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Community Circles and Love Triangles: Gun Violence and Belonging in Oklahoma! and West Side Story

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As the national tour of Daniel Fish's critically acclaimed *Oklahoma!* crisscrossed the United States in 2022, company members found themselves in unfamiliar territory. Instead of the stunned silences and standing ovations that typified the production's reception at Broadway's Circle in the Square Theatre, the national tour's audiences offered an unexpectedly prickly bouquet of responses, including walkouts, boos, taunts, "thumbs down" gestures, refund demands, social media rants, and in one case, "vomiting in the balcony." ([1]) Of course, *Oklahoma!* had its share of detractors since the production's pre-Broadway days at St. Ann's Warehouse, just as the national tour's hostile reception was neither comprehensive or invariable; still, in cities across the country, the revival inspired tonally different audience responses to its New York City run. In a 2023 *HowlRound* article, Jud Fry actor Christopher Barrow suggests some likely triggers in Fish's *Oklahoma!* for the tour's audiences, including its aesthetic boldness, its identity-conscious casting, and its refusal to treat its source material as canonical, precious, and unchanging. ([2]) (It is worth noting, too, that the production's original deep thrust staging was flattened to fit the US's network of proscenium theatres). While I, like many non-coastal Americans, bristle at generalized depictions of our theatregoers as less open-minded or equipped to handle experimental or challenging performances, I do suspect that Barrow missed a potential trigger for heartland audiences: the revival takes direct aim at the nation's ever-hungry gun culture and those who continually nourish it through word and action. ([3]) A buoyant, nostalgic, and unproblematically patriotic musical Fish's *Oklahoma!* is not. But was *Oklahoma!* ever?

The theatre of post-Newtown America (or post-UVA, post-Pulse Nightclub, post-Las Vegas, post-Tops Market….) has yet to fully reckon with a discomfiting, perhaps inconvenient reality: the industry and its artists have long been active, direct participants in the country's gun culture. Indeed, many of the theatre's cumulative products, from anti-gun docudramas and *Annie Get Your Gun* revivals to vaudevillian William Tell tricks and Wild West Show battle reenactments, are not just embodied responses *to* gun culture, they *are* gun culture. While the term itself has become something of a partisan battleground, "gun culture" is an omnipresent, self-reinforcing system of beliefs, values, and feelings about firearms and their usage, as well as the behavioral actions and socioeconomic, cultural, and political transactions that inspire or sustain them. Gun cultures exist anywhere guns circulate, and therefore "gun culture" as a term lacks specificity until contextualized by the society in which it functions. In what follows, I treat the phrase "US-American gun culture" as neither neutral nor strictly pejorative or celebratory, though I favor Pamela Haag's assertion that gun companies have long exerted a behemothic and tactical influence on how Americans regard guns. ([4]) Despite the relative youth of the nation's gun culture, it is a maddeningly complex, enduring, and variform organism. It whispers in myths; it shouts at the gun range. It operates simultaneously on the personal and institutional levels and engages manifold publics. It is animated by patrolling border militias and simulated gunfights at the OK Corral, and it is embodied by gun control activists and the twelve-year-old girl cradling her first shotgun in the glow of the Christmas tree. It meticulously sutures guns to American identity, and American life to guns. And whether or not we like it, the theatre regularly supplies the thread.

Onstage gunplay not only disturbs audiences by surrogating actual gun violence or reenacting trauma, however; it also delights, astounds, amuses, and disarms. Nowhere is this capacious narrative and affective flexibility more apparent than in the American musical canon, where firearms serve a startling variety of functions while sliding easily along spectrums of genre, style, and tone. They are the go-to props of musicals set or staged in wartime, symbolic of hostile environments, courageous heroes, and desperate aggressors. They are the accoutrement of comedy and the drivers of tragedy. And, of course, they persist as ambivalent, malleable, and unpredictable indexers of political schisms, social inequities, and the empire-building violence required by Western patriarchy, colonization, and capitalism. As a vehicle for propelling questions of US-American gun culture(s) into the popular consciousness, the musical is a uniquely equipped performance form. Mounted to the notes of soaring harmonies, transported on the limbs of undulating, often virtuosic bodies, or underscored by elaborate landscapes and soundscapes, gun narratives intensify, stretch, transmute, and become unsettled in the musical medium.

Despite their thematic and aesthetic heterogeneity, however, American gun musicals tend to press guns into service as potent indicators of belonging or marginality—often by distinguishing natural or paradigmatic Americanness through authoritative gun use or by harnessing guns as tools that induct characters into or expulse them from meaningful relationships, identity groups, or communities. ([5]) Indeed, with few exceptions, a gun musical's firearms help compose, fortify, alter, and/or destroy human connections, be they romantic couples, love triangles, family units, friend circles, or communities organized by place, politics, religion, race, and other social or material conditions. To trace the guns in *Hamilton* (2015), for example, is to see guns violently regulate American identity/ies. ([6]) The mainspring of 2000's *The Wild Party*'s climactic

