

**WEST  
SIDE  
STORY**



SOUTH  
BEND  
**CIVIC**  
THEATRE

## **Educational Resource Packet**

### **An Interdisciplinary Resource Packet for Teachers**

Prepared by the South Bend Civic Theatre

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*West Side Story*- **October 8 & October 9, 2022**

Free School Performances October 10 @10:30AM

**“OUR WEST SIDE STORY”  
¡YO SOY WEST SIDE!**



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## PRODUCTION HISTORY



Dancers getting ready for the opening night of *West Side Story*, 1957. Getty images

**Synopsis:** Set in the Upper West Side of New York during the mid-1950s, *West Side Story* is a take on *Romeo and Juliet* for mid-twentieth-century America. The Montagues and the Capulets are replaced by two rival gangs, the Jets, a gang made up of poor White neighborhood boys of mixed European immigrant backgrounds, and the Sharks, a gang of Puerto Rican arrivals. Their rivalry is thrown into further relief as Tony, a former member of the Jets and a close friend to the Jets' leader Riff, falls in love with Maria, the sister of the Sharks' leader Bernardo. As the Jets and Sharks jockey for turf in the changing urban landscape, they

grapple with issues of racial intolerance, sexism, and immigration, all while seeking to assert their own identities as young adults in a world that marks them as delinquents.

***West Side Story* in the Making:** In the late 1940s, choreographer and director Jerome Robbins approached composer Leonard Bernstein and writer Arthur Laurents about a project to create a modernized, musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. He proposed that the story focus on Jews and Catholics during Passover and Easter on New York's Lower East Side. Newspapers at the time referred to the collaboration as *East Side Story*. After Laurents completed to first draft, the group realized that their work was little more than a musicalization of *Abie's Irish Rose*, a long-running play from the 1920s about Jewish-Catholic intermarriage. The project was set aside, until Laurents ran into Bernstein in Beverly Hills. There, the two saw a



Jerome Robbins. Getty images



Jerome Robbins teaching choreography to some of the Sharks. Getty images

newspaper headline "More Mayhem from Chicano Gangs." Bernstein suggested changing the play to be set in Los Angeles, but Laurents felt he was more familiar with Puerto Ricans and Harlem in New York. The New York newspapers were filled with articles about gang violence, and the city was experiencing a rise in Puerto Rican migration, so the project felt timely. Steven Sondheim, a young newcomer, was invited to write the lyrics for the project, and *West Side Story* as we know it was born.

**Production History:** *West Side Story* opened on Broadway at the Winter Garden Theatre on September 26, 1957. It ran for 732 performances before closing in 1959. It ran again for 253 performances in 1960. It also premiered in England at the Manchester Opera House and then at Her Majesty’s Theatre in London for 1,039 performances. In 1962 it toured through Scandinavia. The production was revived on Broadway in 1980 and then retooled for modern relevance by Laurents, with the help of Lin-Manuel Miranda, in 2009. The 2009 revival opened at the Palace Theatre and ran for 748



*West Side Story* on Broadway in 2009. Getty images

performances. *West Side Story* was again revived again under the director Ivo van Hove in 2020. The original *West Side Story* film debuted in 1961 under the direction of Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise. A remake of the film is scheduled for release in December 2021, directed by Steven Spielberg. Rita Moreno, who won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her performance as Anita in the original 1962 film, is also an executive producer on the project.

**Awards:**

**Original Broadway Production:**

- Tony Award for Best Choreography
- Tony Award for Best Scenic Design
- Tony Award nominated for Best Musical, Best Featured Actress in a Musical, Best Costume Design, Best Conductor and Musical Director

**Example Activity:** Have students think critically about white-washing. What does white-washing mean? How does it affect the credibility of a narrative? How might it be at play in *West Side Story*, which was written and directed by White creators? Do Puerto Rican contributors, like Lin-Manuel Miranda in the 2009 Broadway revival and Rita Moreno in the 2020 film, make a difference?

**Film:**

- New York Film Critics Best Picture
- Academy Award for Best Picture
- Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor
- Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress
- Academy Award for Best Direction
- Academy Award for Best Cinematography, Color
- Academy Award for Best Art Direction, Color
- Academy Award for Best Sound
- Academy Award for Best Scoring of a Musical
- Academy Award for Best Editing
- Academy Award for Best Costumes, Color
- Academy Award for Best Costumes
- Grammy for Best Soundtrack
- Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture—Musical,
- Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actor
- Golden Globe Best Supporting Actress

## CHARACTERS

**The Jets-** gang of poor White neighborhood boys of mixed European immigrant backgrounds but called Polish. Led by Riff. Ensemble Jets include: Action, A-Rab, Baby John, Snowboy, Big Deal, Diesel, Gee-Tar, Mouthpiece Tiger; Graziella, Velma, Minnie, Clarice, Pauline

**The Sharks-** gang of Puerto Rican arrivals to New York. Led by Bernardo. Ensemble Sharks include: Pepe, Indio, Luis, Anxious, Nibbles, Juano, Toro, Moose; Rosalia, Consuela, Teresita, Francisca, Estella Margarita

### Main Characters

**Riff-** the leader of the Jets, practically a brother to Tony.

**Tony-** a fellow Jet and close friend of Riff. He wants to leave the gang life, but Riff asks him to return. Works at Doc's drugstore. He falls in love with Maria.

**Bernardo-** leader and founder of the Sharks and older brother of Maria. He arrived in the mainland prior to Maria but still treasures his homeland.

**Maria-** sister of Bernardo, recently arrived in New York City. Characterized as niece and dreamy. She falls in love with Tony. She attempts to prevent the fights between the two gangs.

**Anita-** Bernardo's girlfriend and friend of Maria. Independent, but deeply in love with Bernardo. She prefers the mainland to Puerto Rico.

**Chino-** friend of Bernardo and fellow Shark. Bernardo plans for him to marry Maria.

### Other Supporting Characters

**Doc-** owner of the drugstore where the Jets regularly hang out and where they meet the Jets for their war conference. He prevents their assault on Anita and assists Tony when he attempts to get away.

**Schrank-** the plain clothes detective who attempts to keep the Jets in line. He harbors racist sentiments towards the Sharks while also disparaging the Jets. His goal is to avoid a gang war to maintain his position on the force. Officer Krupke's superior.

**Officer Krupke-** beat cop who works under Schrank to maintain order among the street gangs. Object of the humorous song "Gee, Officer Krupke" in the second act.

**Glad Hand-** social worker in the Gym Dance Scene.

**Anybodys-** a tomboy who tags around with the Jets. She wants to be a part of the gang, but they repeatedly reject her because she is a girl.

## ABBREVIATED TIMELINE OF U.S./PUERTO RICO RELATIONS

**1898- The Treaty of Paris** ends of the “Spanish-American” War, or the Cuban War of Independence. Puerto Rico is given to the United States by Spain as a concession of war.

**1899- a series of essays in *Harvard Law Review*** calls the Puerto Rican people “an alien and inferior race.”

**1900- the U.S. Congress passes the Foraker Act**, which grants free entrance to Puerto Rican exports to the U.S. This act makes Puerto Rican ports “coastwise,” or domestic ports, for economic purposes.

**1901- Supreme Court names Puerto Rico “foreign in a domestic sense.”**

**1904- the Supreme Court case *Gonzalez v. Williams*** rules in favor of a Puerto Rican woman who had migrated to New York, setting the status of Puerto Ricans as “U.S. nationals.”

