

I'm in America: Critically Exploring Latino Cultural Identity in *West Side Story* for English  
Classrooms

by

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## **Abstract**

Race, culture and identity, alongside portrayals of the Puerto Rican culture, are themes which are highly intertwined in the Broadway musical *West Side Story*. Starting from its Broadway premiere to its eventual film adaptation, the musical has often been challenged due to its limited and stereotypical portrayal of the Puerto Rican racial group in the United States. However, the musical has remained as one of the most important and influential pieces of United States popular performance. This research seeks to justify the integration of the musical as a text in English secondary classrooms in Puerto Rico as a way for students to critically examine and deconstruct this portrayal and the many discourses which surround it. Through the creation of lesson plans supported by Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy, this research aims for students to challenge racist and assimilation discourses in the musical through a close analysis of the social, racial, and gender conflicts, as well as power relations as portrayed in the musical. Additionally, Louise Rosenblatt's Reader's Response Theory allows teachers to measure students' understanding of the conflicts portrayed and the stance they take upon the examination of the musical. Lastly, teachers are provided with a working framework towards the use of the musical in the classroom through the creation of lesson plans based on the Curriculum Maps provided by the Department of Education of Puerto Rico.

## Resumen

La raza, la cultura, la identidad y la representación de los puertorriqueños en los Estados Unidos son algunos de los temas que se encuentran entrelazados en el musical de Broadway, *West Side Story*. Desde su puesta en escena y posterior adaptación cinematográfica, este musical ha sido desafiado frecuentemente debido a la representación limitada y estereotipada de los puertorriqueños como grupo racial en los Estados Unidos. Sin embargo, *West Side Story* se ha mantenido como una de las piezas más importantes e influyentes de la cultura popular estadounidense. Este proyecto de investigación busca justificar la integración de este musical como elemento de análisis en las clases de inglés a nivel secundario en Puerto Rico para que los estudiantes examinen y deconstruyan críticamente la representación de la cultura puertorriqueña y los diferentes tipos de discursos que la rodean. A través de la creación de planes de enseñanza apoyados en la pedagogía crítica de Paulo Freire, se busca que los estudiantes reten los discursos racistas y asimilistas en el musical, al analizar los conflictos sociales, raciales y de género, así como las relaciones de poder. Asimismo, la teoría de la recepción de Louise Rosenblatt permite que los maestros puedan medir el entendimiento y la postura de sus alumnos en cuanto a los conflictos que se representan en el musical. Por último, se les provee a los maestros un marco teórico para el uso del musical en el salón de clases por medio de la creación de una serie de planes educativos basados en los requerimientos de los mapas curriculares del Departamento de Educación de Puerto Rico.

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## **Dedication**

To *Mama Lula* and *Abuelita Patria*. ¡Bendición!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*Immigrant goes to America,  
Many hellos in America;  
Nobody knows in America  
Puerto Rico's in America!*

*--Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim (West Side Story)*

When referring to Broadway's history, critics often agree on *West Side Story*'s place as an icon of American musical performance. The musical, in its multiple iterations, which cover a wide spectrum of genres in US popular culture, established itself as a Broadway musical phenomenon, launching the career of its creators to new heights; its success transcends all age barriers and promises to remain in the American cultural subconscious for years to come. However, the musical's history is not one without its controversy. *West Side Story* saw its conception in 1949 when Jerome Robbins, the musical's choreographer, took the initiative to reimagine Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in a contemporary setting. After approaching Leonard Bernstein (composer), who was open to this new reinterpretation of an old classic, *West Side Story* was placed on hold due to its many similarities to the long established 1920s stage comedy *Abie's Irish Rose*. This was a result of Robbins' original intent to center the musical's conflict on the relationship between a Jewish Juliet and a Catholic Romeo while in the middle of Easter/Passover celebrations. The project was placed on hold until 1954, year in which a gang related article, and Arthur Laurents' asseverations of first-hand knowledge of "Puerto Ricans and negroes and immigrants who had become Americans", provided the much needed context for what we now know as *West Side Story* ("The Moon Comes Out" 337).

It is precisely Laurents' remarks which would later motivate many cultural critics to openly criticize the musical and offer a justification towards the challenge of its inaccuracies in the portrayal of Puerto Ricans. This would only be exacerbated by Stephen Sondheim's own

comments about why he rejected the project at first. As he explained, he initially rejected the project on the grounds of his “ignorance of Puerto Rican culture and lack of experience of being poor” (Negrón-Muntaner 60). This asseveration by Sondheim becomes a red flag over the portrayal of the Puerto Rican culture in the musical as it points towards, what critics would later refer to, as a stereotypical portrayal of the Puerto Rican identity born out of a very limited knowledge of the context surrounding the Puerto Rican community in both the island and the United States. Nevertheless, the many inaccuracies surrounding the characters affiliated to the Puerto Rican racial group’s identity in the musical did not hinder it from eventually becoming the main point of representation of the Latino culture in the U.S., yet it placed the musical in the center of analysis for cultural critics.

It is these same critics who would come to see the musical as, “the earliest—and arguably the only—widely disseminated American mass culture product to construe Puerto Ricans as a specific, and hence different, U.S. ethnic group, ranked in a particular social order, living in a distinct location, yet informed by a uniquely American racialization process” (Negrón-Muntaner 60). Although the musical only makes direct reference to a single racial group in the Latino spectrum, this does not stop critics from drawing parallels to this portrayal when referring to Latinos in US popular culture. Therefore, its examination would not only serve as a glimpse of the Puerto Rican culture as it is represented in United States’ popular culture but also as an examination of Latino cultural identities and perspectives both in and out of Puerto Rico.

As previously stated, the musical, and its subsequent movie’s visual representation of Puerto Ricans as an ethnic group, has opened the doors for constant criticism of the musical due to the approach taken towards the racialization of the Puerto Rican identity; a process informed, or rather misinformed, by a series of generalizations and assumptions portrayed by the creators

of the play. As pointed out by Puerto Rican theater critic Brian Eugenio Herrera, when referring to the influence the musical had at the time of its release in US Popular Performance, “*West Side Story*, however inadvertently, became the template for all things Puerto Rican” (240). Nowadays, the Latino figure does have a wider representation in popular media yet it is still noticeable how this representation falls under many of the original representative stereotypes of the Latino culture. I believe Herrera’s statement regarding the musical’s influence still holds true in our current times and this opens up a discussion of the musical in an academic environment which discusses cultural representation and identity. However, for this discussion to be beneficial in an academic environment, it can only be achieved through a critical reading of the musical so as to decipher its abundant references to Puerto Rico’s sociocultural environment; a factor which ultimately put into perspective the abundant advantages of *West Side Story*’s integration into the English Curriculum at secondary schools.

Taking into consideration many of the inaccuracies in the musical’s representation of the Puerto Rican cultural identity, it is not surprising for many students’ first interaction with the musical to be an emotionally charged one. Personally, my first interaction with the musical took place during one of my undergraduate composition courses. In this course, we were tasked with watching the musical and examining the way in which the Puerto Rican culture was portrayed. To this day, I still remember the surprising effect Anita’s statements in the song “America” had in many of my peers upon listening to the lyrics “Puerto Rico my heart’s devotion / let it sink back in the ocean” which would only be exacerbated as we further explored the lyrics of the song. This led to an inquiry process in my group through which we identified ways in which the representation of our culture differs according to different perspectives and what effect this

eventually has in our perception of our culture. It is this same approach I follow towards introducing the musical in the Secondary English Curriculum.

High school students, especially those in the 12th grade, academically explore issues of cultural identity and how cultural differences are dealt with through music, movies and other artistic platforms. In the wake of Ferguson, an event which placed racial issues and conflicts in the spotlight, students would greatly benefit from an honest discussion of race and identity as well as the issues which surround these concepts. As Ferguson evidenced, media has a strong influence in the manner in which race is observed, and oftentimes, it deviates into negative racial stereotypes of many racial groups and minorities. In the case of Ferguson, Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager who was shot and killed by a White police officer, was often portrayed as a criminal and a dangerous individual; a factor many attributed as racially charged discourse. After the events which followed Ferguson, many would come to challenge the manner in which the media portrays these type of events and the discourse which is used. Another example of the current climate regarding racial issues is evidenced in the statements of United States presidential candidate for the Republican Party, Donald Trump, who categorized Mexican immigrants in the United States as criminals, drug dealers, and rapists (Neate and Tuckman). Trump received a strong media backlash from these comments from many member of the Latino community who observed these comments as racist and misinformed. These events accentuate the need for students to be engaged in discussions which directly challenge the manner in which racial groups are stereotypically portrayed in the media. *West Side Story*, as a major work of United States popular culture, presents an ideal teaching tool towards a representation of racial minorities and the media and can be used towards prompting a dialogue regarding portrayals of race and identity in United States popular culture.

Through an analysis of the musical *West Side Story* following the principles of problem-posing education, students can engage with the musical in a dialogical process informed by Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response theory in which they challenge the musical's construction of the Puerto Rican cultural identity, while also placing into perspective their own perception of their identity as a nation. Although this musical is by no means an accurate representation of Puerto Rican culture, due to its influential position in the consciousness of Americans, it has, at times, taken this role and has even been used as a way to inform others of the racial identity of, not only Puerto Ricans, but also of Latinos. An example can be seen in an initiative created by the Seattle Police Department which seeks to use the musical as an educative tool and a way for authority agencies to connect with the youth. As it reads in the project's description, "The West Side Story Project (WSSP) is a collaboration between police, theatre, and schools which uses the themes of *West Side Story* to address youth violence, youth-police relations, and cultural differences" (West Side Story Project). Although a discussion of the themes surrounding the musical may certainly serve a potentially beneficial academic purpose, ignoring the cultural inaccuracies and major racist discourse, which is often embedded in the discussion of race in the musical, might have a negative impact in students' cultural perspective. Even more important when referring to Puerto Rican youth, the discussion of *West Side Story* must closely follow and connect to students' own perspective of their cultural identity; a factor which will majorly influence the musical's discussion in an academic environment.

One of the major elements of problem-posing education is its incorporation of the students' immediate sociocultural environment as a starting point for the discussion of issues that have a direct effect on students' lives. As Nina Wallerstein aptly puts it, when referring to the

process of education as described by Paulo Freire, “[p]eople bring with them their cultural expectations, their experiences of social discrimination and life pressures, and their strengths in surviving” (33). In this same line of thinking, when making reference to Freire’s input towards education, it is crucial for the educator to understand the concept of learning as being directly correlated to the students’ experiences; a process which should take place under the purpose of reinforcing or challenging “existing social forces that keep them passive” (Wallerstein 33). Topics that make direct correlation to students’ life and culture facilitate students’ critical thinking process as they explore, along with their mentors, ways in which they can build up a connection between the texts to be discussed and their own experiences. As established by Freire, “[s]tudents, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (81). Through the incorporation of *West Side Story*, along with an examination of whether its portrayal of the Puerto Rican and Latino culture has had, or still has, a positive or negative effects on their cultural identity, educators will be able to start a dialogical process in which students will challenge both their own as well as others perception of their own cultural identity. Moreover, looking at the musical from a critical perspective would enable the discussion to touch upon the many problems surrounding the musical, as opposed to simply including it at face value which would turn problematic due to the racial connotations the discussion of the musical entails.

