

West Side Story A Puerto Rican reading of "America"

by Alberto Sandoval Sanchez

from *Jump Cut*, no. 39, June 1994, pp. 59-66
copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 1994, 2006

"My final prayer:
O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"
— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

To my nephew and niece in the U.S.A.,
Laura and Vladimir Estrada Sandoval

After my immigration to Wisconsin in 1973 to attend college, the musical film WEST SIDE STORY frequently was imposed upon me as a "model of 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 actualize with my bodily presence their stereotypes of Latinos' 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][\[open notes in new window\]](#) As the years passed by I grew accustomed to their actions and reactions to my presence. I would smile and ignore the stereotype of Puerto Ricans that Hollywood promotes. Or perhaps, was I unwilling to identify with the Puerto Rican immigrants living in New York because of my own prejudices of class or race?

As it happened I moved to New York City in 1983, to the neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen which borders the area where the film takes place, better known today as Lincoln Center. I lived in the neighborhood for eight months with the New York Puerto Ricans. Given that at the time I became acquainted with New York territories and shared daily the socio-economic reality of Puerto Rican immigrants, I became interested in correlating and contrasting the film with the historical reality of the immigrants. At that time I had the opportunity to see the movie, which was shown at the Hollywood Theater on Eighth Avenue, between 47th and 48th Streets.

My interest on decentering, demythifying, and deconstructing ethnic, social, and racial stereotypes of Latinos inscribed in the musical film 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 articulation of the stereotype and identity of Puerto Rican immigrants in the U.S.A. as well as for all other Latino immigrants. 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 with the coveted Oscar Award.

On the other hand, the audience's reception, which was manipulated by a patriotic discourse generated and transmitted through the song, led me to question and problematize up to what point the musical configures, produces, and re-produces a racist discourse of Latinos' Otherness in the U.S.A. How does the musical film project ethnic difference as a threat to the national, territorial, racial, and linguistic identity as well as to the national and imperial subjectivity of the Anglo-Americans?

From such a questioning posture, we should examine how the musical film through its music, its dances, its romantic melodrama, and its exoticism of cultural Otherness distracts from the racism in it. How does it attract, interpellate, and position ideologically the perceiving spectator — whose social construction of reality and racial differences belong to the U.S.A. — by spatially dividing the Puerto Ricans from the Anglo-Americans, Puerto Rico from the U.S.A., the West Side from the East Side, the Latino race from the Anglo-Saxon race, 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 confront the Anglo-American power as intruders in and invaders of their territory: the U.S.A.

WEST SIDE STORY depicts a fight for urban space, a space that has already been impregnated with cultural symbols and political significations for the relations, interactions, and social actions according to the "American Way of Life." In this sense, the film projects how the Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the 40s and 50s not only usurps the order and the semiotic spatial organization of the Anglo-Americans, but how it also constitutes a threat for 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 the Anglo-Americans, their socio-political system at the capitalist center of New York City.

For those who know Manhattan, the city is divided territorially, economically, racially, and ethnically. Each socio-economic group inhabits a space concretely demarcated, and even neighborhood border crossings are avoided. Specifically it has been the film WEST SIDE STORY (1961, but staged on Broadway in 1957) that has contributed to perpetuating the image of the West Side as a site of urban, ethnic, and racial problems.

The plot of the musical film is about the hostility, hatred, and confrontations between two gangs. As the action develops, those gangs ("the Sharks are Puerto Ricans, the Jets an anthology of what is called 'American'" [137]) reveal not a mere struggle for territory but rather a socio-economic and racial confrontation. Although the Jets constitute "an anthology of the Americans," that gang consists solely of children of white European immigrants, Their actions and values already consolidate the ideological apparatus of the Anglo-American political national subjectivity, that is, the ideological program and behavior of the "All-American Boy."

