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“COULD WE NOT DYE IT RED AT LEAST?”:

## Color and Race in *West Side Story*

*West Side Story*  
(1961). Directed  
by Jerome Robbins,  
Robert Wise.  
Shown: preview  
program cover.  
Photo courtesy  
of United Artists/  
Photofest.

By  
**LAUREN  
DAVINE**



**B**efore embarking on his work as choreographer and co-director of *West Side Story* (1961), Jerome Robbins wrote a letter to Saul Chaplin, Walter Mirisch, and Robert Wise, the producers of the film, expressing his anxiety surrounding the adaptation of the Broadway musical to the screen:

*West Side Story* was a believable and touching work because of the special poetic conventions we evolved, conventions which were inherently theatrical. The problem is now to find a new set of conventions, inherently cinematic, which will also convey the essence of a show whose essence is not in any of its separate elements . . . but in their organic unity. (qtd. in Vaill 322).

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article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/vjpf](http://www.tandfonline.com/vjpf).

*Abstract:* *West Side Story's* (1961) harmonious integration of music, dance, and cinematography is evidence of its effective transposition from stage to screen. However, despite the film's ostensible unity on the level of structure and style, one cannot ignore the strong sense of dissension present in terms of racial conflict in the film, which is played out through the film's color. This article argues that this disunity expressed through the film's color, as well as the "chromophobia" that runs throughout the film, are indicative of a deeper fear of miscegenation which lies at its core.

*Keywords:* color, Hollywood cinema, musical, race, *West Side Story*

Robbins realized his artistic vision and retained the rigorous coherence of his original production. Amanda Vaill, a biographer of Robbins, argues that the strongest segments of the film adaptation were characterized by a novel "synthesis of music, shot, and action" (322). Wise's "imaginative but controlled color concept" (Wise, qtd. in Acevedo-Muñoz 18) is reflected in the film's meticulous design, which foregrounds, above all else, the expressive potential of the film's color cinematography (Acevedo-Muñoz 18).

The film's intricate color scheme is introduced in the overture, where the only movement over an abstract Manhattan skyline is the changing background colors: from citrine yellow, to poppy red, to persimmon, to magenta,

to violet, to iris blue, etc. The array of colors onscreen each correspond to a song in the overture, and reemerge later on when the song is featured in a musical number (Acevedo-Muñoz 125). For example, the poppy red backdrop in the overture is accompanied by the instrumentals of the song, "Tonight." Correspondingly, the "Tonight" musical number/montage opens with an ominous sky at sunset in this same shade of red. The overture sequence is the first indication that the use of color in the film is carefully and thoughtfully orchestrated. The function of color is further reinforced by the "color-coordinated costumes" (Acevedo-Muñoz 18) and set design. Ostensibly, color plays a central role in sustaining the "organic unity" of the musical that Robbins describes. Despite

*West Side Story* (1961). Directed by Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise. Shown: Jet Song. *Photo courtesy of United Artists/Photofest.*





*West Side Story* (1961). Directed by Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise. Shown far left: George Chakiris; right foreground: Russ Tamblyn. Photo courtesy of United Artists/Photofest.

the film's unified structure and style, however, the strong sense of dissension in terms of racial conflict cannot be ignored. The conflict between the two rival gangs is played out through the film's color, which disrupts its organic unity. This disunity expresses a fear of miscegenation, an anxiety that insidiously permeates the entire film.

The film's preoccupation with miscegenation is pointed out by Frances Negrón-Muntaner, who argues that the film's "antimiscegenation motif" places it alongside D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) (88). Through an analy-

sis of the film's reception in various contexts, Negrón-Muntaner challenges dominant interpretations of the film by uncovering "subversive readings" which work to effectively address the ways in which the film has constructed "Puerto Rican subjectivity as deviant" (87). This contention also follows Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's reading of the musical as framing "ethnic difference as a threat to the territorial, racial, and linguistic identity, as well as to the national and imperial subjectivity, of Anglo-Americans" (63). In his deconstructive analysis of the film, Sandoval-Sánchez argues that

the film reproduces racist discourses of white American ideology by constructing a series of "binary oppositions" which reinforce a mythology of Puerto Ricans "as invaders and intruders of the U.S. mainland" (Sandoval-Sánchez 64). This sense of fear and anxiety surrounding the racial other in the film is displaced onto another discourse emphasizing the fear of color itself.