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gunfire, to cite another, is a love triangle that materializes and dematerializes in a single evening. And while *The Wild Party* is fictional and *Hamilton* fictional*ized*, intimate partner and intra/inter-community gun violence in the US is real, persistent, and documented. According to the John Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, over half of all intimate partner homicides in the US are committed with firearms, and "a woman is five times more likely to be murdered when her abuser has access to a gun." ([7]) In addition, the Deputy Police Commissioner of Buffalo, New York argued in 2021 that an "overwhelming number of shootings and murders in Buffalo stem from revenge, retaliation and escalating beefs," many of them now fueled by social media. ([8]) American gun violence carves up communities along and across categories of identity and culture: Black Americans are ten times more likely to die by gun homicide than white Americans;([9]) 4.5 million US women alive today report being threatened with a gun;([10]) firearms were used in 73% of trans American homicides between 2017 and 2021;([11]) current or former members of the US military make up a disproportionately high number of gun suicides;([12]) and "gun deaths recently surpassed car accidents as the leading cause of death for American children," making the US an "extreme outlier" in gun fatalities in minors. ([13]) Still the country's gun culture continues to thrive, buoyed by a formidable supply of ideologies, narratives, factoids, slogans, and figureheads that operate both within and far beyond gun-positive spaces. Germane to this essay is the recurring deployment of gun industry propaganda that reinforces an insider/outsider binary of American life. This includes mythic depictions of gun ownership that imply gun-handling is an endower of true, unassailable Americanness, and that personal firearms enable US-Americans to safeguard their loved ones and communities from external threats (despite data that concludes that guns in homes *increase* the risk of gun injury and death). ([14])

In this essay, I analyze how guns and the people who carry them shape and reshape two of the American musical's classic human groupings: the community circle and the love triangle. I engage in close readings of two Golden Age musicals, *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *West Side Story* (1957), as well as their recent, gun-heavy Broadway revivals, in order to illuminate how firearms arbitrate or exacerbate race- and class-based conflicts within the depicted communities and "solve" the musicals' imbalanced love triangles¾either facilitating a community-sustaining union or preventing a community-conjoining union from occurring. Indeed, in assessing these musicals and their twenty-first-century revivals as gun musicals, distinctive patterns in the gendering, racializing, and classing of American guns and gun violence become evident. These patterns, not surprisingly, are directly tethered to and expressive of the gun cultures and the wider sociopolitical landscapes in which the productions were created. As I argue, the original musicals reified conventional notions of the appropriate US-American gun handler as the white, Christian, cishet man, presenting their gun possessions as uncomplicated, necessary, and intuitive within the plays' white supremacist patriarchies. The revivals, however, attempt to adapt the musicals' guns to the country's hyper-violent present, both by amplifying the gun's role in catalyzing domestic and community violence and inculcating more participants into gun culture systems, including through the increased representation of skillful women, Black, and Latine gun handlers. In manifesting this provocative transferring of power, the revivals variously challenge and fortify the mythic triangulation of firearms, white masculinity, and Americanness.

Shotgun Weddings and Handgun Honeymoons: The Guns of Oklahoma! (1943) and West Side Story (1957)

Oklahoma! premiered on Broadway two years before World War II's Allies and Axis powers laid down their arms. *West Side Story*'s Broadway opening occurred one day after the Little Rock Nine, surrounded by heavily armed National Guardsmen, integrated Arkansas's Central High School. While mapping both musicals onto a timeline of US gun events is a useful task, it is more meaningful to determine how Golden Age gun musicals reflected and upheld prevailing firearm discourses and representations. Following a brief primer on the material and metaphorical contours of midcentury America's gun culture, I will assess *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story*'s guns—and, more importantly, gun handlers—as chief arbitrators of belonging or marginality within the musicals' imagined communities.

By the 1940s and 50s, US-American gun culture bore only a partial resemblance to its nineteenth-century predecessor(s). As homegrown demand for firearms dried up following the American Civil War, the US gun industry attempted to stem the tide by pursuing foreign military contracts, especially in Europe, and by popularizing civilian gun ownership and use in North America. Late-1800s ads from Winchester, Ithaca Gun Company, and other manufacturers increasingly appealed to modern women and family men, recommending shooting sports—hunting, target shooting, and trapshooting—as healthful, safe, character building, suitable for women and children, and implicitly American (despite the sports' much longer history in Europe). ([15]) Meanwhile, the newly founded National Rifle Association (NRA) promoted the creation of rifle clubs, training courses, and competitive shooting matches with an eye toward advancing marksmanship in the general public and, by extension, deepening the country's reserve of skilled shooters. ([16]) In the twentieth century's early decades, increasing numbers of white middle-class women took up shooting sports, while gun manufacturers and conservative commentators intensified their use of fear-based rhetoric to present personal gun ownership as *the* effective defense against home invasions and violent assaults. The latter exploited white Americans' anxieties around race, immigration, and the specter of "urban crime" and reified whiteness as a prerequisite for proper gun ownership in the United States. Such rhetoric persisted through the mid-twentieth century as the civil rights movement re-enlivened debates about which Americans had (or *should* have) uncontestable gun rights. Some civil rights leaders, for example, proclaimed the right to bear arms as essential both to protecting Black communities from violent white mobs and to fully enfranchising African Americans as US citizens. As historian Nicholas Johnson notes, Rosa Parks, T.R.M. Howard, Daisy Bates, and other Black activists whose families were terrorized by firebombs and burning crosses "embraced private [armed] self-defense and political nonviolence without any sense of contradiction." ([17])

