

## 8 | Un-Gendering ‘Somewhere’

### Women’s Agency and Redemption in *West Side Story*

KATHERINE BABER

In the 2019 revival of *West Side Story* in Manchester, directed by Sarah Frankcom, the character Anybodys steps forward and sings the iconic opening phrases of ‘Somewhere’:

There’s a place for us,  
Somewhere a place for us.

Anybodys and the cast gather to sing of a peaceful place in the ‘open air,’ the antithesis of the cramped urban grid they occupy, and a time for learning and caring, the opposite of their experience so far. In addition to Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics and the song’s appearance in the middle of a ‘dream ballet,’ the music Leonard Bernstein crafted for this moment reminds the listener that this place is imagined. The melody begins with a leap up of a minor seventh, which provides neither a comfortable landing nor the impetus to continue up to the octave. The rest of the verse then flows from this gesture that reaches but ultimately falls short, only for the singer to try again and keep trying. In turn, the chorus provides no conclusion, ending with the incremental step up of a major second on each of the words ‘someday, somehow, somewhere.’ By the end of the act, this loose melodic thread is still hanging. With Bernardo, Riff, and Tony dead, we do not hear a final song from Maria or a closing chorus. Instead, we hear a reprise of ‘Somewhere’ from the orchestra, ending on the major second interval, repeated three times (‘someday, somehow, somewhere’) as the Jets and Sharks process offstage, together carrying Tony’s body. It seems that Bernstein was out of songs, done in by the challenge of scoring a musical that ends in a tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps he recognized that he and his collaborators had already made their point.

Music critics and scholars seem to agree that ‘Somewhere’ is the heart of *West Side Story*, the carrier of its ‘message,’ but what that message might be is open to interpretation. Bernstein called his shot when he wrote ‘an out-and-out plea for racial tolerance’ across his copy of *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>2</sup> The first drafts of the adaptation by Arthur Laurents took place on New York’s East Side and centered on a religious conflict between Catholic and Jewish

gangs. Jerome Robbins, as director and choreographer, was concerned with the challenges faced by young people from immigrant families. The characters wound up united by class and generation but riven by race. The 1961 film version solidified the analogies to the Civil Rights movement and subsequent productions have introduced disability as an organizing theme, critiqued the original text's stereotyping of Puerto Rican and Latinx communities, introduced a bilingual book and lyrics, and turned the mirror on violence, poverty, and xenophobia in America. What all these interpretations share is the recognition that the central dynamic of the musical is the push and pull between exclusion and inclusion. 'Somewhere' tells us is that this is a story about the importance of belonging. In response, Frankcom's choice to have Anybodys sing 'Somewhere' – rather than the anonymous girl of the original, or the boy soprano of Arthur Laurents's 2009 revival – asks us to consider what happens when we read that message through the lens of gender.

In order to read (that is, to interpret) *West Side Story* in a feminist way, we must recognize the unfinished nature of its project. The journey to, or creation of, a place to belong as described in 'Somewhere' is not yet accomplished by the musical's end, but it is perhaps within reach: 'Hold my hand and we're halfway there.' The narrative and characterizations – as expressed through songs, dances, and score – suggest a way forward and that redemptive path, I would argue, is gendered. Or, if we pay attention to Anybodys as a character, and consider also the roles of performer and spectator, the belonging we seek is *un-gendered*. To reach 'Somewhere,' we must step outside the confines of normative masculinity and femininity, each of which comes with its own reductive and destructive strictures.

Beginning with and returning to 'Somewhere' in this chapter also functions as a comment on methodology. When we listen to the score, read the book, attend a revival, or watch the film, we are only 'halfway there.' Although authorial intent is notoriously difficult to untangle in the collaborative medium of the musical, decoding the problems of masculinity and femininity embedded in the text of *West Side Story* is necessary to reading its message. How the middle-class, mainstream audiences of the original production understood gender roles in the socio-political landscape of the 1950s is crucial to this pursuit. Likewise, the performers of the work, and perceptions of those performers, multiply its potential meanings. And without giving in to a presentist critique, the responses of spectators from then to now also matters. As Stacy Wolf demonstrates with her project 'to look and hear from a lesbian point of view,' the meanings of a given work are always assembled from a combination of

text, context, and spectator.<sup>3</sup> While this chapter is not primarily concerned with the spectator's uses of the musical, as Wolf is, a feminist reading needs all three facets of analysis, including the perspectives of what is often described as 'fandom.' This is particularly true in the case of Anybodys, a character whose embodiment and interpretation have evolved in the decades since the premiere in ways that are crucial to our understanding of *West Side Story*.

In addition, any feminist reading of *West Side Story* must be intersectional. Having migrated from Kimberlé Crenshaw's landmark work in legal studies to other fields, intersectionality is a broadly construed and continually evolving methodology in antiracist, feminist analyses.<sup>4</sup> It is also a useful tool in complicating the history of this musical in particular. What attending to race-and-gender reveals is that, in their efforts to create a universalized message about 'prejudice of different kinds,' Bernstein, Laurents, Robbins, and Sondheim landed on a colourblind moral that was gendered as feminine, even as the narrative arc depends on the musical styles and performances of women of colour.<sup>5</sup> The Sharks are nominally Puerto Rican, a category that includes Afro-Latinx people, but cultural specificity and diversity were not goals of the original production team. Still, Black and Latinx women have always been formidable, although limited, presences in the musical. Chita Rivera (whose father was Puerto Rican) originated the role of Anita and when Rita Moreno (born in Puerto Rico) took over in the role in the film adaptation, she became the first Latina to win an Oscar. African-American soprano Reri Grist played Consuelo in the original production and also performed 'Somewhere' from the pit during the live production and on the Broadway cast recording.

