

# Tset Hikwstexw te Sqwelteltset: We Hold Our Language High

*Stelómethet, Ethel B. Gardner*  
*Simon Fraser University*

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*This article examines the phenomenon of what Halq'eméylem renewal means in the lives of Stó:lo people today. Stó:lo Elders emphasize that Stó:lo identity and world view are embedded in our near-extinct Halq'eméylem language, which identifies us as a distinct Aboriginal people in Canada. Interviews with nine co-researchers are presented as poetic monologues that reveal that within a short time, the Stó:lo persisted against all odds to develop a Halq'eméylem movement to "hold our language high." In addition to increased self-esteem and pride with the use of Halq'eméylem, the poetic monologues reveal a reversal of the trend toward Halq'eméylem extinction and illustrate how Halq'eméylem is increasingly becoming a viable part of our modern Indigenous lifestyles.*

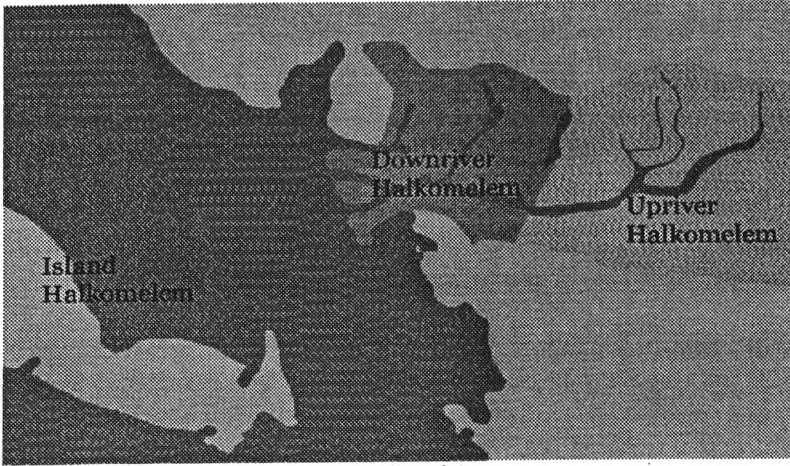
Our language embodies a value system about how we live and relate to each other. It gives a name to relationships among kin, to roles and responsibilities among family members, to ties with broader groups. There are no English words for these relationships because, in general, social and family lives are different from ours. If our language is destroyed, these relationships break down and will inevitably destroy other aspects of our way of life and culture, especially those that describe [humans'] connection with nature, the Great Spirit, and the order of things. Without our language, we will cease to exist as a unique people. (cited in Siyámtelet, 1988, pp. 7-8; Assembly of First Nations, 1992)

The Elders' lament "Without our language, we will cease to exist as a unique people" implodes in my mind as a Stó:lo person who is acutely aware of the critical state of our language. The implications of what this statement means concerns me deeply. According to Bauman's (1980) classification, our Stó:lo Halq'eméylem is verging on obsolescence, the stage before extinction. Only a handful of fluent Stó:lo Elders are involved in the language work, so what we do now as a language community is crucial to determining whether we reverse the process or allow Stó:lo Halq'eméylem to become extinct (Crystal, 2000). This article examines the Stó:lo people's efforts to revive our Halq'eméylem language and is illustrated with excerpts from interviews conducted with nine Halq'eméylem language revivalists (Gardner, 2002).

## *Halq'eméylem Language*

We are the Upriver Halq'eméylem people. Our language is one of three dialects of Halkomelem, a member of the Salishan language family. Halkomelem is divided into three principal dialects: Upriver, Downriver, and Island.

The Upriver dialect is spoken from as far as Yale down to Matsqui in the lower Fraser Valley of southwestern British Columbia. The Downriver



### *Halkomelem Territory.*

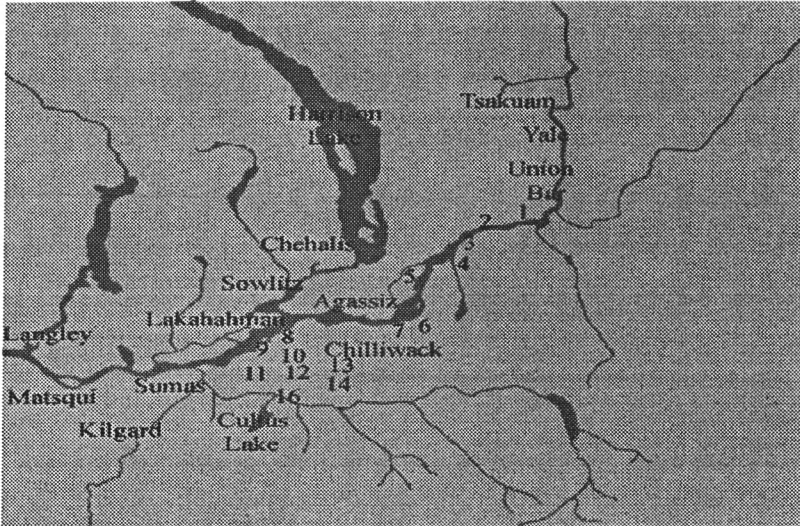
*Gerdt's and Compton [www.sfu.ca/halk-ethnobiology](http://www.sfu.ca/halk-ethnobiology).*

dialect is spoken in the Vancouver Metropolitan area, and the Island dialect is spoken in southeastern Vancouver Island from north of Saanich Arm to Nanaimo (Emendorf & Suttles, 1960). *Halq'eméylem* is used when referring to the language from the Upriver perspective, and the following map shows the communities in the traditional Halq'eméylem-speaking area.