Although they belong to the working class, obviously the Jets' members act according to the values, attitudes, beliefs, and ideals of the Anglo-American national subjectivity. They have an ideological and political consciousness of their nationality and imperial superiority, as shown by their competitive spirit to be "Number One." For this reason, they emblemize the ideology of the "All-American Boy," a totally white identity which does not make room for any other racial groups in the gang. In this way, the Jets define themselves in the first song, "Jet Song," in terms of their own socio-political and personal superiority, confidence, and arrogance:

"I want the Jets to be Number One, to sail, to hold the sky!
We're Jets! The greatest!"

It should be pointed out that blacks have no representation or participation in this "anthology." 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 racial minority group, the Puerto Ricans.

In its historical specificity, the space of the West Side obtains its total meaning only by reading its "not-said" space — that is, the upper East Side, present because of its topographical contiguity. The upper East Side stands as 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; Jets/ Sharks; White Anglo-

Americans/ Spics. 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 towards immigrant Latinos.

From a questioning perspective, I propose to examine how the East Side's absence — a geo-political absence signaled metonymically in the title — becomes present. It displaces and decenters the story of Maria and Tony's love in 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, which could be entitled "East Side History of Hatred/ Racism." With this title I name the ideological discourse of the deep structures of the text. By so doing, I decenter the melodramatic and romantic title of WEST SIDE STORY.

My alternative reading based on the binary opposition between West Side and East Side is more fully understood by considering that in 1949 the play's original title was to be East Side Story. The play was supposed to take place in the Lower East Side as a love story between a Jewish girl and an Italian Catholic boy. However, with Puerto Rican immigration, the idea became dated. As a result the team of writers and producers would even consider Chicano gangs in their search for some exoticism and "color." As Arthur Laurents 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 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, and that started the whole thing." [2]

Bernstein was really inspired by the Chicano gangs:

"...and 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." [3]

Laurents also seems to have made the following comment:

"I suggested the 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." [4]

Although the team was clearly interested in juvenile delinquency, it is interesting to observe how ethnic and racial minorities replaced each other. The writers moved comfortably from Jews and Italians to Chicanos to blacks to Puerto Ricans. They were just searching for a confrontation between peoples of color and caucasian Anglo-Americans. Such script assumptions reveal a priori the attitudes and prejudices against racial minorities in the U.S.A. at different historical periods. These prejudices constitute a discourse of racism by framing the racial Other in stereotypes of delinquency, poverty, and crime. That is, indeed, how Puerto Ricans were conceived of in WEST SIDE STORY.

The first scenes of the film establish the dramatic conflict: two gangs fight for social spaces, public territories, and institutions. The first to appear are the Anglo-Americans, the absolute owners of the open spaces, that is, the streets and the basketball court. The crisis surges from the fact that the Jets do not allow the settlement of the Sharks in their territory or "home" (137). As a result, the drama articulates a binary and hierarchical opposition of power relations, and this binarism establishes the dominant paradigm of the musical film: Jets/ Sharks; U.S.A./ Puerto Rico; Center/ Periphery. Even the following binary oppositions can be read: Empire/ Colony; Native/ Alien; Identity/ Alterity; Sameness/ Difference.

This bipolarity becomes further materialized iconically in the gangs' names: Jets/ Sharks. When the film starts, in the scene where 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 metonymical implications of cannibalism and of sharks' horrifying ferocity. For this reason, Sharks is used as the metaphor to denominate immigrant Latino Otherness coming from the Caribbean. The opposition of Jets vs. 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 film could 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 ideologeme: "All-American Boy." On the other hand, the Puerto Ricans are black haired, dark skinned, and skinny. This first representation installs the spectator within readymade, stereotypical models of race and socio-cultural behavior. 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 as the Jets associate the Puerto Ricans with cockroaches: when Anita, looking for Tony, enters the candy store, one of the Jets whistles "La Cucaracha."

After a rigorous examination of the 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 the 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' voice becomes 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." (138)

"All right, Bernardo, get your trash outa here (139)."

Although the policeman's statement indicates 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. Even the Jets make use of a racist and discriminatory discourse in order to expel the Sharks:

"We do own [the streets] (140)."