**1917- the Jones Act grants citizenship to all Puerto Ricans** and extends some liberties of self-government to the island. The Jones Act did not grant Puerto Ricans the right to vote in federal elections, and it imposed literacy tests that disenfranchised 70% of the population. Puerto Rico is given a resident commissioner in the U.S. Congress, a non-voting member of the House of Representatives. Puerto Ricans can vote in federal elections if they move to the mainland.

**1941- the Navy begins using Vieques**, an island about 5 miles east of mainland Puerto Rico, for military exercises. Until 2003, Vieques was used for testing bombs and other weapons, including Agent Orange.

**1946- Jesús T. Piñero was appointed Puerto Rico’s first native governor** in its 450 years of colonial history.

**1947- the U.S. Congress amended the Jones Act** so that the citizens of the island would thereafter elect the governor.

**1950- Public Law 600** gave Puerto Ricans the power to write their own constitution, which would be subject to veto by the US Congress.

**1950s- Operation Bootstrap**, a series of U.S. government initiatives designed to industrialize Puerto Rico’s sugarcane economy.

**1952- Puerto Rico becomes an *Estado Libre Asociado***, or Commonwealth, of the United States. 81% of the Puerto Rican public approves this decision.

**1954- four Puerto Rican nationalists** in favor of Puerto Rican independence entered the gallery of the US congress, opened fire, and wounded five representatives on the anniversary of the passing of the Jones Act.

**1957- *West Side Story* opened on Broadway** at the Winter Garden Theatre on September 26

**1961- the film *West Side Story* is released**, Puerto Rican Rita Moreno wins the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her performance as Anita in *West Side Story*

**1967- Puerto Rico holds a referendum on the status of the island.** The choice was given between Commonwealth status, statehood, or independence. The majority voted for Commonwealth status.

**1997- Cruz María Nazario**, an epidemiologist at the University of Puerto Rico’s Graduate School of Public Health, and her team find that the incidence of cancer was 27% higher in Vieques, which had been used as a testing ground by the US Navy for over half a century, than the rest of Puerto Rico.

**1998- Puerto Rico holds a referendum on the status of the island.** This time the options were statehood, independence, free association, territorial commonwealth, and none of the above. The results were inconclusive.

**1999- David Sanes**, Vieques native and civilian employee of the Navy, is killed by a bomb dropped by a military training exercise in Vieques. This tragic death begins a wave of protest against the Navy’s use of Vieques in Puerto Rico and mainland US. Governor Pedro Rosselló begins talks with the US government to find a solution to the problem.

**2001- Governor Sila María Calderón signs a treaty with President George W. Bush** that guaranteed the Navy’s exit of Vieques by May of 2003

**2003- the U.S. Navy leaves Vieques.**

**2012- the Puerto Rican public votes in a referendum in favor of US statehood.** The issues is presented in an elaborate way on the ballot, with two questions: (1) whether they agreed to continue with Puerto Rico’s territorial status and (2) to indicated the status they preferred from statehood, independence, or a sovereign nation in free association with the United States. While 54% of voters selected “no” for the first questions, the results of the second question were not great enough to indicate a preferred path forward.

**2017- Hurricane Maria devastates Puerto Rico**, causing more than 4,600 deaths. Still more have died due to the hurricane’s effects, such as lack of electricity in homes and hospitals, lack of safe transport to towns and cities, and lack of food and water. The effects of the hurricane continue to be felt in Puerto Rico; the Puerto Rican public votes in another referendum in favor of U.S. statehood.

**2019- Rita Moreno receives a Peabody Award.** Moreno is one of sixteen people to have won all four major entertainment awards: an Oscar, an Emmy, a Grammy and a Tony (EGOT). She is one of only five people to add the Peabody Award to that list.

**2020- the Puerto Rican public votes yet again in a referendum in favor of US statehood**, with 52% of the vote in favor. It is unlikely that the US Congress will take up the question of Puerto Rican statehood.

**Example activity:** Have students research the United States’ response to Hurricane Maria. What does this recent event tell us about the relationship between the US government and Puerto Rico? How does it relate to Puerto Rico’s history of colonialism?



## TIME AND PLACE: THE NEW YORK OF *WEST SIDE STORY*

### Migration: Puerto Ricans in New York

Puerto Ricans have been living in the United States mainland since the mid-eighteenth century. While Spanish law prevented their colonies from trading with any country besides Spain itself, Puerto Ricans sought ways to avoid relying on expensive Spanish goods. They traded sugar and molasses for much more moderately priced food products from New York, New England, and Pennsylvania. With trade often comes the migration of people, and merchants, students, and laborers from Puerto Rico began establishing themselves in the young United States. After Puerto Rico's failed 1868 struggle for independence from Spain, known as *El Grito de Lares*, independence activists sought haven in New York City. There, Puerto Ricans laid the foundations for future Puerto Rican political activism in the United States by publishing several newspapers. Later in the nineteenth century, changes in the island's economy resulted in the displacement of workers. Many of these workers migrated to the United States, and, along with previous migrants, established the first Puerto Rican enclaves in New York.

In 1898, the United States gained Puerto Rico as a concession from Spain after the Cuban War of Independence, also known as the Spanish-American War. United States' rule accelerated economic changes that were already happening in Puerto Rico, as the United States government encouraged the development of large sugar plantations on the island. U.S. corporations discouraged the formation of native industries that may have provided additional jobs. The mechanization of sugar production also eliminated workers. These changes left many smaller landowners and their employees without work. As competition with cheaper U.S. imports increased, skilled artisans, such as shoemakers and textile workers, also became unemployed.

Migration to the U.S. mainland increased as Puerto Ricans sought employment. The passage of the 1917 Jones Act, which made Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens, also encouraged migration. Since Puerto Ricans were now citizens, the military could conscript Puerto Rican men for service in WWI. Veterans and soldiers made up a significant number of migrants to the mainland. Approximately 71,000 individuals left Puerto Rico for the United States between 1909 and 1940. New York City especially attracted Puerto Rican migrants. By 1940, there were approximately 61,500 Puerto Ricans living in New York City.

Yet, the boom for Puerto Rican migration to the U.S., especially New York City, occurred during and after World War II. Wartime industries and the subsequent post-war economic boom demanded workers, and Puerto Ricans were available to meet that demand. Between 1947 and 1949, an average of 32,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the U.S. each year, mainly New York. By 1950, there were 245,000 Puerto Ricans living in the city. New York industries depended on migration from Puerto Rico as they faced competition from other cities. Representatives from New York companies went to Puerto Rico to recruit workers. These workers were mainly recruited for low-paying, blue-collar jobs in light industry, restaurants, hotels, and garment manufacturing. This migration boom inspired *West Side Story*.

This large migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City added new vibrancy to the city's culture, like many waves of immigrants and migrants before them. Puerto Ricans formed neighborhood organizations, established newspapers and magazines, and participated in the arts. Nowadays, Puerto Ricans make up 8.9% of New York City's population and 32% of the city's Latino population. Famous Puerto Ricans and people of Puerto Rican descent from New York include Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Academy Award winning actress Rita Moreno, writer and composer Lin Manuel Miranda, baseball player and musician Bernie Williams, and U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

### **Lincoln Square, Urban Renewal, and Gentrification**

Present-day Puerto Ricans in New York live primarily in the Bronx, in Brooklyn's East Harlem ("Spanish Harlem" or "El Barrio"), and on the Lower East Side ("Loisaida"). At the time of *West Side Story*, however, the city looked different, and the story is set in a neighborhood that no longer exists, Lincoln Square, also known as San Juan Hill. Lincoln Hill was a poor, working-class neighborhood in Manhattan, from West 60<sup>th</sup> Street to West 66<sup>th</sup> Street, between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, just a few blocks from Central Park. It had previously been the home of Irish immigrants, but, by the 1950s, the neighborhood had changed to include a mix of White, Black, and Puerto Rican communities. The neighborhood was the birthplace of the popular dance the Charleston, had a vibrant jazz scene, and was home to famous pianist Thelonious Monk. It also had a strong theatrical and visual arts presence.

