

There Aint No Cowboys in Portishead (or Are There?): Story Fragments, Identity, and Singing the American Dream With an English Accent

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Abstract

In this performance autoethnography I explore how songs and cowboy images, typically American phenomena, have imprinted my life and have helped provide narrative resources for challenging available stereotypical gender scripts.

Keywords

storytelling, performance autoethnography, songs and songwriting, identity, gender

Overture

This performance autoethnography begins with the first verse from *Desperado* a song written by Glen Frey and Don Henley (Members of the band “the Eagles”) and was released on the album of the same name in 1973. For rights reasons the lyrics can’t be reproduced here, and indeed in written form the musicality and scene setting tone of the song are noticeably missing and difficult to imagine. But, it may be that you recall the song and the album? The album was imbued with a feel of the “old west” and fittingly the band members were dressed as cowboys for the photo on front cover. The lyrics in the first verse of the song, which was how this performance began, asks the protagonist—a typical cowboy—why he doesn’t come to his senses because he’s been “riding” fences for so long, its like, he really should know better *by now*. Plucking the chords on my guitar (as opposed to playing the notes on a piano as the Eagles’ had performed in the recorded version) I sing *you’re a hard one*, as I glance at the audience who seem to recognize the tune, the lyrics and the motif for what is to come.

Are There Cowboys in England?

English culture, and English people’s lives, has been shaped in many ways by Hollywood and American TV shows that were our stable diet before the arrival of Nordic Noir. Like many children born in the 1960s in England I was exposed to an American dream which included orange tinted wastelands, dust-covered pioneers, and a soundtrack that plucked at my folk heritage.

Cowboy imagery, through bands like the Eagles and television shows like the High Chaparral, (my Monday

evening staple in the 1970’s) offered (my generation) a whiff of escapism that shrouded many gendered, class, and racial tension that are so obvious to me now, but at the time, I was allured by an illusion and the type of magical alchemy that occurs when you become absorbed by a show and then live and develop the story in your play time.

Likewise, growing up in the west of England, my life was being shaped and infused by the gendered, class, and racial expectations in my back yard, Portishead, a small, working-class town with a port, on the banks of the Bristol Channel. This expanse of water, separating south Wales from the south west of England, is known in Welsh as “Môr Hafren” and in Cornish as “Mor Havren” meaning “the Severn Sea.” The tide rises here over 40 feet making it the second highest tide in the world, and its waters extend to the North Atlantic Ocean. This tidal range makes it a dangerous stretch of water with rips that pull toward the open ocean with such speed and power that even small vessels can be whisked away with no trace. These waters speak a language of their own regardless of whose banks they touch.

Victor Hugo, French playwright, poet, and novelist wrote, “Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which can not remain silent” (Hugo, 1864). For me, songs and songwriting fulfills this aim too, drawing from our spiritual, fleshy, earthy bodies *that which cannot remain silent*. But, how we express that knowing, and how

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we communicate it or share it, is, as narrative scholars suggest, shaped by the tools we have access to and the rhythms that we are immersed in. That is, the local, native, near, and the colors from a particular pallet and what we have to hand in our own back yard. For me this pallet includes the folk tradition of contemporary English music, the sounds, colors, and movement of the Bristol Channel, with its huge changes in tide and flow, the ships that pass-by my window, off on their journeys to the far stretches of the earth and the black mountains that drift away in the background on the Welsh coast opposite.

Cowboy songs like “Desperado,” or “Mama’s don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys” (Bruce & Bruce, 1975) express a particular narrative landscape too. That is, they filter or color our vision and understanding in certain ways. For me Desperado gives rise to a landscape of an individual being a loner and is slightly sad maybe because he is not quite “fitting in” but yearns to. The song and lyrics also evoke in me a feeling of perhaps a person becoming “hard” on this journey of life, but there being good reasons for it. If we have some understanding of “why” this has happened it would be perhaps easier to gain respect for the individual’s life circumstances, action, behavior, and choices, and then we might respond by saying, “ah.” And that’s something many counselors and psychotherapists will recognize. It reminds me of something Kim Etherington (2000) wrote, that the very things that make it possible to cope with life, and to survive and stay alive, at one point in time, may be the very things that might, over time, harm us, rob us of connection, love, or life. For me, there’s an ache in this song and I was drawn to it as soon as I first heard it.

