

For never was a story of more woe  
than this of Juliet and her Romeo.  
—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Frances  
Negrón-Muntaner

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 made our  
most congenial theatrical form respond  
to the beauty in our time and to the  
humanity in some of its ugliness.  
—Stanley Kauffmann, “The Asphalt Romeo and Juliet”

The ideas of the past weigh like a  
nightmare on the brains of the living.  
—Stuart Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-  
structuralist Debates”

There is no single American cultural product that haunts Puerto Rican identity discourses in the United States more intensely than the 1961 film, *West Side Story*, directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. Although neither the first nor last American movie to portray Puerto Ricans as gang members (men) or as sassy and virginal (women), hardly any Puerto Rican cultural critic or screen actor can refrain from stating their very special relationship to *West Side Story*. Jennifer López, the highest paid Latina actress in Hollywood today, recalls that her favorite movie was *West Side Story*. “I saw it over and over. I never noticed that Natalie Wood wasn’t really a Puerto Rican girl. I grew up always wanting to play Anita [Rita Moreno’s Oscar-winning role], but as I got older, I wanted to be Maria. I went to dance classes every week.”<sup>1</sup> Journalist Blanca Vázquez, whose editorial work in the publication *Centro* was crucial in creating a space for critical discourse on Latinos in media, comments: “And what did the ‘real’ Puerto Rican, Anita, do in the film? She not only was another Latina ‘spitfire,’ she also sang a song denigrating Puerto Rico and by implication, being Puerto Rican. . . . I remember seeing it and being ashamed.”<sup>2</sup> For Island-born cultural critic Alberto Sandoval, the film became pivotal in

his own identity formation: “‘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?’ 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.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the ironies of the film’s centrality in Puerto Rican identity discourses, however, is the universal consensus by both critics and creators of *West Side Story* that the film is not in any way “about” Puerto Rican culture, migration, or community life. The creators of *West Side Story*, for instance, have been consistent in representing the work as non-mimetic. Lyricist Stephen Sondheim initially rejected the project on the grounds of his ignorance of Puerto Rican culture and experience with poverty: “I can’t do this show. . . . I’ve never been that poor and I’ve never even met a Puerto Rican.”<sup>4</sup> Without a touch of irony, Leonard Bernstein has written about the extent to which he researched Puerto Rican culture in New York before writing the score: “We went to a gym in Brooklyn where there were different gangs that a social organization was trying to bring together. I don’t know if too much eventually got into *West Side Story*, but everything does help.” The “superficiality” of the way that Puerto Ricans were represented in the book made one of the original *West Side Story* producers, Cheryl Crawford, insist that “the show explains why the poor in New York, who had once been Jewish, were now Puerto Rican and black. . . . When someone said the piece was a poetic fantasy, not a sociological document, she replied, ‘You have to rewrite the whole thing or I won’t do it.’”<sup>6</sup> Hence, if *West Side Story* was never intended to be “real” and doesn’t feel real to Puerto Rican spectators, what accounts for its reality effects?

For those who have critiqued *West Side Story* oppositionally, the film opened a discursive space from which to speak for the “real” Puerto Rican community; a subjectivity allegedly not represented or misrepresented in the film. For many Puerto Rican spectators who identify with the narrative, *West Side Story* is a morality play about “our” everyday problems: racism, poverty, and the destructiveness of violence. An example of this pedagogical reading is exemplified by Actor’s Playhouse, a Miami-based theater group that recently staged the musical to a group of “at risk” young adults who were mostly Latinos. The purpose was “to show them the devastating consequences of associating with gang members who use violence as their primary way of solving differences.”<sup>7</sup> This benign view of the film, however, was not shared by the government officials who pulled *West Side Story* out of the Brussels World’s Fair “on the ground that it was bad publicity for America.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, far from the

homogeneous reading some critics have given the film as a piece of racist propaganda against Puerto Ricans, *West Side Story* endures in part due to the many discursive uses and “real” identifications it allows.

Simultaneously, the film’s instant canonization is not arbitrary. Several key discourses and histories of Puerto Rican–American representation coalesce in this text. First, the film—although not an entirely predictable Hollywood musical, as I will discuss in the following section—perseveres in a long tradition of representing Latinos as inherently musical and performative subjects, ready to wear their sexualized identity for a white audience at the drop of a hat. Consistent with this history, the “Puerto Rican music” found in *West Side Story* is an American-made fusion of a wide range of rhythms with no discernible or specific national origin. In this sense, despite *West Side Story*’s dramatic elements, Latinos are doing exactly what they are expected to do, particularly at a time of significant racial and social unrest in the United States: singing and dancing the night away.

There is a second, and much less argued, reason why *West Side Story* easily slides into the throne of a foundational narrative. Despite the existence of an imperial photographic archive where Islanders figure, Puerto Rican representation in American cinema was practically nonexistent during the Spanish-American War period through the beginning of sound cinema. The still photographs of the early part of the century were also quickly archived as most in the United States opted to forget their Caribbean wards. Hence, although *West Side Story* is not the first film to represent Puerto Ricans within a legal or sociological discourse (*12 Angry Men* and *The Young Savages*, for instance, preceded it), it remains the most cohesive product of American culture to “hail” Puerto Ricans as U.S. Puerto Ricans. The fact that this hailing constructs Puerto Rican subjectivity as criminal (men), and victimized (women)—two sites of shameful identification—also intersects with broader political discourses regarding U.S.–Puerto Rico relations, and social hierarchies among Puerto Ricans.

In Louis Althusser’s well-known essay “Ideology and State Apparatuses” (1970), a privileged scene and realm of subjection is staged as an encounter with a police officer and the Law: “There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there!’ One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e., recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by hailing.”<sup>9</sup> Puerto Rican spectators, even those oppositional and critical viewers, have not been able to resist the command to turn around and respond to the film’s shameful hailing. The film’s effectiveness in interpellating spectators as Puerto Ricans is due to several factors, including the specific ways that the Puerto Rican subject is constituted, the performance of Puerto Rican actors, the selection of

key issues in the life of Puerto Rican communities in the U.S. (racism, police brutality, violence), and the worldwide recognition of the film's "aesthetic" quality and high entertainment value.