The city government saw the area differently, however. They saw the neighborhood as a "slum," and the influential and controversial builder Robert Moses sought to "re-build" the area. He headed the Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project, the largest urban renewal plan in the country. The ambitious project planned to transform eighteen city blocks into the largest performing arts complex in the world, along with 4,000 middle-income apartments, two public schools, a shopping center, parking garages, a skyscraper hotel, a high-rise office building, a ten-story fashion center, a midtown campus for Fordham University, and a new headquarters for the national Engineering Societies. The performing arts complex, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, would include five buildings housing an opera, a symphony, a ballet, a theater, a museum/library, and a school.

Yet Lincoln Square was not a "slum," and city officials even noted that it had no "structural defects." Robert Moses, however, was working toward the lofty goal of "progress." Progress, especially in promoting the arts, would better all. It would also assert America's artistic and cultural standing on the world stage. Those living in the area, however, were left out of the "all" that would be bettered. 7,000 low-income apartments were lost, and the poor, Black, and Puerto Rican residents of the neighborhood had little political power to fight for their right to the space. Residents were forced to find places to live elsewhere. The 1962 film version of *West Side Story* was shot on streets blocked off for demolition. Ultimately, the Lincoln Center continues to operate today, with *West Side Story* being the only monument to what was there before.

## Narrative and Reality: Gangs of the 1940s and 50s

Although the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York had begun decades earlier, politicians did not begin to ring the alarm bells until around 1935. They began to fear the political power that the new Puerto Rican population could wield as citizens with the right to vote. Popular media also began to reflect this sense of alarmism, and newspapers and magazines published articles that spewed racist and xenophobic depictions of Puerto Ricans—that they were lazy, disease-ridden, dependent on state welfare, and, above all else, members of violent gangs. During the 1940s tide of international decolonization movements, Congress began to revisit the 1917 Jones Act<sup>1</sup> to create more autonomy for Puerto Rico, but public sentiment remained steadfastly against Puerto Ricans. *West Side Story* reflects popular concerns over the criminality of Puerto Rican youth that were still strong when the musical opened in 1957.

Gangs were a part of life in the New York of the era, and there were certainly Puerto Rican gangs operating in Puerto Rican neighborhoods. Gangs grew as a response to the harsh realities of life in working-class New York. Before World War II, New York had begun transitioning from an industrial economy to a service economy. The war slowed the transition down by revitalizing some manufacturing, and the economic boom during and immediately after the war attracted Puerto Rican workers. However, after a boom comes a bust, and a few years after the war New York's shift to a service economy accelerated. Many poor, Black, and Puerto Rican New Yorkers were left without jobs. The decline in manufacturing jobs was felt especially by young people and high school dropouts. As relatively new arrivals to the city, Puerto Ricans were even more vulnerable than other groups to the changing economy.

Many young people, including Puerto Ricans, felt disaffected. Left with few job prospects to allow them to take on the role of “provider,” young men felt the need to assert their masculinity in other ways. Gangs offered a way for young people to gain a reputation, and they could fight for resources such as space, parks, and swimming pools. More importantly, however, gangs fought for “ethnic honor.” For Puerto Rican youth, who were marginalized, disparaged in the media, and discriminated against as they sought employment, a chance to fight for honor was a chance worth taking. Many of these gang members felt that they were not only fighting for their personal reputation, but the reputation of every member of their race.

Gangs went on “raids” or “rumbles” into enemy turf to gain new ground or seek retribution for a previous attack. These raids became especially intense when opposing gangs were of different races, where honor was at stake. Such clashes took place at the borders between predominantly European American and predominantly Puerto Rican or Black neighborhoods. As Eric C. Schneider, an expert on twentieth century gangs of New York, explains, “European American gangs, with at least the tacit support of adults, enforced neighborhood boundary lines by violently assaulting minority group members, particularly adolescents, who crossed them” (24). This phenomenon can be seen in *West Side Story*. For example, the police officer Lieutenant Shrank voices his support for the Jets' attempts to rid themselves of the Sharks, whom he refers to as “tin-horn immigrant scum.”

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<sup>1</sup> The Jones Act of 1917 gave citizenship to all Puerto Ricans. See the timeline in this packet for more details.

Gangs rarely targeted bystanders, children, and women. In fact, while they came to conflicts armed, they often did not intend to kill rival gang members. Instead, they hoped to scare their rivals and prove themselves to be tough. Death and injury were caused by gang rumbles. However, this violence was not the one-sided work of Puerto Rican gangs or other gangs made up of people of color. European American gangs also perpetrated violence to maintain the “status quo.” Nevertheless, the changing economy, poverty, and blatant discrimination against Puerto Ricans were the roots of this violence. Gangs were an outgrowth of a society that condemned some to the status of permanent “lesser.”

### **Afterward: The Nuyorican Arts Movement**

The impact of Puerto Ricans in New York was felt on the island as well, and Puerto Rican islanders developed the pejorative term “Nuyorican” to describe the Americanized Puerto Ricans of New York. The very people it was meant to offend, however, transformed the word into a powerful marker of community. “Nuyorican” became a tool of survival, a way of claiming an identity that was neither Puerto Rican nor American. It was a way to come together around a shared set of experiences in the face of the discrimination.

The concept of “Nuyoricanness” was being developed in conjunction with post-Civil Rights Era discussions around Blackness. These broader cultural discussions around what it means to be Black or Nuyorican in America were concentrated around groups of artists of color. The work of these artists was not accepted by White society, so they sought to bring their art into the world outside of mainstream entertainment and publishing industries. Like the Black Arts Movement, the Nuyorican Arts Movement was created organically to allow the work of artists of color to flourish.

While the roots of the Nuyorican Arts Movement reach back decades earlier, the movement began to take its shape in 1973 with the founding of the Nuyorican Poets Café. Its founders include Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Lucky Cienfuegos, Sandra Maria Esteves, and Diane Burns among others. These poets, playwrights, and musicians performed plays, Latin Jazz and Hip-Hop concerts, and, importantly, slam poetry. Slam poetry is a genre of spoken-word poetry that combines elements of written poetry, performance, audience participation, and hip-hop. It is performed at poetry “slams.” Slam poets mixed classical poetry with the language of the street, creating a uniquely American poetic form. The café popularized the art form, which is now practiced competitively across the country. Slams at the Nuyorican Poets Café continue to draw thousands of spectators each year.

While the Nuyorican Arts Movement in its full form was a product of the 1970s and 80s, its impact can still be felt today. The poets, playwrights, and musicians of the movement forged new paths in American art and changed the way we express ourselves.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, a host of complex social and economic factors prompted Puerto Rican migration to the mainland. The colonial history between the U.S. and Puerto Rico created doubts, that still exist to this day, around the status of Puerto Rico and its islanders. Once on the mainland, Puerto

Ricans encountered discrimination, and their enclaves were the targets of “urban renewal.” Some youth formed gangs in order to combat their feelings of hopelessness in a social order that deemed them inferior. In this marginal space, however, Puerto Ricans were able to counter their oppression by creating art, advocating for political autonomy, and developing a culture distinctly their own.

