

Media and Gender

History, Representation, Reception



a cura di
Maria Elena D'Amelio e Luca Gorgolini

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***Amistead Maupin's Tales of the City:* Queer genealogies, memory, and representation in contemporary serial narratives**

Ilaria A. De Pascalis

Netflix productions for the LGBTQ+ community

In the 4th episode of *Amistead Maupin's Tales of the City* (Lauren Morelli, Netflix, 2019), we see a double generational clash. 28-years-old Ben confronts the privileged and older men he is having dinner with about racism and transphobia within the gay community while they reclaim the right to tell whatever they want because of the fight they had to put over during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, Mary Ann is shocked by the possibility that nowadays burlesque can be reappropriated as a feminist practice in a queer cooperative. Both situations deal with the circulation of knowledge, wisdom, and consciousness among people of different generations belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.

The episode is intensely self-referential, as the whole miniseries deals with history, memory, and genealogy in the LGBTQ+ community at many levels, including the comparison with the previous adaptations of Amistead Maupin's stories and the creation of a complex genealogy among the characters, with the elders taking care of the youngsters, and vice-versa, in a continuous circulation of knowledge and mentoring.

Tales of the City is, in fact, a cross-media serial narrative that started in 1976, when the writer Amistead Maupin first published his short stories in a newspaper column¹. Transformed into many novels, three television miniseries (produced by Channel 4 and distributed in the US by PBS in 1993, 1998, and 2001), a Broadway musical in 2017, and the Netflix original we are focusing upon in 2019, the series builds a world around 28 Barbary Lane, San Francisco, starting

¹ About the literary *Tales of the City* as serialized domestic fiction, see Robyn R. Warhol, *Making "Gay" and "Lesbian" into Household Words: How Serial Form Works in Amistead Maupin's Tales of the City*, in "Contemporary Literature", 1999, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 378-402.

in the last years before the HIV/AIDS global epidemic and lasting until 2019 – at least for now. The 2019 miniseries is almost a manifesto for the self-identification of the LGBTQ+ community in contemporary San Francisco, its everyday life made of cultural relations and emotional exchanges, and its representations.

The revival goes hand in hand with other Netflix queer-themed productions (such as *Orange is the New Black*, 2013-2019, where the showrunner Lauren Morelli was part of the writing team), and it is an expression of the interest the platform has in building an ongoing solid relationship with its queer subscribers. In its *Inclusion & Diversity* policies, the platform declared its interest in storytelling that removes “the barriers of language, device, ability or connectivity” to broaden the on-screen representation of diversity². A crucial aspect of *Tales of the City* in this perspective is its attention to representing queer history as multifaceted, inclusive, and essential for the subjectivities of contemporary members of the LGBTQ+ community. Such a representation comes from the relationship between the Netflix original and pop culture history, carried on by the references to the books and the past adaptations: it also comes from the storyline that focuses on the making of a documentary about San Francisco LGBTQ+ spaces.

Queer narratives and storytelling

Dealing with the long history of the cross-media narrative *Tales of the City* means addressing the history of that part of the LGBTQ+ community that identifies with the word ‘queer’ and how it defines itself. As explained by Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, the term ‘queer’ was reclaimed in the 1980s

as an umbrella term to designate resistant and non-normative sexuality, seemingly unburdened from the separatist strains that had emerged around gay and lesbian identities. Maintaining a relation to its original meaning, reclaiming ‘queer’ was about being different, but unapologetically so³.

In this perspective, the concept of ‘queerness’ mainly develops the political stance against every form of binarism and fixed identity, especially the one

² Netflix Jobs, *Inclusion & Diversity*, available at <https://jobs.netflix.com/inclusion> (last access September 2022).

³ Hannah McCann, Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, London, Bloomsbury, 2019, Perlego Edition, p. 19/285, <https://www.perlego.com/book/2995742/queer-theory-now-pdf>.

related to sexual experiences. Queerness is a politically charged practice that challenges normativity and lets people see the intersectionality of the multiple possibilities beyond the static dialectic between homosexuality/heterosexuality, male/female, black/white, and so on. Doing so produces new kinds of kinship and relations that complement the bio-legal family in a wider emotional net. Individualism and nuclear families are replaced within queer cultures by the value of multiple ties that reclaim the human need for affection, care, knowledge, and pleasures broadly shared.

Navigating the debate that led to this specific definition, however, is not easy; still, it can be interesting to hint at some of its seminal moments, as they provide possible meanings that had a role in the identification of the queer community and its representation. Covering some aspects of this debate, therefore, can help to better understand the genealogy of the queer community and how it defined itself, reclaiming the slur. As it is reconstructed by Lorenzo Bernini⁴, the storytelling of the queer community has a double starting point: in May 1990, a New York organization against homophobia and for the increase of gay, lesbian, and bisexual visibility officially named itself *Queer Nation*, to reclaim the presence of LGBTQ+ citizens in public spaces and to undermine the conventional idea that these spaces are only intended for heterosexual visibility. One of their slogans is the chant “We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to this”, that is the center of the final protest in the installment of *Tales of the City* we are analyzing here (Fig. 1).



