

RUNNING HEAD: Throughness

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‘Throughness’: A Story About Songwriting as Auto/ethnography

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Abstract

A recent special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* (December 2016) throws a welcome spotlight on the place of songs within qualitative research. In this essay, I share a story that contributes to the gathering conversation around music and songs as a (perhaps unique) form of qualitative inquiry. My contribution focuses specifically on *songwriting* as a form of research, which has received limited attention to date within the qualitative inquiry literature. The story is inspired by recent explorations of songwriting as reflexive practice, and I share it with the aim of expanding understanding and inviting further dialogue on the processes of writing (songs as) qualitative research.

Keywords: autoethnography, lyrical inquiry, music, narrative, reflexivity, songwriting as research

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What drives this ... deep desire to be in the song? What does it bring us?

What are we connected to in the process of singing, playing music, or in accepting the invitation to a lyrical journey, and where does it come from?

We can trace our stories through songs, and perhaps songs allow us to grasp a story fragment that has yet no breath. You might want to find neat logical connections, or you might let go of that idea, on linearity, and accept the gift however it comes. (Douglas, 2016, p. 799)

A recent special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* – titled ‘The song book of our lives: lyrical autoethnographic performances’ – throws a welcome spotlight on the place of songs within qualitative research. Contributors portray how, for example, pop, jazz or hip hop songs offer alternative entryways to understanding (Callier, 2016), a soundtrack for personal transition (Boylorn, 2016), and a sense of corporeal and emotional embodiment (Holman Jones, 2016). In his introduction to the special issue, Bryant Alexander notes that the contributions “only begin to tap into the worldmaking and sense making of songs that constitute the songbook of our lives” (2016, p. 774). He continues: “I hope, as you read these performative and poetic pieces, that you will also begin to chronicle your own stories through song, memory, and critique.” I would like to respond to his invitation with a story that contributes to the gathering conversation around the use of music and songs as a (perhaps unique) form of qualitative inquiry (e.g., Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; Bresler, 2008; Carless & Douglas, 2011; Jenoure, 2002; Leavy, 2009). While a significant body of literature has explored music and song, less consideration has been directed towards *songwriting*. Within the special issue, for example, only two contributors considered the processes of writing songs (Douglas, 2016;

Luckett, 2016). My contribution is angled specifically in this direction, towards songwriting as research, which with a few exceptions (Carless, 2010, in press; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2011; Douglas, 2012, 2016; Patti, 2009; Scott-Hoy, 2009) has received less attention to date.

I have written hundreds of songs over almost three decades, yet the process – the act of writing – remains mysterious to me on so many levels. I can live with this mystery when I am writing songs for myself, perhaps as a way to explore, navigate and communicate my own experiences, my own truths. But it's harder to manage the mystery when my songwriting explicitly becomes qualitative research. This may be as a component of our ethnographic studies (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2015a; Douglas & Carless, 2005) or it may be through autoethnographic work (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2015b). Oftentimes, the boundaries between the two appear permeable to say the least. Throughout, I write songs to bring a “participatory and participant perspective” which reflects my “desire to be connected to and to be part of moral community” where the goal is “compassionate understanding” (Denzin, 2003, p. 6). And in these projects – where songs take center-stage as critical, accessible, engaging, democratic, transformative social research – I feel an expectation to articulate process, to speak of method. Yet when I contemplate this task my mind clouds with questions: How do we write songs as qualitative research? What kinds of processes matter when writing a song? What can we do to support and nurture these processes? What might we draw upon when writing songs about our own or another's life? And how is it that culture, politics and personal biography can become so powerfully entwined in a song?

Through the story that follows I explore these questions by sharing an experience of songwriting as a form of qualitative research, in this case autoethnography. Using a storytelling approach helps me respect the mystery and openness of the art: as Bob Dylan has said, the only rule in songwriting is there are no rules! That, he says, is what makes songwriting so attractive. My story is inspired by recent explorations of songwriting as

reflexive practice (Douglas, 2012, 2016), and I share it with the aim of expanding understanding and inviting further dialogue on the processes of writing (songs as) qualitative research.

