

Volume 6, Issue 2, Winter 2017

Langscape

MAGAZINE

A man with a mustache, wearing a light-colored bucket hat and a red and white striped shirt, is holding a black camera with a large, fluffy microphone attached to it. He is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background is a dry, wooded area with sparse trees and a clear sky.

Resilience and
Resistance:
Why the World Needs
Biocultural Diversity

Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua.
It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts
about the importance and value of biocultural diversity.

We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity
through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an appealing
sensory context of articles, stories, and art.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS

Front: Dub Kanche checks whether everything is OK with the audio

Photo: Thor Morales, 2016

Back: A child gazes at the ocean.

Photo: Manuel Maldonado, 2015

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Editor: Luisa Maffi
Editorial Assistant & Web Support: Coreen Boucher
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MAGAZINE

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— Special: Reconnection *and Reconciliation*

IN THE SALISH SEA, PACIFIC NORTHWEST



Above: The Salish Sea Bioregion is defined by watershed boundaries and encompasses inland seas and lands of many First Nations in British Columbia, Canada, and Native American Nations in Washington State, USA. Source: mycoastnow.com, 2017

Heal the Land, Heal the People



*Strengthening Relationships
at Hwaaqw'um in the Salish Sea*

*Maakw'stem 'uw huliitun tst.
Maaqkw'stem 'uw shilhukw'tul*

*"Everything is what sustains us.
Everything is interconnected."*

This is a story about coming home to a Quw'utsun (Hul'q'umi'num, Coast Salish) village site to heal. To heal the land, relationships with one another, and the people and communities around us as we find ways to reconnect to the natural systems that give our lives deeper meaning.

Growing up in very dissimilar circumstances, my uncle Tousilum (Ron George) and I have both found our hearts drawn to the same land on which our ancestor T'awahwiye was born and raised. Although we experienced very different upbringings and experiences of abuse, each of us suffered psychological conditioning brought on by unrelenting oppression from members of the Catholic Church and the many forms of colonization. Shining a light into the dark corners of our lives is not an easy thing to do.

Tousilum is the eldest son of the late Qwiyahwul-t-hw (Bennett George) and Thutsimiye' (Violet George) and nephew to my late grandfather, Bob. We are

the descendants of Quw'utsun Hereditary Chief Tousilum (Lhumlhumuluts') and his wife, Taltunaat, and of their daughter, T'awahwiye (c. 1854–1951). T'awahwiye was born and raised at Hwaaqw'um (Burgoyne Bay, Salt Spring Island, one of the Gulf Islands on the west coast of Canada, in what is now known as the Salish Sea). There, a permanently occupied Quw'utsun village of five longhouses once stood below the towering "bent-over rock" that is Hwamat'etsum (Mount Maxwell), one of the highest peaks on the island. Quw'utsun people belong to the Hul'q'umi'num language group of Coast Salish First Nations. Our territory centers in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, the main island off the southern coast of British Columbia, and extends into the Gulf Islands and beyond.

Hwaaqw'um (also spelled Xwaaqw'um) was and is an important spiritual place, where merganser ducks were harvested and dried in large numbers. Hwaaqw'um encompasses three sensitive ecosystems: coast Douglas fir and Garry oak on land and the marine eelgrass habitat, where traditional use and harvesting continue to this day. Historic and current

Above: Quw'utsun Big Canoe landing at Hwaaqw'um. 2016

cultivation and gathering of camas, berries, nettle, cedar, and other plant species for food, medicine, and clothing, along with seaweed and shellfish harvesting, fishing for octopus, salmon, and herring, and deer hunting show just how intimate the relationships are between all relations at Hwaaqw'um. *When you spend time on the land, with the songs and stories spoken in the language of that place, the beauty and strength of our culture is revealed.*

From a young age, Tousilum's father regularly traveled over to Hwaaqw'um by x'pey (cedar) dugout canoe with his grandfather Walter George and other Quw'utsun relations to visit T'awahwiye. Some days the ocean winds cutting through the Sansum Narrows between Vancouver Island and Salt Spring Island were favorable enough to catch a helpful breeze in the belly of a bedsheet sail, mounted on a mast in the middle of the canoe. Luschiim (Arvid Charlie) also used to come over to Hwaaqw'um under sail and canoe and likes to share stories of when he used to harvest octopus and sea urchin there as a young boy.

