A Puerto Rican Reading of the America of West Side Story

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

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

As it happened, I moved to New York City in 1983, to the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, which borders the area where the film takes place, an area better known today as Lincoln Center. I lived in the neighborhood for eight months with "Nuyorican." 2 At this time, I had the opportunity to see the movie, which was showing at the Hollywood Theater on Eighth Avenue between Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth Streets. Since I was becoming acquainted with New York neighborhoods and sharing daily the socioeconomic reality of immigrant Puerto Ricans and their offspring, I became interested in correlating and contrasting the musical film with the historical reality of the immigrants. There had been a massive exodus from the island in the late 1940s. At the time the musical was produced, in 1957, the Puerto Rican diaspora had already penetrated the Anglo-American cultural imaginary. This massive migration would become one of the major constituents of the "Latin other" in the U.S. Puerto Ricans would occupy a position at the intersection of the "Latin foreign other" and the "Latin domestic ethnic and racial other." Such an overlapping of categories resulted from the fact that Puerto Ricans have been American citizens since 1917, but also have their own national identity, defined primarily by their Hispanic roots and values and by having Spanish as their language. In this sense, like Carmen Miranda and Desí Arnaz, they were perceived as a "Latin foreign other," exotic "Latinas" with accents. However, in contrast to Miranda and Arnaz, given their colonial and minority status, defined by race and class—Puerto Ricans also became representative of the "Latin domestic ethnic and racial other."

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

My interest in decentering, demythifying, and deconstructing ethnic, social, and racial stereotypes of Latinos/as inscribed in the musical was the result of witnessing the reaction of an Anglo-American audience that applauded euphorically after the number "America." Only then did I understand the power and vitality of the musical, not just as pure entertainment, but as an iconic ideological construction of the stereotype and identity of Puerto Rican immigrants, and all other Latino/a immigrants, in the U.S. I also realized, at the same time, that, in the musical number "America," there is a political campaign in favor of assimilation. Such assimilation is pronounced by a Puerto Rican herself, Rita Moreno, whose acting was awarded the coveted Oscar. 3 The audience's reception, which was manipulated by an Anglo-American patriotic discourse generated and transmitted through the song, led me to question and problematize how the musical configures, produces, and reproduces a racist discourse of Latino otherness in the U.S. How does the musical project ethnic difference as a threat to the territorial, racial, and linguistic identity, as well as to the national and imperial subjectivity, of Anglo-Americans? From such a questioning
posture, we should examine how the musical, through its music, dances, romantic melodrama, and exoticism of cultural otherness distracts from the racism within it. We should also examine how it attracts, interpellates, and positions the perceiving spectator—whose social construction of reality and racial differences constitute the Anglo-American dominant ideology—by dividing spatially Puerto Ricans from Anglo-Americans, Puerto Rico from the U.S., the West Side from the East Side, the Latino ethnicity from the Anglo-American Eurocentric, white ethnicity, the Puerto Rican cultural reality from the Anglo-American one, the poor from the rich. These binary oppositions produce a political, patriotic, and mythifying discourse in which the Puerto Ricans, as intruders and invaders of the U.S. mainland, confront the Anglo-American system of power.

The Politics of Space

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

Manhattan is divided territorially, economically, racially, and ethnically. Each socioeconomic and ethnoracial group inhabits a space concretely demarcated, and even neighborhood border crossings are avoided. Specifically, it has been the musical West Side Story that has contributed to the perpetuation of the image of the West Side as a site of urban, ethnic, and racial tensions. The plot of the musical presents the hostility, hatred, and confrontations between two gangs. Those gangs—the Sharks are Puerto Ricans, the Jets an anthology of what is called ‘American’—reveal, as the action develops, not a mere struggle for territory but, rather, a socioeconomic and racial confrontation. Although the Jets constitute an anthology of “Americans,” the gang is made up solely of the children of white European immigrants. Their actions and values embody the ideological apparatus of the Anglo-American national subjectivity—that is, the ideological program and ways of doing of the “all-American boy.” Although they belong to the working class, it is obvious that the Jets act according to the “American dream.” They have an ideological and political consciousness of both their nationality and imperial superiority, as shown by their competitive desire to be “number one.” For this reason, they emblematized the ideology of the all-American boy, a totally white identity that does not leave room for any other ethnoracial groups in the gang. The Jets define themselves in the first song—“Jet Song”—in terms of their own sociopolitical and personal superiority, confidence, and arrogance. In this song, they claim to be the greatest, those who want to be number one and hold the sky. (Indeed, they dream ‘high.’) It should be emphasized that blacks have no representation or participation in this “anthology of Americans.” Is it because they had already been confined to their own space in Harlem? Hence, the Anglo-American power confrontation is limited to the recently migrated ethnoracial minority group, the Puerto Ricans: “Against the Sharks we need every man we got” (143).