Mother's Day, 30 March 2014, 10.40am

I've phoned to say "Happy Mother's Day" and to apologize for once again not being there in person to give my mother a hug. One son living at the opposite end of England, the other settled thousands of miles away in Zimbabwe. It dawns on me that a line from a song I'd written nine years earlier – in witness to the stories of *other people's* mothers and grandmothers in the southwest of England – could now be sung by *my* mother: "Children up country and overseas/Me dreaming of people I so rarely see." But she was, at least, flying to Zimbabwe in three days time to be with her overseas son and meet her first grandchild, three weeks after his birth.

"Do you think you could write a song for Joshua? Like you did for Daisy?" she asks.

"It doesn't work like that mum!" I blurt out, before softening and saying, "I'm sorry, I don't think I could. Writing a song is not really something I'm in control of – I can't just make it happen."

I think back to writing *One Day In June (Daisy's Song)* for my friends' new baby in 2003. I'd been half expecting a call so I had my mobile with me and – unusually – I had it switched on. And it was as I was walking along a towering cliff top in North Cornwall, looking down and out at the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, that the call came. Daisy had arrived. A little late – but she was here. *Write her a song!* The idea came, just like that, before I'd got back to the car. *How many people have had a song written in celebration of their birth?*

When I got back home to Bristol, I set to work writing. And the song came fast. I wrote it in a couple of hours and had it recorded and posted off to Daisy's parents, Sian and Davey, within a week. Sian told me they loved the song and that she cried when she heard it. A year later, she told me that she often put the CD on and sung along to her baby daughter. Two years later, I sang the song at Sian and Davey's wedding. Thirteen years later, in 2016, Davey asked if I'd bring my guitar to Daisy's birthday celebrations and sing the song as a surprise. That time, it had Davey and I in tears. The song has endured as it's meaning – to us at least – has grown and deepened.

Lots of mums have told me they love *Daisy's Song*. It is sweet – a little cheesy perhaps – but then it's a song for a baby. It's a celebration. It marks a moment of joy. I was surprised but pleased to find the sentiments of the song within myself. Singing or listening to it even now I find it soothing. Comforting. It makes me feel, for those three minutes, like everything just might turn out okay.

So now, in 2014, how can I deny my mother a song to celebrate and mark the birth of her first grandchild?

29 September 2016, 11.50am

I'm driving through city traffic to my therapy appointment. The radio is on, tuned to BBC Radio Four. Talk not music. Half of me worrying about what might emerge during this week's session, half of me listening to a feature about 'pony books'. Author Meg Rosoff (who I hadn't heard of but, we are told, was the 2016 winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the biggest cash prize in children's literature) is telling how she is often asked to write an enthusiastic 'blurb' for a yet to be published novel. Of course the publishers, she says, are hoping for a "*This is the greatest novel I've ever read!*" kind of statement. "But," she says, "I generally *don't* feel it's the greatest novel I've ever read." Meg tells us that she

has long pondered what is missing from these books. Recently, she began to understand that what's missing has something to do with *voice*.

Around the time this dawned on her, Meg was taking riding lessons and her teachers were talking about *throughness*. They would instruct her to “be more through.” Not understanding what ‘throughness’ was, she looked it up and found it to be *a cycle of energy between horse and rider, connecting the two, which has to be soft but strong...*

1 April 2014, 7.15pm

Over the past twenty years, I've written most of my songs in the mornings. It seems something about the freshness of the day, combined perhaps with a quality of energy in me, increases the chance of a song happening. It might also have something to do with a sense that I have time, an awareness that a whole day stretches ahead, I know I will not run out of time before the song is complete. Unfortunately, this way of working does not sit well with fulltime academic employment. Hence I find myself sat at my kitchen table this *evening*, energy levels low after a day's work, trying to take up the challenge I've set myself to write a song for Joshua.

I'm wondering how to approach this challenge. I'm feeling slightly nervous, cautious at the prospect of writing about or around the birth of my brother's first child. As adults, my brother and I have never been close. Nowadays, it seems we inhabit different worlds, not just different countries. I feel an ocean of silent space between us. So many tensions, difficulties and differences that we are unable to even touch – let alone dive into. I am frightened to give voice to these truths and – at this point in my life – have decided that it is best not to. Yet songs do not allow the luxury of secrets and silences. Good songs deal in truths – it's as plain and as simple as that. Aside from the words, I feel sure that whatever I create musically, he won't like. He has told me, as kindly as he was able, that my acoustic music is not to his taste.