In early fall, T'awahwiye collected berries there in her cedar woven basket, "ground them into a thick jam in the carved basin of a generations-old grinding boulder, and patted the mixture into little cookies that she dried in the sun. When they were dry, she brought them into the house, where they kept all winter long," Grandpa Bob recounts in his book *The Akerman Family: Growing Up on Salt Spring*, in which he shares early memories of local plant knowledge at Hwaaqw'um. "Grannie showed me what plants were

good to eat and what plants to avoid. In the spring, when the first leaves come out, new plant shoots are sweet and tender—and really good to eat. When the new salmon berry shoots—grannie called them thaskies—were about a foot high, we broke them off, peeled the skin and ate them raw. We did the same with mukmuk, the new shoots off the button-berry bush. Grannie said that Oregon grape shoots were healthy, kind of like a spring tonic to tone up the blood, so we ate those too."

"Shining a light into the dark corners of our lives is not an easy thing to do."

My vision for Hwaaqw'um is to continue, and strengthen, Hul'q'umi'num relationships to the land, to one another as human beings, and to all our relations. To have grannies and grandpas speaking the language and sharing stories on the land with younger generations.

As a vehicle for reconcili-action, the Xwaaqw'um Project was started in January 2015. Reconcili-action can take many forms, but must be led by local Indigenous people. Building relationships takes time and effort. It starts by coming together and helping one another—*ts'ets'uwulhtun*. Guided by Quw'utsun Elders and Knowledge Keepers, over the last three years the annual Indigenous Youth Culture and Leadership Camp has provided an opportunity for Youth from the Victoria and Duncan Aboriginal Friendship Centers to participate. Grade-school and post-secondary students have taken part in land-based education at Hwaaqw'um, with community gatherings and workshops open to everyone. A more visible Indigenous presence at Hwaaqw'um connects Quw'utsun, Salt Spring islanders, and visitors to Hul'q'umi'num culture, language, and stewardship.

"The people are just so grateful," Tousilum says, reflecting on what the many gatherings mean to him. "Sharing the food, having a cup of tea together. And just walking this land. It opens the soul of this land. You know, the good feeling that we can bring out in one another. And it shows. The laughter here on this land all weekend, it has been gentle, it has been loud, lots of coming together, lots of sharing. Just been powerful within itself."

Our work is guided by Quw'utsun Elders and Knowledge Keepers with support from Cowichan Tribes (the Quw'utsun band government), along



Above: Tousilum (Ron George) drumming at a Hwaaqw'um Community Feast. 2015



Above Left: Intertidal Species Net Pull Workshop at Hwaaqw'um. Salt Spring Islander David Denning (L) and a youth from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre raise the net under the watchful eye of Mount Maxwell. 2015

Above Right: Smoking salmon heads the traditional way on a *pi'kwun* stick. 2015

with reference to the 2015 Xwaaqw'um Indigenous Use Feasibility Study. Future goals of the Xwaaqw'um Project include setting up signage, carving a big canoe, and carrying out an ecological and traditional food restoration plan under the guidance of Elders, rooted in Hul'q'umi'num knowledge and language while also incorporating scientific understanding of ecological restoration and climate change resilience. Future gathering spaces and full access to land and water at Hwaaqw'um are crucial to support the continuing cultural work, and may include an Elder-caretaker in residence, a cultural interpretive center, a dock, and a carving shed.

*"Truth, Respect, Healing.
These are fundamental
human rights."*

Hwaaqw'um has a more recent history of Western agricultural and industrial use including livestock and hay, forestry, log handling, an active shellfish lease, and heavy public use of walking pathways and shoreline access points. These activities have impacted terrestrial and marine ecosystem by removing habitat, reducing biodiversity, introducing invasive species, changing hydrology, and degrading soils. A landscape and seascape restoration plan is yet to be realized. Restoring the cultural and ecological integrity of Hwaaqw'um will enhance the quality of life for all who live on or visit Salt Spring Island.

All people are invited to engage in respectful cultural exchange with Hul'q'umi'num language,

traditions, and ecological teachings at Hwaaqw'um. The welcoming and celebratory nature of our community gatherings creates a caring space for dialogue on reconciliation. "The land is being danced and the old ones are waking up," Tousilum explains in a video about the carving and installation of the first pair of Coast Salish welcome poles raised since contact. "The land [at Hwaaqw'um] is coming to life."

Many friends, family, school groups, and organizations have paddled over by big canoe taking the 90-minute journey across from Maple Bay on Vancouver Island to Hwaaqw'um on Salt Spring. Luschiim (Arvid Charlie), Hwiemtun (Fred Roland), Qwiyahwul-t-hw (Robert George), and other Quw'utsun Elders and Knowledge Keepers have contributed to many satisfying days on the land, including plant medicine walks, sound healing, and various food harvesting opportunities.