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My sister put the LP on the turntable, lowered the needle, turned up the volume, and returned to sit next to me, up close. “Des-per-aaadooo” boomed from the speakers after a gentle piano introduction, as we, feet on the coffee table, lyrics in hand, sat back, and joined in with “why don’t you . . .” We sang at the top of our voices, we sang together, feeling all the emotion that could be musters by two girls, thirteen and seventeen, about a cowboy who needed to come to his senses, who’d been “out there” for so long. Ah He was a hard one, we could both feel that, as we sang “you got your rea-sons.” All the fine things in life were available, but the Desperado wanted the thing he “couldn’t have.”

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I wonder how this ache infuses my living, writing and my understanding of the world, and the choices and consequences that I face? And I wonder how these become hidden such that we don’t know something with the conscious mind, but it can be revealed to us through writing a song?

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Out of Hope

In old spanish the adjective *desperado* is said to mean “out of hope” and “desperate,” and in English “a desperate or reckless man.” But, “Out of hope” can take more than one meanings, it can mean “no hope left” or it may also allude to there being something that will emerge from being “out of hope.” While the song, I think, refers to “no hope left,” my life and song writing take life from this type of imaginary, so that for m out of hope means out of something imagined, something concrete can begin to emerge that is *hopeful*. Out of the desperate something GOOD might begin to form. And from where I sit now surveying my history and family background I imagine my father may have had this second type of hope, for what life might offer his family; let me explain.

What I Didn’t Know

I didn’t know my father was an Irish immigrant when I was a child. I only really learned about the racism in my city as I’ve considered it as a researcher, and began to piece together what type of narrative might have offered an Irish immigrant, like my father and his brother, *hope* in a hostile city. A city where his mother, my grandmother, I’m told, had a nervous breakdown after women in the city wouldn’t talk to her for two years, because she was Irish.

I wonder if “being a rebel” and being different, an outsider, could become an “esteemed narrative” rather than a negative one for my father and his brother, to survive bullying, abuse, and confrontation? What I do know is by the time my sisters and I were born there was a story embedded in my family about being “better than them” and I never really knew where it came from or even questioned it. There was something in this story that made it good to be “different”; it was OK to “swim against the tide” and doing so was a strength and was a story that gave me confidence, just to be born a Douglas meant I was special.

From about the age of eight I remember Every Sunday my mother would set off for church in Bristol, with my two sisters and I in the back of the car, about a twenty-minute drive. But first, she’d stop to pick up a 75-year-old woman called Miss Hegadon, who lived at the top of our road. Each week we would take her to her place of worship, an Anglican church on the other side of the city to where we were heading. To me it seemed a hassle, but I never remember my mother saying or acting as if it was, and Miss Hegadon was always very grateful to my mother. She would fold a five-pound note, as small as it would go, and discretely pass it to my mother to help with the petrol costs, with a look of sincerity, and with dignity. I watched from the backseat, as the old lady opened the car door and struggled with her walking stick and handbag, to rise from the seat, before closing the heavy car door and calling on her unsteady limbs to take her into her service.

Faiths taking different paths yet sharing so much, and none if it spoken.

I didn't know, as a child, we were attending a Pentecostal church where diverse ethnicities were welcome. I just noticed people clapped hands, looked happy, wore colorful cloths, and swayed in rhythm to the music and songs and sometimes danced in the isles as they sang. The church was located on the edge of "red-light" district and St Pauls, an area of Bristol where race riots erupted in the 1980s at the black and white café. It kicked off some of the worst confrontations between the police and community the city or country, has ever witnessed.

We were usually late arriving, so what met my ears as we climbed the steps to the doors of the modern building, was an harmonious sound of voices and spiritual singing. We filed in behind my mother and often were greeted by hugs from my cousins, aunts, and uncles along the way to take our seats. I liked the informality but would usually "zone-out" once the preacher started, or did I? Was there something impregnating my consciousness, logged in the inner recesses, cracks, and crannies when I thought I was day-dreaming

Mixed in with cowboys, it seems, I have a reservoir of swimming against the tide narrative fragments. Why not apply those to issues of gender and ethnicity, and expand the repertoire for action.

What I Did Know

It wasn't just music and songs filtering through my consciousness, there were also the American TV shows that mainlined into my very English, west country home by the sea in Portishead, and not least of these was the one show called *The High Chaparral*.

