

THE MEMORY OF THE BODY: FOLK SONG AS KEY FOR RELEASING CULTURAL MEMORY

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Introduction

This essay is intended to complement and explicate the performance I gave on the evening of July 31st, as part of the festival program. Herein, I employ praxis as method, addressing and exploring the subject of collective memory through the lens of the body. As a diaspora-born hybrid, I am still in the process of understanding what my relationship to the folklore tradition of the Slovácko region (South and Southeast Moravia) is, and how I can best serve it and give it life. The body has been one of my primary means for exploring these uncertain domains.

The performance I presented is based on folk songs collected by my great-grandfather Vladimír Úlehla (1888–1947) in his book *Živá píseň* (1949 [2008]). The vast majority of the songs were collected in the town of Strážnice, where Úlehla spent part of his youth. Several songs transcribed in the book (and that I sang on the 31st) were sung by consanguineal relatives of mine.

As a biologist, Úlehla believed that songs were living organisms, intimately related to their ecological conditions, and carried through time by families and ancestral lineages. The extraordinary work of my ancestor arrived to me after a cultural/linguistic rupture and displacement—my father left communist Czechoslovakia in 1968 at the age of 19, I was born in the US, and we didn't speak Czech at home. Because oral transmission, linguistic continuity, and to a large extent connection to place were absent (although this is not completely true, because in many ways South Moravia has been the most consistent physical reference I have had, and my grandparents were enthusiastic practitioners of Slovácko folk songs), I had to look for other ways to forge a connection with the songs. This is where the body became a terrain for inquiry,

something Kuna Rappahannock¹ theatre practitioner Monique Mojica describes as *blood memory*:

“Our bodies are our libraries—fully referenced in memory, an endless resource, a giant database of stories. Some we lived, some were passed on, some dreamt, some forgotten, some we are unaware of, dormant, awaiting the key that will release them.” (Mojica 2011: 97)

What memories, experiences, or ways of being in relation can our bodies reveal to us that our consciously encultured minds might not be able to? For me, the songs my great-grandfather collected are such a key, releasing emotions, stories, memories, textures, bodily sensations, and unexpected experiences. Over time, they begin to slowly transform me, proposing and gradually establishing an ethical framework of their own. My position in relation to the songs is receptive—I submit to them, rather than control or assert mastery over them.

Perhaps not everyone will agree. People have told me that what I am doing is strongly about my ancestors, and that it is part of traditional folklore. Others have told me it is only about my personal creative expression, and decidedly not part of folklore. Some think that because I am American I have no business doing it at all. Perhaps all are true, depending on where you stand. But at the heart of the matter, these questions concern me most:

- *How do you take good care of the songs of your ancestors, within a continuum of ordinary (quotidian) and extraordinary circumstances, and how do you care for them over time, with a view to the future?*

- *Considering the first question inevitably leads to this one: how do you serve your culture in all that you do?*

- *And if you are serving culture, how can you give all of yourself to a song? How can you disappear so that only the song remains?*

1. The Kuna are an Indigenous people from the territory of what is now the country of Columbia and Panama, the Rappahannock are an Indigenous people from what is now the state of Virginia in the USA.

Attending to these questions requires a framework much larger than any one human life, whether laterally in the present moment (i.e. it can't be addressed by one's imagination, but only through inter-relational acts), or by stretching backwards and forwards in time.

Following and Tradition

I have heard several Slovácko singers and musicians express related sentiments. In a 2016 interview for an arts and culture journal in Ostrava, the renowned lead violinist from the Hornácko region (a subregion of the Slovácko region) Martin Hrbáč remarked:

*“In music and songs there are a myriad of moods and truths that our ancestors have already experienced, and I only follow the beautiful ones that they left us in those songs and music.”*²

Hrbáč's comment suggests that within the performance of folklore, there is a wide collective frame, invoking the past and (re)enacting it in the present. It involves some measure of personal choice or intuition (what one follows or continues), but it is also of much wider collective experience. The temporal breadth of that expanse is what gives clarity to the present. In his essay *Tu es le fils de quelqu'un*, Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski said this on the subject:

