Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Published by Punctum Books

T. Johnson, Jeff.
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The Champ

I ain't got no trouble with them Vietcong.
— Muhammad Ali, as quoted by Wesley Morris, “From a Blockbuster Fighter To a Country’s Conscience”

There’s trouble and there’s “trouble” &c. This sounds familiar but so does everything. Today a terrible thing happened. One person was responsible. That’s how easy it is to be a ghoul. That’s why we’re so scared. Some of us are already gone.

57 Thanks to Ray De Jesús for SMS sparring in preparation for this Trouble Song.
58 Ali has also been quoted, “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong” (e.g. BBC, The New York Times, Wired), “I ain’t got no quarrel with those Vietcong” (e.g., History.com), “I ain’t got no quarrel with the Vietcong” (e.g. The Daily Telegraph), “I got nothing against no Viet Cong” (e.g. Fusion). It is unclear whether variations are attributable to the transcriptions of reporters and editors or to various instances of Ali’s pronouncement, or some of each.
59 A floating refrain that is provable as true and false. As the days pass and this cruel summer reveals new horrors — more unarmed Black Americans shot by police officers, more lone gunmen channeling broad frustrations, more reportage conflating positions, intentions and affiliations, more politicians seeking dubious solutions — we find it ever more difficult (one month after writing the sentence that carries this note) to sing the song of individual responsibility.
60 On June 12, 2016, a man shot up a nightclub, it seems, because he could not stand the thought of two men dancing. He claimed to be a Muslim. If Ali were alive he would tell us the truth: No Muslim would do such a thing. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on NYC, Ali was quoted in a Reader’s Digest interview: “I am angry that the world sees a certain group of Islam followers who caused this destruction, but they are not real Muslims” (as cited in Tim Stanley’s June 4, 2016 Opinion piece for The Telegraph, “Muhammad Ali was an American idol and a Muslim. Read his words on Islam”). Stanley also quotes a statement Ali made in December 2015 (“Presidential Candidates Proposing to Ban Muslim Immigration to the United States”): “I believe that our political leaders should use their position to bring understanding about the religion of Islam and clarify that these misguided murderers have perverted people’s views on what Islam really is.”
61 Ali claims, in conversation with David Remnick (as reported in Remnick’s King of the World), that he was scared one time, before the first round of his first title fight with Sonny Liston, and we believe him. Or: Fear is a form
We do not know how to properly crawl into the larval state. One friend broke his collar and crawled below the front stair to heal, or die. Another disappeared into himself. Three others died swerving to avoid an animal crossing their path. How many die fleeing their ostensible protectors? There is no end to early death. Nor to crawling.

Trouble’s undersong: *I have come from the land of myth and blame. All the latter is upon me for good reason; the former is death’s grin. I have seen the world lying in its grave. The grave is empty, just bones.*

†††

In the famous photo from Ali-Liston II (1965), Ali says everything but what he says, even when the caption says what he says. *Get up. Get up and fight.* Ali knows the fix is in. Ali still does not know if he beat the odds the previous year, when Liston did not answer the bell. Listen, this is not to say Sonny Liston should not have lost to Cassius Clay or Muhammad Ali. He lost to both, though he threw the latter fight.

*Get up and fight,* Ali says. This is not a moment of triumph, but of disillusionment. The image, one angle, one version, hangs of trouble, and Ali was a troublemaker in the ring as well as out of it, and death is the threshold for both fear and trouble. Near the other end of his career, after his third fight with Joe Frazier — the Thrilla in Manila, October 1, 1975 — Ali claimed the brutal fight was the closest he had come to death.

In vain we resist turning the book into the book of the dead, as every book becomes the book of the dead. And every book is written while death takes its due, so that some are alive and dead over the course of the book, and the book carries those deaths, or is haunted by them.

“*And me and trouble was never far apart*” (50), Reminck quotes Liston about his boyhood. And he carried the title like trouble; no other bearing was allowed to him.
above the President’s desk.\textsuperscript{64} Triumphalist Metanarrative vs.
Death of the Dream: Meta by a knockout.

Ali in 1965 is learning America. He has found the key he does
not want. Liston lays down, one eye on the floor. This\textsuperscript{65} is not a
love song.\textsuperscript{66} This is not the key to victory. This is the beginning
of a whole lot of trouble.

\textsuperscript{64} That it is a less famous version of that moment — Obama has a black-and-
white print of John Rooney’s photo, rather than the more celebrated color
shot by Neil Leifer — suggests an alternate and coincident history. Rooney
captured two iconic images from that moment: one that is similar to Leifer’s
image, but from one seat over in black-and-white, and the one Obama fa-
vors, in which Ali is not swiping left. Some of the apparent disdain is gone
from the latter, but it loses none of its ambiguity. Which suggests the pos-
sibility that Obama knows the difference between what the photo says and
what it shows.

\textsuperscript{65} This photo, this storied moment, and this Trouble Song, all of which dance
around the ring (and ring around the rosie).

\textsuperscript{66} Nor is it an attempt to speak for the dead, even if these photos (and songs)
speak to us.