He likes his music harder: Muse, Pearl Jam, rock music generally. But then I'm not writing this song for him. I'm writing it for my mother, for Joshua and – perhaps – for me. So I will continue.

I'm holding my Brook acoustic guitar, handmade for me in 2004 by a small company in southwest England. Early that year I visited the workshop to pick out the wood from which it would be built: a broad pale piece of sitka spruce for the top, some deep pink-sheened Indian rosewood for the back and sides, peach-colored mahogany for the neck and pitch black ebony for the fingerboard. I visited it, and took photos of it, at various stages of its construction. In one photo, Simon, one of the luthiers, stands like a proud father at my shoulder as I hold and admire the half-finished instrument.

I'm enjoying the feel and sound of new phosphor-bronze strings. New strings are a joyful indulgence: the notes ring crisp, clean and resonant; my fingers slide smoothly between frets; the guitar itself seems to want to sing. But I'm ruining it all by blowing away on harmonica as I play. I can't really play harmonica. I've never written a song with harmonica before. It's a god-awful noise! It disturbs the peace, intrudes on the calm of the finger picked G major chord variations I'm exploring. The mostly familiar sound and vibrations emanating from my guitar are reassuring and soothing, they embrace and engulf me. These sounds tell me it is okay. They say there is order and harmony in my world. They offer a safe-enough foundation upon which I can lean. The harmonica is telling me something else entirely. The noise is out of kilter, it warns of pain and danger, threatens chaos and shows me I am not in control – not even close.

Fortunately for me perhaps, I am physically unable to sing while blowing and sucking on the harmonica. I have to stop playing harmonica if I am to sing. So the words I need to find to make the song must be built upon the foundation of the guitar. Perhaps it's the abrupt end to the chaos and claustrophobia of the harmonica – a return to the space and calm of the

guitar alone – that offers me the space into which, it seems to me at this moment, *these* words *must* go:

There is a chance of a new frontier
 There is a chance of building bridges
 But we walk on and on
 Making the same mistakes¹

As quick and (seemingly) as easy as that! Bob Dylan has said that some songs take about as long to write as they take to sing. That was the case with this verse: one chord change, 25 seconds – a done deal. I'm thinking: *I can't just leave it at that! If it came that easily it must be crap! Shouldn't I have to work harder?* But these words seem fixed – they don't want to change. It feels like that decision isn't up to me...

29 September 2016, 11.52am

I'm in good time for my appointment and find a two-hour parking space nearby. I'm reversing in as Meg recounts how it was a riding teacher named Anna Hardwick who was first able to explain to her what throughness really is and why it is essential to good riding. For Anna, throughness relates to connection between the front of the horse and the back of the horse. When throughness is present, the horse works in a relaxed manner from its engine, the back end, through its front end. It is something a rider has to learn to feel, Anna says, which takes time. I switch off the engine but stay in the car with the radio on. This idea of 'throughness' has captured my imagination – there's something in it that speaks to my experience. It makes sense somehow although I can't yet grasp what sense it makes.

Meg asks if throughness also refers to a connection between the rider and the horse. “Absolutely,” Anna replies, describing how by being positioned in the middle of the horse’s back, where long ligaments and muscles run to connect the horse, riders can have a disruptive influence if they get their balance or timing wrong. “It is,” she says, “about the age-old idea of partnership.” Anna describes how you shouldn’t *impose* on the horse what you want it to do. Rather, you want the horse to *want* to do what you’re asking it to. To achieve this, she says, a good rider asks questions of the horse which, through training, the horse learns to answer in a confident and relaxed manner. The horse that doesn’t know what its doing, is asked a question it doesn’t understand, or is asked in a way it doesn’t understand won’t be relaxed. And you cannot have throughness, she concludes, without relaxation because the horse is not able to use its muscles properly.