FIG. 1.

⁴ Lorenzo Bernini, *Le teorie queer. Un'introduzione*, Milano, Mimesis, 2017, p. 133 and following.

In February of the same year, at the University of Santa Cruz in California, Teresa de Lauretis used for the first time the expression “Queer Theory” in a conference about gay and lesbian studies. She was inspired to use the term by a conference held at Anthology Film Archives in New York in 1989, whose proceedings *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* were edited by the collective Bad Object-Choices and published by Bay Press in 1991. De Lauretis wanted to create new storytelling for lesbian and gay sexualities, to eradicate the generic opposition of homosexual/heterosexual (mirroring the marginal/dominant dialectic), and to look at the differences inside the LGBTQ+ community. Such a multiplication of possible identification positioned sexuality “as an agency of social process whose mode of functioning is both interactive and yet resistant, both participatory and yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference, demanding political representation while insisting on its material and historical specificity”⁵.

According to this narrative, Queer Theory is born under a double constellation: activism against homophobia and discrimination, especially during the AIDS epidemic and the insurgence of physical violence against LGBTQ+ bodies perceived as sick and dangerous in the cities, on the one hand; and film and video studies, with their attention toward both visual representation and apparatuses, on the other hand. Putting the “queer” identity at the center of the discourse in this sense had a double stand: an openly political stance generated from the personal perspective of those who reclaim the slur as well as their visibility into the street; and a self-reflective mode that pays attention to the visual performances produced about or by people in the community (in or out of their closets). The double identity is shadowed a few years later, in another seminal essay by the activist and scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Queer and Now*:

That’s one of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically. [...] Intellectual and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes ‘queer’ [...] are using the leverage of ‘queer’ to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin,

⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction*, in “Differences”, 1991, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. iii-xviii: iii.

migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the *center* of gravity) of the term 'queer' itself deepens and shift⁶.

In this passage, Sedgwick also points toward another aspect of the association of the adjective 'queer' with the noun 'theory': its attention toward LGBTQ+ activism and self-definition, as they intertwine with other political issues such as race, nationality, and so on. In this sense, she locates Queer Theory as a partner with intersectional perspectives, emerging in those same years as an analytic tool for activists and scholars and investigating "how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life"⁷. Once again, the very foundation of Queer Theory has a political stance against any dialectic that risks normalizing discrimination. Instead, it embraces multiplicity, and addresses the position of performative subjects⁸ in cultures and narratives.

Queer Representation and Queer History

This relationship between queer people and on-screen representation is particularly significant within the community. For our purpose, the most interesting aspect is their political stances toward historical narratives and the genealogies that they originate. As Anamarjia Horvat stated,

On the one hand, the question of LGBTQ histories is a complex one, as queer people were often forced to stay hidden and to deliberately destroy the evidence of their existence in order to survive. On the other, the specific history of discrimination and persecution that marks both the LGBTQ

⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Queer and Now*, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, ed. by Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 8-9.

⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, Sirma Bilge, *What Is Intersectionality?*, in Patricia Hill Collins, Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020 (2nd ed.), <https://perlego.com/book/1536696/intersectionality-pdf>.

⁸ The third name that emerges as seminal for Queer Theory is that of Judith Butler and her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990. In the volume, she uses both the works by Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault to disrupt sex/gender binarism and analyze the power structures underneath subjects' agency and representation. Therefore, gender performances are multiple, culturally coded, and open for interpretation. A beautiful discussion of the debate among de Lauretis, Butler, and Sedgwick, and the valorization of bodies and their material aspects, is in the essay by Biddy Martin, *Sexualities without Gender and Other Queer Utopias*, in "Diacritics", 1994, vol. 24 no. 2/3, pp. 104-121.

past and present has often meant that queer histories have been deliberately erased and removed from official narratives⁹.

Queerness, as a political stance for subject positions, pervades every aspect of human experience, including history and memory. *Tales of the City* does not only represent the histories of LGBTQ+ people, addressing the spaces where the community gathered in the past and the changes in San Francisco city life in the last decades. The series also wants to reclaim a queer perspective upon history, as something that goes far beyond the official reports and canonical records, and has far more to do with personal memories, oral accounts, and media products. Finally, it expresses all these issues through queer narrative and aesthetic forms.

As for queer history, I refer to the idea of “queer time” according to José Esteban Muñoz: a queer history calls for a mobilization of the past in the service of a queer future that moves beyond the negative present of queer exclusion and abjection¹⁰. Time goes beyond the hegemonic chronological linearity, relating to “associative traces” and “affective connections”, in order to produce a living, multilayered narrative, exposing the personal perspective upon human experience. Such an idea of mobilization of time layers through oral history is apparently the foundation of the intradiegetic documentary directed by Claire Duncan, whose nostalgic and decadent vision of the San Francisco LGBTQ+ community enforces a problematic perspective on the idea of memory and history. The interviews with various characters composing the documentary are deeply embedded in the narrative texture, giving the spectator the sense of an ongoing story, bursting with life, and ricocheting in multiple streams, notwithstanding Claire’s manipulative approach. Even if, in the last episode, the director talks about “editing” her story, erasing the people she doesn’t like out of it, personal memories and lives still burst out from the screen, invading public and private spaces all the same with their affects, emotions, desires.