As a weary but victorious America emerged from two World Wars, flush with good-guys-with-guns narratives, the gun industry endeavored to amend US history by inserting firearms at every page turn. According to Haag, midcentury ads "retroactively fetishized" guns and boasted "[c]asual assertions…that Americans had 'always' loved guns, or that they had a 'timeless' tradition of gun fluency, a 'priceless tradition' in firearms, or had 'long known how to shoot,' with 'every boy' trained as a marksman." ([18]) Of especial importance in this historical re-envisioning was the mythologizing of the Wild West. Colt's ads "rehabilitated the cowboy" into a "steely-eyed" and courageous icon of white American masculinity, while Winchester marketed its Model 1873 rifle as The Gun that Won the West. ([19]) Mythic depictions of the American West swept through 1940s and 50s popular culture like wildfire. Taking a page from the dime novels, frontier melodramas, and Wild West Shows of the nineteenth century, midcentury movies, magazines, and television series invited American audiences to visit an Old West of unparalleled danger, bravery, and beauty, with expert gun handling serving as the coin of the realm. ([20]) It was within this gun culture that *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story*'s original productions operated.

In an essay illogically asserting that politics are "absent" in American theatre, political theorist and theatre writer Benjamin Barber concedes that "on second inspection" the dual love plots in *Oklahoma!* "emerge as emblems of a powerful social context":

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> No less than Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, whose social context is a struggle between goatherds and vintners over the right to use a contested valley, *Oklahoma!* puts the question of whether the territory can unite as a state around a common civic faith and a common political identity, or will be allowed to fracture and disintegrate along the fissures opened up by the competition of its economic factions. ([21])

These adversarial populations—farmers and cowmen, settlers and nomads—coalesce (if only outwardly) as the Indian and Oklahoman territories become one state. ([22]) As Bruce Kirle explains, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* "historicizes the isolationist/ interventionist conflict that preceded and shadowed America's participation in World War II" and argues for unity in the face of a common enemy: the spread of fascism. ([23]) Yet national belonging in *Oklahoma!* is determined not just politically or geographically, but also socioeconomically and racially, as Andrea Most and Warren Hoffman have ably illustrated. ([24]) Furthermore, the musical's male characters employ violence (or the threat of violence) as a way of formalizing the community's boundaries, with firearms often accelerating the admissions process or keeping outsiders at bay. Indeed, the firearm's vital role in US settler colonialism is plainly wrought in the musical. Though the original libretto contains no staged or referenced gun deaths, it also notably contains no Indigenous characters, suggesting that the settlers' rifles have already succeeded in ejecting Native communities from their lands ("Oklahoma" comes from the Chocktaw "okla humma," meaning "Red People") and denying their identities as US-Americans. ([25]) Because Rodgers and Hammerstein "erased [the] indigenous complexity" of the musical's source material, Lynn Riggs's 1930 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, and whitewashed its frontier community, *Oklahoma!*'s guns persist as the designated material and symbolic deliverers of Manifest Destiny. ([26])

In more recent productions—at DC's Arena Stage (2010), the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (2018), and Broadway's Circle in the Square (2019)—multiracial casts reconstitute *Oklahoma!*'s typically homogeneous community, "unsettl[ing] preconceptions of the frontier as white," as Donatella Galella argues. ([27]) However, in *Oklahoma!*'s first Broadway run guns appeared predominantly in the hands of white men, though some scholars read farmhand Jud Fry's sexual savagery as representative of a stereotyped class- and race-based Otherness that "cannot be whitened." ([28]) (Curly's description of Jud as "bullet-colored, growly man," indicating, perhaps, a tanned, dirty laborer's bronzy skin tone, nevertheless leaves open the possibility that Jud is not white). ([29]) The only woman to touch a gun is Aunt Eller, *Oklahoma!*'s no-nonsense matriarch; in the spontaneous brawl between farmers and cowboys at the top of Act Two, Aunt Eller "*grabs a gun from some man's holster and fires it,*" putting an abrupt halt to the fighting. She then points the gun at groups of men, coercing them to rejoin the singing. They do. Within *Oklahoma!*'s strict gender binary, Aunt Eller is unique. "She is an uncommonly public woman who mediates between male and female culture," notes musicologist Susan C. Cook, but "[h]er public power comes at a cost; widowed, she is a desexualized crone, who stands apart from the other women[.]" ([30]) Gun handling, then, is a mark of Aunt Eller's singularity.

If *Oklahoma!*'s guns exclusively belong to white men, what do they signal about the men's belonging within the musical's real and aspirational American communities? Two scenes offer clues: cowboy Curly McClain and antisocial farmhand Jud Fry's private meeting in Act One, and Act Two's box social. In the first, Curly and Jud converge in Jud's lodgings, the farm's defunct smokehouse, where Curly goads Jud into imagining killing himself (the better to live on in the memories of his mourners). On the smokehouse's walls, Rodgers and Hammerstein specify, hang the accoutrements of manual farm labor and images of nearly naked women. Below them sit limited furnishings: a "grimy" and unmade bed, a spittoon, and a table and chairs. ([31]) Within this hypermasculine space, a remote and decommissioned site of work that now hosts the community pariah, each of Jud and Curly's gun acts—for they are *acts* in the theatrical sense—exteriorize the men's identical objectives: to triumph over their competitor, win Laurey and her farmland, and through these conjoined possessions achieve a level of community integration and security that presently evades them both. The acts escalate in intensity as the scene progresses. Jud seizes his pistol as Curly approaches the smokehouse and begins to methodically clean it; following a spate of Curly's insults, Jud "reflex[ively]" pulls its trigger and blasts a bullet into the ceiling; Curly demonstrates his shooting skill by firing a bullet through knothole in the smokehouse wall. Due to their solitude and emotional intimacy, Jud and Curly's forced displays of heteronormative frontier masculinity reverberate with both violent and homoerotic potential. But rather than the smokehouse containing the men's armed antagonism, the guns audibly broadcast it, drawing Aunt Eller, Ali Hakim, and several others to their spot. "'S all right!" Aunt Eller assures those who have gathered. "Nobody hurt, just a pair of fools swapping' noises." ([32])

