

from: Jose, Can You See?: Latinos On
and Off Broadway
by Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez

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A Puerto Rican Reading of the America of *West Side Story*

My final prayer: O my body, make of me always
a man who questions.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

After my immigration to Wisconsin in 1973 to attend college, the musical film *West Side Story* was frequently imposed upon me as a model of/for my Puerto Rican ethnic identity. Certainly it was a strange and foreign model for a newcomer, but not for the Anglo-Americans who actualized, with my bodily presence, their stereotypes of Latino otherness. Over and over again, to make me feel comfortable in their family rooms and to tell me of their knowledge about Puerto Ricans, they would start their conversations with *West Side Story*: "Al, we loved *West Side Story*." "Have you seen the movie?" "Did you like it?" On other occasions, some people even sang parodically in my ears: "Alberto, I've just met a guy named Alberto." And, how can I forget those who, upon my arrival, would start tapping flamenco steps and squealing: "I like to be in America! / Everything free in America."¹

As it happened, I moved to New York City in 1983, to the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, which borders the area where the film takes place, an area better known today as Lincoln Center. I lived in the neighborhood for eight months with "Nuyoricans."² At this time, I had the opportunity to see the movie, which was showing at the Hollywood Theater on Eighth Avenue between Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth Streets. Since I was becoming acquainted with New York neighborhoods and sharing daily the socioeconomic reality of immigrant

Puerto Ricans and their offspring, I became interested in correlating and contrasting the musical film with the historical reality of the immigrants. There had been a massive exodus from the island in the late 1940s. At the time the musical was produced, in 1957, the Puerto Rican diaspora had already penetrated the Anglo-American cultural imaginary. This massive migration would become one of the major constituents of the "Latin other" in the U.S. Puerto Ricans would occupy a position at the intersection of the "Latin foreign other" and the "Latin domestic ethnic and racial other." Such an overlapping of categories resulted from the fact that Puerto Ricans have been American citizens since 1917, but also have their own national identity, defined primarily by their Hispanic roots and values and by having Spanish as their language. In this sense, like Carmen Miranda and Desi Arnaz, they were perceived as a "Latin foreign other," exotic "Latinos" with accents. However, in contrast to Miranda and Arnaz, given their colonial and minority status, defined by race and class—Puerto Ricans also became representative of the "Latin domestic ethnic and racial other."

West Side Story was staged at the Winter Garden Theater in 1957, and the film released in 1961 mirrors with great accuracy the original stage production. In this essay, I alternate the theatrical text with the movie script, which was partially revised. By using both versions, just as in the cases of Miranda and Arnaz, my goal is to make of both renditions a single ideological and political text that registers the cultural continuum of Broadway and Hollywood.

My interest in decentering, demythifying, and deconstructing ethnic, social, and racial stereotypes of Latinos/as inscribed in the musical was the result of witnessing the reaction of an Anglo-American audience that applauded euphorically after the number "America." Only then did I understand the power and vitality of the musical, not just as pure entertainment, but as an iconic ideological construction of the stereotype and identity of Puerto Rican immigrants, and all other Latino/a immigrants, in the U.S. I also realized, at the same time, that, in the musical number "America," there is a political campaign in favor of assimilation. Such assimilation is pronounced by a Puerto Rican herself, Rita Moreno, whose acting was awarded the coveted Oscar.³ The audience's reception, which was manipulated by an Anglo-American patriotic discourse generated and transmitted through the song, led me to question and problematize how the musical configures, produces, and reproduces a racist discourse of Latino otherness in the U.S. How does the musical project ethnic difference as a threat to the territorial, racial, and linguistic identity, as well as to the national and imperial subjectivity, of Anglo-Americans? From such a questioning

posture, we should examine how the musical, through its music, dances, romantic melodrama, and exoticism of cultural otherness distracts from the racism within it. We should also examine how it attracts, interpellates, and positions the perceiving spectator—whose social construction of reality and racial differences constitute the Anglo-American dominant ideology—by dividing spatially Puerto Ricans from Anglo-Americans, Puerto Rico from the U.S., the West Side from the East Side, the Latino ethnicity from the Anglo-American Eurocentric, white ethnicity, the Puerto Rican cultural reality from the Anglo-American one, the poor from the rich. These binary oppositions produce a political, patriotic, and mythifying discourse in which the Puerto Ricans, as intruders and invaders of the U.S. mainland, confront the Anglo-American system of power.

The Politics of Space

West Side Story depicts a fight for urban space, a space that has already been impregnated with Anglo-American cultural symbols and political significations for power relations, interactions, and social actions. In this sense, the musical projects how the Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the 1940s and 1950s not only usurps the order and the semiotic spatial organization of Anglo-Americans, but how it also constitutes a threat to the assumed coherent and monolithic identity of the Anglo-American subject. I am interested in highlighting how the Puerto Rican immigration, from the margins of the “ghetto,” threatens to disarticulate, according to Anglo-Americans, their sociopolitical system at the capitalist center of New York City.

Manhattan is divided territorially, economically, racially, and ethnically. Each socioeconomic and ethnoracial group inhabits a space concretely demarcated, and even neighborhood border crossings are avoided. Specifically, it has been the musical *West Side Story* that has contributed to the perpetuation of the image of the West Side as a site of urban, ethnic, and racial tensions. The plot of the musical presents the hostility, hatred, and confrontations between two gangs. Those gangs—“The Sharks are Puerto Ricans, the Jets an anthology of what is called ‘American’” (137)—reveal, as the action develops, not a mere struggle for territory but, rather, a socioeconomic and racial confrontation. Although the Jets constitute an anthology of “Americans,” the gang is made up solely of the children of white European immigrants. Their actions and values embody the ideological apparatus of the Anglo-American national subjectivity—that is, the ideological program and ways of doing of the “all-American boy.” Although they

belong to the working class, it is obvious that the Jets act according to the “American dream.” They have an ideological and political consciousness of both their nationality and imperial superiority, as shown by their competitive desire to be “number one.” For this reason, they emblemized the ideology of the all-American boy, a totally white identity that does not leave room for any other ethnoracial groups in the gang. The Jets define themselves in the first song—“Jet Song”—in terms of their own sociopolitical and personal superiority, confidence, and arrogance. In this song, they claim to be the greatest, those who want to be number one and hold the sky. (Indeed, they dream high.) It should be emphasized that blacks have no representation or participation in this “anthology of Americans.” Is it because they had already been confined to their own space in Harlem? Hence, the Anglo-American power confrontation is limited to the recently migrated ethnoracial minority group, the Puerto Ricans: “Against the Sharks we need every man we got” (143).

