“Trouble in the Suburbs”: In-Betweenness and Non-Conformity in Cheever and Bernstein

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When I first discovered Leonard Bernstein’s 1952 opera, *Trouble in Tahiti*, I was immediately struck by the numerous ways in which it echoed John Cheever’s novels and short stories, and among them, more specifically, those which took the American suburbs as setting. Was there a “Verdi of suburbias”, akin to Cheever, who had been known as “the Tchekhov of suburbia” or “the Ivy League Faulkner of the New York exurbs”? In particular, both Cheever and Bernstein appeared to capitalize on the essential duality and imposture of suburban life which Americans have repeatedly foregrounded, up to the more recent Todd Haynes film, *Far from Paradise*, or even more recent TV series *Desperate Housewives*. Yet, neither Cheever’s nor Bernstein’s perspective can be reduced to that of mere social observers. John Cheever once said humorously: “I think I have sometimes been mistaken as a social observer. You can’t say, ‘I don’t deserve it,’ but the fact that I can count the olives in a dish just as quick as John O’Hara doesn’t mean I am O’Hara.” I shall argue that, for both Cheever and Bernstein, the choice of suburban space as setting ultimately results not so much from a desire to launch a satirical attack on the hypocritical conformism which suburbia may embody as from an attempt to project the ambivalence underlying their own gender constructions and aesthetics on a setting that conjures up indetermination and duality.

2. That is how Aldridge, “John Cheever and the Soft Sell of Disaster”, 172, sums up the image of Cheever popularized by *Time magazine*.
Sociologist Barry Schwartz enhances the duality of suburban life as he isolates the following features as characteristic traits of suburbia: “Transience of residence awkwardly joined to an intense obsession in the repair and appearance of the home.” In Bernstein’s opera, which stages one day in the life of a suburban couple, this “transience of residence” is more specifically reflected in Sam’s commuting, but also in Dinah’s comings and goings – her visit to the psychiatrist’s and subsequent lunch in a diner in town, followed by her return to Brookline – while the music conveys the toing and froing through alternating musical motifs each associated with a distinct place and mood (the office motif, the domestic quarrel motif, for instance). Meanwhile, the articulation of “an intense obsession in the repair and appearance of the home” falls to the chorus, as it repeatedly sings of “the pretty red roof,” the “up-to-date kitchen, washing machine. / Colourful bathrooms” and of the emblematic “little white house in Brookline,” in Scarsdale, Wellesley Hills, Ozone Park, Highland Park, Shaker Heights, Michigan Falls, Beverly Hills. While commuting is also a regular motif in Cheever’s fictions, the latter explains:

Suburbia, which is the setting for many of my stories, reflects the restlessness, the rootlessness of modern lives. It is a way of life that had to be improvised. There were no suburban traditions. People had to learn how to get along with one another and how to establish a new society.

Suburbia is thus quintessentially defined by indetermination and suspension, while, in their own specific way, the oxymoronic names Cheever gave to his suburban towns, Proxmire Manor, Shady Hill, Bullet Park, suggest their ambiguous status.

6. Ibid., 16.
7. Ibid., 16.
8. Ibid., 12, 19.
Trouble in Tahiti opens with a prelude sung by a trio intent on glorifying the joys of suburbia. While an enthusiastic portrayal of life in the suburbs is thus drawn by the chorus, Bernstein evidently means it to be debunked by the following scene, as the duo sung by Sam and Dinah offers a vision of suburbia which clearly contrasts with the idyllic representation provided by the prelude. Scene I thus draws on the traditional motif of the domestic quarrel, a foundational and recurrent motif in American literature which Cheever himself has frequently re-visited throughout his career. Strikingly enough, the libretto activates the very same metaphors of confinement which Cheever’s stories and novels relentlessly re-write. The author of Falconer insisted that:

Falconer is not Sing Sing. I used the imaginary prison of Falconer principally as a metaphor for confinement. It would be the third large metaphor I’ve used. The first is St. Botolph’s, a New England village which has the confinement of traditional values and nostalgia; the second was the suburban towns, Bullet Park and Shady Hill, again areas of confinement; and the third is Falconer.10