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

From a questioning perspective, I propose to examine how the absence of the East Side—a geopolitical absence that is signaled metonymically in the title—becomes present. It displaces and decenters the story of love between Maria and Tony on the West Side. Indeed, my alternative reading, by centering on the absent action on the East Side, concentrates on the ideological production of a political and racist discourse that could as easily be entitled “East Side History of Hatred/Racism.” With this title I name the ideological discourse of the deep structures of the text; by doing so I decenter the melodramatic and romantic title West Side Story.
Furthermore, when the play was restaged at the Kennedy Center in 1985, the correlation between West Side and East Side surfaced once again. The East Side imposed itself as the always-absent presence; as one critic saw it, the actress Katherine Burkhalter "looks and sounds more like an East Side debutante than a West Side Puerto Rican girl . . ." It is evident in this comparison that there is a specific sociocultural and ideological configuration of the East Side and the West Side in terms of class, race, and ethnicity. Such a contrast and worldview are embodied in the silences, omissions, and gaps of the East Side in West Side Story.

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

Laurents had suggested the idea of blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York "because this was the time of the appearance there of teenage gangs, and the problem of juvenile delinquency was very much in the news. It started to work." Although the team was clearly interested in juvenile delinquency, it is interesting to observe how the "domestic ethnic and racial others" interact and replace each other. The writers moved comfortably from Jews and Italians, to Chicanos, to blacks, and finally to Puerto Ricans. They were simply searching for a confrontation between peoples of color and Caucasian Anglo-Americans. The assumptions of such a script reveal a priori the attitudes and prejudices against racial minori-

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

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

Drawing the Line

The first scenes of West Side Story establish the dramatic conflict: two gangs fight for social spaces, public territories, and institutions (fig. 2.1). The first to appear are the Anglo-Americans, the absolute owners of the open spaces, that is, the streets and the basketball court. The original text specifies the ownership of the space by the Jets: "The action begins with the Jets in possession of the area: owning, enjoying, loving their 'home'" (137). The crisis surges from the fact that the Jets do not allow the settlement of the Sharks in their territory or home. As a result, the drama articulates a binary and hierarchical opposition of power relations, and this binarism establishes the dominant paradigms
of the musical: Jets/Sharks; U.S./Puerto Rico; center/periphery; empire/colony; native/alien; identity/alterity; sameness/difference.

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

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

After a rigorous examination of the opening scenes, one can detect that the Anglo-Americans generally establish command by speaking first and defining the Puerto Ricans in a pejorative way. Take, for example, a policeman's arrival at the basketball court in the first scene, and later at the candy store. In both scenes, the Puerto Ricans are ordered to leave; the policeman wants to talk only to the Jets. In this way, the immigrants' voices become silenced and marginalized. The policeman says, "Get your friends out of here, Bernardo, and stay out! Please! ... Boy, oh, boy. ... As if this neighborhood wasn't crummy enough." Indeed, the original text reads: "Boy, what you Puerto Ricans have done to this neighborhood. ... All right, Bernardo, get your trash outa here" (138-39). Although the policeman's statement registers the abuse of power by an agent of power, his individualization as a character does not excuse him from participating in the blatant racism in the apparatus of power. He consciously favors the expulsion of the Latinos: "I gotta put up with them and so do you" (139); it is never a matter of acceptance or integration. The Jets also make use of a racist and discriminatory discourse in order to expel the Sharks: "We do own [the streets]. ... We fought hard for this territory and it's ours ... the PR's can move in right under our noses and take it away" (140-41). They propose to hang a sign forbidding trespassers; they are the ones who draw the line.