**Example Activity 1:** Have students research the contributions of Puerto Ricans and people of Puerto Rican descent. Consider, for example, the role of Puerto Ricans in the famed 396<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (“The Harlem Hellfighters”) of WWI. Students might create posters, presentations, or reports on the figure/group of their choosing.

**Example Activity 2:** Initiate a discussion with students about gentrification. What is gentrification? What does it look like? Who does it benefit? Introduce the example of the Lincoln Square/ San Juan Hill neighborhood of New York. Then, have students research other examples of gentrification, potentially in their own communities. For example, consider Secretary Pete Buttigieg’s “1,000 Homes, 1,000 Days” initiative while he was mayor of South Bend. Is this a case of gentrification or urban renewal done right?

**Example Activity 3:** Introduce students to selected slam poetry, which can be found on YouTube channels like Poetry Slam Inc., Button Poetry, or SlamFind. For example, [“Hands” by Sarah Kay](#), [“My Honest Poem” by Rudy Francisco](#), or [“Afro-Latina” by Elizabeth Acevedo](#) might serve well. Slam often speaks of heavy and adult themes, so ensure that the poem chosen is appropriate for your grade level. You could also have students choose one of [the founders of the Nuyorican Poets Café](#) and read one of their poems. Have students think critically about the genre of spoken-word poetry. How is it similar or different from other types of poetry that they have encountered? If doing a unit on *Romeo and Juliet*, have students compare a spoken-word poem to a Shakespearean monologue/soliloquy. Are there any holdovers between the two genres?

## UNDERSTANDING WEST SIDE STORY AND STEREOTYPES

After having been hired to revitalize the Sharks' dialogue in the 2009 Broadway revival of *West Side Story*, Lin-Manuel Miranda reflected to *The Washington Post*, "I think *West Side Story* for the Latino community has been our greatest blessing and our greatest curse." His comment sums up most of the debate around the cultural impact of the musical. On the one hand, the musical and subsequent film brought Puerto Rican characters into the spotlight and allowed Puerto Ricans, like Rita Moreno, to succeed in the industry. On the other hand, *West Side Story* relies on stereotypes of a marginalized group and has propped up harmful misconceptions of Puerto Ricans.

For the better part of a century, *West Side Story* has been one of the only mainstream representations of Puerto Ricans, but none of its original creators were Puerto Rican. In fact, the creators knew very little about the Puerto Rican experience in New York, except for what they read in the newspapers. The lyricist Steven Sondheim nearly rejected the job, protesting, "I can't do this show. I've never been that poor and I've never even *known* a Puerto Rican!" On top of the lack of direct knowledge behind the project, the original Broadway production featured no Puerto Rican actors. The actors who played the Sharks wore brownface. In the film, the version best known in popular culture, Rita Moreno was the only Puerto Rican actor. All the rest wore brownface, and even Moreno was required to darken her skin with makeup.

Because of their lack of direct knowledge, the creators of *West Side Story* relied on popular stereotypes of Puerto Ricans, who by the 1950s were increasingly migrating to New York. Popular representations in newspapers considered Puerto Ricans to be criminals, and news coverage from the 1930s stereotyped Puerto Ricans as "the city's most dangerous newcomers" (Thomas 8). From the earliest days of American colonization in Puerto Rico, the rhetoric of criminality was a primary tool for denying Puerto Ricans equal rights. In 1899 a series of essays in the *Harvard Law Review* featured debates about the legal status of Puerto Rico. One contributor, Judge Simeon Baldwin, called Puerto Ricans, "...ignorant and lawless brigands..." (qtd. in Thomas 6). *West Side Story* does nothing to shrink these long-held stereotypes. Instead, its Puerto Rican characters are knife-wielding gang members. Such a depiction ignores the struggles that Puerto Ricans faced as they came to New York. Even though Puerto Ricans became American citizens with the passage of the 1917 Jones Act, they still found themselves struggling to find work due to racial discrimination on the mainland. *West Side Story* rejects a more complex picture of the Puerto Rican experience in favor of simpler, though clearly false and harmful, stereotypes.

Often, *West Side Story* is defended on the basis of Leonard Bernstein's music and Jerome Robbins's choreography, which attempt to make use of Latin American and Caribbean music and dance styles. Even in that regard, however, the musical does not quite meet the mark. The famous gym scene "Mambo" is not, rhythmically, a mambo, and the Sharks' rooftop dance scene is choreographed as a formal Spanish *paso doble* rather than a dance of Latin American or Caribbean origin.

Nevertheless, *West Side Story* endures among Latinx, and especially Puerto Rican, communities in the United States. Poet and Latino Studies scholar Deborah Paredez recalls how she and her mother watched and re-watched *West Side Story* throughout her childhood, scoffing at the

brown-face makeup while also singing and enjoying the film. Writer Carina de Valle Schorske reflects on how her mother taught her to condemn the stereotypes in *West Side Story*. But when her mother first went to see *West Side Story* in theatres, she and her friends cheered when the Sharks came on screen. Performer Jennifer Lopez considers the film one of the inspirations for her career. Certainly, Rita Moreno's performance stands out as a redeeming feature. During the song "America," she "sings of assimilation while dancing its undoing," according to Paredez. Moreno's dancing undermines her professed love for America in the song by showcasing Puerto Rican-influenced movement. She also plays a pivotal, complex role; Anita is the only character in the film to change, from condemning Tony and Maria's love to deciding to embrace it. The role also won Rita Moreno the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, making her the first Hispanic woman to win an Academy Award. Her performance opened doors for future Latina women to succeed in the industry.

*West Side Story* is a complex piece. It endures, but it also endorses the contemporary stereotypes of Puerto Rican criminality, which are still all-too-common today. For Latinx communities, viewing *West Side Story* can be pleasurable and painful. At the end of the day, critical viewing is essential to understanding *West Side Story*, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

**Example Activity:** Have students think about assimilation. What are the problems associated with assimilation? What are the advantages, for marginalized groups and the dominant society? Then, have students listen/ watch critically to the song "America" from *West Side Story*. What does it have to say about assimilation?