The fear and loathing of color in Western culture is what David Batchelor terms "chromophobia" (22). For Batchelor, chromophobia's modus operandi is "to purge color from culture" and to un-

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dermine its value and importance (22). Batchelor argues that there are two rationales used for this expulsion of color (22). The first understands color to be characteristic of “some ‘foreign’ body—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological” (Batchelor 22–23). The second frames color as “superficial” and “supplementary,” as something that is “inessential” (Batchelor 23). In summary, color is marked as both “dangerous” and “trivial” (Batchelor 23). Moreover, the fear and denouncement of color in Western culture is symptomatic of broader anxieties surrounding “race, gender, [and] sexuality” (Dalle Vacche and Price 52). “Color is routinely excluded from the higher concerns of the mind,” argues Batchelor (23). “It is other to the higher values of Western culture” (Batchelor 23). As a case in point, Robbins expressed his dislike for *West Side Story*’s ostentatious use of color in a letter to friend and dance critic, Richard Buckle:

Some of it’s wonderful and exciting ... but some of it gets bogged down in the lack of understanding of what the scenes or the musical numbers were about. And occasionally Hollywood rears its ugly head and splatters the screen with the soft lights streaming from Heaven or garish Technicolor or STEREOPHONIC SOUND. (qtd. in Berson 157)

As his letter suggests, Robbins sees color as well as other cinematic elements (lighting, stereophonic sound) as secondary to the theatrically derived (and higher art) elements of music and dance.

If in Western culture color is associated with a foreign, exotic “other” (Batchelor 22–23), then it is no coincidence that the most colorful sequences in the film<sup>1</sup> are ones that showcase Puerto Rican subjects. “America” is one of such musical numbers, which accentuates the Puerto Ricans as objects of spectacle. Sandoval-Sánchez argues

that the spectacle of ethnic otherness in the film is used to divert attention away from the racism at its core (64). This strategy is employed in the “America” sequence. The song is set up as a “male-female” (Acevedo-Muñoz 160) political argument between Anita (Rita Moreno) and Bernardo (George Chakiris). Anita takes an assimilationist stance, rejecting her country of origin and praising life in America, while Bernardo takes an anti-assimilationist one (Sandoval-Sánchez 72). Bernardo’s lyrics effectively express the racism and prejudice that the Puerto Rican immigrants have to endure (“Life is all-right in America/If you’re all-white in America”). Despite Bernardo’s demystification of Anita’s assimilationist argument (Sandoval-Sánchez 73), Sandoval-Sánchez asserts that these dissenting statements are ultimately overshadowed by the song’s “patriotic pro-U.S. propaganda” (73). Moreover, the incredible dancing and syncopating Latin rhythm further undercut the song’s social commentary, inviting the audience to become mesmerized by the spectacle that is accentuated by the vivid shades of purple and red that the Sharks wear.

“In many ways,” argues Negrón-Muntaner, “*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” (94). Raymond Knapp echoes this essentialist understanding of Puerto Rican culture, arguing that the “vigorous and exaggerated hand and body gestures” of the Puerto Ricans in the film “deriv[e] from a general tendency in America to perceive many immigrant populations as generally more exuberant and colorful” (206). Knapp argues that this racial stereotype “might be explained in terms of a need to compensate for inadequate English, but... also reflects the contrast

this presents against the more restrained gestural vocabulary of a predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture” (206). This sense of restraint that Knapp identifies is associated with the Jets, whose whiteness marks them as American and the “norm.” It is also expressed in the light, muted, and washed-out colors worn by the Jets. Almost all of the Jets wear variations and gradations of muted browns, mauves, yellows, beiges, blues, and grays. The cool tones that the Jets wear are in keeping with the “cool, angular” and “modern strands of jazz” that are associated with them, most pointedly in the cool jazz musical number, “Cool” (Wells 147). Moreover, aside from some of the Jets being aptly named “Ice” and “Snowboy,”<sup>2</sup> their choreography is also consistent with their cool demeanor, especially in the “Prologue,” with their detached finger snaps, cool strides, and chassés. Thus, one could argue that the restrained movements and, by extension, colors, worn by the Jets are representative of the “chromophobic impulse” (Price 80) that Batchelor writes about. As Batchelor explains, behind the degradation of color in Western culture is a fear of color—“a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable” (Batchelor 22).

