and drive and not listened to when she tries to challenge those ideas by telling the truth about her experiences of struggle and failure in college. Her individuality comes from her perceived competence and as such she is being pushed away from the community to the big world outside, as can be seen from her solo number “Breathe” (Hudes and Miranda 19, translation mine):

**CARLA/DANIELA/PIRAGUA GUY/OTHERS**

Mira, allí esta nuestra estrella.

[Look, there is our star.]

**NINA**

They are all counting on me  
to succeed.

I am the one who made it out!

The one who always made the grade.

But maybe I should have just stayed home . . .

The fact that the community is “pushing Nina away” comes from a place of caring but it nonetheless places her outside of the community as the individual. From these examples, we can see that, at least in these two musicals, the idea of the individual sits uncomfortably with the idea of community.

The theory presented by Sullivan of the needs of the community being regarded as of higher value than the needs of an individual is also true in *Rent* and *In the Heights* (136-137). In *In the Heights*, Kevin decides to sell his company, which is a major employer in the neighbourhood, to help his nuclear family with financial troubles. This is presented as a universally bad decision in the musical. The nuclear family that he sold the business to help rejects the decision immediately and so does the rest of the community. They cannot accept that a community member would put his individual needs above the needs of the community. Kevin attempts to explain his motives by saying “I’m not a welfare office! Family comes first, above everything.” but still gets no support (Hudes and Miranda 78). Even his family places the needs of the community above theirs. In the end of the musical when Usnavi decides to use the lottery money to fix his shop and preserve a vital part of the community instead of using it for his personal escape, the community and the audience is supposed to see this as the right kind of behaviour, putting the community above your own needs, as showcased by the triumphant nature of the song where Usnavi makes this decision. In *Rent* Mark is forced to reject a lucrative job offer because it would be considered as “selling out” which would go against the community’s ideals and therefore make it look bad (Larson 95). Later after Angel’s

death when the community seems to be falling apart, Mark accepts this job and puts his needs first. This leads to a crisis of conscience for him and he quickly resigns, being unable to put his needs before the community's without feeling guilty, which shows how the feeling of community still exists even if it seems like the community is about to crumble.

The anxiety that Mark and Nina feel at being separated from the community as individuals shows that community membership is more important than individual success in both musicals. They attempt to hold on to their community despite quite clearly being already different. They have not explicitly chosen to exit the community but rather it is something that has happened to them, being HIV negative and leaving to receive a higher education, and is even a rather enviable situation for the remaining community members. Yet when they gain these positive things in their lives that make them individuals, they lose the community which is presented as something even better, something that you can have even if you are sick or not thriving financially. Therefore, deliberately isolating yourself from the community as Kevin does by putting his individual needs before himself is presented as a bad thing because he is doing it consciously. He has chosen to reject the community and therefore does not seem to see the immense value that it has to the other members.

## **2.6 Shared Territory**

The definition of community can also include the idea of a shared territory (Smith 229). The territory relevant to the musicals examined in this thesis is New York City. The city of New York is composed of boroughs and the boroughs are further divided into neighbourhoods that vary greatly from one to another. As a whole, New York City “does not have unifying qualities or principles other than geography” (Smith 230). Due to this, New York City does not fulfil the definition of a territory for a community in the traditional sense. According to Smith, New York City can instead be defined as an “imagined community” (230). An imagined community is defined by Anderson as

“imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (qtd. in Smith 230). In this definition, people turn the society into a community in their imagination. Anderson is defining imagined communities through nations but Smith claims that this idea can be expanded to relate to the boroughs and neighbourhoods of New York City (231). Most of the residents of New York city have no contact with each other but regardless, the identification of its residents with the city creates an identity of community for them (Smith 231).

Whereas New York City as a whole can be defined as an imagined community, individual boroughs and neighbourhoods on the other hand can fit the traditional definitions of community (Smith 231). This definition can be applied to the neighbourhoods relevant to the musicals examined in this thesis, the Lower East Side and Washington Heights. *Rent* takes place in the Lower East side, which is located “in the south eastern part of New York City in the Manhattan borough”, and more specifically in Alphabet City within the Lower East side, which is an area containing “the only Avenues in Manhattan with single letter names” (Smith 231). Alphabet city and its residents, who were largely classified as bohemians and artists, experienced a big push for gentrification in the 1980s, which led to widespread resistance (Sites 73). The issue of gentrification will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. Washington Heights is also located in the borough of Manhattan in the northern portion of New York City. Washington Heights has long been viewed as “a magnet for newcomers” as in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it attracted many immigrants of Irish, Italian, Greek and Cuban descent as well as Jewish people from Germany and Eastern Europe (Dicker 715). From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, more immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Cuba started populating the area and the neighbourhood started to experience physical deterioration (Dicker 715). In the 1980s, Washington Heights was known for being “the centre of New York’s crack cocaine trade” but the situation had changed by the 1990s (Dicker 722). In the

2000s, the neighbourhood still has a largely Latino population and especially strong Dominican community (Dicker 714).

How the community's shared territory is defined functions as a device for the musicals to define the communities against the audience. The audience is perceived as consisting of non-community members who are not familiar with the Lower East Side or Washington Heights. This is established in how the narrator characters in both musicals feel the need to introduce the area to the audience right in the beginning of the story. In *Rent*, Mark is technically talking to the audience of his documentary film but the audience in the theatre cannot be separated from that and the stage directions also state him as talking "to audience" (Larson 3). Mark tells the audience that they "live in an industrial loft on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue B, on the top floor of what was once a music publishing factory" and that "Outside, a small tent city has sprung up in the lot next to our building" (Larson 1). *In the Heights* goes a bit further in this introduction. The entire opening number functions as the introduction of the community to the audience. As the number begins, the stage directions say that Usnavi "*turns to us*", the audience (Hudes and Miranda 1). After he has introduced himself and Abuela Claudia, Usnavi addresses the audience directly and says (Hudes and Miranda 3):

You're prob'ly thinkin', "I'm up shit's creek!  
I've never been north of Ninety-sixth street."  
Well, you must take the A train  
even farther than Harlem to Northern Manhattan and maintain.  
Get off at the one eighty-first, and take the escalator.  
I hope you're writing this down, I'm gonna test ya later.

From here, it is clear that the perceived audience of the musical is not a person who is familiar with Washington Heights, or even the other neighbourhoods further in the city. One can also read a sense of pride in this description. Certainly, Usnavi mocks the neighbourhood's remote location, but also in a way, he mocks the audience's perceived attitude. The last line in the quote can be read as his remark that the audience has not even paid attention to his explanation. It is clear from these examples that the community's territory is a vital part of their experience.

## 2.7 The Ensemble Number

In the musical as an art form, the idea of community is best presented through the ensemble number. Briefly defined, the ensemble number is when a larger number of actors, or even the whole cast, are on stage at the same time performing the same number. The ensemble number is a staple of the musical as a dramatic form (McMillin 78). According to Wolf, the ensemble number turns the individual voices of the actors into one and “presents a community on stage” (95). She states that the presence of multiple people and voices on stage “enforces the idea of ‘the people’ through the volume of voices and the volume of bodies, the aural and visual space taken up by the whole group” (95). The ensemble number can be used to both create harmony between the different characters by having them sing in unison and to showcase division by having the characters sing in different octaves, singing sections in different time, or even singing completely different lines simultaneously (Wolf 95). The effect of the ensemble number derives from what surrounds it, for example speech, music or an act break (Wolf 97). McMillin adds that “inclusive group performance” is especially prominent in “the most successful rock musicals” (78). During the ensemble number, the perspective of the musical is united in the ensemble and the different identities lose focus (Wolf 95) which is why it is so suitable to showcase the communal aspects of the musical story.

Both *Rent* and *In the Heights* feature several prominent ensemble numbers. Both musicals begin with their namesake numbers, “Rent” and “In the Heights”, that introduce the community and most of its members and give an idea of what they are about to the audience. Both musicals also end in ensemble numbers that give a hopeful view of the future of the communities despite the stories themselves making the audience doubt that a happy ending is possible in reality. The act breaks in the musicals are also similar. Just before the act break, the principal romantic couple is shown kissing in a way that is impossible to ignore. In *Rent*, Mark points the audience’s attention to it by saying “Oblivious, Mimi and Roger share a small, lovely kiss” (Larson 85) and in *In the Heights* the stage directions note the kiss between Benny and Nina is being “illuminated by fireworks” (Hudes

and Miranda 94). The kiss is not the thing that the audience is left with, however, as the ensemble gets the last word in a declaration and celebration of the community. In *Rent* the ensemble exclaims “Viva la Vie Bohème” (Larson 85) and *In the Heights* breaks in “En [In] Washington Heights” (Hudes and Miranda 94, translation mine). This contrasts the heterosexual love story, which is a grand convention of the musical as a genre (Wolf 8), with the depiction of a bigger community. In a way, this shift of attention from the kissing couple back to the whole cast shows the audience how the story is not really about the romantic couple but rather the community. The ensemble number is also utilized as a literal celebration of the community in both musicals. In *Rent*, the community lists what they stand for and what they stand against in “La Vie Boheme” and in *In the Heights*, the community celebrates itself and their heritage in “Carnaval Del Barrio”. Both numbers will be discussed in more detail in relation to the idea of carnival in Chapter 5.1.