However, while reproducing stereotypes remains a hazard of every revival, reading *West Side Story* affords an opportunity to examine the 'intercategorical complexity' of the various identities at play. As Jennifer C. Nash explains, this strain of analysis uses categories of identity (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, gender) in a contingent fashion, in order to reveal the relationships between them and expose the inequalities such categories perpetuate.<sup>6</sup> Crenshaw and others affirm that attending to identity can 'reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories.'<sup>7</sup> In this practical vein, casting has become an area where the critical analysis of the text connects to the work of social justice. The women carry the moral of the story, so it matters that we have seen Ariana DeBose (whose father is Afro-Puerto Rican) as Anita in Steven Spielberg's 2021 film adaptation. On

a textual level, if the message of the musical is that intolerance kills, then looking at and listening to the intersection of race and gender tells us that racial violence is not just the doing of white supremacy, but is aided and abetted by what we now call ‘toxic masculinity’ and by restrictive gender roles that limit the agency of women of colour to the affective realm.

### Much Ado about Masculinity

Within the frame of *West Side Story*, as in postwar American society, anxieties about race and gender are mutually reinforcing. Not only are the Sharks and Jets embroiled in a racialized conflict over territory, but as teenagers they also struggle to define and defend their ‘manhood.’ Together, the score, choreography, and the lyrics emphasize belonging as the crux of the matter. As Riff reminds the Jets, ‘when you’re a Jet, you’re a Jet all the way, from your first cigarette to your last dying day.’ They are each other’s chosen family, ‘never alone’ and ‘never disconnected.’ They are also brothers in arms, on the defense against the Sharks and often using militarized language. Robbins’s choreography embodies both the belonging and the aggressiveness in densely packed formations, lunges and prowling, and athletic leaps. Even the violence is choreographed, in cooperation with the music, which draws heavily on the then contemporary styles of bebop and cool. The words used to describe jazz where it appears in the outlines – brutal and violent – suggest the music as embodying, in and of itself, the characteristics of conflict.<sup>8</sup> And that conflict is not only racially coded, via the association with jazz, but is also an explicitly male domain. As Wells notes, the ‘Prologue’ and later ‘The Rumble’ are ‘ritualistic tableaux in which male energy, male behaviors, and male street values are reified.’<sup>9</sup> In a similar way, the music, lyrics, and choreography of ‘Cool’ demonstrate that for these boys on the cusp of adulthood, maintaining their masculinity is like walking a tightrope.

The Jets, ultimately, do not keep their cool and in the show’s deceptively boisterous 11 o’clock number, ‘Gee, Officer Krupke,’ they explain to themselves and to the audience that their hoodlum status is a failure of ‘domestic containment.’<sup>10</sup> In ascribing their troubles, albeit jokingly, to a ‘social disease,’ the Jets turn our gaze to systemic issues. As the representative youth, Action is bounced from Krupke the police officer, to a judge, to a psychologist, and finally to a social worker who recommends ‘a year in the pen,’ presumably starting the cycle over again. Most of the song focuses on the deficits of the Jets’ home lives, and alcohol and drug abuse figure

prominently in this disordered domestic scene (grandpa is 'always plastered' and grandma 'pushes tea'). However, it is the inability to correctly perform gender roles that drives the verse home: 'my sister wears a mustache, my brother wears a dress. Goodness gracious, that's why I'm a mess.' The social contract of the 1950s placed the burden of forming a proper adult masculinity on the mother. As Elaine Tyler May explains, 'mothers who neglected their children bred criminals; mothers who over-indulged their sons turned them into passive, weak, and effeminate "perverts."' <sup>11</sup> In the 2009 cast recording, Curtis Holbrook lisps the final words of the stanza, 'that's why I'm a mess,' signifying what sort of 'sickness' we should presume Action has.

In order to belong, at least to one another, the Jets must both affirm their whiteness, counter to the Sharks, and prove their masculinity by rejecting the feminine. Little wonder, then, that they constantly dismiss their girlfriends, Graziella and Velma, and the gender non-conforming Anybodys. Moreover, when we realize that this virulent form of white masculinity is a driving force throughout the musical, it seems inevitable that the tragic ending is guaranteed by the rape of Anita, a woman of colour. It is also worth noting that the sexual violence was not demanded by the source material. Killing Bernardo as the Tybalt figure was dictated by Shakespeare's text, but the 'taunting' of Anita is an invention for the musical. That said, the authors' decisions should be considered in light of the fact that for them, the threat of being diagnosed as 'sociologically sick' was very real, given that all of them were gay and Jewish – two communities often under suspicion.