In the “Prologue,” the muted colors that the Jets wear are interrupted by the burst of reds and deeper purples that characterize the Sharks. After Bernardo, wearing a poppy red shirt, is confronted by a pair of Jets, he falls back onto a crimson red wall, and punches it in anger. The red in this sequence stimulates action (Benson), and contributes to the rising tension between the two gangs which climaxes in a chaotic, “brassy brawl” (Berson 89).<sup>3</sup> Moving beyond this surface characterization of the color red, it is important to draw out its deeper, cultural significance within the film. That red is also the color of blood is especially meaningful within *West*

*Side Story*, not simply because blood is shed, but that blood is shed in the “protection of pure blood” (Case 71). In Arthur Laurents’s book of the musical, he describes the Jets as “an anthology of what is called ‘American’” (Laurents 137). Laurents’s use of the term “anthology” refers to the idea that the Jets are a “hodgepodge” of young men “coming from various [ethnic] backgrounds” (Hoffman 98–99). Sandoval-Sánchez argues that this characterization is rendered ironic in light of the fact that the Jets are “children of white European immigrants,” and thus conform to a white, “all-American” national identity (64).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Jets want to protect their turf not only because it is their territory, but also because they want to keep its whiteness intact (Sandoval-Sánchez 64). The impulse to maintain whiteness is especially evident when the hypocritical Lieutenant Schrank (Simon Oakland) warns the two gangs that the brawling must stop, but then supports the idea of the Jets “cleaning up” (*West Side Story*) the neighborhood and ridding it of its Puerto Rican immigrants. The gang and police are not only protecting their turf, however. They are also striving to protect its cleanliness, and maintain a territory of pure (white) bloodlines. The fear of miscegenation, and the adulterating of white blood, is rampant throughout the film. This idea of “white blood” points to a crucial irony in the film: the color of blood is red, but those who are principally connected to the color (the Puerto Ricans) are discriminated against on the basis of not possessing said “white blood.”<sup>5</sup> The irony is further perpetuated when we notice that one of the Jets actually wears a red shirt in the “Prologue” sequence. In this way, the color red in the film performs a dualistic and contradictory function. On the one hand, red is associated with the Puerto Rican immigrants; on the other hand, the logic of the film portends that “true” blood is ultimately white blood. Therefore, red

is also expressive of white blood lines. The meaning of red is muddled by the film’s logic.

Red as a color that taints and corrupts is rooted in the Christian belief that regards red as the color of the devil and represents an “ancient and heathen bloodthirstiness” (Pleij 83). Moreover, if color in general is understood to be a characteristic of a baser, “alien” body (Batchelor 22), then the color red seems to be the quintessence of chromophobia, because of its strong associations with the vulgar and the erotic. The anxiety surrounding the contamination of white blood is coded in the film as anxiety about protecting one’s turf, but the language that the Jets use in describing the Sharks is rife with xenophobic undertones. For example, the Jets further demean the Sharks, in contrast to the other gangs that they have defeated in the past, because “they multiply, like cockroaches,” and are “eating all of the food” and “breathing all the air” (*West Side Story*). The Jets’ values are articulated in “Jet Song,” which appears to be a harmlessly entertaining musical number. Its lyrics, however, strongly emphasize the familial and the fraternal, and thus the importance of loyalty to one’s own kind for life: “When you’re a Jet/You’re a Jet all the way/From your first cigarette/To your last dying day/When you’re a Jet/If the spit hits the fan/You got brothers around/You’re a family man!” Thus, in the context of this reading of the film as expressing an anxiety surrounding miscegenation, it appears that red in the film is an expression of this fear. Like the presence of the other, red is a bold color that literally disrupts the muted and whitewashed tones that color the world of the Jets and, by extension, the Western world.