"We fought hard for this territory and it's ours. The PR's can move in right under our noses and take it away (141)."

"We're drawin' the line."

"We're hangin' a sign/ Says 'visitors forbidden'/ And we ain't kiddin'!"

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 which reproduces without control and infects the territory. In order to exterminate them, the Jets prepare for a war: the rumble. These scenes conceive of the Puerto Ricans only in their whole criminal and barbaric potential. The Jets transfer skillfully the concept of their 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 about Latinos, their ways of doing things, and the image of them as criminals. The Puerto Ricans are only defined in their criminal potentiality, as carrying weapons that the Jets will have to face and to deem equal. Indeed, when the rumble takes place, the Puerto Ricans' disposition to fight (and to assassinate) is accentuated by the script having them arrive first at the location. In this scene when Tony tries to make peace, Bernardo refuses reconciliation. This stereotype of Puerto Ricans' aggression and violence becomes emphasized by their killing a Jet first. Also, it cannot be forgotten that in the prelude to the song "America," one of the young women also jokingly defines 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.

The dance scene in the gymnasium is vital for visualizing the divisive frontier line between the two gangs. Skin color, dress codes (particularly for the women) and dance styles define the two gangs. This iconography refers to cultural dress codes, as well as ways of dancing. In the dance the action changes its course: the hatred between the gangs seems open to the possibility of communication and living together. This possibility arises from the physical attraction between Tony and Maria. Their relationship will become a story of love (of course, impossible), which will predominate from then on as the principal story line.

Maria and Tony's first encounter means 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 the couple's love relationship in a mental and utopic space: the newly fallen-in-love couple ignore and absent themselves from immediate reality. From then on Tony and Maria face a dilemma of trying to locate themselves in an historical, urban space which will permit and respect their interracial relationship. Undoubtedly they, and the audience, expect this relationship to result in marriage. Both of them are conscious of their ethnic and racial difference; as Maria says:

"But you're not one of us...and I am not one of yours."

Tony will express later in a song his search for such an ideal space and time:

"There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us...
There's a time for us,
Someday a time for us...
Somewhere
We'll find a new way of living...
There's a place for us, a time and place for us.
Hold my hand and we're halfway there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you there.
Someday, somehow, somewhere!"

In this way, by erasing the historical present (in the time of the movie), the plot establishes the impossibility of an interracial marriage. Romantic melodrama is a

strategy of power to hide and soften the racist discourse. The film's narrative detour from warfare to love story functions as camouflage. In these terms, the system of power disassociates itself from any consciousness of racial prejudices and discriminations. Indeed, Tony and Maria become the scapegoats of a racist discourse because their relationship must end in a tragedy. Although their utopic interracial marriage cannot take place, the apparatus of power does not take any responsibility for it.

Instead, the blame falls on the Puerto Ricans because Chino assassinates Tony in revenge for Bernardo's death. Hence, Latinos' 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, a happy-ever-after outcome for Maria (and 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. Thus, the story contains a chain reaction, a circuit of events which 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 perceiving spectator disidentifies with Chino, and although viewers may feel some compassion, clearly only Chino bears the blame for the tragedy. Nevertheless it does not cross viewers' mind that Tony is also a criminal. His crime is obscured behind Maria's love:

"When love comes so strong,
There's no right or wrong,
Your love is your life!"

Ironically, although Tony has killed her brother, she cannot stop adoring him: "Te adoro, Anton." In this scene Maria evokes *la pietá* while holding Tony's corpse in her arms. This image evokes a Christian cultural repertoire that depends on melodrama for its lachrymose manipulation. It also articulates a series of connotations about woman as submissive and suffering mother, as the mother of sorrow and solitude.

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. Is there no possibility for a future Puerto Rican generation in the U.S.A.? The answer is provided by the text itself as Maria sings the 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.
Someday
Somehow
Some..."

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 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 ending for the love's 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 utopic space of eternal love.