"I am envisioning how it used to be when our great-grandmother was here," says T'awahwiye (Philomena Williams). "The environment was the classroom. We need to get our survivors to places like this. Their spirits are fragmented and lost and they need medicine to build their spirits up again to become healthy people."

The familiar *Tzinquaw* songs and dances about thunderbird and killer whale, shared by Tousilum and younger singers and dancers at Hwaaqw'um and at many events throughout Quw'utsun Territory, are powerful medicine. Tousilum consistently



Above Left: Welcome Pole raising ceremony at Hwaaq'w'm. 2016

Above Right: Tousilum (Ron George) and Qwiyahwul-t-hw, Jr. (Benny George), members of the Tzinquaw Dancers, at the Hwaaq'w'm Welcome Pole raising ceremony. 2016

comes prepared with his whole self to crack a joke before leading the *Paddle Welcome, Prayer Song, My Son, Where Are You*, and other songs passed down to him from a long line of ancestors. Tousilum is a family man, a community man, a ceremonial man. He speaks from that well-rooted place of gentle strength, grounded in the growing acceptance of what was and what is, while staying open to the hopes and dreams he holds for what is yet to be shared on his homelands.

Yet Tousilum, like most in his family of twelve children and like many others from the Cowichan Nation, is a residential school survivor. His heart, mind, and physical body were preyed upon, between the ages of five and sixteen, at Kuper Island Residential School, on what is now known as Penelakut Island to the north of Salt Spring, and at St. Mary's Residential School in Mission, on the mainland of British Columbia. The physical, sexual, and psychological assaults from those government-sanctioned institutions almost broke him.

"For a good part of my life," confides Tousilum, "the spirituality of my being meant nil. It meant nothing. I didn't care. Oh, God [sigh], I didn't care for my physical being, I didn't look after myself. The only part of me that I really lived in was here—the mind. The mental being. But it was also a scary place to be at." Of those many decades during which he didn't listen to his elders, his parents, his grandparents, he says, "I only carried on one vicious way of life. From the age of thirteen, I could drown it with all the alcohol that I wanted to. And I did that."

Tousilum wants his story to be heard as he continues to shed light into the dark corners of his past and moves toward healing for himself and toward clearing away some of the weight felt by all of his descendants. "You can share, it's out there now. I want people to know." Truth, Respect, Healing. These are fundamental human rights. "We were put in our place and were silenced—for so many generations we were silenced. And for a long time after that we were silent. Many more generations after that. All that kept me going was that the old people never gave up on me. They saw that pain in this young man. They saw this anger in this young person. They saw the chaos in me. They saw the running away that I did. They recognized all of that. Just very simple



Above: Tousilum (Ron George) and Qwiyahwul-t-hw, Jr. (Benny George) standing by the Hwaaq'w'm Welcome Pole. 2016

words, saying, ‘Hey, we need you,’ and they took me in; and I started dancing, I started singing, I started drumming. I danced and I danced and I danced, and I loved it. That kept me going, and I’m still going yet. So the dances that we do, called the *Tzinquaw*, it’s been about 60 years for me now, and they are still in my heart and my soul yet, today.”



Below: Songs around the fire. L to R: Joe Akerman, Benji George, Hwiemtun (Fred Roland), Tousilum (Ron George), and Qwiyahwul-t-hw (Robert George). 2015

Finding the strength to stare into the eyes of his own lived trauma and to make daily efforts to heal got a boost on two sunny spring days in 2015. On the first day, Tousilum bravely took part in the first-ever public sharing of his painful past, with largely unknown workshop participants made up of leadership from local government, schools, and other community organizations in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island. He joined a group of five Hul’q’umi’num Elders—like him survivors of residential school—to lead a *Cultural Connections Workshop*. Bringing settlers and survivors together in a direct and heart-centered way, this experiential workshop moved participants through an abbreviated version of the process of colonization from first European contact. One by one, the Elders began to share their very personal and raw stories of their own residential school experience.

The second day, on a span of intertidal rock at P’q’unup (Southey Point at the northern end of Salt Spring), Tousilum happily harvested seaweed

and other intertidal plant species for the first time ever in his life—one of a very long list of rights and responsibilities that had been taken away from him. Yet, the day-long grin the 70-year-old was wearing suddenly vanished as he looked north, lifting his gaze from the rock in front of him. The looming memory of the Kuper (Penelakut) Island Residential School, on the island just across the water from Southey Point, again brought tears to his eyes.