Different from earlier films, *West Side Story* represented Puerto Ricans as part of a community and allowed them to be central in the narrative, although depending on the community of spectators, the Sharks are seen as antagonists, victims, or even heroes. Hence, it was not only a single Puerto Rican who was hailed as a criminal, it was a generalized "Puerto Rican youth." At the same time, and perhaps more important, the Puerto Rican community is not hailed only as criminal, but also as racialized and colonized. Thus, when Lieutenant Schrank addresses the Puerto Rican men, he subsumes their ethnic/national subjectivity to their inherently criminal one, conjuring shameful identifications. In doing so, *West Side Story* locates Puerto Rican identity at the crossroads of colonialism, racialization, and shame by addressing not just one Puerto Rican but a whole community as abject. Yet, in hailing Puerto Ricans and immediately constituting their subjectivity as criminal, this group acquires several previously denied possibilities, including social and visual representability. The recognition by the Law dramatically increases the stakes since, as Judith Butler suggests in *Bodies That Matter*, "in the reprimand the subject not only receives recognition, but attains as well a certain order of social existence, in being transferred from an outer region of indifferent, questionable, or impossible being to the discursive or social domain of the subject."<sup>10</sup> Hence, while it is true that *West Side Story* constructs the Puerto Rican male subject as criminal, it is also wrapping around that location a whole host of other identifications in a subtle chain of signification. This is why the critics of *West Side Story* have failed to contest the enduring effects of the film. The deployment of an equally conservative discourse of normalcy or the use of legal concepts such as justice and fairness ignores the degree to which Puerto Rican popular culture reveres outlaws as part of a several-centuries-old encounter with colonial rule and often embraces individual violence as a means of addressing unequal power relationships.

At the same time, the legalistic struggle over Puerto Rican subjectivity and representation is linked to the broader issue of colonial relations. As constituted by the legal apparatus, Puerto Ricans born in Puerto Rico are American citizens who cannot vote for president or have voting representatives in Congress. Puerto Rico itself belongs to, but is not a part of, the United States; it is bound by the law but has no rights under the law. Hence, the constitution of subjectivity within *West Side Story* and American legal discourse both displaces and reveals the "special" colonial relationship that binds and implicates Puerto Ricans and Americans: Puerto

Ricans are in point of fact outside—or besides—the law. It is *West Side Story*'s inadvertent play with the opacity of Puerto Rican subject formation discourses that allows many Puerto Rican spectators to “recognize” themselves in it.

In endlessly engaging with *West Side Story* instead of, for example, *Trash* (another paradigmatic film in the representation of Puerto Ricans on the screen and a relatively marginal film by Andy Warhol), intellectuals have constructed both their identity and agency in response to what they purposefully claim to reject: American mass culture definitions of legality, justice, and subjectivity. As Butler suggests, “The ‘I’ who would oppose its construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition; further, the ‘I’ drawn from what is called its ‘agency’ in part through being *implicated* in the relation of power, indeed, enabled by the relations of power that the ‘I’ opposes is not, as a consequence, to be reducible to their existing forms.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, although critics reject a racist subjection, they offer a subjection on the “good” side of the law—the representation of Puerto Ricans as ordinary, law-abiding citizens—and hence fail to explore the status of being simultaneously in and “outside” the law. Thus, contrary to what positive images critics suggest, an identification with the criminal may have more potentially unsettling consequences than identification with the so-called positive characters, just as a disidentification or partial identification with all characters point to a multiplicity of subject positions, not reduced to the law.

*West Side Story* is then not worth arguing about on the basis of truth, but rather on the layers of deception, displacement, and uncertainty that constitute identity formation processes and cultural production. The film also allows an inquiry into the ambiguous relationships between Puerto Ricans and the United States; the Latinization of New York culture and, through it, all American culture; and the queerness of spectatorship, those surprising moments where an appropriated move or gesture opens up unintended and nonnormative identifications. *West Side Story* has provided what no Puerto Rican-made film has been able to deliver to date: a deceptively simple, widely seen, and shared text dwelling on still critical issues like migration, class mobility, racism, and police brutality. In this sense, the film's reality effects are far from exhausted, although certain historical shifts are increasingly eroding its grip.

### **The Puerto Rican “Thing” and the Make-Up of Identity**

If *West Side Story* has constituted Puerto Rican subjectivity as deviant, and if critics have not been able to address that injury except by recurring to

equally problematic positive images and legal discourses, how can we reconfigure its meaning within a Puerto Rican–American cultural context? What are subversive readings of *West Side Story*, readings that reverse, decenter, challenge, and displace its centrality from Puerto Rican and American cultural discourses? From the many ways that spectators resist and complicate the subjection of cinema, I suggest several ways in each of the subsequent sections. In this section, I will concentrate on the “make-up” of *West Side Story* and comment on its self-acknowledged failure at representing “us” by “reading” its performances, in a similar way as do judges and onlookers when witnessing a drag ball. In subsequent sections, I will also examine the queer displacements in the film—the ways that *West Side Story* textualizes a complex web of relationships between race, gender, and sexuality.

In a general sense, *West Side Story* is the Puerto Rican *Birth of a Nation* (1915): a blatant, seminal (pun intended), racialized, aestheticized eruption into the national consciousness. The praising of *West Side Story* as a “technical” achievement is also consistent with the ways that race has been at the core of all fundamental innovations in American cinema, the most obvious being *The Birth of a Nation* (1915/narrative), *The Jazz Singer* (1927/sync sound), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939/color). In this sense, we can say that racial tropes not only fuel cinematic invention, but also synthesize national allegories of race relations. A superficial reading of *West Side Story* and *The Birth of a Nation* finds relevant commonalities in narrative strategies, such as the use of “blackface”/“brownface,” as well as an antimiscegenation motif. Different from *The Birth of a Nation*, however, *West Side Story* posits an extrafilmic utopia of integration in an undefined future. The analogy is most significant in its reception, allowing for divergent ways of constructing meaning.

Most mainstream (white) critics consider *The Birth of a Nation* the foundation on which narrative American cinema is built, ignoring or glossing over how racism informs representational technologies. The characterization of *West Side Story* as a contemporary version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (a “classic”), but also embodying technical mastery, has the same effect of overlooking the film’s use of racist discourse to construct its narrative. *Variety* offers a typical *West Side Story* review:

The Romeo and Juliet theme propounded against the seething background of rival and bitterly-hating youthful Puerto Rican and American gangs (reping the Montagues and the Capulets) on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, makes for both a savage and tender admixture of romance and war-to-death. Technically it is superb; use of color is dazzling, camera work often is

thrilling, editing fast with dramatic punch, production design catches mood as well as action itself.<sup>12</sup>

Or as Stanley Kauffmann insists in *The New Republic*: “*West Side Story* has been overburdened 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.”<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, the critics who dismiss the importance of race in the film are inadvertently pointing to an important set of displacements in the film’s construction, where issues of gender and sexuality play an equally important role, and where the most pivotal social issues are not located in the most obvious places. Although most spectators of *West Side Story* are unaware of the production’s history, it is crucial to recount the series of transformations that the play underwent before it became first a Broadway show and then a Hollywood film, in order to relocate oneself as a spectator.