No doubt the space without socio-historical contradictions that Maria longs for is beyond the grave. There she would meet with Romeo and Juliet, the literary prototype of the bourgeois melodrama of impossible love. With the film having such a transcendental, ahistorical, and assumed universality in its ending, it erases all historicity. What it re-produces is a mythification whereby WEST SIDE STORY perpetuates itself for its aesthetic, literary, and apolitical values. Take for example the following comment from film critic Stanley Kauffman:

"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. Though much of the work dance and song and cinematic skill fuse into a contemporary theatrical poem." [5]

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 musical comedy. [5] Although a Puerto Rican sings it, its patriotic message is delivered by an assimilated immigrant who despises her origin and autochthonous culture for her preference of the comfort of the "American way of life." This song with Spanish rhythm and a "typical Spanish" choreography centers the spectator 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 the building (notice how they are confined to closed spaces), pretends to be 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 ethnicity, and assimilation. The importance of this scene does not simply derive from its comical aspect but also lies in the fact that here the Puerto Ricans insult each other for being divided politically and ideologically between nationalists and assimilated.

This scene was a racist and defamatory articulation towards Puerto Rico in the original text. In the film version, it was revised in order to soften a negative attitude toward Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican immigrants. Indeed the song "America" in its two versions consolidates the drama's political and ideological nucleus. Although in the original version, Anita proclaims openly her total assimilation and scorns her native land and its historico-cultural reality, the cinematographic version makes use of irony when she is singing, "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 hack 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, socio-economic and demographic problems, and crime. Although Bernardo discredits and demythifies Anita's exaltation of the "American Dream," his comments are subordinated and silenced because of the song's patriotic pro-U.S.A. 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 reactualized; those who may not like it can leave the land of Uncle Sam. In such terms, the prejudices, discrimination, and racism that Latinos face in the U.S.A. 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:

"Automobile in America. Chromium steel in America.
Wire-spoke wheel in America. Very big deal in America!
I like the shores in America! Comfort is yours in America.
Knobs on the doors in America.
Wall-to-wall floors in America!"

In spite of Anita's assimilation, once she finds out that Bernardo is dead, she changes her attitude towards the Anglo-American system. Ironically Anita, the most assimilated, ends up the most ethnic by affirming her cultural difference. Such difference becomes impregnated with hatred up to the point of telling the Jets, without fear and in total challenge:

"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, she advises Maria to forget Tony and, "Stick to your own kind!" In this scene, now it is Anita advocating racial and ethnic segregation. In this way the system of power does not experience any guilt feelings for its racial discrimination — provided that Puerto Ricans will always be Puerto Ricans, and in instances of crisis, no matter how assimilated, they will always join their own people. The threat of racial Otherness is concretized in Anita's self-consciousness; difference, by extension, means the potential to rebellion and socio-political subversion.[7]

On the other hand, now that Anita opposes Maria 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 with members of the same race and culture.

WEST SIDE STORY has had international fame and success. I have demonstrated how the universal plot of a love story registers, in its historical specificity, a racist discourse. Critics elided the issue of racism and concentrated on urban problems of juvenile delinquency. The choreography was highly praised, and a critic even proposed conserving the film as a cultural monument:

"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 [Robbins] made our most congenial theatrical form to respond to some of the beauty in our time and to the humanity in some of its ugliness." [8]

This "ugliness" cannot be verbalized because it would uncover the truth: WEST SIDE STORY discursively articulates racial discrimination in the U.S.A.

However the racist discourse is not totally silenced within the textual surface. In one scene when Anita enters the candy store, the practice of racism flourishes openly. While stopping her, one of the Jets says:

"She's too dark to pass."

Such a declaration confirms that the struggle for territorial supremacy is truly based on racial discrimination, of a sort which often is not euphemistic. In this way, the text contains its own critique of racism, which it locates in several domains: adolescence, juvenile delinquency, agents of power, and even in the spectators' point of view.