In its historical specificity, the space of the West Side obtains its total meaning when the “not-said” space is read. The “not-said” space is the Upper East Side, which is present because of its topographical contiguity. The Upper East Side is the center of Anglo-American white power, for the upper bourgeois class resides there. At the same time, the action in the West Side is referred to as a “story.” In this way, the title silences the dynamic, processual, and dialectical concept of history. It postulates a binary opposition marked by the presence and absence of economic, ethnic, and racial differences: West/East; story/history; Sharks/Jets; spics/white Anglo-Americans. In the above terms, the title *West Side Story* expresses a merely superficial structure at the level of its enunciation—a story of love. However, when the title is read in metonymical relation to the center of power, an absent structure is registered under the textual surface of the story of love; that is, the film has as its deep structure an explicit discourse of discrimination and racial prejudices toward immigrant Latinos/as.

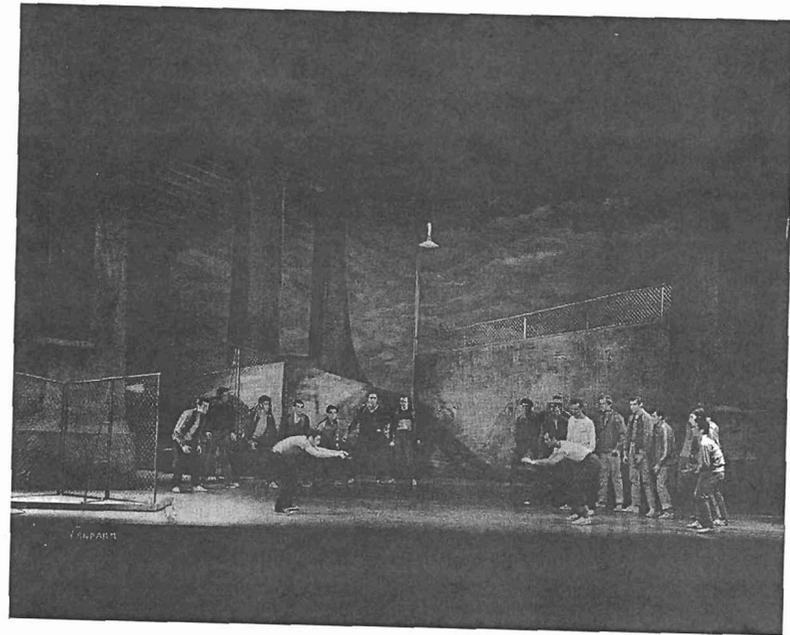
From a questioning perspective, I propose to examine how the absence of the East Side—a geopolitical absence that is signaled metonymically in the title—becomes present. It displaces and decenters the story of love between Maria and Tony on the West Side. Indeed, my alternative reading, by centering on the absent action on the East Side, concentrates on the ideological production of a political and racist discourse that could as easily be entitled “East Side History of Hatred/Racism.” With this title I name the ideological discourse of the deep structures of the text; by doing so I decenter the melodramatic and romantic title *West Side Story*.

Furthermore, when the play was restaged at the Kennedy Center in 1985, the correlation between West Side and East Side surfaced once again. The East Side imposed itself as the always-absent presence; as one critic saw it, the actress Katherine Buffaloe “looks and sounds more like an East Side debutante than a West Side Puerto Rican girl . . .”⁴ It is evident in this comparison that there is a specific sociocultural and ideological configuration of the East Side and the West Side in terms of class, race, and ethnicity. Such a contrast and worldview are embodied in the silences, omissions, and gaps of the East Side in *West Side Story*.

My alternative reading, based on the binary opposition between West Side and East Side, is more fully understood when it is realized that the original title, considered in 1949, was to be *East Side Story*. The play was supposed to take place on the Lower East Side, as a love story between a Jewish girl and an Italian Catholic boy. However, with Puerto Rican migration, the idea became dated. As a result, the production team even considered Chicano gangs in their search for some exoticism and “color”; as Arthur Laurents, who wrote the book for *West Side Story* has stated, “My reaction was, it was *Abie’s Irish Rose*, and that’s why we didn’t go ahead with it. . . . Then by some coincidence, Lenny [Leonard Bernstein] and I were at the Beverly Hills pool, and Lenny said: ‘What about doing it about the Chicanos?’ In New York we had the Puerto Ricans, and at that time the papers were full of stories about juvenile delinquents and gangs. We got really excited and phoned Jerry [Jerome Robbins], and that started the whole thing.”⁵ Bernstein became really inspired by the Chicano gangs; later explaining that “while we were talking, we noticed the *L.A. Times* had a headline of gang fights breaking out. And this was in Los Angeles with Mexicans fighting so-called Americans. Arthur and I looked at one another and all I can say is that there are moments which are right for certain things and that moment seemed to have come.”⁶

Laurents had suggested the idea of blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York “because this was the time of the appearance there of teenage gangs, and the problem of juvenile delinquency was very much in the news. It started to work.”⁷

Although the team was clearly interested in juvenile delinquency, it is interesting to observe how the “domestic ethnic and racial others” interact and replace each other.⁸ The writers moved comfortably from Jews and Italians, to Chicanos, to blacks, and finally to Puerto Ricans. They were simply searching for a confrontation between peoples of color and Caucasian Anglo-Americans. The assumptions of such a script reveal a priori the attitudes and prejudices against racial minori-



