Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Modes of Trouble — Terms — Elaboration, Embellishment, Embodiment

Now heavens. Or should I perhaps give up troubling to correct such nonsense altogether, and simply let my language come out any way it insists upon?
— David Markson, Wittgenstein’s Mistress

Delivery format/conveyance, temporality, part of speech (n. vs. v., etc.), representation/non-representation (and replacement), referential vs. poetic language, vocalization/enunciation: all of these are integral to what is being said (or elided), and to the nature of trouble’s appearance (as “trouble,” or as inference of trouble).

A semantic constellation: genre, general(ity), generic, gender. Trouble may be a man, a woman, a transgender person, a situation, an atmosphere, a condition — trouble is contingency, in a word. To speak of Trouble Songs is to invite genre trouble (via genre consciousness).

—an extended outline format, a set of expanding propositions, invitations to trouble space

A point in the Oxford English Dictionary’s constellation of meanings for “gender” binds it to genre: “Kind, sort, class; also, genus as opposed to species. the general gender: the common sort (of people).” Compare to “genre”:

a. Kind; sort; style.
b. spec. A particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose.

Once genre enters, the room is gendered (that is, troubled by gender, or gen[d]re).
Trouble may be appropriated, and misappropriated.

Is trouble (inter-)culturally transmittable? Is trouble historically transmittable? Is trouble chrono-logical? That is, can it be dis-

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38 “We’ve got to show them we’re worse than queer / SUCK MY LEFT ONE SUCK MY LEFT one” (liner notes) hollers Kathleen Hanna on Bikini Kill’s “Suck My Left One,” from Bikini Kill’s self-titled debut EP. At the time (1991), a wave of feminist punk, dubbed riot grrl (later mass-mediated as Riot Grrrl, that third r adding a cartoon growl — or purr), acts up during grunge’s USA-via-Seattle, crowd-surfing big splash, as Bikini Kill leads the charge into boy-strewn waters. Defiantly unladylike, Hanna belts out lines like Eat meat / Hate Blacks / Beat your fucking wife / Its [sic] all the same thing (“Liar”), troubling the waters of American commercial culture and calling women to the stage. The last song on the EP is a live recording of “Thurston Hearts the Who,” featuring Molly Neuman (credited as molly germs), who is invited onstage to recite a hostile review while the band plays the song (ostensibly for the first time) behind her. Neuman created the zine Girl Germs, along with Allison Wolfe, with whom she formed another influential riot grrl band, Bratmobile. Bikini Kill takes its name from a zine written by Hanna and the band’s drummer, Tobi Vail (who will be a founding member of Ladyfest, a feminist nonprofit arts and music festival). At the turn of the millennium, Hanna further troubles genre and gender with Le Tigre (whose albums are bookended by Hanna’s Julie Ruin project†). The group layers electronic elements, including programmed beats and samples, with minimal traditional rock instrumentation to create feminist agit-pop, accompanied live by multimedia performances. The original trio includes a filmmaker, Sadie Benning, and another zine maker, Johanna Fateman. Benning is replaced by the band’s projectionist, JD Samson, between the group’s 1999 self-titled debut and its 2001 follow-up, Feminist Sweepstakes (both of which are released on the queer label Mr. Lady, itself an invocation of gender trouble). Samson goes on to raise genderqueer awareness in her dance music project (with Johanna Fateman), MEN.

† The first, self-titled Julie Ruin album precedes Le Tigre’s eponymous 1999 debut by a year, anticipating stylistic shifts Hanna will explore with her Le Tigre bandmates. In 2013, nearly a decade after Le Tigre’s final studio album, Hanna issues a second Julie Ruin album, Run Fast, which is followed in 2016 by Hit Reset. Hanna’s hiatus (or exile) from music is well documented in Sini Anderson’s vital 2013 documentary, The Punk Singer.

39 Misappropriation is (an) appropriation.
covered or elaborated along a line of time, according to a logic of transport and association?\textsuperscript{40}

Trouble is a hiding place. The singer does not have to reveal what is behind the song. The Trouble Song is a veiled confession: nothing but trouble. Or, it’s a veiled threat: nothing but trouble in here. In that sense, is it a threat to the singer, the listener, or both? When is trouble the agent, or the subject, and when is it the object of the song?\textsuperscript{41}

If “trouble” replaces trouble, the song might replace the singer (or the subject).\textsuperscript{42} The song travels over time, transcending the moment of its conception or documentation, moving out of its context but carrying a context. Judith Butler summarizes the philosophical tradition of mind/body dualism with reference to “relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy”: “The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether” (12). If trouble is the anchor of the flesh, the predicament that is embodiment in an antipathetic world, song — and in particular, Trouble Song — is the entertainment of flight: from trouble, from embodiment, along the float lines of signification.

When “trouble” replaces trouble, the singer enacts a relation to embodiment that the listener uses as a model for her own displacement. She is good and gone in song, as Jason Lytle of Grandaddy sings in “Lost on Yer Merry Way,” which begins, Trouble

\textsuperscript{40} Yes and no. Discovery leads to (or from) recovery, and an inevitable recovering; all things cannot be present — or accounted for — at once. This is concept trouble, or the trouble with concept(s).
\textsuperscript{41} And how does this relate to signification?
\textsuperscript{42} Cf. Willie Nelson, The Troublemaker, which, as noted, (also) (explicitly) replaces the singer with the album. The movie-poster Is is silent (and/or replaced by a comma).
\textsuperscript{43} if not the
\textsuperscript{44} Here let us say “political” encapsulates — and embodies — the world that is the case, as Wittgenstein has it. Or: The body is the case, and the song will be the body, as “trouble” will be the word that is the case. And: the footnote is the case/song before (and after, and beneath) the case/body.
with a capital T. Escape is a trick of language — in the second verse, the line morphs into Trouble with people like me, which is followed by Tie ’em down and then they vanish instantly. If the song remains, if it plays over time, the vanishing is a continuous present to the listener.