*West Side Story* is based on a 1949 play called *East Side Story*, a love story between a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy frustrated by both families. “As early as January 1949 Robbins had come to Bernstein with a proposal that they make a modern-day version of *Romeo and Juliet*, using the conflict between Jews and Catholics during the Easter-Passover celebrations as a contemporary equivalent.”<sup>14</sup> However, after some thought, collaborators Jerome Robbins (choreographer), Leonard Bernstein (composer), and Arthur Laurents (writer) put the project on hold partly because the proposed project’s storyline was too similar to Anne Nichols’s *Abie’s Irish Rose*,<sup>15</sup> the longest-running show on Broadway during the 1920s. Recalling the meeting, Laurents claims that Robbins made the suggestion of creating “a contemporary version of *Romeo and Juliet*—one Jew and one Catholic” to which Laurents replied that “it was *Abie’s Irish Rose* to music and [he] wouldn’t have any part of it.”<sup>16</sup>

Different from *Romeo and Juliet*, *Abie’s Irish Rose* is a comedy, not a tragedy, and the final resolution is staged as an integration of Jews and Catholics through marriage, upper-class mobility, and the triumph of “whiteness” as a new identity for the children of European immigrants, regardless of their religion. Read as a national allegory, *Abie’s Irish Rose* is about how the melting pot successfully created American whites out of a broad spectrum of European ethnicities, immigration histories, and classes. Significantly, by the end of the play, Abie and Rose celebrate a hybrid Christmas with their children, who are fraternal twins. The twins, named Rebecca and Patrick in honor of Abie’s mother and Rose’s father respectively, will clearly grow up to be neither Jewish nor Catholic, Irish nor European, but “All American.”

The fact that the  
two principal  
“Puerto Rican”  
characters are  
“white” actors  
makes *West Side  
Story* a drag ball  
of sorts, where  
white (male)  
America can  
inhabit the dark  
and dangerous  
skins of Puerto  
Ricans, and desire  
Natalie Wood  
safely (protected  
by her whiteness)  
while indulging  
in Rita Moreno  
from Bernardo’s  
masquerade.

At the height of the late 1940s, Bernstein felt that Abie’s conflict was outdated. World War II had created a new context for Jews in America; anti-Semitism was at an all-time low, and many first-generation Jews and Irish were integrated as Americans, despite a lingering pain and discomfort. However, the basic premise of impossible love based on a socially imposed norm continued to be compelling to Robbins, Bernstein, and Laurents. “We’re fired again,” wrote Bernstein, “by the *Romeo* notion; only now we have abandoned the Jewish-Catholic premise as not very fresh, and have come up with what I think is going to be it: two teenage gangs, one the warring Puerto Ricans, the other ‘self-styled’ Americans.”<sup>17</sup> According to Bernstein, the new idea emerged spontaneously: “‘I was at a Beverly Hills pool with Arthur Laurents. I think I was in California scoring *On the Waterfront*. And we were talking ruefully about what a shame that the original *West Side Story* didn’t work out. Then, lying next to us on somebody’s abandoned chair was a newspaper headline, ‘GANG FIGHTS.’ We stared at it and then at each other and realized that *this*—in New York—was it. The Puerto Rican thing had just begun to explode, and we called Jerry, and that’s the way *West Side Story*—as opposed to *East Side Story*—was born.”<sup>18</sup> The Puerto Rican “thing” was nothing but the emerging of a public subjectivity for a community that had lived in New York for decades. *West Side Story*, however, visualizes this process through the historical experiences of other urban communities.

Maintaining Catholicism as a plot continuity—although the East Side’s Italian boy became Polish—the identity that disappeared from the original equation was Jewish, a critical displacement since the creators of the film were all Jews. However, the thematic disappearance of the Jews did not mean that the issues that have affected Jewish integration into the United States vanished. As Michael Rogin has commented, Jews in New York have been fundamental appropriators of subaltern culture—particularly African American—in diverse forms, including minstrelsy, as part of an effort to address the complex process of cultural assimilation.<sup>19</sup> While blackface was only partially used in the staging of *West Side Story*, the play’s music is heavily indebted to jazz and Latin American rhythms, and the casting in both the play and the film could be broadly understood as a minstrel act. Simultaneously, the hybridity of Jewish insertion into dominant culture is split along several axes, including the assimilated white/unassimilated immigrant, masculine/feminine, and insider/outsider.

The travesty of racial displacements in the staging of this musical often led to the ridiculous. Mason Wiley and Damien Bona write that the Mirisch Brothers, executive producers of *West Side Story*, had “toyed” with the idea of casting Elvis Presley as the leader of the American street gang, with his followers played by Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Paul

Anka.<sup>20</sup> Although Jerome Robbins had requested Rita Moreno to audition for the Maria character for the Broadway show, once the play was transformed into a Hollywood production, the likelihood that a Puerto Rican or Latina actress would be granted the lead role considerably diminished. Within these parameters, it is not surprising that Natalie Wood and George Chakiris were cast in the two lead Puerto Rican roles. At the same time, since Puerto Ricans are a multiracial people and some are indistinguishable from both whites and African Americans (as coded in the cinema), other visual and aural devices had to be mobilized to signify the specificity of the Puerto Ricans. Otherwise the visual economy of contrast between Jets and Sharks and Maria and Tony would be lost, and with it the allegedly objective nature of racial difference. The three most obvious signs of racialization efforts are the use of “brownface” for Bernardo, the always shifting, asinine accent deployed by most Puerto Rican characters, and the unnaturally blonde hair of the Jets. Without these three devices, most actors would simply look and sound like what they technically are: “Americans.”