## Miscegenation, Assimilation, and the Feminine Other

The Jet Girls and the Shark Girls are different sides of the same coin. They are young, but striving for an adult stylishness, and they challenge the authority of the boys they run with. Before the War Council at Doc's store, Graziella sasses Riff and Diesel as they attempt to dismiss them: 'I and Velma ain't kid stuff, neither.' <sup>12</sup> Similarly, Anita warns Bernardo, 'I am an American girl now. I don't wait.' When he responds with a nostalgic invocation of Puerto Rico, where women know their place, her retort undercuts his masculinity: 'Back home, little boys don't have war councils.' <sup>13</sup> With their roles conditioned by gender *and* race, the girls represent two related concepts that complicate the theme of belonging: the desire to assimilate and the fear of miscegenation.

Although the parts for the Jet Girls are small, with no music of their own, they do have a symbolic impact. *Romeo and Juliet* is a story about inter-marriage and adapting it to a 1950s context updated that tribalism to fit current racist and xenophobic taboos. The fear of miscegenation is clearest in the 'get together dance' as moderated by Glad Hand, which produces exactly that outcome – Shark Boys with Jet Girls and vice versa. As described in the stage directions: 'There is a moment of tenseness, then Bernardo reaches across the Jet Girl opposite for Anita's hand.' The 1961 film adaptation, which addresses racism even more directly than the musical, heightens this moment. The statuesque blonde Carole D'Andrea as Velma stops opposite George Chakris's Bernardo and it is she who recoils, offended. Throughout the swing era, desegregated dance floors, like the one at the Savoy in Harlem, had produced anxious commentary.<sup>14</sup> On this 1950s dance floor, white girls are used to confirm that any interaction between Jets and Sharks other than fighting is unacceptable.

On the other side, there is Maria, more naïve than Graziella or Velma, but crucially a temptation to a white man. According to Wells, Maria is a figure familiar from the exotic operas and operettas of the nineteenth century as 'an exotic, ethnically differentiated character who woos – or despite her chaste passivity, attracts – a white male tenor, often to his demise.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Tony and Maria's romance does get the white male tenor (or leading man) killed. Given that Bernstein's stated goal was to make a point about racism, and the racial dynamics encoded in the music, dancing, and characterizations, it is plausible to read this inter-gang romance as an analogy to miscegenation. Notably, the serenade 'Maria' is composed out of the dissonant tritone interval that unifies the score as a whole and which is fundamentally unsettled, as an interval that splits the octave in equal halves. Although the interval resolves in this number, it emphasizes Tony's yearning and foreshadows that in captivating him, Maria has become a destabilizing force within the score and the narrative. Though she is a milder personality than Anita, Maria is no less dangerous as a magnetic feminine Other.

We never see enough of Tony and Maria's romance to know the basis of their attraction, but her appeal to the audience at least is made clear in 'I Feel Pretty.' At the same time, the song functions as a container for Maria, confining her to the realm of the affective. Where we might have expected an 'I want' song from her, we have instead a song that simply states how she feels: pretty, witty, gay, charming. The fast triple meter that indicates both waltz and an Aragonese *jota* (two charming dances), the flamenco-inspired flourishes and castanets all add to her exotic allure while the largely

strophic form and the straightforward harmonies keep her expression simple. This is also one of the few songs where the tritone interval is not present, perhaps indicating that Bernstein wanted the song to be uncomplicated. Moreover, Sondheim's later admission that the rhymes he gave Maria in the song were too sophisticated for her is revealing. Rather than clever, Maria is meant to be straightforward, as Laurents confirms in the dialogue. When they meet, Tony asks if she is joking, meaning deceiving him, and she responds: 'I have not yet learned how to joke that way.'<sup>16</sup> Although naïve, the power of her feelings and those she evokes in Tony lead the hero to his doom.

Anita, on the other hand, is a force in her own right and gives voice to the strategic move that also preoccupied the musical's creators: assimilation. Andrea Most has provided an overview of the assimilation narrative and its prevalence among the music theatre works of Jewish-American creators. Those earlier narratives, like *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922), were common enough for Bernstein, Laurents, and Robbins to be worried about repeating a cliché. In response, they moved *East Side Story* to the Upper West Side and shuffled the ethnicities involved. As they take the place of the Jewish gang/Capulets, there is a marked tendency to acculturate among the Shark Girls. When we first see Anita, remaking Maria's dress in the bridal shop, she is described as a Puerto Rican girl wearing a flashy dress that is an 'unsuccessful attempt at movie-star-American.'<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, Consuelo is described as having 'patently' bleached blonde hair. These efforts to assimilate are characterized as deliberate and perhaps overdone – not just American, but 'movie-star' American.

The issue of assimilation comes to a head as Bernardo and the Sharks depart for the War Council. When Anita insists on her Americanness, Bernardo mocks her by addressing her in Spanish and with all of her saint and matrilineal names – 'Anita Josefina Teresita . . . Beatriz del Carmen Marguerita, etcetera, etcetera' – a naming practice one might downplay or curtail as part of acculturating.<sup>18</sup> He is crudely illustrating that she is a first-generation immigrant, as opposed to the second- or third-generation Jets. Bernardo and Anita recognize the same problems, but their reactions to the Jets are conditioned by their gender roles: beating them versus joining them.<sup>19</sup>

