

## **AND YOU, DEAR EAGLE, HAVE YOU SEEN MY COWS? REFLECTIONS OF MORAVIAN SONG IN NORTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS SPACES**

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In July 2017, I participated in a three-day cross-cultural heritage sharing retreat with a small group of Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Scholars, and Cultural Practitioners from Cree, Syilx, Anishinaabe, Métis, Hawaiian, and Haida Nations. I was invited to attend by the organizer, Dr. Virginie Magnat, Professor of Critical and Creative Studies at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. Dr. Magnat is also a Cultural Practitioner engaged in a process of recovering her Occitan song heritage. My presence at the retreat was as a Cultural Practitioner of South Moravian traditional song, which, in a hybridized way that I will explain shortly, is my own heritage. The retreat occurred within the framework of “Honoring Cultural Diversity through Collective Vocal Practice,” a research project initiated by Dr. Magnat and funded by a SSHRC<sup>1</sup> Connection Grant from the government of Canada that brings together individuals from Indigenous, Settler, and Immigrant communities in heritage-sharing ceremonies. Over the last year, I have been one of several graduate students assisting Dr. Magnat with this project by helping organize and taking part in heritage-sharing ceremonies on Musqueam and Squamish territories (in Vancouver, British Columbia) and Syilx territory (in Kelowna, British Columbia).<sup>2</sup> The July 2017 retreat took place on Syilx territory in southeastern British Columbia, and was conducted under Syilx and Cree ceremonial protocols, as

1. SSHRC is the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

2. The following individuals are involved in the project: Elder Delphine Derickson, Elder Winston Wuttunee, Joseph Naytowhow, Dr. Carolyn Kenny, Dr. Vicki Kelly, Dr. Manulani Aluli Meyer, Dr. Jill Carter, Dr. Virginie Magnat, and graduate students Mariel Belanger, Corrine Derickson, Claire Fogal, and myself.

the most senior Elders were Syilx and Cree. The objective of the retreat was to gather together the Advisory Council of Indigenous Elders overseeing and advising Dr. Magnat on her project, and to participate in several days of collective vocal practice. Besides Dr. Magnat, I was the only ostensibly non-Indigenous person there, although, in fact my maternal grandmother was Cherokee Indian, but I am not a carrier or practitioner of Cherokee culture.

In some ways, I am an unlikely candidate for the title “cultural practitioner of South Moravian traditional song”—many people whose work appears in this volume might better fit that description. My father escaped communist Czechoslovakia in 1968 and I was born in Tennessee. We didn’t speak Czech at home and my mother is American. Despite this, I have been going to South Moravia every year or two since 1983, and everyone on my father’s side of the family lives in the Czech Republic. As a hybridized Czech-American, or rather Moravian-American, Moravian culture is the most vibrant, living traditional culture that I have had access to, due in part to my great-grandfather Vladimír Úlehla’s book about Slovácko song, *Živá píseň (Living Song)*, (1949). Cutting across space and time, his text has allowed me to encounter him and his ideas, and I often feel as though we are in conversation. The book has also provided access to more than 300 songs that he collected and included in the book, some of which were sung by my relatives, and which I have been able to learn despite the absence of oral transmission and the rupture of culture that happened when my father emigrated. Also fostering my relationship with traditional culture has been the living example of my grandparents, both of whom are/were devoted practitioners of traditional song from Slovácko; a series of continually unfolding existential conversations with my father, who unfailingly acts as cultural ambassador and litmus; and field work in South Moravia undertaken over the last two years as part of a PhD in ethnomusicology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. I am learning to speak Czech and researching Slovácko song in traditional and experimental

contexts in the Czech Republic, but I simultaneously follow a performative and contemplative inquiry with Slovácko songs in North America. In other words, I sing in a variety of contexts in both North America and the Czech Republic, and observe and learn from what happens when I do.

Although their contexts are much different, my mentors, friends, and colleagues at the retreat are also trying to learn, remember, or teach their language (in some dire cases, just before it completely dies out); some have been displaced from their traditional land; some come from hybrid families themselves, and grapple with the complexities of hybrid identity within the hegemonic Settler culture of Canada; and all are working to revive their traditional knowledge and cultural practices after physical and cultural genocide enacted by residential schooling, discriminatory and racist legislature, land grabs, and displacement. I do not mean to conflate or draw equivalence between the histories of Indigenous peoples in North America after colonization and the Czechs during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Nazi occupation, and communist regime. However, I wish to emphasize that each of these cultures has been threatened and diminished in particular ways, and given my positionality, I had much to learn from the ways in which my fellow retreat participants have struggled to care for and embody their traditional cultures in the modern world.