George Chakiris, who played Bernardo, was the only actor who was “brownfaced.” Given the history of Hollywood representation of Latino working-class men and Chakiris’s own record in the production—he had played the leader of the Jets in the theater—brownface served the function of underscoring Bernardo’s ethnicity; it was a clamp used to avoid any ethnic misreading, and hence, his “realness” and potential reversibility. However, Bernardo’s brownface was widely commented on by many observers. Together with his flawed accent and eccentric Spanish pronunciation, the same devices designed to make him more authentically Puerto Rican are responsible for his unconvincing performance—which nevertheless landed him an Oscar. Simultaneously, although Natalie Wood’s brunette type was less criticized on the basis of appearance, her voice was a continuous source of authenticity problems, and even mockery. Not only was her singing voice dubbed, but her “speaking accent helped her earn the Hasty Pudding Club’s award for worst actress of the year.”<sup>21</sup> The fact that according to the narrative Maria had been in the United States for less than two months makes it even easier for the audience to “read” (diss and put down) the performance.

The casting of Natalie Wood to play the lead character responds to several distinct, but related, discourses and taboos. While Jerome Robbins cast many unknowns for the Broadway version, Hollywood rarely takes this risk, since it may hurt the box office. Despite the fact that Rita Moreno is light-skinned, given the narrative’s overt articulation of ethnicity as racial difference, the union of Tony and Maria could have created anxiety in 1961—although not in 1941—as any sexual contact between them could

have resulted in interracial love and offspring. One way to alleviate this anxiety and allow white audiences to enjoy the interracial seduction without its consequences was to cast an actress whom everyone knew to be white. The interracial exchange becomes a safe spectacle for white audiences. A dissimilar, yet complementary, logic applies to the casting of George Chakiris as Bernardo. As the leader of the Sharks, Bernardo is an alternatively attractive and menacing subjectivity. Due to his projected power, possible seduction, and capacity for violence, employing a white actor is consistent with Hollywood casting logic; only secondary, less powerful Shark roles went to Latino actors. At the same time, although Bernardo is played by a Euro-American actor, it is acceptable for leading white men in Hollywood to seduce a nonwhite woman, an option rarely offered to actresses of color in relationship to unhyphenated American men.

The fact that the two principal “Puerto Rican” characters are “white” actors makes *West Side Story* a drag ball of sorts, where white (male) America can inhabit the dark and dangerous skins of Puerto Ricans, and desire Natalie Wood safely (protected by her whiteness) while indulging in Rita Moreno from Bernardo’s masquerade. Furthermore, the conspicuous absence of blacks—even Puerto Rican blacks—makes the “epidermal” differences secondary, even an aesthetic affectation. Brownface in this case is a way to get outside of “white” skin—although not too far—and into the skin of another without risk. It is the analogy of tourism and ethnic dining, with the “Latino” style and music connoting everything opposed to rigidity and repression: a boundless energy and irrepressible sexuality. Minstrelsy also confirms what many whites suspect—that whiteness is emptiness. Hence, whiteness is not only constituted in opposition to people of color, it can also subsume and consume all cultures under its skin without either addressing the specific reasons for a group’s subaltern status or challenging the bearer’s whiteness.

Given the obviously “inauthentic” representations, what drags us Puerto Rican spectators back to the chair as Puerto Rican spectators? Although the leads are made up to look like “us” and fail, most of the identification work takes place with the secondary characters and the vaguely “Latino” music. Rita Moreno’s bodily poetics and dignity in playing Anita continuously threaten the narrative with a counternarrative of a female migrant experience, even if this is an inadvertent effect. The single most commented-on musical sequence by Puerto Rican critics, the rooftop “America” number, is one place to start.

Poet Alberto Sandoval reads the song as a “political campaign in favor of assimilation” and remarks that “such assimilation is pronounced by a Puerto Rican herself, Rita Moreno, whose acting was awarded the coveted Oscar Award.”<sup>22</sup> Media advocate Blanca Vázquez falls short of

blaming Rita Moreno for instilling negative images of herself as a Puerto Rican girl growing up in the United States during the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> In the estimation of these critics, Moreno was awarded an Oscar for singing the praises for cultural assimilation, understood as annihilation. The equation of assimilation as annihilation stems from the assumption that transforming the specific habitus of a certain representation of Island culture—Spanish language, Afro-Caribbean music, and peasant ethos—entails the end of the Puerto Rican nation. While Moreno may have received much less criticism had she played the least interesting, albeit “positive” role of Maria, what she achieves in this musical is nothing short of stunning. On the one hand, she rises above the limitations of the social script to show her incredible talent as an actress, singer, and dancer. At the same time, Moreno paves the way to consider Puerto Rican–American identity as a distinct social and cultural formation. Furthermore, the “America” sequence, while limited in discussing the specificity of Puerto Rican incorporation into the United States, is saturated with some “authentic” moments at the level of performance and in the representation of the pains and joys of many immigrant Americans.

In addition, one of the major criticisms of the “America” sequence is that “Puerto Ricans insult each other for being divided politically and ideologically between nationalists and assimilated.”<sup>24</sup> Yet this is precisely one of the reasons that the number hits a chord among Puerto Rican spectators, since this is the way that the question of Puerto Rico–U.S. relationships has been historically discussed among Islanders—acrimoniously. The number does not elude most of the immigrant issues like racism and economic marginality, at the same time that it highlights the rosy expectations and optimistic reasons that most migrants have for coming to the United States. If anything, “America” portrays an ambivalent picture of life in the United States, with all its oppression and promise. The level of irony, social critique, and protagonism of the women contrasts with most of *West Side Story* in its subtlety and insight. What is perhaps jarring for some spectators is the notion that it is the leading “authentic” Puerto Rican actress who is singing the praises to America, and the “brownface” Bernardo who critiques the United States. However, although some of us may not agree with what Anita sings, it is hard to deny that Anita is the most articulate and dynamic character in the film, and that undoubtedly most Puerto Rican immigrants have at one point or another agreed with both sides. The identification slippage comes in, however, on several other counts: the rigid gendering of the debate, the use of the term *America* to refer to the United States (Puerto Ricans use *United States*, *up there*, or *up north*, since *America* refers to the continent), and the use of a specifically American fusion of Latin American music.

In many ways, *West Side Story* suggests that cultural identity is, so to speak, a matter of make-up. Puerto Ricans are made of dark powder, bright-colored ruffled costumes (women), black and dark colors (men), accents, and unlimited movement. In opposition, white men are made up of yellows, browns, and light blue; the women, orange. However, the film never entirely succeeds in maintaining the illusion of difference. The dance scene in the gymnasium, for instance, succinctly taps into the tension between difference and sameness. The Puerto Ricans “look alike,” as do the Anglos; but at the same time, many are indistinguishable from each other. The details of dress, body movements, skin tone, and hair color are mobilized to define the boundaries of sociability, as these Puerto Rican bodies’ identities are not obvious and must be clearly—and repeatedly—labeled. The single exception is Maria, who is dressed in white. Maria’s name and white costume connotes her as a “virgin,” but also as untouched by American culture and uncontaminated by racism. That the film’s arguably “perfect” character is thoroughly incoherent and otherworldly suggests that the narrative cannot resolve its rips at the seams.

