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## CHAPTER FOUR

# Singing in Troubled Times

## “This Country”: Reflections on Songwriting and Singing Qualitative Research

KITRINA DOUGLAS

The first song I ever heard sung during a session at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) was in 2006 when David Carless sang “We Crossed the Tamar” (Carless, 2005), a song he’d written as part of a commissioned research project. The following year he returned to sing two songs, “Cold Soul” and “Stumble,” (Carless, 2007), through which he tried to incorporate his “singing self” within the straitjacket of evidence-based medicine, a culture that expects a researcher to be neutral and unaffected and is hostile toward those who use their selves in their work.

In the years since, an increasing number of songwriters and songs have been performed at the conference. Among them, Bill Rawlings, “Performing Songs for Cindy: A Musical Autoethnography,” in 2014, and “Recovering Notes on Aging” in 2016. In 2016 Bryant Alexander invited Devika Chawla, Stacy Holman Jones, Durell Callier, Tami Spry, Anne Harris, Robin M. Boylorn, Norman K. Denzin, and myself to contribute to “The Songbook of our Lives” panel, creating a space where those of us with interest in singing and songs could come together to voice our interests. That same year Stacy Holman Jones invited participants at the “Day in Autoethnography” to explore

rhythm, music, and songwriting in one of the afternoon workshops. This year (2018) the circle has been extended, as songwriters and singers were given an opportunity to *sing* as a response to *troubled times* and to reflect together on some of the powerful ways songs support our scholarship and lives more broadly.

Alongside these formal sessions there has also been a “congress fringe” where a small number of us have met informally to make music, share songs, and in the folk tradition, pass the guitar around. These sessions have been hugely important to me as a singer-songwriter as it has given me a safe and public space to share songs.

It was during one of these fringe events, sitting in the shade, on a low wall outside the Illini, that in 2017 I first shared a song that led Marcel Diversi to ask me to send him the chords and lyrics. There was something about this song that moved him to want to play and sing it. One of the most powerful aspects of a song is evidenced in his request. You see, songs need to be sung and shared, and given life by others. In what follows, I share a little more of this journey.

### ***Singing and Research***

Singing, according to a variety of research across the health and social sciences sectors/disciplines, can bring physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits (Art Health Network Canada, 2009). These include improving mood, reducing stress, increasing immune function, elevating levels of neurotransmitters associated with wellbeing, enhancing the body’s ability to overcome diseases, and aiding recovery from physical and mental illnesses. Added to these are the social benefits and spiritual dimensions of singing, which are said to contribute to health and happiness (Clift & Hancox, 2001; Kreutz, 2014). Recent studies have shown singing to an unborn baby during pregnancy or to a newborn baby during infancy can create a unique bond between mother and child, generating enhanced feelings of love, affection, connection, and relaxation, even during a stressful delivery.

A few years ago, when I was doing research for the Department of Health and exploring the health benefits of dance, I remember asking two 9-year old girls taking part in the research, “Why do you

dance?” In response, they described a variety of health benefits as if reciting from a script—much like the list of health benefits for singing described above.

“I see,” I said, and then asked, “And would you still dance if it wasn’t healthy?” In unison, without pause to think and with huge smiles on their faces, the two girls replied “Yes! Of course.” I feel the same about singing. There may be a huge wealth of evidence in health research prescribing reasons for singing, but that is not why I sing. Nor do these reasons motivate me to write a song or record it, or to sit with friends singing and listening to each other’s songs. Neither do these above insights into the health benefits of singing shed light on how some songs trouble me and provoke me to think about my behaviour, actions, or inaction. Nor does this comprehensive list allude to the way that songs sometimes cause distress, or remind us of injustice, prejudice and silencing, and even inequality and/or of wrongdoing and violation of human rights abuses.

Often in our research we use stories to communicate. Arthur Frank (2004) reminds us that “[s]tories do not merely narrate events”: they also focus our attention on what issues are worth noticing and the people whose lives are worth reporting (p. 62). The same can be said for song. Across the centuries, songs have made it possible to keep in focus and in public view the lives of people and communities the authorities would rather we forget. In Frank’s (2004) terms, songs make it possible to show some events and lives that may have otherwise been rendered absent.

Such motives lie behind some of the songs I write and sing, recognizing the multidimensionality of songs to allow us to sing softly, but *carry a big stick*.

