The Circle

Can the circle be unbroken?
— The Carter Family et al.

You’re caught in a vicious circle / Surrounded by your so-called friends
— Lou Reed, “Vicious Circle”

Say a community surrounds us. Depending on where we stand within that community, this is to be desired, we are told. And if we’re in a community long enough, we may know what it’s like to be contained there. The tighter the circle, the less likely one can get in. If life itself is a circle, it’s broken and unbroken in each lifetime, as birth and death are the prerequisites for every life. Or: The broken circle may not be unbroken, except by the record’s turn.

Perhaps that home in the sky of which they sing is no comfort to us, either because it won’t be enough like the earthly home we sometimes love, or it sounds too much like the one we thought to escape. Or we reject such promise as too unlikely in any case, or we’re ready at the bell to truly and forever call it a day. Or again to return to previous tropes, the record will play after we’re gone, and that’s just fine.

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72 often by the community
73 or out
74 Death and taxes are at best two-thirds of our obligations: It’s such a gamble when you get a face, as Richard Hell has it in “Blank Generation,” eager as he is to roll the dice (I was saying let me out of here before I was even born, he delivers himself before the hand is dealt). Tell me why is the pain of birth / Lighter borne than the pain of death? argues Joanna Newsom on her song “Divers.” We are born against this plashing. There’s only three things for sure: taxes, death and trouble, sings Marvin Gaye in “Trouble Man.” Taxes and death catch up to us, but we’re born into trouble.
There’s a dark and a troubled side of life, The Carter Family sings before insisting we keep on the sunny side, keep on the sunny side of life. But the storm returns to crush our hopes, but the sun will return, keep on the sunny side of life. The third verse, where we pray and hope, fails to deliver us from the promise of that first line, nor does verse three regain the irresolvable, dialectical beauty of those first two verses.

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Should the flood come, The Staple Singers remind us (in “Wade in the Water”) not just that we cannot walk on it, or that we may be born again (baptized by blood or water, dressed in red or white), but that to trouble the water is to get in. Their “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” adds a blue note to the song’s final accord.

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The trouble singer is beyond the grave, which the recording both allows and attests. Once we discover the recording that outlasts the singer, we suspect the recording is always already an afterlife. The singer has a foot in the grave, so to speak. This

75 “Keep on the Sunny Side”
76 Of course, we saw it coming, as the opening lines of “Can the Circle Be Unbroken” attest:
I was standing / By the window / On one cold and cloudy day
77 As, elsewhere in another time, Morrissey will begin his album Vauxhall and I (1994) with a promise he may or may not keep: There’s gonna be some trouble.
78 though the agency, if not the refrain, is God’s: God’s gonna trouble the water
79 Which sounds more inevitable, if not more possible, than “Can the Circle Be Unbroken?”
80 if not in that home in the sky
81 if not the performance
82 and the performance
83 and the afterworld
allows^84 an irrational^85 belief that the singer can report from the afterlife.^86

“Curse my name when I’m gone” is the trouble singer’s calling card.^87 If and when the singer leaves town after her song,^88 she symbolically enacts a final departure; abandoning her immediate authority (as mic controller^89 and presence presenting the song) also amplifies the power of the song as witness from beyond. She unbreaks and breaks the circle, singing the way in and the way out of community.

Of course, to the extent the Trouble Song does its trick^90 and convinces the audience its troubles are both evoked and put at bay, the trouble singer is imperiled by the end of the spell. In particular, she’s in danger of being hung with a sign that says troublemaker.^91 As a parting gift, the singer takes the blame for whatever troubles she leaves behind, but she has to leave to make that possible.^92

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84 and promotes
85 or non-rational, but no less transporting
86 thus achieving an impossible critical position from which one might see the world from a remove, which is of course frustrated by the fact that the singer or recording appears in the world
87 or payment for her ticket out of town
88 often an exceedingly good idea (with or without mic drop), as will be suggested soon
89 figurative in a remote historical context; see Appendix C for the Electronic Literature Organization 2014 conference panel presentation “Troubadours & Troublemakers,” which introduces a contemporary trouble singer figure, the DJ (who may be accompanied by an MC and/or a Mixmaster)
90 magic, we insist
91 again, see Appendix C, and consider the often overlooked (or even indistinct) difference between talking about something and making it happen
92 and to avoid the direct consequences of blame, which extend to pillory; leaving, she wagers (and leverages) renown
The song itself can’t fix people’s troubles, though it might allow singer/listeners to reflect on their troubles in a way that benefits the community. At least (and maybe at most), the song offers respite in a communal environment, but that’s not a simple or simply escapist pleasure. We pursue a particular role for the trouble singer, and it’s tied to the duration of the song as much as the material of the song. Let the record complicate this.

93 Only problems have solutions, as attested in the second episode of the *Breaking Bad* spinoff *Better Call Saul*, in which the kingpin Tuco Salamanca reappears (or pre-appears) to invoke the difference between trouble and problem (and dispel the former by reducing it to the latter, then erasing it): “They say I’m in trouble,” his suburban desert grandmother tells him; “There’s no problem,” he assures her.

94 and their commonality
95 but maybe let’s not blame the trouble singer for this, either
96 or gift, or curse (the spell might work, but the hangover might be brutal, with all apologies to and for the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* storyline in which, having attained her black robe in witchcraft, Willow Rosenberg does magic like Ozzy Osbourne does drugs)
97 as observed in Trouble Songs