

For millions of theatre, music, film, and television fans the words ‘West Side Story’ are forever entangled with perceptions and representations of US Latinx cultures like no other art product in the history of ‘American’ media.<sup>1</sup> Since Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins, and Stephen Sondheim premiered *West Side Story* in 1957 it has become a filter, a set of eyeglasses through which US Latinxs and Puerto Ricans have been codified for mainstream audiences. Frances Negrón-Muntaner has referred to *West Side Story* as ‘the Puerto Rican *Birth of a Nation*: a blatant, seminal . . . valorized, aestheticized eruption into the (American) national “consciousness.”’ In other words, *West Side Story* has been seen by many social critics and academics as a sort of ‘trauma’ for the Puerto Rican diaspora.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, it has also been identified by many Puerto Rican, Newyorican, and Latinx performers in all media as a motivation and a door into the arts. Performers from Rita Moreno to Jennifer López to Lin-Manuel Miranda have cited *West Side Story* as an instrumental and inspirational step in their paths to professional careers.<sup>3</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the instinct to ‘burn’ *West Side Story* because of its perpetuation of stereotypes is shortsighted: it misses the historical and political context through which the Latinx experience of *West Side Story* can be seen as rebellious and subversive. From the revision of the ‘America’ lyrics to more accurately represent the disappointment of Bernardo and the Sharks vis-à-vis racism, discrimination, harassment, and lack of economic opportunity, to Maria’s usurpation of the ‘Miss America’ title, to the ironic rendition of the hymn ‘(America) My Country, ’Tis of Thee,’ and other references, *West Side Story* offers many conspicuous instances of criticism, resistance, and debunking of various ‘American’ myths.<sup>4</sup> The fact that most of that criticism is channeled through the Puerto Rican Sharks, and well-grounded in the Puerto Rican mid century ‘immigrant’ experience, allows for a reading of *West Side Story* as somewhat subversive in the landscape of 1950s and 1960s US popular culture. The argument, typical in sociological debates, that *West Side Story* offers no alternative to the representation of Puerto

Ricans/Latinx than that of finger-snapping, knife-wielding, juvenile delinquents is myopic and fails to account for the genuine, if limited social commentary that the text offers in context.<sup>5</sup>

But while the representation of immigrant, Latinx/Puerto Rican characters and attitudes can be debated as ranging from abject to progressive, it is the history of casting the Sharks in the most visible versions of *West Side Story* – Broadway 1957, the 1961 film, and prominent revivals – where more problematic issues arise. Historically, the casting of principal performers in *West Side Story* tends to favor a pattern that arguably privileges ethnically white – Anglo, Caucasian, and European types – for certain roles while reserving background and/or smaller parts for visibly more ‘ethnic’ actors. This pattern, which extends to the TV show *Glee* (2009–2015), was only visibly subverted in the 2020 Broadway revival. The controversial production though, directed by Ivo van Hove, went on hiatus on 15 March 2020 after only a few months due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The shift to a Puerto Rican focus, after the aborted ‘East Side Story’ idea, brings the Hispanic cultural debate into focus.<sup>6</sup> This chapter considers primarily issues of Puerto Rican/Latinx representation and casting in the original 1957 Broadway show and the 1961 film directed by Robert Wise with Jerome Robbins, while briefly commenting on other productions, including the 2020 Broadway revival, directed by Ivo van Hove, and the 2021 film, directed by Steven Spielberg.

### ‘In America now . . .’

Negrón-Muntaner addressed the issue that the original film was not ‘about’ Puerto Ricans, that it was never intended to be ‘real,’ and that it does not ‘seem real to Puerto Rican spectators.’<sup>7</sup> She argues that *West Side Story* is ‘the most cohesive product of American culture to “hail” Puerto Ricans as Puerto Rican-Americans. Puerto Rican spectators have not been able to resist the command to turn around and respond to the film’s shameful hailing,’ she writes.<sup>8</sup> In spite of the argument that the Sharks are depicted mainly as criminals, it is clearly the Jets who begin the cycle of violence that places the Sharks on their path to criminality. In the prologue that sets up the film’s first act, the spectator is introduced first to Riff, leader of the Jets, who refers to his gang as ‘juvenile delinquents,’ and later to Bernardo, leader of the Sharks. Bernardo is harassed without visible provocation apart from his ‘otherness.’ Later at the ‘war council’ it is confirmed that it was the Jets who ‘jumped’ Bernardo the first day he moved to the neighborhood.

Criminality and lawlessness are not initially associated with the so-called 'immigrants,' but rather with the perceived 'natives.' Lieutenant Schrank and Officer Krupke are continuously represented as operating 'outside' the law in trying to make deals with the Jets. But police are also the common enemy, and the only truce between Sharks and Jets appears as a rebellious gesture against these corrupt authority figures.

