

**Title: Song writing as reflexive practice: ‘Breathing too loud’ to ‘signals & signs’: Song**

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Abstract: I would like to contribute to the ‘songbook of our lives’ inquiry through a performance which takes two perspectives on songs. The first of these is from the perspective of an individual who is moved *by* songs, the second, as a songwriter/researcher/autoethnographer moved *to write* songs from my research. In the former I share story fragments that reveal how my life, body and story has been touched, shaped and moved by music and lyrics and through narrative fragments trace some of the beginnings of this journey. In the latter, story fragments reveal how song writing has become a way to counter silence, lack of knowing how to respond, and as a way to stand with participants where together we might find a voice of resistance, communion, and transcendence.

Key words: song writing, reflexivity,

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**Prelude: The question**

What do we say when words fail us? When there is nothing to say? And how do we account for the unsaid, the unspoken, the emotions that stir from within-without form. And what should I say to a participant who shares a story about his trauma, loss, grief, and pain? And what I have I to offer a woman in her eighties after she shares wisdom, insight and a story about her life, her hopes, and her fears about her body, her health, her grand-children? And how do I later make sense of what has been shared or pass the batten on? And what stories might nurture me on this journey?

**Breathing too loud**

(Carless, 2000, Used with permission)

[A voice hums the melody and then, after three bars, the guitar and words join in]

This time in the morning even breathing is too loud  
Your heart is the fire, your brain is the water that puts it out  
There’s no pain in the moment but the cheque is in the post  
Talk about living or dying I’ve been wondering which part hurts the most

But while we’re sleeping the world is turning

Without us it gets by just fine

Too much scheming and not enough feeling

And science really isn’t the point

Two PhD students are leaning to become researchers, they are being shaped, boundaries are being claimed. They are drinking tea in the afternoon when one says,

‘Can I play you my new song?’

There was something in the mood, something in the music, something within her, she couldn't say what it was. Leonard Cohen might have said, 'there's a crack that lets the light in'. At the same time, the head and the heart had been on her mind, and she was mindful of a tension she couldn't resolve, how to *be* a researcher in the world. That very morning she'd written down her thoughts, but she didn't know how to express what 'the heart' was telling her.

Before he had even finished the song it had already lodged in the folds of her story, and like an addict she had to have it. She had to sing it. She took ages working out the chords so that she could possess it, so it could become her, and then she sang it, over and over again. *Something* had main-lined into her being.

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What drives this type of 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, and when the story stops, the music that fills-in, might support us to continue the journey. 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.

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#### *A narrative fragment*

A saxophone case opened its lid, inside deep red velvet, it was magical, so too the golden curvy instrument. Her father gently put it to his lips and blew, a moment of awe.

#### *A second narrative fragment*

Music filled her sleep, sound performing misty circles round her bed, and in the car, a few meters from her bedroom window, her father turned off his car engine, but not the song. He

remained in the car, captivated himself by sound. She couldn't see, hear or touch him, but there they both were, spellbound and absorbed by the overwhelming and alluring gift of a song.

At other times she'd be roused from her slumber by the pied piper of her dreams enticing her on a moonlit walk along the cliff path, he teaching her to sing marching songs:

You had a good job on your left: your right

You had a good job on your left: your right

Sound off: sound off

One two: one two

One two three four, one two: three four

What more magical moments might a child be given? This six-foot-four-inch man was inclusive, fun, imaginative, creative, but by no means perfect.

*Get wisdom*

'Get wisdom' he said. Why didn't he say like other parents, 'I just want you to be happy?' Is this an amazing legacy? Or an impossible burden?

An Irish family, he came over on the boat, with his mum, dad, brother, sister, when he was ten. Leaving, tyranny? Family expectations? Poverty? Unemployment? And what did they find in Bristol? Bigotry. 'No dogs or Irish!' He lost his accent pretty quickly, while the school lost his exam results, and his mother, for a while, her mental health, her peace. But he learned to play the bugle with the boys brigade, then the trumpet and then the sax.

And he played football, he loved football, the beautiful game. As a boy every evening walking home from school he'd play a game where he would try to hit, with his football, every fence and gatepost. Then, he'd keep score by recording the results in a little book, he had magical and imaginative ways of playing.

But then there were others stories, the one about, *painting a white strip along the car of a man who had wronged him*, and then going back months later, and doing it again. Painting a new white strip of paint along the side of the car. Revenge. These were the stories his family affirmed, well, his two brothers.