Akin to voguing, the dance at the gym is a ritual to deferring and postponing aggression; of giving attitude; and of symbolically crowding the public space. But while thematically the film insists that ethnic groups should stick to their own kind, the gym scene stages the swan song of antimiscegenation as white bodies cannot help but perform to Latin-inflected music and energy, even when bodily performances differ. The make-up of the parts suggests opposition; the choreography of the whole, hybridity. As Stuart Hall comments, despite the “inauthentic” way that blacks are incorporated into the culture industries, for example, their incorporation has effected certain shifts that may be lost on a purely thematic analysis of a cultural text. Style becomes the subject of discourse, the mastery of writing is displaced by music, and the body itself becomes the canvas for representation.<sup>25</sup> I would argue that these ethnic investments are even more pronounced in *West Side Story*, insofar as they are also akin to gay structures of feeling. Hence the relatively easy fit between jazz, Latin music, Jewish minstrelsy, and gay style in the film, all hybrid, migratory cultural practices.

Several critics have suggested—accurately—that the Jets stood in for Anglo-America’s fear of immigrants’ taking over “their” space, and that the name “Shark” implies savagery, cannibalism, and ferocity, and as such the gang constitutes a “negative” portrayal of Puerto Ricans. Richie Pérez, for example, quotes a 1948 book, *New York Confidential*—which summarizes the still dominant, yet profoundly inaccurate, notion that Puerto Ricans are unassimilable, that is, not part of American culture or body politic—to sustain his argument: “Puerto Ricans were not born to be New

Yorkers. They are mostly crude farmers, subject to congenital tropical diseases, physically unfitted for the northern climate, unskilled, uneducated, non-English speaking, and almost impossible to assimilate and condition for healthful and useful existence in an active city of stone and steel.”<sup>26</sup> However, contrary to both conservative and oppositional discourses, *West Side Story* has simultaneously become a Puerto Rican movie and foundation for a critical discourse of representation, and has bound Puerto Ricans to a “classic” American cultural product. In other words, regardless of whether as a spectator you are oblivious to *West Side Story*’s racism, queerness, or the genericness of “Latin” culture embedded in its music and choreography, Puerto Ricans (as a sign) are forever part of the history of Broadway and American motion pictures—the repositories of American national fantasies. Consequently, *West Side Story* does not divide “the Puerto Ricans from the Anglo-Americans, Puerto Rico from the U.S., 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.”<sup>27</sup> In a twisted way, the film fully incorporates the specter of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. national and sexual imaginary as a distinct group, albeit critically eluding specific cultural formations.

In sum, the “unreal” quality of Puerto Rican characters in *West Side Story* partially responds to a series of displacements shouldered by particular bodies through the narrativization of cultural desires. At the same time, the “realness” of the narrative is linked to its synchronicity with certain extrafilmic processes of subject formation and the selective appropriation of Latin music and talent to stage the musical. Hence, as *West Side Story* is staged and restaged it will become more and more Puerto Rican, black, and “Latino,” even when there are still problematic issues to contend with. In the 1980 Broadway revival of *West Side Story*, for instance, Anita was played by a black actress, Debbie Allen, and Maria by a Puerto Rican from the Island, Jossie de Guzmán. Not surprisingly, de Guzmán was “made up” to be a Puerto Rican: “When they darkened her long silken hair for the part of Maria she revolted at first. ‘Oh my God, I am Puerto Rican—why did they have to darken my hair?’ she thought. They darkened her pale skin too, and after a bit she liked that, wanting to get literally in the skin of Maria.”<sup>28</sup> I would argue, however, that the narrative’s racialization is not only located in the “America” number, or in the use of make-up, but in far more subtle sequences such as the “I Feel Pretty” number, where Maria only feels pretty when a white man, Tony, sees her. In other words, only the white man’s attention allows Maria to become a subject, to be visible. But in Maria’s struggle to be seen by only one man, other subjects watch, enjoy, and unsettle this single authority.

The race-centeredness of Puerto Rican cultural critique has, even when penned by some of its finest gay writers, failed to notice the uncanny queerness of *West Side Story*. Daniel Torres, for instance, refers to *West Side Story* in his novella *Morirás si da una primavera*, in the context of the Puerto Rican narrator's cruising of a "tomcat" in a New York bar:

Lo de siempre: una conversación sobre el tiempo o sobre lo que fuera hasta que llegaba la famosa preguntita que nunca falla: WHERE ARE YOU FROM? A lo que invariablemente contestabas: FROM PUERORICO, I AM PUERORICAN, para apresurarte añadir que sólo hacía un año y medio que estabas aquí, con lo que evitaba a toda costa, según tú, que te confundieran con uno de la claqué del WEST SIDE STORY y compañía con de I WANT TO LIVE IN AMERICA, I WANT TO LOVE IN AMERICA. Tú no, que va, tú eras oriundo de la isla del espanto.<sup>29</sup>

Within the text, the *West Side Story* reference surfaces at the possible moment when a "white" subject may "mistake" a middle-class Puerto Rican for a working-class, politically "unsophisticated" and assimilationist one. Simultaneously, the narrator recognizes his subaltern status in relationship to white subjects, the racialization he has immediately undergone as a Puerto Rican migrant, and his inability to control what *Puerto Rican* signifies in the colonial metropolis. This loss of control is transformed into a hysteric of identification, where the subject affirms himself as a Puerto Rican, yet distances himself from being identified as a New York Puerto Rican.

Commentators have suggested that *West Side Story* is a rigid text where dichotomies such as Sharks/Jets, animal/technology, east/west, and white/nonwhite constitute the text's armature. However, although the musical's book narrative requires these dichotomies to maintain the illusion of racial difference, the murkiness of race representation through brownface, the superficialities of the ethnic masquerade, and the gender and sexual tensions in the narrative make *West Side Story* a more complex—and seductive—text for addressing key issues of identification and subject formation. In considering *West Side Story's* minstrelsy, it is important to recall that as a popular practice, blackface "was an all-male entertainment form, combining racial and gender cross-dressing, male bonding and racial exclusion, misogyny and drag."<sup>30</sup> In this sense, *West Side Story's* relentless allure is produced not only by what it says about racialized representation, but by the extremeness of its artifice, the feminization of the Jets' performances, and its excessiveness.