Apart from celebration, the ensemble number is also used to grieve the loss of a key community member in both musicals in “I’ll Cover You (Reprise)” and “Alabanza” which show the collective grief of the whole community. Conventionally, in musicals as a genre, “death can be the conclusion of the action or the springboard for the action to come” (Greenspan 157). In these moments of grief, the audience is left uncertain if the death will be the end of the community or a new beginning. As the whole community is present in the grieving process, in an effective use of the ensemble number, the feeling of turmoil spreads across the whole community rather than just one or two characters.

The ensemble number is clearly being used in both *Rent* and *In the Heights* in varying ways to highlight the communal aspects of the story as well as in direct praise of the communities. Notably both musicals also end in the cast singing the last line in unison despite singing different parts earlier in the final number. The contrast of the different voices becoming one really brings emphasis on the community. In their last lines both of the groups seem to in a way summarize what their communities are about as in *Rent* they sing “No day but today!” (Larson 141) which relates to the

community's bohemian ideals on living in the present and in *In the Heights* the last line is "Home!" (Hudes and Miranda 153) which shows that even though the people in the neighbourhood came from different places they have found a home in each other.

In conclusion, the ensemble number is how the musicals further display the ideals of community, such as unity, belonging, harmony and even conflict, which were introduced through the theory and discussed in the chapter. Through the ensemble number these ideals are applied to the story through a natural type of expression for the musical as a genre.

### 3 Gentrification of New York City

The ongoing process of gentrification in their neighbourhoods affects the communities greatly in both *Rent* and *In the Heights*. This chapter will explore how the gentrification process was executed in New York and analyse how this can be seen in the musicals. Lastly, the importance of gentrification to the communities in the musicals is discussed.

The East Village in New York city, and more specifically the “white bohemian” part of it, became “fertile terrain for early gentrification” in the 1980s (Sites 77). What happened in the East Village is a good case example of the urban gentrification process in itself as, even though the neighbourhood groups formed a resistance movement against gentrification, they were unable to resist “the economic forces at work” (Sites 70). The gentrification process then continued to expand onwards from the older inner city pushing “farther and farther to the margins of the city” (Sites 70). This is also what connects the two neighbourhoods of *Rent* and *In the Heights*. The gentrification process is in full action in the East Village in *Rent* while the area residents are still trying to protest it. In *In the Heights*, which takes place around a decade later in time, gentrification has reached Washington Heights which is located in the “margins of the city” that Sites was referring to (70). Having seen the gentrification process go through other parts of New York City before finally reaching Washington Heights could be one of the reasons that the neighbourhood residents are not actively protesting it but rather quietly accepting it as an inevitable fact.

According to Sites, the gentrification of New York City was largely caused by middle-class people wanting to return to live in the cities instead of the suburbs (70). In order for this to happen, other people had to “make room” in the cities and these “other people” were often people living in low-income housing (Sites 70). Sites states that the supporters of gentrification often claim that the new middle-class residents coming to the area will “lift up” the area and break down the “economic and racial segregation of the US metropolis” by living there alongside the pre-existing residents (70). The reality is, however, that these new residents are not settling down alongside the long-time

residents of the area but rather the investments that the gentrification process brings into the neighbourhood introduces an economic pressure to the area which is pricing out the current occupants (Sites 70). This happened in the East Village as well as the wave of gentrification “swept young artists, students, and working-class residents into surrounding lower-income and industrial areas” (Sites 80). The pricing out of the current residents can be seen in *In the Heights*. It is explicitly brought up in the first song as Usnavi says (Hudes and Miranda 3-4):

I'm getting tested, times are tough on this bodega.  
 Two months ago somebody bought Ortegas.  
 (*points to the salon.*) Our neighbours started packin' up and pickin' up  
 and ever since the rents went up  
 it's gotten mad expensive  
 but we live with just enough—

Ortega's is the first business Usnavi has seen fall to gentrification and it is shown relocating to the Bronx, which is an instance of the current residents being pushed away from the area. Later in the musical, Kevin sells his business to a big company for “nothing” because he is desperate to be able to pay for his daughter's tuition (Hudes and Miranda 77). In the end of the musical, Usnavi is shown to be again very aware of these developments as he says: “In five years, when this whole city's rich folks and hipsters, who's gonna miss this raggedy little business?” (Hudes and Miranda 150). All of these examples show how the local owned small-businesses are being priced out of the neighbourhood and being replaced with corporations and other high-capital businesses.

In the mid-1980s, major developers and institutional lenders became increasingly interested and active in the East Village (Sites 83). According to Sites, “once neighbourhood gentrification begins, it is often seen as ecologically self-reproducing, each stage leading to the next” (81). That is, when “pioneers” become interested in improving the area and start doing just that; it leads to middle-class people becoming interested in living there, which in turn makes the neighbourhood seem more attractive to the “truly affluent” (Sites 81). Another possible way for this to happen is that “aggressive real-estate entrepreneurs operating at the ‘urban frontier’ clear the ground for

speculators and more reputable investors” which in turn arouses interest in the area for “large scale institutional investors and developers” (Sites 81).

In *Rent*, “Benny is the embodiment of all those who seek gentrification of the Lower East Side” (Smith 233). He can be seen as representing the “aggressive real-estate entrepreneur” side of things as his efforts very much include “clearing out” the neighbourhood to make it more desirable for investors (Sites 81). He has bought the building where Mark, Roger and Mimi live, and where he himself used to live as well, and hopes to build “a state-of-the-art digital, virtual, interactive studio” with “condos on the top whose rent keeps open our shop” (Larson 30). He tries to engage Mark and Roger in his project by telling them how they could live in the building rent-free and produce films and write songs in the studio (Larson 30). He does not, however, consider the other residents of the building to be worthy of his new development. He also wants to stop the people in the neighbourhood from protesting as it would look bad for his investors, that is, his father-in-law. Benny seems to uphold the view that gentrification is beneficial to the neighbourhood, as is illustrated by him saying (Larson 72):

They make fun – yet I’m the one  
attempting to do some good  
or do you really want a neighbourhood  
where people piss on your stoop every night?

He does not see it as his responsibility to help the homeless and drug-addicts who assumedly are the ones “pissing on his stoop” but rather his solution is to move them somewhere else.

In *In the Heights* the gentrifier of the neighbourhood is not personified on stage and remains unseen. The current or former residents of the area do not seem to be interested in being a part of the gentrification process but rather would like to try to preserve the heritage of the barrio, as Usnavi chooses to do in the end of the musical. Benny does seem to have some business aspirations but he does not seem to have a clear plan on how to make them come true. His assumptions about being a successful business owner also seem a little misguided as he seems to think that the Rosarios are very successful when in fact they are struggling and end up selling the business

altogether. He in fact seems to be just copying the Rosarios' business aspirations as he is hoping to open a "Benny's Car Service" just like the Rosarios' car service business (Hudes and Miranda 45). Even after he has been fired from his job he exclaims that he is "taking over the barrio!" (Hudes and Miranda 122). Therefore, it is unclear whether Benny dreams of being part of the gentrification of the neighbourhood, or the effort in preserving it. In the end, he only says that he will "start planning my own business" the next day, leaving the nature of his plans ambiguous (Hudes and Miranda 143).

These investors and entrepreneurs coming to the East Village did not always settle for waiting to price out the existing residents of the area that they did not see as "desirable" people living in their developments (Sites 83). In addition to complaining about the increased rents, some of the low-income tenants in the area reported "physical harassment and declines in building services" especially in the properties in the "urban frontier" (Sites 83). Some of the more aggressive techniques used to drive out tenants were "illegal efforts, including turning off the heat and hot water in winter, renting to the drug pushers who terrorize tenants, or torching emptied units" (Meleqtd. in Smith 232-233). The incentive for this aggressive behaviour was the fact that empty buildings were often more valuable to the housing developers than occupied ones (Sites 83). The developers could do what they pleased with the empty houses whereas the occupied ones were only hindering their process as they knew quite clearly that the existing tenants would not be the ones living there after the development process was complete.