Why and when does “trouble” appear in songs? How aware of its usage are arrangers and performers of Trouble Songs? The concern is not just — and not primarily — what “trouble” is (what it means, what it refers to) in a Trouble Song, but to investigate/analyze/diagram/trouble/vet/consider how “trouble” is used grammatically, which pronouns and characters it relates to, who delivers and reports trouble (cf. also subject/object orientation), etc. In his ethnomusicological study of working-class Texans’ identification with country music, Real Country, Aaron Fox considers modes and representations of affect — what these Texans talk about when they talk about “real country”:

“Feeling” and “relating (to)” are diffuse, integrative, summarizing ideas. These terms, which fulfill a variety of grammatical functions, often appear to refer to essentialized, ineffable properties of social and aesthetic experience: if you have to ask what “feeling” means, in other words, you’ll never know, and that’s the point. “Feeling” is an inchoate quality of authenticity. But this phenomenological knot can be analytically untangled to reveal an orderly, dynamic, and elegantly binary semantic field. (155)

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45 Trouble Songs’ style for quoting lyrics is italics, to indicate they are sung — slanted and inflected — and that they do not belong to the singer (are borrowed, transmitted, paid forward, lost). Quotations from texts other than songs are treated with standard quotation marks.

46 Ask you just what kind / Of trouble I might find / Tonight out of my… my mind, Lytle (dis)embodies (and echoes my mind) in “Chartsengrafs.”

47 And does it appear as the sign of a disappearance — of trouble, of the singer or subject?

48 We could say writers, and we could say transcribers, or we could invoke conjurers (though perhaps only performers have the power to conjure, even if they need a spell).
Of course, the language of the academic clashes with the phenomenon under consideration, but simply put, Fox is coordinating two fields: verbal expression and embodied emotion. The singer relates to his audience — imparting a lyrical story, articulating emotion, connecting to common experiences — and the audience responds in kind — feeling it, singing along, moving to and being moved by the song.

The trouble singer also presents an “inchoate quality of authenticity” which we — and she — might call “trouble.” We can ask what it means, but the singer can’t — or won’t — tell us any more than her song does. She relates by genre, or generically. Her trouble and ours might not signify the same way, and the Trouble Song accounts for this in its open feel (sic) of meaning. Perhaps What is trouble? is not the right question. Instead, the singer asks — or replies — What’s your trouble? and the audience responds in kind. This rapport is the mutual feeling, the sharing, of trouble.

Retying the knot: What does “trouble” do/mean for the singer vs. the listener(s) — what role does the trouble singer play, and how do listeners charge/change the song (and how is that complicated by the lag and historicity afforded/effect by recording, along with complications of time and race displacement)? Here we (re-)enter the trouble space. Whose trouble is this anyway?

These are the songs people call “the sad, slow songs,” and they typically tell of troubled moments in life: heartbreak, despair, regret, aging, leaving, desire for forgiveness, shame and sin. Such songs evoke an intensely felt sense of location and temporality. (Fox 88)

Consider the ethos and ambience of the Trouble Song as distinguished from a phenomenological classification of songs that

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49 though it comes out Trouble, trouble, I’ve had it all my days
include “trouble” in their lyrics. Cat Power’s *The Covers Record* includes “trouble” songs, but is a holistic collection of Trouble Songs in that the songs are infused with the climate(s) of trouble. It is significant that one of the “trouble” songs (which is also a Trouble Song) is a Dylan cover (“Paths of Victory”), since Dylan is especially attentive to the Trouble Song mode/mood.

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50 Which is to say, trouble (and gen[d]re) may be in the house — here, consider verse and chorus as stanzas, or rooms — even when “trouble” is not in evidence.

51 troubled also by format for all those listening to *The Covers Record* on CD

52 A list of trouble-saturated musicians and albums would be a long one, but a few notables spring to (this) mind (this moment): Dusty (Springfield) in Memphis, Judee Sill, Smog, Syd Barrett, Bonnie Prince Billy, Amy Winehouse, Love, Gil Scott-Heron, Ann Peebles — and of course, most of blues and much of country music (a study of the dynamics of trouble in rap and hip hop could overfill its own volume). Every music list is a process of exclusion. The reader of a list makes her own, largely in opposition to the trigger list. All the better. Note also: Trouble might just as likely be a mood as a mode — a passing fancy, or the wake of (if not waking from) one. Dylan has recorded at least 24 songs with some form of “trouble” in the lyrics (and countless Trouble Songs that do not mention the word), several of them far better known than “Paths of Victory,” which appears on Dylan’s *Bootleg Series, Vols. 1–3 (Rare & Unreleased), 1961–1991*. Dylan has also recorded “Trouble Songs” (songs with “Trouble” in the title) like “Trouble” and “Trouble in Mind,” and has avoided “trouble” by replacing it with “worry” in “Someday Blues,” his version of Muddy Waters’ “Trouble No More” (also worried by the Allman Brothers).