In contrast to the lawlessness of the 'natives' and the impotence of 'the Law,' the Sharks (especially 'their girls') are productive, law abiding, and bound by ties that constitute them within some sense of community. Maria, Anita, Rosalia, and Consuelo all work in the bridal shop and appear to live in the same building. They speak Spanish to one another occasionally, trust each other, and visit one another. There is no real reference to 'home' or community around any one of the active Jets; they are amorphous as far as social or national identity is concerned, with the exception of the term 'natives.' Tony is also explicitly finished with his gang life; he works (which provokes the scorn of the gang) and tells Maria that he goes to church. In contrast, Riff lives with Tony's family and he explains the Jets' dire domestic situations in 'Gee, Officer Krupke': drugs, alcohol, abuse.<sup>9</sup>

As comical as the number is, it stands in great contrast to what we know about the Sharks and their community. In the film, Bernardo and Maria live with their parents and people know them and respect them in their building. We know that Maria has a caring, loving relationship with her parents, as evidenced in their exchange at the fire escape during the 'Tonight' duet. Although parents are absent from the immediate space of the narrative action, we know that Maria's parents are just off-screen. It is also evident that Maria has been brought up properly, in an environment that encourages work and Catholicism, itself an important identity symbol for many Puerto Ricans. Besides the Shark women, we know that Chino also works, and the movie suggests that Maria's parents own the neighborhood bodega. Moreover, the only 'domestic' space represented in the film is Maria's family apartment in the 'Puerto Rican' neighborhood. There is a sense of community already built around the space shared by the characters and it is one of diversity and integration, however unwanted for the assorted 'whites.' In the prologue sequence we see two prophetic signs opposite each other, one stating 'KEEP OFF' and the other 'SE HABLA ESPAÑOL.' These suggest the inevitable integration of this neighborhood and the acknowledgment of the Puerto Rican/Latinx presence. The Jets are just an assortment of what Lt. Schrank calls 'immigrant scum,' with no distinct cultural backgrounds. (Tony is referred to as 'a Polack.') With no 'home' other than the streets, no 'family' other than the gang, no social

ambitions other than reclaiming their indistinct 'turf,' the Jets are, by far, the group with no discernible cultural or social identity.

The block, the building, and the apartment where Maria and Bernardo live with their parents constitute the only 'home' seen in *West Side Story*. In the 1961 movie there are six important sequences that take place in the apartment and its immediate surroundings, more than any other space. These are: Bernardo, Anita, and Maria after the dance at the gym; Tony and Maria on the fire escape where she speaks to her father through the window; the 'America' number sung on the rooftop of the same building; Tony and Maria's utopic 'I want' song, 'Somewhere,' and the lovemaking scene; Maria and Anita's confrontation in the 'A Boy Like That/I Have a Love' duet; and Lt. Schrank's interview with Maria after the fatal rumble. This unique domestic space is somewhat problematic in the absence of parental figures, its 'colourful' design and the featuring of a shrine to the Virgin Mary in Maria's bedroom, expanding on certain stereotypes about Latinos. It is, however, the only domestic space seen in the film, but one where some signs of cultural identity can be glimpsed: a bowl of tropical fruit on the table, a guitar propped up against a corner, a combined dining/living room area. Besides the 'colour,' food, music, and references to family and Catholicism as cultural identity signs, there is a fleeting yet clear image of a small Puerto Rican flag along with the US flag visible on top of a television set. The two flags together call Schrank's attention and he stops for a moment, to observe. The Puerto Rican flag shows up occasionally in films or television where a Puerto Rican presence is implied, especially in New York settings. What is far less common is to see the Puerto Rican flag together with the US flag, though that is the official Commonwealth of Puerto Rico constitutional practice. Media representations of Puerto Ricans rarely acknowledge Puerto Rico's unusual political relationship with the USA. Extending Bernardo's retort to Anita during the 'America' argument, 'Puerto Rico is *in* America now' – slightly revised from the show – and referring to the constitutional status of the territory in 'Commonwealth' with the USA, Maria's family, in all evidence, is adjusted to this new status and welcoming of their 'US–Puerto Rican' political and social (if not ethnic/cultural) identity.

Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since 1917, and the 'Commonwealth' status was made constitutional by referendum and ratified by the US Congress in 1952. As US citizens, Puerto Rican 'migration' to the US mainland began in earnest in the 1920s and continued to grow over the next three decades. Between 1950 and 1960 some 470,000 Puerto Ricans (around 20 percent of the Island's population) came to the USA,

mostly to New York City, but also to places like Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston.<sup>10</sup> This migratory wave peaked around 1953/54 coinciding with Maria's arrival – and with Bernstein, Robbins, and Laurents seriously beginning to give shape to *West Side Story*. Nevertheless, it is the definition of Maria's family as 'US Puerto Ricans' that is most significant, giving them, more than any other characters in the film, a sense of identity; a problematic hyphenated identity, but to a certain extent, 'real.' Maria's family is one of 'good' immigrants and good Americans: hard-working, law-abiding, church-going, and respectful of Puerto Rico's political and constitutional relationship to the United States, however awkward that status might be. The phrase 'Puerto Rico is *in* America now' that Bernardo recites to Anita with ironic gusto acquires a double significance. On one hand, it acknowledges Puerto Rico's new political status that surrounds directly the temporal context; on the other, it emphasizes Bernardo's slippery, sardonic definition of that status. As the 'counterpoint' of 'America' effectively foregrounds, 'Puerto Rico is *in* America now,' but Puerto Ricans remain trapped between unofficial second-class citizenship, and the need to assimilate culturally.

