Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Trouble Song as Speech Act & Magic Language

The Trouble Condition & The Talismanic Effect

But when a man suspects any wrong, it sometimes happens that if he be already involved in the matter, he insensibly strives to cover up his suspicions even from himself. And much this way it was with me. I said nothing, and tried to think nothing.

— Herman Melville, Moby Dick

These signs of distress signify distress only indirectly: what they indicate first is the effort to avoid showing distress.


The artist’s sitters present themselves with an attitude and a sartorial flair, that, as the critic Kobena Mercer has argued, attract the gaze yet also defend against primitivist projection, carving out a space where the self and its aesthetic construction can take center stage.

— Huey Copeland, “Barkley L. Hendricks: Figures and Grounds”

Just as a man (and a character in a film) might hide his distress in a gesture of distress, a singer might hide his troubles — and himself — in an aestheticized (and potentially anesthetizing) evocation of “trouble.”

“Historical images, like mass-cultural ones, are hardly innocent of associations: indeed, it is because they are so laden that they are used” (Hal Foster, “Against Pluralism” 29). So too is “trouble” laden and useful. But does it necessarily reference iden-

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67 or cover
tification in the listener? And if “trouble” operates as a shield for or against trouble, might it also operate as a shield against the listener (or for trouble in another sense), a way to protect the private concerns of the singer or speaker — a way to protect trouble? Indeed (and in addition), “trouble” might protect the speaker from the singer, whether or not by design of the song-writer.

Consider the case of the cover, in which the singer might not (be able to) access the original trouble, or might more or less intentionally redirect “trouble” to her own trouble (or her own indication of trouble, which may itself be enmeshed in character representation). In this cluster-case, representation merges with production (and/or reproduction). What of Walter Benjamin’s aura remains in such handed-down “trouble,” and how might this be further complicated by cultural appropriations of Trouble Songs (by singers and by listeners)? If the aura or authenticity of “trouble” fades in this exchange, does the Trouble Song paradoxically become a more powerful (or, at least, effective) shield or talisman against trouble? Furthermore and at any rate, in all of these possibilities and contingencies, the Trouble Song may absorb the condition as trouble (that is, as part of its trouble condition).

The poet John Ashbery sings of this trouble condition in his long poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. … (68)

In the trouble light, we are tempted to ascribe the Parmigianino convexity effect to a distortive affect of trouble. As with any cover, Ashbery converts his subject with an objectifying gaze,

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68 A related concern revealed (or, paradoxically, uncovered) by this conceit: Is “trouble” the shield, or is the singer the shield, or is the song the shield?
69 abetted — or conjured — by Ashbery
which is the troubling of representation, if not the trouble of representation.

In the next book Ashbery published after *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 1977’s *Houseboat Days*, the second poem, “The Other Tradition,” calls trouble by name as it concludes

... You found this
Charming, but turned your face fully toward night,
Speaking into it like a megaphone, not hearing
Or caring, although these still live and are generous
And all ways contained, allowed to come and go
Indefinitely in and out of the stockade
They have so much trouble remembering, when your
forgetting
Rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night. (3)

We might look back in search of the referent of “this,”? and we can attribute it to a forest, or the idea of a forest, or the way “the idea of a forest had clamped itself / Over the minutiae of the scene,” and we will certainly find other candidates for “this”-ness, and perhaps this is also part of the trouble condition. We too (like they, whoever they are) have trouble remembering, or we hone in on “this” “remembering,” losing ourselves.

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70 Some poets indicate when a stanza break does or does not coincide with a page break, but few indicate whether a hanging line is a matter of typography or intention. See Lyn Hejinian’s *The Cell* for examples of clearly intentional hanging lines. Compare to the poems in C.K. Williams’s *Tar*, which habitually hang, perhaps only (if not certainly) by exceeding the width of the page.

71 Here we are tempted to throw clarity to the wind and say “‘this’ referent,’ which improves upon the range and flow of sense.

72 See Joshua Clover’s chapbook (with accompanying multivocal music-mashup CD), *Their Ambiguity* (2003).

73 “Their Ambiguity” also appears in the collection *the totality for kids*. Warning: Their ambiguity will remain, though they might refer to poetry and revolution. Note also: “‘The content of the town is our pleasure; everything that remains is form, // though one could say the same thing about the totality for kids’” (55).
So there is pleasure in “trouble,” just as trouble itself may be a source of pleasure, at least temporarily.