Louise Rosenblatt’s Readers’ Response theory also provides an educational theory highly intertwined to the inclusion and discussion of texts, such as *West Side Story*, in the classrooms. As Rosenblatt’s explains, “[r]eading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (73). As such, the discussion of the

musical in the classroom, and the direction this discussion takes, is crucially connected to the students' stance regarding the text; a factor which will consequently result in shaping the meaning the students eventually obtain from their reading of the text. Just like critical pedagogy, Readers' Response is closely connected to the readers' past experience and sociocultural background and these have an effect in the stance the reader takes upon the examination of a text. For this reason, an examination of the musical, and the many viewpoints in which it can be approached in the classroom, would provide a framework for teachers to work with when integrating discussions of the musical in the curriculum.

The incorporation of the musical into Secondary English classrooms of Puerto Rican high schools would follow a theoretical framework towards writing units born out of the use of the Curriculum Maps for the 12th grade. This is directed towards complying with the educational requirements established by Puerto Rico's Department of Education and the need towards making education an experience relevant to current events and issues in a multidisciplinary approach, an aspect explored by integrating the concept of transversal themes and other planning tools, in accordance with Policy Letter 6-2014-2015 of Puerto Rico's Department of Education. The writing units would revolve around the use of the musical, both the stage version and its movie adaptation, as texts to be discussed in class and as the means towards building students' writing skills in different genres such as: argumentative writing, epistolary writing, narratives and creative writing.

This research aims to answer interrogatives regarding students' viewpoints of their own cultural identity as they explore how their culture is portrayed in the media. *West Side Story*, and its unique representation of the Latino culture provides the tools necessary towards prompting a critical analysis of the concept of cultural identity in the classroom. Through lessons specifically

developed towards the integration of the musical in the English classroom, students will undergo a process of inquiry in which they will explore how an outsider's perspective towards their culture can offer a view different from their own as well as reasons why this may have had, and still has, an effect in the overall portrayal of Puerto Rico as a nation. Following a multidisciplinary approach, students will integrate historical facts to their analysis of the musical by researching its sociocultural context. Additionally, the research will explore what kinds of connotations this could have in students' view of their culture and how these effects are still seen in today's pop culture; both locally as well as internationally.

In its structure, this thesis will encompass the following chapters: Chapter One serves the purpose of an Introduction to the project; Chapter Two presents the Literature Review while Chapter Three consists of an examination and discussion of the musical's power dynamics in regards to racial groups and figures of power; an analysis closely connected to Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. In addition; Chapter Four presents a formal analysis of the musical's gender portrayals and the tensions behind said portrayals; and Chapter Five focuses on a discussion of pedagogical implications of the integration of the musical in English Secondary classrooms following Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Louise Rosenblatt's Reader's Response Theory along with the conceptualization of lesson plans for a 12<sup>th</sup> grade English class. The lessons designed are be based on the Curricular Maps provided to teachers by the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, and feature several approaches towards the discussion of the musical.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

“...the show wouldn’t be *Abie’s Irish Rose*. It would have Latin passion, immigrant anger, shared resentment.” – *Arthur Laurents*

Although eventually successful in both Broadway and Hollywood, *West Side Story*’s conception was not one without its own series of problems and controversies. These struggles did not stop the musical from becoming one of the most successful works of American musical performance as evidenced by the longevity of the musical in the United States popular culture. More than fifty years later, the musical still makes its presence known and has managed to remain relevant both critically as well as culturally. It is this longevity which has led historians, cultural and theater critics, educators and even institutions to examine the impact the musical has had through its unique portrayal of social issues and the Latino culture. In this same line, it is of special interest in this research to examine this literature as well as the pedagogical possibilities the use of *West Side Story* as a teaching tool brings to multidisciplinary education.

### **West Side Story’s Background**

First conceived as a modern adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* by Jerome Robbins, *West Side Story* underwent a series of major changes while under the helm of its production team: Jerome Robbins (choreographer), Leonard Bernstein (composer and lyricist), Arthur Laurents, (librettist) and Stephen Sondheim (lyricist). As Laurents himself says in a piece written for the New York Herald Tribune, Robbins had initially imagined the musical as a love story in which, “[t]he young lovers were to be contemporary adolescents, their families in religious conflict: Juliet a Jewish girl, Romeo a Catholic boy” (“The Growth”). This early version, which was briefly known as *East Side Story*, was placed on hold due to its similarities to *Abie’s Irish Rose*, a major Broadway hit play. It was not until 1955 that, “a chance meeting between Bernstein and Laurents” and a conveniently placed newspaper headline about “gang

activity” and “juvenile delinquency” offered the major components of what was first known with the working title of *Gangway!* but eventually came to be known as *West Side Story* (Acevedo-Muñoz 1). This placed the majority of the musical’s action in New York’s west side “using the perceived rise in Puerto Rican gang violence there as the story’s catalyst” (Acevedo-Muñoz 2). Taking into consideration the chosen setting for the musical, it is crucial to understand the historical and social context behind the portrayals of the Puerto Rican population from New York, a population which would, at the time, be referred to as the Puerto Rican “problem” (Perez 11).

Puerto Ricans’ migration to the United States started early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with many important figures in Puerto Rican politics leaving the island after United States President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones-Shafroth Act in 1917. This law declared Puerto Ricans as United States citizens which opened up the doors towards the free movement of Puerto Ricans to the United States. In this same line, the 1940s and 1950s saw an increase which would come to be known as the Great Migration; a period where “mainstream US society became more aware than before of the Puerto Rican presence in New York, its surrounding urban areas, and a few other parts of the country” (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 75). Paradoxically, this movement takes place at a moment in which, under Operation Bootstrap, “Puerto Rico was being showcased as a successful model of industrial capitalist development, modernization, and democratic rule” (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 75). A major emphasis of Operation Bootstrap, a strong industrialization program which promoted the modernization of Puerto Rico, was placed in the control of the population in the island. As Acosta-Belén and Santiago further explain, “[f]amily planning and population control initiatives to reduce births on the island and accelerated migration to the United States were given high priority” (77). The promoted migration of Puerto

Ricans to the United States observed a rise in the number of Puerto Rican immigrants; many of them in New York. Coincidentally, this migration process was concurrent to a rise of gang violence and juvenile delinquency. As theater critic, Brian Eugenio Herrera aptly puts it, many of this delinquency and gang crimes were oftentimes attributed to “ethnically or racially identified groups of kids defending and violating ethno-racial boundaries” (235). Therefore, as the Puerto Rican teacher and activist Richie Pérez put it, when referring to the rise in juvenile crimes, “[i]t was easy to link us, as a people, to the problems troubling America” (11). Eugenio Herrera further reaffirms this point by arguing the following in regards to the selection of Puerto Ricans as the racial group to go face to face to the Americans:

[T]his selection of the Puerto Ricans as the group to rival the “anthology of what is called American” thereby influentially paired the “social problems” of youth criminality and Puerto Rican migration, which had not previously been particularly interconnected in the popular imaginary, let alone “twinned” as they would be in *West Side Story*. (236)

This point further cements *West Side Story*’s role in establishing a socially constructed stereotype, and mainly misguided version, of the Puerto Rican cultural identity as a racial group. As Herrera later discusses, the musical “addressed uncertainty among 1950s observers regarding how the new Puerto Rican arrivals in New York should be understood, especially with regards to existing racial structures” (240). This eventually led to the dehumanization of this racial group as a way to establish a clear sense of power relations between the already established racial groups in the US and the new racial group in the form of the Puerto Ricans. In a sense, *West Side Story* eventually worked as a “political, patriotic, and mythifying discourse in which the Puerto Ricans confront the Anglo-American power as intruders in and invaders of their territory: the U.S.A.”

(Sandoval). Even further, *West Side Story*'s structure could be seen as an "explicit discourse of discrimination and racial prejudices towards immigrant Latinos," (Sandoval) an area further discussed in this research.

## **Cultural Reception**

When making reference to *West Side Story*'s reception by cultural critics, it is important to point out the manner in which the musical dealt with establishing a clear identity of the ethnic groups it involved. A section of Perez's study titled, "From Assimilation to Annihilation: Puerto Rican Images in U.S. Films", explores *West Side Story*'s representation of Puerto Ricans. As he explains:

*West Side Story* did depict Puerto Ricans in both family and work situations. However, it simultaneously perpetuated the stereotype of Puerto Rican males as knife-carrying gang members who could only solve their problems through violence. It also developed the images of Puerto Rican women as either innocent, passive, virginal beauties (María, the Natalie Wood character), or "hot-blooded," "fiery," spontaneous and worldly (Anita, the Rita Moreno character for which she received an Academy Award). (15)

These representations quickly fell under attack from audiences who deemed them culturally inaccurate and even denigrating. Many cultural critics, and even artistic figures, openly criticized the musical's portrayal of Puerto Ricans and Latinos in general placing an emphasis on the negative connotations the musical adheres to the characters' race.

Some of these detractors of the musical expressed their views shortly before it premiered; editors of *La Prensa*, New York's leading Spanish-language newspaper, "threatened to picket the show's New York opening" for they believe that the musical "perpetuated the pejorative view

that Puerto Ricans, whether living on the island or in New York City, were public-health nuisances”, a factor attributed to one of the musical’s most recognized song lyrics in the song “America” (Herrera 241). Another figure who criticized the musicals’ portrayal of Puerto Rican culture was writer and activist Jesús Colón. In the preface of his book of short stories titled *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches*, while making reference to *West Side Story*, he observes the following:

We Puerto Ricans have... been subjected to treatment in the Broadway drama and a famously successful musical show. But invariably this treatment harps on what is superficial and sentimental, transient and ephemeral, or bizarre and grotesque in Puerto Rican life—and always out of context with the real history, culture and traditions of my people. (9)

In his book, Jesús Colón offers a culturally accurate portrayal of the initial migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States which would eventually come to be the main driving force of the Nuyoricano literary movement. Writers of the diaspora, such as Piri Thomas, Esmeralda Santiago and Tato Laviera, were influenced by his writings and would come to offer first-hand portrayals of the immigrant lives in the United States.

The notion that the musical portrays a negative and stereotypical view of Puerto Ricans is shared by many other critics of the musical. These critics point out the musical creators’ failure at providing the spectators of the show a culturally accurate representation of a racial group, a need accentuated by the eventual success and major impact the musical had in Latin@ representations in the media, even more so after the successful adaptation of the musical as a film feature. As Negrón-Muntaner claims, “*West Side Story* is then nothing short of a Puerto Rican *Birth of a Nation* (1915): a blatant, seminal (pun intended), valorized, aestheticized

eruption into the (American) national ‘consciousness’” (61). This clearly places into perspective how much of an influence the musical has had and opens the door towards it being observed as a potential sociologically accurate piece.