### 'Will you let me pass?'

Within the improbable narrative world of *West Side Story*, the focus on Puerto Ricans has been well documented and criticized. Not only were all four creators of the show Jewish New Yorkers, but Sondheim himself acknowledged that he was not qualified to write for these characters: 'I can't do this show . . . ' he is reported to have said. 'I've never been that poor and I've never even *known* a Puerto Rican.'<sup>11</sup> And yet in the process of the movie adaptation, Sondheim and screenwriter Ernest Lehman made a significant number of changes to the lyrics and format of the song 'America,' transforming it into an 'argument' oscillating between definitions and revisions of the immigrant experience and the fallacy of 'the American dream.'

Besides the fact that nobody in Puerto Rico refers to the USA as 'America' (more likely *Estados Unidos*, or 'New York,' as synecdoche for the USA), the film version of the song significantly softens up the prejudiced content that led to such criticism during the initial stage run.<sup>12</sup> The biggest change is the reworking of the song structure from an argument between four of the girls (Rosalia, the one favorable to Puerto Rico, Anita and the others to 'America') into a gender-divided counterpoint where the

boys, led by Bernardo, and the girls, led by Anita, discuss passionately the immigrant experience from two well-defined and completely opposite points of view. In the stage version the song 'America' is emphatic in its lampooning of Puerto Rico as an underdeveloped, poverty-stricken, overpopulated, violence-infested, and disease-riddled country, in contrast to the material advantages of the 'American' experience.

The film version of 'America' sharply emphasizes the social disadvantages, the ethnic and racial prejudice, and even the violence to which the immigrant is exposed. The 'Americanization of Anita' is ridiculed by Bernardo and the Sharks as a sign of weakness as he quips, 'Look, instead of a shampoo, she's been brainwashed . . . and now she's queer for Uncle Sam.' The prologue to the musical number is faithful in the adaptation, affirming Bernardo's disappointment at the contradictions between his naïve immigrant desires ('We came eager, with our hearts open . . .') and the cruel reality of prejudice ('Lice! Cockroaches!'). But that is as far as the stage version goes, so it is meaningful that the film version goes to such efforts to dramatize Bernardo's disillusionment, and then later to give him the final word; agreeing in no uncertain terms with Bernardo's miserable prophesy of 'America' ('Everywhere grime in America . . . Terrible time in America'). The movie's gender counterpoint emphasizes the women's shallow view of 'assimilation' as something strictly related to conspicuous consumption: it suggests that *being* American means to spend notably on consumer goods. The men, however, have a decidedly dystopian, more realistic view of a significant portion of the immigrant experience in the USA.

Surely the result is imperfect, yet nothing short of subversive, especially since Anita, the most vocal champion of the 'America' experience, later recants her previously cheery 'Americanization.' After the traumatic attempted rape perpetrated against her by the Jets, Anita's near-final words serve as a real redemption for her character: 'Bernardo was right . . . If one of you was bleeding in the street, I'd walk by and spit on you!' She delivers the false news about Maria's death saying 'I have a message for your *American* buddy' pronouncing the adjective 'American' as if it were an insult. Anita realizes that 'Bernardo was right' about the fallacy of the American dream, even if it takes the experience of sexual violence to come to this realization. While the Sharks are certainly portrayed as patriarchal and infected with stereotypically 'Latin' machismo, they are also evidently affectionate (especially Bernardo with Maria and Anita), while the Jets are consistently and plainly misogynistic ('. . . Whadda we poopin' around wit' dumb broads?'). The Jets' women,

Anybodys, Graziella, and Velma, are treated in an openly hostile manner. This pattern reaches its most violent manifestation in the racially and sexually charged assault against Anita.

Anita's attempt to make peace, prompted by Maria's desire to escape with Tony 'Somewhere' (against Anita's warning, 'you'll meet another boy tomorrow, one of your own kind, stick to your own kind') leads to what is the most violent scene in both versions. By contrast most of the fight action between the gangs is 'stylized' dancing rather than stunt fighting. Even the killings of Riff and Bernardo, one arguably accidental, the other swiftly brief, are notorious for their lack of graphic violence. But Anita's confrontation with the Jets at Doc's candy store is verbally and dramatically aggressive. While trying to reach Doc and Tony, Anita is harassed by the Jets with racial epithets and cruel stereotypes ('Spic! Lyin' Spic!').

The screenplay and libretto describe the rest of the scene graphically, referring to the Jets as animals, as if they were attacking wolves or dogs:

The taunting breaks out into a *wild, savage* DANCE, with epithets hurled at Anita, who is encircled and driven by the whole *pack*. At the peak she is shoved and falls in a corner. The Jets lift Baby John up high and drop him on top of her . . .<sup>13</sup> (My emphasis.)

Ultimately, for Anita as much as Bernardo, the phrase 'terrible time in America' turns out to be a prophetic, emphatic truth. Subversive for its 1957/1961 contexts, the progressive discourse in *West Side Story* is subtle yet persistent, and never as violent as in the assault against Anita.