These illegal efforts at driving out residents are present in *Rent*. The titular song of the musical is brought on by Benny turning off the electricity to the building, leaving the tenants to keep warm by their own means on Christmas Eve (Larson 7). Benny also puts a padlock in the building's main entrance on the same day after a protest in a nearby empty lot, leaving the tenants unable to enter (Larson 83). He later returns to the building on New Year's Eve with the alleged intent of letting his friends return to the building. This again shows how he sees his former friends

as befitting his vision for the building but the other residents are seen as undesirables. These extortion techniques are not present in *In the Heights*, however. As has been already mentioned, the gentrifier of the neighbourhood is unseen and so are their actions, apart from the raising costs. This might be showing how the nature of gentrification has changed over the years between when *Rent* takes place and when *In the Heights* takes place. Perhaps it means that in some way, there is not a similar “rush” in the process as it is already stretched from the East Village all the way to Washington Heights. Perhaps these illegal efforts would gain more negative attention if they were not directed towards homeless people and drug addicts, whom a lot of people would have a hard time sympathizing with. Perhaps it has just been proven that these techniques are not needed anymore because the residents of the area have come to accept gentrification as a reality and no longer protest it in the same way as they used to.

Even though it is not an extortion technique in *In the Heights* but a city-wide blackout, the loss of electrical power is a significant metaphor in both musicals. It symbolises the powerlessness that the residents of the neighbourhood experience in the face of gentrification, among other things. This is vocalised in *In the Heights* as the characters repeatedly sing “We are powerless” during the blackout (Hudes and Miranda 89, first instance). The loss of electrical power, and the security and comfort it brings, symbolises how the neighbourhoods are being taken away from the communities along with their security and comfort.

A perception of “urban disorder” had appeared in New York in the 1980s and it was only increased by expanding rates of housing abandonment and fear of crime (Sites 92). The leaders of the city wanted to revamp its image by “remaking the city for middle-class visitors as well as the affluent” (Sites 93). In order to make this rebranding of the city succeed, the city began to “clean up” public places and neighbourhoods to make them more attractive for tourists which in turn made finding living spaces harder for low-income residents as well as the homeless (Sites 93). According to Sites, local authorities began singling out “a motley assortment of culprits, from criminals to

'squeegee men,' who were seen as responsible for disturbing declines in public welfare and neighbourhood stability" (93). City agencies were instructed to "clear the streets and parks" of these "culprits" by a range of different means; "drug dealers, panhandlers, and gang members were arrested or driven away" as well as "many other public-space users, including minority youth, political protesters, counterculture members, street vendors, and housing squatters" (Sites 93).

The effort to "clean the streets" can also be seen in *Rent*. Not only is it the apparent desire of Benny and his investors, the police are also portrayed as harassing the homeless and poking them with their nightsticks, only stopping when they are being filmed (Larson 47). Later police officers are seen entering "in riot gear" and saying "I'm dreaming of a white, right Christmas" as they look over on the neighbourhood streets (Larson 58). This seems to echo their desire and preparedness to "clean" the streets of the neighbourhood. In a way, the effects of gentrification can already be seen in *In the Heights*. Washington Heights was "the centre of New York's crack cocaine trade" in the 1980s but by the 1990s "the epidemic had blown over" (Dicker 721-722). The musical is also clear of the other listed "culprits" that were undesirable in the gentrified neighbourhoods of the envisaged new version of New York City. One can wonder if this is because the gentrification process of the neighbourhood is so far advanced that these people no longer reside there. Another, arguably more plausible, reason is that these people are also undesirable in the picture of the neighbourhood community that the musical wants to portray. There are apparently some "thugs" living in the neighbourhood but they do not appear on stage (Hudes and Miranda 90). Through the conscious effort of composer and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda to not show street violence (Low), the musical has in a way promoted the ideals of re-branding of New York City by clearing the undesirable people from appearing on stage which erases the reality of how the gentrification of the area affects them.

The neighbourhood communities in the East Village “mobilized to resist residential displacement” (Sites 70). They did so by organizing, for example, sit-ins and several protests (Smith 232-233). The gentrification process, however, could not be stopped despite these efforts (Sites 70). Protesting is also a part of *Rent*. The first act is mostly leading up to Maureen’s performance “protesting the eviction of the homeless (and artists) from the 11<sup>th</sup> Street lot” (Larson 24). After the performance, a riot breaks out on Avenue B as the protesters clash with the police that Benny called. The protest seems to be somewhat peaceful, though, with Joanne describing it as follows: “The cops are sweeping the lot / but no one’s leaving / they’re just sitting there, mooing!”, showing that the act of protest is sitting down, not a violent riot (Larson 83). Protests are not present in *In the Heights*. The neighbourhood residents seem to have accepted the reality of gentrification and do not wish to protest it as it would not change anything, as it ultimately did not in the East Village either. The only one even mentioning the idea of protesting is Sonny when he gives an impassioned speech about what he would do with the lottery money (Hudes and Miranda 51-53):

With ninety-six thousand, I’d finally fix housin’  
 give the barrio computers and wireless web browsin’.  
 Your kids are livin’ without a good edumacation,  
 change the station, teach ‘em about gentrification.  
 The rent is escalatin’.  
 [...]
 The rich are penetratin’.  
 [...]
 We pay our corporations when we should be demonstratin’.  
 [...]
 I’ll cash my ticket and picket, invest in protest!  
 Never lose my focus till the city takes notice  
 and you know this man! I’ll never sleep  
 because the ghetto has a million promises for me to keep!

Sonny is only 16 years old and this outburst is met with “a stunned silence” and Vanessa dismissing him by saying “You are so cute!” (Hudes and Miranda 53). This shows how the community sees protesting gentrification as young idealism and not worth the effort in reality. Changing demographics are also a part of the history of the neighbourhood of Washington Heights. The musical also acknowledges that as when the Rosarios remove the sign for their car service, it

reveals a “glimmer of an older sign: O’Hanrahan Car Service” (Hudes and Miranda 146) which is an allusion to the neighbourhood’s population formerly being largely Irish as it is now Latino and some day it will be something else. Knowing the neighbourhood’s history and already having seen the demographic change might also be one of the reasons the residents do feel the need to fight the fact that it is changing.

Somewhat ironically, telling stories about the gentrification of these neighbourhoods also contributes to the gentrification process, according to Sites (93). He mentions *Rent* as one of the cultural products “celebrating the community’s reputation as an unruly space of artistic creativity and romantic danger” which “offered bohemia mythologized and packaged” and thus helped the neighbourhood become more palatable for tourists (93) which in turn contributed to the gentrification of the area. Savran criticizes this by giving the “double-decker bus New York Apple Tour of the East Village that provided tourists with the chance to see real bohemians and junkies” as an example of the harmful consequences of the mainstream popularity of *Rent* (Savran). Miller on the other hand, congratulates *Rent* for bringing people who the “Broadway audiences generally don’t want to see” into their attention, such as “gays and lesbians [...] or S&M dancers, drug addicts, drag queens, or performance artists” (191). While the mainstream finally saw the victims of the gentrification of the East Side, they also contributed to it with this visibility. The musicals themselves, however, give a quite different view of the future of the neighbourhood. At the end of *Rent*, it is revealed that Benny’s wife has pulled “Benny out of the East Village location” (Larson 134). As Benny is the single face of gentrification in the musical, it could seem to the audience that his pulling out would have remedied the situation. This is of course not the reality, however. The true shape of things can be seen when right after Mark discloses that Benny is no longer pursuing his business efforts in the East Side, “the projector blows a fuse” and the apartment loses power (Larson 134). This can be read as symbolising the continuing state of powerlessness of the community against gentrification. In *In the Heights*, Usnavi expresses the view of the city being full

of “rich folks and hipsters” at the beginning of the final number of the musical (Hudes and Miranda 150). By the end of the song he has changed his mind, however, as he claims that “with patience and faith, / we remain unafraid” and that he will be staying in the neighbourhood indefinitely (Hudes and Miranda 153). It is notable that in the end of *In the Heights*, “the blackout goes on and on” which again can be seen as symbolising the community’s continuing state of powerlessness against gentrification (Hudes and Miranda 147). As both musicals were released while the gentrification process was still on-going in the neighbourhood it can be argued that it is justified that their endings are a bit ambiguous on this matter. The positive attitudes of the characters can also be seen as alluding to the perseverance of the community itself even if their shared territory might be permanently changing.