Although Jerome Robbins “explicitly resisted the idea that he was ‘documenting’ contemporary social formations”, “reviewers and audiences alike lauded *West Side Story*’s presumed sociological accuracy” (Herrera 237). At its beginning, one of the shows initial financial mentors dropped out of the project for, as explained by Acevedo-Muñoz,

[s]he wanted more sociological content explaining the resentment between the gangs and the Puerto Rican poverty angle. She wanted to know how Puerto Ricans and African Americans had replaced the Jews as the city’s poor population. (2)

However, this didn’t stop the show, and its creators, from receiving praise and being recognized over the themes presented in the project. Acevedo-Muñoz indicates, “[e]ven in the early stages of production, the film’s potentially positive and pedagogical uses with regard to gangs, gang violence, and Puerto Rican youths in particular were already being discussed in some influential circles” (151). As an example, former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt requested the premiere of the musical to be a benefit to the project Encampment for Citizenship, a project which purpose was to “equip young people with the knowledge of the major issues before our American community” in an attempt to build bridges “between Latin American and North American youth” (Acevedo-Muñoz 151). As a matter of fact, shortly after the musical’s release, Robbins, Bernstein, and Sondheim were honored for their contributions towards the fight against juvenile delinquency (Acevedo-Muñoz 4). As Brian Eugenio Herrera explains, “this propensity to view *West Side Story* as a sociologically authentic representation of, or even solution to, New York

City's social problems only increased over time," a factor evidenced by Bruno Bettelheim's (psychoanalyst and social theorist) use of the musical as "a case study of ethnic hostility and group belonging" (237). Nevertheless, it is important to point out the problematic nature of the racial stereotyping and racist discourse presented in the musical and the possible repercussions its use in academic environments would bring, if the aforementioned discourse is to be ignored. This research proposes to build a theoretical framework in which the musical's representation of the cultural Other, and the intricacies in its discourse, are discussed in an academic environment as a means towards the identification of racist discourse and power relations in the musical.

### **Musical's Relevance in US Popular Culture**

*West Side Story*, even though heavily criticized by cultural critics, achieved great success in Broadway throughout its run and came to be a staple in US performing arts. Additionally, its feature film adaptation, under the direction of Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, was nominated for 11 categories of the Academy Awards of which it obtained 10 wins. As Acevendo-Muñoz points out:

[H]istorians point to the commercial and critical success of the 1961 film version [...] as being partly responsible not only for the show's staying power and popularity but also for bringing the concept of musical theater to audiences around the world who had little access to or even awareness of the Broadway musical. (5)

Not only this, the musical has also remained one of the principal and most recognized work to portray Puerto Ricans as a racial group in US popular culture. Although more recent works<sup>1</sup> have offered new portrayals of Puerto Rican culture, cultural critic Frances Negrón-Muntaner argues

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<sup>1</sup> Recent works which have offered portrayals of the Puerto Rican culture include the Broadway musical *In the Heights* and the television series *Orange is the New Black*.

the musical, through its representation of Puerto Ricans, “has provided what no Puerto Rican-made film has been able to deliver to date: a deceptively simple, widely seen, and shared text dwelling on still critical issues like migration, class mobility, racism, and police brutality” (87); issues which are still heavily relevant in Puerto Rico’s sociopolitical context. In addition, it is also important to take into consideration that, as pointed out by Communications professor Dr. Kennaria Brown, “there is still a dearth of specifically Puerto Rican characters and stories in major Hollywood films” (194) which explains why the musical still retains its influential place in US pop culture.

To this day, *West Side Story* is still being performed in different venues to great success; a lot of these venues are high schools and colleges across the US. In 2009, Arthur Laurents with the help of American composer of Puerto Rican descent, Lin Manuel Miranda, commandeered a revival of the acclaimed musical to great success; the revival obtaining multiple accolades including several nominations for Tony Awards. Additionally, it is not rare to observe references to the musical in popular TV shows; one of the most recent examples found in the show *Glee*, which centered a story arc on the musical. As Acevedo-Muñoz explains, “[d]ue to *Glee*’s appeal to younger viewers, it is possible that for many of them, this was their first contact with *West Side Story*” (148). As he later points out, “the producers’ decision to air a *West Side Story* theme... shows the film’s continuous impact on and relevance to the current media landscape” (148). Therefore, ignoring *West Side Story*’s influential role in the representation of Latinos in the US would close the doors to discussions which might benefit student’s examination of their own culture as it is portrayed in the media.



## **Towards the Incorporation of *West Side Story* in the Classroom**

The incorporation of *West Side Story* in the classroom, and the development of a theoretical framework towards its discussion as the main purpose of this research, follows the principles of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response theory. These two educational theories place education as a dialectic process in which the student engages, both the teacher and the text, in a questioning process that leads to praxis. In order to understand the use of these theories towards the discussion of the musical in the secondary classroom, it is crucial to discuss their main components and approaches towards education.

The scholar and cultural critic Henry Giroux, as one of the main theorists of critical pedagogy, argues education cannot happen in a vacuum. He explains:

It is impossible to separate what we do in the classroom from the economic and political conditions that shape our work, and that means that pedagogy has to be understood as a form of academic labor in which questions of time, autonomy, freedom, and power become as central to the classroom as what is taught. (3)

A student, as an individual rather than an object, is surrounded and is affected by his/her sociopolitical environment. Therefore, it is crucial for the teacher to engage the student in a dialectic process taking into consideration this background. Dialogue, as defined by Freire, "is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (88); a world that has been defined as not a "static reality" but as a "reality in the process of transformation" (83). This idea clearly supports Paulo Freire's view of education which rejects the banking model in which the student is a passive learner and receives information without some form of critical analysis. Problem-posing education provides the teacher with the ability to challenge students' perceptions of the world around them; more specifically it allows the teacher to guide

students through a process of transition in which, from passive objects, they become an agent of action.

For the integration of *West Side Story* in the classroom, it is crucial for students to challenge the racial discourse and power relations portrayed in its structure as a way to identify their cultural identity and their position as an oppressed group in the musical's discourse. In other words, as teachers, we are tasked to guide our students towards adopting a questioning stance towards the reading of a text. As pointed out by Kalogirou and Malafantis,

the art of questioning is not only an efficacious tool in teacher's hands used to enhance his/her disciples' act of reading and reflecting upon a text; it is also a strategic skill utilized (or might be utilized) by the students in order to interrogate the texts they read, to critically interact with them. (267)

*West Side Story*, along with many other representations of the Latino culture, tends to have a dehumanizing effect. As Richie Pérez explains, "when we [Puerto Ricans] do appear in the mass media, we are the targets of consistent negative stereotyping, which includes ridicule of our culture and language" (8). Critical pedagogy, in its humanizing nature, allows students to challenge these stereotypes through oppositional and negotiated readings of the texts discussed, oftentimes using their sociopolitical background and ethnic hierarchies as a source for support for their interpretations.

Although it is crucial to guide students toward challenging *West Side Story*'s representation of the Latino and Puerto Rican cultural identity, in order to use the musical as a teaching tool, it is also equally important to allow students to build their own reactions and responses to the musical on their own terms; especially during the beginning of the discussion. As Probst explains, as educators "we must try... to respect the natural influence of literary texts

upon readers” (37). A crucial component of reader-response theory is the student’s interaction with the text, and consequently, the negotiation of meaning process the student goes through during the reading of the text. In this case, I am using the term “reading” loosely for I am referring to any act of meaning negotiation. As Robert E. Probst says,

[t]he literary experience, then, although it may involve learning about history, biography, genre, technique, and the other elements into which literature is too easily subdivided, is first of all the immediate encounter between a reader and a book. Texts and lessons should begin here, assisting the students to articulate and investigate that influence rather than replacing it with peripheral matters. (37)

The discussion of *West Side Story* in Puerto Rican secondary classrooms benefits greatly from the use of this theory for it allows students to respond directly to the message being received by the text; a response usually anchored in the students’ understanding of their culture, their sociopolitical environment, and their understanding of their own cultural identity.

In the case of this research, the theoretical framework is being developed towards the use of the musical in Puerto Rican classrooms. Students are expected to have some level of awareness of their sociopolitical environment and will, to some degree, be able to identify with some of the themes presented in the discussion of the musical; themes which are recurring in their culture. However, although outside of the scope of this research, this does not imply the use of the musical in other cultural contexts is impossible with proper adaptation.

### **Chapter 3: Sharks vs. Jets: Racial Discourse and Power Relations in *West Side Story***

*West Side Story*'s reception, and many of the literature written about it, reflects upon its representation of Puerto Ricans and Latin@s as a racial group divided, and often placed in opposition, to its Anglo-American counterpart. As some of the literature affirms, these social and racial power relations are often part of racist discourse anchored in Puerto Ricans' colonial, and subordinate status under the Anglo-Americans (Sandoval, Negrón-Muntañer, Brown). As previously discussed, Roberto Sandoval Sánchez, professor and cultural critic, explains this division of the two racial groups as the source of "a political, patriotic, and mythifying discourse in which the Puerto Ricans confront the Anglo-American power as intruders and invaders of their territory: the U.S.A." This, in a sense, provides us with an understanding of the musical's placement of both racial groups at odds in a territorial conflict; the Anglo-Americans defending what they consider theirs while the Puerto Ricans search for a place of belonging in the already established socio-political system of the US. In fact, it is this division which guides much of the musical's events to its tragic conclusion as we observe how these groups in conflict are further divided by tragedy. However, in order to better understand the series of events leading to this conclusion, it is imperative to examine how these two races are portrayed, and eventually divided into two distinct racial groups at odds. For the purpose of this analysis, I will use a published version of the musical's script and its film adaptation.

#### **The Dehumanization of the Puerto Rican Community**

One of the major criticisms adhered to the musical is the manner in which its representation of the Puerto Rican, and consequently the Latin@ identity, is dehumanized. Richie Pérez, when referring to the discrimination against Puerto Ricans in the mass media, argues there are three main forms of discrimination: (1) exclusion, (2) dehumanization, and (3)

job discrimination. First, exclusion is defined as the lack of representation and recognition of Puerto Ricans in any type of media. Second, dehumanization is observed in the negative stereotypical representation of Puerto Ricans “which includes ridicule of our culture and language” (8). Lastly, job discrimination is observed as Puerto Ricans are blocked from being involved in the medium as well as from offering their input in the creative process. Following said ideas, *West Side Story*, whether purposefully or not, manages to build up a racist neocolonial discourse in its representation of the Puerto Rican racial group, a manner accentuated in the negative stereotyping of the Puerto Rican culture in the musical and film and the choosing of white actors to represent the major roles connected to the Puerto Ricans.