Anita and the Shark girls are positioned as cultural mediators and 'America' is Anita's argument for assimilation. Working on a lyrical and musical level, it creates a cosmopolitan, hybridized style that captures the mixing of communities. Rather than a faithful evocation of any particular Puerto Rican genre, it is a mashup of the Mexican *huapango* (from which the



song takes its characteristic cross-rhythms), the Puerto Rican *seis*, and the *seis de bomba* (the origin of the verbal rejoinders from Anita and the other girls).<sup>20</sup> In addition, these folkloric traits are blended with the blues, a brassy orchestration more characteristic of Latin jazz, and the Broadway vernacular. The slow prelude captures the ‘spirit, if not the letter, of the *seis*,’ with its gentle syncopations and orchestration featuring Spanish guitar, guiro, and claves, as Rosalia sings about the beauty of Puerto Rico.<sup>21</sup> But when Anita takes over the melody, she inserts a prominent blue note as she declares: ‘I like the island Manhattan. Smoke on your pipe and put that in!’ This slang expression and bluesy turn usher in the chorus which touts the benefits of living in the US. Doubling down on the role of women as cultural mediators, both film adaptations gender the disagreement, with Bernardo and the boys opposing Anita and the girls, emphasizing the resistance of race to assimilation. The future is only alright ‘if you’re all white’ in America. The women, their perspective, see more social freedoms and economic opportunities.

Even within the original text of the musical, the conflict is immutable, only yielding a little in the final, unspoken moments of the ‘Somewhere’ reprise. We could read Anita’s fate as determined by the tragic arc, but that would ignore the confluence of race and gender that we have already seen in the characterization of the Jets, the use of the Jet Girls as a device, and in Maria’s role. Anita is a type of exoticized female lead related to Maria, but still distinctive. In operatic terms, Anita is a Carmen-like figure whereas Maria is more like the demure Micaëla. According to Elizabeth Wood, characters and singers like Anita, Chita Rivera, and Rita Moreno are a threat to white patriarchy as ‘renegade figures of unbridled sexual passion: gypsy and Jew as the exotic, feminized, non-Western Other, the object of the male gaze whose return of the gaze with teasing defiance, scorn, or indifference enhances her allure for male desire.’<sup>22</sup> ‘Teasing defiance’ captures Anita’s attitude toward Bernardo and the flashy choreography and costuming that attends almost every iteration of ‘America’ is certainly alluring. The parallels to *Carmen* would have been clear to the collaborators, all of whom were familiar with opera.

Although initially intended as a parallel to Juliet’s nurse in Shakespeare’s play, Anita’s role here is also embedded as part of a secondary romantic couple as dictated by the demands of opera, operetta, and musicals. As a result, there were some difficulties in defining her character, since she was neither significantly older like Juliet’s maid (or Aunt Eller in *Oklahoma!*) nor a peer like Rosaline (or Ado Annie). Given the struggles, when Robbins wrote to Bernstein and Laurents on 18 October 1955, he was afraid that Anita would fall into cliché as ‘the typical downbeat blues torch-bearing 2nd



character,' citing Julie in *Show Boat* (1927). As a result, Robbins predicted, 'the audience will know that somewhere a "my man done left me" blues is coming up for her.'<sup>23</sup> In this comment, Robbins clearly reads Anita as a woman of colour. Julie is passing at the beginning of *Show Boat* but is later revealed to have 'Negro blood' and it is that miscegenation that puts her narrative on a tragic course. The torch song 'Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man' provides the audience with their first hint that Julie is a 'tragic mulatta' figure when Queenie, the Mammy figure of the musical, recognizes it. The blues singers and characters Robbins was thinking of, as well as those whom Bernstein most admired, like Billie Holiday, were Black women.<sup>24</sup> In turn, Anita and her version of femininity draw expressive power from these voices.

Small changes to Anita's character (lowering her age) and the avoidance of the blues (for the most part) in her musical characterization helped avoid the cliché Robbins feared. However, there was no easy solution to the threat Anita posed to the social order, whether the collaborators were conscious of it or not. Of course, Maria's message to Tony has to go astray, as does the messenger Friar Lawrence sends in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the expediences of musical theatre meant the messenger had to come from among the existing cast. Anita is close at hand and in terms of her own character development, perhaps recognizes that Maria's goal and her own desire to belong in America are sufficiently aligned. The sexual violence she experiences, however, is not called for by the plot. It is a consequence of the demands of race and gender that intersect in her person and the legacy of the unruly women of colour who are her theatrical ancestors. Extending the work of Susan McClary and Nelly Furman on the figure of Carmen, Wood proposes that such voices can be heard 'Sapophonically,' as a 'rupture and escape from patriarchal order,' an order that insists that 'runaway female desire, Carmen's "rebel bird", must be captured, caged, crushed.'<sup>25</sup> This is doubly true for Black women in America, like Julie, who dare to express their desires. Ironically, it is Anita, with her faith in the assimilation narrative of 'America,' who becomes the most forceful example of its failure. However, the invocation of the 'Sapphonic' points to the way out of the racial trap that *West Side Story* exposes and it does so through two women's emotional relationship with each other.