2.1 The Broadway production of *West Side Story*. (Vandamm Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.)

ties in the U.S. at different historical moments. These prejudices constitute a discourse of racism by framing the “racial other” in stereotypes of delinquency, poverty, and crime; it is, indeed, how Puerto Ricans were conceived and portrayed in *West Side Story*, which re-presents the new spatial paradigm, the *locus urbanus*, for people of color.⁹

Drawing the Line

The first scenes of *West Side Story* establish the dramatic conflict: two gangs fight for social spaces, public territories, and institutions (fig. 2.1). The first to appear are the Anglo-Americans, the absolute owners of the open spaces, that is, the streets and the basketball court. The original text specifies the ownership of the space by the Jets: “The action begins with the Jets in possession of the area: owning, enjoying, loving their ‘home’” (137). The crisis surges from the fact that the Jets do not allow the settlement of the Sharks in their territory or home. As a result, the drama articulates a binary and hierarchical opposition of power relations, and this binarism establishes the dominant paradigms

of the musical: Jets/Sharks; U.S./Puerto Rico; center/periphery; empire/colony; native/alien; identity/alterity; sameness/difference.

This polarity becomes further materialized iconically in the names of the gangs: Jets/Sharks. When the film starts, in the scene in which the Sharks are pursuing the Jets, on a wall in the background appears the drawing of a shark with its mouth wide open, exposing its sharp teeth. Such an iconic representation emphasizes the "criminal" and "barbaric" potential of all Puerto Ricans. Such Puerto Rican barbarism is confirmed when one of the Jets pronounces, "The Sharks bite hard . . . and . . . we must stop them now." Clearly, the bite has metonymic implications of cannibalism and of sharks' horrifying ferocity. For this reason, sharks are used as a metaphor to denominate the immigrant Latino otherness coming from the Caribbean. The opposition of Jets versus Sharks reproduces an ideological configuration that opposes cultural technology to nature, aerial military techniques to primitive and savage instincts, civilization to barbarity. In this context, the musical could also be read as an imperialist discourse in which the colonized are represented as a threat to the process and progress of the imperialist and civilizing enterprise.

In this first scene, the two gangs have contrasting physical and racial appearances. Most of the Anglo-Americans are blond, strong, dynamic, and healthy and so embody the ideologue of the all-American boy. On the other hand, the Puerto Ricans are black-haired and skinny, with "greasy, tanned faces."¹⁰ This first representation installs the perceiving spectator within ready-made stereotypical models of race and socio-cultural behavior.¹¹ In the scene, the Puerto Ricans provoke the Anglo-Americans, and for such actions the Jets expel the Puerto Ricans from their territory. The rejection and exclusion of the "racial and cultural other" is made totally explicit with a graffiti stating "Sharks stink." Later, this insult becomes monumentalized when the Jets associate the Puerto Ricans with cockroaches: when Anita, looking for Tony, enters the candy store, one of the Jets whistles the song "La Cucaracha."

After a rigorous examination of the opening scenes, one can detect that the Anglo-Americans generally establish command by speaking first and defining the Puerto Ricans in a pejorative way. Take, for example, a policeman's arrival at the basketball court in the first scene, and later at the candy store. In both scenes, the Puerto Ricans are ordered to leave; the policeman wants to talk only to the Jets. In this way, the immigrants' voices become silenced and marginalized. The policeman says, "Get your friends out of here, Bernardo, and stay out! . . . Please! . . . Boy, oh, boy. . . As if this neighborhood wasn't crummy enough." Indeed, the original text reads: "Boy, what you Puerto Ricans

have done to this neighborhood. . . . All right, Bernardo, get your trash outa here" (138–39). Although the policeman's statement registers the abuse of power by an agent of power, his individualization as a character does not excuse him from participating in the blatant racism in the apparatus of power. He consciously favors the expulsion of the Latinos: "I gotta put up with them and so do you" (139); it is never a matter of acceptance or integration. The Jets also make use of a racist and discriminatory discourse in order to expel the Sharks: "We do own [the streets]. . . . We fought hard for this territory and it's ours . . . the PR's can move in right under our noses and take it away" (140–41). They propose to hang a sign forbidding trespassers; *they* are the ones who draw the line.

Between the two gangs erupts a hostile confrontation and warlike intensity because the Jets want to maintain their territory and socio-political order. The "other" threatens to snatch away their spaces and institutions (the gymnasium, the basketball court, the streets, and the candy store). The Jets are not willing to give up: "We fought hard for this turf, and we ain't just going to give it up. . . . These PR's are different. They keep on coming like cockroaches." Clearly, the Jets judge the Puerto Rican migration to the urban center as an invasion of cockroaches that reproduces without control and infects the territory. In order to exterminate them, the Jets prepare for a war: the rumble. These scenes conceive the Puerto Ricans only in their criminal and barbaric nature. The Jets skillfully transfer the concept of deadly weapons to the Puerto Ricans: "They might ask for blades, zip guns. . . . But if they say blades, I say blades. . . ." Those in power enunciate the discourse of the "other." By using such an ideological strategy of transference and transposition, the script, in the lines assigned to the Jets, accentuates and perpetuates stereotypes of Latinos/as, their ways of doing things, and the image of them as criminals. The Puerto Ricans are defined only in their criminal potentiality, as carrying weapons that the Jets will have to face and to match. Indeed, when the rumble takes place, the Puerto Ricans' disposition to fight (and to assassinate) is augmented by their arriving first at the location. In the scene in which Tony tries to make peace, Bernardo refuses reconciliation. This stereotype of Puerto Rican aggression and violence becomes further emphasized when the Sharks are the first to kill. In addition, it cannot be forgotten that, in the prelude to the song "America," one of the young women jokingly defines the Puerto Ricans as criminals: "You'll go back with handcuffs!" (165). In this manner, an assumed criminality of Puerto Ricans becomes stereotyped in the eyes of the Anglo-American audience.¹²

Somewhere Other than Here

The musical's dance scene in the gymnasium is vital for visualizing the divisive frontier line between the two gangs. In the original text, a stage direction states, "the line between the two groups is sharply defined by the colors they wear" (152). The two gangs are defined both by their dress code, which refers to cultural codes (particularly for the women), and by their styles of dancing. They are also defined by the color of their skin. It is in this dance scene that the action changes its course: the hatred between the gangs is open to the possibility of communication and living together, a possibility that arises from the physical attraction between Tony and Maria. Their relationship will become a story of love (albeit a doomed love), and it will predominate from then on as the principal plot of the dramatic text.