Tropicalization, as a form of dehumanization, is presented by Brown and refers to a process in which a group is imbued with a set of traits, images, and values that serve a hegemonic function when directed from an oppressing group to an oppressed group (196). In the case of *West Side Story*, as Brown explains, the tropicalization manifests “by subsuming Puerto Rican culture into ‘a mythic idea of *latinidad*’, while stereotyping Puerto Rican people as the embodiment of the social ills of the day, thereby establishing them as scapegoats” (196). This idea of *latinidad* is represented in the musical through several means, one of the most controversial seen in the use of brown-face with Caucasian actors and actresses, and development of marked accents to categorize the Puerto Ricans a separate and distinct racial group. Early on during the musical, it is easy to separate both groups in conflict through several factors stressed by the musical creators; their skin color, clothes, and their accents. The Jets, clearly Caucasian, use light colored clothing coordinated throughout its group while the Sharks use bright colors leaning towards the red color palette which accentuates the Sharks exoticness and sexuality. Rita Moreno, the Puerto Rican actress who played the role of Anita in the film

adaptation of the musical, would later express her disdain at the use of brown-face in order to separate and distinguish the Puerto Rican group as opposed to the Jets. In her recent memoir she expresses the following:

One of the few things that I disdained while filming the movie was the makeup used to paint the Puerto Ricans the same color. We Sharks were all the same homogeneous brown! Our gang, including me, was a uniform tobacco brown color, and that was just plain wrong and inaccurate. Puerto Ricans, with their varied genetic ancestry—Spanish, Taino Indian, Black, Dutch—are born with a broad palette of skin colors, from outright white to true black. (Moreno)

Moreno's expressions place an emphasis in this problematic representations of the Puerto Ricans as a racial group. As a way to better understand these contrasting points in the representation of both groups in conflict, an examination of their introduction in the musical heavily exemplifies this dehumanization process.

### **Jets vs. Sharks**

The beginning of the first act of the musical marks our first introduction to the two racial groups at odds; “[t]he boys—sideburned, long-haired—are vital, restless, sardonic; the Sharks are Puerto Ricans, the Jets an anthology of what is called ‘American’” (*West Side Story* 137). On the one hand, as Sandoval explains, “[a]lthough the Jets constitute ‘an anthology of the Americans,’ that gang consists solely of children of white European immigrants” which effectively consolidates their position of power due to the implied racial superiority accentuated by the lack of racial diversity in their ranks. As further put by Sandoval, the Jets “emblemize the ideology of the ‘All-American Boy,’ a totally white identity which does not make room for any other racial groups in the gang”. Even in its given name, Jets, the Anglo-American gang

appears to put forward their superiority both in the “Jet Song” as well as in its tangible symbol of representation in the plane; it remarking on the notion of military and technologic advance. On the other hand, the Sharks are immediately introduced as a marked and distinct racial group who challenge the already established hierarchical system and are represented in an almost feral manner, the shark as an emblem of their exoticness and almost savage animal nature. As argued by Sandoval, “[s]uch an iconic representation emphasizes the criminal and barbaric potential of all Puerto Ricans”, a factor later seen constantly through the development of the conflict. Even when looking upon spatial relations between the symbols of both teenage gangs, it is easy to establish the position of the two racial groups: the Jets on top for they are expected to be at a higher position or in the air while the Sharks are at the sea and at a lower level than the Jets. In addition, early on during the film it is easy to identify the conflicts and power hierarchies between both groups, a relationship accentuated by the role authority figures take in the conflict.

Although adult figures are scarce in the musical and film, figures of authority such as Lieutenant Schrank and Officer Krupke adhere to the hierarchical notions and even enforce them through discriminatory discourse, an example seen in the musical’s first scene at the basketball court as Schrank exclaims, “Boy, what you Puerto Ricans have done to this neighborhood” (*West Side Story* 138); a phrase which can be taken as a reference to the Puerto Rican “problem” (as discussed in chapter 2). As Negrón-Muntaner puts it, when referring to power relations and the manner in which authority figures interact with said groups,

the Puerto Rican community is not hailed only as criminal, but also as racialized and colonized. Thus, when Lieutenant Schrank addresses the Puerto Rican men, he subsumes their ethnic/national subjectivity to their inherently criminal one, conjuring shameful identifications. In doing so, *West Side Story* locates Puerto

Rican identity at the crossroads of colonialism, racialization, and shame by addressing not just one Puerto Rican but a whole community as abject. (86)

It is precisely this notion which often drives criticisms to the musical for it seems to suggest a stereotypical, and more importantly, holistic view of the Puerto Ricans racial group as a source of criminality and violence. Even when the authority figures are seen in conflict with the Jets, said figures push away the Sharks and talk only to the Jets, oftentimes ending in racist discourse directed towards the Puerto Rican group. An example can be seen in the previously discussed first scene after the rumble in the basketball court in which, after sending away the Sharks and referring to them as “trash,” Lieutenant Schrank says the following to the Jets:

If I don’t put down the roughhouse, I get put down—on a traffic corner. Your friend don’t like traffic corners. So you buddy boys are gonna play ball with me. I gotta put up with them and so do you. You’re gonna make nice with the PRs from now on. (*West Side Story* 139)

This example places the racist discourse, not only as part of the conflict between the two teenage gangs, but as a major form of racism tied to hierarchical power relations in the US. Furthermore, it could also be seen as an example of the colonial status of Puerto Ricans and evidence of the uncertainty seen as the Puerto Ricans challenge established socio-political structures and fight for the territories the Anglo-Americans have claimed as their own.

The conflict between the two groups is maintained throughout the extension of the musical and is amplified after the two young protagonists are introduced. On the one hand, Tony, an Anglo-American boy and a member of the Jets, seeks to move away from the gang in search of something better as evidenced by his interactions with Riff and the song “Something’s Coming.” On the other hand is María, sister of the leader of the Sharks, who seeks to become “a



lady of America.” Both character’s fates are intertwined in the dance scene which, as pointed out by Sandoval, is one of the crucial moments in which the division and conflict between the two gangs is better exemplified. As he declares, “[t]he dance scene in the gymnasium is vital for visualizing the divisive frontier line between the two gangs”; a factor seen in both the dress codes and the ways of dancing of both groups. Although the possibility of a conciliation between the two groups is observed as Tony and María first meet and fall in love, an idea explored during their dance as well as during the duet “Tonight”, this notion is shattered by the reality of differences as part of two different racial groups in conflict.

### **The Rumble: Contrasting Hoodlums**

The scenes which precede the rumble once again portray a racist discourse directed at the Sharks. A scene which cements this discourse once again places figures of authority at odds with the Sharks. During a war council which takes place at Doc’s store, both the Sharks and the Jets discuss the details of the rumble. During said discussions, Tony arrives and pushes both sides to agree to a fair fight. However, it is at this moment that Lieutenant Schrank arrives in the scene. After throwing racist epithets at the Sharks, he kicks them out of the store as it is observed in the following fragment of the musical:

Clear out, Spics. Sure; it’s a free country and I ain’t got the right. But it’s a  
country with laws: and I can find the right. I got a badge, you got the skin. It’s  
tough all over. Beat it! (*West Side Story* 179)

This fragment further pushes the idea of the Puerto Ricans being a group not accepted in the socio-political context of the time and even seems to suggest the desire by the authority to get rid of the group; this as Lieutenant Schrank repeatedly asks the Jets to allow him to help them get rid of the “Spics” by informing him of the place in which the rumble will take place.

Right after the scene at Doc's store, we are introduced to Tony and María in the bridal shop; a vital scene for it represents a symbolic union between the two racial groups as they pretend to get married. This is the last scene in which both characters can be together in an almost positive light since the hope of finding a way for both groups to reach a truce is lost after the rumble. In a sense the scene foreshadows the upcoming tragedy as Tony tries to stop the rumble and ends up killing María's brother, Bernardo.

The rumble scene is important for it once again shows the Puerto Ricans as an active part of the violence and even as the ones who provoke it. Even though Tony, at María's requests, attempts to stop Bernardo from starting the rumble, Bernardo disregards him and shows himself to be extremely violent by becoming the first one to attack. However, due to Tony's intervention in the fight, Riff, another leader of the Jets and Tony's best friend, is stabbed and killed by Bernardo. This provokes Tony, who had up until now been in favor to stopping the fight, to attack Bernardo and he ends up killing him; an event that starts a tragic chain of events which ends in Tony's death.

### **Someday, Somehow, Some...: An Unresolved Racial Conflict**

The musical's last few scenes offer up what could be seen as a grim outcome to the love story, but also as a culmination to a racist discourse. After María finding out of Tony's involvement in her brother Bernardo's death, she initially rejects him but eventually comes to accept him and forgive him. They end up planning to run away for Tony is being pursued by the police for the murder of Bernardo. However, María is unable to meet Tony and she sends Anita with a message for him to wait for her. In what is considered one of the most racially charged scenes, Anita is attacked by the Jets on the way to delivering the message (this scene will be analyzed more in depth in the next chapter). In her rage, she tells the Jets to inform Tony that

Chino, who María was betrothed to, had killed María in a rage after finding out her involvement with him. This results in Tony facing Chino and ultimately being murdered at his hands. The last scene places María and Tony crushed under the conflict between the two racial groups, unable to find their desired “somewhere”.

The rumble scene and the aforementioned scene are vital parts to the analysis for they put forwards the Puerto Rican stereotype of aggression and violence. As Sandoval describes it,

[i]ndeed, when the rumble takes place, the Puerto Ricans’ disposition to fight (and to assassinate) is accentuated by the script having them arrive first at the location.

In the scene when Tony tries to make peace, Bernardo refuses reconciliation. This stereotype of Puerto Ricans’ aggression and violence becomes emphasized by their killing a Jet first.

This affirmation of the stereotype becomes, in a sense, the greatest example of the dehumanization of the Puerto Rican ethnic group at the hands of the musical racist discourse. Although some critics like Acevedo-Muñoz make reference to instances in which both ethnic groups in conflict are observed as aggressive or violent, it would be an error to deny the impact *West Side Story* as the main representation of the Puerto Rican ethnic group in the media had at the time in the American subconscious. As composer of Puerto Rican descent, Lin Manuel Miranda pointed out to Berson,

The movie is all over the world, and for many people it’s their only exposure to even the term Puerto Rican. They might not even know that Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean. So when your only image is that of a knife-wielding guy in a pompadour with dark makeup, that’s hard. The show is a major export of our image, and we didn’t really have a hand in it. (as qtd in Berson 213)

It is precisely this well-put point by Miranda which really places into perspective the need to examine this film and its representation of the Puerto Rican ethnic group. The analysis of the racial stereotypes the movie presents is not a means towards putting down the film or disregarding its importance in American pop culture. The real purpose of a discussion of the film would be to challenge students' perspective of their cultural identity by prompting them to examine the way their culture is observed while also building up a sense of identity in them through a critical reading of the piece (an approach further explained in Chapter 5).

## **Chapter 4: Puerto Rico's in America: Gender Tensions and the Assimilation Discourse in *West Side Story***

*"Puerto Rico / my heart's devotion / let it sink back in the ocean"* - Anita from *West Side Story*

After more than fifty years from the musical's first release, the song "America" remains as one of the most recognized elements of *West Side Story*. It is quite difficult to picture the musical without Rita Moreno's intricate dance steps on the rooftops of New York as she sang a song many have seen as a hymn to assimilation and a form of US propaganda. Anita's rejection of her native island, and her acceptance of a new culture expressed through the sound of flamenco and other Latin rhythms, is by far one of the most culturally criticized pieces in the musical which introduces viewers to what many observed to be an assimilating discourse in the musical. In addition, the musical number serves as an introduction to gender tensions within the Puerto Rican group as both the Sharks and the Puerto Rican women face their reality within the "American Dream." An examination of María and Anita's role, as well as their interactions with the Sharks in the events of the musical, provides a better understanding of racial and gender tensions surrounding the portrayal of the Puerto Rican ethnic group.