Between the two gangs erupts a hostile confrontation and warlike intensity because the Jets want to maintain their territory and socio-political order. The "other" threatens to snatch away their spaces and institutions (the gymnasium, the basketball court, the streets, and the candy store). The Jets are not willing to give up: "We fought hard for this turf, and we ain't just going to give it up. ... These PR's are different. They keep on coming like cockroaches." Clearly, the Jets judge the Puerto Rican migration to the urban center as an invasion of cockroaches that reproduces without control and infects the territory. In order to exterminate them, the Jets prepare for a war: the rumble. These scenes conceive the Puerto Ricans only in their criminal and barbaric nature. The Jets skillfully transfer the concept of deadly weapons to the Puerto Ricans: "They might ask for blades, zip guns. ... But if they say blades, I say blades. ... Those in power enunciate the discourse of the "other." By using such an ideological strategy of transfer and transposition, the script, in the lines assigned to the Jets, accentuates and perpetuates stereotypes of Latinos/as, their ways of doing things, and the image of them as criminals. The Puerto Ricans are defined only in their criminal potentiality, as carrying weapons that the Jets will have to face and to match. Indeed, when the rumble takes place, the Puerto Ricans' disposition to fight (and to assassinate) is augmented by their arriving first at the location. In the scene in which Tony tries to make peace, Bernardo refuses reconciliation. This stereotype of Puerto Rican aggression and violence becomes further emphasized when the Sharks are the first to kill. In addition, it cannot be forgotten that, in the prelude to the song "America," one of the young women jokingly defines the Puerto Ricans as criminals: "You'll go back with handcuffs!" (165). In this manner, an assumed criminality of Puerto Ricans becomes stereotyped in the eyes of the Anglo-American audience.
The musical’s dance scene in the gymnasium is vital for visualizing the divisive frontier line between the two gangs. In the original text, a stage direction states, “the line between the two groups is sharply defined by the colors they wear” (152). The two gangs are defined both by their dress code, which refers to cultural codes (particularly for the women), and by their styles of dancing. They are also defined by the color of their skin. It is in this dance scene that the action changes its course: the hatred between the gangs is open to the possibility of communication and living together, a possibility that arises from the physical attraction between Tony and Maria. Their relationship will become a story of love (albeit a doomed love), and it will predominate from then on as the principal plot of the dramatic text.

This first encounter between Maria and Tony is love at first sight. The camera captures them exchanging glances, and these glances erase themselves from the immediate reality. From then on, Tony and Maria face a dilemma of trying to locate themselves in a historical, urban space that will permit and respect their interracial relationship. Unnecessarily, Tony and Maria, and the audience, expect this relationship to result in marriage. Both of them are conscious of their ethnic and racial difference; as Maria says, “[Y]ou’re not one of us . . . and I am not one of yours.” Tony will express later, in the song “Somewhere,” their search for such an ideal place and future time when they will be accepted for what they are: an interracial and interethnic couple.

An interracial marriage is possible only through erasing the historical present and creating a utopia (in the time of the movie). Romantic melodrama is a strategy of power used to hide and soften the racist discourse. The narrative detour from warfare to love story functions as a camouflage. In these terms, the system of power disassociates itself from any consciousness of racial prejudice and discrimination. Indeed, Tony and Maria become the scapegoats of a racist discourse, because their relationship must end in tragedy. (Of course, if there’s anybody to be blamed for this tragedy, it is Shakespeare, who wrote Romeo and Juliet, the model for West Side Story.) Although their utopian interracial marriage cannot take place, the apparatus of power does not take any responsibility for it. Instead, blame falls on the Puerto Ricans, because Chino assassinates Tony in revenge for Bernardo’s death. Hence, Latino otherness functions within a chain reaction of provocation: the Puerto Ricans provoke the Jets by killing one of them, Tony responds by killing Bernardo, and the chain is closed when Chino kills Tony. With this final death, the happily-ever-after outcome for Maria (and the audience) is impossible. In addition, in this last scene, the apparatus of power exercises its authority and control by arresting Chino; prison is the only space available for criminal immigrants. Thus, the chain reaction is, in fact, a circuit that begins and ends with the policeman as the representative of power.

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

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

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

Maria cannot mention a place for her future happiness; in this way her love remains suspended. She dreams about a utopia of love after life, because the “where” cannot be located either in her utopia, her present, or her place of origin. This “would-be world” does not exist in the text, and tragedy; instead of marriage, is the only possible closure. In the tragic finale, Maria remains on the threshold of “America.” She is marginalized, hysterical, and hateful: “WE ALL KILLED HIM; and my brother and Riff, I, too. I CAN KILL NOW BECAUSE I HATE NOW”
(223). At the end, while holding Tony's corpse, she becomes delirious, wishing to join him in the utopian space of eternal love.18 There is no doubt that the space without sociohistorical contradictions for which Maria longs is beyond the grave. There she would meet with Romeo and Juliet, the literary prototypes of the bourgeois melodrama of impossible love. Such a transcendental and assumed universality in the ending erases all historicity. What it reproduces is a mythicization whereby West Side Story perpetuates its aesthetic, literary, and apolitical values. Take, for example, the following comment from film critic Stanley Kauffmann: "West Side Story has been over-burdened with discussion about its comment on our society. It offers no such comment. As a sociological study, it is of no use: in fact, it is somewhat facile. What it does is to utilize certain conditions artistically—a vastly different process. Through much of the work, dance and song and cinematic skill fuse into a contemporary theatrical poem."19

