

MIT Student

West Side Story Notes

### On Race

(From *Whiteness of Another Color*, Jacobson)

“White ethnicity is deployed throughout *West Side Story* not so much as a marker of “difference” but as suggestive of mere variety in a way that consolidates whiteness and accentuates the distance between whiteness and its racial others “

The Jets “an anthology of what it means to be American”

The reason why the Jets are so intent on keeping their “turf” is in some ways related to their new position as “white.” In fact it seems as though you replace the word “Jet” with “White” in “When You’re a Jet,” all the sentiments of inclusion and family, a sense of belonging, a place all come with losing the designation of being a different. In the city, this is something you get by having your “own neighborhood” in the same way other groups have from the rich Whites in the Upper East Side to African Americans in Harlem. The Jets have “earned this neighborhood” or place in the white race, now no longer are “immigrants.”

Then you are set  
With a capital J,  
Which you'll never forget  
Till they cart you away.  
When you're a Jet,  
You stay a Jet!

However, Tony, when exchanging words of love with Maria, uses his ethnic name “Anton” not his Anglo-American name “Tony” almost as if he is willing to give up this new location of security to be with her, in an unstable and unestablished social position.

(From “A Puerto-Rican Reading of ‘America,’” Sanchez)

“ For this reason, they emblemize the ideology of the “All-American Boy,” a totally white identity which does not make room for any other racial groups in the gang. In this way, the Jets define themselves in the first song, “Jet Song,” in terms of their own socio-political and personal superiority, confidence, and arrogance”

“ Such script assumptions reveal a priori the attitudes and prejudices against racial minorities in the U.S.A. at different historical periods. These prejudices constitute a discourse of racism by framing the racial Other in stereotypes of delinquency, poverty, and crime. That is, indeed, how Puerto Ricans were conceived of in WEST SIDE STORY.”

Sanchez points out the overtly racist attitudes presented in *West Side Story*, where they are obviously second class citizens in the eyes of the neighborhood, the law, the local business. While the Jets get special treatment from the police, and the falsity of the “American Dream” for anyone who isn’t white enough to pass.

Both groups feel as though they don't have fair treatment. "America" is all about how immigrants come from what might well be uncivilized countries to where they have opportunity and rights even though this is not always apparently true, because the discrimination they face blocks all the "benefits" of living in New York. "Officer Krupke" is all about how youths from poor families in the city are passed around from one institution that is supposedly going to help them to another. At the beginning of the song when Riff is "arrested" he says "deep down there's some good" but by the end the chorus goes "We're no good, we're no good, we're no earthly good" as if the only thing these arms of society have done is convince them that they didn't join society correctly. They blame their parents, the ones who are probably still identified as immigrants, for not raising them correctly.

We see through these two groups different sides of New York and the American city. It is at once the place of opportunity, where they can make something new and prosperous for themselves but also where they are kept back by society. In the end, the "place for" Tony and Maria is not in the city at all, but in the country.

### Some other observations

Graffiti: Sharks and Jets tags: The Jet's presence is established, the Sharks are fighting for it, quietly making their marks and being impeded by the Jets

On the door behind Chino when he tells Maria that Tony killed Bernardo, Bernardo has written his nickname "Nardo" so it is almost as if he is haunting the space

A Generational Gap: Just as the Jets are pushing away from their parents who aren't "Americans" like them, they also resent the older generation (including Doc and Officer Krupke and Lieutenant Schrank) for creating all the problems they deal with.

"You was never my age" and "We didn't make this world"

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