### **A Lady of America: Virginal Beauties and Fiery Latinas in Assimilation**

María, "an excited, enthusiastic, obedient child, with the temper, stubborn strength and awareness of a woman" (*West Side Story* 150), is observed as a representation of the innocent and virginal beauty oftentimes portrayed as an object to be desired. In the film adaptation, the character is played by Natalie Wood, a factor much criticized by Latino viewers who, according to Brown, see this casting of a White woman as a form of US racism (202). The research took place during a 6-week critical media literacy class and placed 17 young Puerto Rican women, single mothers who were on welfare ages 16 to 21, to react to the film. In their examination of

the film the element which presented the most obvious opposition was the casting of María. As explained by the researcher, Kennaria Brown, the participants' reception of the casting of Natalie Wood "became the focal point of their opposition" (202). As Brown explains,

Their reception of Natalie Wood as María was doomed from the start because before they noted her brownface appearance or heard her poor accent, they knew that in one of the rare films that featured Puerto Rican characters, a White woman was chosen to play the Puerto Rican lead and that choice was due to U.S. racism. (202)

This is an important point of examination for most of the main Puerto Rican characters in the film were delegated to be played by White actors while Puerto Rican actors and actresses were offered dancing and non-speaking roles; Rita Moreno being the one substantial exception. These patterns of racism regarding the casting of Latin@s is not exclusive to Hollywood films. As English professor and historian David Román observes,

[t]he resentments that continue to surround the musical's casting of non-Latinos in Latino roles, its perpetuation of Latino stereotypes as criminal and primitive, and its endorsement of American identity over Island loyalty shape the scholarship produced by Latino critics. (33)

Laurents's revival in 2009 tried to address some concerns he had about the film version. As he expressed for an interview for the *Hartford Courant*, "[t]he movie is so degrading to Hispanics. It had that Max Factor 'Hispanic' make-up and the Hispanic equivalent of the oo-la-la accents and those DayGlo costumes. Just awful" (Rizzo). Still, the film remains as one of the main representations of the Latino identity in Hollywood and the discussion of María's character as

played by Wood offers viewers a perspective of, not only the problematic nature of the casting but also of the character's representation during the events of the film.

Throughout María's first appearances, it can be observed how little control her character has over her life living under the constant vigilance of male figures in the film. As pictured by Acevedo Muñoz, "María is dressed only in a white slip, a neutral color that only she wears in the movie. The light cotton undergarment is adorned with a small gold medal of the Virgin Mary on a baby" (87). This accentuates her virginal image, a transition phase which is exploited by the plot as she is "eager for some kind of sexual thrill" (Acevedo-Muñoz 88). Even though betrothed to Chino, María expresses she feels nothing for him and seems to be seeking greater liberties now that she is in America; a factor evidenced by her plead to Anita to change her dress and make its neck an inch lower or simply dyeing it red. As María says to Anita during the scene at the bridal shop, it was now "a dress for dancing, no longer for kneeling in front of the altar" (*West Side Story* 150). María seems to be constricted by her virginal role, a big contrast to Anita's fiery Latina image, and seeks to become "a lady of America" as a way to break away from said constrictions. Eventually, she is engaged in a struggle to embrace her new identity in the new land as well as her sexual identity. It is important to point out how America is observed by María as a place of freedom, a freedom constricted by her brother's control upon her. The dance in which she meets Tony marks the first time she is able to embrace her life as an American, and consequently to assimilate culturally, yet she is still pulled away by her brother; in this case a tangible figure assigned to her Puerto Rican identity.

In contrast, Anita, "a Puerto Rican girl with loose hair and slightly flashy clothes... knowing, sexual, sharp", is observed as a character in control of her actions and one who embraces her new identity as an American woman. As Acevedo Muñoz points out, "Anita is

sexually active” a factor evidenced through María’s threats to divulge with her parents something that happened between Anita and her brother Bernardo at the balcony in the movies. This places her as a more knowing character in contrast to María’s innocent portrayal. Although heavily interconnected to her male counterparts in the form of the Sharks, Anita is seen as a strong-willed individual who has her own views about her position in this new space.

, as the only Puerto Rican actress to be given a lead role in the film, opens one of the most recognized scenes in the film by exclaiming the often quoted and analyzed “Puerto Rico / My heart’s devotion / let it sink back in the ocean”; lines of the song “America” which marked her career. As Negrón-Muntaner asserts, “[i]n the estimation of several critics, Moreno was awarded the Oscar for singing the praises of cultural ‘assimilation,’ understood as annihilation, and hence affirming that Puerto Ricans were shameless” (“Feeling Pretty: PR Identity” 80) However, as further argued by Negrón Muntaner,

[e]ven if many of us do not agree with what Anita sings, her performance is compelling to Puerto Ricans in large part because she sings to the greatest shame of ethno-national discourse: the desire for incorporation in the American body politic as a queerly raced and feminine subjects. (80)

It is this asseveration which places Anita in such an important position for this discussion; her desire to become assimilated puts her at odds with her cultural identity as a Puerto Rican.

Through an examination of both María’s and Anita’s musical numbers and main plot lines during the musical, it is evident how both begin the narratives as individuals in search of assimilating to the culture in which they find themselves. However, as the events of the film unfold, and tragic events closely connected to the racial conflict between both gangs have an



effect in their lives, a transition is observed in which both women have to face their cultural identity and eventually reconnect with it or disregard it. On the one hand, Anita, when faced with Bernardo's death caused by Tony, rejects her previous assimilating discourse thus pushing forward the divide between both racial groups. On the other hand, María realizes her hopes of becoming "a lady of America" and finding a better place for her love are crushed after Tony is killed by Chino in retaliation over Bernardo's death.

### **Everything Free in America: Assimilation and Racism at Odds**

The Puerto Rican migration to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s observed an increase in the number of Puerto Ricans by the thousands in many cities of the US; New York being one of the cities which observed the biggest increase in Puerto Ricans. As explained by Acosta-Belén and Santiago,

Puerto Ricans in the United States have, by and large, resided in urban areas... As relative newcomers to the New York City immigrant population, Puerto Ricans generally lived in the more economically depressed parts of the city, often residing in substandard housing. (92)

This information sheds some light to the sociological context which surrounds the time period in which the events of *West Side Story* take place; a period in which, "not only did Puerto Ricans find themselves in a disadvantaged position with respect to housing in New York City, but they also made up the growing low-wage labor force in the city" (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 92). For this reason, it is particularly interesting to observe how the musical's scene in which the Puerto Rican women exclaim the benefits of living in "America," while the men point out instances of racism they face every day, portrays the realities of the Puerto Rican immigrants in the US.

The discussion of the musical number “America” within the context of the film, and the understanding of said context, is connected to the setting of the musical number which takes place on the roof of the apartment building the Puerto Ricans live in. As Tolentino affirms,

[t]o place Puerto Ricans within a US story of immigrant assimilation, the film features the rooftops and fire escapes of New York City apartment building in ways that simultaneously suggest a preoccupation with verticality, as a metaphor for the immigrant’s upward climb in the United States, and also with marginality, or racial exclusion. (6)

One of the major topics which drive the events of the musical is the territorial conflict between racial groups. That a particularly important scene in which this conflict is discussed by the Puerto Ricans takes place at a rooftop evidences this marginalization. As Acevedo-Muñoz explains, “[i]t is significant that although the Sharks are repeatedly denied the access to the ‘streets,’ they have taken over the rooftops of their own tenement buildings” (97). All throughout the musical, a struggle between racial groups towards the control of territories has been a poignant example of the hierarchical powers established and, as we observe in this musical number, the rooftops have become a safe place for the ethnic minorities.

This scene varies greatly between the stage version and the film version. Both versions open with Bernardo and Anita having an argument over María’s involvement with Tony at the dance, an argument which escalates to an open criticism of the Puerto Ricans immigrant experience as they face racism. The Sharks, led by Bernardo, express their wish to return to the island due to their disenchantment with the “American Dream.” Although he is mocked by the others, he points out the wage inequality between racial groups and other racism instances which demonstrate his resentment over such events since both groups are immigrants; the only

difference being that Tony, as an example of the White group, happened to be born in America. The Puerto Rican girls, led by Anita, happily point out the many benefits living in America provides them. As Acevedo-Muñoz explains, “they are happy and hopeful and see the material conveniences of living in the United States as a realization of the American Dream” (97). It is at this point that the stage play and the film come apart.

In the stage version of *West Side Story*, the Sharks leave the rooftop towards the war council while the girls move on to perform “America” with Rosalía, one of the Puerto Rican girls, becoming the dissenting voice against Anita’s assimilation discourse. As Acevedo-Muñoz affirms,

in the play, the song “America” is emphatic in its lampooning of Puerto Rico as an underdeveloped, third world, poverty-stricken, overpopulated, violence-infested, disease-riddled country, and as contrast, it cites almost exclusively the material advantages of the American experience. (162)

Rosalía starts the musical number with the following lines:

Puerto Rico...

You lovely island...

Island of tropical breezes.

Always the pineapples growing,

Always the coffee blossoms blowing.... (*West Side Story* 167)

These lines draw a picture of an almost paradisiac Puerto Rico, one which many of the Puerto Rican immigrants hoped to return to once they obtained enough financial security. To this positive note Anita answers,

Puerto Rico...  
You ugly island...  
Island of tropic diseases,  
Always the hurricanes blowing,  
Always the population growing...  
And the money owing,  
And the babies crying,  
And the bullets flying. (*West Side Story* 167)

Unlike Rosalía's portrayal of the island, Anita directly attacks the island's image as she suggests it is a land of diseases and criminality. These lines would often be heavily criticized by many by the fact it promoted a negative image of Puerto Rico, its speaker being a Puerto Rican herself. These lines are followed by a back and forth between Rosalía and the other Puerto Rican girls; Rosalía expressing her wishes to go back to the island while Anita and the others attack those wishes and point out the benefits of living in America. The stage version does not explore racism and the immigrant situation, and this is one of the major changes that truly make the film version stand on its own. As pointed out by Sandoval, "This scene was a racist and defamatory articulation towards Puerto Rico in the original text. In the film version, it was revised in order to soften a negative attitude toward Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican immigrants."

In the film version of the musical number, Bernardo and the Sharks are the ones who go face to face with Anita's asseverations as they place forwards several instances of racial discrimination. As Acevedo-Muñoz states, "[a]ll the girls defend and love the America they think they know; all the boys blow the whistle on its inequality, prejudice, violence, and resentment" (97). In other words, "[t]he dispute oscillates between definitions and revisions of

the immigrant experience and the fallacy of the American Dream” (161). In the case of the film, the song starts with Anita singing similar lines with some changes to the lyrics such as exchanging “You ugly island” for the ironic “My heart’s devotion” which transforms the song’s tone into one that is less mocking towards the island although still presenting its assimilation discourse. The rest of the song is spent in an exchange of views as the Sharks point out the many instances in which racism closes the doors of many opportunities to ethnic minorities while Anita and the Puerto Rican girls point out the material advantages of living in America.