“The writers, the great writers of the past, have been very important for me, even if I have struggled against them. In facing up to Calderon or Slowacki it was like the struggle between Jacob and the angel: “Reveal unto me your secret!” But in actual fact, to hell with your secret. It's our secret that counts, we who are alive now. But if I know your secret, Calderon, then I can understand my own. I am not speaking to you as the writer whose work I must stage, I am speaking to you as a distant relation of mine. Which means that I'm speaking to my ancestors. And of course, I don't see eye-to-eye with my ancestors. But at the

2. “V muzice a v písničkách je nepřeborné množství nálad a pravd, které prožívali už naši předci, a já jenom navazuji na to krásné, co nám v těch písničkách a muzice zanechali.” (Vrchovský 2006)

same time I cannot deny their existence. They are my base; they are my source. It's a personal question between me and them." (Grotowski 1997: 292)

Moravian ethnomusicologist Lucie Uhlíková once told me that younger singers are becoming more interested in the texts of folk songs in a new way that people who have grown up around the songs their entire lives don't do. Perhaps this is an indication that a rift is growing, that collective memory is receding into history—as in French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' (1877–1945) understanding of collective memory as distinct from historical record. I also find myself very interested by the folk song texts, and Grotowski's statement feels appropriate. Through the songs I ask my ancestors, how did you see the world, and what would you think of this one? Is there something of value that you could perceive that I am becoming insensitive to? Encoded in the songs, I start to sense an ethical framework quite different from the one espoused by the anthropocentric modern West. I see humans who communicate with animals and the spirits of their ancestors, whose cares and concerns are intimately linked with weather patterns, animal behavior, topography, who are not the dominating masters of their environment but exist as an inter-relational part of it.

Later in his essay, Grotowski claims that “when machines dominate, our attention must be turned to what is human. The whole of life is a complex balancing process. It's not so much a question of finding a conceptual formula as of asking yourself the question: Is this life that you are living sufficient for you? Are you happy with it? Are you satisfied with this life that surrounds you?” (Grotowski 1997: 293) In response to his query, I find the songs of my ancestors to be a vital source of resisting and negotiating what I perceive to be a world heading unboundedly in a direction that feels forgetful.

Epigenetics

There is an analogue to body memory in the hard sciences, namely discoveries in the field of epigenetics, otherwise

known as surface DNA. In 2017, researchers discovered that environmental genetic changes can be passed down for up to 14 generations in a nematode (roundworm) population, the longest chain of epigenetic transmission observed in an animal species (see Klosin 2017). Although discoveries of this kind are difficult to track in human populations due to the relatively long time it takes for successive generations to emerge, research involving descendants of Holocaust survivors and the offspring of women who survived the Dutch famine of 1944 provide evidence that epigenetic “memory” may be stored in successive generations.³

I want to highlight that both Hrbáč and Mojica’s statements as well as research in epigenetics suggests that what we might assume to be the provenance of a single human being might well extend beyond the confines of any one human life, and the construction and existence of any one human identity may be the result of many more factors than we know. The perspective of “I” suddenly telescopes outward and upward, backward and forward, generating a view of one’s life as a small notch in a much larger network of relations.

The Colloquium as Collective Memory

As a musician performing at the music festival in Náměšť nad Oslavou, I am grateful for this colloquium, which offers a chance to publically explain what I perceive to be happening in my work. I am curiously uncertain how what I do feeds, disturbs, or is irrelevant to traditional musicking here in Moravia. Where are there resonant threads, and where are there none? The colloquium provides a moment when those of us who think and care deeply about folk music from our various disciplines and nationalities, assemble together, and speak about our findings and new ideas—an emergent public act that strengthens, problematizes, and reveals what may have been transpiring privately. We react and agree or disagree with one another, until the next step of elaboration unfolds.

3. For examples of this newly emergent field see Yehuda 2018 and Zimmer 2018.

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Summary

Offered as a companion to a Dálava performance that occurred at the 2018 iteration of the Folk Holidays Festival, this essay posits the body as a receptacle of collective memory, and folk song as a key which activates or unlocks those memories. Author draws upon the work of Indigenous scholar/performer Monique Mojica and Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, the burgeoning field of epigenetics, testimony from renowned Horňácko violinist Martin Hrbáč, and embodied research with folk songs from the Slovácko region (Moravia, the Czech Republic) to consider song performance, even in diasporic conditions lacking continuity of transmission, for its trans-temporal, inter-subjective potentialities.

Key words: Cultural memory; folk song; embodiment; blood memory; the Slovácko region; Moravian folk music.