The significance of the gentrification of the neighbourhoods to the communities in the musicals is undisputable. By being driven out of the neighbourhoods they risk losing the shared territory that is one part of the basis of their community (Smith 229). The neighbourhoods are also a big part of the communities’ respective identities. The neighbourhoods are the places where these people have settled with people that they feel a connection to — in other words where they have formed their communities. Having to move out of the neighbourhood could mean the end of the communities as well as the people would not be in contact with each other all the time. In *In the Heights*, Vanessa tries to counter the idea of losing touch just because someone moves into another neighbourhood by simply stating that Usnavi can visit her by taking the A-train (Hudes and Miranda 142). For the community member in the musicals, the threat of relocation is, however, seen as a direct threat towards their communities as the neighbourhood is a vital part of their community identity as well. The uncertainty that the gentrification process causes for the residents is also one of the reasons they need to have a community. The community brings them a feeling of safety when things around them are changing. Upon risking losing their actual homes, the community provides a possibility for them to have a “home” of another kind.

## 4 The Communities and the American Dream

This chapter will explore the idea of the American Dream according to different understandings of the term and analyse how these views on the term tie into the communities *Rent* and *In the Heights*. First the term's definition is explored and then how the idea of the American Dream affects the US society is discussed. I will provide analysis alongside the theory on how the American Dream can be seen in *Rent* and *In the Heights* and if it seems to be attainable for the characters in the musicals. Lastly, I will discuss if the idea of the American Dream is compatible with the idea of community.

As a term, the "American Dream" was invented only in 1931 but both Samuel and Cullen point out that even if it was not verbalized as such until then, the "roots of the phrase go back centuries" (Samuel 3). Cullen goes as far as to say that the American Dream started with the Puritans (13). In this chapter the American Dream will be examined from a more contemporary point of view. Today, the American Dream is often understood to mean that you can achieve anything you want in the US if you want it hard enough and work hard enough for it (Cullen 5). The goal of the American Dream is to "end up with more than you started with" (Cullen 159). This idea spawned the term and the goal of "the self-made man" (Cullen 69). This part of the American Dream has been especially tempting to the working and middle classes (Samuel 7). According to Samuel, the goal is that even if you cannot improve your own quality of life through your relentless hard work, you can at least offer better opportunities to your children by, for example, being able to send them to college (Samuel 7).

The American Dream is a key theme in *In the Heights*. The biggest promoters of the Dream are Usnavi and Kevin while the other characters seem to have more of a sceptical relationship to it. Usnavi promotes the Dream already in the first song of the musical when he talks about "the day we go from poverty to stock options" (Hudes and Miranda 12). By saying "we" instead of just "I" he seems to make the American Dream into the Dream of the whole neighbourhood even though the musical later shows that it is not quite so. In the song "96,000", as the neighbourhood is dreaming

about what they would do if they won that sum in the lottery, Usnavi once again steps in to support the ideals of the Dream (Hudes and Miranda 51)

It's silly when we get into these crazy hypotheticals.  
You really want some bread, then go ahead, create a set of goals  
and cross them off the list as you pursue 'em.

He does not seem to want his friends and neighbours to think that winning the lottery is the only way for them to see such sums of money and thus clearly wants them to believe in the principles of hard work of the American Dream.

This dream of offering better opportunities to your children presented by Samuel (7) is the key theme of Kevin and Nina's relationship in *In the Heights*. As a young man, Kevin rejected the life of a farmer that his father and grandfather had lived and moved to America in the search of another way of life. He recalls this in the song "Inútil" after having learned that his daughter Nina had dropped out of the college she had worked so hard to get into and that he had worked so hard to get her into. Kevin recalls how he told his father that he would "change the world someday" (Hudes and Miranda 38). It seems though that quickly after he came to the US, he transferred those dreams onto his daughter. In the same song, he sings about her (Hudes and Miranda 38):

As a baby she amazed me with  
the things she learned each day.  
She used to stay on the fire escape  
while all the other kids would play.  
And I would stand beside her and I'd say:  
"I'm proud to be your father,  
'cuz you work so much harder  
and you are so much smarter  
than I was at your age."  
And I always knew that she would fly away.  
And that she was gonna change the world someday.

From here we can see Kevin projecting a key element of the American Dream – working harder than others – onto his daughter as a young child which shows how he still believes in the Dream even though he gave up on the high hopes he had of he himself changing the world. He does not install the ideas of the American Dream onto the community as Usnavi does but only on his

daughter who is the closest representation of him. He is also willing to sacrifice the wellbeing of the community in the effort to achieve the Dream as he sells his business to pay Nina's tuition even though his business is a major employer in the community.

According to Samuel, the American Dream is very ambiguous in its nature which is both the appeal and the strength of the idea. He claims that as much as the idea has changed shape through time, it has ultimately stayed the same. He says that the Dream is a "product of our [American] collective imagination" and as such every individual decides its meaning themselves according to "whatever we want or need it to mean" (Samuel 4). The success that the American Dream is about is commercial success for most people (Cullen 59-60) but it can also be that of independence (Samuel 4) or the communal success of the whole group, or even the whole country (Samuel 9). This is also illustrated by Kevin's attitude towards the Dream that was examined in the previous paragraph. When the Dream does not work for himself, he adapts the Dream according to his means to be about his daughter instead.

The American Dream's ambiguity also affects its place in time. According to Samuel, "the American Dream seemed to almost always reside in the past or loom in the future; rarely ever existing in the here and now" (197). This is also about the term's ambiguity as the Dream is hard to pinpoint in time, it is always ambiguously somewhere else. This again fits into Kevin and Nina's situation. The Dream is always somewhere in the future. First it is after Kevin moves to the US, then it is after Nina finishes college. This is also the point in future where the image of the Dream is left amongst the family in the end of the musical. Kevin justifies his decision to sell the family business and start over as a car mechanic just to put Nina through college by saying: "I always had a mind for investments. Nina Rosario, Bachelor of Arts. When that day comes, we'll call it even." (Hudes and Miranda 134). After Nina has finished college, it is to be expected that the realization of the Dream will once again be moved into a later time but it seems that the Dream's hold on Kevin is

so strong that he will never give up on it because he has built his whole life in the United States around it and sacrificed so much to achieve it that giving up on it would mean giving up on his life.

The American Dream has shifted focus even during our modern history. Earlier the American Dream signified not only an individual's personal success but also the communal interest of the nation as a whole (Samuel 9). In the 1980s, there was a noticeable shift away from these communal interests to a firm interest on only the individual which befitted the political climate of the Reagan era (Samuel 10). At this time, it also started to become clearer that the American Dream was unattainable for the majority with the rising debt rates and financial inequality brought on by the decade (Samuel 10). People started to be more optimistic about the American Dream by the beginning of the 1990s (Samuel 137). The reality was, however, that many people had to move downward rather than upward (Samuel 140). By the 2000s, social mobility had become harder than ever (Samuel 169) which can mean hard times for the American Dream.

*Rent* can be seen as rejecting the ideals of the American Dream, especially the ones of individual prosperity that were developed in the 1980s. Although the musical does not specify the exact year in which it takes place, it is evident from the story that it takes place sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Instead of becoming anxious about prosperity being harder and harder to attain, the characters of the musical embrace this situation by not striving for financial prosperity, or even financial stability, at all. This is with the exception of the character Benny who seems to have embraced some of the ideals of the Dream while discarding others. The musical's story suggests that Benny's financial stability is all the product of his marriage to a "wealthy daughter of the revolution" (Larson 68). Now that he has in some way reached the financial prosperity that is a part of the American Dream, he wants even more by starting his own business project in the East Village. This would suggest that he is keen on the Reagan era idea of the Dream as he wants more and more of the good thing. However, this "greed" for more is also combined with the idea of helping others, such as his former friends. This is expressed early in the musical when Benny is

shown talking to his wife on the phone and saying: “I can help them all out in the long run” (Larson 11). This echoes both the me-focused American Dream and the earlier ideals of the communal good of the American Dream. His interests seem to come first while others’ interests only “in the long run”. But the fact that he even considers the benefit of the others echoes the earlier ideals.

As America is framed as the “land of the free”, it is natural that the idea of the American Dream is also largely based on the notion of freedom. Cullen points out that “all notions of freedom rest on a sense of *agency*, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives” (10, emphasis original). He continues by stating that agency, or the assumption that every person has it, is the very core of the American Dream itself and its fulfilment depends on that very thing (Cullen 10). The idea of upward mobility, the idea that anyone can “get ahead” in life, which is promoted by the American Dream has been condemned as “an opiate of the people” (Cullen 60). This is because it has been proven time and time again that upward mobility is virtually impossible for most Americans, especially non-white working class people (Samuel 7). Despite this, the belief in the American Dream is strongest among those who have the worst odds of achieving it (Cullen 6). The idea of this perfect attainable American Dream causes people to ignore the structural barriers that limit people from advancement (Cullen 6). Having people ignore the structural barriers is vital for the Dream to keep existing in the cultural zeitgeist.