Bernstein’s protagonists echo the metaphor as Sam’s call to Dinah to “break down this wall we have made” is answered by Dinah’s similar call to “break down these bars we have made”.11 In Scene III, Dinah’s account of her dream in the psychiatrist’s office equally points to the suburbs as inducing a sense of confinement. The edenic garden which suburban life may have once held out as prospect has degenerated into:

A garden gone to seed,
Choked with every kind of weed.
There were twisted trees around me,
All black against the sky;
Black and bare and dead and dry.12

Mirroring the powerless father figure conjured up by the dream, “another voice” singing of “a shining garden,” “a quiet place,”13 and strikingly renamed “the singer,” briefly allows Dinah to catch a glimpse of the way out (“He could free me from this place”14) before vanishing.

12. Ibid., 15.
13. Bernstein’s 1983 sequel to Trouble in Tahiti is entitled A Quiet Place.
Yet, while the deflation achieved by Scene I ironically undermines the exhilarated vision of suburbia offered by the prelude, one should refrain from viewing *Trouble in Tahiti* as an uncompromising attack on the suburbs. That Bernstein should trust a bouncy jazzy trio with this eulogy of suburbia indicates ambivalence on his part rather than adamant criticism. There is as much celebration at stake in this particularly long and melodic prelude as in Cheever’s equally complex tributes to suburbia. Cheever’s edenic depiction of life in Shady Hill in “The Worm in the Apple” was thus accounted for by the author himself: “I got so cross with critics always saying that all I could write about was unhappy people that I sat down and wrote ‘Worm in the Apple’.”15 And, in his 1969 novel *Bullet Park*, Nailles sounds like his spokesman as he comments:

Well I suppose there’s plenty to be sad about if you look around, but it makes me sore to have people always chopping at the suburbs. I’ve never understood why. When you go to the theatre they’re always chopping at the suburbs but I can’t see that playing golf and raising flowers is depraved.16

In the works of both Cheever and Bernstein, the suburbs thus emerge as a convenient metaphorical frame suggestive of an in-betweeness and ambivalence most likely rooted in the artists’ oscillating viewpoints and shifting stances regarding domesticity and heterosexuality. Both bisexuals, both torn between their attraction to men and a longing for heterosexual intimacy, Cheever and Bernstein appear to have capitalized on the “bright falsehood”17 of suburban experience to evoke the alienation and sense of imposture tied to the experience of bisexuality in post-World War II America. I have shown elsewhere the extent to which Cheever’s experience as a gay man in the closet shaped his fictions and, more specifically, how his *Journals*, acting as “avant-texte” (to use Jean Bellemin-Noël’s terminology18), reveal the close connection between his portrayal of suburban life as the experience of imposture and his own perception of himself as an impostor.19 While Cheever’s bisexuality became public knowledge only after his death when his *Journals* and

Letters were published, Bernstein’s, though known to a larger circle, was similarly guilt-inducing and partially closeted.

Trouble in Tahiti is largely inspired by Bernstein’s parents’ lives, as the suburban setting resembles the houses in which Bernstein grew up in the 1920’s and 1930’s and the unhappiness experienced by the protagonists mirrors the misery of Bernstein’s parents’ married life, the parallel being underlined by the composer’s choice of the name Sam, his father’s name, for his male protagonist. Meanwhile, Bernstein, who had married in September 1951, also appears to draw from his own experience of marriage. While he actually married actress Felicia Montealegre a few months after having started to work on Trouble in Tahiti, he had been engaged to her as early as January 1947 before breaking their engagement in the summer 1947.