### **Feeling Pretty: A Variation in the Assimilation Discourse**

Just like Anita’s assimilating discourse as observed in “America,” María has a crucial number which exemplifies her wish to become assimilated as a way to finally be able to be together with the man she loves. By this, she would openly accept this new culture she has been introduced to as a way to bridge these two racial groups in conflict and find a shared space in which they can be together. Through the song, she recognizes herself as a lady of America worth of the Miss America title. Some critics, like Acevedo-Muñoz, categorize this musical number as María’s own challenge to the racial hierarchies for it would have been extremely unlikely for an ethnic woman to win Miss America. However, it can also be observed as her completely disconnecting from her roots in order to comply with the role of the American woman, one that is observed throughout the musical in a fairly passive role when compared to the Puerto Rican women.

It is also interesting to observe Rosalía’s and Consuelo’s, other Puerto Rican women, reaction to María. They both seem somewhat concerned over María’s sudden change from “modest and pure / polite and refined” to the “craziest girl in the block. This transition seems to

continue María's transformation from an innocent virginal woman, to one that is aware of her sexuality and is able to take hold of her individuality, even if it places her cultural identity at risk.

### **Stick to Your Own Kind: A Rejection of the Assimilation Discourse**

The rumble under the highway marks a climactic point in the musical which shifts much of the established preconceptions of the characters as they face the tragedy of Riff and Bernardo's death. Both Anita and María are forced to reconsider their place in the racial groups as a response to the events that lead to the musical's conclusion. On the one hand Anita, who had openly argued in favor of the American Dream, is now faced with the loss of Bernardo as caused by the racial conflict surrounding the claim for territory by both racial groups. On the other hand, María, who had placed her hopes in finding a way for her love to be consummated, now finds herself loving the man who killed her own brother. Both are forced to reconsider their stances in regards to their relationship with their culture and their wish to assimilate to the American culture.

Shortly after the rumble, Chino informs María of Bernardo's death at the hands of Tony. Afterwards, as she confronts Tony, she exclaims, "it's not us! It's everything around us!", placing the blame of the events on both racial groups and their struggle for territory. They both spend the night together and, although María promises to run away with Tony, she is found out by Anita. As Acevedo-Muñoz points out, "Anita's eyes scrutinize María from head to toe, her accusing gaze stopping around the navel: the sexual Anita is quickly aware of the new, sexual María" (118). It is this scene which marks one major shift in Anita's character as she, who once openly supported assimilation, now openly rejected it as she promoted racial segregation through the musical number, "A Boy Like That." In the song, Anita constantly tells María to stick to her own kind as she refers to Tony as the boy who killed María's brother. Anita goes so far as to echo

Bernardo's own view earlier in the musical which tells to María boys like Tony only want one thing; to sexually possess the woman. As she tells María in the song: "A boy like that wants one thing only / and when he's done he'll leave you lonely. / He'll murder your love; he murdered mine" (*West Side Story* 212). Although this view serves as an echo of Bernardo's earlier words, it is a marked example of Anita's shift in character as she rejects a relationship which, to some degree, she had supported.

In the middle of the musical number, "A Boy Like That", there is a shift towards the song "I Have a Love" which ends up being a conciliatory note between both women. In the 2009 revival of the Broadway musical, the language of the song is changed to Spanish which makes the racial divide even more poignant as Anita rejects the English language and welcomes her roots once again. Directly after the musical number, Anita agrees to help María and tells her of Chino's plan to kill Tony. Lt. Schrank's arrival effectively blocks María from meeting Tony and Anita is tasked with informing Tony she would be late to their meeting.

In order to inform Tony of María's late arrival, Anita heads to Doc's store in which she is faced with one of the most racially charged and violent scenes of the musical. Acevedo-Muñoz describes the scene as follows,

The "Taunting" of Anita is arguably the movie's climax... The Jets hurl epithets and insults, some in Spanish, to the increasingly terrified Anita, whom they accuse of spying for Chino. She is called "pig" and "tramp" and "lyin' spic" as the Jets slowly but resolutely surround her. (120)

The scene eventually escalates to an attempted rape of Anita by the Jets. Ironically, as Acevedo Muñoz asserts, "Anita's innocent dream of assimilation... turns into the nightmare of prejudice and sexual violence" (120). Although Anita is saved by Doc at the last minute, this event is

enough to turn her from her earlier assimilating discourse. Anita, at this specific moment is a woman who has lost everything. She insults the Jets, and recognizing Bernardo was right, she exclaims during the scene, “If one of you was bleeding in the street, I’d walk by and spit on you” (219). Anita’s last scene during the musical marks María’s and Tony’s doom as she informs the Jets of María’s death at the hands of Chino; a clear lie which leads Tony to look for Chino and trigger the last tragic scene. Believing Anita’s statement about María’s death, Tony goes out to search for Chino who ultimately shoots him just as he sees María is alive and safe. This leads the musical to a close as María blames the death of Tony, Riff and Bernardo on all of them. As she exclaims while holding Chino’s gun, “I CAN KILL NOW BECAUSE I HATE NOW,” evidence of her desperation as she observes how the hate between the two groups has provoked such loss.

Anita’s last few scenes in the musical are an important element of discussion. As Sandoval explains, “[i]n spite of Anita’s assimilation, once she finds out that Bernardo is dead, she changes her attitude towards the Anglo-American system. Ironically Anita, the most assimilated, ends up the most ethnic by affirming her cultural difference.” An examination of Anita’s character would be an effective tool towards the discussion of the racist discourse and its effects in either shattering or reinforcing a character’s racial identity. María can also be observed as a character who underwent a transformation during the musical as she is first observed as contemplating her life in America as a positive, and possibly freeing, change. However, as the tragedy takes a hold of those hopes, María realizes the place for which she looked along with Tony was non-existent; the cultural divide and the sociopolitical hierarchies would remain in place effectively stopping their ability to be together.



## **Chapter 5: Integrating *West Side Story* in the English Secondary Classroom**

The purpose of this research, as previously established, is to engage students in an examination of their cultural identity through means of a critical reading of the script of *West Side Story* and a critique of the film version of the Broadway musical. During the initial stages of this research, I was repeatedly asked whether the musical was not an outdated text with outdated portrayals of the Puerto Rican identity. In many of these occasions, my answer was that many things change but others remain the same; although the representation of Latinos in the media has seen an exponential growth in the last few years, *West Side Story* remains to be seen as a fundamental piece of US popular performance. The purpose of this research is not to use the musical as an accurate portrayal of student's cultural identity. On the contrary, while some students may be able to relate to some of the themes found in the musical, the purpose of this research is to guide students towards exploring the way in which culture, as much as it is socially constructed, is also at times imposed by the oppressor's postcolonial and racist discourse, a concept which is explored in the examination of Puerto Rican stereotypes in the musical.

Up until this moment, I have focused this research in the close examination of the musical's themes regarding the portrayal of the Puerto Rican identity in a foreign context and based upon an outsider's view of our identity as a distinct and separate racial group in the United States. The discussion touched upon topics such as racism, sociopolitical hierarchies, gender relations, racism and assimilation discourses, and other areas critical to the development of the students' critical consciousness. This analysis serves as a starting point and basis towards the development of lesson plans directed towards their integration in a teaching unit for high school students; more specifically 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in Puerto Rico who are expected to utilize

different texts and genres to critically examine both their own culture and the world which surrounds them.

The integration of *West Side Story*, in the English Curriculum does not aim to replace traditionally used texts nor does it cover traditionally taught features, such as grammar content, in the classroom. Although *West Side Story* can be integrated in the discussion and teaching of these features, it is not within the purpose or scope of this research to provide the means to do so. However, through the use of critical pedagogy, by means of the participatory approach to teaching, students will be able to explore “content that is meaningful to students” and “the language that is worked upon emerges from it” (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 170). As explained by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, “[t]he Participatory Approach is based on a growing awareness of the role that education, in general, and language education, specifically, have on creating and perpetuating power dynamics in society” (170). *West Side Story*, in its portrayal of the Puerto Rican racial group, allows students to effectively explore concepts of culture and identity while building language skills which transfer to their continuing education.

The basis for the integration of *West Side Story* in the secondary classroom complies with requirements of Puerto Rico’s Department of Education which calls for the teaching of English to be “categorized by an interdisciplinary approach where learning English as a second language is integrated with the learning of other subjects” (Proyecto de Renovación Curricular 18). Given its sociopolitical and historical themes, and its use of theater and film, the integration of the musical allows for teachers of different subjects to create a collaborative teaching experience which goes beyond the English course by including subjects such as History, Social Sciences, Art, and Music. In addition, the planning and development of teaching materials and lessons should be organized in units of learning as instructed in Policy Letter 06-2014-2015.

According to the Curricular Renovation Project of the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, “in order to fulfill established purposes and social expectations, education and schools, beyond the knowledge of different disciplines, need to foster educational experiences of current issues which claim critical attention” (my translation) (65). Although *West Side Story* is not a recent work, the themes involved in its discussion continue to be current and crucial in Puerto Rico’s sociopolitical context. As presented by Cohn, Patten and López, “Puerto Ricans have left the financially troubled island for the U.S. mainland this decade in their largest numbers since the Great Migration after World War II, citing job-related reasons above all others.” As further presented,

U.S. Census Bureau data show that 144,000 more people left the island for the mainland than the other way around from mid-2010 to 2013, a larger gap between emigrants and migrants than during the entire decades of the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s. This escalated loss of migrants fueled the island’s first sustained population decline in its history as a U.S. territory, even as the stateside Puerto Rican population grew briskly. (Cohn, Patten and López)

This pattern is strikingly similar to the one observed in *West Side Story* which opens the doors to the comparison of both migratory movements and their causes as well as the sociopolitical context which surrounds both movements. In addition, the discussion of the musical in the classroom complies with the need to integrate transversal themes into the curriculum.

Transversal themes are defined as “a combination of teaching contents which are integrated into the different academic disciplines and address all areas of knowledge” (my translation) (Proyecto de Renovación Curricular 65). As further explained,

These transversal themes address problems and current social issues which schools should not be inhibited to touch upon such as the necessity to develop civic and ethical values, democratic values, environmental conscience, culture of peace, cultural identity, good health and consumption habits, technology and education, among other relevant issues in our current society. (my translation)

(Proyecto de Renovación Curricular 65)

The discussion of *West Side Story* integrates many of these transversal themes which emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the musical in the English classroom. By discussing the musical, students are able to touch upon areas related to these themes and this puts into perspective the educational benefits of the musical as a text in the classroom.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

This research promotes the discussion of *West Side Story* in the English Curriculum through the use of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Louise Rosenblatt's Reader's Response Theory as previously discussed in Chapter 2. During the lesson planning process, teachers need to be prepared to adapt the lessons according to students' initial reactions in regards to the incorporation of the musical in the classroom; Freire's theory places authentic dialogue as the focus in the teaching process while Rosenblatt's theories are heavily reliant on meaning negotiation between the student and the text as it is being discussed in the classroom.