*In the Heights* showcases some of the social barriers to achieving the American Dream. As mentioned earlier, Kevin believes in the American Dream adamantly and promotes it heavily to his daughter Nina. Nina on the other hand, has experienced some of the social barriers while attempting to fulfil the Dream and as a result has become sceptical about it. In the song “Breathe”, Nina recalls her efforts in making the American Dream a reality by saying, “I got every scholarship, saved every dollar” (Hudes and Miranda 19). Despite the scholarship and years of saving money, she had to drop out of college because she lost her scholarship due to inadequate grades. She tries to explain this to her parents by saying that “I couldn’t work two jobs and study for finals and finish my term

papers” and that “The scholarship only covered part of it.” (Hudes and Miranda 36). This shows how even if one works hard and earns a place at a university and a scholarship it still takes additional funds for textbooks and utilities which creates a social barrier to access higher education for the people who lack those funds. Achieving the Dream seems to demand more hard work than a person could possibly be able to perform.

In *Rent*, one reason why the community members do not feel a connection to the American Dream is that some of their agency is simply taken away by the fact that they have a deadly disease. They see their time alive as clearly limited and therefore also their opportunities as such. This is illustrated by their usage of the metaphor of renting. They do not dream of owning anything, as would befit the ideals of the American Dream, but rather know that they are destined to just “rent”. This metaphor is used in, for example, the song “What You Own”: “So I own not a notion / I escape and am content / I don’t own emotion – I rent” (Larson 129). The idea of renting comes up also in what could be construed as the characters’ best moments, such as the love song between Collins and Angel, “I’ll Cover You” where the characters repeat this idea twice (Larson 52-53):

I think they meant it  
when they said you can’t buy love.  
Now I know you can rent it.  
A new lease you are, my love.  
On life – be my life.

There is no dream of eternal love between the couple as they know their time is limited and this same way of thinking applies to their attitude to achieving material goods in the form of searching for the American Dream.

Another metaphor that can be read as applying to the American Dream is the “powerlessness” brought on by the blackout in *In the Heights*, that was also mentioned in Chapter 3. As Sonny mentions the anxieties he has about the future of the neighbourhood, Usnavi, a believer in the American Dream, as established earlier, answers him in the following manner (Hudes and Miranda 124):

**SONNY**

But y'all keep dancin' and singin' and celebratin'  
but it's gettin' late and this place is disintegratin' and-

**SONNY/VANESSA**

We are powerless, we are powerless!

**USNAVI**

Alright, we're powerless, so light up a candle!  
There's nothing going on here that we can't handle!

By taking what Vanessa and Sonny are singing literally as the lack of electrical power, Usnavi shows his loyalty towards the Dream. He chooses to ignore the suggestion that they could be powerless in society and responds by giving literal suggestions in how to “remedy” the situation of not having electrical power, by lighting a candle. He chooses to believe that they have agency and are not powerless. This shows the difference between Usnavi’s views on the American Dream and the views of the rest of the neighbourhood.

Cullen presents the idea that the American Dream has been very useful for the United States as a country whose population consists of a large variety of different nationalities and ethnicities. When the population does not share the same values or even languages, the American Dream “becomes a kind of lingua franca”, something that everyone can understand despite their background (Cullen 6). According to Samuel, the American Dream has become “the mythology in our [American] cultural DNA”, it affects the decisions and views of all citizens, whether they personally believe in the Dream or not (Samuel 196). This shows how the American Dream is so deeply attached to the American experience that people are affected by it even if they choose to reject it. This is true also in *Rent* where most of the characters have consciously rejected the ideals of the American Dream. They are still affected by it when, for example, Benny is trying to make them part of his vision of the Dream or when they cannot help themselves and start dreaming about how nice it would be to have a steady income and their own business in Santa Fe.

The song “What You Own” can be seen as an exploration of the idea of the American Dream in *Rent* as well. The song begins with exploring the idolisation of working hard (Larson 128):

Don't breathe too deep.  
 Don't think all day.  
 Dive into work.  
 Drive the other way.  
 That drip of hurt.  
 That pint of shame.  
 Goes away.  
 Just play the game.

From the last line of this quotation one can see how the Dream can be seen as a game that needs to be played and one plays to win. The American nature of the Dream is illustrated by the chorus “And when you're living in America / At the end of the millennium / You're what you own.” (Larson 129) It encompasses both the American nature of the Dream as well as the commercial nature of the Dream that was emphasised in the 1980s. The song also includes the idea of the Dream being very individual-oriented, as even though the song is sung by both Mark and Roger, they are removed from each other in the reality of the musical. The song gives the impression that striving for the Dream is a lonely and trying reality, as the line “We're dying in America / To come into our own” suggests (Larson 130). At the end of the song, both Roger and Mark decide that striving for the American Dream is not worth it as they realise that “I'm not alone” and return to restore their community (Larson 131). This also puts the idea of community above the idea of the American Dream.

By its universal nature, the American Dream has been an easy way for immigrants to express American values and to assimilate in this way to American culture without losing their own ethnic identity completely (Samuel 197). Huntington claims, however, that Latin American immigrants posed a threat to the American identity and to the American Dream. His reasoning is that immigrants from Latin America showed little interest in assimilation and preferred to speak their own language, and seemed uninterested in striving for upward mobility by wanting to start businesses or work their way up in existing ones (qtd. in Samuel 176). His claims did not go

without criticism, however, as others were quick to point out that one cannot make such generalizations about a group as diverse as the Latin American community (Samuel 176). This shows how the American Dream is so entrenched in the American consciousness that the rejection of it can be seen as threatening the status quo.

The claim that Latin American immigrants do not see the American Dream as their own is clearly invalidated in *In the Heights* as some of the characters are strong believers in it. The life story that Abuela Claudia presents in the song “Paciencia y Fe”, however, can be seen as following Huntington’s views. Abuela Claudia immigrated to the US much earlier than the other characters and seems to have a very clear opinion that if leaving Cuba had not been an absolute necessity for her and her mother, they would not have done it. She compares the beauty of Havana to the coldness of New York by saying “Ay, Mamá! So many stars in Cuba. / En Nueva York we can’t see beyond our streetlights!” (Hudes and Miranda 61). The comparison between the starlight in Havana and New York shows how you have to give up on many beautiful things for the necessities a person needs to live. She and her mother did not come to America in search of a Dream, they came to survive. She expresses this by singing: “Ain’t no Cassiopeia in Washington Heights. / But ain’t no food in La Víbora.” (Hudes and Miranda 61). This idea of leaving having been a necessity is also supported by Nina’s choice of words as she thinks about Abuela Claudia leaving Cuba and sings “And on the day they *ran*” (Hudes and Miranda 132, emphasis mine). Having to run away is not a pleasant thing or a deliberate choice. Abuela Claudia has worked hard ever since coming to America in 1943. She describes this work as “scrubbing the whole of the Upper East Side, the days into weeks, the weeks into years, and here I stayed” (Hudes and Miranda 63) showing that she does not seem to have imagined any possibility of advancement while doing this hard work. Abuela Claudia’s view of American society seems quite aware of all the social barriers she has and her saying “To reach the roof you gotta bribe the supa!” in reference to wanting to see the stars can be read as a metaphor for how the American society works – those who have money to begin with get

to climb the ladder. Her philosophy seems to be one of endurance as illustrated by the saying “*paciencia y fe*” [patience and faith] she keeps repeating throughout the musical. She is not, however, completely immune to dreaming. She sees winning the lottery as her one way to achieve the American Dream of prosperity. When she has achieved that dream she asks “And ay mama, what do you do when your dreams come true? I’ve spent my life inheriting dreams from you” (Hudes and Miranda 63). Just like Nina with Kevin, Abuela Claudia has absorbed the dreams of her parent. It is not the American Dream, however, but rather something from the old country and the old faith, as the Spanish phrase “*paciencia y fe*” suggests.

A further proof of Abuela Claudia’s dream not being the American Dream is the fact that she wants to leave the country with the help of the lottery money. She has lived in New York since 1943 but she decides to move to the Dominican Republic, a country she has never lived in, with Usnavi (Hudes and Miranda 105). This decision can be interpreted in three ways, in my opinion. Firstly, she thinks that any country in Latin America would be better for her than the United States so she chooses the Dominican Republic because it is where Usnavi’s parents emigrated from, and perhaps due to the political situation in her own country of origin, Cuba. Secondly, she wants Usnavi to have the benefits of living with “his people” on “his island” she imagines she would have had if they would have been able to stay in Cuba. Thirdly, she wants to show Usnavi, who seems to believe in the American Dream, that life can be good even without achieving it.