Another moment of possible racism appears in the film version when policeman Schrank kicks the Puerto Ricans out of the candy store and proposes a deal to live

together 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 he has the power and the laws to protect the country from any threat, usurpation, or disorder. Although he justifies his abuse, he is applying the national law that legitimates his abusive actions. From such a hegemonic, hierarchical, and racist position, the badge gives him power and legitimization rights. The badge is the emblem that endorses his own racism and discrimination toward the racial Otherness whom he calls openly and insolently "Spics." If 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 agent of power's actions: "You got the [dark] skin." It cannot be clearer: 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, maximum representatives of Anglo-American power and law, in their own practices of racism.

— CODA —

"...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*

I do not deny it at all. After seventeen years of living in the U.S.A. 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 the "Americans," as the years passed became more Puerto Rican and more Latin American in the U.S.A. This process of disassimilation and decolonization resulted in this experiential and testimonial reading of WEST SIDE STORY: a differential, alternative, provocative, marginal, and radical reading. I do not deny that this is an ideological and political reading, but so are the ones that pretend to be neutral, like 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. As a result, 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 cultural power like Hollywood and Broadway and their official critical response.

Finally, I rescue a quotation from Stephen Sondheim, who wrote WEST SIDE STORY's lyrics, when he was asked to collaborate in the musical. He declared openly 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." [9]

Then, what 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, this cinematographic figurative construction has propagated the image of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.A. and internationally up to the point of becoming the referent *a priori*, the "model of/for" immigrant Puerto Rican ethnicity and identity. The reading gets more complicated when the Puerto Ricans themselves identify with this pseudo-ethnic film image produced by the U.S. cultural imperial power. Those readings rather reveal 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 in the screen. The final result is their appropriating that image as their own and accepting it as the enunciation of

their own socio-historical and cultural subjectivity.

Nevertheless, both Puerto Rican and Anglo-American spectators ignore that in order to achieve the perfect rivalry and hatred between the Sharks and the Jets, Robbins made use of discriminatory practices and racist implications. Even though such practices contributed to the success of the theatrical and cinematographic productions, they can easily be reactualized and reactivated in every single staging and screening:

"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. 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 groups."^[10]

And, if those practices were not enough for the staging of the musical, Maria must also dye her skin dark in case the actress is too white to embody the Puerto Rican race. Such an action is the result of the Anglo-American socio-cultural and political system that conceptualizes all Puerto Ricans as a racial Other and stereotypes them as blacks. This happened to Jossie de Guzmán who had the role of Maria in the 1980 production on Broadway. If they darkened her skin, they did not have to do it to Debbie Allen, a black actress who played Anita, nor to Rita Moreno in the film version. De Guzmán commented with surprise:

"'Oh, my God, I am Puerto Rican — why do they have to darken my hair?' They darkened her pale skin too, and after a bit she liked that, wanting literally to 'get into the skin of Maria.'"^[11]

Therefore, where do the Anglo-American cultural system's practices of racism start or end: in the rehearsals, in the theatrical production, in the screening of the film, or in the reception of the audience and the critics?

NOTES

1. *Romeo and Juliet/ West Side Story*, edited by Norris Houghton (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1965; 167). The movie was produced by Mirisch Pictures in 1961, and it was distributed by United Artists. The play was staged at the Winter Garden Theater in New York City in 1957. In this essay I alternate the movie script with the theatrical text. The play was partially revised for the film. By using both versions my goal is to make of both a single cultural, ideological, and political text which rescues the silences or censorship in the movie version. All quotations belong to the above edition of WEST SIDE STORY; however, when there is no page number next to the quotation, I am using the movie dialogue directly.
2. *Broadway Song and Story*, edited by Otis L. Guernsey (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985; 42).
3. Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989; 14).
4. Joan Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987; 257).
- 5 "The Asphalt Romeo and Juliet," *The New Republic* (October 23, 1961): 28.
6. Jack Delano, a photographer who has lived in Puerto Rico and published a book with photos of the island and its people, observed in his introduction about the song "America":

