

## Culture Through Color Perception In *West Side Story*

**Marissa Christina Secades**

*College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida*

Faculty mentor: Barbara Mennel, Department of English

### Abstract

This article focuses on the use of color theory to clearly characterize members of rival ethnic gangs in the 1961 film adaptation of *West Side Story*. Originally a 1957 Broadway musical, *West Side Story* captured audiences with its groundbreaking innovation in choreography and music, while earning praise from critics for delving into contemporary issues like immigration and gang-related violence. It won an astonishing ten Academy Awards, including Best Costume Design and Best Art Direction, and still holds the record for the most Academy Awards won by a movie musical. While much of the existing research on *West Side Story* focuses on references of vying cultures made explicitly through song and dance, my research instead focuses on the non-verbal representations of these cultures that are expressed through color in the film. By studying the film's iconic art direction and investigating audiences' subsequent perceptions of characters and settings the colors featured in the costume designs and set designs are used to denote a culturally-charged power structure within the Jets and the Sharks. Based on close examination of these various designs, the film's overall color palette, and published scholarship, the *West Side Story*'s non-verbal references are uniquely dangerous to its explicit references, as they subliminally promote harmful stereotypes and suggest that gang violence brings life to an otherwise drab city. Studying the connection between color theory and culture ultimately illuminates the historical roots of society's perceptions of colors and their seemingly inherent associations to certain traits.

On April 9th, 1962, Hollywood's best and brightest stars gathered in Santa Monica, California to honor and celebrate the achievements in American cinema created during the past year at the 34th Academy Awards. By the end of the night, the cast and crew of the Jerome Robbins and Robert Wises' movie musical *West Side Story* (1961) reigned triumphantly, having received a record-breaking ten Academy Awards from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Among these awards were the highly coveted Best Motion Picture, Costume Design in Color for acclaimed Irene Sharaff, and Art Direction in Color shared between Boris Leven and Victor A. Gengelin. Fifty-five years later, *West Side Story* still holds the record for the most Academy Awards won by any movie musical. Originally a 1957 Broadway musical loosely based on William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* captured audiences with its innovation in melodious music and crisp choreography, while earning praise from many critics for addressing the contemporary issues of immigration and gang-related violence through

mesmerizing cinematography. While much of the existing research on *West Side Story* focuses on references of vying cultures made explicitly through song and dance by members of its feuding gangs—the white American Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks—, this article instead focuses on the non-verbal representations of these cultures expressed through the technical use of color in the film. By studying the film’s iconic art direction and investigating audiences’ subsequent perceptions of characters, this essay demonstrates how the colors in the costume designs denote a culturally-charged power structure between the Jets and the Sharks.

### **Fashion at the forefront**

To study how colors signify the social structure in *West Side Story*, we need to understand how colors functioned in the fashion of western society during the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the subsequent decade—the 1960s— when the film was released. Although this storyline is set in the 1950s, the previous decade was profoundly influential due to various large-scale events, both social and economic, occurring simultaneously. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, a decade-long economic slump, most of the world was locked into World War II for the first half of the 1940s. Fashion, and subsequently costume design, changed drastically as manufacturing restrictions were heavily instituted by the United States War Production Board in an effort to conserve and recycle materials needed for wartime materials. Kenneth R. Fehrman and Cherie Fehrman discuss the effects of wartime on the fashion industry: “Strong colors became morale-boosters: gray and red, yellow and brown or black, navy or black with red... Because of a shortage of dyes, colors became subdued. Bright reds became muted plums, while the lime greens turned yellowed and faded blacks, grays, and browns predominated” (Fehrman and Fehrman 165). The War Production Board’s Limitation Order L-85 imposed strict restrictions on not only materials, such as dyes and nylon, but also on designs that would utilize an excess of material, such as long skirts, full pants, and even details like cuffs and pleats. While sporting these styles were noted as unpatriotic and out-of-style by fashion magazines like *Vogue*, large fines were issued for any manufacturers who did not conform to these regulations as well.