The Politics of Race

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

In the film version, this scene, which, in the original text is a racist and defamatory articulation toward Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican immigrants. Indeed, the song "America" in its two versions consolidates the political and ideological nucleus of the drama. While in the original version Anita proclaims openly her total assimilation and scorns her native land and its historicocultural reality, the cinematographic version makes use of irony when she sings "My heart's devotion." Immediately, the line is followed by a statement of contempt, "Let it sink back in the ocean."
becomes so impregnated with hatred that she tells the Jets, without fear and in total challenge, that “Bernardo was right . . . If one of you was bleeding in the street, I’d walk by and spit on you” (219). From a position of pain and rage, Anita advises Maria to forget Tony: “Stick to your own kind!” (212). In this scene, now it is Anita who is advocating racial and ethnic segregation. Thus, the system of power does not need to acknowledge any responsibility or guilt for its racial discrimination. Instead, it posits that Puerto Ricans will always be Puerto Ricans, and in instances of crisis, no matter how assimilated they are, they will always side with their own people. The threat of racial otherness is concretized in Anita’s self-conscious difference, and, by extension, the potential of rebellion and sociopolitical subversion. Now that Anita opposes Maria’s and Tony’s interracial marriage, the system of power exempts itself from preventing such a marriage. In the end, it is the Puerto Ricans themselves who advocate getting married to members of the same race, ethnicity, and culture. This is how the hegemonic power pretends to give agency to the marginalized and disenfranchised.

The Practices of Racism

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

However, the racist discourse is not totally silenced in the textual surface. In one scene, the practice of racism flourishes when Anita enters the candy store. While stopping her, one of the Jets says openly, “She’s too dark to pass” (217; emphasis added). Such a declaration con-
lar reference to “Island of tropic diseases,” telling us everybody knows Puerto Rico is free of disease. And it wasn’t just that line they objected to. We were insulting not only Puerto Rico but the Puerto Ricans and all immigrants. They didn’t hear “Nobody knows in America / Puerto Rico’s in America”—it’s a little hard to hear at that tempo. We met that threat by doing nothing about it, not changing a syllable, and we were not picketed.28

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

The Reception of West Side Story

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

“West Side Story’s liberalism is so ingenious that the show is embarrassing to revive.”
—Martin Gottfried, Broadway Musicals

I do not deny it at all: after decades of living in the U.S., my own personal experience as an ethnic minority has led me to question the U.S. cultural and political system. I, who upon my arrival was an assimilated “American” and more Anglo-American than many “Amery-
While migrant Puerto Ricans protested demeaning representations since the show’s opening in 1957, Puerto Ricans on the island seemed to be ignorant of and distanced from the U.S. Puerto Rican experience. For example, Nilita Vientos Gastón, a prominent Puerto Rican intellectual and guardian of national culture and Spanish language, endorsed and extolled the human values inscribed in the production. In her 1961 review of the production in San Juan, she addressed the issue of violence, gangs, and juvenile delinquency, but, as she did so, universalized the social crisis in the musical as an urban condition in which individuals have lost all capacity to behave in a civilized way. Her reading, which is divorced from the Puerto Rican migrant community that experiences exploitation, marginality, and racism, did not consider how class and race articulate the ideological structure of the musical. Her political position was that the musical did not insult Puerto Ricans:

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

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

In the 1980s, with the staging of Jerome Robbins’s Broadway, an anthology of dance scenes choreographed by Robbins, once again the musical number “America” from West Side Story was staged. The prominent Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez, as if interpellated by magic, fascinated by the spectacle, or hypnotized by the phenomenal dancing, went in search of the meaning of the dances. He seemed to be trapped in the cultural reflection that Broadway offered him as a mirror of Puerto Rican ethnicity and identity, saying that “for fifteen or twenty minutes in the West Side Story scenes…you attend an empire of the senses which modifies and biographs Latinos, Hispanics…you attend the colossal uncovering of being and living of Latinos, of Hispanics…It would be unnecessary to insist on the response of gratitude and satisfaction that the audience finds in Jerome Robbins’ choreography. It is a kind of ontology of New York streets… and it is an open heart to the understanding of Latinos, of Hispanics. It is all understanding and respect.”