As posed by Freire, "[a]uthentic education is not carried on by 'A' for 'B' or by 'A' about 'B,' but rather by 'A' with 'B,' mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it" (93). Discussions of *West Side Story* in the classroom are student-centered; the teacher serves as a mentor guiding the main points of discussion. However, dialogue between both parties needs to be allowed and pursued in

order to create a collective narrative of the discussion in which students bring their previous knowledge and sociopolitical background into play. Once true dialogue is achieved, students are able to challenge the oppressive discourses the musical portrays and consequently identify both a collective and individual sense of cultural identity.

Rosenblatt's Reader's Response Theory provides an additional approach towards the discussion of *West Side Story* for it places its focus in the reading transaction. As teachers, we must be aware of the different reading stances our students might take when approaching and analyzing a text. According to Rosenblatt, reading is a transaction, and as such, it can take two different stances; the *efferent* stance and the *aesthetic* stance. On the one hand, in the *efferent* stance the reader is focused on "building up the meanings, the ideas, the directions to be retained; attention focuses on accumulating what is to be carried away at the end of the reading" (Rosenblatt 73). On the other hand,

[i]f the reader seeks a story, a poem, a play, his attention will shift inward, will center on what is being created *during* the actual reading. A much broader range of elements will be allowed to rise into consciousness, not simply the abstract concepts that the words point to, but also what those objects or referents strip up of personal feelings, ideas, and attitudes. (Rosenblatt 73)

Teaching *West Side Story* in the classroom requires for the teacher to be able to guide students to the different stances in order to construct meaning and understand the different types of discourse observed in the musical.

The lesson plans provided in this chapter will offer teachers different approaches towards discussing *West Side Story* in the classroom under the aforementioned theories. These lessons are focused on the use of the musical in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, which is the scope of the research, but they

can be adapted towards different grades in which the musical themes and topics align with the requirements of the Department of Education of Puerto Rico.

### **Lesson Plans**

The Department of Education of Puerto Rico, through its English Curriculum Framework and Curriculum Maps, provides an effective tool towards the development of units for use in the English classroom. The inclusion and integration of *West Side Story* in the classroom, in regards to this research, is situated within Unit 12.6 of the Curriculum Maps titled “Poetic Justice.” This unit’s focus is in the study of drama and poetry in order to promote student’s understanding of these genres. The following section provides lesson plans aimed towards the development of critical skills as well as writing skills in students while addressing interdisciplinary topics and building students’ awareness of their cultural identity. These plans were designed based on the requirements of the Department of Education of Puerto Rico’s Policy Letter on Planning the Learning Process 06-2014-2015. However, these plans are not restricted and can be easily adapted to different settings and even other levels depending on the educational context. These plans only cover three specific lessons at different points during a 6 week unit which shows different approaches towards the incorporation of the musical in the classroom and as well as several learning activities. These lessons are based only in the use of *West Side Story* as a separate and individual text. However, it is important to point out that, for the effective integration of the musical as a teaching tool in the classroom, it can be taught alongside other examples of Puerto Rican literature or in line with theater performance and Shakespeare’s plays.

## **Lesson Plan #1**

### ***Unit Theme: 12.6 Poetic Justice***

*Transversal Themes: Cultural Identity*

*Desired Result (Enduring Understanding):*

Students will understand that the intended meaning in poetry and drama is influenced by culture and the world around us.

*Summative Evaluation (Performance Task):*

Students will complete a series of reflective journals related to the discussion of *West Side Story* as they explore the meaning of culture as a concept and the elements influential to culture, and the manner in which the Puerto Rican culture is portrayed in the musical.

### **Learning Plan (Suggested Learning Activities):**

*Standards & Expectations:*

**12.L.1** - Listen and interact with peers during class, group, and partner discussions, sustaining and building upon conversations on a variety of grade-appropriate academic, social, college, and career topics.

**12.S.1** - Contribute to class, group, and partner discussions, sustaining conversations on a variety of appropriate and relevant academic, social, college, and career topics by following turn-taking rules, asking and answering relevant, on-topic questions, affirming others, providing additional relevant information, paraphrasing and evaluating/analyzing/synthesizing key ideas.

*Academic Strategy:*

Participatory Approach (Critical Thinking)

*Objective:*

Once finished the lesson, students should be able to define the concept of culture as well as determine factors which have an influence in our culture.

*Initial Activities:*

Students will define and discuss what the concept of culture means to them after being introduced to it by the teacher. (Appendix A Slide 2) This will enable students to discuss the concept of culture as presented in the film.

*Development Activities:*

After the discussion, students will give examples of elements which have an influence in our definition of culture. Students will be tasked with going to the board and writing the different influential elements. Afterwards, students will be shown a Wordle graphic which includes different influential elements in regards to culture. (Teachers may create their own Wordle here: <http://www.wordle.net/create>)

*Closing Activities:*

Using the elements discussed, students will be tasked with determining whether the definition of culture differs depending on the sociopolitical background of the group which offers the definition. In other words, students will be asked to answer the following:

- What does the concept of culture mean to you? Would you say there is only one true definition of your culture or do you believe there could be multiple definitions of culture



in the same group / community / country? Students will write their answers as a response piece.

*Formative Assessment-Other Evidence:*

Reading Response

*Materials:*

Board, markers, computer with projector and speakers.

## **Lesson Plan #2**

### ***Unit Theme: 12.6 Poetic Justice***

*Transversal Themes: Cultural Identity*

*Desired Result (Enduring Understanding):*

Students will understand the intended meaning in poetry and drama is influenced by culture and the world around us.

*Summative Evaluation (Performance Task):*

Students will explore the representation of Puerto Ricans in the film and analyze symbols related to both racial groups: the Sharks and the Jets. Students will complete a short comparison of both symbols.

*Standards & Expectations:*

**12.L.1** - Listen and interact with peers during class, group, and partner discussions, sustaining and building upon conversations on a variety of grade-appropriate academic, social, college, and career topics.

**12.L.1c** - Listen and respond during a read aloud, presentation, or performance from a variety of literature, periods, genres, and styles to analyze character development and setting, and to distinguish the characteristics of tone, voice, and mood; makes connections to text.

**12.S.1** - Contribute to class, group, and partner discussions, sustaining conversations on a variety of appropriate and relevant academic, social, college, and career topics by following turn-taking rules, asking and answering relevant, on-topic questions, affirming others, providing additional relevant information, paraphrasing and evaluating/analyzing/synthesizing key ideas.

**12.R.4I** - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text

**12.LA.5a** – Interpret figures of speech (e.g., oxymoron, hyperbole, paradox) in context and analyze their role in the text.

**12.W.8** - Write routinely for a variety of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

*Academic Strategy:*

Participatory Approach (Critical Thinking)

*Objective:*

After watching the clip, students will discuss the symbols related to both gangs and possible interpretations they can offer for said symbols.

*Initial Activities:*

Students are shown the beginning of the film *West Side Story* in which the Jets and the Sharks are first introduced. Students offer their first reactions to the characters. In addition, students are shown the cover of LIFE magazine of September 9, 1957 which portrays a Shark member under the headline “Crime in the U.S.: Parents and Teenagers Debate ‘Going Steady’.” (Appendix B)

*Development Activities:*

Students will actively discuss the manner in which the characters are portrayed in the film. Emphasis is given to the name of both gangs and the meaning those symbols attach to the characterization of both racial groups.

*Closing Activities:* Students will write a comparison of both symbols as they are represented in the film.

*Formative Assessment-Other Evidence:*

Compare and Contrast Analysis.

*Materials:*

Computer with projector and speaker.

### **Lesson Plan #3**

#### ***Unit Theme: 12.6 Poetic Justice***

*Transversal Themes: Cultural Identity*

*Desired Result (Enduring Understanding):*

Students will understand the intended meaning in poetry and drama is influenced by culture and the world around us.

Actors or those sharing oral interpretations use their voices and bodies to convey the mood and tone of a piece visually and aurally/orally and help us better understand the written and spoken word.

*Summative Evaluation (Performance Task):*

Students will complete a song analysis related to the discussion of the song “America” (Appendix C) from *West Side Story* as they explore the manner in which characters connected to the Puerto Rican culture are portrayed in the musical.

*Standards & Expectations:*

**12.L.1** - Listen and interact with peers during class, group, and partner discussions, sustaining and building upon conversations on a variety of grade-appropriate academic, social, college, and career topics.

**12.L.1c** - Listen and respond during a read aloud, presentation, or performance from a variety of literature, periods, genres, and styles to analyze character development and setting, and to distinguish the characteristics of tone, voice, and mood; makes connections to text.

**12.S.1** - Contribute to class, group, and partner discussions, sustaining conversations on a variety of appropriate and relevant academic, social, college, and career topics by following turn-taking rules, asking and answering relevant, on-topic questions, affirming others, providing additional relevant information, paraphrasing and evaluating/analyzing/synthesizing key ideas.

**12.R.6L** - Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

**12.LA.5a** – Interpret figures of speech (e.g., oxymoron, hyperbole, paradox) in context and analyze their role in the text.

**12.W.8** - Write routinely for a variety of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

*Academic Strategy:*

Participatory Approach (Critical thinking)

*Objective:*

After watching the clip and analyzing the song lyrics, students will start drafting their song analysis placing an emphasis in the representation of Puerto Ricans in the song and the different types of discourse.

*Initial Activities:*

Students are shown a clip of the film *West Side Story* in which the Puerto Ricans perform the song “America.” Students offer their first reactions to the musical number.

*Development Activities:*

Students will actively discuss the manner in which the characters are portrayed in the film.

Emphasis is given to Anita and Bernardo and the message conveyed in the song regarding the concepts of assimilation and racism. Students are also guided towards an exploration of the gender relations in the group.

*Closing Activities:* Students are provided with a handout of the song lyrics and are tasked with choosing a specific section of the song to analyze. Students must explain what type of situation the character is narrating and what type of discourse is taking place.

*Formative Assessment-Other Evidence:*

Poetry Analysis Assignment

*Materials:*

Computer with projector and speaker, handout.

## **Limitations of the Study**

First, this research promotes the integration of *West Side Story* in secondary classrooms through the discussion of the musical as a text. However, the scope of this research is limited to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade for I believe student's maturity allows for there to be a more in-depth discussion of the different types of discourse presented in the text. Nevertheless, through the use of the English Program Curricular Framework, and the Department of Education's Curricular Maps, the discussion of the musical can be adapted towards its integration in different grade levels and subject areas.

Second, one of the critical components in the discussion of the musical is students' sociopolitical background as a guiding factor in the discussions of the texts. As such, the discussion of the musical greatly varies according to the sociopolitical background of the students and therefore the lessons are affected by this. Likewise, the research focused only in students enrolled in schools in Puerto Rico and did not take into considerations contexts outside of Puerto Rican schools. Also, it is important to keep in mind that students of the diaspora, although of Puerto Rican descent, might react differently towards discussion of the musical in an educational context.

Lastly, although a sociopolitical and historic analysis can be integrated into the discussions of the musical, it was not included for it goes beyond the scope and objectives of the research.