The difference between Abuela Claudia’s hopes and dreams and attitude towards the American Dream and Kevin and Usnavi’s belief in the Dream also shows the difference between the reasons that they have had for their immigration. Kevin and Usnavi’s parents have immigrated to the US out of their own will with great hopes for a better way of life there. For them the American Dream is a befitting one and they see the hard work they have to do as a part of the journey of achieving their dreams. For Abuela Claudia the hard work is more something that they were forced to do to survive and be accepted in the US. She remembers facing aggressive behaviour

from people in the US upon her arrival: “You better clean this mess!” and “You better not be late! / You better pull your weight!” (Hudes and Miranda 62). Before recalling those remarks she satirically describes it as “All of society welcoming mami and me / Ha!” which shows her resentment for how they were being treated (Hudes and Miranda 62). Thus, it is no wonder that she did not wish to adopt the Dream that she thinks belongs to the people who treated her in that way. It is not to be said that Kevin or Usnavi would not have faced attitudes like that upon arriving in the US but for them it might have seem more as a part of the process of striving for the American Dream whereas for Abuela Claudia it was malice towards people who were forced to come there to be able to feed themselves. Thus, different stories and reasons for immigration can lead to different attitudes towards the American Dream.

It seems that even if the American Dream is a very personal thing to everyone, in *Rent* and *In the Heights* it is still something that is being made into a more communal one. The ones who believe in the Dream want to make the whole community do the same and strive for the same thing. On the other hand, the American Dream is something that seems to be achieved on a very personal level. First comes you and then all the others, if they come at all. Therefore, rejecting the American Dream seems to be the more community oriented response. In *In the Heights*, Kevin still believes in it in the end but Usnavi seems less Dream-oriented, and notably it is Usnavi who is poised to be the one who will preserve the values of the community. Also, in *In the Heights* when Usnavi offers the Dream to Sonny in the form of a share in the lottery money, Sonny rejects it and makes it clear that taking the money would mean giving up on the community, which he does not want to do (Hudes and Miranda 138). In *Rent*, Mark and Roger give up their brief attempts to strive for the Dream and return to their communities. Benny, who is the embodiment of the American Dream in the musical, is not present in the end of the story. The American Dream is gone but the community remains. The American Dream not working out can be seen as one of the reasons why these people have come together to form a community. Even if some members still believe in the Dream, the community

knows that they need to support them because the Dream is not going to do so. Therefore, the musicals perhaps present the idea that having a community of your own is a dream more worth having than the American Dream.

## 5 Relationship to Mainstream Culture

This chapter will explore the ways in which the communities in *Rent* and *In the Heights* express their differentiation from mainstream culture. First, Bakhtin's concept of carnival in the musicals will be discussed. Then the communities' attitudes to capitalism will be examined. These two subjects are somewhat interwoven and are clear markers of the communities' rejection of mainstream culture so it makes sense to discuss them in the same chapter.

### 5.1 Carnival

Bakhtin brought up the concept of carnival especially in the context of the Middle Ages but it can also be applied to modern-day celebrations (Sebesta 424). According to Bakhtin's views, "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Bakhtin 199). During carnival "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" were suspended and all the people celebrating were considered equals (Bakhtin 199). LaCapra argues, however, that the equality during carnival must not be considered a definite since the festivities might actually "reinforce social structures in certain contexts" (239). He claims that Bakhtin might have underemphasised some of the normative functions of carnival that would exert social control or victimize certain groups (239). Carnival cannot be completely separated from "the nature of the rest of social and cultural life" and the relationships outside carnival time naturally affect the festivities themselves (LaCapra 240).

Carnival celebrations can be seen as a part of both *Rent* and *In the Heights*. Both musicals have numbers that especially portray the idea of carnival but some aspects of carnival also appear at other times in the musicals. The numbers that especially channel carnival are "La Vie Bohème A" and "La Vie Bohème B" (from hereon referred to collectively as "La Vie Bohème" unless otherwise specified) in *Rent* and the aptly named "Carnaval Del Barrio" in *In the Heights*. In these numbers, the respective communities come together in celebration of the community and what it stands for. In *In the Heights* the carnival celebration is inspired by the discomfort caused by the city-wide

blackout. Daniela starts the carnival and encourages everyone to join. She encourages the unsure Carla by saying “Just make it up as you go! We are improvisando!” (Hudes and Miranda 118). The social realities are presented to the carnival celebrators throughout the song but they convince the others to forget their worries and join in on the carnival fun. Social hierarchies are removed as everyone is free to join in on the carnival. In *Rent*, “La Vie Bohème” begins by turning down the prohibitions and hierarchies as the community settles down in the Life Café restaurant despite being told not to do so for the benefit of a more “important customer” (Larson 70). After a brief conflict with Benny who, along with his father-in-law, was the more important customer in the Café, the community starts a song of celebration of the community which can be summarized by the line “To being an us – for once – instead of a them” (Larson 73). The suspension of hierarchies can be seen in how the song lists all the things they are toasting, which includes many types of marginalized or taboo subjects, people and things alongside highly respected artists and entertainers. In the end of the reprise of the song, Mark addresses the mainstream culture directly by asking “Anyone out of the mainstream? / Is anyone in the mainstream?” (Larson 85). This shows how the community reacts against the concept of mainstream altogether and does not see it as something that defines the world.

As the hierarchies have been suspended during carnival, it allows for free speech (LaCapra 242). Even though carnival speech is mostly focused on laughter, it cannot be completely separated from all seriousness (LaCapra 242). The seriousness does have its foundation in the laughter, however (LaCapra 242). This freedom of speech manifested itself in three ways as presented by Bakhtin as “ritual spectacles”, “comic verbal compositions” and “various genres of billingsgate” (204), in which “billingsgate” refers to “coarsely abusive language” (Merriam-Webster.com). All of these represent variations of folk humour (Bakhtin 204). “La Vie Bohème” can be seen a performed spectacle. It starts as an ironic answer to Benny’s claim that “Bohemia’s dead” (Larson 72). In the beginning of the spectacle Maureen moons Benny and the references to several taboo subjects, such

as “dildos” (Larson 74), “mucho masturbation” (Larson 73) and “sodomy” (Larson 77) can be seen as a “genre of billingsgate” (Bakhtin 204). “Carnaval Del Barrio” does not include “profanity” in the same manner as “La Vie Bohème” but the spectacle they put on does include a fair amount of mockery of all the people who try to interrupt the carnival celebration with their problems or concerns whereas people with good news are met with cheers. The carnival is also a spectacle in the sense that it involves triumphant singing, dancing and waving of flags.

Death is also a big part of carnival celebrations. Death is, however, not a serious thing in carnival but it is rather “portrayed as a comic monster” and its importance is not overemphasized (LaCapra 241). Death is also inextricably linked to rebirth and renewal in carnival (Sebesta 427). It has a very optimistic almost utopic feel of starting over (Sebesta 427). Benny’s announcement that “bohemia is dead” is not only the thing that inspires “La Vie Bohème” altogether but death is also present throughout the song (Larson 72). Death is present in the song in the form of AIDS. The number includes the exclamation of “Actual reality – Act up – Fight AIDS!” (Larson 79) and “La Vie Bohème A” is interrupted by several people being reminded by their beepers to take their AZT medication (Larson 80). In “La Vie Bohème B” the toast is expanded “To people living with, living with, living with / not dying from disease” to remind that dying is not the predominant characteristic of a person with HIV/AIDS (Larson 85). In *In the Heights*, death is not a part of “Carnaval Del Barrio” but it makes an appearance right after it as Abuela Claudia’s death is made apparent during the “playoff” of the number (Hudes and Miranda 127). This in a way shows the connection between carnival and death.

Apart from the carnival dedicated numbers, the carnival principles of death being linked to rebirth and renewal are also present in other parts of *Rent* and *In the Heights*. Sebesta argues that “Death, particularly as a result of AIDS, is clearly a primary image in *Rent*; however, it moves beyond a simplistic image to become a theme about how the living deal with death, and the rebirth that can result from it” (Sebesta 427-428). She continues by saying that since Angel’s death occurs

in the middle of the second act instead of the end of the show, the audience gets to see a glimpse of Angel's partner Collins dealing with loss and "his own HIV-positive status" (Sebesta 428). Also, in the end of the musical, arguably in the biggest leap from the opera *La bohème* that *Rent* is based on, Mimi does not die but rather comes back from death's door. This is another example of a rebirth in *Rent* and it gives a clear signal that the musical is about "rebirth, renewal, and life" and not about death and dying (Sebesta 428). Similarly, in *In the Heights*, the death of a central character occurs in the middle of the second act. Abuela Claudia dies right after the explicitly carnival musical number, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. The community members are shown dealing with her death and honouring her memory in the song "Alabanza" where after Usnavi's speech about Abuela Claudia's death and life the community gathers to sing her praise, notably all in Spanish (Hudes and Miranda 128-130). In the next number Nina and Usnavi go through Abuela Claudia's belongings and mourn her but in the end the focus is firmly placed on moving on and renewal as Nina sings (Hudes and Miranda 133):

While the woman who held us is gone.  
But we move on, we grow, so . . .  
Hold tight, Abuela, if you're up there.  
I'll make you proud of everything I know!

