

Daisy Pinos

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Beyond the Ruffled Red Dress

Imagine being part of the lowest of classes and having little to no status in society. Now imagine being told you were going to get a movie produced about your life, culture, and your daily struggles. How exciting would that be? The world will finally understand you and maybe all the judgment will stop. But now imagine the main role, which is supposed to be played by you, or at least someone who has lived through the struggle, is being played by an upper-class actor who has no idea of the hardships you've faced. Worst of all, imagine the producers and directors making a mockery of your life and portraying it in such a way that could be seen as humorous or racist. Now, imagine you're Puerto Rican and watch Leonard Bernstein's 1957 production, *West Side Story*. *West Side Story* is twenty-eight-time academy award winning musical and is one of the most critically acclaimed musicals of all time as well as one of the most racist. Puerto Rican women, like Anita and Maria, in the 1950s were confronted by domestic stereotyping, sexual double standards, as well as racial oppression.

In Bernstein's musical *West Side Story*, a variety of different songs portray the many conflicts of the 1950s. *West Side Story* has brought us the very well-known, yet criticized and condemned song, "America", written by Leonard Bernstein. "America" was performed by the Puerto Rican women and men of the musical, where both genders go back and forth in a musical battle to convince the opposite gender about the wonders of America and the hardships.

“America” demonstrates the collision of cultures within the Puerto Rican ethnic group. The women discuss the American dream which included freedom of expression, breaking free of typical gender roles, freedom from their old lives in Puerto Rico, and overall, a new start. The men in this song were very quick to contradict all of the points that the women made and discussed the hardships of living in America, which were much harder for them for being immigrants. The girls, as Anita lead, expressed their fondness of America and how they have much more opportunities, without having to work as much as in Puerto Rico as they sang, “Everything free in America”. Bernardo, leader of the Puerto Rican gang, The Sharks, is much more cynical about America than his girlfriend Anita. Bernardo refutes this idea made by the girls by saying, “For a small fee in America”. In saying this, Bernardo insists that pursuing the American dream comes with a fee and everything is in fact not free. In addition, Anita sings about freedom of expression in the line, “Free to be anything you choose.” During the 1950s America was known by the rest of the world as the place to go when you wanted to be free and become whoever you wanted to be. Anita, along with the rest of the girls are excited to be a part of this new country where they can express themselves in a way they couldn’t back home in Puerto Rico. Of course, the men contradicted this line by saying, “Free to wait tables and shine shoes.” The boys suggest that because of their race, the best opportunity they will get in America will be as a waiter or shining shoes, both of which are humble jobs that do not offer much pay. The scene not only depicts racism that Puerto Ricans faced in America in the 1950s, but it strongly emphasizes domestic stereotyping. Women in the 1950s were expected to be a stay at home wife/mother and comply with their husband's demands, as well as rely on them for emotional and financial stability. The song emphasizes male superiority and the marginalization

of women and the very little freedom they were given. A *New York Times* article titled, “Trousered Mothers and Dishwashing Dads”, by Dorothy Barclay explains the ways in which gender roles have started to change. She describes the daily tasks men began to take part in at home such as washing the dishes or cleaning the house. However, she explains how many people grew concerned over the “trend toward sameness of both sexes.” During the 1950s, women taking the role of a man was seen as extremely uncommon and somewhat taboo. Any women who were not married was seen as undesirable and received much pity and judgment. Barclay explains how people were scared of this sudden change because they worried about the children and how their mindsets would develop. Domestic stereotyping was an issue that men all over the nation were bringing upon women, including men in the political force. In a *New York Times* article, “Man Tells Women They Lack Rights”, by Emma Harrison, it is revealed how men, including the president of the United States during 1957, President Eisenhower, considered themselves as “typical masculines”, and demonstrated superiority towards women. Lastly, a *New York Times* article titled, “Jobs That Women Don’t Get” by Bernardo Roshco explains how jobs were given by ability, cost, and tradition. Women were constantly being misjudged in terms of their intelligence, abilities, and work ethics. They were not getting offered the same jobs as men because they were not seen as mentally fit for the job, or smart enough. While men were being offered jobs in media, radio stations, accounting, and other high wage jobs, women were only socially fit for jobs such as seamstresses, cooks, or assistants. Evidently, society was not ready to assimilate to this new mindset that women have acquired which, as a result, led to, and continued the practices of domestic stereotyping which Puerto Rican women suffered from in the 1950s.