The box social is a community-sanctioned pageant of territorial masculinity masquerading as a charity auction. Like the display behaviors of male peacocks and harbor seals, *Oklahoma!*'s men flaunt their authority, capital, and sexual devotion, but unlike the female peacocks and harbor seals in the market for a mate, the eligible women whose lunch hampers (and selves) are up for auction lack the agency to choose or refuse bidders. "*Oklahoma!* thus embodies what Erin Addison calls an 'American secular ideology' of individualism and freedom for men and romance/marriage for women," offers Cook. ([33]) Within this frontier thunderdome of cishet male competition, guns are enlisted as valuable commodities and tools of intimidation.

In negotiations as part of the box social's transactional politics are *Oklahoma!*'s two love triangles. Curly and Jud are in pursuit of Laurey, who understands she must choose a man to help manage the farm she has inherited. The flirtatious Ado Annie, meanwhile, is torn between sweet but featherbrained cowboy Will Parker and the "Persian peddler / Lothario" Ali Hakim, the latter of whom is an ethnoracial outsider "typically played broadly and theatrically—for laughs—via the conventions of vaudeville," writes Kirle. ([34]) Given that Ali's interest in Ado Annie is carnal rather than marital, Will and Ali's battle over Ado Annie's hamper is an asymmetrical affair. Its lopsidedness is also engendered by violence, as Ado Annie's father Carnes forces Ali to participate at gunpoint, prodding the peddler in the back with the tip of his gun to ratchet up the bidding. Though Will loses the hamper to Ali, he "gets" Ado Annie by satisfying Carnes's demand that his daughter's husband-to-be be financially solvent. Later, Ali marries the universally irritating Gertie Cummings in a shotgun wedding, consequently abandoning his nomadic lifestyle and assimilating into the territory folks' white Christian community, his amorous ways and his Otherness curbed by the promise of gun violence. In *Oklahoma!*, the fathers' firearms orchestrate unions that are advantageous for the community's survival but not necessarily for marital harmony. Sung by the musical's bachelors with Ali singing lead, Act One's "It's a Scandal! It's a Outrage!" lampoons the men's "entrapment" by armed fathers and their supposedly eager daughters:

> MEN: It's gotten' so you cain't have any fun!

> Every daughter has a father with a gun!

> It's a scandal, it's a outrage!

> How a gal gets a husband today!([35])

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Winning Laurey's hamper (and presumably her hand in marriage) also requires considerable capital. In an effort to best Jud—who eventually bids "all I got in the world," two years of savings from farm work—Curly sells off the vital assets of a cowboy: first his saddle, then his horse, and finally his gun. As the *coup de grâce* of the men's acrimonious bidding, Curly drawing his gun is read first as a physical threat, frightening the crowd and inspiring Jud to retreat. For Scott McMillin, Curly's capacity with a gun appeals to Laurey because it keeps Jud's violence in check: "The cowboy-hero handles a gun so well that even the hired hand has to worry about him—that is one of the hero's desirable attributes." ([36]) Even after his gun sells, Curly secures Laurey's hamper, her hand, and newfound respectability as a chosen caretaker of colonized Oklahoman land.

Of the three guns in Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story*, the famed musical that transports Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to a hot and claustrophobic Manhattan neighborhood in the 1950s, two tellingly belong to law enforcement officials. Lieutenant Schrank and Officer Krupke are white supremacist authority figures who enforce an inequitable set of rules for rival street gangs, the Puerto Rican Sharks and the (traditionally) white ethnic Jets. The officers never draw their guns, at least according to the Broadway libretto. Schrank is a plainclothes cop whose weapon is presumably concealed by his suit jacket; Krupke's sidearm, however, is always a visible part of his police uniform, indexing his simultaneous, conflated roles as neighborhood protector and aggressor. The third gun, and the only one that discharges within the course of the musical, is extracted from its apartment hiding place in Act Two, Scene One by Chino, a young Shark desperate to avenge the death of the gang's leader, Bernardo. Chino unwraps the gun, which the stage directions specify has been stored in a cloth "the same color as BERNARDO's shirt," and jams it into his pocket before exiting, affiliating *West Side Story*'s sole civilian firearm with two Puerto Rican immigrant men. ([37])

At the musical's climax Chino finds his target, former Jet member Tony, and fatally shoots him as he runs into the arms of his lover Maria, Bernardo's sister and Chino's intended wife. As "CHINO stands very still, bewildered by the gun limp in his hand," the lovers sing fragments of "Somewhere," the musical's utopic ballad of freedom and inclusion, before Tony succumbs to his gunshot wound. In the action that follows, Maria silently beckons for Chino's gun and then turns it on Sharks and Jets alike, who at the report of the gunshot have amassed in a "ritual assembly" around Tony's body. "How many bullets are left, Chino? Enough for you? And you? All of you? WE ALL KILLED HIM; and my brother and Riff. I, too. I CAN KILL NOW BECAUSE I HATE NOW. How many can I kill, Chino? How many – and still have one bullet left for me?" Unable to pull the trigger, Maria throws the gun away and collapses on the ground, sobbing. In the musical's final moments, Tony's body is carried away by Jet and Shark boys, a procession forms, and Maria follows in its wake, "lift[ing] her head proudly and triumphantly." The neighborhood's adults, including Schrank and Krupke, remain onstage, "bowed, alone, useless" as the curtain falls. ([38])