Moreover, Maria's desire to usurp the 'Miss America' title is itself an act of resistance against the ultimate celebration of white female Americana. The idea of an 'ethnic' Miss America in the 1950s is nothing short of unthinkable. Criticism of 'I Feel Pretty' points to it as a sign of Maria's submission to the gaze of a white man: she only becomes visible when desired by Tony. Yet arguably she is also showing an unusual sign of subjectivity. She rebels against patriarchal assumptions ('Why did my brother bring me here? To Marry Chino. When I look at Chino nothing happens') and expresses her desire to 'touch excitement.' Granted, she falls in love with the first man she sees outside of the immediate work and domestic spaces. Yet, the 'choice' of Tony is her only expression of sexual desire and agency. 'I Feel Pretty' and the Miss America claim extend the manifestation of Maria's subjectivity and expand on the consistent questions about Puerto Rican 'Americanness.'

Another important reference to the Puerto Rican 'problem' is the Sharks' whistled rendition of Samuel Francis Smith's 1831 '(America) My

country 'tis of thee . . . ' Upon being banned by Lt. Schrank from Doc's candy store the Sharks' farewell statement is the whistled phrase from the song invoking the lyrics 'My country 'tis of thee/sweet land of liberty/of thee I sing . . . ' The last note is rendered in a lowering turn, as if it was deflating, subverting the fallacious lyrics. Like Maria's claim to the Miss America title, the Sharks' appropriation of this other 'America' song comes across as an act of rebellion with its ironic use of a cultural symbol whose lyrics insist on the 'native' profile of the 'real' American: ' . . . Land where my fathers died [. . .] My native country thee . . . ' With these three visions and revisions of the word 'America,' Anita, Maria, Bernardo, and the Sharks are constantly calling our attention to the dystopia of *this* immigrant experience.

### 'It was like putting mud . . . '

The history of *West Side Story* and its relationship to Puerto Ricans and Latinxs in the USA continues to be controversial. Even if context allows for a reading against the grain that puts Puerto Rican characters in a progressive light, as I argue, more effort went into getting the music right than the casting. Some 'Newyorican' context was to be provided by Bernstein's musical choices. As Elizabeth Wells has demonstrated, the many colours of Latin rhythms, Afro-Cuban jazz, the influence of Xavier Cugat, Dámaso Pérez Prado, and the 'mambo craze' of the 1950s all found their way into Bernstein's score.<sup>14</sup> The ease of travel between New York and San Juan allowed Bernstein to fly south to the Island and do some research there. The prominent Newyorican musician, composer, and band director Bobby Sanabria released the album *West Side Story Reimagined* in 2018. It unearthed inspiration from samba, mambo, Mexican, and even strong Afro-Caribbean intersections lying just under the surface of Bernstein's score, though many of these had already been partially adopted into the city's musical soundscape.<sup>15</sup>

The casting practices for the original 1957 Broadway production of *West Side Story*, however, set the pattern for the persistent racial and ethnic hierarchization of principal roles that has been associated with *West Side Story* since 1957. The original run featured two actors of Puerto Rican descent in prominent roles: Jaime Sánchez as Chino, and Chita Rivera as Anita. Sánchez would go on to a long career in theatre, films, and television. Rivera, a 'Newyorican,' was already a Broadway veteran who was married to 'Jet' Tony Mordente. That Anita, the show's designated 'Latin spitfire'



stereotype, should be played by a performer with real Puerto Rican ancestry became the norm, especially in contrast to the casting of Maria. Carol Lawrence, who played Maria in the first run and the 1960 revival, was Italian American. She showed up at her first audition 'heavily made up and bejeweled in an attempt to look like a Puerto Rican Juliet.' But Robbins would not have it and instructed her to clean up and then come back.<sup>16</sup> She won the role after numerous auditions and callbacks, and aside from a heavily 'accented' speech and singing pattern, the Maria/Anita contrast in make-up, costume, and even movement – given that Maria's is largely a non-dancing part – was clearly established. Since then, the female actors identified with Maria (especially Natalie Wood) would continue to fall into the 'whiter' category, associated with her modesty and lack of sexual experience, in contrast to Anita's 'spitfire' persona. With Chita Rivera on Broadway and Rita Moreno in the 1961 movie the Maria/Anita dichotomy became most visible.

During its Broadway run, Hollywood producer Harold Mirisch saw the show, purchased the film rights, and began developing the project for United Artists.<sup>17</sup> Natalie Wood was one of the last actors cast for the film in August 1960. Rita Moreno had tested for Anita as early as January. With more tests and screen credit negotiations extending for months, Moreno was signed up as Anita in late July 1960.<sup>18</sup> Moreno was an established character actor in countless 'barefoot princess' parts going back to 1950. But she had played important featured roles in the movie version of *The King and I* (1956), for which Jerome Robbins had recreated his Broadway choreography, and especially *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) where, as 'Zelda Zanders,' co-director Gene Kelly gave her the only non-ethnic part of her early career. Paradoxically, and in contrast to the 'whitening' of the role of Maria (on stage and film) Moreno, the 'Spanish Elizabeth Taylor' was not dark enough to play Anita.<sup>19</sup>

