

Puerto Ricans and Gangs in New York as Portrayed in *West Side Story*

Barbora Fialová

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Mgr. Libor Marek, Ph.D.
děkan



doc. Mgr. Roman Trušník, Ph.D.
ředitel ústavu

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ABSTRAKT

Cílem této bakalářské je analyzovat vyobrazení Portoričanů a gangů v New Yorku v americkém muzikálu *West Side Story* z přelomu 50. a 60. let 20. století. Teoretická část práce se zabývá historickým a kulturním pozadím imigrantů a zkoumá New York v první polovině 20. století. Praktická část obsahuje představení muzikálu a jeho tvůrců. Následně jsou charakterizovány imigrantské gangy z *West Side Story* a jejich reálná podobnost s imigrantskými gangy.

Klíčová slova: *West Side Story*, gangy, Portoriko, imigrace, etnické sousedství, New York, Spojené státy americké

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis aims to analyze the portrayal of Puerto Ricans and gangs in New York in the musical *West Side Story*, which was written throughout the mid-1950s and completed in 1959. The theoretical part focuses on the historical and cultural background of Puerto Ricans and other immigrants to New York in the first half of the twentieth century. The practical part introduces the musical and its authors. The main goal of this thesis is to examine the immigrant gangs in *West Side Story* and identify the characteristics they share with actual gangs, with the focus on immigrants from Puerto Rico.

Keywords: *West Side Story*, Gangs, Puerto Rico, immigration, ethnic neighborhoods, New York, the USA

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I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

West Side Story is considered to be one of the best musicals ever written. The original Broadway theatrical production won 3 Tony awards in 1958, and the film version was awarded 10 Oscars in 1961. This work is still frequently produced on stages all over the world, and a new film version by Stephen Spielberg will be released in December 2021.

Many people think of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* when they hear *West Side Story*, and this musical was indeed based on Shakespeare's famous love story, which shows how timeless this tragic tale of two teenage lovers is. Since many theses and papers focus already on the similarities between Romeo and Juliet and between Tony and Maria, I decided to base my thesis on an examination of the two gangs represented in this musical – the Jets, who are represented by European immigrants' descendants and the Sharks, who are represented by Puerto Rican immigrants.

The aim of this thesis is to examine Puerto Ricans and European immigrants' descendants from *West Side Story* and identify the characteristics they share with real immigrant gangs. It is crucial to understand why Puerto Ricans and Europeans immigrated to the United States and whether their expectations about living in the U.S. were fulfilled or not. The examination also requires an understanding of the relationship between the United States and the immigrant groups. Next, it is essential to gain some insight into gang behavior and society in New York and how it changed over time, and why. The key themes of *West Side Story* are discussed in the practical part and are directly linked to the historical background.

The practical part of my thesis shortly describes the creation and plot of *West Side Story* and introduces the authors of this musical. The differences between the movie and stage production are also covered in this part of my work. The main focus of the analysis is the gang behavior and Puerto Ricans in the musical based mainly on the lyrics of the songs from *West Side Story*, compared to reality. Other characteristics and thoughts behind the musical story are analyzed individually.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1 THE HISTORY OF PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rican culture slowly developed from hunter-gatherers into sophisticated farmers making pottery. The first settlers came around 2000 B.C. and stayed in small communities of 25 to 30 persons in mangrove swamps which were rich in food and provided shelters. These people lived mainly by fishing, but they also managed to hunt more giant water animals like manatees and turtles.

Around 500 to 200 B.C., agricultural Salaloid people arrived from South America and settled in Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands. Salaloid people brought pottery skills to the Caribbean, and they left many artifacts behind. It is unclear whether Salaloid people's pottery skills and other cultural influences were gained thanks to newcomers from South and Central America or trade with other cultural groups from the Caribbean area. The flourishing of the Salaloid culture in 1200 was credited to the Taino (interchangeably Taíno) culture. It is not clear who the Taino were ethnically, but they were possibly descendants of Salaloid people.¹

Borinquen, Taino, were attacked by the Carib and Taino Caribbean at the beginning of the 1490s, just before the Spanish arrival. These Caribbean were cannibalistic people who had come from the north of South America. They enjoyed fighting with bows and poisoned arrows. Taino were tireless, and they fought admirably, but unlike Carib and Taino Caribbean, Taino's existence was not centered on warfare. Taino had to move their villages inland.² This Puerto Rican ancestry is also portrayed in *West Side Story*. Puerto Ricans, the Sharks, always fight in their group in order to protect their territory.³

In 1493 Christopher Columbus accidentally "discovered" Puerto Rico on his second journey to the Americas and named the island San Juan Bautista. "Later this was changed, and San Juan's name was given to the principal city, while the island became known as Puerto Rico (Rich Port)."⁴ In her book, *The History of Puerto Rico*, Lisa Pierce Flores writes that it took almost 100 more years until the island was officially named Puerto Rico by Spanish people. In 1508 Ponce de León became a governor of San Juan Bautista. Since then,

¹ Lisa Pierce Flores. *The History of Puerto Rico*. (CA, etc.: Greenwood, 2010), xix-xxi.

² Adalberto López and James F. Petras. *Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans: Studies in History and Society*. Cambridge, Mass. (New York London, New York: Schenkman Wiley, 1974), 14-15.

³ Robert Wise. 1961. *West Side Story*. (United Artists), 0:11:41-0:15:05.

⁴ Louise L. Cripps. *Puerto Rico: An Island Christopher Columbus Discovered 500 Years Ago*. Dorado. (Puerto Rico: Borinquen Books, 1987), 9.

the Puerto Ricans were under foreign powers. Puerto Rico became a part of the United States after almost 400 years of Spanish rule.⁵

1.1 Puerto Rican inhabitants

The people “of Hispanic features together with traits native to Indians ... and traits from Africa”⁶ inhabiting Borinquen at the time of Christopher Columbus’s arrival called themselves Borinquen, which was also the name for Puerto Rico’s island back then. Borinquen and the inhabitants of Bahamas shared the same culture and language, and by ethnohistorians, these inhabitants were considered one group of people they named Taino. Taino meant “good” or “noble,” as Borinquen also described themselves to Christopher Columbus when he arrived on the island.⁷

According to the book *Caciques and Cemi Idols*, Taino were divided into three groups based on their living area. Taino living in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Jamaica were the Western Taino. The Eastern Taino lived in the Virgin Islands and north of Guadeloupe, and finally, Taino living in Puerto Rico and Hispaniola were identified as the Central or Classic.⁸

These inhabitants of (at that time) Borinquen island lived in tribes along the rivers and the sea. They were skilled people inventing technology for fishing, such as boats, traps, nets, and hooks. Besides fishing, they domesticated animals “they often made friends of the manatee,”⁹ and Taino doctors used herbs to cure diseases and illnesses. Another source of their living was growing corn, tobacco, and yuca.¹⁰

The chief of Taino society was *cacique*, who was in charge of usually one village and had some privileges. The *cacique* did not have to work and could have more than one wife.¹¹ Apart from this, all the tribe members were equal. The rules they had made applied to everybody in the same way. Neither the land nor the property was divided, and everything belonged to everyone. Taino lived in big wooden houses, and they slept in hammocks. Thanks to the favorable weather conditions, they were able to cook and eat outside most times. They believed gods lived in everything around them, and that was the reason why

⁵ Flores, *The History of Puerto Rico*, xix-xxi.

⁶ Julian H. Steward. *The People of Puerto Rico: A Study in Social Anthropology*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 31.

⁷ Irving Rouse. *The Tainos; Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*. (Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

⁸ José R. Oliver. *Caciques and Cemi Idols the Web Spun by Taino Rulers between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 7-8.

⁹ Cripps, *Puerto Rico: An Island Christopher Columbus Discovered 500 Years Ago*, 16.

¹⁰ Lincoln Bergman. *Puerto Rico, the Flame of Resistance*. (San Francisco: Peoples Press, 1977), 6.

¹¹ López, Petras, *Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans: Studies in History and Society*, 14.

they worshipped the mountains, the sea, the forests, and the sun.¹² The Taino had been living quite a simple life of efficient farmers who cultivated various foods. Their life changed dramatically with the arrival of Spanish people.¹³

1.2 Puerto Rico under Spanish rule

Christopher Columbus discovered the Caribbean islands when he was on his first journey to find gold. Christopher arrived at Hispaniola, where he successfully found what he was looking for. Columbus got this gold for free from the locals because they did not put any exceptional value on it. After returning to Spain to share the news with the queen, Columbus and the Spanish royalty decided to trade with these islands and conquer them.¹⁴

In 1493, as was already mentioned, Columbus sailed back to the Americas, but this time he landed on Borinquen. The Taino were forming alliances in order to protect themselves against Spanish invaders. Meanwhile, the Spanish were convinced that the Taino are good and peaceful people compared to the cannibalistic Carib. There are speculations between historians about the brutality of the Carib people. A historical proof exists which shows that Carib people ate human flesh in order to survive. However, the belief that Caribs are flesh-eaters and therefore they are “bad” permitted the Spanish to enslave the Carib people and make them Spanish prisoners.¹⁵

The Spanish people did not try to occupy Puerto Rico for over ten years after Columbus' discovery. In 1508 came Juan Ponce de León, who had traveled with Columbus on his second journey to America. When Ponce de León and his crew of approximately 50 Spaniards arrived in San Juan Bautista, they were welcomed by one of the Taino *caciques*. Agüeybana, the cacique, gave the newcomers food and provided them with temporary accommodation. Agüeybana became a blood brother with Ponce de León.

The reason for León's journey was to find gold. Unfortunately, the Taino used the gold they had for making jewelry. At first, the Taino were interested in the colorful clothes and some other cheap trinkets the Spaniards owned, so the Spanish were bartering it for Taino's golden jewelry. After a few months, however, most of the Taino did not want to barter and work voluntarily in the goldfield for Spanish anymore. The Spanish then introduced *repartimiento de indios*. The Taino had to work for the Spanish for free. In return, the

¹² Cripps, *Puerto Rico: An Island Christopher Columbus Discovered 500 Years Ago*, 13-17.

¹³ Flores, *The History of Puerto Rico*, 7-25.

¹⁴ Cripps, *Puerto Rico: An Island Christopher Columbus Discovered 500 Years Ago*, 7.

¹⁵ Flores, *The History of Puerto Rico*, 19.

Spaniards promised to protect Puerto Rico.¹⁶ San Juan's city in Puerto Rico became a harbor for the ships full of gold and silver that the Puerto Ricans sent to Spain.