This first encounter between Maria and Tony is love at first sight. The camera captures them exchanging glances, and these glances erase ethnic and racial differences. Such an effacement is duplicated in the camera focus: the space (and gang members) surrounding Tony and Maria are blurred. This juxtaposition situates their love relationship in a utopian space: the newly fallen-in-love couple ignore and absent themselves from the immediate reality. From then on, Tony and Maria face a dilemma of trying to locate themselves in a historical, urban space that will permit and respect their interracial relationship.¹³ Undoubtedly, Tony and Maria,—and the audience,—expect this relationship to result in marriage. Both of them are conscious of their ethnic and racial difference; as Maria says, "[Y]ou're not one of us . . . and I am not one of yours." Tony will express later, in the song "Somewhere," their search for such an ideal place and future time when they will be accepted for what they are: an interracial and interethnic couple.

An interracial marriage is possible only through erasing the historical present and creating a utopia (in the time of the movie).¹⁴ Romantic melodrama is a strategy of power used to hide and soften the racist discourse. The narrative detour from warfare to love story functions as a camouflage. In these terms, the system of power disassociates itself from any consciousness of racial prejudice and discrimination. Indeed, Tony and Maria become the scapegoats of a racist discourse, because their relationship must end in tragedy. (Of course, if there's anybody to be blamed for this tragedy, it is Shakespeare, who wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, the model for *West Side Story*.) Although their utopian interracial marriage cannot take place, the apparatus of power does not take any responsibility for it. Instead, blame falls on the Puerto Ricans, because Chino assassinates Tony in revenge for Bernardo's

death. Hence, Latino otherness functions within a chain reaction of provocation: the Puerto Ricans provoke the Jets by killing one of them, Tony responds by killing Bernardo, and the chain is closed when Chino kills Tony. With this final death, the happily-ever-after outcome for Maria (and the audience) is impossible. In addition, in this last scene, the apparatus of power exercises its authority and control by arresting Chino; prison is the only space available for criminal immigrants.¹⁵ Thus, the chain reaction is, in fact, a circuit that begins and ends with the policeman as the representative of power.

In the final scene, the audience identifies with Maria, whose role is that of a mediator. The spectator disidentifies with Chino and, although viewers may feel some compassion, clearly only Chino bears the blame for the tragedy; it does not cross the viewer's mind that Tony is also a criminal. His crime is obscured by Maria's love when she sings the song "I Have a Love": it is a kind of love that is too strong to be rational. Ironically, although Tony has killed her brother, she cannot stop adoring him: "Te adoro, Anton" (224). In this scene, Maria evokes La Pietá while holding Tony's corpse in her arms. This image activates a Christian cultural repertoire that depends on melodrama for its lachrymose manipulation. It also articulates a series of connotations about women as submissive and suffering mothers, as mothers of sorrow and solitude.¹⁶

Given that Chino will be incarcerated and that Tony is dead, the film's ideological message implies the extermination of all Puerto Ricans and a desire for them to return to their place of origin.¹⁷ Is there no possibility for a future Puerto Rican generation in the U.S.? The answer is provided by the text itself, when Maria sings that last song. Clearly she states that there is no place for her integration:

Hold my hand and we're halfway there
 Hold my hand and I'll take you there
 Some day
 Somehow
 Some . . . (223)

Maria cannot mention a place for her future happiness; in this way her love remains suspended. She dreams about a utopia of love after life, because the "where" cannot be located either in her utopia, her present, or her place of origin. This "would-be world" does not exist in the text, and tragedy, instead of marriage, is the only possible closure. In the tragic finale, Maria remains on the threshold of "America." She is marginalized, hysterical, and hateful: "WE ALL KILLED HIM; and my brother and Riff, I, too. I CAN KILL NOW BECAUSE I HATE NOW"

(223). At the end, while holding Tony's corpse, she becomes delirious, wishing to join him in the utopian space of eternal love.¹⁸

There is no doubt that the space without sociohistorical contradictions for which Maria longs is beyond the grave. There she would meet with Romeo and Juliet, the literary prototypes of the bourgeois melodrama of impossible love. Such a transcendental and assumed universality in the ending erases all historicity. What it reproduces is a mythification whereby *West Side Story* perpetuates its aesthetic, literary, and apolitical values. Take, for example, the following comment from film critic Stanley Kauffmann: "*West Side Story* has been over-burdened with discussion about its comment on our society. It offers no such comment. As a sociological study, it is of no use: in fact, it is somewhat facile. What it does is to utilize certain conditions artistically—a vastly different process. Through much of the work, dance and song and cinematic skill fuse into a contemporary theatrical poem."¹⁹

The Politics of Race

There is no doubt that the song "America" and its choreography constitute one of the most rhythmic, energetic, and vital hits in the history of Broadway musical comedy.²⁰ Although it is a Puerto Rican who sings it, the patriotic message is delivered by an assimilated immigrant who despises her origin and autochthonous culture and prefers the comfort of the "American way of life." This song, with Spanish rhythm and a "typical Spanish" choreography, centers the audience in the exoticism and spontaneity of Latino otherness. Nevertheless, the lyrics make the audience concentrate on the patriotic message exposed in the political exchange between Anita and Bernardo. The song, performed by the Puerto Ricans on the roof of a building, (notice how they are confined to a building), pretends to be a Puerto Rican self-definition or enunciation. The song's confrontation of identities takes place when the Puerto Ricans consciously take sides on issues of nationalist politics and assimilation.²¹ The importance of this scene does not derive simply from its comical aspect, but rather, from the fact that the Puerto Ricans insult each other for being divided politically and ideologically between the nationalists and the assimilated.

