Trouble Songs: An Invocation

But before long, the words lost their sense completely, becoming little more than a means to regulate breath — which, she soon supposed, was as good a use for them as any.
— Ted Mooney, The Same River Twice

Denaturalization of one's personal and cultural premise.
— Caroline Bergvall, “Middling English”

Trouble, trouble, I've had it all my days / It seems like trouble going to follow me to my grave
— Bessie Smith, “Downhearted Blues”

Language is not only a means for saying, language is what we are saying. Record, we say, and we mean album, or we mean vinyl, or we mean history. Let the record show.⁷ That we say record and not CD, tape, album or document is integral to what we are saying. We place ourselves in history, and we place history in ourselves when we use particular language.⁸

History exists as Trouble Song and is troubled by its⁹ representation. Distinctions between Trouble Songs collapse into versions, iterations, variations and interpretations. Just so, trouble is inescapable, and can be only partially elaborated. To speak the word “trouble” is to invoke trouble. The Trouble Songs project is

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⁷ that we were there.
⁸ Speaking of “the dispersed, intensely regional transformations” of English as it is used and altered over time, Caroline Bergvall reports: “This transport flows across both diachronic and synchronic routes, sheds as much as it drags historical account along with itself” (14). The term diachronic refers, in linguistic study, to “the historical development of a language,” while synchronic refers to a descriptive approach to the state of language at a given time (Oxford English Dictionary online). Trouble Songs, as a study, explores the continuum between these approaches, which makes it essentially diachronic in scope, though there will be moments of synchronic reflection, particularly within the moment of song. To return to and reiterate Bergvall, “This transport flows across both.”
⁹ Call it “History, Trouble Song.”
such an invocation and elaboration. When we say “trouble,” we refer to the history of trouble whether or not we have it in mind. When we sing trouble, we sing (with) history. We sing history here; we summon trouble.

A Trouble Song is a complaint, a grievance, an aside, a come-on, a confession, an admission, a resignation, a plea. It’s an invitation — to sorrow, frustration, darkness. It’s part of a conversation, or it’s a soliloquy, and it’s often an apostrophe. The listener overhears the song, with sympathy. The song is meant for someone else, someone dead or gone. The singer doesn’t care who hears, and the song is a dare. Or it’s a false wager — to speak trouble is to summon trouble, but it’s already here.

Trouble is loss — or the threat of loss, which is the appearance of loss. A Trouble Song is impossible speech; it speaks about the inability to speak. Trouble is a lack of what once was possessed, a desire in absence, an absence in desire. Trouble is the presence of absence, a present of loss. It is impotence and despair, but a Trouble Song is not a negation or a denial. Its admission is its invitation. Trouble is spoken not only in resignation and exasperation, but in defiance. Trouble is spoken as a challenge to death and defeat. In a Trouble Song, there is history, but there is no past — trouble is here and now. Which is to say, there is history, but it is not (the) past.

Trouble has a cousin: problem. They are related, but not by blood. The problem can be articulated, while trouble doesn’t need an article, slips away from the most slippery terms, escapes parts of speech, without leaving us. “Trouble” is the signifier that refuses to signify, or will only call itself. Trouble is its own copula.\(^\text{10}\) When we sing trouble, we are inextricable with it — and in-

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\(^{10}\) To say She troubles me, or She is trouble — or “She was trouble,” as private dick Philip Marlowe, via Raymond Chandler, says in The Big Sleep (17) — is to bind two things that were different, but have become inseparable. Untie them, and they are still linked. To be in trouble is to be. (Copula is etymologically linked with couple and copulate; all of these forms are intimately linked with trouble.)
deed we sing along as we listen. Troublemaker\textsuperscript{11} and trouble are one. To trouble is to haunt, and a haunting cannot be grasped, only felt. The problem can be grasped, if not resolved. It’s strictly nominal, and can be designated. Trouble is free to change form, to embody the problem. The latter can lead to trouble but cannot become it. Trouble has no limit, no end. Like suffering, it is transferable, even and especially upon death. Trouble is what gets you.

The word is an evocation, but it is also a talisman. To summon “trouble” is to replace trouble with the word — to have the word instead of trouble. “Trouble” is a magic word, an incantation that protects the singer, and the listener, from trouble.\textsuperscript{12} The word also replaces description. Context in and around the song may bring us closer to the real trouble and its sources, but such investigations also bring us closer to danger and ruin — the danger and ruin of history.\textsuperscript{13} “Trouble” is in harm’s way, or in the way of harm — it is between the singer and actual trouble. Or the singer keeps us behind him as he faces trouble, turns to whisper “trouble” over his shoulder. If we peek around him we are on our own. Or the singer embodies trouble, stands between us and the real, facing us. “Trouble”\textsuperscript{14} is the singer, “Trouble”\textsuperscript{15} is the song; trouble\textsuperscript{16} is behind the singer, “trouble”\textsuperscript{17} is before us. We step around “trouble” to face the real at our own peril. We have been warned by the song.

\textsuperscript{11} On the title track to his country gospel album \textit{The Troublemaker} (1976), Willie Nelson is the song, which names him, an outlaw hippie Christ, as he sings it.
\textsuperscript{12} It might also, as will be explored, protect the singer from the prying I of the listener.
\textsuperscript{13} The angel of history’s problem is its inability to turn away from the ruin of history, but unlike the angel of history, we have trouble at our backs whether or not we face the ruins.
\textsuperscript{14} a name, an embodiment
\textsuperscript{15} an eponymous song title, and the substance (insubstantial as it may be) of the song, framed by titular quotation marks
\textsuperscript{16} of which he sings
\textsuperscript{17} the song, the representation of trouble which we witness
If trouble runs through song it runs through time. The body of Trouble Song, when considered as such, is a single text, the map laid over the territory of history. Time collapses into this text. Trouble Song is its own genre, or it is the collapse of genres. It is genre trouble.

Trouble Songs, like the Trouble Song, is necessarily unfinished.

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18 Body, text, map — a mixed metaphor, or a signal fluidity.
19 “[T]o make ‘gender trouble’ is to act up as subtext: that is, to perform subversions: parody, pastiche, ironic mirrorings, deconstructive replications. … [But to] make real gender trouble is to make genre trouble” (Retallack 112; cf. Butler).
20 Here, let us sing the book, though elsewhere Trouble Songs (no italics) will be treated as a project, ongoing, a song about a song (so the quotation marks have not yet come to roost).
21 and always already