## WEST SIDE STORY AND ROMEO AND JULIET

When Robbins and Laurents first began developing the groundwork for what would become *West Side Story* in 1949, the explicit goal of the project was to reinvent Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* for the modern era. As the Capulets and the Montagues are reimagined as the Sharks and the Jets, Romeo and Juliet are replaced by Tony and Maria. While the two productions are very similar, they also bear important differences. For example, the divisions of *West Side Story* center on racial difference, while the root of the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is never specified by Shakespeare. The similarities and differences between *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet* have made the two a great pair in the classroom since the movie's release in 1961. Here are some suggestions for bringing *West Side Story* into conversation with *Romeo and Juliet* in your classroom:

1. Like Tony/Romeo and Maria/Juliet, many other characters in *Romeo and Juliet* also find their doubles in *West Side Story*. For example, Bernardo takes the place of Tybalt. Prompt students to brainstorm *Romeo and Juliet* characters that have doubles in *West Side Story*. Then, have them list the important similarities and differences between the two. Are their motivations the same? How about the way they accomplish their goals? This activity can be done as a Think, Pair, Share or extended to have students create a poster/other visual media depicting the two characters and listing their differences.
2. While *Romeo and Juliet* is a play, *West Side Story* is a musical. Have students think about the differences between the two genres. How do these differences affect the telling of the story? How do song/dance help/hinder the communication of important themes? Once you have discussed these questions as a class, divide the class into groups and assign them a scene/act from *Romeo and Juliet*. Have students create a soundtrack for their assigned act/scene and justify their choices in writing or in a presentation to the class. Consider giving students the opportunity to go the extra mile by writing their own song(s) or creating a dance to present to the class.
3. *Romeo and Juliet* is set in Verona in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries and was written in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. *West Side Story* was written to reflect contemporary realities of mid-twentieth century America. Have students think about what literature in general has to say about the time/place it was written/set. Then, direct students to focus on the works at hand. What does *Romeo and Juliet* tell us about the society in which it was written? How is that different from what *West Side Story* has to say? After thinking about these questions (either as a bellringer, class discussion, teacher presentation, or Think, Pair, Share), have students brainstorm current issues that might cause conflict like that of *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*. Then, have students work in groups or pairs to craft their own modern-day *Romeo and Juliet* by picking a current issue that speaks to them. This activity can be done by having students focus on particular scenes or acts, or writing up a synopsis of the whole play. What would be the driving issue that causes difference? Who would be the Montagues and Capulets/Jets and Sharks? What would the characters names be? How would they act? How would they speak? And, importantly, how would the story end?



4. Similarly to the above, this suggestion asks students to think about contemporary social issues. It also asks the teacher to have become familiar with the page in this packet on stereotypes in *West Side Story*. In recent years, there has been increased interest in *West Side Story*. The 2009 Broadway revival enlisted the support of Lin-Manuel Miranda to add some bilingualism to the dialogue. There was another Broadway revival in 2019 by director Ivo van Hove who hoped to modernize the production. A remake of the film is also coming out in 2021. Why is *West Side Story* still relevant? What might this recent interest in the film say about the issues of today? How are current debates around immigration/belonging present in the musical? After thinking about these questions, have students also consider the limitations of the film. What does it say about Puerto Ricans specifically that might not be accurate? What stereotypes does it rely on? Is the musical still valuable given these limitations? If grade-level appropriate, *West Side Story* may also make a good introduction to the term “stereotype” and have students point out stereotypes in the film.

**Resources for comparison:** Bringing *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet* together has inspired many educators throughout the years. At the end of this packet, we have provided a Venn Diagram Character Comparison Resource that can be used with suggestion one above. We have also included a movie watch sheet that encourages comparison. In addition to the suggestions provided here, TeachWithMovies.org provides worksheets and ideas for comparing the two productions:  
<https://teachwithmovies.org/west-side-story/>

## SPOTLIGHT: RITA MORENO



Rita Moreno. Getty images

On December 11, 1931, Rita Moreno was born Rosita Dolores Alverio in Humacao, Puerto Rico. At the age of five, she moved to New York to live with her mother, who was then working as a seamstress. From a young age Moreno showed grit and talent. At six she started taking dancing lessons, and by 13 she had booked her first Broadway appearance in the play “Skydrift.” She also gained employment dubbing films and doing radio.

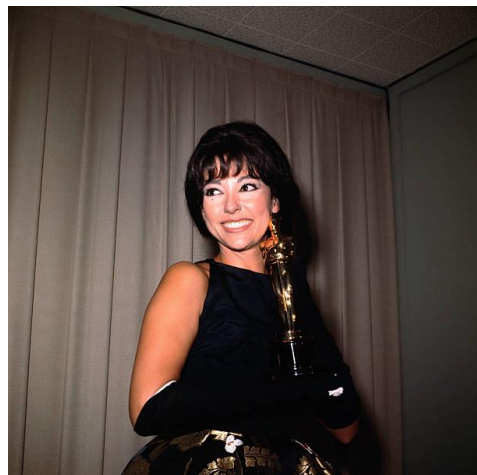
Three years later she arrived in Hollywood and booked a part as an extra in an Army film. That work qualified her for the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the union for performers in film. As she began her career in Hollywood, she changed her name from Rosita Alverio to Rita Moreno. She was then able to secure her true debut role in the movie *So Young, So Bad* when she was just 18. While *So Young, So Bad* was a

flop, she kept working, and her career has since included appearances in over 40 films including *West Side Story*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, *The King and I*, *The Ritz*, and *Casa de los Babys*.

In her early films, Moreno was often racially cast as “dark skin” characters. She played stereotypical East Indian princesses, Native American maidens, and, of course, the Latin spitfire. She was required to wear dark makeup and do accents. Speaking of this time, Moreno says, “It dismayed me; I began to feel demeaned, that my dignity was on the line. But I had to make a living and I had to be an actress. I was determined that, with perseverance and faith, at some point someone would say ‘That girl has talent’ and would cast me in something meaningful.”

That something meaningful came in 1961 when she was cast as Anita in the film production of *West Side Story*. This role gave Moreno the opportunity to play, as she says, “a young Hispanic woman with dignity, and enormous strength.” For her dynamic portrayal of the complex Anita, Moreno won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, becoming the first Hispanic woman to win an Academy Award. Her performance as Anita has inspired future generations of performers, including Jennifer Lopez, who recalls, “I saw [*West Side Story*] over and over... I grew up always wanting to play Anita.”

Finding success in the industry did not become easier after Moreno’s Oscar win, however. After her win, Moreno did not do a film for over six years. She was offered parts in gang movies, but she refused to do stereotypical roles that relegated Hispanic and Latinx actresses to demeaning roles.



Moreno and her Oscar, 1962. Getty images



Moreno in 2018 at the 90<sup>th</sup> Annual Academy Awards. Getty images

While Moreno faced many obstacles in her career, she has been able to achieve remarkable success. One of only sixteen people to win the four awards of the coveted EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony), Moreno was also awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2004. The medal is the nation's highest award given to a civilian. She has also won several lifetime achievement awards, such as the SAG Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013, the Kennedy Center Honors in 2015, and the Peabody Career Achievement Award in 2019. By winning the Peabody, Moreno became the first Latinx person to win the five awards of the PEGOT (Peabody, Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony). She is one of only three Americans to have these five prestigious awards on her mantle.

Moreno's recent projects include the Netflix reboot of *One Day at a Time* and as a voice actor in *Rio 2*. Moreno is also partnering with Steven Spielberg as executive directors on the 2021 film remake of *West Side Story*. She will also appear in the film. Moreno continues to fundraise for various charities and give lectures. She gives the following advice to young performers, "The most important thing young people can do for themselves and their children or future children is to go to school and get a good education. They need to find something they love and pursue it. They should not give up following their dream. It's not always possible to find something you truly love, but if you can, you must work to fulfill your dream."

## SPOTLIGHT: LEONARD BERNSTEIN

What is American music? That was the question that Leonard Bernstein took up in his life's work as a pianist, conductor, and composer. Born on August 25, 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Bernstein grew up hearing all kinds of music—from classical to jazz and early rock. Both of his parents were Jewish immigrants from Ukraine, so Bernstein's first introduction to music was the melodious sounds of the pipe organ and choir at Mishkan Tefila Temple in Boston. At the age of ten, Bernstein began taking piano lessons, showing prodigious talent and a knack for picking out tunes from the radio by ear.