### *Halq'eméylem Origins*

Our Stó:lo origin stories, our *sxwoxwiyám*, tell us that we have lived on our land since *time immemorial*, while Western science dates the earliest occupation of North America to approximately 15,000 years ago (Thom, 1998a). Stó:lo origin stories are centered on *Xá:ls* who brought order into the world, and *Xá:ls* changed people into animals, plants, and stones back and forth, "and [many] Stó:lo have special relationships to these natural resources, for they considered them their ancestors" (Thom, 1998b). Our *sxwoxwiyám* are stories about how we became fully human and connected to the world as we understand it today.

Nine thousand years ago salmon was an important food staple alongside land mammals, which made our ancestors distinct from other cultures in the New World and beyond. Our Stó:lo culture developed from a hunting-gathering lifestyle dependent on fresh catches of fish and wildlife to complex communities of people with social status and ranking systems, regional trade networks, and an elaborate artistic and ritual life. The Stó:lo developed social classes formed through intermarried family groups that gained wealth by controlling access to the best fishing, hunting, and gathering locations. Radiocarbon dating in the mid-1950s placed the origin of the Salish people, which includes Coastal and Interior Salish, at the



*Upriver Halkomelem Territory (Halq'eméylem).*

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*Index: 1 Chawathil, 2 Skawahlook, 3 Ohamil, 4 Peters, 5 Seabird Island, 6, Popkum, 7 Cheam, 8 Skway, 9 Squiala, 10 Skwah, 11 Aitchelitz, 12 Kwawkwawapilt, 13 Yakweakwoose, 14 Skowkale, 15 Tzeachten, 16 Soowahlie.*

Lower Fraser Valley canyon. Evidence showed that people moved from the coast into the interior as the salmon shifted up the inland waterways (Carlson, 2001).

*Stó:lo Halq'eméylem Today*

Stó:lo organization today consists of a Stó:lo Nation Government, which includes 19 of 24 First Nation Bands in Stó:lo territory as follows (Stó:lo Nation, 1996).

Aitchelitz	Skawahlook	Scowlitz
Chawathil	Seabird Island	
Cheam	Skowkale	*Yale
Kwantlen	Skway	*Union Bar
Kwaw Kwaw Apilt	Soowahlie	*Peters
Lakahahmen	Squiala	*Chehalis
Matsqui	Sumas	*Skwah
Shxw'ow'hamel	Tzeachten	
Popkum	Yakweakwoose	
*Independent Stó:lo Bands.		

Stó:lo, our Halq'eméylem word meaning river, is the collective name for all people whose Aboriginal right it is to speak the Halq'eméylem language. The River, or Stó:lo, and fishing are at the heart of Stó:lo culture. Although our Stó:lo, or River, culture Halq'eméylem and its direct ances-

tors evolved for 10,000 years in the Stó:lo area (Carlson, 2001), within 200 years of European contact our Halq'eméylem language was nearly completely annihilated. For 200 years the colonizers tried to make us forget who we were, to forget our history, language, and culture. But despite the hardships of the past, we now aspire to become people who know our history, who know our language. The Stó:lo are nearly 7,000 strong now, a force to carry forward a legacy of 10,000 years of cultural development and change on *S'ólh Téméxw*, the land of the River People.

### *Te St'áxem qas Te Smelá:lh*

I use the terms *st'áxem* and *smelá:lh* as metaphors that weave through the history of language loss and the resulting revitalization efforts; *st'áxem* as a metaphor for the effects of Canada's past assimilationist policies and *smelá:lh* for our efforts to transcend those effects.

*Smelá:lh* is the Halq'eméylem word for high-status people from high-status families. To be *Smelá:lh*, meant to be from a family who "knew their history." Being from a *Smelá:lh* family meant that the family knew which productive fishing or berry picking sites they had access to, and knew the legends, or *sxwoxwiyám* related to these places and resources. *Smelá:lh* people knew special information about plants and other resources and had relationships with spirits of prominent family ancestors. Being *St'áxem* refers to a low-status family, or poor people. *St'áxem* implies "people who have lost or forgotten their history." Without knowledge of history one could not access the hereditary privileges of high-status families. To be upper class or lower class, then, was determined by the access one had to the River and its resources and to the rich spiritual resources associated with it. In effect the River defined our social structure. Today many of us are "lower class," or *st'áxem*, because we do not have a deep understanding of our culture and how it is embedded in our Halq'eméylem language. Our language was stripped from our tongues by the colonial imperative.