As I’m listening, my thoughts are dancing all over the place. Throughness resonates in so many ways. From my early childhood onwards, whether formal education or informal teaching, wasn’t it all about imposition? Why can’t I remember a sense of partnership, of being asked to do something in such a way that I wanted to do it? No wonder the journey got bumpy at times. Then I think about learning to play guitar at 18, to sing, to write songs. These things were not *imposed* on me – they were never required. I never studied them formally, never took lessons. I *wanted* to do them. Still do. At times in music it does feel like I’m being asked questions – and my only hope of finding an answer is through playing, singing, writing. Finding an answer is creating a song and this necessitates making connections between different elements of my ‘hidden self’ – thoughts, emotions, memories, experiences, sensations – by successfully connecting aspects of my ‘musical self’ – melody, rhythm, phrasing, words and tones. It has been the same with surfing. I just went and surfed. Still do. There’s no imposition from anyone, nobody tells me what to do or how to do it.

Perhaps it's the case that the waves ask questions – and the only way to figure out an answer is by connecting body, board and wave to make a ride.

I have five minutes until my appointment. It's time to go. I grab my bag from the passenger seat and look at the car radio as if that could clarify my thoughts. "One day," Meg says, as I reach for the radio's off button, "a light bulb really went off in my head and I thought..." Wait! I need to hear this sentence! But it's too late, the button is already pressed and her voice has faded away.

1 April 2014, 7.35pm

I'm still at the kitchen table, the Brook is still singing, and I'm still hammering on and off G major variants. A second verse is clearly needed and I have a template now: four lines, a single change to C major and back again. It doesn't get much simpler than that.

I've never been to Zimbabwe and have no desire to go. I feel like I've already spent too much of my life in heterosexist or outright homophobic environments. And Zimbabwe is – it seems – a nation dominated by heterosexism and riddled with homophobia. Male same-sex sexual activity is illegal and, since 1995, the Mugabe administration has reportedly carried out campaigns against gays and lesbians. Discrimination is said to have increased over the past decade since new laws were passed in 2006 making it a criminal offense for two people of the same sex to hold hands, hug or kiss. Gays and lesbians have reported being bribed, detained, beaten and sometimes raped by the authorities. The threat of violence within communities is constant and suicide attempts are common. Sitting in my kitchen in Leeds, a photo of my boyfriend and me on the wall, Zimbabwe sounds like hell.

I think of this nephew I am yet to meet: less than three weeks old, a vulnerable and dependent little person in need of safety, protection and nurturing. Okay, discrimination on the basis of sexuality is probably not an immediate threat to a baby born to heterosexual

parents, but it will be a serious one when he gets older should he explore anything other than heterosexuality. But even now, as a baby, my mind springs towards other perceived dangers. His family live on a remote wildlife and conservation farm surrounded by animals that represent (to me at least) danger: lions, hyenas, crocodiles, lethal insects and snakes! I imagine an extreme African climate: sun, lack of water, cold nights. I imagine inequality and deeply ingrained racism – lives shot through with white privilege and interracial tensions. And then how reliable are the generators used each day while the electricity supply is off? Once again, my mind is full of questions: *Will you be safe Joshua? Who will protect you? How long does safety last?* And once again, the words come in a tumble:

There is a place of peace and hope
 There is a way, surrounded by good folk
 In the cold of the night and the heat of the sun
 They're with you, they'll keep you safe¹

29 September 2016, 6.45pm

One of my favorite things about modern technology is being able to visit the BBC website, click a 'listen again' link, and hear a program that would, even just a few years ago, have been gone forever. Back home, I do that now, using my phone, to return to the story Meg was telling when I turned off the car radio earlier in the day. "One day," she says again, "a light bulb really went off in my head and I thought throughness applies to writing just as well as it does to riding."

Immediately, I've got it: *Yes! That's it! It does! I see that too.* It applies when I write songs. It applies when I write stories. Writing autoethnography and ethnography too. Writing all forms of qualitative research perhaps? I can feel when throughness is present – and see

when it is missing. Yet I cannot control it. I cannot *make* it happen. I can see its mark on those writings that ‘work’ and I can sense a void in the writings that don’t.

