Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Nobody Knows (Great Things to Small)

The lyric floating over this manuscript, from Amiri Baraka’s Wise, Why’s, Y’s (1995):

Wise I

WHY’S (Nobody Knows The Trouble I Seen)
Trad.

If you ever find yourself, some where lost and surrounded by enemies who won’t let you speak in your own language who destroy your statues & instruments, who ban your omm bomm ba boom then you are in trouble deep trouble they ban your oom boom ba boom you in deep deep trouble humph!

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24 yet to sting, or stung and numbed
25 Baraka appeared in Part One as LeRoi Jones, the name under which he published Blues People among other works, before changing his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka in 1968. As Fred Moten says in a footnote to In the Break, “The question of the name is unavoidable” (271). Moten decides to use the name Baraka even when referring to work published under the name Jones, because Moten's interest is in a prolonged period of radical transition for the poet, and in honor of the super-chronological, far-reaching implications of Baraka’s transformation.
probably take you several hundred years
to get
out!

We may be privileged with a sideline seat to such trouble, a tick-
et with a curse, but check the Jumbotron: We are here.26

†††

During a media presser leading up to Super Bowl XLVIII (2014),
Seattle Seahawks cornerback (and Stanford University gradu-
ate) Richard Sherman was asked about being called a “thug”
after a post-game braggadocio-fueled rant following a team
victory in the previous week’s NFC Championship game. He in-
terpreted the question not as another opportunity to apologize
for unchecked (if contrived) bravado and rhetorical showman-
ship, but rather an opportunity to unpack the coded language of
sportscasters, radio callers and bloggers alike:

The only reason it bothers me is because it seems like it’s the
accepted way of calling somebody the n-word nowadays. Ev-
everybody else said the n-word, and then they said “thug,” and
they’re like aw, that’s fine. And that’s where it kind of takes
me aback, and it’s kind of disappointing because they know.
What’s the definition of a thug, really? Can a guy on a football
field just talking to people — maybe I’m talking loudly and
doing something, you know, talking like I’m not supposed to.
…I know some “thugs,” and they know I’m the furthest thing
from a thug. I’ve fought that my whole life, just coming from
where I’m coming from. Just because you hear Compton, you
hear Watts, you hear cities like that, you just think “thug, he’s
a gangster, he’s this, that, and the other,” and then you hear
Stanford, and they’re like, “oh man, that doesn’t even make
sense, that’s an oxymoron.” You fight it for so long, and to

26 How do we talk about a poem that’s perfect and doesn’t need us? Let us pass
over and return (stylus digging groove), and flip the side.
have it come back up and people start to use it again, it’s frustrating.\textsuperscript{27}

During a media presser leading up to Super Bowl L\textsuperscript{28} (2016), Carolina Panthers quarterback (and Auburn University graduate) Cam Newton was asked about widespread criticism of his on-field enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{29}

I think this is a trick question. Because if I answer it truthfully … but I’m gonna say it anyway: I don’t think people have seen what I am or what I’m trying to do. … I’ve said it since day one. I’m an African-American quarterback that may scare a lot of people because they haven’t seen nothing that they can compare me to.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27} “Richard Sherman Thug is another way of saying the ‘n’ word.” YouTube transcript ours. Accessed February 4, 2016.
\textsuperscript{28} The game was advertised as Super Bowl 50 because the traditional Roman numeral designation does not fit the standardized Super Bowl logo template, according to Jaime Weston, the NFL’s vice president for brand and creative. So says Wikipedia (so even Weston’s ludicrous title is provisionally ratified). L is also the typical indication of loss on a score sheet, and since one team must technically win the Super Bowl (even if they don’t get to take it home), perhaps there are other reasons, particularly in the season of Donald Trump as so-called legitimate Republican presidential candidate,\textsuperscript{a} for avoiding an L in Super Bowl 50.
\textsuperscript{29} The question was “Why do you think that you’re judged, why do you think that you’ve become more of a lightning rod than other athletes?” Newton has been criticized in some quarters for showboating during and after plays, as in his spectacular, frequent, and lofty (though rather un-quarterback-like) entrances into the end zone, followed by his uniform rendition of hip-hop’s dabbin’ dance.
During a media presser leading up to Super Bowl XXII (1988), Washington Redskins\textsuperscript{31} quarterback (and Grambling State graduate) Doug Williams was asked about his experience as a Black quarterback. The question reportedly\textsuperscript{32} began, “Doug, obviously you’ve been a Black quarterback your whole life.” Williams responded to the effect (in-pre-internet matters of sports media, we often rely on hearsay) that he’d been playing quarterback since high school and had always been Black. He too remembers the essential form of the question he was asked: \textit{How long have you been a Black quarterback?}

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Are these Trouble Songs transcribed? Baraka has certainly signified the poetics of trouble, with its deep deep echo of erased song. Sherman, Newton and Williams, though, are they trouble singers? As in so many Trouble Songs, where something comes over the singer, and the microphone opens a void, these players, after and before the game, bear our witness. Among all the rehearsed and recycled lines, the thoughtless refrains, they find a moment to look the crowd in its recording eyes,\textsuperscript{33} to briefly sing of what ails us: our own smallness, our failures of imagination, our withdrawal from the commons.

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\textsuperscript{31} As of this writing, Washington’s professional football team is still represented by a racial slur. The irony of Washington’s ignominious moniker juxtaposed with its groundbreaking Black quarterback is lost on no one who isn’t lost.