The Spanish brought Christianity to San Juan Bautista, and churches and cathedrals started to be built on the island. Some Spanish monks educated the Taíno Christian religion and a new language. The Spanish introduced some new plants suitable for Puerto Rican climate and animals like pigs and goats. The Spanish also sailed with some women, which led to mixing the Spanish, Negroes, and Taino races.¹⁷ Christianity that the Spanish brought to Puerto Rico is represented in *West Side Story* by Maria's necklace with a cross and "a small shrine to the Virgin" in Maria's room.¹⁸

1.3 Puerto Rico under the rule of the United States

The history of Puerto Ricans and the United States began early after Spain had conquered Borinquen in 1508. Under Spanish colonial authority, Puerto Rican people came to the United States to earn their living by working or trading. Other immigrants came to the States to achieve their independence from Spain.¹⁹ Puerto Ricans believed in the reputation of economic opportunity and freedom that New York was offering.²⁰

After the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States acquired Puerto Rico. The wealth of the Puerto Rican island was therefore concentrated in the hands of the States. Since then, the migration from colonial Puerto Rico to the U.S. increased. Puerto Ricans were part of one of the biggest emigrations at the beginning of the 20th century. The Puerto Rican community had always been very close-knit, and they helped one another during the migration to settle in, look for a job and build a community.

As already mentioned, Puerto Rico became a part of the U.S. legal system in 1898 after the Treaty of Paris was signed by the United States and Spain. No native Puerto Ricans were involved in creating the terms of the treaty or signing it.²¹ In the year 1900, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the territory of Puerto Rico belongs to the United States

¹⁶ López, and Petras, *Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans: Studies in History and Society*, 15-17.

¹⁷ Cripps, *Puerto Rico: An Island Christopher Columbus Discovered 500 Years Ago*, 19-21.

¹⁸ Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim. *West Side Story*. (New York, NY: Music Theatre International, 1957), 78.

¹⁹ Carmen Whalen, and Victor Vásquez. *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 1-6.

²⁰ C. Wright Mills, Clarence Ollson Senior, and Rose Kohn Goldsen. *The Puerto Rican Journey; New York's Newest Migrants*. (New York, New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 43.

²¹ Whalen, and Vásquez. *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, 1-6.

but that it is not a state.²² In other words, according to Jorge Duany, “the island has not been incorporated into the United States.” This legal framework for “a civil government in Puerto Rico under U.S. tutelage” was called the Foraker Act.²³

Due to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1952, the archipelago became a new colony form. Although the creation of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico did not liberate Puerto Rico, it did provide specific political, legal, and economic power, which was not a usual model of colonialism. The Commonwealth’s creation legitimized colonialism and control. In other words, “‘Commonwealth’ was the name applied to and ways of legitimizing colonialism.” The States’ domination and colonial strategies of control over Puerto Rico remained the same before creating the Commonwealth.²⁴

Since Puerto Ricans now had no barriers in moving to the United States, the number of immigrants in the States proliferated. By 1950, more than ten percent of Puerto Ricans moved to the continental United States. During that year, most of them were settling in New York City. The most significant concentration of Puerto Ricans in New York City was in Manhattan.²⁵ These migrants settled mainly in Brooklyn and uptown Manhattan came to be called *Nuyoricans*.²⁶

1.3.1 Puerto Rican Migration to the United States

The history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States is extensive. The U.S. government was creating the conditions for Puerto Rican emigration, as the States directly impacted the Puerto Rican economy since they acquired the island. In 1917 every Puerto Rican was declared a U.S. citizen by the U.S. Congress. U.S. citizenship enabled Puerto Ricans to migrate free from any immigration barriers. The U.S. policymakers in Puerto Rico promoted colonization plans and contract labor programs as a way to reduce the population - they blamed Puerto Rico’s financial difficulties on “overpopulation.” Puerto Ricans were often recruited as a cheap labor force either to the United States or other places.²⁷

²² José Atilés-Osoria. “Colonial State Terror in Puerto Rico: A Research Agenda.” *State Crime Journal* 5, no. 2 (2016): 223-4.

²³ Jorge Duany. *Puerto Rico: What Everyone Needs to Know*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 45, 46.

²⁴ Atilés-Osoria. “Colonial State Terror in Puerto Rico: A Research Agenda,” 223-4.

²⁵ Robert T. Novak. “Distribution of Puerto Ricans on Manhattan Island.” *Geographical Review* 46, no. 2 (1956): 182.

²⁶ Stephen Keeling, and Alison Roberts. *The Rough Guide to Puerto Rico*. (London etc.: Rough Guides, 2011), 364.

²⁷ Whalen, and Vásquez, *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, 3-27.

The actress Rita Moreno, who played Anita in *West Side Story*, shares this recollection of leaving Puerto Rico in 1936 with her mother in *A Memoir*:

Even then, at five, I sense that my father Paco is history—that we are leaving not just Puerto Rico, but also Paco... Leaving Paco seemed acceptable under the circumstances, but my brother? ... I cried as Mami kept repeating, “Francisco can’t come to America this trip,” in answer to my pleas that my baby brother come too... I could not invent the horror of our voyage to New York; such is the stuff of fiction, of perilous shipwrecks and near death at sea... This lasts for five effluent-flowing days and nights... The boat was so packed with Puerto Ricans, now I wonder whether it was even legal... Later I would read descriptions of slave ships, of people crammed together, of toilet effluent running down the deck, and it would be all too familiar.²⁸

Many Puerto Rican men who worked as a labor force in Puerto Rico thought of the migration as a transfer from one job to another. Some of them had specific jobs in mind that they wanted to do, some wanted to continue with their own business, but most wanted to look for any kind of job they could get. On the other hand, many women were housewives or not old enough to work back in Puerto Rico. For all of the newcomers from Puerto Rico searching for a job in New York, it must have been difficult times. New York was a strange city to them, and often they did not even speak English, or they to speak English.²⁹ When five-year-old Rita Moreno arrived in New York in 1936, she felt “frightened and unwanted.”³⁰

The rapid industrialization during the 1950s and 1960s in Puerto Rico was, in many aspects, very successful. Unfortunately, due to population growth and increasing capital-intensive industries, the work supply was deficient, and unemployment rose radically. The rapid growth of unemployment in Puerto Rico led to the effort to move the Puerto Rican surplus population to the States. In the 1950s, most of the newcomers were usually young city people. They had almost no education and only a few professional skills. They lived mainly in New York City and worked as manufacturers as they had a lack of professional skills. These were also the peak years of Puerto Rican migration to The United States.³¹

On the other hand, immigrants coming to the United States before the 1950s were skilled and educated people with high incomes. They were trained in professional or administrative

²⁸ Rita Moreno. *Rita Moreno: A Memoir*. (New York: Celebra, 2014), 39-49.

²⁹ Mills, Ollson Senior, and Goldsen, *The Puerto Rican Journey; New York's Newest Migrants*, 63-64.

³⁰ Moreno, *Rita Moreno: A Memoir*, 51.

³¹ Vilma Ortiz. “Changes in the Characteristics of Puerto Rican Migrants from 1955 to 1980.” *The International Migration Review* 20, no. 3 (1986): 612-13.

work.³² At that time, these people were the only ones who could afford to pay for the transportation to the U.S. After that, the borders were unrestricted, and the costs for traveling by plane were highly reduced.³³

1.3.2 Puerto Rican Rights as U.S. Citizens

The Jones Act in 1916 granted U.S. citizenship to every Puerto Rican. Most of the Puerto Rican politicians did not like this because they believed that due to the newly granted U.S. citizenship, the States would never make Puerto Rico a state. Some other critics said that U.S. citizenship also created a barrier for Puerto Ricans in becoming an independent country if they later wanted to be one. In addition to this, Puerto Ricans who were not living in the United States could not vote for the U.S. president, nor did their “advisory” delegation to the U.S. House and Senate have the ability to vote on any legislation.³⁴

A Bill of Rights was given to the Puerto Ricans thanks to the Jones Act. Besides an eight-hour workday, the Bill of Rights also included freedom of speech. Puerto Ricans were obliged to be a part of the military service due to the Jones Act.³⁵

1.4 The Puerto Rican Diaspora in New York

When Rita Moreno and her mother lived at their aunt’s during the 1940s, Rita’s mother, Rosa Maria, had many jobs. She was not only “sewing in the factory in the garment district,” but also, she was “cleaning apartments,” and when she had some free time, she was “making tissue flowers to sell to Woolworths.” Rosa needed to earn enough money as soon as possible and find a place only for her and Rita so that Rosa could continue searching for a new husband.³⁶

Puerto Ricans were not passive. The migration to the United States and their struggles with U.S. citizenship helped them shape and put effort into building their community organizations such as ‘Ateneo Obrero and La Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana.’ This organization “fostered mutual aid in a collective struggle and solidarity among and between Puerto Ricans and other Latinos.” Puerto Ricans did not accept poverty nor unemployment because they migrated in order to achieve a better life.³⁷

³² José Ramón Sánchez. *Boricua Power: A Political History of Puerto Ricans in the United States*. New York: New York University Press, 2007), 67.

³³ Ramón Grosfoguel. “Puerto Rican Labor Migration to the United States: Modes of Incorporation, Coloniality, and Identities.” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 22, no. 4 (1999): 510.

³⁴ Flores, *The History of Puerto Rico*. (CA, etc.: Greenwood, 2010), 81-82.

³⁵ Duany, *Puerto Rico: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 47-48.

³⁶ Moreno, *Rita Moreno: A Memoir*, 63.

³⁷ Whalen, and Vásquez, *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, 41-2, 74.

During the process of settling in the States, they had to face many challenges. They did not come to work only; they came with their families and community members. The migration aimed to improve their living standards and to accommodate all of their needs. Their family and community connections were powerful, and they kept their connections with the other Puerto Ricans who still lived back on the island. Puerto Ricans living in the United States counted on their traditions and their social network.³⁸ Puerto Ricans used to fight for their rights, and this is also presented in *West Side Story* as Rita Moreno says in her book: “Anita was real! She was Puerto Rican, and she was fighting for her rights. She had plenty to say about what was wrong in America – and the world.”³⁹

Puerto Ricans had one of the worst conditions for living and earning money in America. Places for them to live were overcrowded – “twelve in a room in America,” and they had a lack of medical and schooling support. In New York and Chicago, newcomers could visit the Migration Division Office, where they helped them find a job and resolve their complaints. The Migration Division Office was the minimum of support they were getting, and even then, they faced discrimination. Public thoughts on Puerto Rican immigrants became very harmful, and it only strengthened the already poor social conditions of Puerto Ricans in the United States.⁴⁰

Even though Puerto Ricans did not come to the States under ideal circumstances, they all worked together. They tried to make the settlement for other newcomers from Puerto Rico as easy as possible. They created their public associations in the places where it was not possible to live in “close, ethnic neighborhoods.” Puerto Ricans led educational programs to improve their kids’ schooling opportunities and sponsored clubs to help the Puerto Rican newcomers.⁴¹

One of the most important Puerto Rican activists was called Jesús Colón. He lived in New York City from 1917 until 1974. Colón was present during the creation of New York City’s Puerto Rican community and was one of its most fruitful leaders. He went to night classes and studied English to perfect his skills. Colón wrote over 400 essays in which he, in his own words, tried to describe the real experiences of Puerto Ricans in the city, how they feel, what they think, and also how they live and work.