There might be a great deal of both Bernstein and his father in the male protagonist of the opera, but, more importantly, the arrogant and quasi Darwinian celebration of manly values which Sam’s part gives voice to, in Scene V in particular, could be read as the articulation of “the cultural anxieties around gender, sexuality, musicality, and national identity that,” as underlined by Nadine Hubbs, “significantly shaped twentieth-century American music”. Bernstein’s ironical treatment of triumphant manliness and masculinist ideology such as voiced by Sam could thus be interpreted as a covert attack on what had been a widespread anxiety-ridden discourse on American music in the teens and twenties – that American music was insufficiently virile to compete with Western European music. Indeed, Sam’s preposterous praise of winners, of “men who can make it” might well be Bernstein’s tongue-in-cheek response to American composer Charles Ives and to his doubts as to the future of American music. Through Sam, the “anthropomorphized ‘American music’” pervading Ives’s discourse and conveying his...

22. Ibid., 77-78.
own gender anxieties is being simultaneously actualized and undermined by Bernstein as he literalizes Ives’s metaphor and stages a ludicrous flesh and blood advocate of physical exercise. Bernstein seems to be taking the attack a step further and driving the point home as he has Dinah mock “the handsome American” who appears in the inset musical in Scene VI and remark with mixed feelings: “I must say he’s really a man: / Six feet tall, and each foot just incredible!”

The questioning of a rigidly and exaggeratedly gendered mapped-out territory for American music which these scenes appear to point to may thus account for Bernstein’s choice of the quintessentially indeterminate suburban space as setting. It also introduces us to the essential ambiguity of a work which appears to welcome and favour in-betweenness on all fronts, whether aesthetic, generic or stylistic. The transience that is crucial to the experience of suburbia thus permeates both textual and musical space as, listening to Bernstein’s opera, one commutes, so to speak, between opera and musical, but also between the musical work and its referential frame – whether historical, political or biographical.

The celebratory dimension in Bernstein’s opera deserves to be considered first in that perspective. While French sociologist Luc Boltanski once remarked that critique and celebration were the two basic modes of human activity, as is pointed out by art critic Dorothea Von Hantelmann, celebration, which is not to be confused with mere affirmation, “exists as a kind of counter-strategy to critique.”

Von Hantelmann thus insists that critique and affirmation, “though under opposite signs […] are only superficially opposed to each other because fundamentally they lay claim to the same terrain: the interpretation of the world of facts” while “celebration is about proposing, producing and cultivating ways of being in the world” and “strives to establish an alternative base for critique, a base that acknowledges its common ground with the given as much as it strives towards something that is qualitatively different from the given.” Moreover, as Von Hantelmann relevantly points out, “the paradigm of celebration” questions “the separability of the symbol and the symbolized” and, like performative speech, “produces the reality that it


signifies,” so that “celebration presupposes [...] an oscillation between reality and the modes of its aesthetic transformation,” “all who participate are elevated to a festive state” and “one is affected, changed and displaced by something that is present there.” The celebration at work in Bernstein’s prelude blurs the frontiers between art and the given, the reality it is involved in, and the negation of a clear demarcation line between reality and aesthetic experience is one way in which his aesthetic choices fit in with the moral, sexual, social ambivalence the work testifies to. In that perspective too, his work is comparable to that of Cheever whose characteristic flights of lyricism appear to achieve a similar effect, being quintessentially celebratory and, as essential providers of pathos, a privileged site for involvement and adherence not only of the author with his object, but also of the reader with that same object.

Besides, a particularly striking feature of both Cheever’s and Bernstein’s works is their use of “hypertextual ambiguity.” I have already enhanced the superimposition of hypertextual dynamics and closetedness in Cheever’s fictional works, an emblematic instance of which may be found in “The Seaside Houses,” a 1961 short story in which the narrator discovers a copy of *Fanny Hill* in a closet.

In Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti*, hypertextual ambiguity is mostly confined to Scene VI, one of the longest scenes out of the seven scenes the opera is made of. Scene VI is set at the cinema, where Dinah has gone to see a movie, a musical itself entitled *Trouble in Tahiti*. The scene is composed of Dinah’s summary of and critical comments on the movie, which are interspersed with the contrasting interferences of the chorus, a trio which, for the most part, sings the words “Island Magic” which happen to be the title of a song included in the musical. The very title of the musical, *Trouble in Tahiti*, entails a deliberate metadiscursive commentary on his work on the part of the composer himself. As he chooses to give the same title to his own opera and to the musical which