\textsuperscript{32} per \textit{Rocky Mountain News} reporter Bob Kravitz, who later claimed to have been sitting next to the reporter in question (details of this account come from Snopes.com, which investigated the following popular claim: “Before Super Bowl XXII in 1988, a reporter asked Washington Redskins quarterback Doug Williams, ‘How long have you been a Black quarterback?’”)

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{We’re talking about practice}, reigning National Basketball Association MVP Allen Iverson repeated many times with an incredulous array of inflections during a 2002 press conference in which he was taken to task for his imperfect record of game-prep attendance.
Trouble sings the singer, trouble (through its troubler) sings the song. Trouble sings to us even when it isn’t there.34

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Then there is the game itself. Super Bowl L (2016, Santa Clara) will be remembered as another W for Beyoncé at the big game. Previously she had performed the National Anthem at Super Bowl XXXVIII (2004, Houston), and the halftime show at Super Bowl XLVII (2013, New Orleans), during which she was later credited for shutting the whole thing down.35

Super Bowl L was a forgettable game even if it had a storybook ending for aging white quarterback Peyton (“The Sheriff”) Manning36 at the expense of ascendant Black superstar Cam (“Superman”) Newton (who muttered deflated monosyllabic replies at

34 or when it’s dismissed by its own name, which is not the same as dismissed by name, though it is that too

35 Following her halftime show, less than two minutes into the third quarter, power went out in the Superdome, causing a 34-minute delay in the game. Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis later suggested the outage was no accident, because it halted his team’s momentum (they had a 28–6 lead), allowing the San Francisco 49ers4 to regroup and mount an ultimately unsuccessful comeback attempt, in any case helping broadcast ratings. Others suggested (employing the loaded oxymoron “partial blackout”) that Beyoncé’s powerful halftime show overloaded the grid.

a Whose quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, three years later would stir trouble from the bench (to which he had been demoted) by refusing to stand for the pre-game National Anthem, in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Soon he joined the company of Tim Tebow as a polarizing backup QB with the best-selling jersey in the league. He found more trouble after he announced that he did not vote in the November 2016 election. By the 2017–18 season, Kaepernick was blackballed by team owners and executives, but his principled stand against police brutality continued to reverberate through the league.

36 who had a lackluster game for a historically underwhelming Super Bowl-winning Denver Broncos offense that was carried by its shutdown defense, though Manning’s poor showing did nothing to discourage a stale chorus of “Victorious Sheriff Rides off into the Sunset” headlines
his post-game presser, ultimately and somewhat abruptly walking off into the darkness at the edge of the set).

Beyoncé’s performance once again dominated. Co-headliners Coldplay and Bruno Mars were reduced to props, while her dance crew was elevated and politically charged, outfitted in Black Power getups and organized in (Malcolm) X formation.

The stage for Beyoncé’s halftime performance of “Formation” was set by the previous day’s release of the song’s new single and video versions, which established a rich backdrop of imagery related to the Black Lives Matter anti-police brutality movement, the structurally racist government (non-)response to Hurricane Katrina (highlighting its lingering effects while radically remixing Bayou social codes), and a matrix of Black Southern culture references and gleefully knowing materialist contradic-

37 while Beyoncé sported a gold X-emblazoned bandolier jacket designed in militant-bling homage to the one Michael Jackson wore during his 1993 world tour.

38 For once in Trouble Songs, a footnote is a mere footnote: Predictable (but no less troubling) Fox News backlash included erstwhile NYC mayor Rudy Giuliani denouncing the performance as shamefully incendiary and anti-cop (“It was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers”), calling for “decent, wholesome entertainment” at future halftime extravaganzas during the Super Bowl’s annual celebration of America’s commercial values.

39 Jeff Chang’s We Gon’ Be Alright (2016) concludes with a critical meditation on Beyoncé’s album-length film Lemonade (which itself concludes with “Formation”). He folds in half-time staging and film location, so the site becomes one of intimate and public powerlessness:

We see her crying as she lies on the floor of the New Orleans Superdome. … She has returned to the same place where she once short-circuited her Super Bowl half-time Show, where eight years before, tens of thousands displaced by Hurricane Katrina, denigrated by the media, and treated as animals by federal and local authorities, sought refuge and comfort” (163).

Troubling the water, Christina Sharpe (In the Wake, 2016) recalls “the Black displaced of Hurricane Katrina held in deplorable conditions in the Superdome, [who] continue to be in a holding pattern” (72) and live in the wake of “a past that is not past, a past that is with us still” (62).
tions, all cast under the spell\textsuperscript{40} of what \textit{Daily Show} “Senior Beyoncé Correspondent” Jessica Williams celebrated (in a report with all the fierce allusive delirium\textsuperscript{41} summoned by its subject) the day after Super Bowl Sunday: “The Black girl magic in that video was out of control.”

\textsuperscript{40} just one side effect of which transforms a military exercise into \textit{ok ladies now let’s get information}

\textsuperscript{41} The highlight was a dexterous call-out of Giuliani’s cynical appeal to wholesome middle-American concerns via a subtle critique of his subliminal association of “decent” with whiteness, and, in the context of his rebuke of Beyoncé’s performance, the association of Blackness with indecency: “You know what’s right in the middle of America? Ferguson, Missouri.”

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