³⁸ Whalen, and Vásquez, *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, 41-2, 74.

³⁹ Moreno, *Rita Moreno: A Memoir*, 259.

⁴⁰ Grosfoguel, “Puerto Rican Labor Migration to the United States: Modes of Incorporation, Coloniality, and Identities,” 515.

⁴¹ Petra Press. *Puerto Ricans*. (Tarrytown, NY: Benchmark Books, 1996), 39.

Jesús Colón was born in Cayey, a small town in Puerto Rico that was also the home of cigar makers involved in political, social, and cultural life and became the community's leaders. Before World War I, the cigar industry was very prosperous.⁴² The cigar makers were confident people who had had the highest salary in Puerto Rico before 1925. As mentioned earlier, they were intelligent leaders who actively helped to form political and economic communities. They helped the Puerto Rican society to extend their social power. Puerto Ricans' power was hidden in their skill of making the perfect cigars, and they did not believe that any kind of machine could master that skill.⁴³

The Brooklyn and Manhattan neighborhoods were called *Colonia Hispana* by the Puerto Ricans. It was a very energetic full of life and diverse community formed by people who wanted to be part of the working or middle-class in New York City. All of the *Hispanos* lived in the same neighborhoods, no matter what job they did or did not do or how skilled or unskilled they were. Professionals such as doctors and lawyers were serving all these people who lived in the community.⁴⁴

In 1950 most Puerto Ricans lived in Manhattan. The total number of all Puerto Ricans who moved to the city was 138,507, which made 56 percent of the city population. They were living all over the island, concentrated in separate areas. The places where they tend to stay were either locations close to the bus stops or underground or somewhere with cheap housing where they could live with their families or where they had some neighbors with Puerto Rican ancestry.⁴⁵ "Alleyway. A suggestion of buildings; a fire escape climbing to the rear window of an unseen flat."⁴⁶ The living of Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story* was another aspect inspired by reality.

⁴² Whalen, and Vásquez, *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, 68-69.

⁴³ Sánchez, *Boricua Power: A Political History of Puerto Ricans in the United States*, 53-4.

⁴⁴ Lorrin Thomas. *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City*, 23.

⁴⁵ Novak, "Distribution of Puerto Ricans on Manhattan Island." 183-6.

⁴⁶ Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim. *West Side Story*. (New York, NY: Music Theatre International, 1957), the beginning of scene five.

2 GANGS IN NEW YORK

One of the first definitions of what “gang” actually means was written by the Chicago sociologist Frederic Thrasher in 1927. In his definition, Thrasher mentions that gangs are groups of people which were formed spontaneously at first, and later they “integrated through conflict.”⁴⁷ Gangs were groups of usually young boys whose fellowship led to troubles. They were a part of some minor crimes like theft and painting graffiti.⁴⁸ During the first minutes of *West Side Story*, a minor crime like graffiti or fight can be seen.⁴⁹

Gangs are usually associated with groups of people who were discriminated or had some economic difficulties. We often classify four main kinds of gangs: Hispanic, black, Asian, and white. Each of these ethnic groups had its reasons for creating gangs. For example, white gangs such as the Ku Klux Klan “promote and act on racist beliefs.” Asian gangs, on the other hand, were known for gambling, the use of narcotics, and prostitution. Compared to Ku Klux Klan, the Asian gangs also profited from their actions. The black gangs emerged mainly in order to protect themselves from the other gangs.⁵⁰ Due to the mass immigration from Puerto Rico to the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, some Puerto Rican children created their gangs in New York to gain the feeling of unity.⁵¹ There are two gangs in *West Side Story*. One of them is represented by white immigrants, and the second one by Puerto Rican immigrants.⁵²

2.1 The History of the Gang Culture in the U.S.

The end of the American Revolution in 1783 can be considered as the beginnings of the United States’ gang.⁵³ By the 1850s, around five million immigrants had come from Germany, France, the U.K., and the Netherlands into the U.S. Those people settled in New York City, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Boston. After the first immigration wave, two more followed. In the second wave, people came from northern and western Europe, and in the third wave, from southern and eastern Europe. Many newcomers overwhelmed the young

⁴⁷ Karen L. Kinnear. *Gangs: a Reference Handbook*. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 2.

⁴⁸ Marilyn Tower Oliver. *Gangs: Trouble in the Streets*. (Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1995), 26.

⁴⁹ Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 0:07:37-0:15:18.

⁵⁰ Rick Landre, Michael Miller, and Dee Porter. *Gangs: A Handbook for Community Awareness*. (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 4.

⁵¹ Oliver, *Gangs: Trouble in the Streets*, 31.

⁵² Robert Wise. 1961. *West Side Story*. (United Artists).

⁵³ Dale L. June, Mohamad Khatibloo, and Gregorio Estevane, eds. *The Re-Evolution of American Street Gangs*. (Boca Raton, FL: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 35.

seaside cities in the Northeast of the United States, creating the conditions for the birth of the street gangs.⁵⁴

One of the first well-known gangs in the U.S. was the Doan Boys. The members of this gang were traitors, burglars, and robbers, as it was described in an act that was approved in 1783 by the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The chief of this gang, Moses Doan, and all his followers stole horses and sold them to the British Army. Stealing and consequently selling the stolen horses was their primary source of income for many years. Members of the Doan gang also served as spies for the British Army. In 1781 Moses Doan was killed by Capt. Robert Gibson. Two other Doans were arrested in 1787, which was the end of this very first infamous gang.

In the 19th century, criminal gangs began to emerge, the ones we know today. Many scientists say that gangs started to form because of “a growing population, bad economy, a breakdown of the family, massive immigration, and an increase in job competition.”⁵⁵

2.2 Gang Behavior

In 1935 a little Puerto Rican boy stole a cheap penknife in a store in New York. This boy was caught, which resulted in a race riot, and “... within a few hours, the streets of Harlem were overrun by 3,000 angry Negroes, who smashed store windows, attacked whites, fought the police, looted, and fired buildings.” The fight went on for about 12 hours, and over 100 hundred people were injured.⁵⁶

From the first emergence of gangs in the U.S. in 1783 after the end of the American Revolution, the gangs' behavior has changed. In the 18th century, gangs were a part of illegal cheap liquor selling to pirates, pickpockets, drunks, and many other criminal groups. The first street gang in New York City was formed around the year 1825 by Irish men. This gang had an official leader, the members were armed, and the members worked together for many years. The members of this gang were mainly local thieves and pickpockets.⁵⁷ At the beginning of the twentieth century, gangs were part of unionizing “American factories and industries” in New York City. The members of gangs were hired by factory owners to control factory employees and to murder potential strikebreakers.

⁵⁴ J. C. Howell. *The history of street gangs in the United States: Their origins and transformations*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, an imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2018), 1.

⁵⁵ June, Khatibloo, and Estevane, eds. *The Re-Evolution of American Street Gangs*, 35-36.

⁵⁶ James Barron. *The New York Times Book of New York: 549 Stories of the People, the Events, and the Life of the City--Past and Present*. (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2009), 1063.

⁵⁷ Howell, *The history of street gangs in the United States: Their origins and transformations*, 2-4.

In the second half of the twentieth century, many Puerto Ricans arrived in New York City and settled in neighborhoods that Jews, Irish or Italian had already occupied. Young boys created gangs to protect their neighborhood from the Puerto Rican newcomers, who also had to form gangs to protect themselves.⁵⁸ Based on this fact, it is possible to assume that the Jets were a gang of mixed nationalities such as Jews, Irish and Italian. They grouped in order to protect their neighborhood from the newly arrived Sharks.

2.3 Gang Violence in the 1940s and 1950s in New York

Street gang violence was developing from protection and gangsterism to criminal activity. They pose a threat to the state through the

instability generated through the corruption and the destruction of democratic governance, by the disruption of equitable commercial transactions and the distortion of free market economic mechanisms, and through the normalization of intimidating violence by degrading personal and collective security.⁵⁹

Gang violence has been studied for many years by sociologists, but we still do not have clear answers as to why it happens because of the difficult nature of the situation. Being present during the violence itself is very dangerous. The sociologists mainly obtain retroactive data, and they base their studies on them.⁶⁰

At the beginning of the 1940s, local citizens of New York City were concerned with not only the fact that young boys and also girls were joining the gangs, but the gangs were also becoming more violent than earlier. In response to that concern, many researchers started to investigate those young gangs. Researchers believed that young people joining gangs had not enough social control and participated in crime because they were learning about crime from other groups. In 1946 New York City faced terrible street gang activity such as “vicious and apparently senseless murders.” At that time, the age of the group members was between 10 and 20 years. During the second half of the 1940s, social workers who had special training started to communicate with gang members to change these young people’s activity and behavior. Social workers organized many different activities for the gang members, such as

⁵⁸ Oliver, *Gangs: Trouble in the Streets*, 14-23.

⁵⁹ Max G. Manwaring. *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*. (All Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), 8-9.

⁶⁰ Martín Sánchez-Jankowski. *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991),137-8.

“athletic activities, block parties, camping trips, trips to the movies and other positive activities.” Gangs usually consisted of 25 to 200 men and carried weapons with them.

The public awareness of gang activity has grown since the 1950s, as more significant gangs have begun to engage in big fights. Before each battle, the war council always agreed on a place, time, and weapons to use during the battle. Most often, they used bricks, chains, and bats as weapons.⁶¹ “Senseless murders” and also fights are one of the main topics of *West Side Story*. One of the organized activities by possibly a trained social worker, Glad Hand, was a dance at a dance hall where both of the rival gangs were encouraged to dance with one another. This scene suggests that there is no difference between them, at least for the night.⁶²

In the article from 2013, *The Bully Inside Us: The Gang in the Mind*, Billow writes that every person who belongs to some group expects somebody to lead the group. People naturally seek a leader.⁶³

According to Jankowski, there are many reasons young boys want to become a part of a gang. Some of the boys want to join a gang because they have lost their fathers, and they need to identify with some other male authority figure. Others come from a broken family and are looking to substitute that family. It is common that in gangs, the members call one another “brother,” and they create a family. Another motive could be related to a lack of job opportunities: boys who are not very skilled might feel they are only left to join a gang in order to survive. Last but not least, many young boys joining gangs are only doing so because of the influence of older boys. These are only some of the many explanations of why young boys want to belong to a gang. It should be also added that, they do not necessarily apply to all of the members.⁶⁴

2.4 European Immigrants in the U.S.

Before the 1930s, New York was full of immigrants who created their neighborhoods. Every neighborhood tried to protect itself from other communities of different nationalities. Therefore, one of the reasons for growing gangs was protection against invasion and crime. The newer immigrants and members of gangs and Mafia of the twentieth century such as Jews and Italians “became necessary warriors on both sides in a struggle that not only

⁶¹ Kinnear, *Gangs: a Reference Handbook*, 38-41.

