

11 | *West Side Story* and the Intersections of Class, Colourism, and Racism

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Leonard Bernstein always feared his legacy would be that of ‘the composer of *West Side Story*.’¹ Doubtless he had already enjoyed celebrity stature long before the show; Bernstein had been hurled into the upper echelons of society as a young man. After stepping down from the post of Music Director of the New York Philharmonic in 1969, the Maestro continued to hobnob with the likes of the Kennedys, Andy Warhol, and the Jewish progressive music set in New York. Bernstein’s collaborators in the show that secured his place in music history, though perhaps not as famous as Bernstein himself, were all highly successful in their respective fields and thus could be found socializing in similar circles. In fact, at least three of the four would be in attendance at the infamous soirée that inspired Tom Wolfe’s controversial essay, ‘Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s’ (1970): a scathing indictment of classism and racism among elite liberals, as well as the decadence of white privilege.² In examining the essay alongside the ways in which class and race intersect in *West Side Story*, one sees reflected clearly both the progressive spirit of the collaborators and what could be called their colonialist and commercial sensibilities; indeed, just as today, we must remember that prejudices often hide behind education and self-professed leftism.

Broadway and the ‘Culture Industry’

One could assert that Bernstein bemoaned his predicted legacy because he long yearned for not just commercial but also critical success as a composer of concert music and opera. Long before Bernstein’s entrance on the scene, however, Broadway was dominated by late capitalist economic considerations not unlike those in other sectors of industry. Certainly, Bernstein and his collaborators pushed boundaries in innovative and unprecedented ways. Ultimately, however, they were still subject to the ambitions of their financial backers, and thus limited in the way all music is when the creators are paid commodities and music their product.³ As one of America’s most

emblematic forms of musical entertainment, Broadway is thoroughly embedded in what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno dubbed the 'Culture Industry.' Briefly put, this refers to a society that is totally economically driven, where cultural 'products' undergo increasing levels of reification, boosted by the mass media.⁴ Adorno argued repeatedly throughout his career that in late capitalist society nothing is held sacrosanct and above fetishization; the approach to 'manufacturing' arts, theatre, film, literature, and other cultural idioms is no longer distinguishable from the means by which products are kept stocked on grocery shelves.⁵ Much like the multitude of brands that grow increasingly similar based on consumer taste, music and other arts are fetishized in the name of the free market. Tin Pan Alley, for example, churned out a constant barrage of songs not unlike goods traveling down a factory conveyor belt, often in the process exploiting musical styles developed by people of colour. Speedy proliferation and delivery of songs were often more important than artistic quality. Such an approach, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue convincingly, is also an exhibition of the thought values encouraged by the greater establishment and their emotional manipulation of society. By streamlining American culture, conformity, superficiality, and standardization in all other areas of society are bolstered; the mass media consequently reinforces the continued production of art by saturating our society with its product to increase the appeal further still.⁶ Those who extol the virtues of the free market argue that it creates more choices; in fact, the 'Culture Industry' can produce a self-reinforcing system of limited choices and standardization, traits that often define authoritarian societies.

Class and the Creators

To be sure, the collaborators who created *West Side Story* all enjoyed high social status and the trappings of wealth; they also, however, were genuinely committed to bringing about social change through their work. The political beliefs of the three older men – Robbins, Bernstein, and Laurents – were far enough left that the career of each was affected to some extent by McCarthyism. From the outset, however, *West Side Story* was perhaps limited by the 'Culture Industry' and the manner in which the latter shaped the men's own values concerning class and race. Regardless of this potential influence and the musical's commercial success, the collaborators were truly groundbreaking in confronting important social issues of the times: particularly in a realm of the arts often reserved for light-hearted

