The American tradition of Broadway has long been a forum for hosting discussions about what it means to be an American; however, only recently have these conversations been facilitated by minority groups. The musicals *West Side Story*, conceptualized by Jerome Robbins and a group of white, male Jews in 1959, and *In the Heights*, created by Lin-Manuel Miranda and a team of other minority minds in 2008, both attempt to incorporate Puerto Ricans into the landscape of American citizenship. *West Side Story* highlights the highly racialized differences between Puerto Rican and white characters, excluding them from American cultural citizenship; conversely, *In the Heights* depicts a community in which characters of Puerto Rican and other ethnic backgrounds blend together, upholding the melting pot ideology on which America prides itself.

*West Side Story*, written in 1959, just after an enormous wave of Puerto Rican immigrants entered New York, culturally works to provide a concept of Puerto Ricans as an ethnicity for white audiences. Tony, the son of Polish immigrants, who is seen as an “American” because of the color of his skin, falls in love with Maria, a Puerto Rican. The racial divide between the Jets (Polish-Americans) and the Sharks (Puerto Rican immigrants) is strictly enforced by all in the play except Tony and Maria.

*West Side Story* uses flashy song and dance numbers to classify Puerto Ricans in a way that was easy for American audiences to understand, and categorizes Puerto Ricans for audience members as “bits of mildly stimulating, if ultimately irrelevant, ethnic fantasies” (Rubin and
Melnick 105). West Side Story’s ability to sweepingly define Puerto Ricans for a mostly white Broadway audience suggests that before West Side Story, there was no mass cultural perception of Puerto Ricans. The show was written 12 years after Operation Bootstrap, which caused “a yearly average of 48,000 Puerto Ricans to leave the island, primarily for New York…between 1947 and 1957” (Rubin and Melnick 261). The writers of West Side Story are able to portray all Puerto Ricans as juvenile delinquents, easily exploitable for the purposes of entertainment, because for the creative team behind the production, that is what they were. The fact that Stephen Sondheim, the lyricist for West Side Story had “never even known a Puerto Rican” echoes this sentiment (Sondheim, as quoted by Sanchez 1). Because Puerto Ricans were so foreign to white Americans, the men who would shape their images in America knew nothing about them. Puerto Ricans had not had a strong, constant presence in America before West Side Story, so had no opportunity to reach white American audiences with their own art and their own perceptions of themselves. In her book, Where the Girls Are, Susan Douglas makes the point that although certain people defend Walt Disney’s misogynistic portrayal of women in his films by stating that he was only projecting the gender-based ideologies of the time, “Disney wasn’t passively or innocently reflecting anything; he was actively emphasizing and exaggerating certain assumptions about women and girls while clearly ignoring others” (Douglas 30). West Side Story similarly creates ways of thinking about Puerto Ricans, but instead of magnifying and omitting pre-existing thoughts about Puerto Ricans, Robbins and his cohorts saw a space for a cultural perception and filled it. West Side Story imposes an ideological view of Puerto Ricans as singing Chicanos who were markedly different than white Americans.

West Side Story works so well to separate Puerto Ricans from whites, and therefore from American cultural citizenship, because a majority of the racialized differences between the two
groups are articulated by Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks. When the Sharks and the Jets meet for their war council, Riff, the head of the Jets, proclaims that “Bernardo hasn’t learned the procedures of gracious livin’,” and Bernardo replies, “I don’t like you, either. So cut it” (Lehman 62). Because Bernardo refuses to act the way the Jets do, he is perceived by American audiences as wanting to be separate from all America. Additionally, when, in the song “America,” Anita and the Sharkettes proclaim their love for the country by singing “Life is alright in America,” they are countered by Bernardo and the male Sharks singing “If you’re all white in America” (Lehman 42). Although female Puerto Ricans are seen as wanting to be cultural citizens of America, they are also perceived as being dominated by their male counterparts. Bernardo is the strongest Puerto Rican male character, so he acts as a spokesperson for all of the Puerto Ricans in the show. The characters of West Side Story represent all Puerto Ricans for white audiences, so, since Bernardo does not want to be a part of white America, it appears to Caucasians that all Puerto Ricans do not want to be treated as white Americans, therefore justifying their marginalization.