Besides having to fake a heavy accent, all the 'Sharks' in the cast – assorted white actors and a handful of Latinx dancers – were required to don 'brownface' makeup. In a 2017 interview with NPR, Moreno described the makeup as 'extremely dark . . . It was like putting mud on my face.' The story, which Moreno has told in numerous interviews and retold in her 2013 memoir, is further elaborated in the interview. Moreno says that she explained to the make-up man that Puerto Ricans came in a wide array of colours: fair, light brown, 'Taíno' bronze, black. 'Why do we all have to be the same colour?' The man replied, according to Moreno, 'What are you, a racist?'<sup>20</sup> Precisely because Puerto Ricans are not easily identifiable due to our broad racial diversity, Negrón-Muntaner argues that Puerto Rican

‘ethnic specificity had to be easily seen and heard.’<sup>21</sup> This need led to the imposition of ‘extremely dark’ make-up and the uniform thick accents on all actors. These practices were especially conspicuous in George Chakiris as ‘Bernardo,’ a Greek American who had played ‘Riff’ in the London production in 1959, and Joanne Miya, a Japanese American, as ‘Francisca,’ who recalls how she had to ‘pass’ for Puerto Rican in her audition.<sup>22</sup> And while the ‘Sharks’ are presumably a mix of ‘Newyoricans’ born in New York, and recently arrived migrants (like Maria), the accent, along with the ‘brownface’ was adopted by the producers and imposed on the performers in a form of ‘drag’ or ‘masquerade’ designed to avoid any ‘ethnic misreading’ of their identity.<sup>23</sup>

In spring 1960 the film producers were considering some actors for the part of Maria who had ‘ethnic’ acting experience, or even Latinx heritage. A standout on the list was Susan Kohner, daughter of Mexican actress Lupita Tovar, who had played the troubled ‘passing’ teen ‘Sarah Jane’ in Douglas Sirk’s 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life*.<sup>24</sup> But the producers, nervous about a largely unknown cast, hired Natalie Wood. Wood had a long career as a child actor from the 1940s, later specializing in *ingénues* at the brink of sexual awakening, and she had the right experience. Furthermore, she had name recognition and, like Carol Lawrence before her, she was of white European ancestry. In the context of 1950s and ’60s Hollywood, Maria and Tony’s romance could be interracial only in ‘drag’ but not in reality. While the other Sharks were required to apply ‘extremely dark’ makeup (even the fairly light-skinned Moreno), Wood was allowed to ‘pass’ for Puerto Rican without such impositions. As a typical Latin ‘spit-fire,’ Anita’s persona also comes imbued with sexuality – a slightly different version of the ‘barefoot princess’ she had been playing since the early 1950s. That stereotype has been mapped out by many scholars, most recently Priscilla Peña Ovalle. ‘Hollywood’s depiction of racialized female sexuality,’ writes Peña Ovalle, was ‘a version of femininity that signified looseness or “excessive” female sexuality through hoop earrings, long and wild hair, an off-the-shoulder blouse, and bad attitude.’<sup>25</sup> By contrast, the recently transplanted Maria, in her white dress and her *ingénue* manner, is unequivocally characterized as virginal, a disparity further emphasized by the casting of a white actor as Maria.

The 1980 Broadway revival, directed by Jerome Robbins himself, underscored this pattern in a rather paradoxical way. A contemporary article published in the *New York Times* described the two characters in typical terms. ‘The one is ethereal, fawnlike. The other is a little firecracker, sizzling and popping on stage and off.’<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, the article was referring

respectively to the roles of Maria and Anita. Tellingly, the role of Maria went to the Puerto Rican actress Jossie de Guzmán, who was made to dye her hair several shades darker than her natural light brown and have ‘her pale skin’ darkened. But the compromise of a Puerto Rican actress playing the ‘ethereal, fawnlike’ Maria – even in ‘brownface’ – appeared to complicate the implied sexual contrast associated with the characters. Debbie Allen, an African American dancer and choreographer, was cast as Anita. In the black-and-white photograph accompanying the article the skin tone contrast is even more dramatic. But the author goes further in the ‘type-casting’ of Anita: he describes Allen’s outfit for the interview as ‘a fox jacket with free-swinging skins, a knit dress in fire-engine red and shiny cowboy boots to match.’ While that description could fit a 42nd Street sex worker circa 1980, no such description of de Guzmán followed. Instead, aligning again actress and character, the author wrote of de Guzmán ‘[s]he is deeply religious, like the girl whose role she plays.’<sup>27</sup>

The next major revival on Broadway ran 748 performances from 2009 to 2011. Directed by then ninety-one-year-old Arthur Laurents, the production featured an attempt to further acknowledge and contextualize the Puerto Rican culture purportedly at the core of the show. Lin-Manuel Miranda, a Newyorican known at the time as the Tony award-winning composer and lyricist of the hit show *In the Heights* (off-Broadway 2005), was engaged to translate and adapt certain lyrics and dialogue into Spanish, in a search for more authentic flavour. ‘A Boy Like That,’ one of the dramatic high points of the show, with the fatal lyrics ‘Stick to your own kind,’ was one of the translated songs. But audience response was lukewarm, and the lyrics went back to their original (accented) English after only a few months.<sup>28</sup> Casting was also revised to hire all Latinx actors for the Shark parts. Karen Olivo, a Broadway veteran whose credits included *Rent* (1996) and *In the Heights*, won a Tony Award for the role of Anita. Olivo is a Bronx native from a multi-ethnic Puerto Rican–Dominican family. The role of Maria went to Josefina Scaglione, an Argentinian musical theatre actress of Italian descent. According to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Laurents was unable to find a suitable Maria – among the thousands of Latinx performers auditioning for parts – leading to his casting of Scaglione.<sup>29</sup> She was a Broadway rookie who had appeared in Argentinian productions of *Cinderella* and *Hairspray*. It is telling that Laurents could not find the ‘right’ Maria and the final choice confirmed the historic trend: Scaglione’s fair skin, light straight hair, and green eyes were a visible contrast to Olivo’s brown skin, wavy dark hair, and dark brown eyes.