entertainment and the many conformist tropes encouraged by the 'Culture Industry.' The notion of a Broadway musical that depicted youth gangs and the violence they caused along with the hatred and racism that brought about their formation was subversive in 1957. The show's creators did wrestle with strictures posed by their financiers, determined to preserve the artistic integrity of the show. Its unusual and violent nature made it difficult for head producer Cheryl Crawford to raise money, and in April 1957 she pulled out of the project. (See Laura MacDonald's chapter on the show's producers for more on this [Chapter 6].) The social, musical, and dramatic significance of *West Side Story* make plain that its creators were intent on a new approach to the musical in which controversial social issues were not just clever gimmicks for shock value; indeed, they were being centered for one of the first times in Broadway history.⁷ No work, however, should be above scrutiny, nor should its creators.⁸ *West Side Story* has been performed all over the world for decades, and continues to be embraced globally as a masterpiece. As long as this work remains such an important part of the repertory – and given the show's inherently serious nature – scholars must resist the temptation to ignore those elements that can be criticized.

In 1970, journalist Tom Wolfe was ready to take the creators of the show to task in a controversy that directly confronts the issues of class and white privilege. Three of the collaborators – Bernstein, with Jerome Robbins and Stephen Sondheim guilty by association – received a thorough literary mauling that year in his 'Radical Chic,' a prescient essay that has remained relevant, all the more so in the era of Black Lives Matter and George Floyd. Bernstein, with his A-list attendees as accessories, is lambasted for his classism, casual racism, and shocking tone deafness concerning the extent of his white privilege. Bernstein was hosting a benefit soirée for the legal aid of several prominent Black Panthers. Wolfe introduces the concept of 'radical chic,' a term coined by the author to describe the way in which rich socialites and celebrities collect social issues to champion not with sincere conviction, but because it adds to their socially progressive credentials and helps them climb the social ladder. While he does not use the term itself, the author refers implicitly to what writer Teju Cole dubbed the 'White Savior Industrial Complex,' a systemic aspect of capitalist society in which Black people are reified for the emotional gratification of the white saviour. Not unlike the charges made by Wolfe against Bernstein, Cole argues: 'The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.'⁹ Perhaps with good reason, Wolfe indeed considered Bernstein to be part of that very

problem, savagely lampooning the musician for suggesting that he had known discrimination similar to that experienced by Black Panther leader Don Cox. Bernstein asked Cox how he felt being in his luxurious penthouse: 'When you walk into this house, into this building . . . you must feel infuriated!' Cox felt 'embarrassed' but assured Bernstein, 'I don't get uptight about all that . . .,' then relating how recently he exited ' . . . the courthouse in Queens and there was this off-duty pig going by . . . see . . . and he gives me the finger. That's the pig's way of letting you know he's got his eye on you.' Cox admitted that made him angry, causing Bernstein to respond, 'God, . . . most of the people in this room have had a problem about being unwanted!'¹⁰ Wolfe's portrait of Bernstein is devastating: A famous, rich white man who believed himself capable of understanding the feeling of rejection that Don Cox would have felt in that situation, probably because he was Jewish and gay and had known prejudice, but unable at that moment to accept how different his life experiences were to those of Cox.

We cannot separate such snapshots of Bernstein the man from Bernstein the composer, Jewish musical champion, and conductor who primarily led performances of works by his fellow white composers. In addressing these complex biographical constructions, we initially come across far more questions than answers. The significance, however, begins when we actively confront and decolonize history while remaining sensitive to the challenges Jewish American composers such as Bernstein faced. To be sure, he understood prejudice well as both a gay man and first-generation American Jew coming of age during the Holocaust – nonetheless, he enjoyed a degree of privilege his colleagues of colour did not.

In similarly poor taste to his conversation with Don Cox and decades prior, Bernstein had dedicated his Harvard undergraduate thesis to racial elements in American music, assigning these works in their unadulterated form to an inferior stage of development and lauding the multiculturalism and what he considered sophisticated use of jazz as realized by the likes of Copland and Gershwin. Given his undergraduate thesis at Harvard, Bernstein clearly considered himself an 'expert' on the 'natural development' of multiculturalism in music: regrettably, he persisted in confusing forced assimilation, assumed authorship, and uncredited cultural appropriation with promoting a diverse picture of the 'American dream' – allegedly accessible to all.¹¹ At best, Bernstein's thesis, written at the age of 20, was haughty and dismissive of colleagues of colour who possessed similar merit and musical training, such as William Grant Still; at worst, the ideas assumed superiority and outright entitlement to assert ownership

over elevating Black music to a perhaps 'high art' form as heard in music by Copland and others.