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

And, if those practices were not enough for the staging of the musical, the actress who played María had to dye her skin dark if she was “too white” to embody the Puerto Rican race. Such an action is the result of the Anglo-American sociocultural and political system, which conceptualizes all Puerto Ricans as a “Latin domestic ethnic and racial other” and stereotypes them as black. They did not have to darken Debbie Allen, a black actress who once played Anita, nor Rita Moreno in the film version. However, when Josie de Guzmán, a light-skinned Puerto Rican, played the role of María in the 1980 production on Broadway, she had to be darkened. De Guzmán’s first reaction to the darkening was, “Oh, my God, I am Puerto Rican—why do they have to darken my hair?” Yet later, “they darkened her pale skin too, and after a bit she liked that, wanting literally to ‘get into the skin of María.’”
This reaction reveals the complex dynamics of blackface and the politics of representation. Not all Puerto Ricans are black, but on the stage, in order to satisfy the horizon of expectations of Broadway audiences, some performers will or must engage in appropriating the “racial other” as stereotyped in the Anglo-American cultural imaginary. Within these racist practices, de Guzmán is forced to pass as an au­
ciotics of representation. Not all Puerto Ricans are black, but on the stage, this reaction reveals the complex dynamics of blackface and the poli­
in order to satisfy the horizon of expectations of Broad­
ments, reveals that in representing the “other,” race is performative. Race is historically, politically, ideologically, and culturally constituted, produced and represented in given social formations, power relations, and discursive practices.

The reception of West Side Story is another story for U.S. Puerto Ricans, the so-called Nuyoricans. Particularly, it is women who have chal­
egored and presented by successful white men, not one of them Hispanic. Here, we have María, the virgin, ready to sacrifice all, and the other side of the Latina, Anita, the “loose one” who sings “I want to be in America,” meaning not in Puerto Rico, “that ain’t America and it ain’t good enough!” ... Where were the rest of us? Where was my own mother and aunt? And all those valiant women who left Puerto Rico out of necessity, for the most part by themselves bringing small children to a cold and hostile city. They came with thousands of others, driven out by poverty, ill-equipped with little education and no knowledge of English. But they were determined to give their children a better life, and the hope of a future. This is where I had come from, and it was these women who became my heroes. When I looked for role models that symbolized strength, when I looked for subjects to paint and stories to write, I had only to look at my own. And my source was boundless, my folklore rich and the work to be done would consume an eternity.”

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

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

Ortiz Cofer transformed this incident into a source of empowerment, but, sadly, this occurrence attests to how Latinos/as constantly have to justify and prove who they are. As a result of discrimination and stereotyping of Latinas, Ortiz Cofer was forced to develop a politics of affinity with other Latinas. She now uses her writing as a medium to educate those who are prejudiced and to break away from dominant cultural representations, like that of María in West Side Story. “Every time I give a reading,” she says, “I hope the
stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes."

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

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

Whenever we think about mainstream representations of Latinos/as on Broadway, we see a flashing marquee reading *West Side Story*. Indeed, as shown in the previous chapter, Puerto Ricans became internationally famous because of the success of that theatrical production and its later film version. However, when we try to name other representations of Latinos/as on Broadway, either in Anglo-American works or in theatrical productions by Latinos/as themselves, there is a long, long silence. Whenever I ask in which plays or musicals have Latinos/as been represented on Broadway, the answer is the following: "Let me see . . . well . . . I really cannot think of any." And I hear over and over again: "Are there any other shows besides *West Side Story*?" It took even me by surprise to realize that there is another production that has taken the Puerto Ricans around the world. The show was *A Chorus Line*, the second longest running musical on Broadway history (1975 to 1990, surpassed by *Cats* in 1997), which had two Puerto Rican protagonists, Diana and Paul (fig. 3.1). But the story does not end there. Once I started my research, I found out that one of the authors of *A Chorus Line* was a Puerto Rican. Born Conrado Morales in Spanish Harlem, he renamed himself Nicholas (Nick) Dante.
80. For definitions and descriptions of the African roots of conga, samba, and rumba, see the glossary included in Roberts, Latin Tinge, 220–33.
81. Xavier Cugat, in an unnamed interview quoted in Roberts, Latin Tinge, 87.
82. Pérez Firmat, Life on the Hyphen, 29.
84. Arnaz, A Book, 77.
87. Desi Arnaz, in A Tribute to Lucy.
88. Keller, Hispanics and U.S. Film, 98.
89. According to Lucille Ball, Thunderbird in Palm Springs was not only one of the most beautiful golf courses, but also “one of the most prejudiced. Not only did it refuse to admit Jews, but, celebrity and property owner or not, Desi was not invited to join either,” Ball, Love Lucy, 245.
90. Desi Arnaz, in A Tribute to Lucy.
92. “Cuban Pete,” words and music by José Norman, 1936.
93. The episode, which centered around the character Lucy’s giving birth, was enormously popular: “That night 44 million Americans (more than one fifth of the population—and 30,000 of them sent personal congratulations) tuned in to watch.” Brady, Lucille, 213.
97. Xavier Cugat, in an unnamed interview quoted in Roberts, Latin Tinge, 87.
98. Miranda dressed as a bahiana, with “a silk turban, golden earrings, a starched skirt, trimmed sandals, golden bracelets and balangandás . . . an ornamental silver buckle, with amulets and trinkets attached, worn on fast days by the slaves. . . . The long, broad skirt was suitable for Carnival; indeed men who dressed like Bahian women had always participated in Carnival parades. Moreover, outside the markets and doorsteps of Bahia where the true Bahianas sat, turbans and the balangandás were considered leftovers from slavery days.” Gil-Montero, Brazilian Bombshell, 54, 56.
100. A friend once told me the story of how her mother dressed her as Carmen Miranda and darkened her face for Halloween.