In its third season, the Fox television show *Glee* (2009–2015) featured a story line around a production of *West Side Story*. The casting of Maria itself became a dramatic hook; the white star of the ‘glee’ club, Rachel Berry (Lea Michele) and the African American diva, Mercedes Jones (Amber Riley) auditioned and competed for the role. After much embellished suspense and various ‘sing offs’ the role went to Rachel, by white default casting. The co-directors declared Mercedes a ‘risky’ choice, presumably because of the implications of miscegenation brought by her pairing with a white Tony. More importantly, the role of Anita went – by ‘brown’ default – to Santana López, the only openly Latina character in the main cast of *Glee*. Santana was played by Naya Rivera, born in Los Angeles to a multi-ethnic family with Puerto Rican and African American ancestry. As I have argued elsewhere, the most notable element in the *Glee* narrative arc is that Santana/Rivera is never seen auditioning for the part of Anita. While casting Maria became the narrative cliff-hanger of several episodes, it appeared that Santana López was the *only* choice for Anita.<sup>30</sup> In one scene, Santana and Rachel are rehearsing the duet ‘A Boy Like That/I Have a Love’ in a dark limbo set. That scene comes near the end of the show, with Anita in mourning and Maria in her nightgown after sexually consummating her relationship with Tony. But in the *Glee* intersection, Santana appears in a low cut, sleeveless, fire-engine red dress topped with a red rose in her hair, while Maria appears in the white dress (‘the only one there in white . . .’) as seen, presumably, in the ‘Dance at the Gym’ scene. Once again, the contrast drawn between Anita’s type and Maria’s visibly whiter, more demure fashion, conforms to the historic pattern: ‘one sassy, sexy and brown,’ the other ‘virginal, modest, and white.’<sup>31</sup> The alignment of whiteness with modesty (‘ethereal, fawnlike’) and brownness with the ‘spitfire’ stereotype (‘racialized sexuality’) is firmly upheld for *Glee*’s twenty-first-century teen/tween audiences.

### ‘Getting it right’

In the volatile cultural wars of the Trump years, it is hardly a coincidence that in the 2020s *West Side Story* saw a major Broadway revival and a Steven Spielberg remake of the film.<sup>32</sup> The Broadway production, a ‘re-imagining’ by Belgian avant-garde director Ivo van Hove, featured a multi-ethnic cast that included Newyorican soprano Shereen Pimentel as Maria, and first-generation Colombian American Yesenia Ayala, as Anita. In an atypical role reversal, Pimentel’s Maria was the one with the slightly darker skin and

wavy hair, while Ayala has lighter skin and straight hair. Moreover, van Hove's version, set in contemporary times, made the 'Jets' a more racially diverse gang than the original assorted whites of every other historic production, in a nod to its twenty-first-century setting. The 'Sharks,' meanwhile, retained their predominantly Latinx – if not exclusively Puerto Rican – ethnic composition. Arguably, the diversification of the 'Jets' represented an acknowledgment of evolving US demographics. The incorporation of a multi-media design, including live video feed from backstage, and 'Jumbotron' style CCTV displays of main action on stage, attempted to create the urgency of a social media livestream. The production eliminated the song 'I Feel Pretty' and the 'Somewhere' ballet, allowing it to run in 100 minutes without an intermission. Van Hove replaced Robbins's choreography – with its balletic motifs – and substituted it with a more defined 'street dance' style by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. Not all the critics were impressed, but some emphasized the background of the Trump war on immigration and police violence as a fitting context for the revival, pointing to its formal sense of urgency as a political statement. In fact, van Hove's production expressly underscored the ways in which the original social and political message of *West Side Story*, however naïve or muddled originally, could be brought to the contemporary surface with an innovative approach that otherwise left its core message intact.<sup>33</sup> In a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*, Sasha Weiss wrote: '[s]o many of the contentious issues of contemporary life – poverty, immigration, gender discrimination and dysphoria, sexual violence, police brutality – are written into the play from the very first scene . . . "it's all there."<sup>34</sup>