In examining Bernstein's magnum opus, how do such issues of class, colourism, and racism intersect? In what ways did the collaborators' subtle racism manifest in *West Side Story*? Did Bernstein engage in cultural appropriation of Latinx and African American musical materials? These are all questions that must be addressed in any critical analysis of the work.

Class, Colourism, and Racism in *West Side Story*

In many regards, *West Side Story* is centered on issues of class, and this was indeed always the intention, from the days in which Bernstein, Robbins, and Laurents entertained the idea of an 'East Side Story,' which was to be based on rival Irish Catholic and Jewish immigrants on New York's Lower East Side. In essence, this would represent the ethnic struggle between two white outgroups who both experienced discrimination, with the Catholic populace still enjoying more privilege than their Jewish counterparts. Eventually, the idea evolved into the Jets (Polish or Eastern European whites) and the Sharks (Puerto Ricans). From the outset, the Latinx gang is assigned the more menacing name, with 'Sharks' conjuring gruesome images of dangerous predators ready to attack at any moment. It is impossible to know whether the naming of the gangs itself was an unconscious expression of racism; however, it is among other aspects of the show that could have been more culturally sensitive.

In terms of casting, however, there were more insidious forces at work, particularly in the 1961 film version. There has been much discussion over the years about the decision to cast Carol Lawrence, a white woman, in the role of Maria for the original stage rendition. Did the creative team simply defer to their own racist colourblindness? Did they intend for Maria to represent a lighter-skinned Puerto Rican who would therefore appear more desirable and more chaste? When we compare Maria and the darker-skinned Anita, their characters are almost opposites. Where Maria is naïve and virginal, Anita is portrayed as sex-crazed and sassy. When the Jets meet Maria near the end of the show after Chino has killed Tony, they are deferential; when they encounter Anita at the drugstore where she has come to deliver a message to Tony from Maria, they sexually assault her, implying that she was 'asking for it.' While this was likely meant as a harsh criticism of sexual violence, when seen in the

context of a greater narrative, one wonders if Anita's darker skin tone was – consciously or unconsciously – correlated to her characterization.¹²

While Bernstein had little involvement in the film version of *West Side Story*, the set was rife with colourism. The filmmakers insisted that Rita Moreno, the Latinx performer who played Anita, wear brownface along with her castmates, Natalie Wood and George Chakiris. Moreno has shared the treatment to which she had been subjected:

We all had the same color makeup, it was a very different time . . . I remember saying to the makeup man one day, because it was like putting mud on my face, it was really dark and I'm a fairly fair Hispanic, and I said to the makeup man one day 'My God! Why do we all have to be the same color? Puerto Ricans are French and Spanish . . .' And it's true, we are very many different colors, we're Taino Indian, we are Black some of us. And the makeup man actually said to me, 'What? Are you a racist?' I was so flabbergasted that I couldn't come back with an answer.¹³

It is important to note that the show's original collaborators were not involved in the decision to use brownface, but this was indeed the culture that surrounded the show. Those who made the film recruited a very white cast, which can also be said about the original Broadway production.