In the film version, this scene, which, in the original text is a racist and defamatory articulation toward Puerto Rico, was revised in order to soften the negative attitude toward Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican immigrants. Indeed, the song "America" in its two versions consolidates the political and ideological nucleus of the drama. While in the original version Anita proclaims openly her total assimilation and

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scorns her native land and its historicocultural reality, the cinematographic version makes use of irony when she sings "My heart's devotion." Immediately, the line is followed by a statement of contempt, "Let it sink back in the ocean."

Original Text:

Puerto Rico . . .
You ugly island . . .
Island of tropic diseases.
Always the hurricanes blowing,
Always the population growing . . .
And the money owing,
And the babies crying,
and the bullets flying. (167)

Cinematographic Text:

Puerto Rico . . .
My heart's devotion . . .
Let it sink back in the ocean.
Always the hurricanes blowing,
Always the population growing,
And money owing,
And the sunlight streaming,
And the natives steaming.

Anita enunciates Puerto Rican reality as an underdeveloped country with all kinds of natural disasters, socioeconomic and demographic problems, and crime. Although Bernardo discredits and demythifies Anita's exaltation of the American dream, his comments are subordinated and silenced by the patriotic pro-U.S. propaganda. Anita expels any dissidence against the American dream in "the land of opportunity": "If it's so nice at home, why don't you go back there / I know a boat you can get on" (167). Furthermore, Anita echoes the dominant ideology as she advocates total assimilation according to the example of other immigrant people in the past: "Ai! Here comes the whole commercial. The mother of Tony was born in Poland; the father still goes to night school. Tony was born in America, so that makes him an American. But us? Foreigners!" (165). In this way, the myth of immigration to the U.S. is actualized anew, and those who may not like it can leave the land of Uncle Sam. In such terms, the prejudices, discrimination, and racism that Latinos/as face in the U.S. are eliminated and silenced. What the song emphasizes and expresses is the economic prosperity and the instant material gratification of immigrants. Anita voices the dominant imperial ideology in the original text as she exalts the material consumerism and comfort in the U.S.: automobiles, chromium steel, wire-spoke wheels, knobs on the doors, and wall-to-wall floors are all signs of prosperity and industrialization in "America." Clearly, in this parodic inventory of U.S.—manufactured goods, Puerto Rico stands for the economy of an underdeveloped country.

In spite of Anita's assimilation, once she finds out that Bernardo is dead, she changes her attitude toward the Anglo-American system of power. Ironically, Anita, who is the most assimilated, ends up being the most ethnic by affirming her cultural difference. Such difference

becomes so impregnated with hatred that she tells the Jets, without fear and in total challenge, that "Bernardo was right . . . If one of you was bleeding in the street, I'd walk by and spit on you" (219). From a position of pain and rage, Anita advises Maria to forget Tony: "Stick to your own kind!" (212). In this scene, now it is Anita who is advocating racial and ethnic segregation. Thus, the system of power does not need to acknowledge any responsibility or guilt for its racial discrimination. Instead, it posits that Puerto Ricans will always be Puerto Ricans, and in instances of crisis, no matter how assimilated they are, they will always side with their own people. The threat of racial otherness is concretized in Anita's self-conscious difference, and, by extension, the potential of rebellion and sociopolitical subversion.²² Now that Anita opposes Maria's and Tony's interracial marriage, the system of power exempts itself from preventing such a marriage. In the end, it is the Puerto Ricans themselves who advocate getting married to members of the same race, ethnicity, and culture. This is how the hegemonic power pretends to give agency to the marginalized and disenfranchised.

The Practices of Racism

West Side Story has had international fame and success. I have demonstrated how the universal plot of a love story registers a racist discourse in its historical specificity. Even the critics elided the racist issue, concentrating on the urban problem of juvenile delinquency. The choreography was highly praised, and a critic even proclaimed the conservation of the film as a cultural monument, saying, "If a time-capsule is about to be buried anywhere, this film ought to be included, so that possible future generations can know how an artist of ours [Jerome Robbins, the choreographer], made our most congenial theatrical form respond to some of the beauty in our time and to the humanity in some of its ugliness."²³ This "ugliness" cannot be verbalized, because it would uncover the truth, that *West Side Story* is a discursive articulation of racial discrimination in the U.S. The fact that there is not a single black person acting in the film makes evident another element of its racism; the only black character that I have been able to detect stands in the background of the dance scene (a pseudo-mambo) in the gymnasium.

However, the racist discourse is not totally silenced in the textual surface. In one scene, the practice of racism flourishes when Anita enters the candy store. While stopping her, one of the Jets says openly, "She's too *dark* to pass" (217; emphasis added). Such a declaration con-

firms that the struggle for territorial supremacy is truly based on racial discrimination of a sort that is not always euphemistic. In this way, the text contains its own representation of racism, which it locates in several domains: adolescence, juvenile delinquency, agents of power, and even in the spectator's political point of view.