‘Daddy, I don’t think that’s the right thing to do.’

Children notice when parents don’t practice what they preach, but its difficult to say anything, nigh on impossible in some families I’ve learned. But he attended to what she said. He listened, took note, and told his partner,

‘Do you know what our middle daughter said?’ What an amazing thing to be so valued by a parent that they take your council, he listened, and then he slipped from her hands, perhaps his work was done.

He was 52 and she was 21.

[last verse and chorus of Breathing too loud]

Keep breathing, keep on trying, keep on waking everyday  
There’s too many calls, too much noise, rarely that much to say  
But something in the evening, is screaming at me now  
Your heart is the fire, your brain is the water that puts it out

But while we’re sleeping the world is turning

Without us it gets by, just fine

Too much scheming and not enough feeling

And science really isn’t the point

You know I would rather feel alright

But I am, breathing too loud

Am I breathing too loud for you

Am I breathing too loud for you

Am I breathing too loud for you

Am I breathing too loud for you

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How do we communicate the things we can't say? That stubbornly refused to be shaped into words. My body is more than one story, and others too have multiple stories written on, in and through the body. Songs, it seems, hold story fragments that escape a temporal plot, and allow polar tension to co-exist.

'We have strengthened our muscles for argument', Lori Neilsen (2008, p.386) reminds us, but at what cost? In a similar vein Elliot Eisner (2008, p.5) tells us 'we know more than we can tell' or more than we are even aware of. The point being that, 'not only does knowledge come in different forms, the forms of its creation differ.' So when we have no words and have more than words, what is it we have to offer? How might we break through silence?

'Poetry', Billy Collins said recently in an interview, 'is the interruption of silence,' (Plimpton, 2001). I think music and songs answer that call too.

In an autoethnography special interest group prior to the 2015 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Arthur Bochner, one of a number of scholars invited to share a future vision for autoethnography, said he would like his students '*not to become researchers, but to become writers*'. Reflecting on this I thought of my own research practice and what it is I am becoming, or should become? In playing out these dances in my mind I wondered if we don't need to become more than writers? Don't we need more than the written word, more than the rhythm of poetry and more than the lyrics of the song? Do we need a level of knowing that transcends the frameworks put in place by the words we use? All the while recognising that that rhythms,

timing and tunes too are constructed from the fragments, heritage, tradition, and historical moments that birthed them.

As a reflexive tool, it seems to me, that songs help us, help me, answer some of these questions. They help me, in an embodied way, retrace the steps that formed my narrative identity and in the same moment, remind me, remind us, of the heritage, tradition and the history that birthed them. And so, as an inquirer, I use songs to reach out, reach back, and re-set my moral compass. I do this because music can aid the humanizing move which turns ‘thick description’ into ‘thick empathy’. It provides a means to express things we don’t know how to articulate in words, and to move towards an imaginative aesthetic that transcends the ‘problem’ of silence.

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#### *Gwithian sands*

It’s November in England’s most southerly and westerly county, Cornwall, home to wreckers and smugglers, sea mists and winter swells bringing white water crashing against proud cliffs.

Of course, most of the vessels driven and dragged over savage rocks have long gone. Yet, some of the most recent graveyard of wrecks can still be spotted in odd coves or at low tide, and the more sensitive among us may feel an eerie chill on a dark night as impenetrable jaws become exposed by a full moon and we imagine the screams of their victims, or their silence. There is no refuge on these shores.

On this morning two researchers stand watching the waves assemble, each wave rising in a feathering peak, it arcs and then spits its force forward toward the shore in a deafening explosion. The two researchers acknowledge and taste the salt spray on their faces, but today, they don’t suit up in neoprene or enter the icy water with their flimsy fiberglass boards. No, they turn from the waves and drive toward a valley and a small, wooden village hall, protected, a mile back from where the winter swells thrust forward. In this refuge, among a small group of no



more than thirty, they present their research, daring to share with those that took part and others like them, a performance of songs, poems and stories.

“Ooooh!” Mag smiles as they walk in with guitars ‘are we going to have music? I love music.’

From a lofty telegraph wire three crows keep vigil in silence as the two researchers unload equipment and carry it into the hall. For the past year these two researchers have been documenting the lives of women in their 60s 70s and 80s, in order to answer the questions posed by their funders, ‘what does physical activity mean to ‘older’ [a term they dislike] women?’ And they’ve struggled with how to keep the funders happy – funders who didn’t want poems, stories or songs, but rather a scientific missile to load into their policy cannon. So, they’ve struggled with how to share the precious gems passed on to them in looks, moves, silence, warm acceptance, sharing, sitting, watching, listening. And back they have gone, again and again, following the rising and falling of the tide, to invite, to look anew. Each researcher, then, in their own way, responded to the experience of living with these women’s stories in their body, and each responded in song as a way to connect with, mark, resist, and walk on with these women and to invite others to walk with them all.