Returning to the idea of red as expressive of shedding blood in the protection of white blood, the scene immediately following the chauvinistic “Jet Song” is one that is pervaded in red. Riff (Russ

Tamblyn) goes to see Tony (Richard Beymer) who is stocking soda at the rear entrance of Doc’s (Ned Glass) store, and the entire set is covered in red: the red brick apartment buildings, the railings that are painted a fire-engine red bordering the staircase to the back door of Doc’s store, as well as the wrought iron balconies which are also painted in this same shade of red.<sup>6</sup> Red is being used here expressionistically, especially in the context of the previous “Jet Song” sequence. Consistent with the themes of kinship and fraternity that were established previously, Tony and Riff exchange a rhyming motto: “Womb to tomb,” Riff says to Tony. “Birth to earth,” Tony replies. It remains ambiguous whether this motto is something that they share between just the two of them, or if it is shared by the Jets as a whole. The language of the motto is steeped in familial discourse, emphasizing the notion that one must be loyal to his fraternal “blood” until the end. The color red here is a reminder of these pseudo-blood ties, but it is also suggestive of the violence that will be engendered as a result of protecting those ties.

Moreover, the red setting that surrounds the boys sharply contrasts with the muted colors of their clothing (yellow-beige and light blue), creating a sense of disruption and unrest. If in the “Prologue” red connotes action, here it is expressive of impending action, of something that is going to happen. This is consistent with the theme of “Something’s Coming,” the song that Tony sings. Like the words that Tony sings, “The air is hummin’/and something great is comin’,” red creates an anticipatory energy. In a clever use of art direction, feminine garments hang on a clothing line above Tony’s head, as if giving him a sign that the “something” that he is waiting for is actually someone: a girl. As Tony raises his hand to the sky, signaling his acquiescence to the powers of fate, the camera tracks

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*West Side Story* (1961). Directed by Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise. Shown: Rita Moreno, Natalie Wood. Photo courtesy of United Artists/Photofest.

upward to the hanging clothes, and then dissolves to a close-up of gowns hanging in the bridal shop where Maria (Natalie Wood) and Anita work. The graphic match that is created through the dissolve is accomplished primarily through color: the chiffon and raspberry pinks and robin's egg blue that hang on the clothing line meld with the pastel colored dresses in the bridal shop. Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz argues that this editing technique, and the "feminine" setting of

the sequence, not only connects Tony to Maria, but it also marks the beginning of his "personality dissolve" with her, a generic convention of the musical whereby "each member of the principle couple acquires the characteristics of the other" (87). What is most significant about this sequence is that the juxtaposition of the red set with the softer pastel colors creates a discourse in which the loudness of the color red is placated by these mild and understated pastels. The

pastel colors of the dresses that hang in the bridal shop reinforce the film's project of assuaging bourgeois anxieties surrounding the threat of the ethnic other, and by extension, miscegenation. Thus, the film accomplishes this task of assuaging anxiety by dampening the bright, saturated colors that are associated with the Puerto Ricans.

Toward the end of the bridal shop sequence, Maria tells her brother, Bernardo, that "tonight is the real beginning of my life, as a young lady of America." As she begins to twirl gracefully in her dress, there are multiple multicolor after-images of her movement. Her dizzying twirls are accompanied by frenetic music that gets louder and higher-pitched the faster she twirls.<sup>7</sup> With the use of colored filters, Maria's figure soon blurs into a bright red silhouette, until the camera tracks back slightly to reveal other hazy, bright red figures dancing in unison in the "Dance at the Gym" sequence. The creative editing technique used to transition to the "Dance at the Gym" sequence effectively expresses Maria's entrance into the social milieu of American youth and thus the beginning of her life "as a young lady of America." Acevedo-Muñoz argues that this sequence can be read as Maria's desire to assimilate herself within American culture, marking the beginning of her "personality dissolve" with Tony (90). However, the innocuous musical convention of the "personality dissolve" becomes a "cultural dissolve," as Maria begins to conform to the mythology of white, bourgeois womanhood.<sup>8</sup> This mythology reaches its apotheosis in the "I Feel Pretty" sequence later on.