Another act of racism appears in the film version of the musical, when policeman Schrank kicks the Puerto Ricans out of the candy store and proposes a deal to get along in the neighborhood: "I get a promotion, and you Puerto Ricans get what you've been itching for . . . use of the playground, use of the gym, the streets, the candy store. So what if they do turn this whole town into a stinking pig sty? . . . What I mean is . . . Clear out, you! I said, Clear out! . . . Oh yeah, sure, I know. It's a free country and I ain't got no right. But I got a badge. What do you got? Things are tough all over. Beat it!" There is no doubt that Schrank has the power and the laws to protect the country from any threat, usurpation, disorder, or terrorist act. Although he rationalizes his abusive actions. From such a hegemonic, hierarchical, and racist position, the badge gives him power and legitimization. The badge is the emblem that endorses his own racism and discrimination toward the racial "others" whom he calls openly—and insolently—"Spics." He has the badge, a symbol of power, superiority, and official law; all that the Puerto Ricans have is their skin. The blanks must be filled in so that one can read explicitly the inscribed racism in the actions of the agent of power: "You got the [dark] skin." It cannot be clearer: the racist discourse does not disappear at all from the textual surface. Once you fill in the blanks, that discourse reappears and erupts, subverting the policeman as well as the institutions of legal justice—the maximum representatives of Anglo-American power and law—in their own practices of racism.

If the critics silenced the racist discourse inscribed in the movie and in the theatrical production, the creators also did not care to rectify the negative and pejorative image of Latino otherness.²⁴ Concerning a protest against the song "America" by "real" Puerto Ricans, two of the creators, Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein, said in an interview,

[We] got a letter complaining about the one line "Island of tropic diseases," outraged on behalf of Puerto Rico, claiming that we were making fun of Puerto Rico and being sarcastic about it. But I didn't change it.

Opening night in Washington we had a telephone message from *La Prensa* saying that they'd heard about this song and we would be picketed when we came to New York unless we omitted or changed the song. They made particu-

lar reference to "Island of tropic diseases," telling us everybody knows Puerto Rico is free of disease. And it wasn't just that line they objected to. We were insulting not only Puerto Rico but the Puerto Ricans and all immigrants. They didn't hear "Nobody knows in America / Puerto Rico's in America"—it's a little hard to hear at that tempo. We met that threat by doing nothing about it, not changing a syllable, and we were not picketed.²⁵

Obviously, the system of power—ideologically institutionalized in Broadway's official theater—has the final word and authority to silence the inferior "other," to subdue and stereotype the subaltern. Such practices embody an imperialist and ethnocentric posture that makes evident the latent racism inscribed in the text. So, then, how could an immigrant minority that had just arrived be heard or even dare to protest against a song entitled "America" in the fascist McCarthy era? The song "America" had quite a patriotic and propagandistic message, although it was parodic and carnivalesque. Indeed, the song itself can be considered as a fleeting paradigm of "God Bless America," the "second national anthem" of the U.S. Nor should it be forgotten that the same patriotic message is activated in Neil Diamond's "America," which was used in the 1980s by Ronald Reagan's conservative and reactionary campaign to revitalize, propagate, and solidify the myth of immigration to "the land of opportunity." Perhaps it is not pure coincidence that in 1985 a nostalgic and operatic version of the original text of *West Side Story* was put into circulation.²⁶ Once again, in this version the song "America" promotes the immigrants' assimilation and propagates the myths of immigration to the U.S. And, once again, it achieves this by degrading those Puerto Ricans who are not willing to assimilate, and by demeaning their native land: "Puerto Rico . . . / You ugly island . . . / Island of tropic diseases."

The Reception of *West Side Story*

" . . . the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition."
—Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*

"*West Side Story's* liberalism is so ingenious that the show is embarrassing to revive."
—Martin Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals*

I do not deny it at all: after decades of living in the U.S., my own personal experience as an ethnic minority has led me to question the U.S. cultural and political system. I, who upon my arrival was an assimilated "American" and more Anglo-American than many "Ameri-

cans," became more Puerto Rican and more Latin American in the U.S. as the years passed. This process of disassimilation and decolonization informs this experiential and testimonial reading of *West Side Story*, an alternative, provocative, and ex-centric reading. I do not deny that this is an ideological and political reading, but so are those that pretend to be neutral, such as traditional scholarship in academia. My aim has been to question, to read from the margin, and to fill in the blanks with the "not-said" in order to decenter, subvert, and transgress *West Side Story's* official ideological discourse. I have tried to demythify and rescue the racist ideology that was silenced, but registered, in the textual interstices. This racist discourse is clearly inscribed in institutions of power such as those in Hollywood and on Broadway, and in their official critical responses.

Finally, I rescue a quotation from Stephen Sondheim. When asked to collaborate on the musical, Sondheim used as an excuse for not getting involved that he had never met a single Puerto Rican, nor had he shared their socioeconomic disadvantages: "I can't do this show. . . . I've never been that poor and I've never even *known* a Puerto Rican!"²⁷

Who are the Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story*? Are they simply literary products, ideological signs, and cultural discursive stereotypes of the Anglo-American sociopolitical system of power? Indeed, *West Side Story's* cinematographic figurative construction has propagated the image of Puerto Ricans to the extent that it has become the a priori referent, the model of/for immigrant Puerto Rican ethnicity and identity. The reading becomes more complicated when Puerto Ricans themselves identify with this pseudoethnic film image produced by the U.S. cultural-imperial power. This identification reveals the colonial condition of Puerto Ricans. Once they are interpellated by the prefabricated Hollywood image—"made in the U.S.A."—of their ethnicity, they identify with the imperial object/image projected on the screen. This results in their appropriation of that image as their own, and acceptance of it as the enunciation of their own sociohistorical and cultural subjectivity. For example, in 1960, an article in the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Mundo*—"West Side Story Continues To Be a Triumph on Broadway"—praises the musical for the positive representation of Puerto Rican immigrants in New York City: "Although the Hispanic newspapers threatened to boycott and protest the show, *West Side Story* continued its run after the approval of the Puerto Rican Resident Commissioner in Congress, Dr. Antonio Fernós Isern. After seeing the show he declared that there was nothing in it that could be harmful or injurious to the Puerto Rican image. I would add that this production really shows understanding and affection towards our people."²⁸

