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### Where spirit meets bone

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*Published in:*  
International Review of Qualitative Research

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/19408447221114848](https://doi.org/10.1177/19408447221114848)

E-pub ahead of print: 12/07/2022

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Carless, D. (2022). Where spirit meets bone: a meditation on embodied qualitative inquiry. *International Review of Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19408447221114848>

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# Where Spirit Meets Bone: A Meditation on Embodied Qualitative Inquiry

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International Review of Qualitative Research  
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–6  
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DOI: 10.1177/19408447221114848

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## Abstract

This performance autoethnography explores the ways that song writing and yoga, as forms of embodied practice, might inform the methodologies of autoethnography and qualitative inquiry. Throughout the piece, I share and reflect on moments in my own song writing and yoga practice which have helped me develop as a qualitative researcher.

## Keywords

arts-based research, embodied inquiry, performance autoethnography, song writing, yoga

[Sings:]

Like the daybreak

A dusky sunrise

Like a cool breeze

in the summertime

I have been surprised

to find...<sup>1</sup>

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Recently I've started thinking of qualitative inquiry in light of my song writing and yoga practice. I have been asking myself the question: How do song writing and yoga, as different forms of embodied practice, inform the methodologies of autoethnography and qualitative inquiry?

Both yoga and song writing feel like ways of accessing – bringing into the open, making available to consciousness – sediments of truth, held deeply within my being. In her song *Compassion* (Williams, 2014), Lucinda Williams quotes her father, the poet Miller Williams, when she sings: 'You do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone'. Well, through both yoga and song writing I think we begin to find out.

I might 'unmask' what was previously hidden from me – perhaps buried or locked within my body – when I spend time on my yoga mat. Bodies remember (Rothschild, 2000). Bodies keep the score (van der Kolk, 2015). The body's tissues – fascia, muscle, tendon and bone – can 'hold' or 'store' past experiences and emotions, sometimes for many years (Etherington, 2003). The hips, yoga teachers sometimes say, are a storehouse of our experiences. The pelvis the emotional centre of the body. A decade ago, my pelvis was locked: rigid and tight. Through repeating over time ancient, arcing, Asian movements, a body's tissues soften and release. As a body opens, emotions and experiences that were previously calcified are first loosened and then mobilised into consciousness. They are set free to be *felt* – perhaps for the first time. And with emotions – sometimes – come stories.

[Sings:]

Like a dancer's touch  
in the darkness  
It will bridge the distance  
that separates two lives  
I have been surprised  
to find...<sup>1</sup>

When I pick up my guitar and play and sing, I might 'unmask' – hear or feel, perhaps for the first time – previously muted elements of myself. Songs make me much louder than I am (Carless & Douglas, 2021). The noise of the guitar. The opening of mouth, throat and lungs. The always bold step into the unknown: the forever uncharted territory of inventing and combining melody, harmony, rhythm and words without knowing where you are going or where you will end up. Inquiry. Risk. Vulnerability. Discovery. And surprise. Emotions and experiences that were previously hidden, repressed or buried – perhaps by shame or acts of silencing by others – are brought out into the light, made available to consciousness. They are set free to be *felt*. And with emotions – sometimes – come stories.

[Sings:]

The way the sweet strings

kickstart your heartbeat

The way a soft song

opens up my eyes

I have been surprised

to find...<sup>1</sup>

These processes are familiar to narrative researchers. How in an interview, through interaction, a participant might express something of the realities of their life. The sensitive narrative researcher listens, inquires, witnesses, becomes a container for the Other's story (Josselson, 1996). *They* share, recount, reveal. *We* discover, learn, see anew.

But the other side of the narrative gift is that through fashioning stories of our lives we might also create ourselves. As we reform our story, we transform ourselves.

I saw this happening when I started playing gigs in my early twenties – playing my songs to small audiences in bars and cafes. I became aware that the David I was singing in my songs was more appealing to me than the David I saw reflected back at me in everyday life. I liked myself more in song. I made a truer me. A me that I felt better about, happier with. I transformed myself.

[Sings:]

Like a clean wave

that's lit by sunlight

It breaks the silence

that echoes round inside

I have been surprised

to find...<sup>1</sup>

I find it comforting that once a song is written, it stays written. You can play your song over and over again. You can sing it whenever you feel you need it. Through the singing and the playing you get to transform yourself again ... and again ... and again.

Recording a song makes further transformation possible. When we recorded *It's Alright* (Carless & Douglas, 2022), we began with rhythm guitar and vocal. At that moment, these two performances were fixed in time, digitally encoded in ProTools. We added bass. Then, we overdubbed a second rhythm guitar. Then, backing vocals – numerous 'Kitrinas' pooled to form a choir through the marvels of multitracking. Finally, some months later, we added electric guitar.

The addition of each new part altered the previous performances. What had been fixed in time was transformed. Each new contribution remade the song in some way. Each part brought new energy, new intensity, new emotion, new colour and new depth. The song becomes more than it was. I become more than I was.

When a song seeps into public consciousness – when others listen, dance, sing or play along – the possibilities for transformation multiply exponentially. What was personal becomes cultural. What was me, becomes you. You too may transform yourself, your identity, your moment in time. What began with one individual transforming themselves, becomes shared, communal, social change. *We* become more than we were.

[Sings:]

We call our own tune

We crawl a path already strewn

with broken lives

They come and they go

You'll never hear a sound or see the signs

while you're locked inside

Call me crazy, you calm me down

You count me out when I'm on the ground

Did I get out of bed on the wrong side?

And do you mind?

We make our own news

Ignore the truth to chase our own

television lives

A dream of learning

But the more you ask the less you'll know

these television times

Call me crazy, you calm me down

You count me out when I'm on the ground

Did I get out of bed on the wrong side?

And do you mind?<sup>2</sup>

Both song writing and yoga are wholly embodied practices. I cannot engage in either without entering into a serious and sustained conversation with my body. Both song writing and yoga draw on the body in ways that can allow us to access, become aware of, feel and explore the emotions and ‘memories’ our body may hold. But, generally speaking, they do so in different ways, for different purposes and with different outcomes.

When I practice song writing or yoga as research methodology (e.g. Carless, 2022), I am compelled to recognise qualitative inquiry as a fully and unavoidably embodied practice (see Douglas, 2021). Because *I cannot engage in either without entering into a serious and sustained conversation with my body*. Through these particular embodied practices, over time, my body teaches me. It tries to, at least. My body leads, I do my best to follow. Often, I learn. Frequently, I am surprised. Sometimes, I am transformed. As is my inquiry.

[Sings:]

Let’s write a new story

One that opens a door

With a different ending

That’s never happened before

Then we could turn around

We could turn around<sup>3</sup>

## Acknowledgments

The ideas presented here developed through a long and ongoing collaboration with Kitrina Douglas. Thank you for sharing and teaching with such generosity of spirit. Thank you also to Bryant Keith Alexander for once again providing an opportunity to share and publish performative research.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. Lyrics from *I Have Been Surprised* © D. Carless 2012, used with permission.
2. Lyrics from *Television Lives* © D. Carless 1997, used with permission.
3. Lyrics from *Turn Around* © D. Carless 2006, used with permission.

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**David Carless** is a researcher-writer-musician immersed in interdisciplinary projects across social science, mental health and physical activity. His arts-based, narrative and autoethnographic collaborations are available online and have been published as journal articles and book chapters. David works in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at the University of the West of Scotland and is an Honorary Professor in the Centre for Creative Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh.