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Suburban Black Suburban Blue:

Songwriting and Musical Performance as Qualitative Research

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Abstract

In this piece, I explore songwriting and musical performance as an approach to qualitative research, in particular critical autoethnography. Using the example of a song I wrote in 2008 called *Suburban Black Suburban Blue*, I show how moments of history, biography, culture, politics and lived experience can coalesce within a song. Here, rhythm, melody, words, personal voice and the dynamics of musical performance combine to evoke insights, emotions and meaning in ways that support impact, solidarity and transformation.

Keywords: arts-based research, autoethnography, LGBT stories, musical performance, narrative, songwriting

Suburban Black Suburban Blue:

Songwriting and Musical Performance as Qualitative Research

I use songs to reach out, reach back, and reset 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 toward an imaginative aesthetic that transcends the “problem” of silence. (Douglas, 2016, p. 800)

Introduction

In the Beatles song *Julia*, John Lennon sings: *When I cannot sing my heart/I can only speak my mind*. These simple lines resonate deeply with my experience. So often I feel constrained by the dominance of the written and spoken work, particularly in academia but in other domains of life too. I need songs and music to discover, to understand, to express ... what I feel, what I’ve experienced, what I’m thinking, what it might be that I have to offer.

I have needed – and I still need – songs and music to help me connect, to feel a part of, to relate, to interrelate. Songs which help me feel less isolated, less alienated, less alone. And feelings of isolation and alienation loom large in many queer lives. Safety, self-respect, acceptance and solidarity can be hard to find. Building connection and community has been – and still is – paramount for our identity, wellbeing, happiness. Songs offer a miraculous means through which these touchstones might be approached. Yet the expression of queer lives in song has tricky history.

Years before I entered academia, I was writing songs. And years before I started writing songs I fell in love with music. Since I was a child, many stories – ways to be human – seeped into my being through songs. By my 30’s I’d collected around 10,000 songs on LP,

cassette, CD and MP3. I'd heard many more on the radio and TV. But none of these songs – not one – featured a first-person story of attraction, desire, love or romance between two men. The kind of story you hear all the time between a man and a woman didn't seem to exist in song. Lots of men singing 'I want her, I love her, I need her' but none singing 'I want him, I love him, I need him.' I didn't hear *this* kind of story in a song until finally I wrote one for myself in 2008. I called this song *Suburban Black Suburban Blue*.

October 1977

The Tom Robinson Band have a British hit with *2-4-6-8 Motorway*. The song reaches number five in the chart and is played widely on television and radio. I am seven. Despite being young, the song must have seeped into my consciousness as I can still remember and sing the chorus now: *Two, four, six, eight, ain't never too late/Me and my radio truckin' on through the night/Three, five, seven, nine on a double white line/Da da da da dahh da da da dum*. Well, most of it! I haven't heard the song for decades.

February 1978

The band have a follow-up hit with a four track EP which includes the song (*Sing If You're Glad To Be Gay*). The EP reaches number 18. The song is banned by the BBC who do not play it on their Top 40 music show. Perhaps that's why neither the song, the title nor the lyrics registered in my consciousness? It is not until many years later that I first hear it. The verses rage against injustice: police brutality towards the queer community; homophobic attacks in the streets; 'obscene publication' accusations levelled against *Gay News* magazine; the unequal age of consent for gay sex. The chorus is out, proud and simple: *Sing if you're glad to be gay/Sing if you're happy that way, hey/Sing if you're glad to be gay/Sing if you're happy that way*. The song is adopted as an anthem by sections of the gay community. It's

power and meaning grows, deepens and extends over the years, still potent four decades later when it figures in 2017 celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK.

November 1983

This Charming Man by The Smiths reaches number 25. Musically, it's jaunty and alive. Morrissey's vocal melodies are innovative, intriguing, unique in the pop landscape. His singing – the *sound* of his voice – expresses to me a yearning, a desire for something as yet unattained. But the something is unspecified. The lyrics are oblique and abstract: *Punctured bicycle on a hillside desolate/Will nature make a man of me yet?/When this charming man/This charming man...* Then the story pulls back, stops short of saying what the singer desires. Mainstream society was perhaps not yet ready to hear *that* story. Perhaps the BBC would have banned this record too if Morrissey had been more specific? But the most important truth, the story I now hear so clearly, evaded me completely at 13. The true truth is beneath the words. It is in the subtext. It is in the form.

June 1984

Bronski Beat have a big summer hit with *Smalltown Boy*. The song reaches number three and is all over radio and TV. Jimmy Sommerville sings in an agonised, glorious, arresting falsetto: *Pushed around and kicked around, always a lonely boy/You were the one that they'd talk about around town as they put you down.* Then the chorus: *Run away, turn away, run away, turn away, run away/Crying to your soul/Cry boy, cry, cry, cry.* At 14, the record, with its aching sound, melody, atmosphere and voice entered my consciousness to fuse with some part of me. I can still feel its imprint. Yet I never heard myself in its lyrics. I didn't see my life in its story. Was it denial? Repression? Perhaps. Or maybe I was just too young? Or was

it to do with the song being written and sung in the third person? Not *I, me, my ...* but *him*, over there, at a distance. The small-town boy was *Other*, he was always someone else.

October 1998

I'm a student at Southern Illinois University, USA, when I hear on national news of the vicious and ultimately fatal homophobic attack on 21-year old Matthew Sheppard in Wyoming. I do not know what to do. I do not know what to say. I do nothing. I say nothing.

November 2007

A Friday night and Bradley is due home after working away for the week. I drive into the city centre to meet him off the 7.15 London train. I look up at the arrivals screen – the train is on time, platform seven. Unusually, the ticket barriers are open so I'm able to walk onto the platform. A few minutes later the ten-carriage train chugs in, halting finally and breathing out a tired sigh. The doors open and people begin to alight, hundreds of them. I look up and down the packed platform, waiting, excited to be seeing my boyfriend again. People rush past me on either side, heading for buses, taxis, waiting family and friends. Then I see him, walking towards me, looking cool, urban and gorgeous. He's seen me first. He's smiling. His pace seems to quicken. I take some steps towards him. We hug – for quite a while amidst the river of crowd. Finally, I pull back a little to take a look at him. I kiss him on the mouth. He kisses me back. For a moment, it is heaven. A tender, intimate, loving greeting between two men reunited on a station platform. But as we separate, my stomach suddenly sinks, dropping almost into the ground. I notice once more the people swarming past us. *Looking at us? Laughing at us? Threatening us?* I don't know and I can't bring myself to look to find out. But I feel suddenly vulnerable – as if I have exposed not only myself, but Bradley too. *Was*

our kiss too much? Too revealing in this public setting, even in 2007? Have I put us at risk of a homophobic insult or assault? We walk quickly to the car.

December 2007

A joint date-night with Daniel and Paulo – an early meal at Nando’s and a movie. After, we walk homewards down one of the city’s main streets. We reach the busy intersection where we will head in opposite directions. We pause to say our goodbyes. Whenever Bradley and I see Daniel and Paulo at the dance studio or in our homes, we hug and kiss copiously to greet each other and say farewell. *But how to say goodbye in this very public place?* I feel unsure. Even though its 2007, and so much has changed for the better, I still feel unsure. I wait, leaving it to someone else to decide. Daniel does. He steps towards Bradley, places his hand behind Bradley’s head and kisses him warmly on the lips. As the Christmas shoppers flood by weighed down with their purchases, Daniel turns ninety degrees and gifts me too a tender, generous kiss. I feel people looking. Out the corner of my eye I glimpse turned faces. I ignore them. I return Daniel’s smile and kiss Paulo goodnight.

January 2008

It’s a cold, inky northern night. We’re in town for beer and food in our favourite pub. My collar is turned up and Bradley is wearing hat and gloves. As we walk, we huddle close together for warmth and for fun. A cross-roads of city centre streets: *left or straight on?* Perhaps because it’s so cold, perhaps because we’re hungry and thirsty, we take the quickest route: straight on. But it means walking past a row of pubs I usually avoid. Big, bland, city pubs with huge TV screens showing endless football matches. And lots of cheap beer. Subconsciously perhaps, we drift towards the road – to be as far as possible from their doors. We’re only feet away from the entrance to the second or third pub when a dark-haired man –

eighteen or nineteen perhaps – comes flying out, like a cowboy hurled from a saloon in a Western, sprawling on the pavement in front of us. We freeze, pulling closer to each other. His teeth show bright white against the blood coming from his mouth or lips. Some of the blood has dripped down the front of his white England football shirt. *What comes next? Vulgar hate-filled words? Violence?* We both hold our breath. He looks up at us from the concrete, snarls, and charges back into the pub.

February 2008

These and many other fragments of memory ... of experience ... of hope ... of fear ... converge on the single moment in time when I find myself writing the song that becomes *Suburban Black Suburban Blue*. I write with ‘throughness’ (Carless, 2018) – the memories, the emotions, the knowing, the vulnerabilities, the stories all seem to come from some place very deep down. Not from my conscious rational mind, but from my body, my soma, my subconscious, my soul. And they coalesce into a song. It is the day before my birthday. This song is a birthday present to myself.

April 2010

John Grant releases his debut solo album *Queen of Denmark*. Grant is open about his homosexuality in interviews and several songs on the album explore same-sex relationships. In one song – *Caramel* – Grant uses a first-person voice to sing of his love for another man: *My love is the rarest jewel/And he grounds me with his love/My love, he is rich like caramel/And he moves me from above*. This is the first song I have ever heard to do so. The first and only song. As I listen to it for the first time, I feel able to release a deep, long-held breath. When it has finished, I feel unsure whether or not I actually heard what I thought I

heard. I play it again to check. And then I play it again. Each time I play it, I feel a little less alone.

July 2012

Days before releasing *Channel Orange*, Frank Ocean comes out publicly as bisexual. In the song *Forrest Gump* Ocean sings about his male love interest: *You're so buff and so strong/I'm nervous Forrest ... Forrest Gump, you run my mind boy/Running on my mind boy.*

This is now the second song I've heard in which a male singer uses a first-person voice to express his attraction to another man. The album is a critical and commercial success and Ocean is later lauded for “singlehandedly ushering in a new era for queer inclusiveness in mainstream music” (Thomas, 2017).

November 2013

I perform *Suburban Black Suburban Blue* as part of an evening of performative research Kitrina Douglas has convened as a public engagement initiative. The banked seating at Yorkshire Dance in the centre of Leeds is almost full – a hundred adventurous members of the public and students have gathered to see and hear social research as they never have before. Tonight, for this song, I am supported by six backing singers – five male drama students and Kitrina – who stand in a semi-circle around a single mic. They mostly leave the words to me but come in – together, *so* together – on the sung parts which have no words, the ‘*Yeahhh, Yeahhh, Yeahhheheh*’ sections. Those bits that are meaningless when reproduced as text on a page, but elevate, enliven and empower when sung ensemble, with passion. At these moments, the meaning and power of wordless sound is spectacularly revealed. It is *felt*.

Midway through the song, ‘my’ singers spontaneously link arms, pulling each other tightly together as their harmonies intensify and the sound grows larger still. As I sing and as they

sing, I feel it: *I am not alone anymore. I am not alone on this stage ... in this story ... in this song ... in this life.*

March 2014

My boyfriend, James, had been in the audience that night in November. He asks me to play the song now, at two in the morning, cloudy with wine, as we sit around my kitchen table with two musician friends. As I begin to sing the ‘*Yeahhh, Yeahhh, Yeahhheheh*’ intro, James joins in. Cautiously at first. He wouldn’t claim to be a singer. Corinne and Steve join in too, feeling their way into a song they’ve never heard before. It is so intimate, so special, to share a song that I have written in such close proximity to others – others who love music, respect songwriters and are excited to hear a song they couldn’t hear anywhere else. By the time we reach the closing sections of the song, James’ singing has become as impassioned as mine. The kitchen is bursting with sound. We offer no words ... just the noise of pure emotion. As we approach the song’s end, I look across the table at him. And I don’t only hear it now, I see it too. I am not the only one who needed this story in song.

September 2017

LGBT charity Stonewall publish their study *LGBT in Britain: Hate crime and discrimination* (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017). It is not a pleasant read: 21% of LGBT people have experienced a hate crime or incident due to their sexual orientation or gender identity in the last 12 months; the number of lesbian, gay or bisexual people who have experienced a hate crime or incident in the last year because of their sexual orientation rose by 78% between 2013 and 2017; 81% of LGBT people who experienced a hate crime or incident didn’t report it to the police; 29% of LGBT people avoid certain streets because they don’t feel safe there as an

LGBT person; 58% of gay men say they don't feel comfortable walking down the street while holding their partner's hand.

May 2018

We gather for a panel titled 'Bridge over troubled water: Singing and songs as qualitative inquiry in troubled times' at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Illinois. Although Kitrina and I have been writing and performing songs as research across two decades (e.g., Carless, 2017; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2011; Douglas, 2012, 2016; Douglas & Carless, 2005, 2008), this is the first time I have been part of a panel in which *everyone* does so. I am thrilled at the prospect of – for once – not having to speak! To have the freedom to sing and only sing.

As the tiered seating begins to fill, I feel anticipation build in the room. I see familiar faces – colleagues and friends spanning back over 13 years of ICQI. I see faces I do not know. With each performance, each singer and each song, I feel an emotional wallop. Cumulatively, the depth and richness grow and keep growing. What a joy ... to give talk a back seat for a moment, yet still so much be said.

I am second last to perform. I begin by quoting John Lennon, before singing my heart through *Stumble* – a song which musically, tonally and lyrically takes me to a place where I am able to perform: vulnerable yet grounded, seeking yet secure, open yet protected. I love how the guitar sounds on this song. My voice feels true, authentic and held within the space created by the picked chord progressions. Next, I speak my mind: I say a few words about isolation and alienation. I suggest songs can help us connect, to express and share our identities in empowering ways. I tell how a simple first-person declaration of love (or desire or attraction or romance) between two men was absent from my record collection until I

wrote this song. Until then, this was a story – one part of my heart – that I could not and did not sing. And neither, it seemed, did anybody else.

Standing in the centre of the performance space, I use my thumb and forefinger to pick out the bassline, getting the upbeat rhythm going. Then the higher notes, picked out from the descending chord progression. The music is happening. My body wants to move, expand, try to fill the space; I let it. I start to sing the opening melody – no words at all, just heartfelt sound: ‘*Yeahhh, Yeahhh, Yeahhheheh.*’ Seamlessly Kitrina joins me with her harmonies, fleshing out and enriching the sound. Then, with the scene set, the emotional soil tilled, the story in words can begin:

I’ll meet you off the train tonight
And on the platform take your hand in mine
But maybe that’s a kiss too far
We’re just two guys forgetting where we are
Suburban black, suburban blue

Avoid the bloody football fans
Falling out of bars with angry souls
Is it a loss that turned them sour?
I don’t know

[... a chord change into the chorus, the music lightens and lifts, as the urgency of the vocal intensifies Kitrina’s voice soars, extending the emotional punch...]

I’ve felt some rain falling in my heart

I know there's a cold breeze that blows us apart

But I have dreams I'm gonna see come true

And I have a life ... I want to share with you

[...no words now, just music: one guitar and two heartfelt voices into the second verse...]

First he stops and kisses you

On the cheek, the corner of the street

Then he turns and kisses me, all so naturally

The lookers look, they've looked before

We are different, they are sure

We are alone, we are alone

We are together here alone

I've felt some rain falling in my heart

I know there's a cold breeze that blows us apart

But I have dreams I'm gonna see come true

And I have a life ... I want to share with you

I feel it more when I'm with you

Suburban black, suburban blue

But I'm loving you, I'm loving you

You know I do, you know I do

[... no words needed now, we sing our hearts with abandon, the sound swells, until the guitar stops abruptly and we sing the final 8 bars acapella...]

There is silence after the final performance of the panel. Some moments to absorb the experience, the emotions, before the time is right for response. After a little while, from an aisle seat midway back, Johnny raises his hand.

I've known Johnny since participating in his ethnodrama workshop at ICQI a decade ago. A kinship ignited and sustained by the Congress. Just the previous evening we had talked, catching up on news, on partners, on life. He'd pulled out his phone and showed me a picture of him and his husband on their wedding day. In their suits, they looked handsome together, happy together, they looked ... well, they looked *together*. I felt myself nodding, smiling as I savoured the image. *What a treat to see a photograph like this. How good it feels to see a picture like this.* 'We've been together since 1983,' Johnny told me, 'but of course we were only recently *allowed* to get married – when the law changed.'

I found myself trying to imagine what it could feel like to be with another man for over 30 years, to experience that kind of continuity. I couldn't begin to imagine. 'What's it like Johnny?' I asked. 'I've just never known that long a relationship. It seems so ... What's the best thing about it?'

Johnny replied, quick as a flash. 'Dependability,' he said. He paused and looked me in the eye. 'We know we can depend on each other.'

The panel chair invites Johnny to share his response to the performances and I swivel round in my seat so I can see him. He starts to speak: 'I just want to say, to David, that...' But no more words come. In their place, in the space left by silence, I see instead a huge wave rearing up. The kind of wave that is too big to be surfed. Formed from powerful groundswell, created by some distant storm in the North Atlantic, which then travels

tirelessly for hundreds of miles, to break spectacularly, unburdening itself, releasing everything, on a remote Cornish beach. And so it is now. Tears. An outpouring. Such meaning, such pain, so deeply held, for so long. I go to him. We embrace. *I'm scarred too, you know ... I thought, maybe, a life-partner could make it alright, might be enough ... I know now, for sure, that a song of what our hearts contain is air to breathe ... Its absence almost intolerable ... I needed this song. I so needed to hear this song. I so needed to sing this song. I still do.*

September 2018

I contact Johnny to ask his permission to include part of his story here, within my story. In his generous response, Johnny reminds me of what he *did* say, when the emotions subsided:

When I was a teenager in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were no songs whatsoever that addressed man and man romance/love. Being gay at that time in the US (particularly in Texas) was still fraught with stigma and secrecy. Hearing your song in 2018, at age 63, made me realize what I missed in my adolescence, and made me wish I could have had songs like yours to hear when I was growing up. It would have made my coming out and awareness of my gay identity a lot easier. (Saldaña, 2018, personal communication)

Coda

In his classic *Telling Sexual Stories*, Ken Plummer wrote: “As gay persons create a gay culture cluttered with stories of gay life, gay history and gay politics, so that very culture helps to define a reality that makes gay personhood tighter and ever more plausible” (1995, p. 87). Arthur Frank, in *Letting Stories Breathe*, wrote: “Stories project possible futures, and

those projections affect what comes to be ... Stories work to *emplot* lives: they offer a plot that makes some particular future not only plausible but also compelling” (2010, p. 9-10). I want to replace the word ‘stories’ with the word ‘songs’ in both these excerpts. We create – we *need* to create – a culture bursting with songs of queer life, queer history and queer politics. We must do this for each other’s sake because songs project possible futures, affecting what comes to be. Because songs, too, can make a multitude of futures plausible and compelling. In some important way we are lost without music to open up communal queer horizons, through singing our diverse stories of triumph and loss, suffering and joy.

Acknowledgments

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