⁶² Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 0:32:02-0:39:10.

⁶³ Richard M. Billow, “The Bully Inside Us: The Gang in the Mind.” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 33, no. 2 (2013): 141.

⁶⁴ Sánchez-Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*, 39-40.

crossed community, borders but was also city-wide.”⁶⁵ It is possible to see the picture of European immigrant descendants and some of their behavior, such as protecting their territory, in *West Side Story*. The descendants of European immigrants in the musical are represented by the Jets.

More broadly, in the years after World War II, the racial and ethnic landscape of the United States, particularly the country’s white landscape, was quickly changing. Once-maligned ethnic minorities, including Jews, Irish, and Italians, were becoming part of new white mainstream that had been previously reserved only for WASPs, while people of color (particularly African Americans and Hispanic Americans) now found themselves on the rungs of the racial ladder once occupied by these white ethnics.⁶⁶

It is not explicit what races the Jets are. The Puerto Ricans only talk about Tony being a Polack: “With an “American.” Who is a Polak.”⁶⁷ Based on the fact that Tony is marked as a Polack, it can be assumed that he is also a Jew. Judging by the “Jet Song” lyrics: “When you’re a Jet, You stay A Jet!”⁶⁸ it can be said that a Jet means white. The Jets may be of Jewish, Italian, or Irish origin. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the Europeans were coming in masses to the U.S. The European immigrants mainly settled in New York. Tony later denies his place among the Jets: “I’m not one of them.”⁶⁹ Tony’s replica could have two meanings: he is the only Polish among the Jets or simply does not respond to their actions, which makes him a hero. The conclusion is that the Jets may be a mixed gang of earlier immigrant groups to America.

2.4.1 Jewish Immigrants

American-Jewish history is characterized by three waves of immigrants who came from three different parts of the world. These three groups had a different cultural heritage, but they shared the same religion. Most American-Jews had their roots in eastern and central Europe however, the first Jews to settle in North America came from Latin countries. “In 1492, the same year Columbus arrived in the Americas ... Jews were expelled from Spain as part of the Spanish Inquisition.” More Jews from Spain escaping the Inquisition arrived

⁶⁵ Jo Durden-Smith. *Mafia: the Complete History of a Criminal World*. Elsternwick, VIC: Ice Water Press, 2004.

⁶⁶ Warren Hoffman. “As ‘West Side Story’ Returns to Broadway, It Has a Lot to Say about Race in America.” (*The Washington Post*, 2020).

⁶⁷ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim, *West Side Story*, 1957, 39.

⁶⁸ Jamie Bernstein. *West Side Story*, 2020. (<https://www.westsidestory.com/>), “Jet Song.”

⁶⁹ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim, *West Side Story*, 1957, 32.

in the States in 1655. In the 17th century, the only New England colony which allowed a lasting Jewish community was Rhode Island. German Jews in large numbers started to arrive in America from the 1850s.⁷⁰

During the immigrant flood from Europe from 1880 to 1920, nine out of ten from nearly 2.5 million Jews migrated to the United States. Almost three-quarters of the one million Jews remained in New York. Jewish immigrants were primarily young, uneducated, unskilled, and single.⁷¹ As it is also described in the book *Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins* by Greg Lawrence, Jerome's father emigrated from Russia in 1904 while he was still a teenager.⁷² Likewise, Leonard Bernstein's father "fled Russia in his mid-teens."⁷³

Jews were considered to be among those citizens who were more peaceful and law-abiding. Police often praised Jewish people for keeping their neighborhood free of crime. They have been commended in *Washington Sentinel* as well as the *Century* magazine, which was very popular. The Jews were criticized now and then for their obsession with money and their zeal for acquiring it. However, this started to change in 1894 with "an investigation into municipal corruption in the Empire City." This investigation was the first time when the Jewish criminal element was publicly disclosed. The report said that the "New York Police Department had actively protected gamblers and prostitutes." Since then, Jewish have increasingly appeared like "members-in-full of the city's underworld." In 1896, active Jewish participation in extortion, petty crime, and prostitution was reported in a second inquiry. It later appeared in a three-volume work, *The American Metropolis*, by Frank Moss, that the criminal instincts are mainly found in Russian and Polish Jews and that these people are "the worst element in the entire make-up of New York life." This extract was, of course, most terrifying for the Jews living in New York. Their previous self-image of "holy people" now, at the end of the nineteenth century, was replaced with "merchants of vice."⁷⁴

2.4.2 Italian Immigrants

Since the Italians, before the 1870s, were mainly craftsmen and skilled farmers, they tended to settle in or close to urban areas. Mostly they stayed in New York City, San Francisco, and

⁷⁰ Robert Stein. *Jewish Americans*. (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 2002), 6-8.

⁷¹ Ruth Gay. *Unfinished People: Eastern European Jews Encounter America*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 3.

⁷² Greg Lawrence. *Dance with Demons: the Life of Jerome Robbins*. (New York: Berkeley, 2001), 1.

⁷³ Paul R. Laird, and Hsun Lin. *Leonard Bernstein: A Research and Information Guide*. (Seconded. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 1.

⁷⁴ Jenna Weissman Joselit. *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940*. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Indiana University Press Bloomington, 1983), chapter 1.

New Orleans. Italians believed that their skills and trades would be put to better use in a city. In California, they started to produce wine, and they canned or sold fruits and vegetables they grew. Italians were very successful at that time, but it changed with the second wave of Italian immigration in the 1870s.⁷⁵

During the years 1880 and 1920, almost four million Italians came to America with the belief of finding hope and fortune. Most of the immigrants were farmers coming from southern Italy. These farmers were often poor, and in Italy, they were at the mercy of wealthy landowners. Many of these newcomers would build skyscrapers and bridges on their arrival in America. Because of their skin color, religion, culture, and traditions, they often faced prejudice.⁷⁶

Italians preferred to live among their kind, and that is why they created their close-knit neighborhoods. Each of these neighborhoods was called Little Italy, and it was usually an overcrowded community. Men selling fresh vegetables and fruits, women running their errands, and kids playing everywhere filled the streets of every Little Italy. Bakeries, taverns, cheese shops, and freshly produced pasta were always available to the Italians. A growing minority of Italians worked as physicians, lawyers, pharmacists, architects, and schoolteachers in New York. The majority still did construction and street work or were employed as shoeshine men, janitors, or tailors.⁷⁷

The structure of the Italian family life has changed in America. Italian women who were used to being at home with their children back in Italy now had to enter the labor market where they were taught to think independently. Some Italians denied their Italian identity, and they even changed their original names to more American-sounding ones. However, many Italians came to work in America only temporarily.

The Irish Catholics had immigrated to America before the Italian immigrants. Unfortunately, the way Italians expressed their faith differentiated them from the Irish. Between 1900 and 1914, the southern Italians considered their belief separate from the church hierarchy. Subsequently, other ethnic groups questioned the Italian's loyalty to the church. The Irish thought that Italian religious customs ridiculed Catholicism. The Irish priests then wanted the Italians to stop "public shows of religious fervor" and cast down "the

⁷⁵ Michael Witkoski. *Italian Americans*. (Vero Beach, FL: Rourke Corp., 1991), 11-12.

⁷⁶ Rebecca Aldridge. *Italian Americans*. New York, NY: Chelsea House, 2003.

⁷⁷ Barry Moreno. *Italian Americans*. (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 2003), 50-52.

mysticism of Italian Catholicism.” In reaction to the requests of the Irish, the Italian immigrants pressured the church to set up separate parishes for Italians.⁷⁸

2.4.3 Irish Immigrants

Irish emigration to the United States started at the beginning of the 18th century. They settled in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Orleans. Irish looked upon America, and by the mid 19th century, the inhabitants of New York were 26 percent Irish. More than 40 million Americans were of Irish blood by the second half of the twentieth century.⁷⁹

Emigration to America began in earnest more than a hundred years earlier, but the Famine years, from 1846 to 1851, were marked by an urgency to get away as never seen before. Ships had always sailed in the spring and summer months. Now, the clamour for a passage saw vessels of every kind and size, with bunks and hastily raised in the holds, departing in the autumn and winter too. They braved the worst of the weather – the bitter cold, ice, gales, fog, storms and heavy seas, short days and long nights, could not deter these desperate people. Desperation was the distinctive feature of the Famine sailings.⁸⁰

The number of emigrating women and men from Ireland to the United States remained relatively equal from the 1850s until 1921. However, compared to other European immigrant groups, Irish women traveled independently and did not usually follow patterns of family migrations. After the arrival to America, Irish women were not dependent on family ties.⁸¹ Most of the Irish were working class at the beginning of the twentieth century. More than 10 percent of them were police officers, and others were drivers or coachmen. “More and more daughters of hardworking domestic servants were becoming teachers, who would eventually dominate the big-city school systems.”⁸²

The Americans started to accept the Irish people at the end of the 19th century. The second and third generation of the Irish seemed “less foreign” than other southern and eastern European groups coming to the U.S. in the 1890s. The Irish mother tongue was English, and they had Anglo-Saxon features, which made them look more American. By the 20th century,

⁷⁸ Di Franco J. Philip. *The Italian Americans*. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 13-17, 43-46.

⁷⁹ Edward Laxton. *The Famine Ships: the Irish Exodus to America, 1846-51*. (London: Bloomsbury Paperbacks, 2013), 6-9.

⁸⁰ Laxton, *The Famine Ships: the Irish Exodus to America, 1846-51*. 12.

⁸¹ Mary C. Kelly. *The Shamrock and the Lily: the New York Irish and the Creation of a Transatlantic Identity, 1845-1921*. (New York, NY u.a.: P. Lang, 2005), 37.

⁸² Tom Deignan. *Irish Americans*. (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 2002), 50.

the Irish had begun entering the middle class in America. The labor movement improved the working conditions for the Irish. Thanks to the educational achievements, their children were able to pursue more middle- and upper-class careers such as doctors, teachers, and lawyers. Due to their improved economic situation, they could leave the slums and buy their houses in middle-class neighborhoods.⁸³

⁸³ Kerry A. Graves. *Irish Americans*. (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 99-101.