⁹ Anamarija Horvat, *Screening Queer Memory. LGBTQ Pasts in Contemporary Film and Television*, London, Bloomsbury 2021, Perlego Edition, p. 9/23, <https://www.perlego.com/book/2397317/screening-queer-memory-pdf>.

¹⁰ Quoted by Amy Tooth Murphy, *In Search of Queer Composure. Queer Temporality, Intimacy, and Affect*, in Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, Emma Vickers (eds.), *New Directions in Queer Oral History. Archives of Disruption*, London, Routledge 2022, Perlego Edition, p. 28/35, <https://www.perlego.com/book/3286515/new-directions-in-queer-oral-history-pdf>.

Memory, oral history, and the community configuration

The first shot of the series (Fig. 2) sees one of the main characters, Anna Madrigal, the queen of 28 Barbary Lane, stating that the base of the community and its life is still the same after the decades she lived through: “We’re still people. Aren’t we? I mean... flawed, narcissistic, ad doin’ our best”.

In the 6th episode, we see another glimpse of the making of the documentary: Claire wants to interview Ida, the black transgender manager of the queer cooperative *Body Politic*. Claire asks for the history of the physical space, and various people chime in the interview to tell the fragment they know: Ida says, “It’s always been some kind of gay bar. It started out as a cross-dressing club with waiters/hooks in the 1940s, and then it was a Latin leather club”; here, one of the performers intervenes, stating, “Nope, it was a black leather club”; then Margot says, “I heard in the 1960s it was run by some trans lady”, and Carlin adds, “Someone told me it was a lesbian disco club in the 1970s”. During this exchange, there is no coincidence between the series’ camera with Claire’s one anymore, but we just have the series’ camera jumping from one person to another in an unstoppable flow of knowledge and inferences. Claire is disturbed by the disordered overlapping of all these different perspectives, asking for some order and linearity; but in this way, she disregards the complexity of queer time and its reliance upon the mix between memory and narrative, denouncing her being fundamentally alien from the LGBTQ+ community notwithstanding her



FIG. 2. Anna’s interview.

sexual practices or identity claims. In other words, she wants to use a hegemonic narrative form to report queer lives, to the point that she tries to change reality, even violently, to fit her storyline better.

Tales of the City is a representation of the fruitful relationship among serial narratives produced for streaming platforms – particularly open to multiple storylines, wide narrative arches, a choral cast of characters, and made to satisfy niche audiences¹¹ – with the tradition of LGBTQ+ themes, their re-framing in the face of the contemporary development of the community, and elements of queer aesthetic.

Canonical references to HIV positivity and the deep wounds it opened in the community in the past decades go hand in hand with the spectacle of the influencers' lives, the exhibition of queer performances on the stage of the *Body Politic*, and the explicit representation of the various form of queer sexual relationship. The multiplicity of narrative genres and storytelling strategies¹² used within the series mirrors itself in the layered images, enriched by pop culture knowledge shared within the LGBTQ+ community and disseminated through different visual styles used throughout the ten episodes.

The drama of Anna as a trans woman in the 1960s, narrated in the 8th episode, with its filtered colors and the use of vignetting, puts together a nostalgic approach towards queer history¹³ and more recent Instagram vibes. The background history for the creation of the Barbary Lane family is both part of the LGBTQ+ community's past and a contemporary audiovisual product, aware of *Tales of the City's* ramifications and the different uses it has as a cultural item for various generations. The narrative idea of a past that has been lived fully by the main characters sets a complex “emotional landscape” and a “sentimental environment”¹⁴, pervaded by suffering and shame as well as fulfilled desires and joy.

The last episode especially relies upon the wideness of the range between the changes in the community and the permanence of common elements; it also

¹¹ For my discussion of complex narratives in contemporary series, see Ilaria A. De Pascalis, *Cartografie della complessità: modelli di interpretazione della serialità contemporanea*, in “SigMa. Rivista di letterature comparate, teatro e arti dello spettacolo”, 2019, vol. 3, pp. 643-678, available at <http://www.serena.unina.it/index.php/sigma/article/view/6591> (last access September 2022).

¹² For a discussion about the queerness implied by the experience of television and its “promiscuous” narratives, see Michele Aron, *Towards Queer Television Theory. Bigger Pictures sans the Sweet Queer-After*, in *Queer TV. Theories, Histories, Politics*, ed. by Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, Routledge 2009.

¹³ See Gilad Padva, *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan 2014.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 3.

represents and states in the dialogue the need to rely upon queer elders as well as upon younger generations to build a shared, safer space. The LGBTQ+ community and Anna's chosen family are driven together in the fight for the preservation of Barbary Lane, and they need one another not just to survive but to flourish and give more beauty and pleasure to the world.