What about the lyrical and literary content of the show? Is it inherently racist? In fact, just as in the case of radical chic, the collaborators almost certainly intended to express the injustice that the immigrant faced. Class is represented, not inaccurately, as being tied to colour. We see the honest working-class man in Doc; the menacing, racist police officer in Officer Krupke; and the leadership of the white supremacist system is represented by the white detective, Lt. Schrank. As the show progresses, Schrank makes clear that he holds in higher regard the white European immigrant children who make up the Jets. This too demonstrates an important social truth: there is a racial hierarchy in the country in which one's relative proximity to whiteness determines social status and general worth as a human being. In *West Side Story*, even amongst gang members, white criminals are treated with more humanity. There is a sense in the detective's conversations with the Jets that perhaps not all hope is lost for the white gang; the Latinx one, however, must be taken down immediately. The detective appeals to race and colour when he attempts to join forces with the white gang members. As Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz demonstrates in Chapter 10 in this volume, it is actually the Puerto Ricans for whom family life seems to be more important in the show, and the Jets seem to be more devoted to juvenile delinquency.

The creators of *West Side Story* also likely believed that utilizing jazz and Latinx musical materials gave the show a tolerant, internationalist flavor.

Musical tropes from Spanish-speaking cultures also were significant in American popular culture of the 1950s and Bernstein had already shown a fondness for them in earlier compositions, although never to the same extent as in this score. Without consulting with any people of colour in this process – and especially knowing the attitude Bernstein expressed so provocatively in his thesis – using these materials is more akin to cultural appropriation than cultural appreciation, part of a long line of white composers using elements of jazz, blues, various types of Latinx music, and stylistic borrowings from elsewhere in the world. This mining of musical styles from cultural groups who often form a despised ‘Other’ in American society is assisted by copyright laws, which allow pieces of music to be protected but not musical styles. What attitude then do the *West Side Story* collaborators express in what is arguably the Puerto Ricans’ most celebrated moment in the show: ‘America’? It can be interpreted as an anthem of American exceptionalism, a moment in which some of the Puerto Ricans themselves castigate their own homeland while others remember it fondly. (The differences between the way that the song plays in the stage version and in both films is significant here, because on stage one woman defends Puerto Rico while the remainder celebrate their intended assimilation. In the films, ‘America’ is an argument between the women who praise New York and the men who criticize their treatment by whites and pine for their homeland.) Is it an opportunity for Sondheim to have a laugh at American ignorance about Puerto Rico and its people? It can be seen as that and as a paean to American exceptionalism, just as the benefit for the Black Panthers was driven by both genuine care and class-driven ignorance.

When Oppression Meets Oppression

While Bernstein was often well meaning and sincere in fighting overt racism and white nationalist violence, like the majority of comfortable white people of his time, he was perhaps unaware of the covert ways in which he enjoyed the benefits of white supremacy. He whitewashed his own closeted queerness, pitting that identity and his own Jewishness (which he celebrated) against the more powerful prejudices with which African Americans struggled. Even in his grand vision for the development of an Israeli national music amidst his early encounters with the Jewish state, he imagined that Israeli composers would be wise to appropriate vernacular music from the Palestinian population and that of other neighboring Arab countries; in

doing so, they too could reach 'high art' in crafting an 'authentic' national music that 'honored' diversity.¹⁴ Bernstein was known to use his platform as a celebrity and respected intellectual to elevate his Jewish peers while sometimes showing less interest in the musical accomplishments of people of colour, certainly the case in his Harvard thesis. While Bernstein was genuinely interested in the Black Panthers receiving a fair trial, for example, his engaging of the Panthers in 'Radical Chic' perhaps reveals a rich white man's delusional savior complex. Bernstein appears to have marveled at these African American men as cultural curiosities and controversial social commodities. In the safety of his bubble of enlightened privilege, he felt qualified to engage the Panthers in conversation about complex issues of race and Black culture, believing he was providing solidarity as a progressive authority, above reproach as a fellow victim of fanatical prejudice.