The importance of this gun, as a material node in which the musical's themes of racialized violence, urban youth culture, and generational discord seem to converge, has largely gone unacknowledged in the existing literature, likely because the gun is introduced relatively late in the play, after Bernardo and Jet leader Riff die by knife-wounds in the gangs' late-night rumble. However, even in the pre-van Hove world of *West Side Story*, a world that Brian Herrera describes as "characterized by the constant threat of incipient violence," guns are conspicuous. ([39]) Consider the Jets' first conversation about rumbling with the Sharks. Riff suggests that the Sharks "might ask for bottles or knives or zip guns," inspiring a worried "Zip guns…Gee!" from Baby John, the youngest of the group. ([40]) Guns are named again at the gangs' war council, not by Riff or Bernardo but by Tony, who attempts to mitigate mounting tensions by urging the leaders to agree to a fair fight, sans weapons. "Bottles, knives, guns! What a coop full of chickens!" he baits. ([41]) In both conversations, the Jets are depicted as reluctant to arm themselves with guns as a way of holding their turf: "I wanna hold it like we always held it, with skin!" Riff assures his gang in Act One. ([42]) And yet, in Jerome Robbins' choreography the Jets habitually map onto their bodies gestures of guns and gun violence. Jets wannabe Anybodys responds to A-Rab's insults about her appearance by shooting him with her finger, prompting Baby John to ask about the maiming power of zip guns. No one answers. Similarly in "Cool," a frenetic dance in which the Jets attempt to regulate their volatile, pre-rumble energies, A-Rab shapes his hand into a gun, pantomimes firing it, and shouts "pow!," a close mirroring of Anybodys' finger shot. In a choreographic replication of cycles of violence, A-Rab is now no longer the victim but the shooter. Ying Zhu and Daniel Belgrad note in their study of dance in *West Side Story*'s 1961 film adaptation that "Over the course of the dance, this [gun] gesture is not eliminated, but is disciplined and integrated into the emotional fabric of coolness, so that Action, at the dance's end, can control it and use it." ([43]) The Jets' pretend gunplay, Zhu and Belgrad argue, can be situated within the musical's larger motif of subversive "play [as] the bodily assertion of vitality in the face of adult regulation." ([44]) Of course, this simulated battleground of finger pistols and vocalized "pows" —itself a reflection of popular mid-century children's games pitting cops against robbers, cowboys against Indians—fails to prevent real gun violence from materializing.

As Herrera, David Román, Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez, and Frances Negrón-Muntaner have all forcefully argued, *West Side Story*'s message of racial tolerance comes at an ironic cost: the perpetuation of Latine stereotypes and the faulty association of urban US-American crime to rising rates of immigration. ([45]) In the original lyrics to "America," Shark girl Anita paints an unseemly picture of her native island, depicting Puerto Rico's inhabitants as disease-ridden, oversexed, poor, and prone to unrestrained bursts of gun violence: "Always the hurricanes blowing, / Always the population growing, / And the money owing, / And the babies crying, / And the bullets flying." ([46]) The fact that the only gun that takes a life in *West Side Story* is owned by one Shark and fired by another is neither inconsequential nor unrelated to Bernardo and Chino's Puerto-Ricanness and their shared status as racialized outsiders who, if Anita's lyrical tirade is at all based on reality, brought the problems of their homeland with them. The lie Anita tells Tony after being sexually assaulted at Doc's store—that Chino has fatally shot Maria—is not only plausible, given Chino's armed state; it also accords with the feud's escalating violence and anticipates the ballistic trauma to come. In contrast to the white police officers' holstered weapons, Bernardo's gun was unsecured in the home and becomes uncontainable on the streets. With Maria's seizure of the gun, its relationship to the Latine community is solidified. Though she is clearly unaccustomed to handling the gun, its scriptive thingness immediately instructs her how to channel what the libretto terms her "savage" rage. ([47])

America Reloaded: Gun-Centric Revivals of Oklahoma! (2019) and West Side Story (2020)

In the midst of its direct transfer from St. Ann's Warehouse to Broadway's Circle in the Square Theatre, Daniel Fish's revival of *Oklahoma!* grabbed headings in early 2019 by announcing it would be Broadway's first "Gun Neutral" production. For every visible gun onstage, *Oklahoma!*'s producers donated to "organizations working to destroy illegal guns" as well as to those providing arts and STEM programming to communities disproportionately impacted by US-American gun violence. Speaking on the production's partnership with the non-partisan Gun Neutral Initiative, lead producer Eva Price remarked: "[j]ust because a particular story calls for the presence of a particular weapon, that doesn't mean that we have to remain complacent in America's gun-violence epidemic. Helping to destroy firearms that shouldn't be in circulation is both a privilege and a responsibility." ([48]) Implicit in this gun neutral pledge is an acknowledgement that even prop firearms cannot claim neutrality in 2019 (if indeed they ever could). Furthermore, monetary pledges concede that gun cultures and politics are inextricably bound up in economic transactions and therefore tend to capacitate the financially privileged. Much like carbon offsetting, a gun neutral pledge operates from an assumption that even simulated gunplay has the potential to cause harm; it attempts to mitigate possible negative effects, even as it admits the perceived inevitability of theatrical and mediatized guns in popular culture. Shortly after the news went viral, the National Rifle Association's Institute for Legislative Action characterized the production's move as "'smack[ing] of antigun political pandering.'" ([49])