Bernstein spent his early education in the Boston Public Schools. He then went on to Harvard to study music. There, he wrote a senior thesis entitled "The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music," where he made a controversial argument for the time—that "mainstream" American music had long been influenced by Native American and African American music. While still at Harvard, he met the famous American composer Aaron Copland. Copland encouraged Bernstein to get further training as a conductor, and he also offered advice on Bernstein's early musical compositions. This mentorship influenced Bernstein's work throughout his career.



Leonard Bernstein. Getty images

Bernstein took Aaron Copland's advice and enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia where he studied conducting and piano. After his graduation from Curtis, he received his first permanent conducting position in 1943 as Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic. There, his star rose. On November 14, 1943, he filled in at the last minute for the renowned German conductor Bruno Walker. Bernstein became a sensation. The next day he made front-page news in New York, and he was lauded as a burgeoning genius.



Bernstein conducting. Getty images

From that point on, Bernstein was a success. In 1944 he debuted his first symphony, "Jeremiah," which was inspired by his Jewish heritage. He scored ballets like *Fancy Free*, composed operettas like *Candide*, and even wrote a Mass in the Roman Catholic tradition at the behest of First Lady Jackie Kennedy. Most famously, he composed the music for the Broadway musical *West Side Story*. In his music, he strove to connect popular music, jazz, and classical European themes to produce unique sounds.

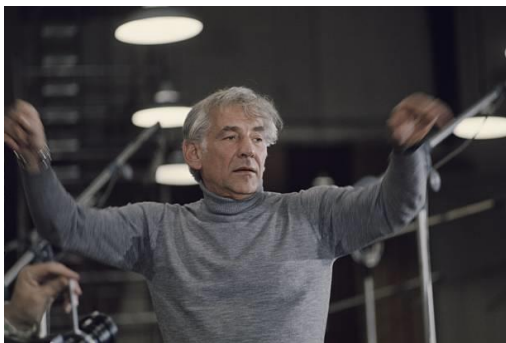
At the time, most conductors of major American orchestras were from Europe. Bernstein proved that an American could succeed and excel in the art form. Throughout his career, he reinvented the role of conductor. Before Bernstein, conductors were advised that, at a concert, only the audience should sweat. Bernstein ignored that advice. He would become so involved in the music that he would often leave the stage dripping sweat, and audiences were drawn more to see him than to hear the music. He made many international tours, where he supported modern American music although it was considered inferior to classical European music.



Bernstein conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood in 1970. Getty images

Unlike other conductors, Bernstein was active in politics. He professed his Jewish religion unapologetically at a time when the world was still recovering from the aftermath of World War II. He stood in solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement, and he protested the Vietnam War. However, his most important social work was teaching. He was dedicated to instilling a love of music in all children. He led the *Young People's Concerts*, a series that aired on television from 1958 to 1972. At these concerts, Bernstein used the new medium of television to introduce all Americans to music. During these concerts, he delivered moving speeches on music and its fundamentals. His passion shined through, and the *Young People's Concerts* have been credited with inspiring many young musicians.

In his personal life, Bernstein struggled against a society that condemned homosexuality. In 1951 he married Chilean actress and pianist Felicia Montealegre, with whom he had three children. Although his relationship with his wife was loving, his personal letters also reveal he had feelings for and relationships with other men. During his lifetime, homosexuality was considered a mental disorder and was met with severe and violent stigma. Bernstein had to grapple with his feelings all his life.



Bernstein later in life. Getty images

It is hard to overstate Bernstein's influence on American popular culture during his career. He attracted a cult of personality that no other American classical musician has been able to achieve since. He received numerous Emmys and Grammys, one Tony Award, and the Kennedy Center Honors. Bernstein was also an intellectual, having published five books and given a lecture series at Harvard. Bernstein died in 1990 at the age of 72. In 2018, for the centennial of Bernstein's birth, over 612 orchestras across the world performed his music. Bernstein is memorialized in his music, which, as he said in 1976, "...can name the unnamable and communicate the unknowable."

## SPOTLIGHT: STEVEN SONDHEIM

One of the giants of American musical theatre, Stephen Sondheim's work as a lyricist and composer has defined the genre. Sondheim was born into a Jewish family in New York on March 22, 1930. His family was prosperous, and Sondheim was able to study piano while still very young. His parents divorced in 1942, so Sondheim moved with his mother to Doylestown, Pennsylvania. There, he became friends with the son of Oscar Hammerstein II, as the Hammersteins had a summer residence nearby.

Hammerstein, the Broadway lyricist and producer behind such famous musicals as *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *The Sound of Music*, became a second father to Sondheim. Sondheim had a complicated and destructive relationship with his mother, but he was able to pursue his musical talents under



Stephen Sondheim. Getty images



Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960).  
Getty images

Hammerstein's mentorship.

Hammerstein treated the young Sondheim like an adult and provided him with a solid role model to emulate. At the age of 15, Sondheim wrote his first stage production, *By George*. The musical was based on his high school and was written to be produced there. Sondheim, thinking his first musical to be worthy of Broadway, brought the work to Hammerstein, who paid him the compliment of tearing it apart. Hammerstein dissected *By George* critically, which both men knew to be necessary for success. In an interview given in 2010, Sondheim remarked that Hammerstein taught him more in that afternoon than most lyricists learn in a lifetime.

After high school, Sondheim attended Williams College where he majored in music while also working as an assistant to Hammerstein. He then won the Hutchinson Prize, which allowed him to study musical composition at Princeton University. After college Sondheim wrote scripts for the television shows *Topper* and *The Last World* and also composed the background music for the play *Girls of Summer*. His break finally came when he was approached by Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein, who asked him to be the lyricist for their new project, *West Side Story*. Sondheim hesitated. He wanted to write both music and lyrics, and he felt that he was not familiar with the subject matter. Hammerstein counselled him to take the opportunity to work with such talents as Robbins and Bernstein, so Sondheim accepted the offer. That decision made Sondheim an essential part of one of the most successful Broadway productions of all time.

After his success with *West Side Story*, Sondheim continued to cement his legacy as one of the key figures of the musical's golden age. His works such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), and *Sweeney*

*Todd* (1979) have won him critical acclaim. His *Pacific Overtures* (1976) was praised for its use of traditional Japanese theatre and haiku, and he collaborated with James Lapine on *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), which won a Pulitzer. He wrote the lyrics for *Into the Woods* (1987), which became a film in 2014.

Sondheim developed a reputation as a lyricist with a knack for witty, conversation lyrics, an ability to blend musical styles, and a willingness to tackle major social themes. He was a willing collaborator, and often worked with other composers, lyricists, and writers to create top-notch musicals.



Sondheim at the premier of *Into the Woods*, 2014. Getty images

In his personal life, Sondheim is a very private, somewhat reclusive figure. In an approved biography from 1990, Sondheim called himself a “late-bloomer,” and he did not have many serious partners. He has been officially with his current partner, Jeff Romley, since 2004, and the couple married in 2017.



Sondheim being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama, 2015. Getty images

Throughout his career Sondheim collected numerous awards. He won eight Tony Awards, a record for a composer, and eight Grammy Awards. He won the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and he won an Oscar for the song “Sooner or Later” from the 1990 film *Dick Tracy*. In 2015 Sondheim received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor that can be given to an American civilian. In 2017 he won the PEN/Allen Foundation Literary Service Award, which had never previously been awarded to a lyricist. The award is given to “a critically acclaimed writer whose body of work helps us understand and interpret the human

condition.” At 90 years old, Sondheim lives a mostly quiet life with his partner, but he continues to be a force in the world of music.