Looking back on the era of *West Side Story*, much has changed, but even more has stayed the same when it comes to the treatment of people of colour, often significantly impacted by classism. Where is the line between reification of people in the 'Culture Industry' and in that of society at large? Increased standardization of culture only serves to preserve class and racial divides and can be a step towards intolerance. Today, even US Presidents are celebrities, hiding behind an image both crafted and leveraged by the 'Culture Industry'; they can be found hosting podcasts with rock stars, appearing on *Saturday Night Live*, and filling arenas for the purpose of political theatre. In the quest for social justice, we must be ready to confront our history, including some of its greatest cultural treasures. We can have empathy for the creators of *West Side Story*, who all experienced discrimination because they were Jewish and gay. Yet, like many white liberals then and now, at times they were blind to their own classism and racism, even as they genuinely believed they were allies to the poor and people of colour. As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated in his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail': 'Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.'¹⁵ We can enjoy and celebrate works such as *West Side Story* while also publicly recognizing potentially insidious messaging and confronting it.

Notes

1. Bernstein stated this often, including in an interview with Paul R. Laird in Washington, DC, on 15 March 1982. Used by permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.

2. Tom Wolfe, 'Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's,' *New York Magazine*, 8 June 1970. <https://nymag.com/news/features/46170/>. Accessed 18 June 2021. Wolfe republished the essay in: *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970; reprint: New York: Bantam Books, 1999).
3. In Marxist economic theory, a product is a finished good intended to be sold, while commodities represent the raw materials used to create the product.
4. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' in Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, ed., *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–146.
5. It is important to note that as significant as Adorno is in theorizing the detrimental impact of mass media in late-stage capitalism upon the arts and therefore the oppressed, he was also blinded by his own unconscious racial biases, reflected in his polemical views on jazz, for example. For a nuanced discussion of Adorno's criticism of jazz, see: Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).
6. When Adorno emigrated to the USA, he briefly worked for a radio broadcaster. He was angered by the simplistic, erroneous manner in which they approached educating the public in music; further, he was disturbed that media companies conducted continual marketing research to further mold the music to the will of the masses, undermining artistic integrity. To Adorno, this was nothing short of brainwashing the public to adopt commercial tastes laden with the values and ideas that ultimately reinforce conformity and uphold class and racial division. The German émigré had seen the power of mass media to shift society as a professor under the Nazi regime and did not want to see the music industry weaponized, as was Goebbels's film industry.
7. Rodgers and Hammerstein paved the way for *West Side Story* in this regard with shows such as *South Pacific*, which opened eight years prior.
8. In the era of McCarthyism, the creators would likely have been forced to avoid including material that may have more accurately reflected their personal views. Yet it is important to recognize that they must still be held accountable as the ultimate authors of the show. With music history saturated with infrequently challenged white supremacy, we must go beyond the common explanation that these works were a product of their time. We often stop short of saying what that 'time' was like for members of the lower class, immigrants, and people of colour.
9. Teju Cole @tejucole (8 March 2012), Twitter post, <http://twitter.com/tejucole>. Accessed 19 January 2022.
10. Wolfe, 'Radical Chic'.

11. Leonard Bernstein 'The Absorption of Racial Elements into American Music,' Harvard Thesis, 1939. Published in: Leonard Bernstein, *Findings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 36–99. For a useful contextualization of Bernstein's thesis, see: Geoffrey Block, 'Bernstein's Senior Thesis at Harvard: The Roots of a Lifelong Search to Discover an American Identity,' *College Music Symposium* 48 (2008): 52–68.
12. The racist trope of the woman of colour who is sexually promiscuous has long existed, not unlike the sexual vilification of the Jews as sexual predators intent on raping 'Aryan' women. Here, the show's creators show the dominant group as the aggressors, likely an intentional statement regarding the savagery of the white race against people of colour.
13. Rita Moreno, 'The Many Accents of Rita Moreno,' 10 January 2017, *In the Thick* (podcast). www.latinorebels.com/2017/01/10/the-many-accents-of-rita-moreno-podcast/. Accessed 19 January 2022.
14. For a consideration of Bernstein's work in Israel and his efforts to foster native Israeli composers, see: Erica K. Argyropoulos, 'Conducting Culture: Leonard Bernstein, The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Negotiation of Jewish American Identity, 1947–1967' (PhD dissertation, University of Kansas, 2015).
15. Martin Luther King Jr., 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' 16 April 1963. www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html. Accessed 28 June 2021.