Sofia, a woman in her eighties, exemplified many of the women they interviewed, she said:

‘My husband says *you say you’ve got all these aches and pains but you can still go dancing*, and I said, you know what Norman, as soon as the music starts I ain’t got an ache or a pain nowhere.’

Sofia couldn’t write, but she was by no means unintelligent or unaware. She was, in fact, bright, alert, aware, practical, sensitive, and very funny. She made them laugh, and her hands danced before them in the telling of her stories, the same hands that had worked this land, and had seen it change. ‘Gwithian sands’<sup>i</sup> was a song that allowed them all to walk on together, and it

was a call to resistance, a call to acknowledgement, a call to push back - as Maggie Kovach (2015) termed it in her key note - against the forces pushing these women, and others like them, to the margins of society.

It was written on a seat on a headland overlooking an ocean where these two researchers surfed with seals, and sometimes dolphins, in a precious connection with the land and the sea. The sturdy immovable and ever moving madness that surrounds these shores, our shores, our land, our people.

### Gwithian Sands

(Douglas, 2012 ©used with permission )

Girls come down to Gwithian sands

Leave your labour leave your lands

Come and run and dance with me

Be the woman you want to be

Summer came and went so fast

Winter chill and father past

Away to where the spirits be

Now what's gonna become of me

Mother worked for all she knew

She was proud and she stood true

Schoolmaster he turned a blind eye

He knew we just couldn't get by

Young girl working on the line

Small hands but she's doing fine  
Working with men four times her age  
But it means she gets a wage

Time moves on  
She grew strong  
Brother sent away to school  
She never learned to write  
But she's no fool

Girls come down to Gwithian Sands  
Leave your labour leave your lands  
Come and run and dance with me  
Be the woman you want to be

Young men all went off to war  
Now in pain as well as poor  
Sisters come on and play your part  
But all this killing ain't in my heart

Time moves on  
She grew strong  
With children of her own to feed  
She never learned to write  
Seems she's no need

Girls Come down to Gwithian Sands  
Leave your labour leave your lands  
Come and run and dance with me  
Be the woman you want to be

Barber Green moved in to Town  
Spewing smoke and laying down  
Tarmac upon golden fields of hay  
Now where ma children gonna play?

Time moves on And now, she's not so strong,  
With a husband who barely clings to life  
She never learned to write  
She's just a wife

Girls come down to Gwithian sands  
Leave your labour leave your lands  
Come and run and dance with me  
Lets be the women we want to be

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*Post script*

That intolerable annoyance surfaced again, writing had left her life flat on the page,  
where was the energy, the 'life-blood' of the song and performance? Where had the body gone?

She smiled and remembered one of the questions posed following the songbook session by a member of the audience:

‘How are you going to get this ‘out there’, people need to hear this!’ A wry knowing smile appeared on the faces of some of the other presenters, ‘*this isn’t a new question*’ they whispered. ‘*haven’t we been asked this before? what am ‘I’ going to do?*’ This time, though, she had one answer,

‘Well, we’ve put Gwithian sands on youtube’ the baton had been passed on, There was no letting up on collective responsibility *we* all have for sharing each others work.

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#### Notes

I am indebted here to Andrew Sparkes who often talks and writes about Leonard Cohen. In Sparkes, A. C. (2007). Embodiment, academics, and the audit culture: a story seeking consideration. *Qualitative Research*, 7; 521 DOI: 10.1177/1468794107082306 Andrew references Leonard Cohen using the phrase ‘There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in’ which is included in the album, Cohen, L. (1992) ‘Anthem’, *The Future*. Columbia: Sony Music. Andrew writes, “With regard to *Anthem* (1992) and his use of the phrase, Cohen later said: ‘That’s the closest thing I could describe to a credo. That idea is one of the fundamental positions behind a lot of the songs (http://arts.guardian.co.uk/fridayreview/story/0,,1305765,00.html).” (Sparkes, 2007)

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<sup>i</sup> The lyrics to Gwithian Sands, as an example of the songwriting process, were published in Douglas, K. (2012). Signals and Signs. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 18(6), 525-532.