### ***The Songwriting Process***

Over the past two decades, in long and thoughtful conversations with David Carless regarding our research practices, I have learned that what often compels one of us to write a song is not a conscious decision but rather an embodied response to what is going on around us: both the milieu of life as well as the research we are

involved with (for example, see Douglas & Carless, 2018) Writing songs, it seems, provides a way to amplify the lives of marginalized people within our communities and attempt to ensure they are not lost and forgotten, even when we don't set out to specifically do so.

Often, when I cannot communicate what I am experiencing or learning in words alone, or when I am feeling conflicted and have contrasting, oppositional, and ambiguous positions on an issue, there is a chance I can access and share some of this through writing a song and singing it, and I am not alone.

Paul Zollo (2003), author of "Song-writers on Song Writing" interviewed 52 of the world's most well-known and regarded songwriters including Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen, John Hiatt, and Jackson Browne. The conversations reveal that many songwriters don't go out with the aim of writing a song with a particular message in mind. Rather, it is the process of playing and singing, which creates in the artist the type of environment that allows songs to be birthed. Many of the artists Zollo interviews suggest it is "the song" that catches the songwriter and his or her role is to be a willing recipient. This makes sense to the social researcher in me. When we invest time "in the field" talking with people and observing day-to-day life, meaning is often hidden. At some other moment, perhaps doing the gardening, as Elizabeth St. Pierre notes, a truth emerges.

Other songwriters Zollo interviewed suggest songs are hidden in musical instruments and waiting to be discovered. This also makes sense to me. For over 20 years I played international and professional golf, spending hours on the practice ground teaching myself to play shots and honing and perfecting this craft. I would lose myself with just one club and a ball and become aware of rhythm and movement and the joy of discovery, attuned, you might say, to my body. Often, when one of these shots emerged during a tournament, and perhaps allowed me to get out of trouble or to win an event, I would be asked by other professionals "How did you play that shot?" as if it was magic. I would say, "Well, just go out to the practice ground and you'll find out." Of course, I could have told them technically how to play the shot, but this alone wouldn't "work": the individual needs to develop feel, balance, and

kinaesthetic awareness before the shot is likely to be *played*. It has been the same for me with writing songs and playing the guitar. It is vital to spend time singing and playing without the aim of writing before it becomes possible to find what is hidden. When playing and learning songs that move me or provoke me there is an opportunity to find—what is, for me—a new chord or different picking pattern, and these, in turn, at some later stage, help dislodge hidden truths. Sometimes it's the failing to attain a chord that I've tried to learn or not quite getting a picking pattern that opens a door to something else magical, and that is the alchemy of songwriting and playing.

Common among many of the songwriters Zollo interviewed was an awareness that through the songwriting process, they found things they didn't know they were looking for, or knew. This is what makes songwriting so alluring and challenging; you don't know what you will find.

Such a process is something I have witnessed while working with David Carless. Like many of Zollo's interviewees David has described the process of songwriting as a "leap of faith" (Carless, 2017), where he is neither totally in control, nor a bystander. In 2009, while we were away doing field research, I received news that a close relative had died. David didn't know what to say, or how to bring any comfort to me. I didn't know either. While I was upset, I didn't want to go home, but neither did I want to do "nothing." I took my pastels and began to paint, and David picked up the guitar and started to play, or should I say, fiddled with some chords. In the next hour or so that passed I watched and listened as David crafted a song while I painted sunflowers. Writing some time later about how the song "A Little Rain" emerged from this fiddling, he described being in an "in-between place" that required him to relinquish control as he began to write this song.

Words were coming from my mouth along with a melody, a rhythm, and a sequence of chords and notes from the guitar. Yes, it was me who was playing the instrument. Yes, I knew the chord shapes: a variant on a G major, some kind of D major, then a C major on the chorus. The dropped-D tuning is an acoustic guitarist's technique

which I also knew and had used before. But somehow what was coming out of the guitar—through, perhaps, a combination of the instrument, what I knew about technique, and the energies in the moment—seemed to provide a platform which facilitated access to things I didn't know I knew, thoughts I didn't know I thought. The words came—not through deliberate thought. (Carless & Douglas, 2009, p. 27)

Exploring what makes songwriting possible, David suggests alongside this sense of uncertainty and unknowing, he needs to be vulnerable to what the song asks of him as an artist. A lesson the songwriter learns is songs don't always take us in directions we would like to go. David possibly didn't want to confront death and grieving, at least in a song, but this is what the moment and the song demanded.

Equally important it seems, in the process of songwriting, is recognizing that the process is an “embodied action” that draws on the empathic capacities of the songwriter (Pelias, 2008, p.188) and allows us to contemplate issues like death and grieving, loss, love, and hope. However, even when all the right things are in place, it doesn't necessarily lead to a song that will *sing*.