According to some news media this was one of the most successful and highly acclaimed Westerns on television because it explored culture and class conflicts among White Americans, Mexicans, and various Indian tribes, at a level not attempted before by a television Western.

The story was set in Arizona in the 1890s and focused on a family of pioneers. The lead character was a Rancher called John Cannon—or as his brother in the show called him, *Big John*. His younger brother Buck, was a cowboy who seemed to like to drink a lot, play cards and was always getting into fights, shoots outs, or other trouble. A third member of the cast was Big John's son, Blue Boy, a young man with blue eyes, blond hair. He never seemed able to gain recognition or respect from his father, Big John. In the first episode Blue-boy's mother dies and this timely departure allowed the series creators to create a cross border liaison—or marriage of convenience—with a Mexican heiress. Enter the stage Victoria Montanna, daughter of a wealthy Mexican. She was a woman with long black hair, long flowing dresses, and who didn't ride out, or take on any farm/cattle work, and (of course)

always looked perfect. Chaperoning Victoria on this marriage cementing relationships between the Montoyas and the Cannons was her brother Manolito. I'm guessing he was supposed to be the heart throb because most weeks there were scenes showing women who had succumbed to his 'charms' and wanted to hang on and never let him go. But the role also called for him to develop a close relationship with Buck, so as, a pair, they were often the ones drinking, partying and getting into trouble together, or bailing each other out.

I loved the show. The only problem, for me at least, was the male-dominated cast meant that when I came to "play" "the high chaparral," it was difficult for me to take-on any of the roles on offer as there was no female roles that I liked or wanted to imagine myself in. I didn't want to mirror—in my games—the only female characters created by the makers of the show Victoria, who seemed to be there just there to add color, look pretty, and to be submissive No!

I wanted to ride the horses, coral the cattle, track the lost steer, lasso the calves for branding, and escape from the narrow storyline offered to my gender.

The beauty of imagination is we can do that. That is, I could do all the things the show couldn't. I could go the places it couldn't and I could believe in a world that the writers couldn't make for me.

So, locked alone in my bedroom, I would pull myself up on to the top bunk of my bunk beds, my imaginary horse. Now, you might not, at first, see the significance of this, but there's something about the physicality of looking at the world from atop a horse, from high up. You have a different perspective, and perspective is important. When you are born female, lower class, immigrant, ethnically marginalized it is good to rise up. From "up there" there is a feel and experience, a different knowing, and it gets lodged in your body.

Then, there's riding that three-foot wide bed and the only way to do that is with your legs wide apart; the very thing "nice" little girls aren't supposed to do. That is, if they are going to become "a lady" and a "lady" was (after all) all that was on offer in "real" life too. Looking back, I'm amazed my 13-year-old legs would stretch that wide, but they did. And it was from up there I could think about disobeying "Big John" and riding off, into the scrubland, looking for a lost calf, losing sense of time, finding a water hole, and

coming face to face
with the other

A young man, from an apache tribe,
Imagining fear,
imagining not being fearful
of the other

and maybe, he was doing the same thing,
running off, not doing what he was supposed to do,
difference, similarities, expectations, imagination,

And now? I can imagine a world that welcomes Irish men like my father, and Black men and women like those that attended the Pentecostal church, and the immigrants that seek refuge in my country now.

New Imaginings

I'm going to finish by sharing an example of, what seems to me, one way all these narrative fragments and identity shaping moments take shape in my life now, through writing a song. That is, one English girl, still imagining a different world. And perhaps, if you listen closely, you can trace some of the roots of these stories in "Fisherwoman" from my imaginings by the sea and my brushes with cowboys, and with songs like Desperado.

This isn't a song about me! Thought I when I wrote it.

Fisherwoman
(Douglas, ©2014)

The Island it had made her strong
Her spirit wild her hair kept long
Years of working by the sea
Had taught her that she must stay free

But at night she dreamt of flying high
In the arms of a lover she would try
To feel the tender sweet touch and the kiss
For that's the thing, she did miss

Hands grew callous by the oars
Pulling nets around these shores
Proving locals they were wrong
This was her world, she did belong

But at night she dreamt of flying high
In the arms of a lover she would try
To feel the tender sweet touch and the kiss
For that's the thing, she did miss

Time was knocking at her door
And of that she was sure
But fire burned within her soul

Could she restore what the sea had stole

One night she slipped out from the shore
Became both history and folklore
But of the tender sweet touch and the kiss
Was that the thing she did miss

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