One event that took place in particular illustrates several themes that I hope to emphasize, namely: *land-based culture (song)*; *continuity*; and what Music Therapist, Interdisciplinary Artist, and Indigenous Studies Scholar Carolyn Kenny and Scholar-Practitioner of Hawaiian and Indigenous epistemologies, Manulani Aluli Meyer described as “*radical mutuality*”—a possibility for humans to co-arise in mutual existence. The retreat itself was a chance to directly engage with this notion. We each participated from our own distinct cultural contexts, epistemologies, and positionalities, and our common task was to discover ways in which we might truly “co-arise,” rather than gloss into a false uniformity, erasing whatever

differences we carried, or else fail to find points of contact and relation. The Elders emphasized a relationship to the land and the importance of continuity, and explored what radical mutuality might be throughout our days together, in both word and deed. These strands are an integral part of reconciliation efforts in North America, and they are also relevant to the study and practice of traditional music in the Czech Republic. Even more broadly, they provide a sustainable answer to the question of how to be a human being in a 21<sup>st</sup> century characterized by ever-accelerating environmental devastation; radical, violent, religious fervor; and a mounting tension between globalist agendas and (at times overtly xenophobic) populist beliefs, the latter a domain in which traditional music is sometimes employed.

During the first day of the retreat, fourteen of us gathered for a heritage sharing ceremony at the En'owkin Cultural Centre in Penticton, BC. The Cree and Syilx Elders began with a smudge, prayers, song, and drumming, and we proceeded around the circle to introduce ourselves and share a song or story. In keeping with the spirit of this inaugural event, Joseph Naytowhow, Nêhiyo Itâpsinowin Knowledge Keeper, Storyteller, Actor, Musician, and Cultural Leader, offered a Cree welcome song to those of us gathered. To my knowledge, there aren't any welcome songs in the Slovácko song repertoire, but when it was my turn I wanted to respond to Joseph in kind. It occurred to me that the song *Letěl, letěl roj* (*A swarm flew*) might be an appropriate answer.

*Letěl, letěl roj nad mej milej dvor  
Zatočil sa kolem nad tým naším dvorem  
Sedel na javor*

*Na javor sedl, na milú volal  
By ona ven vyšla, nebyla tak pyšná  
Sama jedinná*

*Ona nevyšla, poslala posla  
Posle, milý posle, sprav ně to tam dobře  
Jako já sama*

A swarm flew over my love's courtyard  
It turned around our courtyard  
It sat on the maple tree

On the maple it sat, it called to my love  
That she would come out, and not be so proud  
Herself alone

She did not come, she sent a messenger  
Dear messenger, make things right for me there  
Like I would do for myself

(Úlehla 1949: 546 [134/2])

The protagonist is in such intimate relation with the creatures of the swarm that they speak to his beloved on his behalf. We could say that he is a part of his natural environment and in right relation with it. The swarm calls to the girl and asks her to come outside, to be in contact and relation, but she refuses. She is indoors, cut off from the natural world, her suitor, and the swarm, and she further commits to isolation by rejecting the proposal. The song becomes a site where notions of welcome, community and communion, human and more-than-human relations, isolation, and pride are enacted. It is also a love song, saturated with longing for connection. This song is of particular significance for me because it was one of my great-grandfather's favorites. He discusses it in *Živá píseň*, and in Jiří Pajer's monograph *Stoletá píseň*, Maruška Procházková testifies that it was loved by Vladimír and sung at his funeral (p. 214), a fact that my grandmother Blanka Úlehlová corroborated.