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102. It is interesting to notice that Ball asked Miranda for permission to imitate her. Ibid.
103. Pérez Firmat, Life on the Hyphen, 40.
104. Cited in ibid., 38.
105. Pérez Firmat, Life on the Hyphen, 41.
106. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, 1303, “palimpsest” means “1. A manuscript, typically of papyrus or parchment, that has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely erased and often legible. 2. An object, a place, or an area that reflects its history. Latin palimpsestum, from Greek palimpseston, neuter of palimpsestos, scraped again: palin, again.”

Chapter Two

3. There were only a handful of Latino actors in the original Broadway production, as in the film.


8. The Jets certainly concentrate on juvenile delinquency when they sing “Gee, Officer Krupke,” a humorous song that narrates their social and familial crises, and defines juvenile delinquency as a social disease. (Ironically they do not identify racism as a social disease.) They sing, in their self-defense, that they are not delinquents, only misunderstood.

9. It is interesting to point out how a critic can perpetuate such stereotypes: “The influx of Puerto Ricans onto the New York scene offered a group given to high passion and violence, the very meat of Shakespeare’s story. Their gang wars suggested a likely substitute for family feuds.” Gerald Bordman, American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 604. Also, it must be considered that Puerto Ricans were conceived in the 1940s as potential criminals; see Charles E. Hewitt, Jr., “Welcome: Paupers and Crime—Porto Rico’s Shocking Gift to the United States,” Scribner’s Commentator, March 1940, 11–17.


11. Even in their dancing, the Sharks move with passion while the Jets are disciplined, self-controlled, and athletic. In the song “America,” the choreography for the Puerto Rican Sharks is loud, energetic, and aggressive. They imitate guns with their hands, and scream like exotic, wild animals. Comparatively, the Anglo-Americans try to control themselves and their emotions, remaining rational and sublimating their aggressive and passionate instincts as they get “cool” and keep “cool.” About the choreographic movements, Gerald Mast has observed that “Jerome Robbins found a style for slum kids to dance to that street music. His choreographic leitmotif—soaring arms opening wide, one arm spreading toward the earth and the other toward the sky, as dancers rise onto the ball of one foot—becomes an unforgettable image of reaching for sky and longing for space. The movement reveals that these kids are not fancy free but fancy that one day they might fly free from the social tangle of these very streets.” Gerald Mast, Can’t Help Singin’: The American Musical on Stage and Screen (New York: Overlook Press, 1987), 301.

12. Gerald Mast justifies ethnic stereotyping, saying that “Sondheim’s ethnic stereotyping is acceptable in dramatic context, for members of an ethnic group have earned the right to poke fun at their own culture”; Mast, Can’t Help Singin’, 302. This justification fails to acknowledge, however, that the representations of Puerto Ricans are no: in this case constructed by Puerto Ricans.

13. At work here is the Hays Code, which prohibited miscegenation.

14. Gerald Mast recognizes that there is no utopia: “The ‘Somewhere’ ballet thoroughly destroys the illusion that things might get better elsewhere. There is nowhere else. America (as that song makes clear) is as good as it gets.” Mast, Can’t Help Singin’, 302.

15. A stage direction reads, at the end of the play, “The adults—Doc, Schrank, Krupke, Glad Hand—are left bowed, alone, useless” (224). Given that Schrank arrests Chino in this final scene, he is an agent of power who exercises legal action and restores order. In this sense, he is not “useless” at all.