Sometimes, it feels like I have no music *in* me. I may not play the guitar for days on end, I may not write a song for months on end. When I do pick up a guitar, the music that comes seems to hold little in the way of new things, it leads nowhere. . . . Occasionally, I've tried to *force* a song to come—by *making* myself sit with a guitar, play and sing. But whatever comes never seems to *work* as a song. (Carless, 2010, p. 134)

These accounts chime with how Jonny Saldaña teaches script and story writing and encourages the novice writer to avoid giving too much attention to things he or she *wants* to say as if on a mission. “Write with a message, moral or lesson in mind” Saldaña (2011) warns and it will most often result in “a heavy-handed, theme-driven fable rather than a character-inspired and story-driven drama” (p. 121). Likewise with a song, too much concern with a message or moral can produce a song that, in David's terms, will not sing. And “the point” of writing a song is that it is sung. Songs (like stories) seek

a life beyond the songwriter, songs need to be performed and shared and found in public spaces. Songs seek bodies and voices and once turned loose take on a life of their own as songs can be shaped by the way they are sung, how they are performed and played, and who joins in.

### ***Singing***

I can't ever remember not singing. Nor is there a time when I felt I "learned" to sing. I grew up watching my father's band practice in our front room, and him singing with his brother or playing the saxophone and trumpet. Singing was just something that we did, as a family in the car, at church, at school in formal singing lessons, and in the playground. I spent hours and hours playing my parents' records: Albums like *Oklahoma*, and *A Hard Day's Night*, come to mind. I would just place on the turntable whatever was available and sang along. Sometimes I would write the lyrics down to learn them and sometimes I would make them up.

Fast forward 30 years to David writing "A Little Rain" or performing/sharing other songs he had written during gigs in local music venues or to his fellow students in more private gatherings in each other's homes. These informal occasions provided the impetuous, on the one hand, to experience the emotional wallop of a song while, on the other hand, because we were grappling with how to communicate our research more effectively, to explore songwriting and singing in our research.

One aspect of this learning was how, unlike a research report, story, film, or play, a song leaves space for others to join in. In the case of "A little Rain," there was room for me to harmonize, hum, or to tap a rhythm on the table before I learned the lyrics. Whether it is just additional voices singing the melody or voices bringing harmonies, a song's musicality can be expanded and enhanced by others. But, so too can those additional voices remind the singer that he's not alone. So, while poets and storytellers might at times leave spaces for members of the public to make a contribution, songs invite and expect them.

Added to this, unlike research reports and texts, songs get recorded, and during the recording process, as the singer lays down a lead vocal and lead guitar, there is an opportunity for other musicians to contribute additional sounds, rhythms, and pulses. These additions enhance and amplify the mood, message, and spirit of the song, as well as provide an opportunity for further collaboration and solidarity. Recording a song also makes it possible to embrace the potential of digital technology to provide access globally.

A few years ago, after recording “Gwithian Sands,” (Douglas, 2013) David and I made the song accessible on YouTube. Sometime later, a Frenchman named Richard Robert, who I had never met, left a message (in French) asking for me to give him the song lyrics and music so that he could perform the song within his community. His actions illustrate another of the powerful uses of a song over other forms of social science communication. Monsieur Robert could, by learning the lyrics and music, take the song, make it his own, and share the truth that was made manifest to him with people unknown to me. In doing so we have a possibility of sharing something that connects us across borders and languages.

I have briefly shared some of the motives and uses of songwriting and singing for me. This was not intended to be a comprehensive account of the benefits of singing and songwriting. Rather, I hope it provides a backdrop to the circumstances surrounding my writing of the song “This Country.”

### ***Dividing the Kingdom***

In 2015, there were nightly news reports on *BBC News* showing beaches in Italy and Greece. What was unusual about these reports was, unlike the usual tourist setting, the beaches were engulfed by waves of small crafts as refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers fled from North Africa. In the following months, these stories were followed by reports about those who died making the journey. Typically, news reports showed shocking images of distraught surviving family members who had been plucked from the sea but who had witnessed the death of loved ones as boats sank or were

submerged in rough seas. “Tell us what happened,” the reporters asked. And they did.

I watched these stories unfold. I listened to the survivors, and I took the images into my memory, into my body.

News reports over the coming months began to change as airtime was devoted to different questions. Who was responsible for these people now? What should “we” do? How best is it, to help? Where and who should make provision?