In private conversations after the ceremony, Manulani Aluli Meyer told me that she could feel my ancestors up above us. She asked if I would gift the song to her and if she could record it. Corrine Derickson told me that the contours of the landscape were strongly conjured and evoked. Manulani Aluli Meyer and Vicki Kelly, Musician and Indigenous Scholar, emphasized that I was able to effectively enter into the ritual of the ceremony by responding to Joseph Naytowhow in this way. In so doing, they

accepted my participation and gave an indication of how I might continue to proceed. When Manulani Aluli Meyer asked me if she could record the song, initially I was excited and relieved to be able to offer something of evident value. But as the day wore on, I came to recognize the generosity of her question: she wasn't just praising the song, or my performance of it, for my ego's sake. She was gathering me into the community and into relation, helping me to understand what my role might be, and how I might contribute, both through my knowing but also through my learning.

In the post-communist, atheist state of modern Czech Republic, one can still find traces of a past, sacred, pagan world surviving in traditional songs. What if the eagle that speaks in *Hnala Anka krásy* (*Anka drove cows*) could be heard by our Moravian forefathers and foremothers, and we can learn to hear it again too, just as many Indigenous people maintain that animate nature—including animals, plants, water, rocks, mountains, and stars—communicates with humans? Without equating my Moravian ancestors with Indigenous cultural practitioners, I perceive possible similarities.

*Hnala Anka krásy z Uher do Moravy  
 Krásy poztratila, sama poblúdila  
 Pod javorem sedla, orla tam zahlédla  
 Aj, ty milý orle, gde sú krásy moje  
 Já sem ich neviděl, enom sem ich slyšel  
 Krásy rumážgaly, voděňky pýtaly  
 Voděňky studeněj, travičky zeleněj  
 Hledá dívča krásy, z jara do jaseňi*

Anka drove cows from Hungary to Moravia  
 She lost the cows, she lost her way  
 She sat under a maple tree, spotted an eagle  
 Ah, my dear eagle, have you seen my cows?  
 I didn't see them, but I heard them  
 The herd grazed, drank water  
 Of cold water, on green grass

The girl searches for the cows from spring to autumn  
 (Úlehla 1949: 378 [N67], 522 [95c])

What if we let the natural world inform our human affairs and decision making, as Anka does when she asks the eagle for help, or as the young man does in *Zasadil sem čerešenku* (*I planted a cherry tree*) when he waits to begin courting his love until the cherry tree he planted begins to bear fruit?

*Zasadil sem čerešenku v humně  
Dá-li Pámbu ona sa mně ujme  
Začala ně čerešenka rodit  
Začal sem já k svojej milej chodit*

*Došel sem k ní, na lavici spala  
Bozkal sem ju, aby hore stala  
Bozkal sem ju na obě dvě líčka  
Stávaj hore, sivá holubička*

I planted a cherry tree behind the house  
God willing, she will take for me  
The cherry tree began to bear fruit  
I began to court my love

I went to her, she was asleep on a bench  
I kissed her, so that she would stand  
I kissed her on both cheeks  
Stand up, my grey dove

(Úlehla 1949: 647 [328a])

What if we can (and do) have continuing relations with our ancestors? Might it be that they visit us in bird or plant form, as in “Ach, Bože můj,” or “Vyletěla holubička”?

*Ach, Bože můj, Bože, jakú já křivdu mám,  
komu požaluju, dyž rodičů nemám  
V strážnickém hřbitově vyrůstá keříček  
a tam odpočívá můj starý tatíček  
V strážnickém hřbitově holuběnka sivá  
a tam odpočívá má mamička milá.*

Ah, my God, how I have been wronged,  
To whom can I complain when I have no parents  
In the cemetery in Strážnice there is a little bush,  
And there rests my old father  
In the cemetery in Strážnice there is gray dove,  
And there rests my dear mother

(Úlehla 1949: 482/1)

Might this subtly change our relationship to land and inspire a responsibility to prevent environmental devastation? I pose these questions literally and without nostalgia as a way to think about a sustainable, culturally diverse, coexistent future life on this planet.