16. Concerning the image of women in the text, the extent to which Maria’s body functions in a metonymical relationship to the Puerto Rican geographic and cultural territory, which the Anglo-American aims to possess, control, and subdue, should be analyzed. From this perspective, Tony violates the Puerto Rican patriarchal space by penetrating Maria’s room and usurping and displacing the power of the father, the brother, and the family in general. The female body is the corporeal territory that the Anglo-American wants to possess and subject, either for reasons of love, as in Maria’s case, or by rape, as in Anita’s case. The attempted rape of Anita occurs symbolically when the Jets throw her on top of Baby John’s body at the candy store.

17. There is a scene in which the Jets blatantly expel the Puerto Ricans from the U.S.:

Action: Who asked you to move here?
Pepe: Who asked you?
Snoopy: Move where you’re wanted!
A-rab: Back where ya came from!
Action: Spacial (175–76)

18. It is important to notice that in the final scene Maria is left mourning Tony’s death, not Bernardo’s. It is also his body, and not Bernardo’s, that is carried away in a solemn funeral procession.


20. Sidney Mintz, in his introduction to a book of photographs of Puerto Rico by Jack Delano, who has lived on the island, made this observation about the song “America”: “The colonialism of the ruling nation goes further, for it colors the attitudes of nearly everyone who must deal with Puerto Rico. Even in its literature, art, and aesthetics, Puerto Rico is commonly misunderstood. The musical West Side Story is relevant here. In the words of its most popular song, the United States is referred to as ‘America.’ But no one in Puerto Rico ever refers to the United States as ‘America’ and no Puerto Rican ever did. All Latin peoples in the Southern Hemisphere believe that they are Americans, too. (Since they reached the New World and settled the Antilles more than a century before the first English colony was established in North America, they
have a fair case.) And the melodies of Bernstein, for all their beauty, could only have been composed by someone for whom Mexican and Puerto Rican music are essentially the same—that is, 'Latin.' The rich and distinctive musical tradition of Puerto Rico is almost entirely absent from "West Side Story." Mintz, introduction to Jack Delano, Puerto Rico Mix: Four Decades of Change (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 4.

21. It is important to point out that Anglo-American critics saw this scene as a humorous, jokey interplay. David Ewen notes, "In 'America' the Shark girls speak of the joyous life encountered by Puerto Ricans in this country." Ewen, Complete Book of the American Musical Theater (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1959), 64. Leonard Bernstein, in his liner notes to the original Broadway cast recording, mentions that "a playful argument develops between Anita and a homesick Puerto Rican girl over the relative merits of life back home and in Manhattan." Bernstein, Bernstein: West Side Story, CBS Masterworks LP, 1957, cited in David Patrick Stearns, "'West Side Story': Between Broadway and the Opera House," 7, in a booklet included in Leonard Bernstein Conducts West Side Story, Deutsche Grammophon 415 253-4, audiocassette.

22. A similar situation occurs when Bernardo says to the Jets before the rumble starts, "More gracious living? Look: I don't go for that pretend crap you all go for in this country. Every one of you hates every one of us, and we hate you right back. I don't drink with nobody I hate, I don't shake hands with nobody I hate" (190). It is evident that the ethnic minority defines itself in terms of hatred and violence while the Anglo-Americans never verbalize their hatred, or rather, their racism. The system of power allows for the minority to speak on its own behalf; in this way, it takes no responsibility for discrimination and racial oppression.


24. This team was composed of Arthur Laurents, who wrote the book; Leonard Bernstein, who composed the music; Sondheim, who wrote the lyrics; and Jerome Robbins, who choreographed and directed.

25. Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein, quoted in Guernsey, ed., Broadway Song and Story, 53. The New York Times published an article by a doctor who criticized the lyrics of "America" and defended the public health achievements in Puerto Rico: "The Puerto Ricans who have cried 'fool' have a point. The lyrics of this and the other songs created by Mr. Stephen Sondheim are clever and effective, but the reference to 'island of tropical diseases' is a blow below the belt. This is not based on fact.... It is not serious, but, it hits Puerto Rico in a sensitive spot. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico by great effort has made tremendous strides forward in public health as well as education, transportation, communication, and economic development in their 'Operation Bootstrap.' They are especially proud of their public health achievements," Howard A. Rusk, M. D., "The Facts Don't Rhyme: An Analysis of Irony in Lyrics Linking Puerto Rico's Breezes to Tropic Diseases," New York Times, 29 September 1957, L 83.

26. Bernstein, Bernstein: West Side Story, cited in Stearns, "'West Side Story'" 7. See also Bernstein, Bernstein Conducts West Side Story, prod. Hum-
Chapter Three

The title of this chapter is drawn from the song “One,” the finale to (and probably the most famous number from) A Chorus Line, in which the entire ensemble sings “One singular sensation / ev’ry little step he takes.”