Interestingly, at the beginning of the bridal shop sequence, Maria complains to Anita about wearing a white dress to the dance: "Could we not dye it red at least? White is for babies!" Maria's desire to dye her dress red is not only expressive of her wanting to be more grown-up, it is also expressive of her desire to assimilate into American culture. As already mentioned, the color red in the film is rather complex and contradictory: while it is expressive of otherness and the threat of miscegenation, it is also ironically expressive of white blood lines. The convoluted nature of the color

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red is further reinforced in this particular scene. Here, red is the color of new and exciting experiences, of possibility, and of the promise that “something’s coming.” Maria’s entrance into American culture is an entrance into red. This is expressionistically conveyed through the use of red filters in the transition from the bridal shop to the dance at the gym. But what is new and exciting is often also viewed as dangerous. Color is also associated with sex and sexuality; it emerges as a signifier of what cannot be said or shown explicitly (Batchelor 68). Indeed, the red-silhouetted figures at the beginning of the “Dance at the Gym” sequence turn into dancing youth whose loose and drunk-like movements to blues music evoke mid-century anxieties over youth sexuality and delinquency. Anita does not think Maria is fully prepared to be a part of this world, assuring her that she can dye her dress red next year when she is more mature.

White is “for babies,” as it is primarily associated with virtue, purity, and innocence (Dyer 72–73). Aside from her name (Negrón-Muntaner 94), Maria’s innocence is marked by the cross she wears around her neck, as well as the Virgin Mary medallion pinned to her slip dress (Acevedo-Muñoz 88). Her innocence is also implicitly referenced when she meets Tony for the first time. Tony is so enamored upon meeting her that he cannot believe it is real: “You’re not making a joke?” he asks her. She replies, “I have not yet learned how to joke that way.” In this sense, Maria’s white dress is an extension of her naiveté. As Richard Dyer notes, “white is ‘pure and untouched’ and therefore redolent of sexual untouchedness” (74). Although the purity associated with Maria and her white dress seems ironic within the racist logic of the film (which sees the racialized other as a threat to whiteness), it ultimately works to support this logic. Maria’s white dress is not only evocative of anxieties about preserving a chaste femininity, but it also contrib-

utes to the film’s project of assuaging bourgeois anxiety surrounding miscegenation. In fact, these two components go hand-in-hand.

The Latina is often represented in popular culture as a hyper-sexualized “vamp” with a “fiery [and] explosive personalit[y]” (Sandoval-Sánchez 28), a stereotype that is part of a larger conception of Latin American culture as “full of boundless energy and irrepressible sexuality” (Negrón-Muntaner 92). Although Maria’s characterization as

virginal is merely another Latina stereotype (Sandoval-Sánchez 28), she is also made to be diametrically opposed to the “vamp” figure, something that becomes all the more significant when considered in relation to color. As discussed above, color in Western culture becomes an extension of otherness, understood to be the territory of the foreign and exotic (Batchelor 22–23). If red connotes excitement, liveliness, and sexuality, white is tedious, frigid, and bourgeois (Batchelor 11, 18). To put Maria in a white

*West Side Story* (1961). Directed by Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise. Shown: Natalie Wood (as Maria), Richard Beymer (as Tony). *Photo courtesy of United Artists/Photofest.*





*West Side Story* (1961). Directed by Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise. Shown center: Rita Moreno. Photo courtesy of United Artists/Photofest.

dress is another example of the film's attempt to distill and to dampen—to literally whiten—otherness. The notion of whitewashing becomes even more loaded with the knowledge that a white actress, Natalie Wood, is playing Maria. Negrón-Muntaner sees Maria's white dress as not only indicative of her virginity, but also of her being "untouched by American culture and uncontaminated by racism" (94). Although Maria can be seen as unmarked by American culture before her experience at the dance, her white dress is actually expressive of the racist undertones of the film and its project of mitigating the threat of otherness.