Not only does the book's reference point in William Shakespeare's

*Romeo and Juliet* legitimize the high-brow aspirations of a low-brow genre—the musical—and justify the plagiarism of a few plot elements from the play in the musical, the tragic form also offers a space for pre-Stonewall gay structures of feeling. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it is Romeo’s self-perceived effeminacy that brings him to kill his best friend’s slayer and Juliet’s cousin, Tybalt: “O sweet Juliet / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate, / And in my temper soft’ned valor’s steel!”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Tony’s weakness for a socially unacceptable woman brings down the complex world of male play and solidarity and also brings about his own death. Furthermore, the thematics of “impossible love” is close to other ways of imagining—or failing to imagine—love between two men or “the love that dare not speak its name.”

In selecting and discarding plot elements from *Romeo and Juliet* for *West Side Story*, several queer decisions were made to construct an all-male universe. The feuding families of Capulets and Montagues, in which people of different ages and genders coexist, is transformed into two working-class, presumably heterosexual, groups. The few women in *West Side Story*, with the key exception of Anybodys, are mostly enclosed in homes and workspaces. In the few instances when they venture out without a male companion, as Anita does, hostility and violence threaten them, forcing the character to literally go back home. By displacing the nuclear family onto the gang, a “private” conflict (inscribed within the family) becomes public as homosocial, and hence it is easily staged as a spectacle and a struggle for social space.

In the battle for urban mobility (spatial and economic), however, the conflicts between Jets and Sharks are often superseded by the tension between the gangs and the police. Although we could argue that the insidious presence of the police may be also related to the fact that the force was a constant enemy of the gay community of New York during the 1950s, the police, as an institutional body, is akin to the gang, since both are homosocial, hypermasculine, and “rough” worlds. Hence, the interplay of the gang and police engender public space as a masculine territory, even when they are at odds along generational and class lines. The hostility between young and older men is also saturated with immigrant insecurities and resentments concerning the “fatherland(s)” (old and new). Following this, it is important to note that the Jets and the Sharks always band together when in the presence of the police: the cops are the common enemy.

There is, however, a second performative reason why the Jets and the Sharks ultimately protect themselves from the police: the possibility of encountering each other. Hence, one of the queer effects of the film for gay spectators is the possibility to live dangerously, to enjoy the surfaces

in *West Side Story*  
both Maria and  
Anita are left with-  
out men. But the  
fact that both  
women lose their  
partners is part of  
why a more racially  
harmonious  
environment is  
possible. While the  
prevention of the  
foundational  
romance between  
Puerto Ricans and  
Americans is  
certainly a power-  
ful reading, it does  
not exhaust the  
impossibility of  
heterosexual  
coupling.

of rough trade without any of the risks. While a subaltern desire, this investment is similar to that of white spectators in relation to racialized bodies. The effeminacy of many dance sequences with its several numbers where Jets and Sharks pretend to fight, one on top of the other, makes spaces for ritualized same-sex physical contact, which would be otherwise impossible in a Hollywood film in 1961. Thus, in turning down the Jets' invitation to go to the dance, Tony tells Riff: "Go play games with the Jets." Following this, to snapping fingers and boys running out doing pranks, "race" offers a tension to the same-sex contact while displacing the possible homosexual connotations of body movements. *West Side Story* is a racialized tale visualized as a musical feast of gay style, desire for working-class, genteel, "rough" ethnic men, as well as a tribute to performative femininity (the "innocent" white star and the spitfire). Ultimately, what is at stake in the confrontation between Jets and Sharks is the former's masculinity. Race is the epidermis of sexual/gender tensions. It is not surprising, then, that the most "negative" portrayals in *West Side Story* do not correspond to the Puerto Ricans but to the police officers and a butch white woman, Anybodys.

The gangs, homoeroticized by early independent work by such filmmakers as Kenneth Anger, constitute an ambivalent site of identification. On the one hand, it is a community of men, with their own codes and institutions, defying the law. Gangs are also alternative families, significantly without women and fathers who may remind members, particularly those who are white, of their foreign past. On the other hand, the emphasis on masculinity and violence can culminate in brutality against those who cannot become subject to this ethic and aesthetic. In *West Side Story*, the gangs are also themselves differently gendered and sexualized. While the Sharks are solidly heterosexual and self-contained as a single ethnic group, the Jets are constantly menaced by the specter of homosexuality and gender splits. In this sense, the narrative offers spaces of identification with the Jets not only because they are "white," but because they are the site of negotiation concerning gender and sexual identity, a possibility not available to the Sharks. This gender/sex negotiation is easily glossed over in race-centered discussions of the film, in part because it takes place on the narrative's margins through the characters of Baby John and Anybodys.

Anybodys is a "tomboy" white girl who seeks acceptance and integration into the Jets through her affirmation of whiteness. Similar to Maria, Anybodys can only conceive of subjectivity in relation to white men. The Jets, however, are a constant reminder of her abject femininity: "I want to fight," announces Anybodys to the gang, only to have a Jet sarcastically respond: "How else is she going to get a guy to touch her?" (Importantly,

this is the same answer to the question of same-sex contact in the film). Although the Puerto Rican women are barred from the street, and Anita is almost raped when she transgresses white male territory, the hostility that Anybodys embodies and projects is unparalleled in the film, with the exception of Lieutenant Schrank. While the Puerto Ricans suffer racism, they constitute a community composed of a specific socially recognized subjectivity. All white women, however, are accessories. Anybodys, a woman without a proper name, has no community, and she suffers from a lack of recognition as a subject. She is an open subject—"anybody"—sitting on the sexual/gender fence. This nonrecognition of Anybodys makes her the object not of violence, but of laughter: she is the play's fool. At the same time, the scorn for the potential lesbian who struggles for a place among men is not afforded to a second liminal figure, Baby John. Although the Jets sometimes joke about his lack of enthusiasm for fighting, his name evokes sweetness and innocence, not vacated subjectivity. Anybodys and Baby John are the split subjectivities of the pre-Stonewall homosexual figure; bitchy and sweet, hostile and reassuring. While Baby John aims to seduce through "art"—tight pants, soft voice, books—Anybodys seeks power by distancing herself from other subaltern (racialized) people and tries to displace her gender oppression onto her racial privilege. To some extent, she is trying to pass for success and is clearly failing; the misogyny of her representation is not far from the surface.