1. Conrado Morales was born 22 November 1941 in Spanish Harlem, New York City, to Puerto Rican immigrants. His father was a Metropolitan Transit Authority employee. When he quit Cardinal Hayes High School to go onto the stage as a dancer, Morales changed his name to Nicholas Dante. As a dancer he joined Broadway road shows, and in New York, he danced in the choruses of Applause, Smith, Ambassador, I’m Solomon and other stage and television productions. Dante, a Nícheren Shoshu Buddhist, cowrote A Chorus Line, his first professional effort as a writer, he later completed a screenplay, Fake Lady, which was based on the character Paul’s story in A Chorus Line; it was never produced. He also wrote the book for another musical show, Jolson Tonight. In 1991, at the time of his death from AIDS at age 49, Dante was writing a new play, A Suite Letting Go.


3. For a summary of the plot and pictorial documentation of the Broadway production, see “The Ten Best Plays,” in Guernsey, ed., The Best Plays of 1974–1975, 242–44. For the book and lyrics, see James Kirkwood, Michael Bennett, and Nicholas Dante, A Chorus Line: The Book of the Musical (New York: Applause, 1995); hereafter, all quotations are from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text unless otherwise noted. The film version was released in 1985 by Polygram Pictures.

4. According to Martin Gottfried, “line” refers to a) the chorus line, b) the line of the tape on the stage floor, and c) sticking one’s neck out.” Martin Gottfried, Broadway Musicals (New York: Abradale Press/Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 35.

5. Bennett’s skills for manipulation have been openly addressed in the writings about the making of A Chorus Line, and Dante spoke directly of it on a few occasions: “Now Michael was the great manipulator of all time. . . .”; “Michael believed he had to manipulate you to get the work out of you, and he romanced everybody . . . It’s one thing to manipulate your talent; it’s a whole other thing to manipulate your personal emotions to get your talent.”

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Dante, quoted in Ken Mandelbaum, A Chorus Line and the Musicals of Michael Bennett (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 125, 274. James Kirkwood declared that Bennett was “a master of manipulation, and Jesus Christ, sometimes it was so humiliating and damned sick.” James Kirkwood, quoted in Kevin Kelly, One Singular Sensation: The Michael Bennett Story (New York: Zebra, 1990), 234. The issue of manipulation was also brought up by the original cast during its appearance on the TV show Donahue, Multimedia Entertainment, 23 March 1990, transcript 2909, show 0323–90.


7. James Kirkwood wrote an article about his participation in the musical; it is entitled “Not in My Wildest Dreams . . . did I imagine Co-authoring Broadway’s Longest Running Show,” Playbill, September 1983, 8–12. Obviously, there was no interest in inviting Dante to write his testimony.

8. Nicholas Dante, quoted in Kelly, One Singular Sensation, 196–97; emphasis in the original.

9. According to Nicholas Dante, “Jimmy Kirkwood and I went to rehearsal one day and there were about eight new lines in the show that neither of us recognized. I always assumed that Michael had written them, because Michael could be very funny and often came up with wonderful lines. I didn’t find out until about four years after the show opened that Neil Simon wrote them. I never knew.” Dante, quoted in Denny Martin Flinn, What They Did For Love: The Untold Story Behind the Making of A Chorus Line (New York: Bantam, 1989), 127. See also Mandelbaum, A Chorus Line, 147. As for Simon’s own account of his participation in the preliminary phase of the musical, see Gary Stevens and Alan George, “Doctoring the Book,” in The Longest Line: Broadway’s Most Singular Sensation: A Chorus Line (New York: Applause, 1995), XV–XVI.

10. Kevin Kelly clearly states how Bennett appropriated A Chorus Line: “Publicly as well as privately, Michael Bennett proclaimed A Chorus Line as basically his own. In a 1986 interview on National Public Radio he said, ‘It’s the longest-running show in history. And it’s mine! It’s amazing. And it’s the story of my life on top of it’s amazing.’” Bennett, quoted in Kelly, One Singular Sensation, 392–93.

11. Nicholas Dante, quoted in Kelly, One Singular Sensation, 85.


16. Paul’s monologue is reproduced in Kelly, One Singular Sensation, 191–95. The monologue went into A Chorus Line almost exactly as Dante had narrated his life story in the first planning session for the musical. For details, see Mandelbaum, A Chorus Line, 309, 128, and 334. Mandelbaum states, “Prime considerations throughout were to avoid excessive melodrama and any mono-