Maria's wish to dye her dress red comes true in the transition from the bridal shop to the dance at the gym. As Maria begins to twirl in her dress, she also begins to be colored. First, with subtle hints of rainbow, and then a vivid

red covers her. That Maria is made to pass through a rainbow instead of moving directly into red is also telling of the film's anxiety surrounding this color. Just as Anita, all too aware of the color's suggestive connotations, is hesitant to dye Maria's dress red, so too is the film hesitant about Maria falling directly into red, anxious about the color's associations with the vulgar and the erotic. The film mitigates the threat of the foreign and exotic by making this transition to red a gradual one. Maria must transition through the spectrum to comfortably arrive at red.

Maria's descent into color is part of a larger understanding of color as a metaphor of falling from, as well as into, grace (Batchelor 32). For example, Roland Barthes describes color as "a kind of bliss" or "a tiny fainting spell" (Barthes qtd. in Batchelor 32), which

"overwhelms" the senses and leads to a "loss of consciousness" (Batchelor 32). This conception of color as "falling into a state of grace" (Batchelor 32) is also echoed by Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (Batchelor 32). Here, Huxley's comprehensive account of ingesting mescaline is characterized by an intense "experience of color" (Batchelor 32). For Huxley, the mesmerizing effects of color engender a state of ecstasy and a "loss of self" (Batchelor 34). Moving into the cinematic realm, Batchelor discusses the way in which film characters "fall into color" from black and white (36). Using Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987) as an example, Batchelor understands the angel's fall into color as a fall into "a world of sensuous existence, of hot and cold, of taste and touch, but most of all it is a fall into . . . self made with

the explicit purpose of losing the self in desire" (37). Similarly, Maria's fall into color is "a fall into a world of desire" (Batchelor 37). After complaining to Anita that "nothing happens" (*West Side Story*) when she looks at Chino (Jose De Vega), the man that her brother would like her to marry, Maria is overwhelmed with lust and passion after first seeing Tony. When she sees Tony from across the room, everything around her blurs out of focus.

Just as one can "fall" into color, one can also be displaced into color (Batchelor 40). Citing Salman Rushdie's interpretation of *The Wizard of Oz*, Batchelor argues that Rushdie's reading of both the novel and 1939 film emphasizes "an uprooting and displacement into color" rather than "a Fall" (40). A central theme of *The Wizard of Oz* is a yearning for home, but Rushdie argues that the film is just as much about a yearning to leave home (Batchelor 40). Rushdie writes that *The Wizard of Oz* "is unarguably a film about the joys of going away, of leaving the greyness and entering the color, of making a new life..." (qtd. in Batchelor 40). These sentiments are captured in the song "Over the Rainbow" (Batchelor 40). Like Dorothy, who dreams of going "somewhere" beyond her ordinary life, Maria also yearns to leave her humdrum existence of "sew[ing] all day" in the dress shop and "sit[ting] at home all night" (*West Side Story*). She longs for a world of excitement and experience. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Maria's entry into this world is marked by an "uprooting" into color.

Similar to Dorothy's yearning for a "somewhere over the rainbow," Maria and Tony also dream of a utopia where they belong in the song "Somewhere." As they sing, the wall behind them is bisected with color: one side is red and the other side is blue. This expressive lighting is suggestive of the racial dissonance that is all around them, threatening to tear them apart. Maria has fallen into color, but with it she has also fallen into violence. Unlike Dorothy, who re-

turns home safely to "Kansas and Grey" (Batchelor 74), Maria and Tony's worlds are literally separated through color. As opposed to the "illusory" conflicts in the classical musical, Maria and Tony struggle with concrete conflicts that cannot be resolved through musical numbers or personality dissolves (Acevedo-Muñoz 90). Thus, *West Side Story* is "revisionist," subverting both the formation of the heterosexual couple at the musical's end, as well as the fantasy of a "unified community" typical of the folk musical (Acevedo-Muñoz 154).