The end of World War II also marked the end of many wartime efforts and regulations, resulting in revitalized energy being infused into the fashion industry. “By 1947, with the war at an end, Christian Dior had created his revolutionary New Look in soft, gentle colors with yards

of skirt made possible by the availability of postwar goods” (Fehrman and Fehrman 165). Christian Dior’s New Look silhouette revolutionized the fashion industry and led the world into a new era of postwar fashion [Figure 1]. Men and women began sporting a multitude of colors ranging from green to lilac to soft red and even turquoise (Fehrman and Fehrman 165). This domestic trend had a global impact as well. “The colorful shirts of American tourists started a fashion trend internationally... Soon even conventional male dressers were seen in dinner jackets of dark blue, green, or burgundy velvet” (Fehrman and Fehrman 165-166). The strict wartime regulations of the 1940s had become a distant memory as rock ‘n roll’s domination seeped into the fashion industry, prompting women to wear full skirts once again, along with ruffled petticoats and brightly painted lips.



**Figure 1.** “Bar” (right) and “Chérie”(left) designs from the iconic House of Dior spring/summer 1947 collection. (Charleston).

The men and women who were filling movie theaters to watch this film after its release in 1961 may not have had associations with gang life, yet they could find familiarity with these gangs in their attire. They too had dressed in fashions similar to those worn by characters like Riff, the proud and rambunctious leader of the Jets, Anita, the strong partner of the Sharks’ leader Bernardo, and Maria, the “barrio Juliet” of this doomed love story (Berson 46). Costume designer Irene Sharaff clearly drew inspiration from the popular garb worn on the streets

during the 1950s for her *West Side Story* designs. Full-skirt dresses. Blue jeans and boxy t-shirts are pieces that could have been found in any teenager’s closet! As Keith Garebian, an award-winning theatre critic, reveals in *The Making of West Side Story*: “This show had no place for ‘exaggeration or fantasy’, and yet literalness would not help visually. She (Sharaff) went up to 110th Street to take notes on gang clothes” (Garebian 54-55). The men and women in the Jets and the Sharks donned attire in a specific range of colors according to the gang they were affiliated with. While this tactic has been used numerous times on Hollywood and Broadway productions created both before and after *West Side Story*, its use in this film is particularly

troublesome due to common perceptions related to certain colors and the negative cultural connotations that could result from assigning certain colors to culturally-based gangs.

### Riff and the Jets versus the Sharks

As performed by the athletic and acrobatic Russ Tamblyn, Riff is the high-flying leader of the Jets, the resident gang that seemingly owned the streets of Manhattan with ease until the Sharks arrived [see figure 2]. He takes great pride in his position as the leader of the Jets, a role previously held by his closest friend Tony, a former Jet who claims to have retired from gang activities in hopes of finding a more fulfilling purpose in life. Riff's first line in *The Jet Song*, an anthem glorifying the gang and proclaiming their purpose, encapsulates his loyalty to his brothers: "When you're a Jet, / You're a Jet all the way / From your first cigarette / To your last dyin' day" (*West Side Story*). As foreshadowed in *The Jet Song*, Riff dies as a hero, succumbing to injuries following a rumble with the Sharks caused by Tony and Maria's taboo relationship.



**Figure 2.** Riff, left in mustard jacket, watches over the neighborhood basketball court with Ice and Action, other members of the Jets. (“*West Side Story* (1961) Photo Gallery”).

Described as “the composite ‘white’ Americans” by musicologist Raymond Knapp, the Jets rally together to defend their streets from the Sharks, the opposing gang comprised of recently immigrated Puerto Ricans. Although members of the Jets hail from various European backgrounds, they show no mercy towards the Sharks, despite their similarities in being non-natives.