3 NEW YORK IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As a result of newcomers from all over the world, the New York City population had reached 3.4 million inhabitants by the beginning of the twentieth century. New York flourished at this time. New Yorkers started to be interested in buying mansions and flats on Fifth Avenue thanks to the “wealth generated by Wall Street and industrial labor.”⁸⁴ Even the Puerto Rican girl Anita from *West Side Story* dreams of a “terrace apartment” as she sings in “America.”⁸⁵ The sidewalks were lamplit by electric streetlights, and people from uptown Brooklyn used trains and cable cars to get to the city center.⁸⁶

John D. Rockefeller, the founder of the Standard Oil trust, and J. P. Morgan, “the commanding investment banker,” were two of the most successful businessmen at the beginning of the 20th century. The Standard Oil trust expanded dramatically due to the growing automobile industry and conquered America, as it is also shown in the *West Side Story* movie from 1961. By 1961 many more Americans could afford to buy a car, and it is presented at the beginning of the movie with a close-up on the roads and in a scene where the Jets sing the song “Cool” in a spacious garage full of cars. However, the Jets were not Americans who could afford to buy a car as they came from poor immigrant families.⁸⁷

In the 1920s, American farmers increased their standard output by nearly 50 percent. Unfortunately, the European countries could not afford to buy agricultural products from the States due to the shortage of financial means caused by World War I. The massive agricultural overproduction was nowhere to sell. After the First World War, the poor economic situation was one of the biggest problems that later in 1929 resulted in the Great Depression.⁸⁸ By 1929, the output of some industries decreased, and farm prices dropped. In September 1929, many stock prices fell sharply, and in October, people started to sell stocks that were massively losing value every minute.

The United States’ agriculture and industry steeply declined, which was a reason for the continual collapse of stock prices in the 1930s. Business people were scared of investing in new machinery or factories. They did not believe in the profitability they could bring in the future. Americans stopped buying on credit because they were scared, they would not be

⁸⁴ Esther Crain. *The Gilded Age in New York, 1870-1910*. (New York, NY: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2016), 6-7.

⁸⁵ Bernstein, *West Side Story*, 2020, “America”.

⁸⁶ Crain, *The Gilded Age in New York, 1870-1910*, 6-7.

⁸⁷ Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 0:05:07-0:06:23, 1:57:51 to 2:01:53.

⁸⁸ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941*. (Times Books, 1983), 10-11.

able to pay for it later. Over a thousand American banks collapsed in a year, and about 5 million people were unemployed in 1930.⁸⁹

At the end of World War II, New York still had over a million manufacturing jobs, “from dress makers in the garment district to steel fabricators in Queens.” Consumers were able to buy the things they wanted in the stores. However, since then, manufacturing jobs started to disappear. Factories were moved to the South or overseas, where doing business was cheaper because the unions were less powerful.⁹⁰ It is not mentioned in the movie or the stage production whether the Jets girls work or not, unlike Puerto Ricans. Some of the scenes of the musical take place in a bridal shop, where the Puerto Rican ladies work as dressmakers. The work could be one of the reasons why the Jets do not like the Sharks because they are taking them working spots.⁹¹

3.1 Manhattan

Manhattan island is the first take of the *West Side Story* musical.⁹² Many believe that Manhattan is the heart of New York. Thanks to the Broadway theatres, museums and Lincoln Center “that houses the Metropolitan and New York City opera companies, the New York Philharmonic, the New York City Ballet, and the American Ballet Theatre, and the Julliard school of music” Manhattan is the center of entertainment. Many different neighborhoods can be found in Manhattan, such as SoHo, Greenwich Village, Harlem, and Chinatown.⁹³

In 1625 the Dutch colonists renamed the ‘island of hills’ to New Amsterdam. It became the center of New York, and by 1790 New York had grown into the largest city in the United States. Due to many immigrants and refugees living in Manhattan, the city started to construct massive park systems to improve the dirty cityscape. Central Park was created in 1857, followed by the first subway in 1904.⁹⁴

At the end of the nineteenth century, the prices of private houses in town rocketed. For the middle class, most of the New York population, was a lot more affordable to move into Manhattan apartments. Many families were tenement dwellers in these apartment houses,

⁸⁹ R. G. Grant. *The Great Depression*. (London: Franklin Watts, 2007), 8-17.

⁹⁰ Barron, *The New York Times Book of New York: 549 Stories of the People, the Events, and the Life of the City--Past and Present*, 693-697.

⁹¹ Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*.

⁹² Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 0:05:06-0:05:07.

⁹³ Carol M. Highsmith, and Ted Landphair. *Manhattan: A Pictorial Souvenir*. (New York: Crescent Books, 1998), 5.

⁹⁴ Sarah Fendon. *30-Second New York: 50 Key Visions, Events and Architects That Shaped the City, Each Explained in Half a Minute*. (Brighton: Ivy Press, 2017), 34-35.

and the number of such houses multiplied rapidly. The apartment houses had seven to fifteen stories after the height limits of buildings were eased in 1897.⁹⁵

3.2 New York City Society in the First Half of the 20th Century

Since 1898, New York owned the title of the largest city in the world.⁹⁶ Due to the massive immigration waves in the nineteenth century, New York's population fluctuated until the beginning of the 20th century. The food and drinks reflected the history of immigrants and had a multi-ethnic flavor. The immigrants did not bring only different flavors with them but also music. At the beginning of the twentieth century, New York had 600 dance halls filled with black-originated music. "Gilded Age robber barons birthed the Met Opera and Broadway, and jazz erupted in Harlem..."

Before the 19th century, many American households had to sew their clothes themselves. Only wealthy people could afford to go to a tailor. With the arrival of skilled immigrants, New York's manufacturing industry was born in the middle of the nineteenth century. New factories were filled with German and Irish sewers who produced uniforms for prospectors and learned how to recreate French fashion for the American population. By the beginning of the twentieth century, most American women wore clothes that originated in the Garment District.⁹⁷

At the beginning of the twentieth century, only isolated families were making most of the things they consumed. The typical American family now consisted of a man who was usually the one working in the office, shop, or a factory, and a woman who took care of the house and children. All of the social classes strived for the ideal. A woman staying at home and taking care of the kids and a house remained an ideal until the 1960s and 1970s feminist movement.

The first half of the twentieth century also brought the opportunity of buying a car. By developing a more efficient mass production system in 1914, Henry Ford managed to reduce car manufacturing costs. In the 1920s, many more Americans could afford to buy a car. Cars made commuting to the city easier for many people living in rural areas.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Mike Wallace, and Edwin G. Burrows. *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City from 1898 to 1919*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 828-829.

⁹⁶ Barron, *The New York Times Book of New York: 549 Stories of the People, the Events, and the Life of the City--Past and Present*, 24-25.

⁹⁷ Fendon, *30-Second New York: 50 Key Visions, Events and Architects That Shaped the City, Each Explained in Half a Minute*, 180-206.

⁹⁸ Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Karen Manners Smith. *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era: A Student Companion*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117-118, 37-38.

One of the most significant issues in the 20th century, as already mentioned earlier, was the growing number of immigrants and gangs. Gang activity was usually connected to the protection of one's territory as well as racism.

Racism is the belief that actual or alleged differences between racial groups assert superiority of one racial group. A racist outlook opposes a belief in racial equality, which contends that if the members of different racial groups are given equal opportunity to develop their talents, a similar distribution of talent will appear in each group.⁹⁹

Racism and violence are among the most prominent themes of *West Side Story*, and I will focus on their analysis in the second part of my bachelor thesis.

⁹⁹ Christopher Bates Doob. *Racism: an American Cauldron*. (New York: Longman, 1999), 7.

II. ANALYSIS

4 *WEST SIDE STORY*

The first idea of writing *West Side Story* musical first occurred to Jerome Robbins in 1949. Robbins asked Arthur Laurents to write the script and Leonard Bernstein to write the music for this play.¹⁰⁰ In 1949 Jerome's idea was to bring the story of *Romeo and Juliet* back to life. "Jerry came up with modern analogies, such as hostility between Jews and Catholics, to explain the enduring feud between Montagues and Capulets." However, when Robbins shared his idea with Bernstein and Laurents, they both lost interest.¹⁰¹ In 1949 the Jewish-Catholic conflict was well recognized among people, and it became an aim of jokes.¹⁰² The actual creation of *West Side Story* had to wait until the mid-1950s.¹⁰³

Six years later, in 1955, Bernstein met Laurents at the Beverly Hills Hotel, and they started to talk about what they then called *East Side Story*. At that time, "the overlapping topics of gang violence and juvenile delinquency were finding greater currency in the news and everyday life" in Los Angeles.¹⁰⁴ All of the news headlines about violence inspired Bernstein and Laurents to change the previous Jewish to Puerto Ricans and the Catholics to European immigrants. Robbins was keen on their suggestion to base the work on ethnicity rather than religion and change the Montague and Capulet families into two gangs. From primal *East Side Story* now became *West Side Story*, which is about two gangs opposing one another.¹⁰⁵

Later this group of three creators joined Stephen Sondheim, who wrote lyrics to Bernstein's songs at Bernstein's request. Jerome Robbins directed and choreographed this musical, and it premiered on 26th September 1957 at the Winter Garden Theater on Broadway.¹⁰⁶ In 1961 *West Side Story* was adapted into a movie with the director Robert Wise and choreographer Jerome Robbins. The movie "dominated the Oscars" and won 10 awards.¹⁰⁷

It is evident that the thought behind this musical was to point out the contemporary social issues such as gang violence and conditions of immigrants living in the U.S. As it is

¹⁰⁰ William A. Everett, and Paul R. Laird. *Historical Dictionary of the Broadway Musical*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 365.

¹⁰¹ Deborah Jowitt. *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 267.

¹⁰² Richard Barrios. *West Side Story: The Jets the Sharks & the Making of a Classic*. (US: Running Press Adult, 2020), 30-34.

¹⁰³ Everett, and Laird, *Historical Dictionary of the Broadway Musical*, 365.

¹⁰⁴ Barrios, *West Side Story: The Jets the Sharks & the Making of a Classic*, 30-34.

¹⁰⁵ Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, 267-267.

¹⁰⁶ Everett, and Laird, *Historical Dictionary of the Broadway Musical*, 365.