## The Redemptive (Colourblind) Feminine

The song complex of 'A Boy Like That' and 'I Have a Love' sits uneasily within *West Side Story* for many reasons. The discomfort makes sense narratively: Anita has just lost her love and Maria is striving to keep hers

alive. Although appropriate to the situation, the wild contrasts in mood and style can be awkward to hear – particularly Maria’s operatic exclamation ‘Oh no, Anita, no!’ (Performances by Kiri Te Kanawa and Cecilia Bartoli have made clear the dramatic potential in this line specifically.) Indeed, that cry, the duet in counterpoint that follows, and later the *parlando* transition, seem to come from a different world than the songs on either side. The jagged rhythms and contours of ‘A Boy Like That’ are aggressive and Anita’s scansion is awkward. According to Wolf this disorder emphasizes both her fury and that English is her second language.<sup>26</sup> Relatedly, Wells hears Anita’s music as part and parcel of the Hispanicization of the *Shark Girls*.<sup>27</sup> These are both valid interpretations, but the passage would still be musically unsettling even if the language were more fluent. Moreover, this passage has none of the folkloric influences of ‘America,’ rather it embodies the jazz-based, modernist violence of the ‘Prologue’ or ‘The Rumble.’ Anita is adopting what has been, throughout this musical, a masculine style and that cooption is just one of the ways that this pair of songs destabilizes the patriarchal forces driving the narrative.

On the surface, Anita and Maria argue about Tony’s fate, but they also negotiate the relationship between the redemptive feminine and the assimilation narrative. In a striking reversal, driven by her recent experience, Anita rejects the notion of integrating into American culture, warning Maria: ‘stick to your own kind.’ The 2009 revival reinforced this sentiment by having Anita return to Spanish for ‘A Boy Like That.’ Maria initially argues back in Spanish, before switching to English to reprimand Anita: ‘You should know better. You were in love, or so you said.’ After struggling to be heard by Anita throughout ‘A Boy Like That,’ Maria now has her attention and can deepen what Wolf describes as her ‘pedagogy of emotion’ in the second song, ‘I Have a Love.’<sup>28</sup> This pair of songs ‘develops an emotional shift, a change brought about by one woman’s influence on another’ and is as ‘intensely homosocial’ as the rest of the musical has been.<sup>29</sup> In this moment, the balance tilts from the masculine kinship of the Jets toward these two women. In Wolf’s reading, Anita and Maria’s extended duet ‘upends the heterosexual romance entirely, altering and feminizing the affective organization of the musical by linking the two women in intensely grounded affiliation and mutual understanding.’<sup>30</sup> Wells also focuses on their shared place in a violent, masculine world in which this argument between two women represents ‘the only successful and rational mediation of conflict in the entire work.’<sup>31</sup> Wolf hears this kind of female duet as disrupting the heterosexual drive of the musical whereas Wells hears it as offering up the traditional redemptive role for

women, at least temporarily. The latter reading is much closer to the conscious decision-making of the authors, in which the survival of 'Juliet' was a key decision.<sup>32</sup> The nature of Maria's persuasion bears further investigation, then, as do the narrative results.

According to Wells's reading, which she acknowledges is just one possibility, 'I Have a Love' grounds redeeming femininity in whiteness. When Maria shifts to the language of opera, she ushers in a slower, more moderate ballad, which Wells hears as closer to 'classical' style (notoriously the realm of dead, white men). The result is that 'both women have shed their ethnic identity by the end of the number.'<sup>33</sup> Wells sees this as one of the tragedies of the show. The women's wisdom becomes increasingly central to the narrative, but to 'convey the horror of a men's world . . . they also must abjure their ethnic allegiances, a primary source of their spirit and group identity.'<sup>34</sup> This scene hijacks Anita's own self-professed drive toward Americanization, dictating conformity instead of the hybridity of 'America' as the terms of inclusion.

However, another interpretation is evident in the drafting process and ultimately in the score: 'I Have a Love' proposes colourblindness as the solution to the problem of belonging. In as much as Robbins was searching for contemporary touchstones, the collaborators were also seeking to present a universalized theme. The desire to address intolerance in America was always present, even as the cast of characters shifted from early outlines, through scene lists and drafts of the book. As he wrote in his copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, Bernstein had in mind 'racial intolerance,' but also a specific setting at Passover/Easter and a Catholic vs. Jewish conflict.<sup>35</sup> These first thoughts in response to Shakespeare's text reveal the ways in which ethnicity, religion, and race were overlapping concepts for him and his contemporaries. One early outline also proposed a scene at a 'festival, possibly Chinese,' which together with Anita's proposed last name (Ellis, as in the island) demonstrates how the collaborators were attempting to capture the diversity of New York's immigrant community.<sup>36</sup> Another early outline, even closer to the Shakespeare and in which both principals still die, Juliet takes her poison and wanders the streets deliriously. The authors propose that 'as she walks through the streets it's as though – from what we see and hear – she is walking through alleys of prejudice of different kinds.'<sup>37</sup> These attempts to generalize about prejudice depend on what George Lipsitz calls the supposed 'universal interchangeability' of categories of identity.<sup>38</sup> Only this leveling of difference could allow for the solution offered in 'Somewhere,' a song in which prejudice disappears because people simply let go of such differences, including race.