Then came the stories about how some countries were closing their borders and refusing to host asylum seekers. Physical walls began to be erected to keep *them* out. Arguments surfaced over whether refugees “really” were refugees and if asylum seekers “really” were in danger of persecution “back home.” Might they just be coming to take our jobs, our homes, and to exploit our welfare system? What about our children?

As the European Union (EU) and member states debated these questions in parliaments across Europe, and in the EU parliament in Strasbourg and Brussels, and as progress was made toward some provision, so too were the waves of discontent beginning to rise and gain velocity.

Alongside all the debates and arguments, 20,000 or so refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers made a 2,000 kilometre trip to a small French town 33 kilometres from the British mainland, fuelled perhaps by a vision of hope that if they could just get over the channel to the UK, they might find refuge.

The French town is Calais and sits on one side of the English Channel, or in France, pas de Calais. It’s a bustling town with a population of around 74,000. In its back garden is one of the busiest ship-ping routes and a hub for both cargo and passenger ferries. Around 40 times every day, ferries make this one-hour 30-minute crossing back and forth from France to England. Tantalizingly, for anyone trying to get to Britain, the coast is visible from the French shores and only 20 miles away.

Arriving at Calais, migrants erected tents. Later they created makeshift restaurants and built temporary libraries and places of worship. Over time their camp grew, sprawled, and became known as “the jungle.”

In 2016 around 6,400 residents of the camp were evacuated by French police with the intention of resettling them across France. Human Rights Watch (2017) has since issued a report documenting the disruption of humanitarian aid, harassment of aid workers, and human rights abuses by French police.

As the months rolled by, so did the people, and I noticed a greater unease in the UK as stories began to surface about refugees being given homes while citizens of the UK had to remain on waiting lists for housing. I read about our National Health Service's (NHS) burgeoning waiting lists and listened to news reporters interviewing frustrated nationals who thought their illnesses and problems were being pushed down the NHS waiting list in favour of the refugees and immigrants. I heard stories about school provision being overburdened and the finger was again pointed at refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. Then came stories about "British" jobs being lost, and who was to blame? Once again it was those running from persecution who became the scapegoats.

Often too in the UK, the news reports carried stories suggesting EU policy was the problem, and some of my people began to distance "us" (those of us who have British nationality and are citizens of the European Union) from "them" (other European citizens 'us' who live in outside of the UK). Even our own British government was criticized for not being tough enough on asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, when a referendum was held to decide whether to leave the European Union, there was a huge amount of anger, frustration, and unrest in the UK. So much so that when the votes were counted 51.9% of those who signed the ballot paper had voted to leave (this number reflects that it was 71.8% of the population who voted, more than 30 million) with 48.1% wanting to remain (Hunt & Wheeler, 2016).

### ***Drink From the Well***

I began writing "This Country" in 2015 with the images, provocations, and questions about refugees and asylum seekers at loose in both my conscious and subconscious being.

And I am ashamed I did nothing, other than feel it was all so wrong. I didn't think about the crisis all the time, but deep within, at the bottom of my well, there was a dark sense of injustice, and an awareness of a black and fracturing division.

I didn't aim to write a song when I sat down on a nondescript morning in October in 2015. Like many mornings, I had begun by picking up my guitar and playing a few chords and attending, in the process of playing, to how the instrument sounded. I began with a couple of my own songs, followed by a song or two written by my favourite songwriters, songs like "Breathing Too Loud" (Carless, 2000) that fed my spirit but also created a mood where I could raise my voice. In this way, singing creates the type of space where I can notice and vent my emotions. Sometimes I am provoked to just make sounds that may appear to have no meaning but that connect to something within that needs to find expression. The human voice can be so fragile and expressive, and I am often moved by sounds I make, a long-held hum or note while I pick or strum communicates something that needs to be drawn from the well.

My guitar can feel and sound quite different depending on the time of year, the type of house it's living or staying in, the type of strings that I've put on and/or how long those strings have been on the guitar. When it's feeling "good" my guitar seems to be more resonant and more woody compared to other times. Though, of course, it is a hand-made acoustic guitar that is *all* wood, so it should sound woody. What I am aware of is it responds differently and offers a slightly warmer tone. On these occasions I can more easily find myself drawn to experiment with riffs and chord progressions that fit my mood. It's as if I allow the instrument to speak with me and to me and perhaps for me and is reminiscent perhaps of how some of the songwriters in Zollo's book say songs are hidden in the instrument waiting to be discovered.

