

# THE GREAT PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION—AND WEST SIDE STORY

Economic dependency, political ambiguity, and social uncertainty made their way into the lyrics to “America” from West Side Story  
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6-minute read

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by LYRIC OPERA STAFF ([HTTPS://KCOPEA.ORG/AUTHOR/LYRIC-OPERA-STAFF/](https://kcopera.org/author/lyric-opera-staff/))



Anita and the Shark girls in "America" from West Side Story. Photo: Elise Bakketun.

**“A**n out and out plea for racial tolerance” is scrawled across the front page of Leonard Bernstein’s copy of *Romeo and Juliet*. Although today’s Manhattan looks very different from the city the creators of *West Side Story* knew, the musical speaks to an unfortunate human habit that transcends any particular time and place: our tendency to make distinctions between “us” and “them” that can lead to tragic results. It was Jerome Robbins who conceived of a modern-day musical version of Shakespeare’s play, first imagining a conflict between Catholic and Jewish families on New York’s Lower East Side. Robbins and Bernstein eventually shifted focus to the gang wars of the 1950s, which pitted new Puerto Rican arrivals against those whose families had arrived some generations earlier, characterized in the libretto as “an anthology of what is called ‘American.’”

*West Side Story*’s music, lyrics and narrative have shaped public consciousness about Puerto Rico and its people, continuing to capture audiences since it debuted on Broadway in 1957 and the silver screen in 1961, winning ten of twelve categories for which it was nominated at the 1962 Oscars.

Yet, as compellingly raw, accurate and timeless some parts of that narrative have been—including the gang wars in the 1950's Hell's Kitchen section of New York City—it has also served to distort our understanding of the conditions facing Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rico at the time of its creation.

The lyrics of “America” illustrate some of this historical distortion. A “battle rap” of sorts between the women who advocate for being in “America” versus the men who advocate for going back to Puerto Rico, this song captures the fraught history since the United States annexed Puerto Rico in 1898.

*Read more after the video...*



### ***Puerto Rico, my heart's devotion, let it sink back in the ocean***

At the time of the musical's creation, waves of what has been called the Great Puerto Rican Migration were bringing many Puerto Ricans to work in the United States, not because they wanted to leave their homes and lives but because the economic situation on the island was becoming untenable. During this 18-year period (1946-1964), over 600,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the U.S., compared to fewer than 100,000 from 1900 to 1945. Operation Bootstrap brought industrialization to Puerto Rico from 1945 – 1968 but it also led to the greatest exodus from the island (at least until the current post-financial crisis and hurricane flight) by those working in sectors not supported by industrial subsidies. Puerto Rican writer Pedro Juan Soto offers a glimpse into the reality of suffering experienced during this period of migration. His novel *Hot Land, Cold Season* portrays the emotional trauma experienced when forced to leave one's homeland, learn a new language in a cold and unwelcoming environment, and make a life without communal support systems inherent to Puerto Rican culture.

## ***Always the population growing***

During the Great Puerto Rican Migration, the island population remained positive with steady birth rates. However, this too was being challenged; big pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Lilly, and Johnson & Johnson benefitted from Operation Bootstrap by setting up shop in Puerto Rico, enjoying tax breaks, cheap labor and human subjects for experimentation. From as early as 1920, there were concerns by U.S. officials that island overpopulation would lead to disastrous social and economic conditions; public policies aimed at controlling rapid population growth were instituted, signifying the institutionalization of the population control program. U.S. government funds and private individuals supported initiatives including the testing of experimental birth control pills on Puerto Rican women without their knowledge or consent. In addition, instead of providing Puerto Rican women with access to safe, legal and reversible contraception, U.S. policy promoted the use of permanent sterilization. The procedure was so common in Puerto Rico that it was simply referred to as “la operacion.” Institutionalized encouragement of sterilization through door-to-door visits by health workers, financial subsidies, and employer favoritism pushed women toward having a hysterectomy or tubal ligation. More than one-third of Puerto Rican women in a 1968 study did not know that sterilization through tubal ligation was permanent. The euphemism “tying the tubes” made women think the procedure was reversible.

Puerto Rican writer Esmeralda Santiago weaves the history of reproductive abuse into the main character of her novel *América's Dream* as a metaphor for the plight of Puerto Rican women and Puerto Rico more broadly. Using the story of a battered woman in *America's Dream* to retell the history of Puerto Rico, Santiago suggests that Puerto Rico has made a choice to align itself with a more modern way of life with the promise that she will conform into that which American modernity deems best. Unrecognized to Santiago's characters is that American modernity is linked to its sinister underbelly—colonialism—and the benefits of one cannot be assumed without the detriments of the other.

## ***And the money owing***

While the early decades of the 20th century in Puerto Rico were marked by the shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture, Operation Bootstrap was marked by the shift from commercial agriculture to commercial industry. Puerto Rico proved a more desirable environment for manufacturers than other “developing” countries since it was under U.S. jurisdiction and businesses did not have to contend with foreign laws. The barely educated labor force was adequate for the types of manufacturing companies

relocating there, but the supply of jobs did not meet the demand, thus contributing to mass migration at the onset of Operation Bootstrap. With this exodus, the island became segmented into the low-skilled labor force and the highly educated governing elite, creating a tremendous gap between economic classes.

While one-third of the island population remained in the rural areas, they represented only one-sixth of the job market. As large agricultural companies bought land, the average rural peasant could not provide for his family and was forced to move to the city, either on the island (San Juan, Ponce, Mayaguez) or the mainland (i.e. New York, Chicago, Boston). As an incentive to these manufacturing companies, infrastructure investment was supported, but this came at a price, which the Puerto Rican insular government had to manage in the form of debt repayment that continues to choke the island, most recently in the form of PROMESA (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act), signed into law in 2016. Voted upon with no Puerto Rican representation, this legislation instituted an Oversight Control Board to manage the repayment of \$72 billion of municipal debt.

Operation Bootstrap, within which the narrative of *West Side Story* is situated, solidified the island's economic dependency, political ambiguity, and social uncertainty, which migrated to the mainland and is captured, in part, by the conflict this musical animates. The devastation caused by Hurricanes Irma and María in September 2017 further exacerbate the challenges created, in part, by political and economic policies of this period, begging the question, "Who's pulling up whom, whose foot is in the boot, and is the 'sole' of the boot coming loose at the seams in the process?"

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