the diegetic content of the opera incorporates, Bernstein evidently enhances his own ambivalence as a composer equally interested in the genre of opera and in the genre of the musical. The “experimental quality” of Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti*, which is “half an opera, half a musical,” is thus obliquely remarked and re-marked upon, so to speak, through this ubiquitous title. In a similar way, Cheever’s in-between-ness in terms of generic affiliation is manifested by his gradual dismissal of the literary frame he had originally embraced as a *New Yorker* writer, and in particular by his increasingly overriding desire to let discourse thrust its way through narrative. Bernstein’s metadiscursive use of the inset musical in his opera may thus be compared with Cheever’s use of prologues as a privileged site for metatextual comments and a questioning of the novelistic frame.

Moreover, the inclusion of the musical within the opera allows Bernstein to comment on the escapism specific to the genre of musical through Dinah’s comment “What escapist Technicolor twaddle!!” and, further down, in Scene VII, with disenchanted Dinah’s last lines in the opera:

> Meanwhile there is the other magic,
> The bought-and-paid-for magic,
> Waiting on a Super Silver Screen.

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33. Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti* may appear as a forerunner in its use of such generic heterogeneity, since, as is noted by Elise K. Kirk, it is “from the 1970s onward [that] what separated opera from Broadway became increasingly blurred” (Kirk, *American Opera*, Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois Press, 2001, 316). Yet, while Harold Prince associates Bernstein’s 1974 *Candide* with the beginning of what he calls “a cross-over movement in musical theater” (quoted by Kirk, *American Opera*, 316), such genre boundary-crossing “has been true throughout theatrical history,” as is aptly remarked by Kirk, who points out that “*Don Giovanni*, *The Magic Flute*, *Fidelio*, and *Carmen* are only a few of many operas interspersed with musical comedy-inspired techniques and traditions.” (Kirk, *American Opera*, 317)


Naturally, that Dinah should mock the genre in an aria which may be described as “the high point of the opera, a tour de force for a gifted soprano” simultaneously enhances the criticism at stake and Bernstein’s parallel attraction to the genre, an ambivalence that is reflected in Dinah’s sitting through the whole movie, and not only once, but twice, as she sits through it again with Sam in the evening.

But there is also a much less obvious, much more cryptic way in which Bernstein uses this inset musical to provide a critical judgment on the genre itself, as well as on the political scene of the time. Indeed, the association of the title of the musical Trouble in Tahiti and of the title of the song within the musical, “Island Magic,” is resonant with allusions to a very real and distinct musical work, Troubled Island, a 1949 opera by Black American composer William Grant Still. While one cannot but be led to simply hear the title Troubled Island, which the two titles eventually merge into, it is the whole narrative surrounding the performance and reception of Still’s own opera which is immediately conjured up in the listeners’ minds. Indeed, Still’s opera, Troubled Island, was closed permanently after only three performances and despite the enthusiastic response of the audience. Based on Langston Hughes’ 1936 play Troubled Island, with a libretto by Hughes and additional lyrics by Verne Arvey, Still’s wife, the opera stages the Haitian revolution, more specifically the life of Haitian liberator Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and may be viewed as expressing Still’s anti-communist stance with the corrupted figure of Dessalines conveying the failure of revolutionary ideals. While Still ascribed the failure of his own opera both to his being a Black man and to cold-war politics and the workings of a Communist conspiracy, he testified before the House of Un-American Activities Committee in 1951 and up to 1953 exposed several leftist composers as Communists, among whom Leonard Bernstein. As Bernstein buries the title of Still’s opera under his own fictitious titles, he thus appears to be settling a score with Still and, through him, with McCarthyism. But he also attacks the conformism and escapism specific to the genre as Still’s opera ends with the restoration of the love between Dessalines and his wife which entails the revocation of revolutionary politics for the sake of love. This esca-

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Pessimism is made even more manifest by the depoliticization achieved by the 1941 revision of a work which had been written in the 1930's. There is thus a closetedness to this scene which relies upon the dialectical dynamics of openness/secrecy, revelation/occultation created by the intertextuality at work, while the workings of reference may be viewed as literally performing the closetedness entailed by Bernstein’s positioning on the political scene of the time – a positioning which, with cold-war politics and McCarthyism as a backdrop, is itself naturally framed by the dialectics of saying/not saying, disclosing/concealing, exposing/veiling.