On this morning, I was hooked by a riff that triggered me to think about my country and its responses to the refugees. It brought back some of those images and conversations, but not the actual words, just a residue, dark and sad. I'd placed the capo high up the neck, raising the pitch and key while placing my fingers in an A minor chord shape. Minor chords are said to bring flavour, emotion

and musical depth; they are also said to be darker moody chords. I seem to be drawn to the minor chords, as they pop up in a lot of my songs. Minor chords are the archaeologist to my songwriting, dusting the relic gently to expose what is there without breaking it. Perhaps in doing so these darker chords touch my fragility and expose the type of vulnerability David suggests is critical for writing a song that sings.

As I picked one bass and three high strings, one after each other, a rhythm took shape, and as it did a flood of emotional connections to countries whose borders I am allowed to cross. As an EU citizen when I drive from France to Germany, and Germany to Portugal or France, I don't need a passport, and I don't change currency.

I continued picking notes and I experienced doors shutting, standing in the rain and knocking. As words fell into the spaces so too a space emerged for me to strum and make a more discordant noise in the middle of the song, and then I returned to a mellow, reflective space to consider the things I take for granted.

As I look now at my notebook, I see numerous crossings out and changing of words. The lyrics "numbing pain inside my head, heart on fire and feet of lead" seem to reveal a dilemma I felt. Perhaps the song is damning of myself, of my inaction and that of my country. But it also spoke to a political moment and a fracture brought clearly into focus through Brexit.

### **This Country**

*Copyright: Kitrina Douglas (2016)*

It's my country, right or wrong  
Right now I feel as if I don't belong  
'Cause there's no pride it left me long before your call  
Are you listening to any of us all?

The neurons of the brain collide against the soul  
A rotten apple never to be whole  
The selfish gene they tell us in our DNA  
My country full of people bent on making hay

Step out in the rain with me  
Naive to think men are born free  
The numbing pain inside my head  
Heart on fire and feet of lead

My history is written on your land  
Where kin before me took a bloody stand  
A border crossing where some men they drew a line  
Shame you didn't come here at some other time

Step out in the rain with me  
Naive to think we are born free  
The numbing pain inside my head  
Doesn't mean I'm really dead

I want to breath I want to feel some cleaner air  
I want to run somewhere barefoot without a care  
But your vision face entombed within my mind  
I cannot claim that I am really blind

Step out in the rain with me  
Make believe we are born free  
The numbing pain inside my head  
Heart on fire and feet of lead

### ***A New Coat for the Rain***

The ping of an incoming message interrupted my thoughts at 8:30 a.m. on Tuesday, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2018. In a previous message Marcelo had told me how much he loved that I had invited audience members to sing “This Country” with me during the “Singing in Troubled Times” panel. This time his message was a video.

As I watched the film of Marcelo singing my song I was caught off guard by the power it. Marcelo had done a beautiful job making it his own. By removing the capo and playing that same A minor chord at the base of the neck he'd opened up a lower register to sing in a key that suited his voice. His guitar is a Spanish classical guitar,

which also brought a different tonality and mood to the song. His playing style too is all Brazilian, and his picking and strumming influenced more by Bossa Nova, Samba, or perhaps Forro, compared with my very English picking style. To these he'd added slides and bass notes that I'd never thought of, but beautifully enhanced and coloured the song and its musicality. And then there was his pronunciation, Latin and slow, "It is my country" he sang, as opposed to "It's my country" that I sing. Somehow a "truth" embedded in this song migrated those borders and languages that our politics and policies prohibit and in doing so it provided a powerful connection of harmony and fellowship, a type of magical coat that we can all wear, without withdrawing from the content and troubling themes in the song. He went on to tell me,

I played it at a small gathering last night, little more practice now, and folks loved it. I introduced it with a little story about Brexit and people stopped to listen. And then talked about how they think it tells their own stories of how the USA has been highjacked by white nationalism and Trumpian times (personal communication from Marcelo Diversi, June 7, 2018).

I am humbled at the thought of someone wanting to play a song I have written. I am moved and humbled even further when I think of anyone stopping to listen to it when played thousands of miles away. It gives me a sense of hope.

Billy Bragg once said music will not change the world but it can remind us that we are not alone. And perhaps, Bragg continued, we can be inspired to go out and at least try to make a difference (as cited in Fink, 2016). If a song I have penned plays any part in helping others feel less alone, or more connected or inspired to make a difference in the world, or to raise their voice against injustice, then perhaps my feet aren't just lead.

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