In February 2017, Joseph Naytowhow told me that the Slovácko songs I had sung during a recent ceremony reminded him of the songs of the West Coast Indigenous peoples, and then he sang the Eagle Song and the West Coast Anthem. *At the time*, I took him to mean that there was something about the melodic contour in the Slovácko melodies that was present in the melodic contour of the West Coast songs. Eagles appear in several Slovácko songs, and I began to consider whether an aspect of the eagle's flight path had been distilled into the melodies of both of these traditions. Like many Moravian songs, the melodies of the songs Joseph shared encompassed a large range of tones, —extending or hovering on the highest pitch of the song's pitch set, and descending somewhat stepwise to the lowest pitch. Three great experts of Moravian folk song, my great-grandfather Vladimír Úlehla, collector and editor of folk songs František Sušil (1804–1868), and music composer and folklorist Leoš Janáček all believed that folksongs grew out of their ecological conditions, and Úlehla tried to prove it through analysis (for example, he linked the accumulation of intervallic 2nds before a larger interval, a lingering minor 7th, and the repeated return to the 5th scale degree as ways to penetrate the distance of the alluvial fields, 1949: 279), but might animal behavior be reflected in the songs too? What if the songs reflect an active, reciprocal relationality between humans



and their environment, one in which humans “echo” back the “pulses, coded information, and lucid image” (Shaw 2016) that issues from the earth and her inhabitants?

Moravian Ethnomusicologist Lucie Uhlíková has suggested to me that my hypothesis of animal behavior embedded in the melody may not be true, or at least is not provable, because in Moravian song, the relationship between text and melody is quite unstable: evidenced by the fact that many texts may share the same melody, and vice-versa. She also emphasized the constant state of flux of this Moravian musical tradition, its changes after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its exposure to and influence from many other ethnic traditions, and the lacuna of any really old (i.e. pre-Christian) sources of songs. After my presentation at the colloquium, she interviewed several people who have known the song *Letěl, letěl roj* (*A swarm flew*) since childhood, and reported to me that for them, the song was not about the swarm at all. Rather, they perceived it as a love song about two lovers whose families forbid such a love, and that it expresses sad emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Uhlíková’s understanding of the situation pushes me to widen my stance but not to relinquish my earlier hypothesis. Might we think of a song, especially a song which was born of a deep human relationship to nature, which incidentally also carries the accumulated labor, effort and care of the however-many individuals who brought it through time (which in turn gives the song even greater relational-potency, i.e. human to human), as a site in which relational meanings are made and lived out? I am proposing that land-based song that is at least partially orally transmitted is laden with relational possibilities, latently waiting to be activated, and whether they are activated in one way by one group of people doesn’t negate the fact that another facet can be activated in a different group of people. Perhaps this multi-layered relationality is part of how and why these songs succeed at being perpetuated.

3. E-mail conversation with the author, September 29, 2017.

I remembered the conversation with Joseph Naytowhow one day as I was watching swallows fly in a quarry. Their erratic movements and gracefully lurching flight paths seemed to perfectly mirror the asymmetrical rhythmic surges present in the melody of *Lítala laštověnka* (*A swallow flew*).

1 ad 54 *Ej, lítala* Boršov u Kyjova. Sb.Ú.- Zp. Ludmila Rolencová, naroz. 1878,  
dne 27. 7. 1940

Li - ta - la laš - to - věn - ka, li - ta - la, ať sa o - na ne - be ze - mí  
tý - ka - la, ať sa o - na ne - be ze - mí tý - ka - la.

I sang *Lítala laštověnka* with the swallows, and matched my phrasing to the tempo and rhythm of their movements. This is one of the few songs I have known since I was an adolescent; my grandmother taught it to me. As I sang on, I was drawn further and further into a relationship with the birds, tears began rolling down my face, a flood of *sameness* entered my being, as if there were no separation between me and the gorgeous, graceful living beings dancing in the air. This experience—the resounding, embodied manifestation of song, put through human vocal cords, executed in collaboration with birds flying in the center of a quarry—established at least three potent relations: it served to further confirm a relationship between this particular song and the natural world for me; it further deepened the relationship between the human singer and the more-than-human world around her, in this case, her animal co-inhabitant; and it seemed to call—into that moment in time—all of the human relations responsible for the knowing of the song.

My intuition is that even if several texts share the same melody, this does not exclude the possibility of meaning being forged from the synthesis of a particular text with a particular melody. If anything, the existence of multiple texts for a single

melody is proof of further, deeper, more complex interweaving of meanings and relationships, i.e. as one knows more and more texts for a single melody, the texts begin to inform and infuse one another. For example, in song N108 and all of its variants in Úlehla 1949, despite the different contexts of the song texts, most describe a liminal, extra-quotidian moment of transition, and taken as a group, can serve to deepen one another. For example, in one variant a girl thanks and bids farewell to her parents as she transitions into her role as a new bride, in another a man has been at a feast and hasn't slept at home or done his work for four days—he is in ritual time—, and in another a man becomes a murderer, he kills his beloved during the feast of Fašank (Carnival)—another ritual, extra-quotidian time of the year.