The lack of a "unified community" is especially evident in the "Dance at the Gym" sequence. The white and Latino youth do not mix, despite a social worker's efforts to get them to dance together. Instead, they dance separately and keep to opposite sides of the gym. Moreover, the rival gangs and their supporters are further separated through the colors they wear: blues, browns, oranges and yellows for the Jets; purples, black, navy, and red for the Sharks. However, despite their separation and demarcation, Negrón-Muntaner argues that "the film never entirely succeeds in maintaining [this] illusion of difference" (94). She argues that "many [of the youth] 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" (94). Skin color is certainly one of the ways in which the film marks the Puerto Ricans as other (Negrón-Muntaner 91). Rita Moreno, the actress who plays Anita in the film, later criticized the film's exaggerated and essentialist representation of the Puerto Rican characters, pointing out that the makeup they wore looked as if they had been covered with "a bucket of mud" (Berson 158). Negrón-Muntaner describes the representation of the Puerto Rican characters as demonstrating minstrelsy, both through the use of exaggerated accents and mannerisms,

and the use of brown face for George Chakiris, the American actor who plays Bernardo in the film (91).

It is Natalie Wood's darkened skin as Maria which is especially complex, because of the star discourse surrounding her popularity as a child actor and her later status as the "idealized teenage girl" (Finstad 205). After her role as little Susan Walker in *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), it appeared that Wood was "play[ing] everyone's daughter in a series of 'family films,'" such as *Father Was a Fullback* (1950), *No Sad Songs for Me* (1951), and *The Star* (1953) (Tibbetts 146–47). These roles solidified the actress as the perennial "little girl" within American popular culture, so much so that Warner Bros. initially did not want to give Wood the part of the teenage Judy in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) (Finstad 177). This uneasiness over Wood's maturing into an attractive young woman who is no longer a little girl is played out in a scene in Nicholas Ray's film. When sixteen-year-old Judy (Natalie Wood) gives her father (William Hopper) a kiss on the cheek, he reacts by slapping her, chiding her for being too old for "that sort of thing." The film's rationale for this scene was to show the audience that Judy's rebellious behavior is a result of her father being emotionally unavailable (Simmons 59); however, one could argue that Judy's father does not know how to deal with his latent attraction toward his physically maturing teenage daughter, so he slaps her in a bout of panic. Interestingly, PCA director Geoffrey Shurlock flagged the scene as having incestuous undertones, but eventually dropped his objections when he saw the final cut (Simmons 59). Shurlock's concern about the incestuous undertones is perhaps more expressive of a collective cultural guilt than about what was actually happening onscreen. To extend this logic, if Wood is "everyone's daughter"—that is, America's daughter—then to desire her as a sexually attractive young woman (through her father's gaze) is indeed incestuous.

**Maria has fallen into color, but with it she has also fallen into violence.**

Hollywood's anxieties surrounding the maturing Wood were temporarily assuaged when the release of *Rebel* established Wood as "her generation's idealized teenage girl" (Finstad 205), with magazine headlines such as "Natalie's Teenage World" and "Going Steady with Stardom" (Finstad 205). However, the cultural anxiety surrounding Wood would resurface with *West Side Story*, albeit in a different guise. Now the uneasiness surrounding Wood's sexual attractiveness was compounded by her leading role as the Puerto Rican immigrant, Maria. The "sweet child" (Tibbetts 149) of white America now had noticeably darker skin. According to Negrón-Muntaner, the threat of Maria's otherness in the film is placated by the audience's knowledge that she is being played by the white Natalie Wood (92). The cultural anxiety surrounding the interracial relationship in the film is also mollified by this knowledge (Negrón-Muntaner 92).

Whiteness in the film is privileged in obvious, but also subtle, ways, most notably in the "I Feel Pretty" musical sequence. For example, Negrón-Muntaner argues that the sequence conveys the message that "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" (95). Although Maria performs some stereotypical Hispanic choreography in the sequence, such as using a fan in Flamenco-like style, she is also clearly "playing" white as well; this is signaled to us in large part through color. First of all, the dress that she wears is orange and yellow—colors that the Jets and their supporters were wearing earlier at the dance at the gym. Acevedo-Muñoz sees Maria's donning of Jet colors as evidence of her "personality dissolve" with Tony (106); however, this is actually indicative of a cultural dissolve and the assimilationist impulse of the film. Thus, when she begins to sing the song, she wraps a piece of lilac tulle fabric around her neck, imitating the style of a white, bourgeois woman. The muted, lilac scarf is associated with the reserved character of Anglo-American culture, and is an effort to mitigate the "dangerous" otherness of the Puerto Rican characters. Maria's desire for whiteness is most clearly evidenced when she pretends to be Miss America, donning a pink satin stola and a tiara. Acevedo-Muñoz understands Maria's appropriation of Miss America "as an act of resistance and rebel-