While van Hove's revival was still playing on Broadway, Steven Spielberg's remake of the film was in post-production. Rumors about the 'pet project' by the distinguished director had circulated for years. The trade journals finally broke the news in early 2018, while 'buzz' features about casting calls and speculation about Spielberg's approach began appearing in the media shortly thereafter.<sup>35</sup> Aware of the controversy about representation that has followed many productions, Spielberg pledged to engage Puerto Rican actors, singers, and advisors. Screenwriter Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*, 1991) rewrote the character of 'Doc' as a woman named 'Valentina' and Spielberg cast Rita Moreno in the part, with executive producer credit. Spielberg's pledge to 'get it right' came to the foreground in a townhall meeting with Kushner at the University of Puerto Rico on 14 December 2018. The room was filled to capacity with students and faculty from the Theatre Department. When asked by UPR Professor Isel Rodríguez to address how they would

‘represent Puerto Ricans,’ Kushner first flubbed his answer (miscrediting the offensive lyrics ‘... let it sink back in the ocean’ to the stage show) before passing the question on to Spielberg. In a video of the exchange posted on Facebook, Spielberg answered:

The reason we’re here . . . The reason we’ve hired so many Puerto Rican singers and dancers and actors, is so they can help guide us to represent Puerto Rico in a way that will make all of you and all of us proud . . . It’s absolutely important to ensure the authenticity . . . including props, signage, dialect . . . We can only go to the experts . . . That is going to give a lot of credibility to the ‘Sharks,’ to the Puerto Rican community.<sup>36</sup>

But some at the townhall remained skeptical. No production of *West Side Story* contextualizes the Puerto Rican migration vis-à-vis economic conditions in the US territory; people migrate out of necessity, not contempt for the Island, as the ‘America’ lyrics suggest. *The Hollywood Reporter* quoted Rodríguez: ‘No one leaves this Island without sobbing. Three hundred thousand people left after (hurricane) Maria and the scene at the airport was like a funeral.’<sup>37</sup>

Another reason Spielberg and his team were in Puerto Rico was to conduct auditions with local talent. But none of the actors who auditioned through the local talent agent landed any major parts in the film, despite Spielberg’s pledge. Puerto Rican actress, singer, and dancer, Ana Isabelle, a veteran of youth shows on the Telemundo network, was cast as Rosalia – the vocal dissenter in the original ‘America’ version. Casting expanded to Latinx hubs in the USA including New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. The role of Maria went to Rachel Zegler, a Colombian American high school student from New Jersey. She answered the open casting calls that reportedly attracted 30,000 aspirants. The role of Anita went to Ariana DeBose, also a Latina with an Afro-Puerto Rican father, with Broadway experience (*Bring It On*, 2011; *Pippin*, 2014; *Hamilton*, 2015; *Summer*, 2017). Purposely or not, this casting repeats the pattern of a ‘darker’ Anita, curly hair included, in contrast to a Maria who is visibly lighter skinned and with straight hair.

Superficial as the casting distinctions may seem, the Spielberg pledge to ‘get it right’ did extend to important details of context, setting, atmosphere, and historical accuracy to the Puerto Rican experience. As early as 2018 the production engaged the services of Prospero Latino, a strategic consulting firm on US Latinx issues. The firm went on to establish a ‘Community Advisory Board’ to offer advice and strategies to ensure a more equitable and truthful representation of the Puerto Rican/Newyoricán community in

the 1950s. The Board included academics, cultural critics, historians, musicians, and members of various communities, in an effort to ‘integrate historically and culturally authentic elements in every aspect of the production’ and to ‘hear the voices’ of cultural stakeholders. Its purpose was to fairly represent ‘the history of the Puerto Rican diaspora, Latin music, Hispanics in the arts, and the LGBTQIA+ community . . .’<sup>38</sup>

Prominent members included Bobby Sanabria, the Newyorican jazz musician and band leader, known for his extensive work on the ‘Latin’ roots of the *West Side Story* score that resulted in the Grammy-nominated album *West Side Story Reimagined*. Sanabria was one of the people consulted extensively by screenwriter Tony Kushner to help him access a better understanding of the cultural context of *West Side Story* and the impact of the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York in the 1950s. Also on the Board was Dr. Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, Professor of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies at Brooklyn College. One of the founders of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies and a distinguished historian of the Puerto Rican diaspora, Sánchez-Korrol was a main consultant on the project. She too advised the producers on set, looking at everything from diction to posture, to the look of the neighborhood. The filmmakers, she says, wanted to ‘get everything right.’<sup>39</sup> The Board met with members of the cast and crew and confirmed the efforts made at authenticity: costumes, setting, music, etc. Even details of art direction were revised to better reflect Puerto Rican sentiments in 1950s New York, including graffiti references to important political and historical figures like Pedro Albizu Campos and Eugenio María de Hostos.

Delayed for release during the Coronavirus pandemic, Spielberg’s version of *West Side Story* was finally released in theatres on 7 December 2021, to overwhelmingly positive reviews. While there were some naysayers in smaller publications, prominent critics from the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, the *New York Times*, and many media organizations praised the new adaptation for its more rounded representation of the Puerto Rican characters, its fidelity to the look of ‘the Barrio’ in the 1950s, its emphasis on the conflicts brought up by gentrification, and its diverse casting. But the film was also a disappointment at the box office, failing to reach the audiences that its \$100 million budget anticipated. Nevertheless, the Academy of Motion Pictures honored the film with seven Oscar nominations, including Best Picture and Director. The standout (and stand-alone) winner at the Oscars on 27 March 2022 was, as expected, Ariana DeBose winning Best Supporting Actress as Anita, making her the second Latinx woman (after

Rita Moreno in the same role sixty years earlier) and the first openly gay woman of colour to win the Oscar. In her emotional, gracious acceptance speech DeBose reworded lyrics from the libretto to reclaim *West Side Story* as an anthem of inclusion, concluding, 'there is, indeed, a place for us.'