In its formulation of utopia, 'Somewhere' imagines a colourblind America and 'I Have a Love' lays out the path to that vision. However, colourblind logic has often been used to shore up racist structures, perpetuating racial inequality, because its side-effect is to affirm whiteness as the un-marked 'normal.' According to Lipsitz, 'the appeal to colorblindness is a claim with no content. It is a proclamation without a program, a pronouncement without a plan of action.'<sup>39</sup> Lipsitz's definition of colourblindness certainly applies to the logic of 'Somewhere' and 'I Have a Love.' The lyrics, for instance – 'peace and quiet and open air' – indicate only that this idyllic place, free from discrimination, is not a city. The definition of 'somewhere' is so unmarked as to be practically anywhere suburban, ex-urban, or rural. However, whether one hears these songs as an evocation of classical music (*pace* Wells), as a ballad in the Broadway vernacular, or some of both, the unmarked norm at work is white. It is worth noting that the first performance of 'Somewhere' was *literally* colourblind as Reri Grist sang anonymously from the orchestra pit. Laurents perhaps also tipped his hand in 2009 by having Anita switch to English as well for the duet portion of 'I Have a Love,' which vocalizes the unstated assumption that 'universal' belonging is English speaking. However, departing from Lipsitz, I would argue that in the case of *West Side Story*, this colourblindness is not empty of content, rather it overflows with *affective* content.

If we return to Wolf's idea of 'emotional pedagogy' and look carefully at the score, 'I Have a Love' takes up the themes of 'Somewhere' and completes its work. In terms of melodic content, both songs lack the unsettling tritone present in the rest of the musical. Both have simple melodies and lighter orchestrations featuring the warmth of the string section. The two songs also share organizing intervals and 'I Have a Love' manages to resolve the more open-ended structure of 'Somewhere.' The opening phrase, 'I have a love and it's all that I have,' repeats a step up from F to G (with some embellishment), recalling the major second interval of 'someday, somehow, somewhere.' In addition, the minor seventh leap that opened 'Somewhere' reappears with the words 'I love him.' The difference is that after Anita is persuaded to join the melody, they finally land the octave leap that 'Somewhere' never accomplished. This gesture is a triumphant conclusion that accompanies the words: 'Your love is your life.' The way to a colourblind utopia is, quite literally, to love enough. For Maria to love Tony enough not to care about their differences. For Anita to love Maria enough to do as she asks. The redemptive feminine *is* the plan of action.

Of course, this plan of action is not enough. The resolve of these two women of colour is ultimately overpowered by violent masculinity. As Wells

puts it, 'their responses to these atrocities are the loss of faith, the loss of compassion, and the loss of the redemptive feminine.'<sup>40</sup> Because the women's agency is limited to the affective realm – their persuasion is based in emotion and so is the solution they propose – their ability to bend the narrative arc is limited. Moreover, they are bound by gender *and* race. What Devon W. Carbado describes as 'colorblind intersectionality' does not work for women of colour; only white women can stand in for 'all women.'<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the tragedy, then, is that only after colourblindness fails as an option and Maria has experienced sufficient pain and suffering is her challenge to the racist, patriarchal social order enough to move them. She forces everyone – both gangs, Doc, the police – to hear her by holding them all at gunpoint as she stands over Tony's body. At this point, the authors of *West Side Story* deliberately chose to leave their Juliet alive and there is the smallest indication that Maria's words may have landed, as both Sharks and Jets carry Tony's body offstage behind her. But we still have a long way to go from this procession to 'Somewhere.'

### Conclusion: Un-Gendering *West Side Story*

What Anita's and Maria's fates demonstrate is that the problems of race, gender, and sexuality are inextricable. A colourblind solution fails in part because, in attempting to move past race as an issue, it does not attempt to dislodge the restrictive norms of gender roles and compulsive heterosexuality that also bind the characters. In analyses by Wolf and Wood, alternative readings of musicals and operas, as well as alternative ways of listening to performers, can give voice to otherwise unexpressed identities and even suggest alternate endings. In addition, the text of *West Side Story* itself may suggest such a queer reading in the person of Anybodys, the character who almost saves the day. It is Anybodys who warns the Jets that Chino is stalking Tony with a gun and it is Anybodys who succeeds in finding Tony just before the end. Not listening to Anybodys in that moment seals Tony's fate – too far gone in grief to heed the warning, he instead yells for Chino to come shoot him. Continually rejected for refusing to abide by gender norms, it is Anybodys who proves herself the most resilient character. The name also suggests that a universal message might be embodied by the character, both within the text of the musical and in its afterlife.

In the case of the show's leading women, their performances can be read as embodying a lesbian sensibility. According to Wolf, any woman who defies gender norms can appear lesbian because 'culturally dominant,

“commonsense” understandings of femininity weave heterosexuality into femininity’.<sup>42</sup> Examples of this ‘commonsense understanding,’ like the expectation that women serve as mediators or the idea of the redemptive feminine, are key elements of *West Side Story*. A lesbian reading is particularly apt for Anita, whose likeness to Carmen, as discussed before, makes her not only a threat to the masculine of authority of the Sharks and the Jets alike, but also a danger to the heterosexual structure of the musical as a whole. The latter is a feat, fundamentally, of performance rather than authorial intent.