As for their costumes, the Jets do not sport a strict uniform or stylish suits like businessmen would; instead, they are often found in t-shirts with simple patterns, blue jeans, and clean sneakers. They do, however, consistently wear a similar color palette composed of cooler hues like “muted indigo blues, musty yellows, and ochre,” a choice deliberately made by costume designer Irene Sharaff to contrast the Sharks’ costumes which featured stronger, saturated hues of “sharp purple, pink-violet, blood red, and black” (Sharaff 100) [Figure 3]. In her



**Figure 3.** The Sharks, left, face off against the Jets, right, in the neighborhood basketball court (“West Side Story (1961) Photo Gallery”).

autobiography, Sharaff provides a short explanation for her decision to use these colors in the costumes as one of the most prevalent factors in differentiating the Jets from the Sharks: “The colors seemed to suit their physical appearance; moreover, even though in the story the Puerto Ricans were the weaker gang and on the defensive, their outfits gave them an aggressive quality” (Sharaff 100-101).

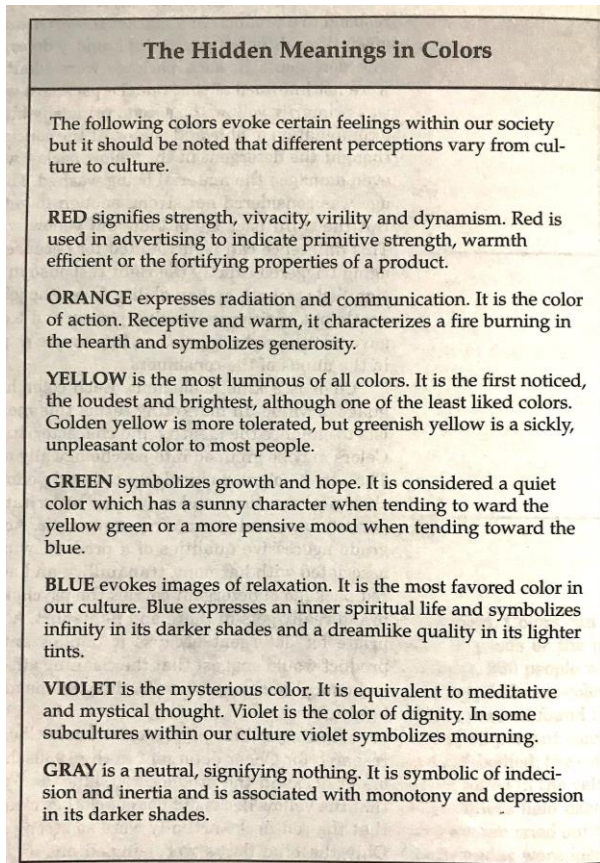
Here, Sharaff admits that common perceptions of colors, such as red signifying strength and aggression, influenced her own decision-making process while designing the costumes and designating colors to each gang. To Sharaff, the Puerto Rican Sharks’ physicality and semblance are naturally aggressive, so they needed to be dressed in colors with similarly perceived qualities.

Fehrman and Fehrman states that perceptions of qualities expressed in colors result from inherent and cultural color biases, which is common and, in many ways, unavoidable:

*“We are all afflicted with color biases based on things we have been taught as children, based on our cultures, and based on misinformation that we have come to accept as fact... In part, humans seem impelled to create symbols and to attach artificial significance to colors because our feelings and emotions, our literary, psychological, and intellectual preconceptions interfere with the direct perception of the physical world.” (6-7)*

While each human experience is unique and intensely affected by individual encounters, the overarching cultures and system of beliefs belonging to each experience comparably nurture it and others of homologous upbringings. For this reason, Western society will often interact with colors in similar fashions because of biases that have been ingrained into society. Marketing agencies have been using this knowledge of color biases and perceptions to their advantage for decades, looking to scholarship highlighting the substantial research efforts and experiments in respected outlets, like the *Journal of Consumer Science* and the *Journal of the Academy of*

*Marketing Science*, to employ the “hidden meanings of colors” in advertisements and branding (Fehrman and Fehrman 147).



**Figure 4.** The Hidden Meaning of Colors (Fehrman 147).

On the other hand, the Sharks’ costumes are both visually and psychologically striking with their reds, purples, and blacks evoking stronger and customarily darker emotions with more complex associations. Red, the color of an open button-down shirt worn by Bernardo, the charming but unswerving leader of the Sharks, evokes passionate emotions— anger, lust, and even love— due to its presence in the natural world as fire and blood (Fehrman and Fehrman 48) [Figure 5].