I am well into my 30s. In school, our Canadian history textbooks taught me nothing about residential schools; experimentation on and sterilizations of Indigenous men and women; the “Sixties Scoop” when Indigenous children in Canada were taken from their families and placed in foster homes or given away for adoption; the potlatch ban; and all other land and economic policies put in place through the Indian Act to ensure the economic and social failure of countless Indigenous people. Tousilum: “I am a second-class citizen in this country. I don’t like Canada. I don’t stand up for the anthem or celebrate Canada Day.”

Language and culture loss, violence, substance abuse, and suicide epidemics are the hallmarks of the very deep intergenerational effects of colonial trauma.

If Tousilum and my Quw’utsun family can find ways to heal, I can heal, the land can heal, and settlers can heal. The hard work we do now forms deep ancestral memories with future generations who will continue to heal in ways as yet unseen. We have all been colonized, and we can begin to set ourselves free by getting back to the land to sit and learn from the old people.

Hwaaqw’um is more than a place for me. It is an ancestor—a relative. My relationship with Hwaaqw’um teaches me the intimate responsibilities woven within the continuation of intergenerational land and sea relationships. The trauma inflicted upon Indigenous Peoples by colonial structures over the last 150 years and more has also been inflicted on our land and sea relations via the often careless, relentless extraction of ecological resources.

At a 2016 panel on reconciliation held at the University of Victoria, one of the Indigenous panel members reflected: “Before reconciliation we need healing, before healing we need trust, before trust we need truth. With truth in place, we can finally talk of justice, but before justice is possible we need to talk about the land. It’s always been about the land. Extraction of resources at unsustainable levels: money, greed, arrogance.”

Confronting this harm and creating a future that revitalizes a sustainable and respectful place for our children and grandchildren means honoring our ancestors and the ancestors of the places we visit and occupy. Importantly, it also means resisting the deeply embedded, often invisible, genocidal processes of colonization and unchecked resource extraction. In this light, ignoring the pressing biocultural issues of our time is not an option. A sustainable future must protect the people and the land—it must create space for all of our relations.

*“If Tousilum and my Quw’utsun
family can find ways to heal,
I can heal, the land can heal,
and settlers can heal.”*

Resilient, graceful, and inspirational Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Youth carefully maintain and generously share the knowledge, culturally practiced legal frameworks, and inspiration for healing the land and ourselves. Deep healing through the language, teachings, songs, and ceremonies passed down by countless generations



Above: Joe Akerman and Luschiim (Arvid Charlie) at Hwaaqwum before the departure of the Big Canoe. 2015

of ancestors, and through stories shared by countless generations to come, will continue here on the rich lands we all live on and enjoy.

For true reconciliation to be implemented and sustained, Canadians must return considerable tracts of land and water, power, and resources back to the keepers of the lands they occupy. The vast privilege enjoyed by settlers on Indigenous lands must be acknowledged and concerted efforts made to support the continuation and resurgence of local Indigenous laws and ways of being. All Canadians can participate in healing relationships with the land, with one another and with local Indigenous people, taking meaningful steps on the lifelong journey of being welcomed by Quw’utsun or other local First Nation families and communities.

Joe Akerman is of mixed Quw’utsun and European heritage. T’awaxwultun is his ancestral Hul’q’umi’num name. Living on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, Joe helped spark a movement to save Grace Islet, a First Nation sacred site, from development and leads the Xwaaqwum Project, which aims to create space for Elders and Knowledge Keepers to continue and enhance culture, language, and land-based knowledge and opportunities.

To learn more about, follow, and support the Xwaaqwum Project, you can visit www.xwaaqwum.com, where you can also watch short videos of the project’s activities and events.

Further Reading

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Terralingua
UNITY IN BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

Terralingua n 1: the languages of the Earth, the many voices of the world's diverse peoples. 2: the language of the Earth, the voice of Mother Nature. 3: an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that works to sustain the **biocultural diversity of life** – a precious heritage to be cherished, protected, and nurtured for generations to come. ¶ From Italian *terra* 'earth' and *lingua* 'language'

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“The more cultures there are, with a diverse set of approaches, worldviews, and strategies arising from them—and therefore the more varied the responses we give to a multitude of stress factors we are faced with—the more resilient we become as a global society. ... We have to constantly remind ourselves that diversity—both in the species around us and within ourselves as yet another species—is one of the critical factors that will enable us to ensure our future on this intrinsically diverse planet.”

—Olga Mironenko