### *Halq'eméylem Revival*

A key group of people in the Stó:lo community are aiming to reverse the process toward "language death" (Crystal, 2000, p. 11) despite the fact that Halq'eméylem has been identified as one of the many Aboriginal languages in Canada headed for extinction (Foster, 1982). This key group includes a handful of older adults who speak Halq'eméylem fluently; three can also write in the language. These people have been active participants in the work of the Skulkayn Heritage Project of the early 1970s, the Coqualeetza Education Training Centre, and the Stó:lo Shxwélí Halq'eméylem Language Program today. The latter initiatives span 30-plus years of Halq'eméylem revival efforts. The Coqualeetza Centre conducted the earlier work with the Stó:lo Elders of documenting the language and developing language and culture resources for teaching.

These efforts led to local language courses for adults and children, but predominantly in the band schools.

Two issues from these earlier initiatives soon became evident. First, the school programs were highly influenced by a linguistic approach and failed to promote a strong understanding of the cultural aspects inherent in the language. Second, the Elders were in the classrooms teaching the young children, but the parents were not able to reinforce the language at home. Thus the language was not being transmitted and reinforced naturally from one generation to the next. A new approach would be needed.

The Stó:lo Shxweli Halq'eméylem Language Program began in 1995 as an endeavor to educate adults who would become fluent in Halq'eméylem and who would pursue a course of study leading to teaching certification. *Shxweli* means spirit or life force (Carlson, 1997) in Halq'eméylem and denotes a level of deep importance afforded the language renewal effort. By teaching the adults, the Shxweli program is addressing the missing link, the intergenerational gap evident in the above-mentioned school programs.

In 1997 and 1998 I became intimately aware of the language renewal effort while taking Halq'eméylem linguistics classes with the Stó:lo Shxweli Program at the Coqualeetza grounds in Sardis, British Columbia, Canada. My reasons for enrolling in the courses initially were purely selfish: I wanted to learn the language of my people the Stó:lo. However, while observing my peers and learning some of the intricate meanings of Halq'eméylem words through the Elders, I was touched deeply by the experience. Sitting in a class of 25 Stó:lo people who were determined to learn the language eventually to become Halq'eméylem language teachers powerfully affected my sense of identity, my understanding of what it means to be Stó:lo. Among my classmates I discovered a reflection of myself that I had experienced only with my immediate family. They resembled me in many ways: in their quiet, respectful accommodation, their easy laughter, and their mannerisms. They knew my relatives and shared with me what they knew about them. I was among kin who were as deeply concerned about reconnecting with our language, culture, and identity as I was. I became interested in knowing more about their experiences with learning Halq'eméylem and being involved with the language revival work.

### *Research Method*

My study is an heuristic investigation, an internal search for understanding the phenomenon of how learning Halq'eméylem can provide a key to understanding my Stó:lo identity and world view. Moustakas (1994) discusses heuristic research as

a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the

search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters there is also a social—and perhaps universal—significance. (pp. 17-18)

Issues of identity and world view and how these are reflected in Aboriginal languages have been emphasized strongly as reasons we might want to focus a great deal of energy, time, and commitment to reviving Halq'eméylem. Thus in my heuristic search I investigated three topics related to these issues, incorporating personal reflections, literature, and conversations with others. First, I explored what happened in the rise and demise of our language and how what happened affected this Stó:lo person's life and identity reflected first in bewilderment and ambivalence and then in a growing pride in our Stó:lo heritage and language. I reflected on my earliest memories of Halq'eméylem, which led to my developing passion to learn more about my people's language. Second, I began to develop an understanding of a Stó:lo world view, or Riverworld view, by examining how Halq'eméylem expresses best the Stó:lo's relationship to the land, to S'ólh Téméxw, discovering how we, our word, and our world blend intimately and spiritually. Third, I examined how our culture, our identity, and our world view are embedded in words of the Halq'eméylem language to illustrate how Halq'eméylem brings these aspects into focus. In examining these topics it became clearer to me how Halq'eméylem expresses intricate cultural nuances important to the Stó:lo. This exploration was important to this research for me to understand the background context of my co-researchers and myself, to provide a backdrop against which to depict our experiences.

The co-researchers in my study include nine remarkable people who are or have been associated with the Skulkayn, Coqualeetza, and Shxweli programs and who are dedicated to reviving the Stó:lo Halq'eméylem language. My main research question is, What does language renewal mean in the lives of the people whose language is being renewed? In this case, people of the Stó:lo community.

The purpose of my research is to tell the story of a community's drive to revive its language despite predictions for its extinction, to document what this effort means to a community of people who believe that without the language they will cease to be a unique people, and finally, to illustrate how this revival effort directly affects people's lives. I depict how specific events in the context of people's lives illustrate what is meant by "language is central to cultural identity," how "language enhances self-esteem and pride, which promotes effective social adjustment," and how "language expresses the world view of its speakers." I reveal what language renewal *means* to people and to their lives, what *inspires* people to learn "a language that is no longer a viable part of modern Indigenous lifestyles," and to reveal how the language *identifies* who we are in a contemporary context and how it reflects our *world view* today.