Even though the musical only shows the community dealing with Abuela Claudia's death for less than a day, instead of the two months that Collins gets in *Rent*, it is clear that they are moving on. Even though Usnavi is first discouraged about Abuela Claudia's death and wants to leave New York, he is inspired to stay and continue the legacy because of a spray-painted portrait of her (Hudes and Miranda 150). Thus, death is tied to moving on.

Carnival is described as "the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal" also apart from death (Bakhtin 199). Both "Carnaval Del Barrio" and "La Vie Bohème" are started by change, or the prospect of it. This coming change is gentrification and the relocation due to it. Daniela starts off the carnival by referring to their impending move "Business is closed, and we're about to go. . . / Let's have a carnival del barrio!" (Hudes and Miranda 116). The prospect of

change is also brought up later in the number as both Daniela (Hudes and Miranda 121) and Benny (Hudes and Miranda 122) sing “Everything changes today.” In *Rent*, “La Vie Bohème” is also inspired by Benny, who as a person represents gentrification in the musical, as mentioned in Chapter 3.

Carnival rituals also have a connection to religious ceremonies as most of them had their carnivalesque counterparts that mocked them and “turned them upside down” (Gardiner 29). Similar activities can be seen in the carnival numbers in *Rent* and *In the Heights*. “La Vie Bohème” takes place on Christmas and is naturally the religious thing that the spectacle mocks. The community mimes the birth of Jesus as Mark sings (Larson 71):

On this night when we celebrate the birth  
in that little town of Betlehem  
we raise our glass – you bet your ass to –  
(MAUREEN slashes hers.)  
La vie bohème.

From here it is apparent that the community mocks Christmas as the birthday of Jesus by mooning Benny and then choosing to praise first bohemia and then all the things the song goes on to list instead of Jesus. Christmas is mocked also in other parts of *Rent* especially by the homeless who sing sarcastic versions of verses of several Christmas songs such as (Larson 55):

Christmas bells are ringing  
Christmas bells are ringing  
Christmas bells are ringing.  
On TV – at Saks.

Sebesta takes up the policemen singing “I’m dreaming of a white, right Christmas” (Larson 58) as an example of the “profanation of this holiday, and subsequent exposing of all its hypocrisies” (433).

The holiday that is “turned upside down” in *In the Heights* is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Although not a religious holiday, it can be seen as a befitting modern day example of such a thing as the values of “liberty” that the US supposedly represents can be as fanatically supported as religion. There is no mention of US Independence Day in “Carnaval Del Barrio”. On the contrary, the song starts to

celebrate all the countries of origin of the community members and wave their flags in pride. As a perhaps additional insult to the United States, the song praises the homelands in Spanish. The song mentions raising the flags of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Cuba (Hudes and Miranda 121). The homelands are praised thus (Hudes and Miranda 121, translation mine):

Me acuerdo de mi tierra!  
Esa bonita bandera!  
Contiene mi alma entera!  
Y cuando yo me muera,  
entiérrame en mi tierra!

[I remember my land!  
This beautiful flag!  
Contains my soul entirely!  
And when I die,  
bury me in my land!]

These immigrants taking the 4<sup>th</sup> of July as a day to praise their respective homelands can be read as a way to defy the United States and to mock its values that are represented by their Independence Day. This can be seen as a refusal to assimilate as, for example, the use of Spanish shows. This also represents the “us against them” mentality that ties into Young’s theory on community being formed in opposition to something else, as discussed in Chapter 2.4 (244). The community places themselves and their “land” in opposition to the US and their respective land.

A part of carnival is also “the sense of a great city (e.g. Paris or London) and the utilization of the town square and the streets adjoining it” (Sebesta 426). New York City can naturally be seen as the “great city” in both *Rent* and *In the Heights*. “Carnaval Del Barrio” takes place on the streets of the neighbourhood and as the song ends the stage directions state that “*the carnival continues onto the next block*” showing how the carnival spirit continues its journey through the streets of the neighbourhood (Hudes and Miranda 127). “La Vie Bohème” does not utilize the streets or a square but it does take place in a significant location, the Life Café. First opened in 1981, the Life Café “quickly became an artist’s haven” (Sidman). As such the Life Café can be considered as a contemporary equivalent of a town square in the neighbourhood, befitting the definition of carnival.

The use of carnival celebrations in the musicals shows how the communities reject mainstream culture because they could choose to celebrate the mainstream holidays that take place at the same time as their carnivals but they choose to celebrate their communities instead. This shows their conscious choice to put the community above the mainstream culture in the US. They do not seem to see themselves represented in these mainstream holidays so they turn them into a celebration that does represent their values and culture. This also showcases one of the reasons these people have formed a community because this lack of representation of the mainstream, or at least the feeling of that, applies to all of them.

## 5.2 Capitalism

The depiction of capitalism is where *Rent* and *In the Heights* most differ and therefore this subchapter is more divided than the others. *Rent* has clear depictions of the downsides of capitalism while the depiction in *In the Heights* can be seen as neutral at most.

In *Rent*, the way the homeless mock Christmas is not only a way in which the show channels carnival, as discussed in the previous subchapter, but also the way in which they mock capitalism and how it has failed them. The same example as in the issue of carnival is fitting here (Larson 55):

Christmas bells are ringing  
 Christmas bells are ringing  
 Christmas bells are ringing.  
 On TV – at Saks.

The homeless clearly show how the Christmas spirit is not something real that affects them but rather something that happens in advertisements and department stores – that is a delusion that is being implemented by capitalism. They also mockingly sing about the legend of the birth of Jesus by adding a capitalist flavour to it “No room at the Holiday Inn – Oh no” (Larson 56). The “oh no” in the end is a sarcastic beat as the homeless would of course not be able to afford to stay in a Holiday Inn. In the end of the musical when it is Christmastime again they repeat this notion “No room at the Holiday Inn – again / Well, maybe next year / or – when” (Larson 132). The homeless

also comment on how the story has gone a year when they sing “How time flies / when compassion dies” which again shows how the values of Christmas as promoted by capitalism are not extended to those most in need (Larson 132).

Arguably the most iconic song from *Rent*, “Seasons of Love” that acts as the opening number of Act 2, can be seen as countering the ideas of capitalism. The song presents several different answers to the question “How do you measure a year in the life?” (Larson 88). The song presents these alternatives (Larson 88-89):

In daylights – in sunsets.  
 In midnights – in cups of coffee.  
 In inches – in miles.  
 In laughter – in strife.  
 [...]
 In truths that she learned  
 or in times that he cried.  
 In bridges he burned  
 or in the way that she died.

It is notable that almost all these presented alternatives are not material things, thus clearly showing that those are not what is important in life. The thing that the song chooses as the best one is, however, love (Larson 89). Smith claims that “This message of love is counter to the dominant capitalist ideology of America, because love is not heralded in the capitalist model” (236). It is notable that in the reprise of the song “Seasons of Love B”, material things are presented as alternatives but the question asked has been altered as well “How do you figure / a *last* year on earth?” (Larson 107, emphasis mine). The alternatives presented this time are (Larson 106):

In diapers – report cards.  
 In spoked wheels – in speeding tickets.  
 In contracts – dollars.  
 In funerals – in births.

The final solution is once again, however, love (Larson 107). This puts the idea of love above all other things. This shift in focus from immaterial to material things in the last year of life can be seen foreshadowing how after Angel’s death, even the pastor shows no compassion in the lack of funds and throws Collins out shouting “Off the premises now / we don’t give handouts here!” (Larson

127). Even the church is shown to be under capitalism when the pastor is calmed by Benny's promise to take care of the bill. This corresponds to Smith's argument that "the love of fellow human beings is absent from the dominant capitalist ideology in America" (236). Even the church values money above the love of fellow human beings, as can be seen from this example.

Despite their anti-mainstream ideals and rejection of searching for monetary gain, even the community in *Rent* cannot always resist the lure of capitalism. Mark sells his film footage of the Christmas Eve riots which leads to a lucrative job offer from a TV show (Larson 94). Maureen directly sees a business scheme here and she suggests planning another protest which Mark could shoot from the beginning so that her performance could also make the news (Larson 95). The job offer and this plan are both initially rejected as "selling out" but Mark ultimately takes the job after it has been offered to him again. Events like this show how difficult it is to try to resist capitalism and how it is a conscious effort to resist it. Mark in the musical is in a privileged position as he is HIV negative and a straight white man. It is unsurprising that he is the one who capitalism is luring. His position is called out briefly after he has made a police officer stop harassing homeless people after filming his actions (Larson 48):

(The POLICE OFFICERS exit. MARK films BLANKET PERSON.)

