Territorial Acknowledgement

Levi Wilson and Emily Menzies

> My name is Levi Wilson. Through my Grandmother I am a member of the Gitga'at First Nation, with strong familial connections to the Hwlitsum and Lamalcha peoples. I would like to acknowledge the shared, asserted, and unceded territory of the Penelakut, Lamalcha, other Hul'qumi'num speaking peoples, and any other peoples who hold rights and responsibilities in and around the territory that is now known as Galiano Island, as well as the treatied territory of the Tsawwassen First Nation. I would like to acknowledge the privilege of living, learning, and caring for one another and the land in their traditional territory.

Acknowledgements today are an adaptation of a traditional protocol that is observed by many Indigenous groups across what is now known as Canada. At their best, acknowledgments achieve the goal of recognizing the peoples who have lived and hold rights and responsibilities in the region that the sharer is now in. For example, when I am in the region that surrounds the Salish Sea, I include in my acknowledgements words such as "shared and asserted" to represent how the peoples here live through the seasonal round, and that the Indigenous inhabitants have never stopped knowing, believing in and, most importantly, acting on their rights and responsibilities.

Why is a territorial acknowledgment critical in a book seeking to inspire and equip people hoping to survive and even thrive during a time of climate chaos? Done right, a territorial acknowledgement is more than just a way to identify oneself as an ally in the struggle for self-determination amongst Indigenous Peoples. By acknowledging place, and the peoples of our place, territorial acknowledgements also demand and provide an opportunity for us to learn about histories, current politics, teachings, and relationships that can contribute to rebuilding ecological, social and economic sustainability in our communities.

Acknowledgements are living documents, meant to grow and change, much like we as people grow and change over time. Done by rote, an acknowledgement quickly becomes meaningless: it stops growing. What I really want you, the reader, to take away is how I have built this practice and changed the wording of my Acknowledgement based on conversations and challenges by those who have heard it. For example, in many of my early versions I included a "thank you" to those First Nations mentioned "for living on their land," but after a month of listening and trying out acknowledgments every single class, one of my students nervously "called in" this wording, because they felt that by including a thank you, I was assuming the Nations listed welcomed and enjoyed having the disparate peoples that now inhabit their territory there. I invited all my classes to help figure out a solution, and over 50 suggestions later, we decided to take out the "thank you" and replace it with "acknowledge the privilege."

Sharing a territorial acknowledgment is one way to foster awareness, community, leadership skills and hope for the future, all of which, I believe, are integral to riding the storms of climate change instead of drowning in them. When we take the time to learn about our place and who the Indigenous peoples of our places are, we build relationships with survivors of the colonial apocalypse, with the keepers of knowledge about how to live within the means of our local ecosystems: both how it has been and how it is now. By learning how people have lived in the places we call home for thousands of years, we gain insight into how to weather future change.

Acknowledgements are an expression of our relationship to the land, no matter whose territory we find ourselves in. If it is a place that you have lived in for a long time, then the acknowledgement will be longer, more complex, and more thought-out than one that is done in a place you may be visiting. The first few times a person engages in this practice it will feel rough:

it should be a chance to learn, and in the future to show that learning. An acknowledgment is a practice rather than a protocol: any person giving an acknowledgement needs to work and reflect, to try again and again, and to get better and more comfortable with giving Acknowledgements as something that requires practice.

Beginning with acknowledgements, settlers can take the opportunity to learn social survival skills that have helped people not only endure genocidal policies but also live well here for thousands of years, such as using humour to overcome adversity, and the importance of holding extended family networks dear. We may learn how to prioritize relationships over time, mutual respect over control, our role as part of a collective over individual greed. We may ponder why so many First Nations are traditionally governed by matrilineal, if not matriarchal, social structures, as well as by clan systems that cross otherwise separate Nations, and how these structures may help foster co-operation even in the face of dire hardship and family breakdowns.

By opening *Rising Tides* with my own territorial acknowledgement for the place the book was born, I am hoping to begin to take acknowledgements back to articulating relationships, instead of getting mired in politics. Back to helping people understand where they are and how they come to be there. As much as I enjoyed crafting my version of an acknowledgement for this volume, I was hesitant to put it into something as permanent as a book. Anishnaabe author Hayden King, who helped craft the formal acknowledgement for Ryerson University, has said that he now regrets writing it because “the territorial acknowledgement [can] become very superficial … it sort of fetishizes these actual tangible, concrete treaties. They're not metaphors — they're real institutions, and for us to write and recite a territorial acknowledgement … I think

we do a disservice to that treaty and to those nations." I have struggled with how to settle this issue. My response is to try and restart the conversation.

Hwunitum -- *the People of Time, or The Hungry Ones -- are very good at dominating, controlling and exploiting land, people and other creatures (see Arnett, 1999). However, we are not great at living sustainably. In fact,* Hwunitum *culture is predicated on the unwavering belief in progress, in expansion, in moving on when we have used all we want from a particular place. However, most of us settlers come from ancestors who lived in a different way, once upon a time. They may have shared similarities with the ancestors of* Hwulmuhw, *the People of the Land, here. In my case, each of my Scottish, Scandinavian, Irish and English foremothers would have had to have known their place intimately: they knew how to keep their families healthy through knowing and predicting and cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with the plants, creatures, and human neighbours with whom they shared their place. Now we have come to another great time of change, and we need to recover, rediscover, and share narratives and knowledges of how to be humans who are tied to place, once again.*

Acknowledgements are best understood as snapshots of a specific time. In this framework, change is not just necessary: it is the whole point of engaging in acknowledgement. Please: take the acknowledgement I am sharing not as a form to fill out with small changes made to suit your region. Rather, treat what I, with the help of many, have crafted as a set of possibilities and suggestions. Embrace the ability to make mistakes and to learn. Take the time needed to care for this practice. Then extend your practice to "caring for one another and the land."

We only have one planet, yet we are trashing it by treating our home as if it is merely a waystation and we have somewhere else to move on to. There are so many wonderful ways to

live in so many wonderful places, as humans have, since time immemorial. As our places change, so must we. To live sustainably, to be able to survive and thrive over time, we need to live as if we mean to stay. How do we learn how to do that?

Some people question the validity of territorial acknowledgements, asking "what is the point when the land will never or can never be returned?" The hopelessness behind this argument reminds me of how some people feel when facing the enormity of climate change.

Levi's grandpa, Fredrick Levi Wilson, a fisherman renowned up and down the coast, witnessed the decimation of the salmon during his lifetime. When asked how fishing was going, he would say, "Haywire, haywire, haywire," with a straight face and a smile in his voice. Somehow he could convey both challenge and an unwavering belief that the challenge would be overcome, one way or another.

The salmon people are survivors, and so are we.

Huy tseep q'u.

Notes:

Levi's voice is in plain text, Emily's is in italics.

Chris Arnett. *The Terror of the Coast: Land Alienation and Colonial War on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, 1849-1863*. Vancouver: Talon Books, 1999.

Hayden King "'I Regret It': Hayden King on Writing Ryerson University's Territorial Acknowledgement." January 20, 2019. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/redrawing-the-lines-1.4973363/i-regret-it-hayden-king-on-writing-ryerson-university-s-territorial-acknowledgement-1.4973371