Documenting what Stó:lo Halq'eméylem language renewal means in the context of people's lives contributes to the small amount of knowledge on language revival. Little is written about how individuals who make up the community are affected by the effort, about what inspires them against all odds, and how language revival might restore wholeness to a community. By conducting this study my hope is that other communities may become inspired to revive their own languages despite the difficulties and barriers they might face. In reading the story of Stó:lo Halq'eméylem renewal, others may gain increased understanding of the complexities and intricacies of reviving a near extinct language, of why it is so important to the people and to humanity generally. Greater understanding may garner greater moral and financial support for the effort.

*A Very Special Wild Strawberry Patch*

The story of Stó:lo Halq'eméylem language renewal intends to serve as an act of "making special" (Kenny, 1996, p. 94) the meaning of Halq'eméylem renewal in our lives today by crafting it as an aesthetic experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). In the aesthetic experience, we can attain the important sense of coherence necessary for healing to occur. In the presentation of my research I resonate the aesthetic "qualities" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis) of *beauty, celebration, triumph, and power*, qualities of Stó:lo Halq'eméylem language renewal manifested in the lives of my co-researchers. *Wild strawberries* is a metaphor that weaves throughout this research on what Halq'eméylem language renewal means to the Stó:lo in the context of their lives today. *Wild strawberries* is borrowed from the Cheam people in S'ólh Téméxw. The Halq'eméylem name for Cheam is *Xwchiyó:m* or *Chiyó:m* and translates as "where there are always wild strawberries" (Wells, 1965, p. 17).

In my presentation of the research, I craft the co-researchers' interviews into poetic monologues, keeping the co-researchers close to the depictions of their experience, true to an heuristic approach. The co-researchers' experiences represent a portrayal of their story, complete in itself, in vivid, alive, accurate, and meaningful language (Moustakas, 1994). The nine co-researchers are represented in three categories of people involved in the Halq'eméylem revival work: Elders, Junior Elders, and Parents with Children at Home.

<i>Parents with Children</i>	<i>Junior Elders</i>	<i>Senior Elders</i>
Katelíla Koyàlemót Tyrone*	Xwelíxwiya Kwósel T'ít'elem Spá:th*	Épelel Siyàmiyatéliyot Yómalot

\*Of the nine only two are male, one Parent, and one Junior Elder.

I asked each co-researcher to share the limited time (1-1.5 hours each) we had together to talk about their life experiences, their thoughts, their dreams, and their motivation in their work as Halq'eméylem revivalists. They were comfortable with me and spoke freely, with an outpouring of detail I had not expected, although the fact that we were involved in the language work we mutually cherished helped. Each person led the way with little prompting from me with questions from the interview guide, which I asked at intervals, and then receded in the background and listened intently as their voices flowed forth loud and clear.

In my study the presentation of the co-researchers' words lays bare for the reader the essence of what each co-researcher shared. I call them poetic monologues. Although the monologues were derived from our interaction, I call them this because they reveal in essence the co-researchers' own search for understanding of the phenomenon they were asked to talk about: their experience. Speaking about their experiences as they did was as much if not more for their sake as it was for mine. I qualify the monologues with *poetic* because each monologue represents a unique character and style that is reflected in the diction and vernacular of each co-researcher. I call them co-researchers because they are deeply involved in learning about themselves and what it means to be Stó:lo by immersing themselves in learning Halq'eméylem. Their experience reflects my experience; my experience reflects theirs.

I titled each of the poetic monologues as follows: "*Signed, te' si:yáye, your friend*" by Katelíla; "*Teach the Children With Love*" by Koyàlemót; "*A reawakening of what's there*" by Tyrone; "*It just has to burst through*" by Xwelíxwiya; "... *In my mind, I can do it*" by Kwósel; "*We have a beautiful dream*" by T'ít'elem Spá:th; "*Just going to teach my little guy*" by Épelel; "*They went and taught on their own*" by Siyàmiyatéliyot; and "*I was going to be stubborn*" by Yómalot. Excerpts from the poetic monologues are woven throughout the following discussion.

#### *Dessert of Wild Strawberries*

When I began my research in 1998 I set out to determine how specific events in the context of peoples' lives illustrate what is meant by:

1. language is central to cultural identity;
2. language enhances self-esteem and pride which promotes effective social adjustment;
3. language expresses the world view of its speakers.

I found these assertions indeed to be manifest in the lives of the Halq'eméylem revivalists as illustrated in their poetic monologues. The co-researchers' stories illustrated how strongly they felt about learning the language, how it transformed their lives from *st'áxem*, not knowing who they were as Stó:lo people, to *smelá:lh*, growing in knowing their Stó:lo identity and world view through language revitalization. Their stories illustrated how the Halq'eméylem revivalists bravely transcended their



fears, anxieties, and insecurities associated with the language work. The co-researchers revealed their intense commitment, sacrifice, and tremendous personal effort to learn and teach Halq'eméylem, to use it in their daily lives, and to transmit it to the next generations. They demonstrate a deep reverence and spiritual understanding of the precious Halq'eméylem knowledge over which they are now stewards.