¹⁰⁷ Anthony Breznican. "A First Look at Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*." (*Vanity Fair*, 2020).

also mentioned in “An Out and Out Plea for Racial Tolerance: West Side Story, Civil Rights, and Immigration Politics” written by Carol J. Oja, William Powell Mason Professor of Music and American Studies at Harvard University: “...the show immediately gained fame for its bold artistic vision and unflinching engagement with social concerns of the day: racial unrest, urban gang violence, immigration and altercations with police.”¹⁰⁸

4.1 About the Authors

4.1.1 Jerome Robbins

Jerome Robbins was born on 11th October 1918 in a Lower East Side immigrant neighborhood in Manhattan. His birth name was Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz, and his family and friends usually called him “Jerry.” Robbins’ grandparents came from the Russian-Polish border, where Jerome’s grandfather made his living as a baker, and consequently, this trade was passed on to his children. To escape the pogroms occurring throughout Eastern Europe, Jerome’s father and his siblings joined the great wave of Jewish immigration to the United States in 1904: “Like many of his generation, Jerry would embrace the idea of putting as much social distance as possible between himself and his origins.” He played the violin, wrote poetry, and revealed other of his talents which served as an escape from his “parent’s corseted world.” He said that he would do anything that would help him believe that things were different,¹⁰⁹ which is perhaps reflected in the song “Somewhere,” in which Tony and Maria describe an idyllic place that can never be. The lyrics are by Stephen Sondheim:

There's a place for us,
A time a place for us.
Hold my hand and we're halfway there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you there
Somehow,
Someday,
Somewhere!¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Carol J. Oja. “An Out and Out Plea for Racial Tolerance: West Side Story, Civil Rights, and Immigration Politics – Carnegie Hall – Google Arts & Culture.” (Google).

¹⁰⁹ Lawrence, *Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins*, chapter 1, 3.

¹¹⁰ Bernstein, *West Side Story*, 2020, “Somewhere.”

Unlike the norm in Puerto Rican families, Jerome's sister Sonia points out that their parents did not show them any love. They did not hug or touch them. She also adds that with her brother, they were not allowed to express any feelings. At home, Sonia was the only ally of Jerome's. She fought with her father regarding Jerry. Sonia knew that Jerome wanted to become a dancer, but their father wanted him to become a shoemaker. Robbins' mother also was not keen on the idea of her son being a dancer but compared to her husband, she supported her son's artistic aspirations.

Jerry liked to surround himself with powerful women such as Mary Hunter, one of the first female directors who worked on Broadway. Hunter introduced improvisation to Robbins, which he later used in his work. In 1941 one of the improvisations he tried was based on *Romeo and Juliet*. Jerome was a Jewish boy, and Janet Reed was a Catholic girl. Janet recalls that this might have been the first time he came up with the idea for *West Side Story*.¹¹¹

4.1.2 Leonard Bernstein

Leonard Bernstein was born on August 25th 1918 in Massachusetts. His parents were first-generation Jewish immigrants from Russia. Leonard's father worked his way up from cleaning fish in Manhattan to a prosperous businessman in Boston. Bernstein had two younger siblings: Shirley and Burton.

Although there was no evidence of musical talent in previous generations of either family, Leonard started to play the piano that his family was gifted at the age of ten. Like Jerome's father, neither Leonard's father fully supported Leonard to become a musician; sometimes he did not even want to pay for Leonard's lessons. Even though Leonard's father was proud of his son's skills, he wanted Leonard to join the family business.

Bernstein attended Harvard, where he majored in music and graduated in 1939. During his studies at Harvard, Leonard "composed a score for Aristophane's *The Birds*, conducted the performance, and staged Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*." His international career began at the end of the 1940s, and during the 1950s, he was working on three musicals. One of them was *West Side Story* which is also probably one of his best compositions.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Lawrence, *Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins*. (New York: Berkeley, 2001), chapter 1.

¹¹² Laird, and Hsun Lin, *Leonard Bernstein: A Research and Information Guide*, 1-8.

4.1.3 Arthur Laurents

Arthur Laurents was born on 14th July 1917 in Brooklyn as Arthur Levine. Arthur's father was a lawyer, and his mother worked as a teacher before she married Arthur's dad. At the age of eight, Arthur's father took him to see his first show, *No, No, Nanette*, and since then, Arthur dreamt of walking down the aisle of a musical he had written. He wrote his first short story when he was ten years old. After college, he changed his name to Laurents and started writing and participating in an evening radio writing class. He was soon writing for *Lux Radio Theater*, which offered him good training in learning "how to establish character through words and propel action through dialogue."

In 1944 he became friends with Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein after he saw *Fancy Free*. Laurents then collaborated with Robbins not only on *West Side Story* but also on the plot outline for *Look Ma, I'm Dancin'!* Arthur was a remarkable stage director, playwright, and screenwriter whose career lasted for seven decades.

As a gay man and a Jew, and having been blacklisted from the film industry ... Laurents was particularly alert to problems of ethics, social pressures, injustice, personal integrity, friendship, love, self-deception, and betrayal. All his dramas deal, at some level, with these issues. Personally he was direct and frank enough to make own wince.¹¹³

4.1.4 Stephen Sondheim

Stephen Sondheim was born on 22nd March 1930. He was the youngest of all of the authors of *West Side Story*, and he also joined them as the last one. Both of his parents were Jewish and part of a typical Jewish upper middle class in New York. His father was a successful dress manufacturer on Seventh Avenue, they lived in an elegant apartment, and Stephen attended a progressive private school.

Thanks to his father, Stephen had a close relationship with music from a very young age. Herbert Sondheim, Stephen's father, used to play the piano with little Stephen. When he was six years old, he started to attend piano lessons and even played at his mother's cocktail parties.¹¹⁴

In 1946 he started studying at Williams, which was an excellent and exclusive college in Massachusetts, and he majored in composition and piano. He composed a piano sonata and a piano suite during his studies. Some of the influences he mentioned were Stravinsky,

¹¹³ Lucy E. Cross. "Arthur Laurents." (The Official Masterworks Broadway Site, February 25, 2015).

¹¹⁴ Martin Gottfried. *Stephen Sondheim*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 10-23.

Gershwin, Ravel, and Prokofiev. The first show he wrote at college was *Phinney's Rainbow*.¹¹⁵

4.2 Differences Between the Stage and Movie Production

The changes made for the movie reflect the change in medium. For the movie production the Prologue song doubled in length. The movie version of the Prologue increases the tension and growing conflict between the two gangs. Next, many expressions in the lyrics and the script were softened. In the song “Gee, Officer Krupke” were the verses: “My father is a bastard, My ma’s and S.O.B. My grandpa’s always plastered, My grandma pushes tea.” changed to: “My Daddy beats my Mommy, My Mommy clobbers me, My Grandpa is a Commie, My grandma pushes tea.”¹¹⁶ Back then, it was impossible to use vulgar phrases because of the Production Code, which restricted how the movies could look. These changes also protected *West Side Story* from being banned.¹¹⁷ Some of the characters had more lines of dialogue in the movie than in the stage version. This way, the viewers can easily understand the characters and their motivation.¹¹⁸ For example, when Chino and Bernardo are entering the bridal shop. The minor change in the dialogue highly suggests that the bridal shop is within a feminine sphere when the two guys arrive, making the man uncomfortable to enter. This change also removes Bernardo’s possession of the women and instead asserts Anita’s authority.

The Stage Script:

MARIA

Come in, Chino. Don’t be afraid

CHINO

But this is a shop for ladies

BERNARDO

Our ladies.¹¹⁹

The Movie Script:

MARIA

Come in, Chino. Don’t be afraid.

CHINO

But this is a shop for ladies.

ANITA

We won’t bite you ‘til we know you better.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Gottfried, *Stephen Sondheim*, 10-23.

¹¹⁶ Bernstein, *West Side Story*, 2020, “Gee, Officer Krupke.”

¹¹⁷ Thomas Doherty. *Hollywood’s Censor: Joseph I. Breen & The Production Code Administration*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 324.

¹¹⁸ Barrios, *West Side Story: The Jets the Sharks & the Making of a Classic*. (US: Running Press Adult, 2020), 289-292.

¹¹⁹ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 20.

¹²⁰ Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 0:31:01 to 0:31:06.

Not only lyrics and dialogues differed but also the timing of the songs. For instance, the song “Gee, Officer Krupke” and “Cool” were interchanged in the movie. Bernardo and Riff, who are two of the prominent roles, are killed during the rumble, and “Gee, Officer Krupke” is a comic song that was meant to help the Broadway audience in the late 1950s to feel a bit more relaxed and cheered up. On the other hand, this song is used before the rumble in the movie. We may assume that the director, Robert Wise, wanted to build more tension after the rumble and not to derogate the action of Bernardo and Riff. The song lyrics: “Boy, boy, crazy boy, Get cool, boy. Got a rocket, In your pocket, Keep coolly cool, boy.”¹²¹ allowed Robert Wise to put the song “Cool” after the rumble in the movie. Compared to the stage, “Cool” in the movie had a function of a sort of calming down song after what has just happened. Whereas on the stage, this song is sung before the battle.

¹²¹ Bernstein, *West Side Story*, 2020, “Cool.”

5 SIMILARITIES TO *ROMEO AND JULIET*

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Robbins based the musical on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. He aimed to bring the story of Romeo and Juliet into the contemporary world. The fact is that Robbins with Bernstein, Laurents, and Sondheim created a very resembling story with *Romeo and Juliet* and many similarities are visible between these two works.

Both of these plays begin with a fight in a public place. *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in Verona, Italy, where at the beginning, Sampson and Gregory, who are servants to Capulets, are getting ready for sword fighting. On the other hand, the updated version of Shakespeare's play – *West Side Story* takes place in the neighborhood on the West Side of New York City. It also starts with a fight but with a dance fight of two gangs – The Jets and the Sharks. Both of these fights are broken up by another man. In Verona, prince Escalus comes to end the fight. In New York City, the prince is replaced by officer Krupke.¹²²

Violence, youth, and love are the main topics of these two works. Young men are fighting for power, and in the middle of these fights, the love of two young people from the opposing families/gangs. The poet W. H. Auden said that Romeo and Juliet's story is not only about the tragedy of these two individuals but about the tragedy of the whole city. Everyone from the city is somehow involved in what happens. We could argue that this statement holds true even more for *West Side Story*, as Norris explains:

But the rivalry of the Sharks and the Jets is sociologically based on a familiar urban problem. Both the ancient Veronese houses were alike in privilege and station; their enmity was unreasonable, so far as we can judge. The cause of the West Side Manhattan gangs' rivalry is completely clear: it is between first-generation Americans whose security—social and economic—they feel to be jeopardized by the Puerto Ricans, and the newcomers, fighting to establish themselves in an alien community.¹²³

5.1 The Sharks

The Puerto Rican gang called the Sharks is parallel to the Capulet family in *Romeo and Juliet*. The leader of this group is named Bernardo; he is also a brother to Maria. Bernardo is proud but skeptical about his position as a newly arrived Puerto Rican in New York City. Besides Bernardo, there are nine other members of the gang. As one of the gang members

¹²² Norris Houghton, William Shakespeare, and Arthur Laurents. *Romeo and Juliet/ West Side Story*. (New York, USA: Laurel-Leaf Books, 1965), 7-10.