During the retreat, I asked Joseph Naytowhow to explain what he had been thinking back in February, and he replied that the aspect of my singing that reminded him of the West Coast songs was the strong presence of “spirit.” In other words, the reason that I had assumed (i.e. the shared presence of animal behavior in melody) was incorrect. According to him, the West Coast peoples' songs are strongly infused with spirit. I will be blunt: for me, singing Slovácko songs has become a way to speak to my ancestors, to call them in, and to continue to cultivate a relationship with them. I feel the presence of something when I sing, and even if it is unseen, it leaves traces in physical behavior, vocal timbre, and affective responses in audiences. Hegemonic North American culture does not overtly acknowledge spirit—we might even say it is hostile to spirit—and it was a tremendous relief to share Moravian folk songs that have become so full of spiritual significance with individuals like Joseph, for whom spirit is an inextricable and undeniable part of life.

These stories illustrate how land-based song traditions might dialectically inform and enrich one another, and it also emphasizes the importance of continuity and continued relation in this dialectic. I first understood Joseph in one way, causing me to reconsider my song heritage, and reflect on new aspects of a song's relation to

its natural world, in particular the way in which humans might have distilled animal behavior patterns into melodic contour and been in active relation to the natural world around them. But if I hadn't met Joseph again, sung with him again, and asked him to explain what he meant about the relationship between Slovácko songs and the West Coast songs, I never would have known that his association was completely different from what I had initially believed it to be. Likewise, if I hadn't had the opportunity to give this paper in Náměšť, Lucie never would have pointed out her perspective as a native cultural practitioner and scholar, and she never would have asked people about the song *Letěl, letěl roj*.

It is for the sake of continuity that I recount these stories, in an effort to see what resonates with other participants of the Náměšť colloquy: with their work as musicians, cultural practitioners, ethnologists, ethnomusicologists, ethnochoreologists, journalists, Czechs, Moravians, Slovaks, Italians, Irish, English, American, hybrid or not. It is for the sake of continuity that I perform Slovácko songs in Moravia even though it requires bridging cultural gaps and misunderstandings, and aggravates sensitive issues of cultural ownership. It is for the sake of continuity that I attempt to foster some kind of dialogue between homeland and diaspora, and to gauge whether or not you care if your friends and family living abroad maintain cultural ties to this place, and what those ties look and sound and taste like. And it is for the sake of continuity that I ask Joseph, Manulani, Vicky, Virginie, and Cori to offer their thoughts on what I have written, and that I include Lucie's diverging conclusions. Might this be a step towards co-creating a radically mutual future existence on this planet?

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## Summary

According to mythologist Martin Shaw, folk tales are not the “penned agenda of one brain-rattled individual” who employs “the most succulent portions of the human imagination” to author them. Rather, he says, they emerge from humans listening to the thinking of the earth itself, and a kind of echo-locating in which the earth “transmits pulses, coded information, lucid image, and then sits back to see what echoes return from its messaging” (2016). Expanding Shaw’s notion—of earth-as-author, humans-as-resounding-translators—to folk song, and narrowing the field to South Moravian folk song as case study, this article explores several ways in which this notion might be true. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Czech/Moravian scholarship emphasized the connection between folk song and its ecological conditions (Sušil, Janáček, Úlehla), and song texts often feature animals, ancestor spirits, and the sentient earth as animate, speaking characters. I employ an experiential, practice-based research to explore these themes, bringing South Moravian traditional songs into cross-cultural heritage sharing encounters with individuals from Indigenous land-based, oral cultures (Cree, Anishinaabe, Syilx, Métis, Haida, Musqueam, others). The result is a meditation on sustainability derived from song, wherein land-based song traditions offer an alternative to the human centric hubris of the anthropocene.

**Key words:** South Moravia; indigenous knowledge; land-based song; cross-cultural inquiry; performance-as-research; diaspora; spirituality.