The effort to 'get it right' in these contemporary approaches to *West Side Story* is particularly conspicuous in the context of Trump's 'America,' but also logical. As I have argued, the edgy, rebellious social critique that *West Side Story* offers is visible in any close reading of the text(s); its portrait of 'America' a lot less passive than critics have acknowledged. A political reading of *West Side Story* does not neutralize the stereotypes about Latinx and Puerto Ricans, the inequities in gender relations, and problems of race, class, homophobia, etc. Nonetheless, the political edge and social critique, as Ivo van Hove said, 'is all there.' The last word should go to Anita herself. On Bernardo's condemnation of a 'terrible time in America,' it is Anita who concludes, 'Bernardo was right.'

## Notes

1. An earlier version of a segment of this chapter was previously published in Acevedo-Muñoz, *West Side Story as Cinema: The Making and Impact of an American Masterpiece* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).
2. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 58–61.
3. Acevedo-Muñoz, *West Side Story*, 152–55; Anthony Breznican, 'West Side Glory,' *Vanity Fair*, April 2020, 107.
4. Acevedo-Muñoz, *West Side Story*, 155–67.
5. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See: Latinos On and Off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 62–82.
6. Keith Garebian, *The Making of West Side Story* (Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press, 2000), 29–31; Arthur Laurents, *Original Story by Arthur Laurents* (New York: Applause, 2000), 338.
7. Negrón-Muntaner, 84.
8. *Ibid.*, 85.
9. Arthur Laurents, *West Side Story* (New York: Dell, 1965), 207.
10. José Vázquez Calzada, *La población de Puerto Rico y su trayectoria histórica* (San Juan: Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1988), 286.
11. Garebian, 37.
12. *Ibid.*, 134–37.



13. Ernest Lehman, *West Side Story*, screenplay (MGM Home Entertainment, 2003), 117–19. Arthur Laurents, *West Side Story*, 217–19.
14. Elizabeth Wells, *West Side Story: Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 32–33.
15. Bobby Sanabria interview with Maria Hinojosa. NPR's Latino USA, 26 September 2018.
16. Garebian, 110.
17. Walter Mirisch, *I Thought We Were Making Movies, not History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 114–15.
18. Acevedo-Muñoz, *West Side Story*, 36, 39.
19. *Rita Moreno: A Memoir* (New York: Celebra, 2013), 87; 96.
20. *In the Thick* podcast. NPR, 10 January 2017.
21. Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 66.
22. Joanne Miya, 'Passing for Puerto Rican,' in *Our Stories: Jets & Sharks Then and Now*, ed. Robert Banas (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, 2011), 223.
23. Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 67.
24. Acevedo-Muñoz, *West Side Story*, 38.
25. Peña Ovalle, 'Rita Moreno's Hair,' in Caparoso Konzett, ed., *Hollywood at the Intersection of Race and Identity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 31. See also Priscilla Peña Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 105–06.
26. Nan Robertson, 'Maria and Anita in *West Side Story*,' *The New York Times*, 22 February 1980, C-4.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Acevedo-Muñoz, *West Side Story*, 146.
29. Ellen Gamerman, 'I've Just Met a Girl Named Josefina,' *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 January 2009.
30. Acevedo-Muñoz. 'Everything *Glee* in "America": Context, Race, and Identity Politics in the *Glee* Appropriation of *West Side Story*,' in Caparoso Konzett, ed., *Hollywood at the Intersection of Race and Identity*, 256–57.
31. *Ibid.*, 259–60.
32. Matt Donnelly and Brent Lang, 'Fox Feels the Pressure from Disney as Film Flops Mount,' *Variety*, 13 August 2019.
33. Adam Feldman, *TimeOut New York*; Ben Brantley, *New York Times*; David Rooney, *The Hollywood Reporter*. All appeared 20 February 2020.
34. Sasha Weiss, 'How "West Side Story" Was Reborn,' *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 January 2020 (Cover story, p. 3).
35. Patricia Guadalupe, 'Many Latinos Loved *West Side Story* but not the Stereotypes. Can New film Version get it Right?' *Culture Matters*, NBC Latino, 17 April 2018. See also, Raúl Reyes, 'A New "Maria?" Latino Actors Audition, Hope for Role in *West Side Story* Remake,' *Culture Matters*, NBC Latino, 30 April 2018.

36. The video, posted by Mario Alegre Femenías, a Puerto Rican film critic, can be viewed here: [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10156569184585549&id=739660548](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10156569184585549&id=739660548).
37. Seth Abramovitch, 'Spielberg Met with Puerto Ricans about "West Side Story" Concerns,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 15 January 2019.
38. Letter from the *West Side Story* Creative team to members of the Community Advisory Board, 6 June 2019.
39. Community Advisory Board meeting held via Zoom, 28 May 2020.