Moreover, the 1950's was not just a time where domestic stereotyping was taking over the minds of society. It was also a time where sexual double standards were seen as the norm. In other words, men were free to sexual actions and promiscuities, while women were not. This is clearly depicted in Anita's simulated rape scene in *West Side Story*. When Anita goes to Doc's store to let Tony know that Maria is going to be late, she encounters the Jets. They quickly judge her and believe she is not trying to help out because of her race and they sexually assault her. Because Anita walked into the store without her male partner, Bernardo, the Jets, believed they were justified to assault Anita. They threw racial slurs at her such as, "spic" or "too dark to pass". They then stripped her out of her clothes until she was only wearing her dress with one of the Jets above her body. We assume she gets raped in this scene, although it is not directly shown in the movie. In Frances Negron-Muntaner's article, "Feeling Pretty", she explains how Puerto Rican women were seen as impure and symbols of sex. In her article, she states, "Puerto Ricans are made up of dark powder, bright-colored ruffled costumes... The single exception is Maria, who is dressed in white" (Negron-Muntaner, p. 94). White symbolizes purity and virginity. Many of the other Puerto Rican women wore red dresses which typically symbolizes love, sex, and evil. As for the white women in the film, they were not wearing the color red. The way Bernstein depicted this scene was absurd as he was suggesting that Puerto Rican women are more sexual and provocative than white women. Altogether, Puerto Rican women were turned into sex symbols in not only *West Side Story* but in society as a whole. To exemplify, the *New York Times* article, "GIRL, 17, SLAIN IN HALL: Waitress Is Stabbed in Sex Attack in Tenement", explains the tragedy of a seventeen-year-old girl who was stabbed in the back in an attempted sexual assault. To further bring sexual double standards in the 1950s to attention, this

New York Times article was not given a big headline in the newspaper like several other articles. In addition, it is not stated anywhere in the article if the person who attempted sexual assault and killed seventeen-year-old Marion E. Brown was caught or punished for their crimes. To sum up, it was a very difficult time for women to casually live their lives when they confronted many life-scarring experiences and tragedies in relation to sexual double standards during the 1950s.

As mentioned earlier, *West Side Story* is one of the most racist musicals of all time. Despite its degrading portrayal of Puerto Ricans, many authors have written an opposing viewpoint on the musical. The opposing conversation is that the Jets, the Polish-American gang in *West Side Story* is the victim of racial stereotyping. In the musical, the Jets have a scene in which they sing the song titled, "Gee, Officer Krupke". In this song, they explain their problems at home. Some of these conflicts they face at home that are mentioned in the song are in relation to abuse, alcoholism, and domestic violence. Author Charles P. Mitchell discusses this in his article, "West Side Story (1961)". He explains how the Jets sing about their own personal problems at home which they use as an excuse for being a part of a gang and participating in delinquency. In singing this song, they are hinting at their white privilege, meaning they can cause trouble and do unjust things, but get away with it for reasons that shouldn't justify their actions. However, Mitchell continues with his article to explain police brutality and their roles in the movie and in the 1950s. These ideas only focus primarily on the Jets and their mediocre struggles and disregard all the other Puerto Rican related conflicts which occurred in the musical. To add on, Warren Hoffman's, *The Great White Way* includes many contradicting statements in Chapter 3, "Trouble in NYC". Hoffman's book disregards all Puerto Rican related problems and focuses on the "whiteness" of the musical. Hoffman reveals how Leonard Bernstein, the creator

of *West Side Story*, had never met a Puerto Rican prior to the creation of the musical. Hoffman continues to explain the background of the musical but fails to explain the racist aspects of the musical that came from this lack of knowledge. In his book, Hoffman stated, “Sure, the Puerto Ricans are suspect figures, but suddenly so too are the Jets, who are no more blue-blooded than the Sharks” (Hoffman, p. 110). In saying this, he insinuates that the Puerto Ricans and the Jets equally faced the same struggles throughout the musical, which is so clearly incorrect as we view scenes such as Anita’s rape scene, as mentioned earlier. When paying close attention to the racial slurs towards the Sharks, and the overall mockery of the Puerto Rican culture, it is evident that the Sharks received much more racial stereotyping.