While West Side Story functions to separate Puerto Ricans from the American image, In the Heights attempts to do the opposite. The musical, which opened off Broadway in 2008, showcases the residents of Washington Heights, a tightly-knit community composed primarily of immigrants, as they try to achieve their own American dreams. The lyricist of In the Heights, Lin-Manuel Miranda, grew up in Washington Heights, and therefore has a deep appreciation for his area, a “pan-Latin neighborhood, where everyone [is] from everywhere” (Miranda, as quoted in “Stage Notes” 5). Miranda, like the team behind West Side Story, writes from his own ethnic perspective. In In the Heights, Puerto Rican and other minority characters are used to depict a multi-cultural America in which people of all backgrounds except Caucasian can be included.
*In the Heights* has almost no white characters; instead, Latinos are the dominant group. Their advantages and obstacles, then, become exemplary of the human condition, as opposed to simply a Latino condition. In the show, Benny, a young African-American, is employed by Kevin, a middle-aged Latino, who doubts Benny’s abilities to succeed in his taxi service because he was not born into a Spanish-speaking family. When Benny asks to make the dispatch over the radio for the taxi service, Kevin refuses because Benny doesn’t “speak Spanish.” Benny protests that he can speak Spanish after “five years with these drivers,” to which Kevin replies “You’re not Latino.” It is only when his wife protests that “Benny is honorary Latino” that Kevin grudgingly allows Benny to test his skills (Hudes, as quoted in “Stage Notes” 34). Because there are more Latinos than whites and other minorities in Washington Heights, Kevin is able to discriminate against Benny because he is not Latino instead of because he is not white. This implies that not being Latino is less desirable than being not white, which suggests that in Washington Heights, being Latino is better than being white. Throughout history, the role of the Caucasian is that of the conqueror; however, *In the Heights* fills the power vacuum left by whites with Latinos. It is important to note that *In The Heights* is not a story of Hispanic oppression of blacks; Kevin’s racist views are treated as outdated, and he eventually sees that Benny is worthy of inclusion in his world. The pervasiveness of Spanish culture mirrors Miranda’s America; when he describes *In the Heights* in an interview, he “marveled that [his] grandparents could visit and make themselves understood, because everyone spoke Spanish” in his neighborhood (Miranda, as quoted in “Stage Notes” 5). In writing *In the Heights*, Miranda took a fact from his life and projected it onto the stage, thus creating an image of America rooted in the barrio instead of the suburbs or other white-dominated residential areas.

When white characters are present, they are purposefully insignificant. Abuela Claudia,
an elderly woman, sings a song called “Pacencia y Fe” that articulates her feelings about immigrating to New York from Cuba when she was a young girl. In the number, Abuela blithely describes “A crowded city in 1943…/ Dancing with Mayor LaGuardia / All of society welcoming Mami and me” while the ensemble, who presumably portray the Caucasian population, hiss “You better learn Ingles…/ You better not be late…/ You better pull your weight” (Miranda, as quoted in “Stage Notes” 16). Despite opposition from whites, Abuela’s perception of America is a positive one. The white characters are not only figments of her imagination, they are ignored. Abuela Claudia would have been immigrating to New York at roughly the same time as the Puerto Ricans in West Side Story; however, by allowing themselves to be marginalized, the Sharks give all of their power to whites. Abuela’s seemingly ignorant but very brave attitude toward immigration renders Caucasians impotent. Abuela creates a mental picture of America that accepts her, which forces American audiences to do so as well.

In the Heights is one of the first musicals written about Latinos by Latinos. On his website, Miranda declares “Mr. Sondheim, look, I made a hat! Where there never was a hat! It’s a Latin hat at that!” (Miranda 1). This quote refers to Stephen Sondheim’s musical Sunday in the Park with George, a production that examines Georges Seurat as he paints Sunday in the Park, a piece that requires incredible passion and diligence. Because of this show, “a hat” refers to a labor of love in show business. Miranda’s remark appears to be merely a celebratory until one realizes that Sondheim wrote the lyrics, which are arguably the most memorable part, of West Side Story. By comparing the two works, Miranda implicitly comments that now there is a new way of depicting Puerto Ricans and other immigrants: as American citizens. West Side Story and the American culture that produced it display Puerto Ricans as un-American others; In the Heights and hopefully, today’s America, name minorities as people who call the country home.
Works Cited