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There is much to attend to in Fish's *Oklahoma!* and Belgian auteur Ivo van Hove's revival of *West Side Story* (not the least of which are van Hove's casting of a sexual predator in the role of Bernardo and staging of Anita's assault as a penetrative rape). ([50]) But rather than comprehensively review the productions or summarize their critical receptions—the latter no small task, given the strikingly polarized opinions of Fish's and van Hove's work—I wish to compare the productions' transformative treatments of guns with those advanced by their source productions. ([51]) Historically, the guns of *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story* have operated as connotatively ambiguous objects until they are lifted into service by their handlers. That is, Curly, Jud, and Carnes's guns are expected accessories for "territory folks" that *become* threatening with use. Fish and van Hove's guns, by contrast, persistently and independently menace, from the racks of guns hanging on *Oklahoma!*'s auditorium walls, always in view and materially and spatially inculcating theatregoers into the production's culture of guns, to the pistol tattoo above Chino's hip, a symbol of his early indoctrination into a gun-saturated world (he is now forever "armed") and a foreshadowing of *West Side Story*'s tragic climax. The revivals' guns not only consummate the violent impulses of their operators, they engender personal and systemic violence. Of Fish's *Oklahoma!* Soraya Nadia McDonald asserts, "social order is enforced and maintained by guns," a description easily transferrable to van Hove's New York. ([52]) In a conspicuous extension of the original musicals' gun narratives, the revivals' community circles and love triangles are contoured or irrevocably broken by armed characters and gun violence.

Fish and van Hove take different tacks in mining and reframing their source material. Fish retains Hammerstein's book almost in its entirety, embedding his major interventions interstitially or via bespoke stagings of scenes and songs. In its most dramatic departure from the libretto, Fish's *Oklahoma!* reconceptualizes Jud's killing as a deliberate gun death. On Curly and Laurey's wedding day, Jud kisses the bride and presents the couple with a gift: his gun, and an opportunity to end his life. It is an earnest plea with a subtle "gotcha" undertone, for if granted, Jud's slaughter will forever haunt their wedding day memories. Curly, with Laurey's wordless blessing, accepts Jud's offer and shoots him. Husband and wife are sprayed by blood as Jud crumples to the ground. ([53]) By replacing Jud's accidental stabbing with the close-range gunning down of an unarmed man (however consensual the victim), Fish renders the impromptu trial that exonerates Curly of criminal culpability distressingly perfunctory. Curly's acquittal, writes *The Atlantic*'s Todd S. Purdum, "feels less like justice and more like rough complicity in vigilantism." ([54]) *West Side Story*'s single, fatal gunshot remains as scripted, though van Hove's fixation on US-American gun violence is manifest throughout the production. Moreover, with a compressed run-time of 105 minutes and no intermission, the revival hastens toward Tony's gun death without *West Side Story*'s customary flashes of levity: "I Feel Pretty" has been cut and "Gee, Officer Krupke" refashioned.

Though Fish began developing *Oklahoma!* in 2007 at Bard College, its 2019 Broadway iteration and the 2020 *West Side Story* revival hum with unmistakable nowness, dialoguing directly with US-American gun politics in the Trumpian age. Both stories are set in an unspecified present and feature multiracial casts, with gender expansive (*West Side Story*) and disabled actors (*Oklahoma!*) further diversifying the depicted communities. ([55]) Fish's reimagined frontier boasts an interracial love triangle (Rebecca Naomi Jones's Laurey, Damon Daunno's Curly, and Patrick Vaill's Jud) and a Black federal marshal (Anthony Cason as Cord Elam), the latter's powerlessness during the murder trial suggestive not just of the community's fervor to exonerate Curly but the precariousness of Cord's endowed authority, even when armed. The antagonistic outsider Jud Fry is no longer a brutish farmhand, but a brooding, wiry, plaid-and-hoodie-wearing blonde, "a repository of loneliness and disconnection" who seeks community belonging and validation through Laurey. ([56]) Developed by Vaill and Fish over years of collaboration, this Jud oozes a despondent vulnerability that adheres his villainous acts¾including sexually assaulting Laurey and attempting to kill Curly with a switchblade masquerading as a kaleidoscope¾to his 'victimization' by an insular, cliquish community. "[It is t]he act of someone who feels pushed into a corner," Vaill claims of Jud's foiled murder plot. "This is someone who feels he does not have control, which is scary." Of Jud's role as the story's villain, Vaill is quick to qualify: "He's *cast* as the villain …. At the end of the day, he's guilty of being in love with someone that people don't think he should be in love with." ([57])

Fish and Vaill's apologist approach to Jud sets the character, and his assisted gun suicide, adrift in murky cultural waters. "Sympathy for the Incel?" wonders Catherine M. Young from the title of her *HowlRound* essay on *Oklahoma!*. In it, Young records a handful of the disparate public responses:

> Journalist Alison Stewart couldn't tell if Jud was more like a fragile, vulnerable "Kurt Cobain type" or a school shooter. Sarah Holdren and Elisabeth Vincentelli both describe him as an incel, the involuntarily celibate men who resent (and occasionally kill) women who won't sleep with them. Frank Rich was enthralled by Jud's anguish. Such ambiguity has political implications. ([58])

Ambiguities there may be, but for Fish and Vaill, Jud is a distinctly American product: a seething, unstable concoction of "virulent misogyny," toxic (white) masculinity, and lone-wolf reclusiveness that finds affirmation through the nation's gun culture. ([59]) But here another troubling narrative metastases. If Jud represents "the role of the outsider that the *community* can create," as Fish indicates (emphasis added), then the blame for Jud's ostracism lies not with him, but with those charged with nurturing and binding communities together: the play's women. ([60])

In van Hove's New York, the Jets encompasses white and Black "native" Americans who together rail against the immigrant Puerto Rican Sharks, transforming the Jets' racial animus from blatant white supremacism to a sort of qualified nativism with irreconcilable outcomes. "Mr. van Hove's casting misrepresents the real solidarities that form at the margins of U.S. citizenship," notes writer and translator Carina del Valle Schorske of the blended Jets. "'Inclusion' here is code for willful colorblindness." ([61]) The gang's new composition enables van Hove to broach stereotypes of African American gun use, as well as more fully confront the injustices of race-based police brutality. Baby John's fear of the zip-gun's ballistic power, for example, is now voiced by a Black teenager (Matthew Johnson). Later, after a brief squabble with the Jets, Officer Krupke (Danny Wolohan) draws his weapon and aggressively pushes it into the temple of one of its Black members, prompting several Jets to draw their smartphones and film the altercation. Krupke backs off, but the event propels the gang into a revamped rendition of "Gee, Officer Krupke." Once a vaudevillian take-down of domineering and inept authority figures, the song is now a humorless "indictment of the carceral state," with white and Black Jets striking 'don't shoot' poses in front of "a bleak video montage of young men being humiliated and abused by the police." ([62]) Branded "harrowing" by *Los Angeles Times*'s Charles McNulty, an "overreach" by *Newsday*'s Rafer Guzmán, and "pandering" by *The New Yorker's* Alexandra Schwartz, "Gee, Officer Krupke" (with choreography by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker) functions as an embodied condemnation of systemic racism, police violence, and the prison-industrial complex—and one of the revival's most overt bids for political relevance. ([63])

Audiences consume the productions' gun acts via unmediated and mediated witnessing. Van Hove's imagistic theatre routinely includes the use of video to bring the "characters closer to the audience" and "create subjective worlds on stage," the director himself explains. ([64]) In *West Side Story,* the characters' smartphones, pre-filmed footage, and live video from handheld cameras¾all projected onto a mammoth, stage-spanning screen¾together constitute an omnipresent surveillance apparatus that is in turns covert and intrusive. At intervals, the films decelerate into slow motion as the stage action unfolds at regular speed, a techno-theatrical "time warp" (to use Sarah Taylor Ellis's term) that often

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prolongs the audience's encounter with violence, as in Tony (Isaac Powell) fleeing from the rumble in a blood-soaked shirt. ([65]) Of one on-location shot that moves through a dead-end street, Schwartz remarks, "The camera advances in a slow dolly shot, producing the weightless, gliding momentum of a first-person shooter game." ([66]) Indeed, the footage collectively documents a story of interchangeable hunters and prey. Cameras invade enclosed spaces—several interiors are pocketed behind the projection screen, including Doc's store—and capture private and imagined interactions. ([67]) In one of the video design's most unsettling interventions, Tony's mental picture of Maria's gun death fills the screen, her head blasted open by Chino's close-range shot. Tony's own death, however, is left unmediated. Chino approaches, fires his pistol, and Tony's body registers the bullet's impact; no extreme closeups linger on his bloodied torso or Chino's inscrutable expression.

Fish's *Oklahoma!* employs live video and projections far more sparingly, notably when handheld video cameras penetrate the cramped environs of Jud's smokehouse. At first, Jud and Curly's tête-à-tête is plunged into total darkness, a drastic shift from the "aggressive brightness" employed elsewhere in the production's lighting design. ([68]) The blackout, which amplifies the dramaturgical work of the scene's soundscape, is later softened by live video tightly trained on Jud's face—tormented, longing for connection—projected onto the stage's backdrop. The scene vacillates in tone between a hushed, erotic intimacy (the men, faces mere inches from each other, whisper their lines into handheld microphones) and the unrelenting menace of cyberbullying, as Curly's disembodied voice calmly extols the virtues of suicide. ([69]) Notes Ben Brantley of the smokehouse scene, "the lines of sex and violence…blu[r] in this gun-toting universe[.]" ([70]) When, after singing "Pore Jud Is Daid" and still blanketed by darkness, the men fire their guns at a knothole, the loud reports startle and unnerve. Sound and sight decoupled, the invisible weapons index their presence sonically.