Baby John, a blonde, shy, and peaceful member of the Jets, is perhaps the most important site of a white Jewish gay subjectivity. Baby John is an avid reader of comic books featuring superheroes. The superhero identification can be understood as a distinctly Jewish identification to the extent that the most well-known of all superheroes, Superman, was created by Jewish artists. At the same time, Superman is what Baby John is definitely not. In contrast to Anybodys, against whom Baby John constitutes the reverse subject position—a man who wishes to escape male subjectivity—Baby John desires, rather than identifies with, Superman. His deep admiration for the superheroes sets the stage for a key scene:

Baby John: Captain Marvel. Gee, I love him.

Jets: So, marry him!

Anybodys: I'm never going to get married—too noisy.

Jets: You're never going to get married—too ugly.

Anybodys, however, is eventually allowed into the all white-male club, at the precise time that racial confrontation is imminent, and death critically undoes the gendered and racially segregated world that gave life to the narrative. Baby John, always singled out by Lieutenant Schrank as the weakest and possibly most law-abiding Jet, is also the first to make a ges-

ture toward the Puerto Ricans. After Tony is killed by Chino, Baby John picks up Maria's mantle from the floor and gently places it on her head. At the film's conclusion, the two bridge subjectivities are the gay man and the virginal ethnic, although neither is what they seem to be.

Different from *Romeo and Juliet*, where both lovers are sacrificed, but peace between the warring families is restored, and from *Abie's Irish Rose*, where marriage can be read as a national reconciliation, in *West Side Story* both Maria and Anita are left without men. But the fact that both women lose their partners is part of why a more racially harmonious environment is possible. While the prevention of the foundational romance between Puerto Ricans and Americans is certainly a powerful reading, it does not exhaust the impossibility of heterosexual coupling. In *West Side Story*, the ethnic community—be it in the form of all-male gangs (whites) or siblings (Puerto Ricans)—is more desirable than heterosexual marriage. In fact, heterosexual love is death: Bernardo dies defending Maria's honor, Riff dies defending Tony (who is sent by Maria to detain the rumble), and Chino will surely rot in jail to both avenge Bernardo and make sure Tony does not marry Maria. However, although it is the "Puerto Rican" women who suffer and are humiliated the most, white women are either irrelevant or undesirable partners, and only men die. Hence, all heterosexuality is lethal, but only for men.

The film's sexual sorting is an important departure from traditional Hollywood narratives involving love triangles between women of color and whites. In the conventional narrative, the white man conquers over the Latino man to obtain the Latina. If a white woman is involved, she will triumph over the Latina and the former character may end up suicidal. In *West Side Story*, the white man does not triumph, and the woman of color does not take her life. In fact, Maria gains agency as a result of losing both her lover and brother, the two men who controlled her life and movements.

The above discussion has centered on the overt, thematic ways that the specter of homosexuality is textualized in the film. However, this is not the only important site within which to discuss *West Side Story's* queerness. As David Van Leer has written, it is crucial to focus on "the language itself, turning from the visible to the verbal, from homosexual narratives to homosexual dictions, rhythms, rhetorics."<sup>32</sup> The first queer decision is, of course, the text's genre. Musicals have historically been created by gay talent and have been the repository of a broad spectrum of gay cultural strategies, including camp, hyperbole, overstated decor and fashion, cross-dressing, quotation, mimicry, gender inversions, put-downs, and bad puns. While *West Side Story's* "poor" setting conspires against certain kinds of campiness, the stylized violence, constant put-downs, puns, and other strategies suggest a gay structure of feeling.

Regarding the book's author, Van Leer comments:

The problem of sexual substitution informs much of Laurents' work. In his play *The Time of the Cuckoo* (filmed as *Summertime*) a female spinster on vacation stands in for the gay man cruising Venice. Such conglomerate identities come to a head (comically) in Laurents' script for *West Side Story*, in which homoeroticized chorus boys, arbitrarily divided into Polish and Puerto Rican, sing a mix of ballet and Broadway, all under the sign of updated Shakespeare.<sup>33</sup>

However, in an attempt to perhaps erase overt Jewish structures of feeling, the play alludes to, but does not fully articulate, the affinity between ethnicity and gayness as a theatrical performance of complicity. This last reading is available, but only from a spectator who sees the "make-up" of identity and recognizes its artificiality.

All the four key figures in the making of *West Side Story* had conflicted feelings about their homosexuality. During the 1950s the best known of the collaborators, Leonard Bernstein, struggled with his ambivalent sexuality and according to his biographer considered his homosexuality "a curse."<sup>34</sup> Bernstein attempted to reconcile to his sexuality—he allegedly thought of himself as "half man, half woman"<sup>35</sup>—through psychoanalysis and was treated by Dr. Sandor Raod, a Hungarian-born psychiatrist, who thought of "homosexuality as a perversion."<sup>36</sup> In Bernstein's case, his homosexuality, his love for the musical theater instead of the "high" art of classical music, and his Jewishness threatened to become major obstacles in developing a successful career, as each of these identity markers and desires were considered "low." Bernstein eventually married a Catholic Chilean woman, Felice Montealegre, but continued to enjoy "slumming with the low life" and indulging in "tall dark, slender, beautiful" men.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, in *West Side Story*, the song with which heterosexuality seems safest is also the queerest, a homoerotic utopia:

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

There is yet a third way that *West Side Story* is queer—even as a musical. According to Dyer, "The musical serves up an utopian world of

abundance, energy, intensity, transparency, and community, in the everyday social inadequacies of scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation, and solitude.”<sup>38</sup> Although hailed as one the stage’s most sophisticated musicals, *West Side Story* is a liminal case of both entertainment and utopia. “I say that entertainment is a kind of performance produced for profit, performed before a generalized audience (the ‘public’) by a trained, paid group who do nothing else but produce performances which have the sole (conscious) aim of providing pleasure.”<sup>39</sup> At the same time, entertainment represents a space for wish fulfillment: “what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized.”<sup>40</sup>

In *West Side Story*, the entertainment value and utopic feel are a coitus interruptus. While it is true that “lower class” (scarcity, unemployment) is provided with the utopian solution of abundance and energy, the excess of dynamism and intensity leads not to a utopian community, but to death. All attempts at open communication are mediated by racism, and the sole moment when the whole community gathers together is to help carry Tony’s dead body. Although the count is even—two white men dead, one Puerto Rican dead, one on his way to the electric chair—utopia is beyond the narrative: placed in an undefined time and space, someday, somewhere. While racism against Puerto Ricans in New York was stiff during the 1950s and 1960s, the notion of Anglo-Latino intermarriage was not an unrepresented reality. Interethnic—although not interracial—romance had flourished in Hollywood during the Good Neighbor Policy of the 1940s. America’s favorite sitcom of the 1950s, *I Love Lucy*, featuring Cuban musician Desi Arnaz and redhead Lucille Ball, beamed from television sets all across the country. The atypicalness of the plot’s twists in relation to the musical genre refers to the narrative’s insistence of preserving the community of men, without women interfering in its play.