While migrant Puerto Ricans protested demeaning representations since the show's opening in 1957, Puerto Ricans on the island seemed to be ignorant of and distanced from the U.S. Puerto Rican experience. For example, Nilita Vientós Gastón, a prominent Puerto Rican intellectual and guardian of national culture and Spanish language, endorsed and exalted the human values inscribed in the production. In her 1961 review of the production in San Juan, she addressed the issue of violence, gangs, and juvenile delinquency, but, as she did so, universalized the social crisis in the musical as an urban condition in which individuals have lost all capacity to behave in a civilized way. Her reading, which is divorced from the Puerto Rican migrant community that experiences exploitation, marginality, and racism, did not consider how class and race articulate the ideological structure of the musical. Her political position was that the musical did not insult Puerto Ricans:

It has been said that the piece is an insult to Puerto Ricans. It is not the truth. The authors, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim, present a real and urgent problem and dramatize an actual situation. In the characterization of the two gangs, they do not favor one to put down the other. This opinion is supported by the song, "Puerto Rico, you ugly island . . ." but, the circumstances in which these words are sung—with sarcasm, by a Puerto Rican woman who believes that she has already adapted to the U.S. to another woman who dreams about returning to Puerto Rico—and the context of the whole piece belies any evil intention [on the part of the authors]. I believe, on the contrary, that the Puerto Ricans are portrayed with sympathy.²⁹

This interpretation reveals the lack of understanding of the racial site of Puerto Ricans in the Anglo-American cultural imaginary. Given that Vientós Gastón reads only the surface text—that is, the love story—she becomes captive to the romantic melodrama of the story. Vientós Gastón misses the racial discourse that inscribes racist and exclusionary practices against Puerto Ricans. To validate her political assertion, she proposes the following evidence to salvage the musical: María is a positive example of innocence, purity, and poetry, and the Puerto Ricans have a concept of family ties that the Anglo-Americans lack. Obviously Vientós Gastón identifies with the idealization of women's virginal status in patriarchy, and defines the structure of the family and Hispanic household as the core and haven of Puerto Rican culture. She dismisses the historical forces of change that altered the Puerto Rican family after migration, and the crisis of patriarchy that Puerto Rican men experienced. Indeed, the truth is that María betrays the father and loses her virginity, usurping in this way all kinds of traditional family values and beliefs.³⁰

In the 1980s, with the staging of *Jerome Robbins's Broadway*, an anthology of dance scenes choreographed by Robbins, once again the musical number "America" from *West Side Story* was staged. The prominent Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez, as if interpellated by magic, fascinated by the spectacle, or hypnotized by the phenomenal dancing, went in search of the meaning of the dances. He seemed to be trapped in the cultural reflection that *Broadway* offered him as a mirror of Puerto Rican ethnicity and identity, saying that

"for fifteen or twenty minutes in the *West Side Story* scenes . . . you attend an empire of the senses which modifies and biographs Latinos, Hispanics . . . you attend the colossal uncovering of being and living of Latinos, of Hispanics. . . . It would be unnecessary to insist on the response of gratitude and satisfaction that the audience finds in Jerome Robbins' choreography. It is a kind of ontology of New York streets . . . and it is an open heart to the understanding of Latinos, of Hispanics. It is all understanding and respect."³¹

Both Puerto Rican and Anglo-American spectators ignore the discriminatory practices and racist implications of the techniques Robbins used in order to create and achieve the perfect rivalry and hatred the Sharks and the Jets. These practices contributed to the success of the theatrical and cinematographic productions and can easily be reactualized and reactivated in every single staging and screening, thus perpetuating the racism. "Jerry Robbins started *West Side* with a bunch of amateurs who had never played roles anywhere—just a bunch of kids who danced in shows," explained the producer, Harold Prince. "He would always call them in groups, 'You're the Jets,' and 'You're the Sharks.' He would put up articles about interracial street fighting all over the bulletin boards where he was rehearsing. He would encourage them not to eat lunch together, but to stay in [separate] groups."³²

And, if those practices were not enough for the staging of the musical, the actress who played María had to dye her skin dark if she was "too white" to embody the Puerto Rican race. Such an action is the result of the Anglo-American sociocultural and political system, which conceptualizes all Puerto Ricans as a "Latin domestic ethnic and racial other" and stereotypes them as black. They did not have to darken Debbie Allen, a black actress who once played Anita, nor Rita Moreno in the film version. However, when Jossie de Guzmán, a light-skinned Puerto Rican, played the role of María in the 1980 production on Broadway, she had to be darkened. De Guzmán's first reaction to the darkening was, "Oh, my God, I am Puerto Rican—why do they have to darken my hair?" Yet later, "they darkened her pale skin too, and after a bit she liked that, wanting literally to 'get into the skin of María.'"³³

This reaction reveals the complex dynamics of blackface and the politics of representation. Not all Puerto Ricans are black, but on the stage, in order to satisfy the horizon of expectations of Broadway audiences, some performers will or must engage in appropriating the "racial other" as stereotyped in the Anglo-American cultural imaginary. Within these racist practices, de Guzmán is forced to pass as an authentic Puerto Rican determined only by race: to be a Puerto Rican is to be a person of color. Such a performance of race and ethnicity, under these specific theatrical racist practices, reveals that in representing the "other," race is performative. Race is historically, politically, ideologically, and culturally constituted, produced and represented in given social formations, power relations, and discursive practices.