## REPUTABLE WEB RESOURCES

### Free Resources for Teaching *West Side Story*

- TeachWithMovies.org provides worksheets, lesson plan ideas, and the trailer of *West Side Story*  
<https://teachwithmovies.org/west-side-story/>
- The official *West Side Story* website provides a detailed synopsis of the work, the lyrics to all the songs, and access to photos and information from each revival of the musical.  
<https://www.westsidestory.com/>
- The Carnegie Hall Weill Music Institute offers a free classroom supplement with lesson plan outlines for a close reading of “Somewhere” and an exploration of “Gee, Officer Krupke.”  
[https://www.carnegiehall.org/uploadedFiles/Resources\\_and\\_Components/PDF/WMI/Soundfly\\_Suppliment\\_AW.PDF](https://www.carnegiehall.org/uploadedFiles/Resources_and_Components/PDF/WMI/Soundfly_Suppliment_AW.PDF)

### The Music of *West Side Story*

- The official Leonard Bernstein website is an expansive resource with access to additional biographical materials.  
<https://www.leonardbernstein.com/at100>
- The official Leonard Bernstein YouTube channel provides access to Bernstein’s music and clips from his Young People’s Concerts. Includes a playlist of selected songs from *West Side Story*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/c/LeonardBernsteinOfficial/featured>
- Clip from the first Young People’s Concert, “What Is Music?” Introduced by Whoopi Goldberg.  
[https://youtu.be/9VV19E\\_QBmo](https://youtu.be/9VV19E_QBmo) (about 4 minutes)
- PBS News Hour interview with Stephen Sondheim, 2010.  
<https://youtu.be/MTw9JZkuIzU> (17 minutes)
- Interview with Stephen Sondheim by Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2017.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/16/t-magazine/lin-manuel-miranda-stephen-sondheim.html>

### Puerto Rico and the United States

- The PBS series *Latino Americans* offers comprehensive accounts of the relations between the United States, Latin America, and those who migrate between the two. The second episode “Empire of Dreams” is most relevant to Puerto Rico-U.S. relations. The entire episode is about 55 minutes, but minutes 15:20- 20:20 are especially valuable.  
<http://www.pbs.org/latino-americans/en/watch-videos/#2365076018>
- PBS *Latino Americans* clip on Rita Moreno  
<http://www.pbs.org/latino-americans/en/watch-videos/#2365023440> (3 minutes)
- NPR Interview with Rita Moreno  
<https://www.npr.org/2018/05/13/610407259/rita-moreno-to-my-gente-be-proud-of-who-you-are-don-t-give-up> (5-minute listen)
- TeenKidsNews Clip “Should Puerto Rico pursue Statehood or Independence?” A brief introduction to Puerto Rican-U.S. affairs for younger students.  
<https://teenkidsnews.com/puerto-ricos-complicated-history-with-the-united-states/> (4 minutes).
- The Nuyorican Poets Café website provides a history of the movement and a list of its founders. The poems of many important founders, like Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, and Diane Burns, can be found on reputable websites like poets.org and poetryfoundation.org.  
<https://www.nuyorican.org/history-awards>
- The *La Brega* podcast series tells stories from the Puerto Rican experience. It is also available in Spanish, which may be a good listening practice for intermediate and advanced Spanish classes.  
<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/la-brega/episodes>



## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Here, we have collected the suggested example activities that are provided throughout the packet into one page for ease of reference. Please refer to the pages on *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet* for our suggestions for comparing the two works.

### Production History

- Have students think critically about white-washing. What does white-washing mean? How does it affect the credibility of a narrative? How might it be at play in *West Side Story*, which was written and directed by White creators? Do Puerto Rican contributors, like Lin-Manuel Miranda in the 2009 Broadway revival and Rita Moreno in the 2020 film, make a difference?

### Abbreviated Timeline of U.S./Puerto Rico Relations

- Have students research the United States' response to Hurricane Maria. What does this recent event tell us about the relationship between the US government and Puerto Rico? How does it relate to Puerto Rico's history of colonialism?

### Time and Place: The New York of *West Side Story*

- Have students research the contributions of Puerto Ricans and people of Puerto Rican descent. Consider, for example, the role of Puerto Ricans in the famed 396<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment ("The Harlem Hellfighters") of WWI. Students might create posters, presentations, or reports on the figure/group of their choosing.
- Initiate a discussion with students about gentrification. What is gentrification? What does it look like? Who does it benefit? Introduce the example of the Lincoln Square/ San Juan Hill neighborhood of New York. Then, have students research other examples of gentrification, potentially in their own communities. For example, consider Secretary Pete Buttigieg's "1,000 Homes, 1,000 Days" initiative while he was mayor of South Bend. Is this a case of gentrification or urban renewal done right?
- Introduce students to selected slam poetry, which can be found on YouTube channels like Poetry Slam Inc., Button Poetry, or SlamFind. For example, ["Hands" by Sarah Kay](#), ["My Honest Poem" by Rudy Francisco](#), or ["Afro-Latina" by Elizabeth Acevedo](#) might serve well. Slam often speaks of heavy and adult themes, so ensure that the poem chosen is appropriate for your grade level. You could also have students choose one of [the founders of the Nuyorican Poets Café](#) and read one of their poems. Have students think critically about the genre of spoken-word poetry. How is it similar or different from other types of poetry that they have encountered? If doing a unit on *Romeo and Juliet*, have students compare a spoken-word poem to a Shakespearean monologue/soliloquy. Are there any holdovers between the two genres?