Keeping in mind the success of these agencies and the commonality towards using these tried-and-true methods, it seems rather obvious why other fields would use this knowledge as well. Just as moviegoers recognized the fashion worn by the Jets and the Sharks, they would also recognize what the colors of their costumes signified. Supplementing the figure above with psychological viewpoints of color, the yellows and oranges featured in Riff and the Jets’ costumes convey a sense of comfort and security with a familiar touch of warmth deriving from associations between the sun and these colors. The blues add to their receptiveness, as it is a likeable color with calming qualities, an affect associated with clear, blue skies.



**Figure 5.** Bernardo, center in red button-down, with other members of the Sharks Pepe and Juano on the offense against the Sharks during a basketball (“West Side Story (1961) Photo Gallery”).

For centuries, the limited accessibility to purple dyes restricted its availability to the royal and wealthy while also having ties to Judeo-Christian symbolism through its sacraments and celebrations in its liturgical seasons; in modern times, however, it elicits sentiments of lust and sensuality, “perhaps being derived from the purple stains of wine-soaked lips” suggests Fehrman and Fehrman (52). The color black is associated with the lack of light or the consumption of darkness in totality; its darkness implies a sense of mystery towards the unknown, similar to the mystery surrounding the Sharks as the “other”.

Studying these associations exemplifies how the Jets have a solid upper hand on the Sharks in terms of fair representation. Without considering any of the racially-charged exchanges or cruel acts of vengeance executed by both gangs, the Jets are styled out to look as if they have a softer side to them, an affect that is absent in the Sharks’ costumes. The Jets’ paler color palette emphasizes their boyish looks, while the deep color palette of the Sharks makes them appear more vigorous, burly, and, as Sharaff articulated, more “aggressive” (Sharaff 100). According to the events of the film though, the aggression of the Sharks is equally matched by the Jets, albeit what their color palettes promote. The Jets go so far as to viciously attack Anita, who innocently stumbles upon the blood-hungry gang while on her way to deliver a message to Tony on behalf of Maria; this sexually-driven attack is unmatched by the Sharks, yet they are the ones wearing colors suggesting an aggressive nature.

### **Anita versus Maria**

The use of color as non-verbal representations of personal character and cultures is even more defined in the costume designs for Anita and Maria, the leading ladies of *West Side Story*. As newly-minted Americans, these women still carry strong ties to their Puerto Rican heritage through their close connection with the Sharks. Anita is in a committed and passionate relationship with their leader Bernardo, who happens to be Maria’s older, protective brother as well. Although Anita taunts her old life in Puerto Rico during the saucy, show-stopping number “America,” her loyalty ultimately lies with Bernardo and his Sharks, while Maria begins to seriously question the need for these gangs and their violence as she falls in love with Tony.

Their costumes and color palettes further emphasize their differences, most notably in the dresses worn at *The Dance*. Here, Anita wears a purple, form-fitting dress with an open neckline and full skirt, which not only accentuates her curvy figure but also complements the Sharks’

formalwear color palette that features, of course, reds, purples, and blacks [Figure 6]. "The girls in the play wore clothes that were less uniform and that could be given more theatricality. Again color was important. The Puerto Rican girls were naturally more exotic looking than the Jet



**Figure 6.** Anita, center in purple formfitting dress, leads the Shark girls in "America" after The Dance ("West Side Story (1961) Photo Gallery").

gang's girls" (Sharaff 100-101). Once again, Sharaff uses color palettes as an identity marker for the gangs, with colors like the purples and reds not only clearly separating the Sharks' girls from the Jets' girls, but also further exotifying Anita and the Sharks' other girls at the dance (and throughout the film) when compared to the softer-colored dresses of the Jets' girls. Comparatively, the red and purples dresses of the Sharks' girls are also sexier, an attribute contributing to the spit-fire archetype that is overwhelmingly associated

to

Hispanic women in film.