## **Further Areas of Research**

Due to the objectives of the research, as mentioned in the limitations of the study section, there are some aspects of the integration of the musical in secondary English classrooms that can be explored or expanded upon. One of the major areas to be explored is the integration of the



musical in other levels. Through the use of the English Program Framework, and Puerto Rico's Department of Education Curricular Maps, the integration of the musical in different grade levels is possible by means of the use of Transversal Themes which cover most grade levels. Future research could explore specific levels in which the integration of the musical would be viable. In this same manner, future research could also address an examination of *West Side Story* in conjunction to other forms of literature which share crucial components with the musical.

An additional point of future research could be the integration of *West Side Story* in a different geographical and social context. This research is limited to Puerto Rican high school students enrolled in the Puerto Rican school system. It would be beneficial to explore approaches towards the effective integration of the musical in schools outside of Puerto Rico.

One last point of future research could be an in-depth exploration of Puerto Rico's current sociopolitical background along with a historic analysis of the sociopolitical context of the island during the musical's events.

### **Closing Remarks**

*West Side Story*, as broadly discussed in this research, is one of the first and major works of US popular performance to portray Puerto Ricans as a racial group in the US. At times in which students are being able observe a rise in racist discourse as a result of events in their country or immediate communities, it is extremely important for teachers to open a forum towards the examination of racist discourse and power relations in society. By allowing students to challenge these concepts we are able to provide them with crucial critical thinking skills, and as such, ignoring the musical's potential use in an educational environment would waste a great number of beneficial opportunities. With this research, I hope to have addressed and eased any concerns over the use of *West Side Story* in the secondary English Curriculum which are

oftentimes tied to criticisms against the musical's stereotypical portrayal of the Puerto Ricans as a racial group for it is this portrayal which needs to be challenged and actively examined by students in the classroom. Although the musical is clearly seen as a source of racist discourse, allowing students to critically challenge and deconstruct the portrayal of Puerto Ricans in the musical serves as a vehicle towards students discussing their views of their cultural identity as well as how this identity is portrayed by others. As an educator, I believe we must challenge students to break their sociopolitical barriers and ultimately gain a sense of political consciousness. The musical, although not necessarily seen as a traditional academic text, provides us with the chance to do it through a critical analysis of its racial representations and the different interdisciplinary elements it introduces through its discussion.

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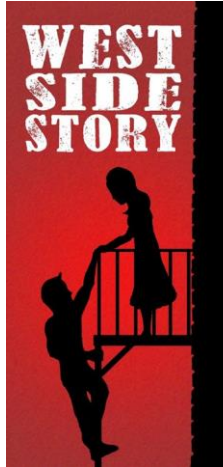
## Appendix A: Presentation Used for Lesson Plan #1



### WRITING PROMPT

- WHAT DOES THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE MEAN TO YOU? WOULD YOU SAY THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUE DEFINITION OF YOUR CULTURE OR DO YOU BELIEVE THERE COULD BE MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE IN THE SAME GROUP/COMMUNITY/COUNTRY?





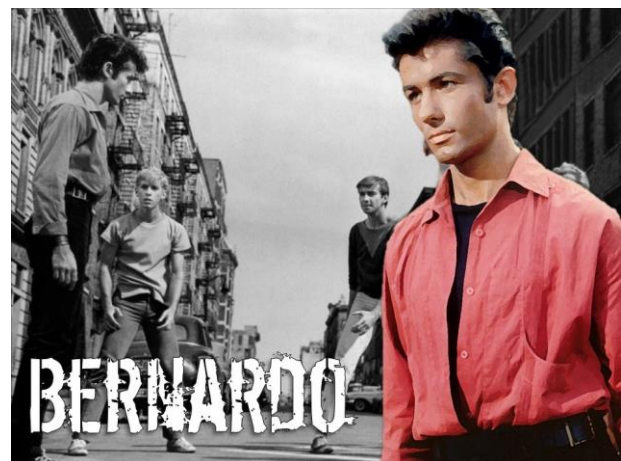
"the earliest—and arguably the only—widely disseminated American mass culture product to construe Puerto Ricans as a specific, and hence different, U.S. ethnic group, ranked in a particular social order, living in a distinct location, yet informed by a uniquely American racialization process" (60)



"Because tonight is the real beginning of my life as a young lady of America!"

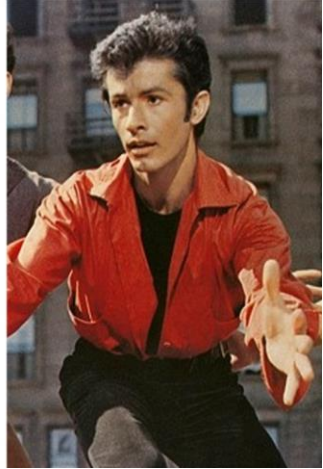


Puerto Rico my heart's devotion  
let it sink back in the ocean  
Always the hurricanes blowing  
Always the population growing  
And the money owing  
And the sun light streaming  
And the native steaming  
I like the island Manhattan  
Smoke on your pipe and put that  
in



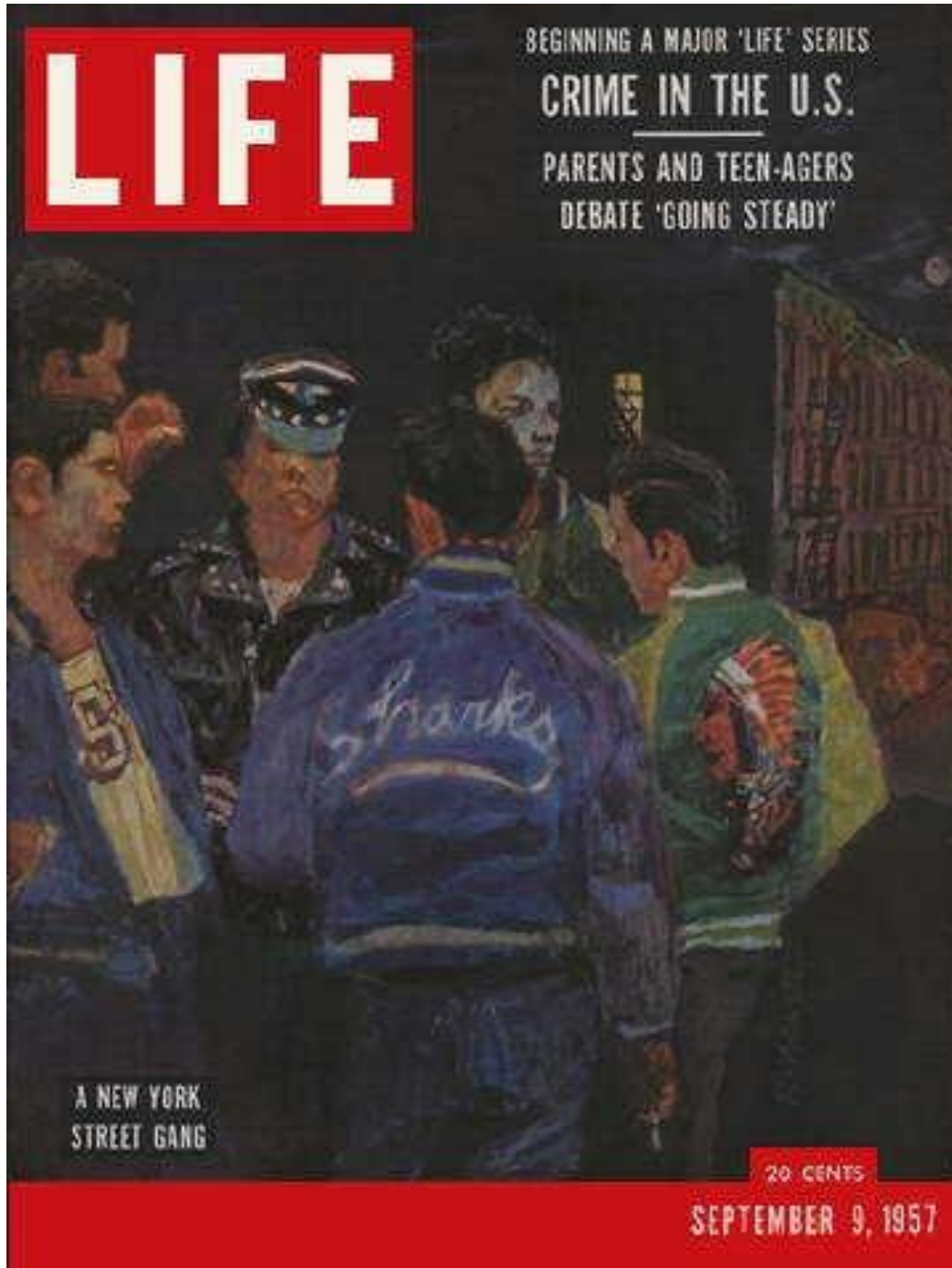


"Better get  
rid of your  
accent!!"





Appendix B: Cover of LIFE Magazine (September 9, 1957)



## Appendix C: America Lyrics

**ANITA**  
Puerto Rico,  
My heart's devotion--  
Let it sink back in the ocean.  
Always the hurricanes  
blowing,  
Always the population  
growing,  
And the money owing.  
And the sunlight streaming,  
And the natives steaming.  
I like the island Manhattan,  
Smoke on your pipe and put  
that in.

**GIRLS** (chorus)  
I like to be in America,  
Okay by me in America,  
Everything free in America

**BERNARDO**  
For a small fee in America.

**ANITA**  
Buying on credit is so nice.

**BERNARDO**  
One look at us and they  
charge twice.

**ROSALIA**  
I'll have my own washing  
machine.

**JUANO**  
What will you have, though,  
to keep clean?

**ANITA**  
Skyscrapers bloom in  
America.

**ANOTHER GIRL**

Cadillacs zoom in America.

**ANOTHER GIRL**  
Industry boom in America.

**BOYS**  
Twelve in a room in  
America.

**ANITA**  
Lots of new housing with  
more space.

**BERNARDO**  
Lots of doors slamming in  
our face.

**ANITA**  
I'll get a terrace apartment.

**BERNARDO**  
Better get rid of your accent.

**ANITA AND THREE  
GIRLS**  
Life can be bright in  
America.

**BERNARDO**  
If you can fight in America.

**ALL GIRLS**  
Life is all right in America.

**ALL BOYS**  
If you're all white in  
America.

(an interlude of WHISTLING  
and DANCING)

**ANITA AND CONSUELO**

Here you are free and you  
have pride.

**BERNARDO**  
Long as you stay on your  
own side.

**ANITA**  
Free to be anything you  
choose.

**ALL BOYS**  
Free to wait tables and shine  
shoes.

**BERNARDO**  
Everywhere grime in  
America,  
Organized crime in America,  
Terrible time in America.

**ANITA**  
You forget I'm in America.

(An interlude of MORE  
DANCING)

**BERNARDO**  
I think I go back to San Juan

**ANITA**  
I know a boat you can get on.

**BERNARDO**  
Everyone there will give big  
cheer.

**ANITA**  
Everyone there will have  
moved here.

Music by Leonard Bernstein,  
lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.