Skeptics may say that a Puerto Rican queer reading is only possible now, thirty-five years after the play and film, when so much—and so little—has changed for Puerto Ricans in the United States. However, partially identificatory readings—different to the oppositional ones—always coexist with dominant ones. On a currently inaccessible Warhol film, Mario Montez, a full-time postal worker and part-time Andy Warhol superstar, plays a woman who undergoes plastic surgery. Once she wakes from anesthesia, she looks at herself in the mirror and breaks out into the most appropriate song: “I Feel Pretty.” In a recent re-recording of *West Side Story*’s music, mostly black and Latino vocalists sing the score. To listen to Selena sing “A Boy Like That” with its refrain of “stick to your own kind” is nothing but chilling. But the black/brown/straight face finally comes down when Little Richard sings “I Feel Pretty,” and it is clear no other performer was meant to sing this song.

## Postscript: Requiem for *The Capeman*

Forty-one years after *West Side Story* premiered on Broadway, another Jewish songwriter, Paul Simon, attempted to bring the story of Salvador Agrón, a former Puerto Rican youth gang member who killed two white young men in 1959 and spent twenty years in prison, to Broadway. The timing was right, since according to recent demographic statistics, if Broadway theater resists Latinization, it will be unable to survive as a lucrative enterprise. New York City's largest minority is Latino, and at the current rate of white flight, Latinos will become its absolute majority in less than twenty-five years. Yet, the initial response from many was a big yawn: "That's two generations trapped in a time machine, as far as Broadway is concerned. At this rate, what do we foresee from the bridge-over-troubled-water to the twenty-first century? Opening in the fall of 2037: a merengue doo-wopera, set in 1997, about the Latin Kings?"<sup>41</sup>

Despite hopes that *The Capeman* would be at least a good musical, the show proved to be financially and artistically disastrous, and for some, possibly delayed the moment when a high-quality, complex Puerto Rican-themed musical could be staged again. On this occasion, Simon's crossover dreams ended in a subtle nightmare. The only substantial contribution of *The Capeman* is that it gave several Latino actors major exposure to a mainstream audience—and that's exactly how much of the Puerto Rican and Spanish-language press perceived it. Ultimately, though, the solid performances of Marc Anthony and Ednita Nazario were caught in someone else's cultural web. While *The Capeman* was a zoom-in to *West Side Story*'s Chino, escorted out of the playground by cops, it lacked good choreography, inspired lyrics, and tight dramatic structure. The failure of *The Capeman* as a show, however, combined with the significant exposure of its talent, had a critical, if unintended effect: it gave life to Latino musical careers, while killing the assumption that only Puerto Rican gang members make it on Broadway.

Simultaneously, *The Capeman* underscores to what extent "authenticity" cannot be equated with reality effects. In telling a story based on "real life," Simon took major risks: he raised \$11 million, composed recognizable Latin music, cast mostly Puerto Rican unknowns (for American audiences), and rejected experienced counsel concerning plot lines. The book's writer was Nobel Prize-winner Derek Walcott, a brilliant poet, essayist, and playwright from the British Caribbean. Assuming that Walcott's Caribbean roots qualified him to write a Puerto Rican story—a problematic essentialist premise—Simon believed he had addressed all of *West Side Story*'s racist elements. Simon's authenticity strategies, however, were intended to universalize the story, beyond its Puerto Rican setting: "I

set out to tell a story from everyone's point of view, not just Salvador Agrón. . . . This is no *West Side Story*. I'm trying to tell a story as accurately and fairly as I can. It doesn't really matter whether the protagonist is Puerto Rican. . . . it's not essential to the central issue of redemption."<sup>42</sup> Ironically, while *West Side Story* is unambiguously not about Puerto Ricans, it achieves a broad-based appeal by eluding authenticity, and instead making use of fantasy, make-up, and dance against the enduring conflictive sites of American identity formation: race, ethnicity, immigration, miscegenation, and desire.

While the richness of *West Side Story* lies on its many ambiguities, *The Capeman's* book suggests that all would have turned out better if little Salvador Agrón had not left the "paradise" of Mayagüez during the 1950s, that ultimately it was migration that made Agrón a criminal. Yet the book does not explore Agrón's complex cultural identifications nor why he sported a black and red cape that, according to Simon, "made Agrón feel like the king of the Vampires, Dracula."<sup>43</sup> In this sense, Simon is right to say that "what is shocking to some people is that Puerto Rican culture is part of America."<sup>44</sup> *The Capeman*, however, failed precisely because it was unable to represent Puerto Ricans as part of the United States, American culture as indebted to Puerto Rican immigrant culture, and how both processes address core issues of twentieth-century American and Caribbean history. At best, the play confirmed that Puerto Ricans are criminals, liberals are inept, and Latinos can very well play their own stereotypes in other people's childhood recollections. Which brings us back to the start.

In her 1997 visit to Puerto Rico, actress Jennifer López announced that one of her dreams is to star as Maria in a remake of *West Side Story*. López restated a similar desire in 1999, shortly after releasing her debut album, *On the 6*. According to the *Miami Herald*, López "has high hopes for a stint in a Broadway musical—Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* would be her top choice."<sup>45</sup> Not surprisingly, the album's title refers to her crossover subway rides from the Bronx to Manhattan while she was growing up and taking singing lessons to become a star. Although Ricky Martin apparently turned down a lead role in the hypothetical production, claiming that the film denigrated "his people," López's performance as Maria can only further complicate *West Side Story's* place in Puerto Rican–American culture. While *The Capeman* died a quick physical and cultural death, *West Side Story*, a story not sung in Puerto Rican music, as well as loathed and cherished by generations of Islanders and U.S.-born *boricuas* alike, remains elusively real and alive.

## Notes

A longer version of this essay will appear in “Passing Memories: Puerto Rican Culture/American Entertainment,” a book-length work-in-progress on Puerto Rican–American cultural practices.

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