lion against the ultimate celebration of white female Americana" (166). Given the film's racist undertones, however, Maria's performance as Miss America only serves to reinforce its project of assimilating the other. In fact, upon closer inspection, Maria resembles the Statue of Liberty, with a stola draped over one shoulder and a bouquet raised in the air like a torch. By dressing Maria up in this way, she becomes an iconographic symbol of freedom and hope for other immigrants like herself; it also furthers the nationalist/assimilationist propaganda started in the "America" musical number (Sandoval-Sánchez 73). Ultimately, however, the pastel pink robe that Maria wears works to undermine this possibility of freedom and hope, reminding one that she is really only free when she is passing as white.

Beneath *West Side Story*'s harmonious integration of music, dance, and cinematography is its use of color—which ruptures its perceived organic unity. The film's use of color is expressive of its racial conflict, and by extension, the anxiety surrounding miscegenation. It is through color that we are able to see the many contradictions and ambiguities of the film. Beneath a narrative which provides a cautionary tale surrounding racial conflict is a film which, ironically, further perpetuates this conflict. "This turf is small, but it's all we got," Riff announces to his fellow Jets. "I wanna hold it like we've always held it—with skin!" Although "with skin" is seemingly referring to the gang's preference for using their bare hands to fight as opposed to using weapons, this statement could also refer to maintaining white skin and is thus rendered ambiguous. To hold their turf "with skin" is to hold it with the notion of white supremacy and the promise of protecting white bloodlines. This brings us to the "paradox of whiteness" (Dyer 47). As explained by Dyer: whiteness "both is and is not a color, is and is not a tangible sign" (47). Dyer argues that it is through its ability to be both "particular and nothing in particular" that reinforces the hegemony of whiteness (47). In other words, the visibility and power of white people is ultimately derived from their invisibility, and thus their status as the norm

*West Side Story* (1961). Directed by Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise. Shown: "America" (George Chakiris, fourth from left; Rita Moreno, third from right). Photo courtesy of United Artists/Photofest.



**Beneath a narrative which provides a cautionary tale surrounding racial conflict  
is a film which, ironically, further perpetuates this conflict.**

(Dyer 81). Although racial dissension is played out primarily through the film's coloration, and thus through its visually striking aesthetic, we must not forget that this conflict ultimately hinges on skin color, and, ironically, the invisibility or "colorlessness" of whiteness.

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#### NOTES

1. "Colorful" in both senses of the word—i.e., in terms of costume and setting, but also in terms of lively dancing.
2. These names not only emphasize the cool demeanor of the Jets, they also underline their whiteness.
3. For a detailed, shot-by-shot exploration of the film's meticulous design, see Acevedo-Muñoz, chapter 3.
4. Warren Hoffman challenges Sandoval-Sánchez's reading of the Jets as "Anglo-American" or "All-American." He contends that the quotation marks that Laurents places around the word "American" in his description of the Jets ("an anthology of what is called 'American'") is indicative of their "tenuous white status" (98). See Hoffman, 98–100.
5. Thank you to Murray Pomerance for his insight regarding the irony of white blood.
6. The color scheme of the setting is the skillful work of art director Boris Levin, who recreated New York's West Side with thirty-seven large sets at Goldwyn Studios in Hollywood (Keenan 117).
7. The hypnotic effect of Maria's twirling in combination with rainbow-colored after-images is reminiscent of an early film by

W. K.L. Dickson, *Anabelle Dances* (1894), which creates a similarly entrancing effect through the image of a twirling woman with hand-coloring techniques.

8. Acevedo-Muñoz acknowledges that Maria's personality dissolve in the film also encompasses "various cultural adjustments" (90), but this is merely a euphemism for the film's racist project of cultural dissolution.

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