Moreover, the “closeting impulse” at work here may be viewed as “culturally conditioned by twentieth-century queer identity and experience, and by [what Philip Brett calls] ‘the discretionary model’ of homosexuality” Quoting Philip Brett, Nadine Hubbs thus speaks of a “collision of musicality and the closet” via a ‘social contract’ whereby queer musicians have willingly sacrificed self-determination in exchange for a degree of respectability and elite status. As in Cheever’s works, the functioning of reference has a performative dimension which merges with the performative dimension of the silences/explications of the libretto regarding sexual issues. In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick insists that:

“Closetedness” itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.

The intertextuality at stake here is a performance which stems out of such silence and is active in a similarly closeted way.

Lastly, two remarkable oxymoronic lines in Scene VII, the last scene in the opera, encapsulate the duality and dynamics of closetedness at work in Bernstein’s opera. As the disillusioned couple is about to leave the house and go to the movie theater, they are gratified with two lines

41. Ibid., 97.
42. Ibid., 9.
which distinctly echo one another and are thus made to resound even more forcefully in the listener’s ears. Sam’s dream of a day “Without the screaming silence” thus echoes Dinah’s own dream of a day “Without the silent screaming.” The duplication of such telltale oxymoron is in itself a hint of its crucial dimension. But its effect is accrued by the nature of the image itself, as these lines articulate the closetedness which pervades the work in the very language of music, in terms which are preeminently those of musical composition. Moreover, the use of chiasmus adds to its specific resonance. The use of chiasmus here evidently foregrounds both the metaphor and the oxymoron at work, by means of mere rhetorical impact. But the chiastic structure also enhances the all-encompassing nature of the metaphorical and oxymoronic image at stake, thus suggesting through the circular imagery it conjures up that these lines actually embrace or literally circumscribe the work as a whole, enclosing most of the issues that the opera raises within the significant figure of the circle.

That Bernstein should have been described as “the musical man of all trades” in a 1950 gossip column in the Pittsburgh Press seems to me a strikingly relevant though somewhat unsavory conflation of the duality and ambivalence involved in his experience as a composer and as a bisexual, for, as is remarked by Marjorie Garber, who quotes the expression, “‘Musical’ is early slang for ‘homosexual,’ and ‘man of all trades,’ in a gay context, self-explanatory.” Meanwhile, as is pointed out by Hubbs, “the histories of musical and homosexual identity in twentieth-century American culture mirror and overlap one another significantly.” More specifically, as Hubbs signals, the connotations in “musical” both in its conventional meaning and “as code for ‘homosexual’” were similar: “It implied membership in an exceptional class (exalted in one case, stigmatized in the other) of persons possessing knowledge and preoccupations alien to the majority.” In Trouble in Tahiti, Bernstein appears to conflate a questioning of gender-normative and genre-normative models as his genre boundary-crossing work, half musical, half

49. Ibid., 66.
opera, stages the failure of a stereotypical heterosexual couple which is conversely delineated along strongly contrasted and highly marked gender-lines. That the scene should be suburbia with its suggestion of transience, duality and indetermination might be viewed as Bernstein’s metaphorical framing but also, paradoxically enough, simultaneous literal encoding of the imposture underlying any rigidly binary mapping out of a territory, be it the territory of music or the territory of gender and sexuality. While the title *Trouble in Tahiti* echoes the title of Cheever’s last novel, *Oh What A Paradise It Seems*, both pointing to the gap between fantasized Edens and more troubling and troubled realities (emblematised by the troubled waters of the pond which serves as backdrop and central metaphor in Cheever’s 1982 novel), the word “trouble” itself thus appears to reach far beyond the most obvious meaning of “unrest,” signalling as it does Bernstein’s interest in opaque language as well as blurred aesthetic contours.

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