Although each of the co-researchers' experiences with the language is unique, our collective experiences as Stó:lo people reflect a holographic quality where the whole is reflected in all the parts. Historical developments such as Canada's assimilation aim and the demise of our language and cultural traditions are reflected similarly in each co-researcher's story. I coined the term *st'áxem effect* to refer to the effect on Stó:lo people when we do not know our history, do not know our culture, and how the *st'áxem effect* hurts our sense of identity. *Becoming smelá:lh* refers to reconnecting with our history, language, and culture to rebuild a strong sense of identity in being Stó:lo, "becoming worthy."

*The way I was raised was,  
I call myself an urban Indian,  
Even though I lived on the reserve.  
Didn't have Elders to pass on the teachings.  
We just knew we were Indians, you know.  
That would bother me,  
Because my friends would say,  
"Well, do you know your language?"  
And I'd, well, "I don't know it,"  
Didn't really understand  
Why it wasn't passed down.  
And to think, their parents would say,  
"Oh you're just too lazy.  
Don't want to learn your language.  
Just lazy, right?"  
So, that would hurt.  
Seemed like I was always asked  
Throughout my whole life by non-Natives.  
"Do you know your language?"*

*Koyàlemót*

*I know an awful lot of culture.  
It's taken 30 years of my life to learn  
The culture, seriously learning it.  
The other 20 years I learned it  
Just fly by night,  
Whatever my mom told me to do.  
Seriously, myself, I've been 30 years  
Learning the culture,  
And there's a huge piece missing,  
And that's the language.  
I can't seem to get  
The full strength of my power  
Until I learn the language.  
Maybe that's why I can't  
Get as good in my education  
As I would like to be, because  
I haven't finished what I started.  
When I get the language, I will be  
Practically complete.*

*Xwelixwiya*

The poetic monologues reveal how reconnecting with our Halq'eméylem language through the various means illustrated can serve to bring healing to our community, to bring pride in our identity, strengthening what it means to be Stó:lo, to be "people of the River." For a long time we did not know how it was, or why, that even though our skins were brown and we were called "Indian," we spoke "that white language" (Yómalot). Even "white" people had no idea of what had happened to us. They would ask, "Do you speak your language?" (Koyàlemót). The situation was confusing for everyone. In this way the hurt of one people hurt all

the people. We are coming out of a dark era, acknowledging and facing what happened to our language and culture, and our rightful Stó:lo identity is resurfacing.

*Mom went to residential school.  
I don't know that she heard the language.  
I've seen it's been healing for her;  
Going to Halq'eméylem.  
I could see she looked different to me,  
Looks more happier.  
It made her spirit feel good,  
Taking back some of her power.  
Koyàlemót*

The Elders have watched the world of Halq'eméylem diminish swiftly before their eyes, swiftly slipping away to be replaced by English. Of all the participants the Elders, who have once seen the language flourish, are the most skeptical that it will become fully revived. Siyàmiyatéliyot has been involved in the work of Halq'eméylem renewal for 30 years and has witnessed only a few people become moderately fluent speakers of Halq'eméylem. Siyàmiyatéliyot and Yómalot have seen people struggle with uttering even a few words and phrases in Halq'eméylem. Nonetheless, they never fail to give themselves to the work of Halq'eméylem revival; they never give up.

*When I started teaching,  
It was with Shirley Norris (Julian now).  
... A time came, she felt  
She learned enough from me,  
Of the language.  
She went and taught alone,  
Here in Chehalis first,  
Or was it Seabird?  
Joe Aleck next came,  
And we went team teaching  
Different places.  
Then, he felt sure of himself and  
Went off on his own too.  
All those times  
People felt sure of themselves  
With the language they learned from me,  
And went and taught on their own,  
That was something  
I had been successful in doing.  
Now Peter and Donna  
Are on their own, too,  
And Tess Ned.  
... Now they're all on their own.  
That's something I have accomplished.  
Siyàmiyatéliyot*

*Rewards?  
Every time I see there's graduations,  
[From Halq'eméylem language classes]  
I feel great, really great.  
I always think what we're doing,  
It's not lost, yeah.  
That's my greatest thanksgiving  
For all of them graduating,  
That's when I'm happiest,  
Seeing them graduating, yeah.  
Yómelot*

*Gee Whiz, I don't want to be negative  
About the revival of our language,  
But a long time ago,  
How the language used to work,  
Even the storekeepers, the Xwelítém  
Got to know the language, and the priests  
Used to be able to talk the language.  
So, I mean, how do I answer that?  
Siyàmiyatéliyot*

We can be grateful to Yómalot and Siyàmiyatéliyot, who shared their experiences of how they managed to “put it [Halq’eméylem] away (Siyàmiyatéliyot),” despite the aim of residential schools to make them forget Halq’eméylem and to forget that they were Xwélmexw. Because of their tenacity, their “stubbornness” (Yómalot), we have been able to arrive at the level of development in Halq’eméylem revival we have reached today.