¹²³ Houghton, Shakespeare, and Laurents. *Romeo and Juliet/ West Side Story*, 12.

and Bernardo's friend, Chino is engaged with Bernardo's sister. Maria is not very enthusiastic about Chino, and she later falls in love with Tony (one of the Jets). Anita is another Puerto Rican woman who is a good friend to Maria and is in a relationship with Bernardo. She is very "flashy, sensual and sharp." The music that accompanies the Sharks has Latin-American cross-rhythms, which generates "a more potent hypnosis" compared to the Jets music.¹²⁴

The Sharks is a group of immigrants from Puerto Rico. According to the historical background, most of the Puerto Rican immigrants lived in Manhattan by the 1950s. As the name of the musical *West Side Story* suggests, the story takes place on the west side of Manhattan in New York City. The Puerto Rican gang lived in one building as it was common for Puerto Ricans to surround themselves with families and friends. They stuck together.

The Puerto Rican girls have been a lot more involved throughout the whole play than the Jets girls. The Sharks also have a lot more women in their group compared to the Jets. One of the reasons might be that Puerto Ricans were used to living and being together most of the time. They migrated as a family. Another reason could be that Puerto Rican men and women were fighting for their rights since they were under Spanish rule, and they also wanted to be heard. Besides, they are undoubtedly very temperament people. Anita's character is very bold and fearless, and she always expresses her attitude. She is the embodiment of this temperament nation.

5.2 The Jets

The Jets is the rival gang to the Sharks. The name of the Jets' leader is Riff. Together with Tony, he established the Jets. However, when Tony started to work as a delivery boy for a drugstore, he stopped engaging in gang activity. He later falls in love with Maria and wants to escape with her. Some of the other gang members are Diesel (Ice in the movie), the right hand of Riff's, A-rab, Action, Baby John, and five more. Several girls are also part of the Jets, e.g., Graziella, Velma, and Minnie. The Jets aim to destroy the growing proportion of Puerto Ricans in their neighborhood before becoming too powerful.¹²⁵

The Jets is a gang of European immigrant descendants. Compared to the Puerto Ricans, the color of their skin is white, and it is possible to assume that they have been living in the neighborhood for a longer time than Puerto Ricans because they are in

¹²⁴ Mary E. Williams. *Readings on West Side Story*. (San Diego, Calif: Greenhaven Press, 2001), 29, 69.

¹²⁵ Williams, *Readings on West Side Story*, 29, 119.

possession of the area. Besides Tony's origin, it is not explicitly said what nationalities the other Jets are. The following dialogue speaks about Tony as a Polack and the color advantage the Jets have, contrary to Puerto Ricans.

BERNARDO

With an "American." Who is a Polak.

ANITA

Says the Spic.

BERNARDO

You are not so cute.

ANITA

That Tony is.

ROSALIA

And he works.

CHINO

A delivery boy.

ANITA

And what are you?

CHINO

An assistant.

BERNARDO

Si! And Chino makes half what the Polak makes – the Polak is American!

ANITA

Ai! Here comes the whole commercial!

(A burlesque oration in mock Puerto Rican accent. BERNARDO starts the first line with her:)

The mother of Tony was born in Poland; the father still goes to night school. Tony was born in America so that makes him an American. But us? Foreigners!¹²⁶

Even though this cannot be said with a certainty, it is possible that the Jets are a group of Jewish immigrants. One reason could be that all of the authors are Jewish, and they wanted to reflect their culture. Given that Tony is a "Polack," thus most certainly a Jew, this could be another reason to conclude that some of the Jets are Jewish. It is undoubtedly not explicit whether the Jets are Jewish, however, which is not surprising in 1958, when acknowledging Jewishness as just another character trait was not yet widespread.

¹²⁶ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 39-40.

5.3 Tony and Maria

Tony, a Polack, and Maria, a Puerto Rican, are the Romeo and Juliet of the *West Side Story*. Once Maria and Tony see each other at the settlement house dance, they fall in love. Tony then follows Maria to the place where she lives and sings her a song. This scene is parallel to the very famous balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. “Sondheim’s lyric of “Tonight, Tonight” cannot touch Shakespeare’s great love poetry of the balcony scene, but it nonetheless breathes ardor and adoration, which reach their culmination in the “wedding” scene of Act I Scene 7.” Bernardo is not happy about Maria loving Tony, and that is why the lovers started to plan to escape together. Tony subsequently killed Bernardo after Bernardo had killed Riff.¹²⁷ As the end slowly approaches, Tony gets false information about Maria’s death. After that, Tony decides to go and find Chino in order to get killed “as well.” Chino then shoots Tony, and he dies in Maria’s arms.¹²⁸

“Maria is an excited, enthusiastic, obedient child mixed with the temper, stubborn strength, and awareness of a woman.”¹²⁹ Maria first appears in the scene, which takes place in the bridal shop. Anita is sewing a dress for Maria for an evening dance. Maria tries to convince Anita:

MARIA

(holding out scissors)

Por favor Anita, Make the neck lower!

ANITA

Stop it, Maria.

MARIA

One inch. How much can one little inch do?

ANITA

Too much.

MARIA

(Exasperated)

Anita, it is now to be a dress for dancing, no longer for kneeling in front of an altar.

...

MARIA

No. But if you perhaps could manage to lower the neck –

¹²⁷ Houghton, Shakespeare, and Laurents. *Romeo and Juliet/ West Side Story*, 10. Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 2:19:32-2:22:22

¹²⁹ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 17.

ANITA

Next year.

MARIA

Next year I will be married to Chino and no one will care if it is down to here!

ANITA

Down to where?

MARIA

Down to here. I hate this dress!

ANITA

Then don't wear it and don't come with us to the dance.

MARIA

(Shocked)

Don't come!

(Grabs the dress)

Could we not dye it red at least?

ANITA

No, we could not.

(Starts to help MARIA into the dress)

MARIA

White is for babies. I will be the only one there in a white – ¹³⁰

Maria's white dress is meant to symbolize her purity. During this dialogue, the audience is familiarized with Maria's situation. Her hand is promised to a boy named Chino. Unfortunately, Maria does not have any feelings towards him, as she says in one of her replicas: "When I look at Chino, nothing happens." She is also mad at her brother, who brought her to Manhattan only to marry Chino: "Ai! Bernardo! One month have I been in this country – do I ever even touch excitement? I sew all day, I sit all day, I sit all night. For what did my fine brother bring me here?" Maria ends this whole scene by saying: "...tonight is the real beginning of my life as a young lady of America!"¹³¹ This sentence shows Maria's excitement about being in America. She believes that an opportunity is waiting for her in America.

Likewise, Tony believes that something is waiting for him too. The role of Tony is presented to the audience before the scene in the bridal shop. He is immediately introduced as the only Jet who has work, and he seems a lot more sensible than the other boys. Tony is probably older than the others, and he thinks more about the future than about killing time

¹³⁰ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 17-19.

¹³¹ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 18.

by fighting with another gang. As the following dialogue suggests, Tony has moved forward, and the Jets are past for him:

RIFF

The Jets are the greatest!

TONY

Were.

RIFF

Are. You found something better?

TONY

No. But –

RIFF

But what?

TONY

You won't dig it.

RIFF

Try me.

TONY

O.K. Every single damn night for the last month, I wake up and I'm reaching out.

RIFF

For what?

TONY

I don't know, it's right outside the door, around the corner. But it's comin'!

RIFF

What is? Tell me!

TONY

I don't know! It's – like the kick I used to get from being a Jet.

RIFF

(Quietly)

... Or from being buddies.

TONY

We're still buddies.

RIFF

The kick comes from people, buddy boy.

TONY

Yeah, but not from being a Jet.

RIFF

No? Without a gang you're an orphan. With a gang you walk in twos, threes, fours. And when your gang is the best, when you're a Jet, buddy boy, you're out in the sun and home free home! ¹³²

Tony's last sentence highly evokes a call for a change. He is not a Jet anymore, and he knows that something else is waiting for him. On the other hand, Riff validates that a gang is a family for many of the members. "Tony, the trouble is large: the Sharks bite hard! We got to stop them now, and we need you!"¹³³ A gang is not only a family for many, but it also has its duties, such as protecting their territory. The same day Tony decides to join the Jets for an evening dance where he meets Maria for the first time.

¹³² Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 14.

¹³³ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 15.

6 THE ANALYSIS OF THREE SONGS AND THE “DRUGSTORE SCENE”

6.1 The American Dream and racism in “America”

Probably one of the most famous songs from this musical is the song “America.” There is no doubt that this song is very rhythmic and energetic. The Sharks sing “America,” and the Spanish choreography of their dance differs the Puerto Ricans a lot from the Jets. This song is mainly a dialogue between Anita and Bernardo.

Although a Puerto Rican sings it, its patriotic message is delivered by an assimilated immigrant who despise her origin and autochthonous culture for her preference of the “American way of life.” ... Nevertheless, the lyrics make the audience concentrate on the patriotic message exposed in the political exchange between Anita and Bernardo. The song, performed by the Puerto Ricans on the roof of the building [...], pretends to be Puerto Rican self-definition or enunciation. The song’s confrontation of identities takes place when the Puerto Ricans consciously take sides on issues of nationalist ethnicity, and assimilation. The importance of this scene does not simply derive from its comical aspect but also lies in the fact that here the Puerto Ricans insult each other for being divided politically and ideologically between nationalists and assimilated.¹³⁴

Anita fully expresses her excitement about living in America in her words: “Buying on credit is so nice.” but Bernardo opposes her by singing: “One look at us and they charge twice.” Furthermore, Puerto Ricans continue by singing: “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.” Apart from Anita, some other girls add: “Skyscrapers bloom in America. Cadillacs zoom in America. Industry boom in America.” The boys react to this: “Twelve in a room in America.”¹³⁵

Anita and the other girls believe that one day their American dream about having a “terrace apartment” and Cadillacs will come true. On the other hand, the boys are disappointed because nothing in America was how they dreamed it could be. The men became aware that being a Puerto Rican in the United States is a disadvantage. Since the first scene during their “fight” with the Jets, Krupke and Schrank come and ask the Jets

¹³⁴ Alberto Sandoval Sanchez. “West Side Story A Puerto Rican Reading of ‘America’” Review of West Side Story. *Jump Cut* no. 39, (1994): 59-66.

¹³⁵ Bernstein, West Side Story, 2020, “America”.

which one of the Puerto Ricans had started the fight. The Puerto Ricans are considered to be a social problem and conflictive people.

The original lyrics of the song “America” were changed from: “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.” to “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.”¹³⁶ This scene was initially been very racist articulation towards Puerto Rico. The lyrics were softened toward Puerto Rican immigrants and Puerto Rico for the movie version.