**BLANKET PERSON**

(to MARK)

Who the fuck do you think you are?  
I don't need no goddamn help  
from some bleeding heart cameraman  
my life's not for you to  
make a name for yourself on!

**ANGEL**

Easy, sugar, easy  
He was just trying to –

### BLANKET PERSON

Just trying to use me to kill his guilt.  
 It's not that kind of movie, honey.  
 Let's go – this lot is full, of  
 motherfucking artists.  
 Hey, artist.  
 Gotta dollar?  
 I thought not.

The end when Mark does not have a dollar to give to the homeless person shows how he himself is mainly interested in gaining something from them, a theme for his movie, rather than actually helping them.

In *In the Heights* the fight against capitalism is well exemplified in the minor character Piragua Guy. As suggested by his name, the Piragua Guy sells piragua, a Puerto Rican shaved ice dessert, from his cart in the neighbourhood. His rivalry with the Mr. Softee truck is a good example of small businesses' struggles with big capitalist companies. In his first song, the aptly named "Piragua", the Piragua Guy establishes the rivalry by singing: "And Mr. Softee's trying to shut me down" but he is not about to give up as he continues with repeatedly singing "keep scraping by" (Hudes and Miranda 72). In the reprise of his song at the end of the musical, the small business gets a small victory over the big company: "And Mr. Softee's truck has broken down. / And here come all his customers my way. / I told you, I run this town!" (Hudes and Miranda 137). The Piragua Guy is shown to fall into the ways of capitalism himself, however, as he sings how he will "hike up the price" and raises the price of piragua from \$1.25 to \$2.25 at the first chance of doing so (Hudes and Miranda 137). This is an example how people might hate capitalism when it is not working for them but also immediately do the same if they get the chance which shows how *In the Heights* has a somewhat different relationship to capitalism than *Rent* as Piragua Guy's actions are not criticized in any way in the musical. This is likely because the community depicted in *In the Heights* is not too concerned with the threat of "selling out" as the community in *Rent*. The Piragua Guy's triumph over the big business also ties into Young's theory on community in opposition (244). The Puerto

Rican dessert represents the community's traditions while Mr. Softee represents the American society at large which the neighbourhood community opposes. Thus, the Piragua Guy's triumph also represents the neighbourhoods triumph which in turn explains why this incident is depicted in a positive light.

Community can be seen as something that shields its members from the harshest reality of capitalism. It is notable that the homeless who are the biggest critics of capitalism in *Rent* are not members of the core community of the story. The members of that core community are able to consciously resist capitalism because the community itself brings a degree of stability and safety into their lives. The homeless are not so lucky and for them the rejection of capitalism is not a choice but rather an inevitability. In *In the Heights*, non community members do not appear on stage to the same extent as in *Rent* and therefore also the biggest victims of the capitalist system are not visible in the story. The community members have again a big enough sense of security from their communities that they do not really need to worry about or reject capitalism. It is just something that exists to them.

It can be argued that the understated staging of the original productions of the musicals represented anti-capitalistic sentiments. Both productions premiered off-Broadway which is one of the reasons they had low-budget single-stage sets. The set to *In the Heights* is just one view of the block (Hudes and Miranda xv). *Rent* had "virtually no set – a couple of tables, folding chairs, a platform for the band, and a junk sculpture on one side of the stage" (Miller 191). Miller describes simplified sets as "the antispectacle" compared to many other "flashier" Broadway shows (191). The low budget looking sets give more room for the story itself rather than mesmerising the audience with expensive tricks.

The way in which the shows also combatted the expensive nature of Broadway was by selling the first two rows at each performance for \$20 on the day of the performance. *Rent* was the first show to start doing this and it has since then become a somewhat of a standard in Broadway

theatres as well as in the West End to sell a specific amount of discount tickets on the day of the performance. The selling of these tickets started a system where people could buy the \$20 tickets at 6:00 PM from the theatre box office in a first-come, first-served manner (Miller 186). This queue-system was converted to a lottery in July 1997 so that it would be safer for theatre-goers who sometimes waited in line up to 24 hours (Miller 186). The \$20 tickets were implemented so that seeing the show would be possible even for people who could not afford normal Broadway ticket prices (Kuchwara) and in this way *Rent* combatted capitalist ideals in the business side of things too.

Nonetheless, both *Rent* and *In the Heights* were successful musicals and as such became vessels for capitalism. *In the Heights* began performances on Broadway on February 14<sup>th</sup> 2008 and closed on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2011 after playing a total of 1,214 performances (Gans). *Rent* began Broadway performances on April 29<sup>th</sup> 1996 and ran for 12 years closing on September 7<sup>th</sup> 2008 with a total of 5,123 performances (Kuchwara). The Broadway production grossed over 280 million dollars during its run (Kuchwara). No matter how you spin it, the musicals, especially *Rent*, did fall victims to capitalism. According to Miller, however, it is not a bad thing since “truly innovative shows are only influential if they are hits” (23-24). Therefore, *Rent* becoming a capitalist success paved the way for shows such as *In the Heights*.

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis explored depictions of community in the musicals *Rent* and *In the Heights*. The focus of the thesis was on social relationships and social issues as exemplified by the focus on community and the use of sociological theories. I wanted to mainly focus on the issues that appear in both *Rent* and *In the Heights* and therefore, issues such as AIDS or immigration that are a big part of just one of the musicals are not discussed in as much detail as one might expect. By not focusing on these issues I believe that my research was significant because issues such as community and the effects of gentrification or attitudes towards capitalism can easily be overshadowed by, for instance, the focus on depictions of AIDS in *Rent*.

The thesis answered the research questions. The community members were the artistic-oriented, anti-mainstream bohemian types in *Rent* and people of Latin American descent in *In the Heights*. The ones that are being excluded from the communities are those who the community regards as “sell outs” in *Rent* and people who do not share Latin American heritage in *In the Heights*. The thesis showed that the communities are necessary because the gentrification process brings uncertainty into the community members’ lives, because ideals such as the American Dream have not supported the community members, and because capitalism is not working for their benefit. They express their communal values through carnival performance which further shows the separation between their communities and the mainstream. From the communities the members receive the feeling of security that they do not receive from the surrounding society amongst changing demographics and societal values. My research was significant because it connected all these various issues to the formation of community and the expression of it. My thesis is a decent examination of different aspects of community in *Rent* and *In the Heights* but it certainly leaves room for further studies. Further research on the topic could be a more extensive research into the societal aspects of gentrification and how it affects communities and marginalized groups as depicted in drama so widening the scope of primary sources. This type of research would require a

better understanding of sociology and the discussion of more plays and musicals from different times which exceeds the scope of one master's thesis.

The respective music styles of the two musicals could also offer interesting commentary into the communities and certainly their expressions of community. I did not, however, feel competent in my knowledge on the issue to include discussion of music in this thesis but it could be an interesting angle for further studies on the subject. Even though the musical styles were not featured in this thesis, my thesis showcased that the musical as a genre is very suitable for depicting stories of communities through song and especially ensemble numbers. Because *Rent* is mostly sung-through it is natural that almost all moments of community expression are also presented through song. *In the Heights* features more dialogue but the most notable moments for the community are expressed through song in numbers such as "Carnaval del barrio". The musical as a genre allows for more elaborate moments of happiness and sorrow for the communities through musical expression which is one of the reasons *Rent* and *In the Heights* offer such strong depictions of community. I believe that my research was successful at discussing the most relevant musical numbers and moments relating to each of the issues discussed.

The thesis shows that the characters in the musicals strongly valued community. Being a member of a community is more important to them than fulfilling individual personal ambitions. Even if community membership requires following some rules that limit personal interests the characters prefer to choose the community. The thesis shows that those people who do not put the community's interests above theirs, such as Kevin in *In the Heights* or Benny in *Rent*, are presented as difficult and even as a threat to the community.

The thesis shows the complex relationship that the communities have towards the American mainstream society. The communities regard themselves as separate from the American mainstream society as they celebrate their communities over it and even mock it. They also mostly reject values such as the American Dream that are strongly marketed as something universal for all people in the

US. The thesis also shows that the community members' perceptions on how much they can affect the society and the changes happening around them. In the end the thesis really shows that the reason for the appeal of belonging in a community also stems from then insufficient feeling of safety that the society has to offer and the people turn to the communities to receive that feeling instead. The main significance of my thesis is showing the similarities in the challenges that the communities face in two musicals that take place in different time frames and describe different groups of people. This showcases how some of these challenges seem to be becoming a part of the American experience for people who are differentiated from the majority of the population in some way.

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