*It isn't easy for people  
To translate our language.  
It was easier for me;  
It was done while I was an infant.  
I kept hearing it,  
Putting it away in my memory ...*

*Today, I have a good level of fluency,  
But when I went to work for Coqualeetza,  
It advanced what I have.  
I learned the writing system;  
I knew my words;  
To write it down was different.  
Once I learned how to read it,  
What I didn't know,  
I could read and put away.  
Like for instance, counting  
Wasn't that important in just everyday life.  
We just spoke together,  
Mother, Father and myself.  
The highest I could count was lheq'átses (five).  
When I went to work for Coqualeetza,  
And learned the writing system,  
I count way more.  
I didn't know all my trees,  
Surely I didn't know all my plants.  
And so, that's how I learned,  
Working with the other Elders.*

*Siyàmiyatéliyot*

*I was really, really lost.  
Why did I want to come to school?  
I was thinking.  
I'll never, never, never forget my  
language.  
I don't have to forget my language.  
Walking around by myself,  
Nobody to talk to,  
I kept thinking that  
I was going to be stubborn ...  
Wasn't ever going to forget  
My language.  
Whenever the Sister talked to me,  
I spoke to her in my own thoughts  
In my language.*

*Yómelot*

The Elders were determined to keep Halq’eméylem alive inside their minds and hearts while it swiftly slipped away all around them. We raise our hands in thanks and respect to them for their great feat. When Halq’eméylem revival began in the early 1970s and beyond, the Elders stepped forward and dedicated their lives relentlessly and unconditionally to this important effort. Their love for the language and the people shines through in their work and in the words they shared.

*The language means everything to me.  
I'm doing everything in my power  
To make sure it is preserved;  
I know it will be used.*

*"I'll help all I can,  
Won't hold anything back.  
I'll tell all what little I know."*

*Yómelot*

*Stó:lo Shxwél is doing everything  
 They can to use the language,  
 Doing their very best to carry on.  
 Tíále always phones me up,  
 And if it isn't her, it is Tlówkomot.  
 Siyàmiyatéliyot*

The Elders are the main source of inspiration for the Halq'eméylem revivalists who are picking up the language, to "put it away" in their own minds and hearts for future generations. The new Halq'eméylem revivalists, who are all learning Halq'eméylem and transmitting what they know to others, look to the Elders for solace when the cause seems unattainable or difficult. They are ever inspired at how the Elders never quit although difficulties may arise.

*It's the Elders that kept me  
 From walking away.  
 They've been involved in the language  
 A long time, and they don't give up  
 On saving the language.  
 They have so much patience;  
 We get so frustrated,  
 And they stayed there with us.  
 The Elders told us,  
 When they go to the other side,  
 They don't have to worry  
 About the language, because  
 The students are going to carry it on.  
 Oh, my gosh, them talking like that; it hurt.  
 I don't think I can walk  
 Away from the Elders.  
 Koyàlemót*

*Tsloyóthelwet is an inspiration to me,  
 Is pushing me to, she doesn't know it,  
 To think in Halq'eméylem  
 Instead of English.  
 I used to think in English  
 And then translate.  
 I need somebody like Tsloyóthelwet  
 So I can hear the language more,  
 Give me a boost.*

*I can't speak it,  
 But in my mind I can do it.  
 I find it easier  
 To do in my head.  
 Kwósel*

These few Elders who remain who are fluent in Halq'eméylem will be gone one day soon. This knowledge strikes fear into the hearts of those charged with carrying the language forward. The Halq'eméylem revivalists will then be on their own. They will bear the responsibility for taking the breath of our language from the remaining fluent Elders and breathing it into the young ones. This realization saddens the hearts of those who have gained so much from the Elders, who yet feel like babies, worried whether they can stand alone without the support of the fluent Elders. It is they who must now stand and support the legacy of the Elders and ancestors. "It's a race against time," says T'ít'elem Spá:th, who is learning what he can of the language in any way he can. Nonetheless, the spirits of our ancestors and Elders will carry on in the Halq'eméylem revivalists through work conducted over the past 30 years to preserve the voices of our ancestors on tapes and CDs now available in the Stó:lo Nation Archives.

The Junior Elders, baby boomers, are the warriors, promoters, supporters, and champions of the language work. They have lived long enough to be wise and to direct that wisdom to work for the common good. The younger Halq'eméylem teachers look to them for their leadership and experience. They may not have the benefit of gaining full fluency in the language for themselves in their lifetime, but they will be good role models and show the younger people that it is worth their time and effort to learn Halq'eméylem and to be proud of it. They will make every effort to learn what they can, especially if the recordings of the Elders made 1970-2002 can be transformed into more accessible learning tools. In many ways they have come to terms with the hurts of the *st'áxem* effect. They can be patient with the time it takes to remember and honor the legacy of language and culture passed on by the Elders and ancestors before them.