Wolf’s lesbian interpretation of ‘A Boy Like That/I Have a Love’ draws on Wood’s scholarship and her own analysis of two seminal performances. The different vocal qualities of Rivera and Carol Lawrence contribute to the effect of the shift in emotional timbre halfway through the number. As heard in the original Broadway recording: ‘The last section transforms a song of conflict and conversation into an expression of love as they join together musically – Rivera’s thick, rough-edged belt and Lawrence’s clear, plaintive soprano – and sing their agreement to each other with the same notes that the (heterosexual) lovers sang to each other earlier.’<sup>43</sup> In Wolf’s reading, the intimacy this scene produces alters the terms of the musical and audiences certainly feel more sympathy for both women in this moment than for anyone else, thanks in large part to Rivera’s and Lawrence’s complementary abilities and performance choices. And to the extent that this song pair lives on in performance, other singers have the opportunity to embody different emotional realities, gender expressions, and sexualities. Indeed, the afterlife of *West Side Story* began fairly quickly, not just with the film adaptation, but also with jazz recordings based on the score, the suite of dances Bernstein excerpted and arranged (Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*), and concert and cabaret performances of the songs.

One performance that offers up something like an alternate ending for the characters can be heard in a concert given by Carol Burnett and Julie Andrews at Carnegie Hall in 1962. Throughout the evening, which was also broadcast on CBS, Carol’s and Julie’s performances ‘repetitively underline how they complement, harmonize, and complete one another,’ which taken together can position the two, implicitly, as a butch-femme couple. In Wolf’s reading, ‘Carol is Julie’s “other” much more so than any man with whom Julie performed.’<sup>44</sup> Their rendition of ‘A Boy Like That/I Have a Love’ comes at the end of a Broadway medley in which they cover a broad swath of repertoire, ‘singing songs representative of the various epochs or eras, if you will, as they were handed down through the ages and into history,’ as Julie archly suggests. (Carol’s response: ‘What?’) In their

performance of 'I Have a Love,' the grainy timbre of Carol's voice displaces the typical male role as counterbalance to Julie's clear coloratura. As a result, we hear two women within the kind of romantic, symmetrical frame that had previously been the territory of (presumed) heterosexual romantic pairs.<sup>45</sup> Notably, the medley for Carol and Julie stops at this point, not because they are out of Broadway history but because their relationship has reached its emotional end-point. If the medley and the program as a whole are about demonstrating their affinity, the two could not be closer than at this moment.

In a similar vein to these lesbian readings of Anita and Maria, the character of Anybodys invites queer listening practices and identifications among fans of the musical. Described in the book as a tomboy, Anybodys can also be understood as a transgender boy or a non-binary person. As Wells points out, the yearning for belonging and normalcy expressed in 'Somewhere' is perhaps most perfectly embodied by Anybodys: 'Although we can clearly see what is required for the other characters to escape – for Puerto Ricans and whites to stop fighting, for Tony and Maria to run away – the metaphor of an incomplete or possible escape suits Anybodys more closely. There is, in fact, no solution to her dilemma of not fitting in anywhere.'<sup>46</sup> One significant story beat, however, does allow Anybodys belonging as a Jet. Having delivered the crucial news that Chino is after Tony, Anybodys finally gets an assignment on behalf of the gang. Before they go their separate ways, Action says: 'Ya done good, buddy boy.' Anybodys responds: 'Thanks, daddy-o.'<sup>47</sup> This moment of acceptance, affirming the role Anybodys has wanted throughout the show, stands in stark contrast to Tony's dismissal later. As Anybodys attempts to get him to safety, he yells: 'You're a girl! be a girl! Beat it!'<sup>48</sup> His rejection attempts to put Anybodys back in place as a girl, but the writers of the musical recognized that their character was not 'like any other girl on earth' – as lyrics from a cut song 'Like Everybody Else' confirm. Whereas A-Rab and Baby John want to be taller or older, Anybodys' predicament is profound: 'Why can't I be male?' Removed almost as quickly as it was added in August of 1957, during the show's out-of-town trial in Washington, DC, the song nonetheless opened a window to another reading of Anybodys, the traces of which still remain in the dialogue and action of the book.

The casting of iris menas, a transgender non-binary actor, in the role of Anybodys in the 2021 film adaptation of *West Side Story* highlights the importance of the character to transgender representation. Likewise, Tony Kushner's small but significant adaptations in the script confront Anybodys' problem more directly than other versions. Most striking is



the clear trauma inflicted shortly before ‘Gee, Officer Krupke’ in another violent confrontation with a fellow Jet. A-Rab says he can verify that Anybodys is a girl because he pantsed them. Anybodys’ response is defiant and comes with fists: ‘I ain’t no goddamn girl!’ (A similar fight in earlier versions stemmed from an insult to Anybodys’ sister instead.) It was never a stretch to read Anybodys as transgender, given that the book for the musical and the 1957 film script both eventually recognize the character’s gender identity and expression. The act of a fellow Jet affirming Anybodys’ true self – ‘buddy boy’ – resonates with other affirmations like correct pronoun usage. This reading has been widely adopted by fandom as ‘head-canon’ for Anybodys – what the text might not confirm, but what a fan assumes to be true. Even the 1950s descriptor ‘tomboy’ can be translated into contemporary notions about the possibilities of gender identity and expression beyond the binary. Kushner’s script shifts the audience toward the realization that Anybodys is trans before there was a word for it and menas’s performance hints that his acceptance may have come too late. Having only recently moved from outsider to insider, he is capable of understanding that others who are marginalized are also at risk. Indeed, immediately after the affirmation of ‘buddy boy,’ he runs into Anita on her way into the drugstore and warns her quietly but urgently: ‘leave.’