To further reveal the issues faced by Puerto Rican women in the 1950’s, they confronted racial oppression. Although themes of racism were previously mentioned, as it was something both Puerto Rican women and men faced, women confronted it in separate ways. To reiterate, *West Side Story* is one of the most racist musicals, and the women portrayed it the most. In Negron-Muntaner’s, “Feeling Pretty”, she explains the ways in which Natalie Wood, a White actress, who played Maria, was criticized for her Puerto Rican accent and was said to have made a mockery of it. (Negron-Muntaner, 2000, p. 91) Negron-Muntaner explains how instead of casting Puerto-Rican actors for the role of a Puerto-Rican, they cast American actors and actresses, with the exception of Rita Moreno who played Anita. Furthermore, she includes the explanation of the use of brown-face in the movie. For the characters of Bernardo and Maria, brown-face was used to make their skin tone “look” more Puerto Rican. In doing this, they added pounds of makeup darker than the actor’s skin tone. To add on, in Frances Negron-Muntaner’s book, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*, she states, “...Puerto

Rican ethnonational identity has been constituted in shame as a result of transnational history...” (Negron-Muntaner, 2004, p. 3) In other words, Puerto Ricans’ identities have always been portrayed in a shameful way, which is clearly illustrated in *West Side Story*. Moreover, in a *New York Times* article titled, “Flow of Puerto Ricans Here Fills Jobs, Poses Problems: ONE OUT OF 20 HERE NOW PUERTO RICAN Trend of New Population Groups in Three Boroughs of New York City”, by Peter Kihss discusses the topic of Puerto Rican immigrants in New York City in the 1950’s. In this article, it is explained how Puerto Ricans migrated to New York City, also known as “The Great Migration”, and there was a massive increase in jobs given to Puerto Ricans. People complained that Puerto Ricans were taking jobs away from them. Overall, similarly to 2018, racism towards immigrants, in this case, Puerto Ricans in the 1950s was very much present in society. To further add on, in *West Side Story*, during the scene of the neighborhood dance, the directors intentionally dressed the Puerto Rican characters with ruffles in their dress and when they danced, they swayed their dresses with their arms in a more Latinized form of dance. This is racially stereotypical because not all Puerto Ricans dance the way it was shown in the movie. In addition, the white women were not given ruffles in their dress the way the Puerto Rican women were. They were given plain dresses without texture. This showed a form of segregation between the females in the movie, not because of the gang they pertained to, but for their race. Bernstein creates a segregation between the groups of women that represent the white biases of the time. Overall, Puerto Rican women in the 1950s struggled through racial oppression not only in *West Side Story*, but in society during their everyday lives.

Ultimately, Puerto Rican women in the 1950s were confronted by domestic stereotyping, sexual double standards, as well as racial oppression. The marginalization of Puerto Rican

women has declined since the 1950s. Women, in general, have been granted many more jobs in the political, industrial, and social workforce. Since the 1950s, a significant increase in Puerto Ricans have migrated to the United States. As for sexual double standards, it is still a major issue that is being dealt with one step at a time. A recent act that was enforced against any sexually based crime is the “Me Too” act. However, much of society still allows for these double standards to remain present, despite the fact that it is improving. In terms of racial oppression, it is not something consistently occurring, although it is very much still present. In 2018, the attention has turned from Puerto Ricans to any undocumented immigrant especially living in Trump America. The target, though, is Mexicans over any other ethnicity. Overall, Puerto Rican women have persevered and prospered through many unjust experiences since the 1950’s and to this day, continue to prosper.

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