"But the colonialism of the ruling nation goes further, for it colors the attitudes of nearly everyone who must deal with Puerto Rico. Even in its literature, art, and aesthetics, Puerto Rico is commonly misunderstood. The musical WEST SIDE STORY is relevant here. In the words of its most popular song, the United States is referred to as 'America,' But no one in Puerto Rico ever refers to the United States as 'America' and no Puerto Rican ever did. All Latin peoples in the Southern Hemisphere believe that they are Americans, too. (Since they reached the New World and settled the Antilles more than a century before the first English colony was established in North America, they have a fair case.) And the melodies of Bernstein, for all their beauty, could only have been composed by someone for whom Mexican and Puerto Rican music are essentially the same — that is, 'Latin.'

The rich and distinctive musical tradition of Puerto Rico is almost entirely absent from WEST SIDE STORY."

Puerto Rico Mío: Four Decades of Change(Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 4.

7. A similar situation occurs when Bernardo says to the Jets before the rumble starts:

"More gracious living? Look, I don't go for that pretend crap you all go for in this country. Every one of you hates every one of us, and we hate you right back. I don't drink with nobody I hate, I don't shake hands with nobody I hate" (190).

It is evident that the ethnic minority defines itself in terms of hatred and violence while the Anglo-Americans never verbalize their hatred, I should say, their racism. The system of power allows for the minority to speak on its behalf, in this way, it takes no responsibility for discrimination and racial oppression.

8. S. Kauffmann, 29.

9. *Sondheim & Co.*, 14.

10. *Sondheim & Co.*, 19.

11. Nan Robertson, "Maria and Anita in WEST SIDE STORY,"*The New York Times* (February 22, 1980): C-4.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Sanchez, A.S., "A Puerto Rican Reading of America," in *Jump Cut* (Berkeley), no. 39, June 1994. * * * The film *West Side Story* is based on the 1950s Broadway stage play, from an idea inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The idea of taking one of the most famous and tragic love stories of all time and translating it to modern America, focusing it around the racial and inner city problems arising at that time (and which still exist today) was a radical one. The Capulet and Montague families are transformed into two street gangs whose members live in the urban ghettos. In spite of its sadness *West Side Story* ends on a positive note with the idea that out of the violence and hatred a better society can be created in which different groups can live together. A. Pillai.

West Side Story is a musical with book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. It was inspired by William Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet. The story is set in the Upper West Side neighborhood in New York City in the mid 1950s, an ethnic, blue-collar neighborhood (in the early 1960s, much of the neighborhood was cleared in an urban renewal project for Lincoln Center, which changed the neighborhood's character). The musical explores the rivalry between the Jets Continue reading the main story. Puerto Ricans are still the city's most numerous Spanish-speaking group with 787,000 residents in 2007, one out of three, according to an analysis of United States Census Data by the Queens College sociology department but their total has steadily declined over the last 25 years. They are no longer the insecure newcomers, compelled to fight for a patch of turf. Start studying Reading - West Side Story. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. How do Anita and the other Puerto Rican girls feel about America? The Sharks? Why? Anita and the girls love life in America and see the opportunities available to them. Bernardo and the Sharks hate life in America because of the prejudice and hate against them. Explain the significance of the scene in the bridal shop. Tonys and Maria took vows of love and devotion to each other. I told you: there's only one thing they want from a Puerto Rican girl." Bernardo. We're untouchable; we are in the air; we have magic!" Tony. How does Lt. Shrank feel about the Puerto Ricans? He hates them. What is the main idea of the movie? Prejudice and Hate.

La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York. Vintage, 1966. [Excerpts]. — Padilla, Ellen. "Race Relations: A Puerto Rican View." Chapter 3 in *The City in the Seventies*. Edited by Robert K. Yin. — Sanchez, Alberto Sandoval. "West Side Story: A Puerto Rican Reading of 'America'". *Jump Cut*, no. 39 (1994): 59—66. 8.