*When I talk to young people,  
Like my daughters' ages, 30,  
And that don't take language classes,  
They look at me real blank.  
Oh, I don't know what you're saying,  
And they feel a little bit ashamed because  
They don't know what you're talking.  
But, they're happy you're talking;  
It's like an honour you would speak to them.  
And, really, all I'm doing is  
Hoping they would want to learn.  
I speak in phrases to them,  
Not in words, i.e. "it's a nice day."  
I say, "láv siyám,"  
And say their Indian name.  
They get real fluttered.  
It tells me that they would  
Like to learn the language.  
I can see it in their body,  
In their eyes, that they are honoured  
That I would call their Indian name  
And talk to them in Halq'eméylem.  
They all want to learn the language.  
Xwelíxwiya*

*Once a language dies,  
So much is lost;  
It's quite frightening.  
People sense that loss; it's real.  
I feel it every day.  
It feels like you lost something precious  
That's so close to you, part of you,  
A part of your spirit.  
It can make me sick to know how  
Assimilation can be that strong,  
To wipe out a large part of our culture.  
I feel a big sense of loss.*

*I refuse to be pessimistic,  
Refuse to give in. I am here to say,  
"It isn't wiped off the face of the earth."  
As long as I know how to speak  
A few words, and continue to learn,  
It's not going to be lost.  
I'll do what I can to pass on  
What little I know, and so will others.  
T'it'elem Spá:th*

The Parents with children at home are the most hopeful for a future that will include Halq'eméylem being spoken by their children and grandchildren. These will be carrying the responsibility for the revival of intergenerational transmission of Halq'eméylem as they teach their children in the natural settings of their homes. They are bursting through the old *st'áxem* stereotypes with a passion, so their children and grandchildren will know who they are as Stó:lo people, as people of S'ólh Téméxw.

*I teach my own kids.  
 Sometimes they're not good.  
 I mean like I scold them. "Emétlha!  
 Emét!" I would tell them, "Sit down!"  
 They picked up the "thank you song"  
 Really quick. They did sing it last May  
 When they opened the new wing  
 To McCammon School.  
 So, they knew the "thank you song,"  
 And they picked that up quick.  
 They Picked up the "Éy tel Sqwálewel st'ílem,"  
 And the "Salish Anthem."  
 I would sing in the car  
 And play tapes over and over.  
 We'd bless the food at the table  
 And I'd lecture them;  
 What to do for the day,  
 And what didn't get done.  
 Katelíla*

*I probably speak it more at home  
 Than anywhere else,  
 With my two daughters, ages three and  
 ten.  
 My youngest daughter now,  
 Says sp'óq'es long before she says eagle.  
 Driving along and "there's a sp'óq'es  
 [bald eagle],"  
 Not an eagle, you know, it's a sp'óq'es .  
 She's just in daycare, but  
 I teach her mainly.  
 The youngest one surprises  
 Both Tseloyóthelwet and Kwósel  
 On her pronunciation already.  
 It's not bang on, but she's at that age  
 They'll learn quick.  
 With her grandmothers on the phone,  
 It's her "táta," her "síle," "the síle."  
 I'm building my vocabulary through them  
 More than anything else, really.  
 It's been worthwhile.*

*Tyrone*

The language embedded in the collective memory of Stó:lo people feels natural to them. "It seems natural today" (Tyrone), "it wasn't anything different; it was just the way mom said things" (Épelel). Even a few words and phrases heard in times gone by was enough to give some people a strong sense of the language and its sounds. What little was spoken was remembered as being spoken with a great deal of pride, "When they talk, they strut," says Xwelíxwiya. This little bit of language shone through the *st'áxem* effect in some cases, planting a seed of Stó:lo identity that with a little nourishment and enlightenment grew into the Halq'eméylem revivalist movement we see today.

*At the table he would ask,  
 "Alétsa Seplíl," and that means,  
 "Where's the bread?" After hearing him  
 Say that so many times,  
 Got to saying that all the time too.  
 He would look at us, and say,  
 "You know what?  
 You're a the'it Xwélmexw," and I'd say,  
 "What does that mean?" and he'd say,  
 "Means you're a re-e-eal Indian.  
 That's what you are."  
 So it always peaked my interest,*

*I used to hear the odd word  
 Here and there from my mom  
 Before going to school.  
 But she never did teach us  
 How to speak the language.  
 She'd tell me what a cat was,  
 You know pus [cat], or a dog or a potato.  
 Wouldn't say any sentences  
 Or anything like that.  
 I was sent to residential school;  
 I was 8.  
 Got a little wee bit exposure*

When I was a kid,  
 Wanted to learn more,  
 But Mom and Dad didn't know  
 The language.  
 T'it'elem Spá:th

To the language, yeah,  
 Just a wee bit.  
 I never actually thought  
 It was another language.  
 Guess to me it was just a different way  
 That mom said things, you know...  
 I didn't know it was Halq'eméylem.  
 Épelel

The challenges of Halq'eméylem revival are many, but not insurmountable, and the learning curve is great. It is difficult to learn a language when there are so few people in the entire world one can talk to and when there are so few easily accessible text and audiovisual resources on which to draw. The work needs to be concentrated with much sacrifice from those who take it on. It is a noble and honorable effort and often not appreciated by others outside the work.