6.2 Social commentary on social institutions in “Gee, Officer Krupke”

During the whole musical, there is a significant figure of the officer Krupke who tries to convince the Jets not to fight. Krupke is one of the only four adults that are present throughout the musical. “Officer Krupke, from the Jets’ point of view, has been trained as an agent of the state to believe that youths gathering in groups on a street corner suggest probable criminality requiring attention.”¹³⁷

In the song “Gee, Officer Krupke” the Jets sing about their problems: “Our mothers all are junkies, Our fathers all are drunks. ... We never had the love that ev’ry child oughta get. We ain’t no delinquents, We’re misunderstood. Deep down inside us there is good!”¹³⁸ These words also suggest that postwar urban America was haunted by “the specter of the juvenile delinquent.”¹³⁹

They continue by singing how nobody takes them seriously: “Just tell it to the Judge... This boy don’t need a judge he needs a [sic] analyst’s care! ... This boy don’t need a couch, he needs a useful career.” Through this song which is presented in a witty manner, the Jets are trying to express their annoyance at how nobody tries to help them and only pushes them into work.¹⁴⁰

The subject of the lyrics is the treatment of youth “in the system.” It is a social commentary on how “modern institutions dedicated towards “social welfare” criminalize

¹³⁶ Bernstein, *West Side Story*, 2020, “America.”

¹³⁷ “Officer Krupke and Constructing Delinquency.” (Ed Reform Anonymous, 2013).

¹³⁸ Bernstein, *West Side Story*, 2020, “Gee, Officer Krupke.”

¹³⁹ Adam Greenfield. “Gee, Officer Krupke’: A Close Reading in the Governmentality Literature.” (Adam Greenfield’s *Speedbird*, September 20, 2015).

¹⁴⁰ Bernstein, *West Side Story*, 2020, “Gee, Officer Krupke.”

typical youth behaviors.” The Jets sing about how they, as urban youths, were identified as a problem group and stuck in between social services that should help them. These institutions often only “pathologize and criminalize” the behavior of these youths, which these services see as the reason for the misfortune of these youths. Irresponsible parents, use of alcohol and drugs, mental state, gender confusion, and laziness are all considered to be a ground for juvenile delinquency.¹⁴¹

6.3 Humanizing the Puerto Ricans through “I Feel Pretty” and the “Drugstore scene”

The Jets girls seem shy and less more involved compared to the Shark girls. Graziella and Velma are the girlfriends of Riff and Ice (Ice is a new character added for the movie, and he is collateral to Diesel in the stage production, who was a Riff’s right hand). Most of the time have stayed in the background. Such as in the song “Cool,” the Jets girlfriends are dancing at the back, and the emphasis is put on the male dance.¹⁴² This scene gives the feeling of not taking the women seriously. There is no chance throughout the whole movie to really get to know these girls.

On the other hand, Puerto Rican women play significant roles throughout the whole musical. The Sharks ladies not only represent determination, such as Anita when she walks into a drugstore full of Jets but also strength like Maria at the end of the movie:

How many bullets are left, Chino? Enough for you, and you? All of you. You all killed him! And my brother and Riff. Not with bullets and guns: with hate. Well, I can kill too because now I have hate! How many can I kill, Chino? How many and still have one bullet left for me?¹⁴³

Maria is the one who points out that it was the hate that killed Tony, Bernardo, and Riff. Even though she is now in possession of a gun, she does not choose revenge like all of the others. “She rises above racism and sets the gun down.”¹⁴⁴ Maria is represented as a very strong young woman. She had lost her brother and boyfriend and can kill everyone (except herself) who killed them, but she chooses not to. The closing scene shows how the Sharks

¹⁴¹ “Officer Krupke and Constructing Delinquency.” (Ed Reform Anonymous, 2013).

¹⁴² Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 1:57:51 to 2:01:53.

¹⁴³ Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 2:24:20 to 2:24:51.

¹⁴⁴ Shmoop Editorial Team. “West Side Story Introduction.” (Shmoop. Shmoop University, November 11, 2008).

and the Jets have forgotten their races for a while and carry away Tony's body together.¹⁴⁵ This final scene suggests the reconciliation of these two gangs.

6.3.1 "I Feel Pretty"

Compared to "America," the music in "I Feel Pretty" sounds much less Spanish. This song is sung by Maria in the bridal shop the night after she met Tony. She sings about how pretty she feels because she is loved "by a pretty wonderful boy." During Maria's singing, the music is calm with the use of tambourine, which should Maria remind of her Hispanic origin. Whenever the other Puerto Rican women start to oppose her: "She thinks she's in love. She thinks she's in Spain. She isn't in love, She's merely insane." the music immediately changes into a more Hispanic temperament rhythm.

Through this song are the Puerto Rican women are not represented as some dirty immigrants. Instead, Maria can be seen as a lady who feels pretty as soon as she puts on some lovely dress. It is visible how much Maria wants to be more American as she also suggests: "I feel dizzy, I feel sunny, I feel fizzy and funny and fine, And so pretty, Miss America can just resign." The song makes the audience sympathize with this young girl and her dream to become more American.¹⁴⁶

6.3.2 The "Drugstore scene"

Anita is going to the drugstore instead of Maria to tell Tony that Maria will be late because officer Schrank interrogates her. When Anita walks into the drugstore, there are only the Jets:

ANITA

I'd like to see Doc.

ACTION

He ain't here.

...

ANITA

I'd like to see it for myself.

ACTION

Please.

ANITA

¹⁴⁵ Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 2:26:23 to 2:26:57.

¹⁴⁶ Wise, 1961, *West Side Story*, 1:23:49 to 1:26:28.

...Please.

ACTION

Por favor.

ANITA

Will you let me pass?

SNOWBOY

She's too dark to pass.¹⁴⁷

Anita went to the drugstore only because Maria was her best friend. The Jets are very rude. Some of the things they say, such as: “She’s too dark to pass.” are very racist. Again, this scene makes us sympathize with this young Puerto Rican woman who just lost her boyfriend and went to the drugstore only because of her friend Maria. Anita is now left with quite a few racist boys. Although what is about to come after this dialogue is even worse. They start calling her “Bernardo’s pig,” “Gold tooth,” “Pierced ear,” and “Garlic mouth.” The taunting breaks out into a wild, savage dance with epithets hurled at ANITA who is encircled and driven by the whole pack. ... Baby John is lifted up high and dropped on her as DOC ENTERS from the cellar...”¹⁴⁸ Rita Moreno alias Anita comments on this scene they used to call the “rape” scene:

...we rehearsed it and rehearsed it and rehearsed it, and that was choreographed just like a dance. It had steps. It just didn’t look like it was dance steps. And we must have rehearsed that for about three hours before we filmed it. Somewhere in the third hour, it was just too much for me. Somebody was pulling at my hair, and I started to cry. I ran to the candy store counter and sat on one of those stools and put my head on my arm, and I could not stop crying. It still gets to me when I talk about it because I’ve been abused so much in some ways just for being Latina, and I’m Puerto Rican. [...] it’s as though this old wound, which I thought was closed with a scar, opened up all over again in this situation. [...] It taught me that I still had to get tougher. It told me that I had to stand up to that. The only reason it got to me is that I really did believe that I didn’t have any value, that I didn’t have any worth.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 110-111.

¹⁴⁸ Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim. *West Side Story*, 1957, 110-114.

¹⁴⁹ “Rita Moreno On The ‘West Side Story’ Scene That Left Her In Tears.” YouTube. YouTube, February 6, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_tWVv5X7Zg.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyze Puerto Ricans and European immigrants' descendants from *West Side Story* and identify the characteristics that the Sharks and the Jets share with real immigrant gangs living in the United States.

For the purpose of this thesis, it was essential to characterize Puerto Rico and its inhabitants before and after they were under Spanish and, consequently, American rule. The main reason for Puerto Rican immigration to America was at first an escape from the Spanish ruler that ruled Puerto Rico for about 400 years. However, many Puerto Ricans came to the States during the 20th century under the rule of the United States. This later immigrant group is portrayed in *West Side Story*. Moreover, one of the actresses, Rita Moreno - Anita, was a part of massive immigration from Puerto Rico to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Her comments support the claim that Puerto Ricans had to face many challenges in the States immediately upon their arrival.

The next chapter focuses on examining the gang culture in the United States and the immigrants such as Jews, Irish, and Italians who came to America mainly before the 1930s. This research was later used to compare the behavior and characteristics of the gangs presented in *West Side Story*. The last chapter of the historical background concentrates on New York in the first half of the 20th century. It also examines the population and society living in Manhattan where *West Side Story* takes place. This part concludes that in the 20th century, New York City was highly inhabited by immigrants of different nationalities and races. Many of these immigrants were involved in crime. Not only crime but also the city's evolution, such as the ability to buy cars, is presented in *West Side Story*.

Based on my historical background, I was able to analyze that the *West Side Story* gangs are sharing some of the characteristics of the real gangs. The minor crime caused by gangs, such as graffiti, is shown at the very beginning of the movie. Senseless murder is another crime that the authors decided to incorporate in the movie. Although compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, Maria at the end of *West Side Story* does not shoot herself or anybody else even though she has the power to do it. The authors used this ending scene as a message that hate should not be a reason for killing people, and thanks to Maria's gesture of sparing the lives, she shows that they are all equal and do not have to kill one another because they are of different races. Overall, the ending of the movie suggests reconciliation of these two rival gangs. According to the findings, the authors were all Jews, so that the ending might symbolize their suggestion to Americans to accept the immigrants.

Not only racism but also the humanization of Puerto Ricans is one of the main topics of this musical. Through different songs composed by Leonard Bernstein with the lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, the characters of *West Side Story* are introduced to the audience. As a young girl who dreams about being more American to be accepted by Americans, Maria expresses herself in the song “I Feel Pretty.” Anita’s temperament is shown in the song “America,” where she performs her excitement about being in the United States. She sees all the opportunities that America offers. However, not everyone feels as excited as Anita. The Puerto Rican boys notice the disadvantages of being a Puerto Rican in America.

Throughout the whole musical, it makes the audience sympathize more with Puerto Ricans. They are mainly introduced to the viewers, and they are portrayed as the ones who are not accepted because of their color. Until Maria meets Tony, who falls in love with her, since that time, she finally feels more accepted, because she is loved by an American, who is actually a Polack. None of the gangs approves of the love of Maria and Tony. Not supporting the love with a person of another kind is typical characteristics of immigrants group which only stick together and protect their territory from other nationalities.

To sum it up, the authors were highly inspired by the reality of the immigrant issues in the U.S. to create the musical. *West Side Story* also reflects Robbins’ life, such as in the song “Somewhere” or when Tony says that he is not “one of them” – Robbins had denied his Jewish origins. This musical also carries a message from the authors who try to say that everyone should be equal and accepted no matter what their origins are.

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