Maria is a bold exception to Sharaff's own style guide for the Sharks' girls. In many scenes, she dresses more like a Jets' girl, wearing whites, yellows, and blues, similar to many of the more conservative, a-line style dresses worn by Riff's girlfriend Graziella. To the dance, Maria wears a simple white dress complete with girlish frills and a bright red waistband. Altogether, it exudes innocence and naivety, so much so that Maria repeatedly tries to convince Anita to take an inch off the neckline, which Anita refuses to comply with. "Could we not dye it red at least?" she pleads. "Oh no, we could not," Anita insists. "White is for babies!" Maria exclaims (West Side Story). This exclamation underscores the significant sway that colors hold in signifying and solidifying traditional connotations and certain characters' awareness of this unspoken rule. Maria understands that she will be perceived in a much different light than Anita because of the differences in the color of their dresses, yet she still pushes for these changes to be made to her dress.

Theatre critic at the Seattle Times Misha Berson proposes that Maria incessantly asking for alterations is an attempt to breakaway from her Puerto Rican roots and childish image: "As a



new immigrant and blossoming adolescent, she is hungry for experience and autonomy. Spreading her wings by attending the dance ‘as a young lady of America’ is an important rite of passage for her” (46-47). Anita does not explicitly state her reasons for refusing Maria’s requests, but her nurturing and observant nature indicates that she, too, is aware of how a red dress can warrant unwanted attention and implications of a sexual agency.

Historically, red has been linked to sexuality, but typically not with a positive connotation. “Lust is so integrated with red that adulteresses were branded ‘scarlet women’ in Puritan times, and in later decades prostitutes were relegated to the ‘red-light’ district” (Fehrman and Fehrman 48). If Maria were to wear a red dress, it

insinuates that she has stepped into womanhood with sexual desires looking to be explored, which will not be tolerated by Anita or Bernardo. Still, she does wear a red waistband, a nod to her coming of age and a foreshadowing clue aimed at her loss of virginal innocence.



**Figure 7.** Maria happily wears her altered dress in preparation for The Dance (“West Side Story (1961) Photo Gallery”).

### **The legacy**

As an icon on both Broadway and Hollywood, *West Side Story* has transcended the test of time in entertainment industry. References to its beloved music, its captivating choreography, and its heartbreaking storyline in current popular culture continue to be made sixty years after its original Broadway debut. At the box office, *West Side Story* initially earned an estimated \$43 million domestically in 1961—which is equivalent to over \$350 million in 2017.

Its success in the United States continued internationally as well. Lin Manuel-Miranda, one of Puerto Rico’s most successful and well-known entertainment stars, spoke to the *Washington Post* in 2009 about *West Side Story*’s legendary impact that reached audiences at home and abroad: “The movie is all over the world, and for many people it’s their only exposure to even the term Puerto Rican... They might not even know that Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean” (Berson 212-213). While this film shed light on Puerto Ricans, a widely unknown group worldwide and underrepresented in the entertainment industry, as well as *La Migracion* of thousands of Puerto Rican United States citizens to New York City during the 1950s, its international success also made it a target for harsh criticism on its representation of Puerto

Ricans and their culture. “Criticisms of West Side Story as an inaccurate, insensitive hotbed of Latino caricatures are unsurprising and cannot be just waved away. Given that West Side Story was not just the first popular drama to focus on Puerto Ricans but, for the vast majority of those who see it, the show/film is the only representation of this ethnic group they’ve seen, the images it conjures have extra weight” (Berson 212). Sharaff’s choice of color palettes play an instrumental role in creating these iconic images, but the acclaimed status of West Side Story in hand with the visual communication ability of colors makes her choices dangerous, as they convey subliminal, biased messages about the Sharks in particular. The contrasting color palettes seen onscreen visually strengthen the me-versus-them narrative between the Jets and the Sharks that is already well-established offscreen before the start of the film’s storyline. This narrative becomes more dangerous as West Side Story continues to become immortalized as a representation of Puerto Ricans who, in truth, are misrepresented in the lens of white American directors and designers as the overtly aggressive, sexually-spirited other gang.

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