Meg continues, telling us how she began to imagine the rider as the conscious mind and the horse as the unconscious. Original voice, she finally understood, is determined by the flow of energy between the conscious and the unconscious mind. “If you’re working from the unconscious, from that powerful elemental place, represented by the horse,” she says, “then a book will have a voice and a book will feel individual and different and unique.” Without it, a story feels lifeless. This revelation, she tells us, solved a problem that had long been bothering her: how people talk about ‘being in the zone’ but never explain where ‘the zone’ is or how you get there. The minute Meg started thinking about a cycle of energy between conscious and unconscious, between horse and rider, she says it gave voice a place. “It tells you where the writing is coming from, from this deep, elemental, powerful unconscious.”

1 April 2014, 7.50pm

In the wake of the second verse I begin to imagine what part I, as an uncle, might play in Joshua’s life. Yes, his parents and extended family will ensure he is safe. *But do I also have some role in helping him feel safe, even if from a distance? Can I bring something different to his life? Might the way I live offer an alternative horizon, a reassurance that there are diverse ways to be human?*

But how can I express or enact any of this in a country governed by such discriminatory laws? I feel like every word and action – simply because they come from *me*, a man in a relationship with another man – could be interpreted negatively. At home and when we travel, my boyfriend and I sometimes hold hands in public. We kiss and (shock horror!) hug in public places too. But these simple expressions of love are *illegal* in Zimbabwe. So how would it be judged if I held Joshua’s hand? What would locals make of

me spending time alone with a young boy? What hostilities might be provoked, justified, excused or even demanded by the law of the land? That I am even thinking these thoughts sickens me – but I recognize their origins. The toxic history of homophobia in England (and elsewhere of course) through much of the twentieth century portrayed gay men as ‘perverts’ or ‘child molesters’ and as being unsuitable parents or teachers. Thankfully, in the UK and many other countries, these prejudices have been assigned to the past. Yet their legacy festers. I imagine the ignorance that underlies them continuing in Zimbabwe in 2016.

I think about how my boyfriend talked about his youth. He told me he never felt safe, never felt accepted, was never told: “You are okay, you are good.” Instead, the message he heard at home, at school and in the community was: *you are gay, you are different from all of us, you are not okay, what you are is wrong*. Even in his thirties, he continues to struggle with the consequences. Before he’d told me this, I don’t think I’d been consciously aware of similar feelings – and pain – within myself. But I was beginning to be aware now. And I was feeling the pain.

I wonder whether Joshua will have safe opportunities to talk about and explore same-sex attraction as he grows up. It seems unlikely within Zimbabwean culture. Perhaps his parents – both of whom have lived in cosmopolitan London and had gay friends – will ensure he was provided with these opportunities? I don’t know. But I do know this: I want to make sure he experiences a more positive and supportive environment than my boyfriend or I did. He has a *right* to this. From these recognitions, it is but a short leap to the lyrics of the chorus, which I sing over an ascending three-chord figure:

I will walk to the water holding your hand

We might sleep by the water, dogs stretched out in the sand

Any time you’re with me, you can be anything you please

It's alright with me¹

Right away, on first sing, these words bring me to tears. Huge gut-heaving sobs. I have to stop playing. I have to put down my guitar. These words came from a deep, deep place. And as the words have come out – been released? – so has a truckload of sorrow. Grief that I wasn't even aware was in me. I indulge the tears – let them come. No more holding on. Something about this moment, these sentiments, feels right – like it had to be, it needed to be expressed, that *I* needed it.

After a break, I pick up my guitar and play some more. I play this new section over and over. I add it to my evolving notepad recording to make sure I remember every nuance. *Yes! I'm loving playing and singing my new chorus! It works! Or then again is it a bridge? What does it matter?* Musically, it brings the rich change in color and tone the song needed after the simple two-chord verses. Lyrically, with a light touch it says everything that I feel needs or wants to be said at this time. As I contemplate a possible third verse, I feel hope, optimism – a sense that there really *is* a chance. And that chance has been created by Joshua's arrival into the world.

You bring a chance of a new frontier
 You bring a chance of building bridges
 Of turning around
 And making tomorrow great¹

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