The reception of *West Side Story* is another story for U.S. Puerto Ricans, the so-called Nuyoricans. Particularly, it is women who have challenged the stereotype of Latina representations in the musical. For example, writer Nicholasa Mohr has deconstructed the stereotypes and demythified the ideological underpinning of Latina women, always represented as passive and virginal, or as spitfires and whores. She emphasizes the fact that women were totally nonexistent as positive role models and were silenced when she was growing up. Indeed, one of her primary goals in her writing praxis is to recover that legacy in her culture, and to contest the "Maria syndrome":

Maria the virgin of María de Magdalena. The "Maria syndrome" had even been immortalized in that great American musical classic *West Side Story*. Beautiful music, exquisite dancing, the entire production conceived, arranged, choreographed and presented by successful white men, not one of them Hispanic. Here, we have María, the virgin, ready to sacrifice all, and the other side of the Latina, Anita, the "loose one" who sings "I want to be in America," meaning not in Puerto Rico, "that ain't America and it ain't good enough!" . . . Where were the rest of us? Where was my own mother and aunt? And all those valiant women who left Puerto Rico out of necessity, for the most part by themselves bringing small children to a cold and hostile city. They came with thousands of others, driven out by poverty, ill-equipped with little education and no knowledge of English. But they were determined to give their children a better life, and the hope of a future. This is where I had come from, and it was these women who became my heroes. When I looked for role models that symbolized strength, when I looked for subjects to paint and stories to write, I had only to look at my own. And my source was boundless, my folklore rich and the work to be done would consume an eternity."³⁴

In sharp contrast to the native Puerto Ricans' reception of the musical, Mohr locates herself, her writing, and her Latina women's history within a political arena where migration, sexism, and racism constitute

the fundamental coordinates of a history of marginalization and oppression.

In a similar vein, another U.S. Puerto Rican writer, Judith Ortiz Cofer, in her collection of essays, stories, and poems *The Latin Deli*, takes a political stand in relation to Maria in *West Side Story*. Her personal story, "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María" narrates how Maria has haunted her all her life. Not even in Europe could she escape the stereotype, as "María had followed me to London, reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are a Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno's gene pool, the Island travels with you."³⁵ Like Mohr, Ortiz Cofer uses the term "Latina" as an identity marker. In that way, she not only embraces other Latino ethnicities in the U.S., she also engages in the deconstruction of Latina stereotypes in Hollywood and in the media. Throughout her life, she has been harassed by people singing "Maria," "La Bamba," and "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" to her after they discover her ethnic background. As she examines the Anglo-American sociocultural attitudes toward her, Ortiz Cofer arrives at the most problematic stereotypical construction: all Latinas work at domestic, waitress, and factory jobs. At this point, her testimonial reaches a political positioning that unveils Anglo-American practices of racism and classism. Having set the stage, Ortiz Cofer presents an incredible autobiographical experience: at her first public poetry reading, one of the guests assumed that she was one of the waitresses and asked her for a cup of coffee. She rationalizes the experience as an act of ignorance, not of cruelty. That scene would continue to remind her of what she needed to overcome to be taken seriously as a writer. Ortiz Cofer's anger at the incident gave fire to her reading, making it a powerful performance. As she read, she addressed her poetry to that woman who had made an unforgettable mistake. "That day," she says, "I read to that woman and her lowered eyes told me that she was embarrassed at her little faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, it was my victory, and she graciously allowed me to punish her with my full attention."³⁶ Ortiz Cofer transformed this incident into a source of empowerment, but, sadly, this occurrence attests to how Latinos/as constantly have to justify and prove who they are. As a result of discrimination and stereotyping of Latinas, Ortiz Cofer was forced to develop a politics of affinity with other Latinas. She now uses her writing as a medium to educate those who are prejudiced and to break away from dominant cultural representations, like that of Maria in *West Side Story*. "Every time I give a reading," she says, "I hope the

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stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes."³⁷

As the years have passed, *West Side Story* has become a classic of Broadway musical theater. It is repeatedly staged in high school and college productions, and regional theater revivals. With each production, the stereotypical representation of Puerto Ricans is activated and circulated. Being such a powerful cultural and ideological artifact in the dominant Anglo-American imaginary, it is not easy to ignore. *West Side Story* is not merely a period piece; it is a theatrical work that continues to sustain the dominant ideology. These elements draw the territorial boundaries between peoples of color, the working class, and the white constituency of "America." Indeed, in an article in the *New York Times* in 1991, "Old Film Mirrors New Immigrant Life," we are told the film is used to educate the children of immigrants on the vicissitudes of migration and cultural survival, and to instruct them on the problems faced in the contemporary urban multicultural city.³⁸

Undoubtedly, any time that *West Side Story* is recycled in its theatrical productions and screen showings, we could find ourselves once again questioning, deconstructing, and demythifying the dominant Anglo-American discursive representation of the "Latin domestic ethnic and racial other." Therefore, for a critical reading the following issues must be tackled: where do the Anglo-American practices of racism, registered in the cultural imaginary, start or end? In the conception of the piece? In the selection of the cast? In the rehearsals? In the theatrical productions? In the screenings of the film after translating the theatrical production into the cinematographic medium? Or in the reception of the audiences and the critics?

3

A Chorus Line

Not Such a "One, Singular Sensation" for U.S.
Puerto Rican Crossovers

Whenever we think about mainstream representations of Latinos/as on Broadway, we see a flashing marquee reading *West Side Story*. Indeed, as shown in the previous chapter, Puerto Ricans became internationally famous because of the success of that theatrical production and its later film version. However, when we try to name other representations of Latinos/as on Broadway, either in Anglo-American works or in theatrical productions by Latinos/as themselves, there is a long, long silence. Whenever I ask in which plays or musicals have Latinos/as been represented on Broadway, the answer is the following: "Let me see . . . well . . . I really cannot think of any." And I hear over and over again: "Are there any other shows besides *West Side Story*?" It took even me by surprise to realize that there is another production that has taken the Puerto Ricans around the world. The show was *A Chorus Line*, the second longest running musical on Broadway history (1975 to 1990, surpassed by *Cats* in 1997), which had two Puerto Rican protagonists, Diana and Paul (fig. 3.1). But the story does not end there. Once I started my research, I found out that one of the authors of *A Chorus Line* was a Puerto Rican. Born Conrado Morales in Spanish Harlem, he renamed himself Nicholas (Nick) Dante.