The queerness of Anybodys is part of what makes them perhaps the closest to a universal character in *West Side Story*. The name Anybodys rings true, as does Sarah Frankcom’s decision to have them sing ‘Somewhere’ and deliver the musical’s message. While Spielberg and Kushner did not recapitulate Frankcom’s choice, they also chose a different performer for ‘Somewhere’ in a move meant to universalize its message. They created a role for Rita Moreno as Valentina, the Puerto Rican widow of Doc who now runs the drugstore and shelters Tony. Like Anybodys she stands between categories. She at least somewhat rejects assimilation: ‘I married a gringo. He (Riff) thinks that makes me a gringa, which it don’t and I ain’t.’ But she is in turn rejected by Anita who, after the older woman interrupts the Jets’ assault, calls her a traitor and rejects her help: ‘yo no soy tu hija!’ Valentina’s version of ‘Somewhere’ reads like a prayer, one rooted in her own past and concerned for the future of the next generation, spanning the generational divide in the hope of breaking down others.

In writing a musical about immigrant youth in New York City, the authors of *West Side Story* confronted intertwined anxieties about sexuality, gender, and race. As a tragedy, it challenged the standards of American musical theatre and fundamentally changed the genre. However, the slim

hope of belonging offered at the end of the musical effectively retreads a colourblind, assimilative (or integrationist) path taken by Civil Rights advocates and opponents of progress alike. This deferred redemption of the Sharks and the Jets is also gendered – it both depends on the imagination of women like Anita and Maria and produces their suffering. However, we can still imagine a path to 'Somewhere' out of the ending of *West Side Story* (an invitation Bernstein hands us in the score) if we look to the work of performers and spectators. If we recognize the interplay of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race we can consider solutions (read: performances and political actions) that undo multiple restrictions or offer multiple ways of belonging. We might also, as invited by the character of Anybodys, expand our ideas about gender beyond the binary and un-gender our vision of 'Somewhere,' making it a space that welcomes multiplicity and complexity. Belonging is not just a 'boy thing' or a 'girl thing' – it's for anybody and everybody.

## Notes

1. Elizabeth A. Wells, *West Side Story: Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 160.
2. 'West Side Story: Birth of a Classic,' [www.loc.gov/exhibits/westsidestory/westsidestory-exhibit.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/westsidestory/westsidestory-exhibit.html), accessed 28 May 2022. Used by permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.
3. Stacy Wolf, *A Problem like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4–5.
4. For Crenshaw's reflection on intersectionality and the evolution of critical race theory see: Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Unmasking Colorblindness in the Law: Lessons from the Formation of Critical Race Theory,' in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, edited by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019). For a summary of the evolution of the term in feminist studies see: Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, 'Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,' *Signs* 38/4 (Summer 2013): 785–810, 785–88.
5. Typescript outline (1955), box 73, folder 10, Leonard Bernstein Collection (hereafter LBC), Library of Congress.
6. Jennifer C. Nash, 'Re-Thinking Intersectionality,' *Feminist Review* 89 (2008): 1–15.
7. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 797.

8. Katherine Baber, *Leonard Bernstein and the Language of Jazz* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 162.
9. Wells, 143.
10. May's term for the social and domestic restrictions placed on women postwar references Secretary of State George F. Kennan's strategy of containment regarding the Soviet Union. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008; orig. 1988), 16–18.
11. May, 96.
12. WSS script, 49.
13. WSS script, 41.
14. Baber, 83–84.
15. Wells, 144.
16. WSS script, 25.
17. Version B, box 73, folder 10, LBC. For Andrea Most's study of assimilation in the United States by Jewish-American creators of Broadway musicals, see her *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
18. WSS script, 38.
19. Baber, 177–78.
20. Wells, 124–25.
21. Wells, 124.
22. Elizabeth Wood, 'Sapphonic,' in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2006; 1994), 43.
23. Letter from Robbins to Bernstein and Laurents (18 October 1955), box 73, folder 10, LBC.
24. Baber, 89.
25. Wood, 44.
26. Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 46.
27. Wells, 154–55.
28. Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 47.
29. Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 49.
30. Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 50.
31. Wells, 154.
32. Three draft scripts exist for *West Side Story*, one in which the double-death at the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* is preserved, one in which both lovers survive, and one that matches the eventual ending. Script Versions A, B, and C, box 73, folder 10, LBC.
33. Wells, 155.
34. Wells, 155.
35. Annotated copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, box 73, folder 10, LBC.
36. 'Gang Bang' outline, box 73, folder 10, LBC.
37. *Romeo and Juliet* outline – 2 acts, box 73, folder 10, LBC.

38. George Lipsitz, 'The Sounds of Silence: How Race Neutrality Preserves White Supremacy,' in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, edited by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 40.
39. Lipsitz, 24.
40. Wells, 155.
41. Devon W. Carbado, 'Colorblind Intersectionality,' in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, edited by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 210.
42. Wolf, *A Problem like Maria*, 41.
43. Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 48.
44. Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 133.
45. Wood, 36–37.
46. Wells, 165.
47. WSS script, 103.
48. WSS script, 115.