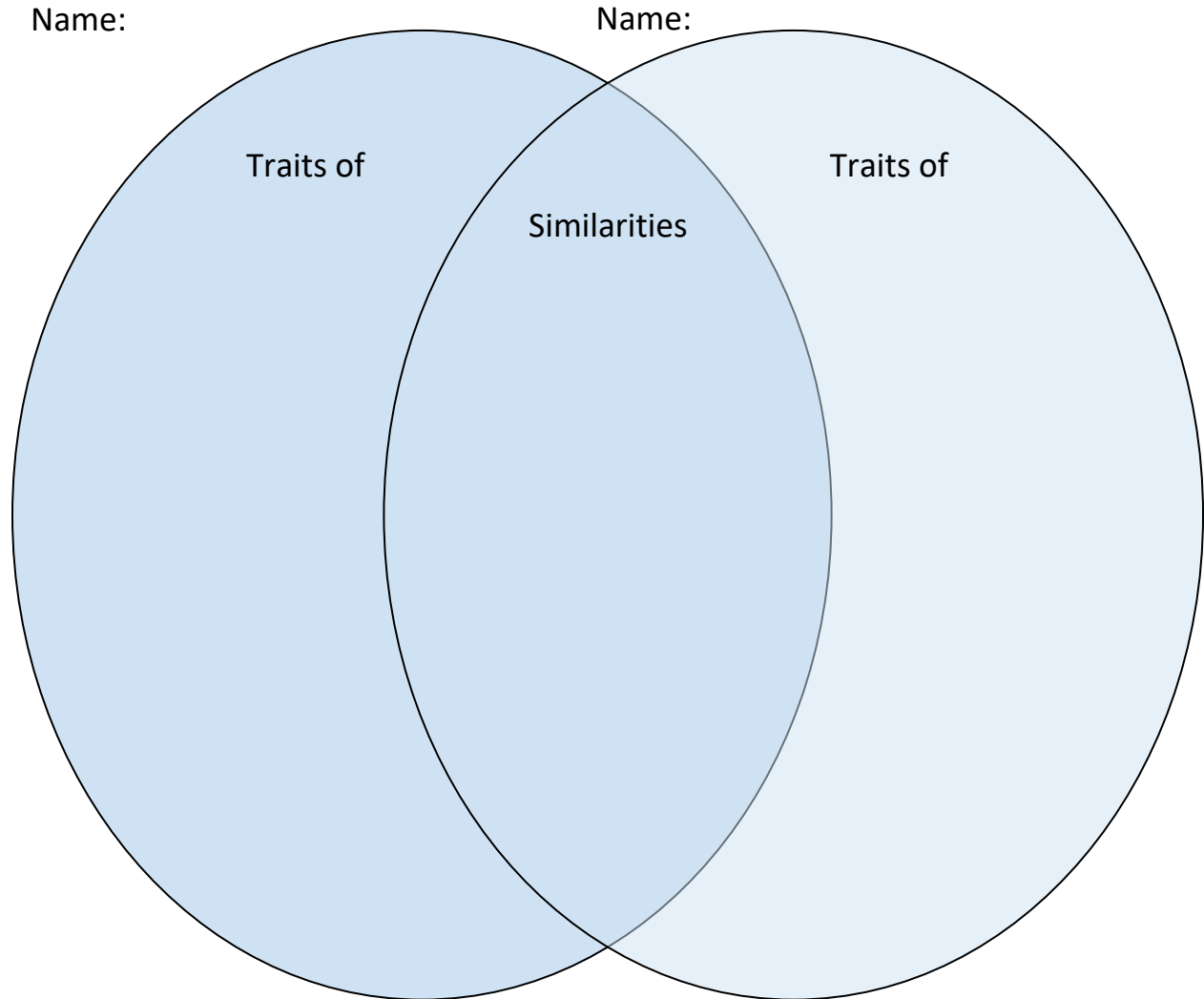
### Understanding *West Side Story* and Stereotypes

- Have students think about assimilation. What are the problems associated with assimilation? What are the advantages, for marginalized groups and the dominant society? Then, have students listen/ watch critically to the song "America" from *West Side Story*. What does it have to say about assimilation?

## CHARACTER COMPARISONS: VENN DIAGRAM

By: Randy Ebright

Compare and contrast two other characters, settings, or situations in *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Consider how and why Shakespeare and the creators of *West Side Story* portray these characters, settings, or situations the way they do. Be sure to answer the questions below the chart as well.



What is the most significant difference between the characters, settings, or situations you chose? Why is this important?

What is the most significant similarity between the characters, settings, or situations you chose? How does this relate to themes in *West Side Story* or *Romeo and Juliet*?

## ROMEO AND JULIET: MOVIE WATCH COMPARISON CHART

*Adapted from a resource by Trent Rodgers*

**Fill in the chart as you watch *West Side Story*. What are the parallels between *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*?**

Romeo and Juliet	West Side Story
<b>Characters</b>	
Romeo	
Juliet	
Tybalt	
Benvolio/Mercutio	
Juliet's Nurse	
Prince Escalus & Verona Officers	
Paris	
Capulets/Montagues	
Balthasar	
Friar Laurence	
<b>Scenes and Events</b>	
Setting in Verona	
Juliet's Balcony	
The Capulet's Ball/Lovers meet	
Lady Capulet/Nurse discuss Paris with Juliet	
Prince Escalus interrupts the fight	
Nurse grieves Tybalt's death	
Apothecary provides poison to Romeo	
Romeo forced into exile for his actions	
Family loyalty spawns dissention	

## Answer Key

<b>Romeo and Juliet</b>	<b>West Side Story</b>
<b>Characters</b>	
Romeo	Tony
Juliet	Maria
Tybalt	Bernardo
Benvolio/Mercutio	Riff
Juliet's Nurse	Anita
Prince Escalus & Verona Officers	Officer Krupke & Schrank
Paris	Chino
Capulets/Montagues	Jets/Sharks
Balthasar	Anybodys
Friar Laurence	Doc
<b>Scenes and Events</b>	
Setting in Verona	Setting in Manhattan
Juliet's Balcony	Maria's fire escape
The Capulet's Ball/Lovers meet	The school Dance/Lovers meet
Lady Capulet/Nurse discuss Paris with Juliet	Anita discusses Chino with Maria
Prince Escalus interrupts the fight	Krupke and Schrank interrupt the fight
Nurse grieves Tybalt's death	Anita grieves Bernardo's death
Apothecary provides poison to Romeo	Doc provides "poisonous" message to Tony
Romeo forced into exile for his actions	Tony plans escape with Maria because of his actions
Family loyalty spawns dissent	Ethnic loyalty spawns dissent

# WEST SIDE STORY CRITICAL VIEWING WORKSHEET

By: Dean Burrier Sanchis

## Additional resource:

<https://illinois.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/6ba5ba5e-9d05-498f-927c-5c6218afaefb/rita-moreno-west-side-story/>

## Background behind the Broadway Musical “West Side Story” (from PBS)

1. Setting (Location and Time Period): \_\_\_\_\_
2. What nationalities or cultures are clashing in “West Side Story”?
3. In what ways was “West Side Story” a groundbreaking musical?

## Scene #1: Tensions

Describe the climate between the Jets and the Sharks? What is causing tensions? Is the police treatment biased?

## Scene #2: “América”

What do the *puertorriqueñas* think about America?

How do the *puertorriqueños* feel about America? How do their views contrast with their female counterparts?

## Scene #3: Anita con los Jets

Why is this is arguably the most controversial and poignant scene in “West Side Story”?

**Extension:** Make two connections from West Side Story to the PRESENT. Are gangs and/or gang violence still prevalent? What about treatment toward immigrants? What has changed? What has not?

# WEST SIDE STORY EJERCICIO CRÍTICO (ESPAÑOL)

Dean Burrier Sanchis

Hispanohablantes // Spanish Speakers // Heritage Spanish

## Recurso adicional:

<https://illinois.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/6ba5ba5e-9d05-498f-927c-5c6218afaefb/rita-moreno-west-side-story/>

## Trasfondo para el musical “West Side Story”

1. Ambientación (¿Dónde toma lugar la historia? ¿En qué década?)
2. ¿Cuáles son las etnias, nacionalidades o culturas que están en pelea en “West Side Story”?
3. ¿De qué maneras fue novedosa la producción de West Side Story?

## Escena #1: Tensiones

Describe el ambiente entre Jets Y Sharks. ¿Cuáles son los factores que contribuyen a esta tensión de los grupos? ¿Cómo es el trato policial hacia las gangas?

## Escena #2: “América”

¿Qué piensan las puertorriqueñas sobre Estados Unidos?

¿Qué piensan los puertorriqueños (en masculino) sobre Estados Unidos? ¿Cómo contrasta su perspectiva colectiva con la perspectiva de las mujeres?

## Escena #3: Anita con los Jets

¿Por qué es tal vez una de las escenas más controversiales e imborrables de “West Side Story”?

**Extensión:** Establezca dos conexiones de West Side Story al momento PRESENTE. Piensa en relación a temas centrales: trato de inmigrantes, violencia, trato policial, gangas, etc. ¿Qué tanto han cambiado las cosas? ¿Cómo han cambiado?

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