Though only men suffer gun deaths in *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story*, the stories' women together absorb much of the gun-related violence and trauma. Armed men (fathers, law enforcers, lovers, and stalkers) perambulate the playing space in *Oklahoma!*, pistols holstered and rifles clutched under armpits; Aunt Eller, by contrast, is accoutered with a wooden spoon for stirring cornbread. But if we simply track *Oklahoma!*'s guns as they pass through men's hands, we risk losing sight of Jones's Laurey and Ali Stroker's Ado Annie, outspoken women of intelligence and agency who must nevertheless navigate the complexities of a materially and psychically hostile landscape. Ado Annie's life choices are under near-constant monitoring by her armed father, while landowning woman of color Laurey "resolute[ly] refus[es] to be thought of as someone's possession" even as she's caught in the crosshairs of rival suitors. ([71]) The production's dream ballet and wedding scene lay bare Laurey's conscious negotiations with *Oklahoma!*'s gun culture¾and the men that drive it. In choreographer John Heginbotham's postmodern dream ballet, Laurey's avatar (Gabrielle Hamilton) moves with within a growing minefield of cowboy boots that are dropped one by one from the rafters. "[T]he sound they make as they hit the stage is as explosive as . . . gunshots," pronounced *The New Yorker*'s Sarah Larson in her 2018 review of the Off-Broadway production. ([72]) Less abstract is Laurey's endorsing of Jud's murder/suicide. In an extended moment of silent contemplation, Laurey spatially maps her inner conflict. She leaves Curly's side to peer searchingly into Jud's face, and then slowly returns to Curly. ([73]) We can only speculate on why Laurey sanctions "prairie justice," Jud's violent and permanent excision from the community, but as a Black woman and a survivor of sexual assault and stalking, Laurey is all too aware of how violence operates at the margins. ([74])

West Side Story's gun culture is likewise androcentric and hierarchical, but the women exhibit manifest signs of inculcation. Whereas Jerome Robbins' choreography restricted the use of gun gestures to his male dancers and Anybodys, De Keersmaeker democratizes the movement by setting it onto the Sharks girls' bodies in "America." The aggressive gesture¾fingers shaped into a gun, straight arm tracing an arc from low to high like a protractor¾runs counter the women's buoyant lyrics ("I like to be in America! / O.K. by me in America! / Everything free in America"). Violence continues to reach *West Side Story*'s Black, white, and brown women in ways unprescribed by Robbins, Laurents, Sondheim, and Bernstein, including Anita's attempted gang rape, Maria's graphic head wound, and the rain-soaked rumble, where several feminine-presenting Jets and Sharks fight. ([75]) One need only witness the distraught Maria's actions after Tony's shooting to comprehend how versant the women are in *West Side Story*'s microcosmic culture of violence. Silently, Maria (Shereen Pimentel) gestures for Chino's gun. Unlike Marias past, who handle the gun with trepidation and difficulty, Pimentel's Maria racks the handgun's slide with speed and skill, advancing the next round of ammunition as she asks, "How do you fire this gun, Chino? Just by pulling this little trigger?" It's a rhetorical question. She is well-acquainted with guns, even if this is the first she's handled, and the Jets and Sharks take her threats seriously. The gun changes hands several more times: a Jet gently disarms Maria as she faces the audience and holds the pistol to her head; later, she reclaims the gun and passes it to Anita. In entrusting the gun to Anita, Maria effectively bars Jets and Sharks alike from accessing it, effectively removing the weapon from circulation¾at least temporarily.

Guns are instruments of revolution and disruption, but they are also instruments of a sort of brutal petrification, of holding in abeyance those who might act counterculturally and preventing new, transformative associations from solidifying. The Golden Age *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story*'s firearms police the perimeters of homogenous human groups, simultaneously restricting access into and thwarting departures from them. In reinforcing the community circle's curved boundaries and transforming a love triangle with three vertices into a straight line with two points, guns and their handlers are bold, convenient catalysts for the American musical's conservative endings. They help the boy get the girl; forestall any integrative or conciliatory pacts between rival street gangs; and fortify the settler-colonialist claims on stolen lands.

In their twenty-first-century adaptations of *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story,* Fish and van Hove present guns as the most responsive, convenient deliverers of modern violence, but their contemporary anti-gun, pro-diversity messages strain uncomfortably beneath the musicals' constrictive Golden Age fabric, fabric that engages firearms in ways that unequivocally benefit white heteronormative America.

After seeing Fish's reimagined *Oklahoma!*, Johnny Oleksinksi of the right-leaning *New York Post* sardonically declared: "everything you cherish about this classic has been taken out behind the bar and shot, replace by an auteur's bag of tricks and a thesis on gun control and westward expansion. Here, the West was won by a culture of violence and toxic masculinity—*what fun!*" ([76]) In all his rhetorical outrage, Oleksinski fails to recognize that *Oklahoma!* has always told this story. What he is detecting, however, are the heightened political stakes of the contemporary gun musical. Staged in the midst of partisan debates over Second Amendment gun rights and alarming rates of US gun injuries and deaths, the majority of twenty-first-century gun musicals, including Fish's *Oklahoma!* and van Hove's *West Side Story*, proceed from three assumptions. First, they regard gun violence as a public health crisis in the United States. Second, they implicate all Americans as active perpetrators or passive abettors in the country's gun violence epidemic. Third, rather than depict gun handling as a prime signifier of national belonging, they suggest that merely *persisting* within the country's omnipresent gun culture is a uniquely American act. Oleksinski's "auteur" jab is likewise somewhat founded. In their searing critiques of US-American gun violence and its impact on disenfranchised communities, Daniel Fish and Ivo van Hove undertake crucial (if imperfect) work. And yet, as progressive white men of privilege, they perhaps cannot help but ventriloquize rather than possess the perspectives voiced by frontline populations.

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