Any time I get able to do that, to laugh or  
 Say something in Halq'eméylem,  
 I'll use any opportunity.  
 Or you can use your Hotmail; I use my  
 Translated version of Catalina, Katelíla.  
 So everyday I check my hotmail,  
 I'm doing Halq'eméylem,  
 Signed ta' si:yáye, your friend.  
 Katelíla

Never ever thought I'd be doing  
 Anything like this [teaching  
 Halq'eméylem].  
 It's wonderful, truly wonderful.  
 When I first started,  
 It's all I really wanted  
 Was to just learn the language,  
 And when we first started taking classes,  
 They were already pushing us  
 To teach, too.  
 Épelel

The fluent speaking Elders can appreciate deeply how our Stó:lo culture and world view is embedded in our Halq'eméylem language. This knowledge is being passed on to the rest of us today, how our land, language, and selves are inextricably interrelated, how spirit permeates everything, and how these concepts are expressed best in our Halq'eméylem language.

I told a few that "mexw" is one word.  
 It's a ending of slhémexw, rain,  
 And téméxw is the earth we walk on,  
 And kwémlexw is the word "root,"  
 Root of all things.  
 And the slhémexw is the rain,  
 The water that we live off,  
 And the Xwélmexw is the people, yeah.  
 That one little word mexw,  
 It means so much.  
 Koyálemexw, he came and asked,  
 When he took that name,  
 Wanted to know what Koyálemexw means.  
 Koyále is a container.

You're a container,  
 You contain lots of things.  
 And mexw is the téméxw you walk on,  
 And the kwémlexw is the root of all things.  
 And you wouldn't think so,  
 But even the animals come from mexw.  
 I says, téméxw.  
 Everything we eat off,  
 Work on,  
 Live on,  
 It's all that, kwémlexw.  
 And that slhémexw,  
 It's the rain that comes down  
 And waters everything we possess.  
 Without that water, you cannot survive,  
 I says, that to Koyálemexw,  
 Yómelot

When we begin to understand these precious gifts, our hearts soar, our emotions are stirred, and we feel the healing of coming to know ourselves as Stó:lo people, River people, as *Xwélmexw*. We become knowledgeable in how to express our love and affection for our people and for Riverways through our songs and prayers in Halq'eméylem.

A person can have their Native pride  
 When they know their language.  
 When I see the students singing  
 In Halq'eméylem,  
 They're really proud of who they are.  
 Being Native, you have a spirit,  
 Spirituality in our people  
 Is pretty important.  
 When the students are using  
 The language and song, or prayer,  
 It brings their spirit to life,  
 So to speak; it is very important.  
 If you only speak in English,  
 All you're doing is using  
 The borrowed language.  
 To imagine life without my language,  
 I'd be living a lie;  
 That sounds devastating to me.  
 Siyàmiyatéliyot

In the Stó:lo communities,  
 You hear the language much more now.  
 Big house talk, you will hear,  
 "Léwecha xwelelèm te syóys me í è." [You  
 are asked to witness the work that is done  
 here today.]  
 Nice to hear it in the longhouses.  
 In the street sometimes,  
 When I see my friends,  
 They look at me and say "Láw."  
 Even on the phone,  
 People are saying our greetings  
 In our language.  
 T'ít'elem Spá:th

The language has become  
 More accepted,  
 A normal course of speech  
 On an individual basis.  
 At an event now, it's normal  
 To have kids sing a song,  
 Regardless of what that song is.  
 For a lot of people, it makes the event,  
 Seeing somebody from their family



*Up there singing.  
Kids in a small ceremony  
Has become an expectation.  
Tyrone*

We learn that respect is the fundamental philosophical value that ties all things into one interrelated creation. Halq'eméylem is being spoken today in this Riverworld view. People are introducing themselves using Halq'eméylem names, talking about their history, saying who they are related to, where they are from. Events are being opened with prayers said in Halq'eméylem; Halq'eméylem is used during traditional ceremonies. People in S'ólh Téméxw are addressing each other informally when they meet and speak what they know to each other. As a result of all the past work and sacrifice, Halq'eméylem is being taught to children on many fronts. Most important, we can see that Halq'eméylem is being transmitted from parent to child in the natural setting of the home.

When we first want to learn Halq'eméylem, we usually do so for our own sake, to connect for ourselves a sense of who we are, to become healed and whole as Stó:lo people, as Xwélméxw, as People of the River. The greatest reward for Halq'eméylem revivalists is to see the fruits of their labor expressed in the children, who are echoing the legacy of our ancestors as they speak, pray, and sing in Halq'eméylem.

*I try to speak it all the time  
At home with my children.  
My kids now, they say,  
"Éy látelh, good morning."  
When they go to bed, they say,  
"Éy slát," "Good night."  
"Tl'i:lsthóme, [I love you.]"  
Koyàlemót*

*Seeing my kids singing.  
The greatest reward for me  
Would be my kids talking,  
And anything else,  
What I hear in the school,  
All that's a plus.  
Tyrone*

*When people hear you  
Speak the language, they're proud.  
They congratulate you.  
It's easier nowadays for people to speak it.  
Now, everybody wants to learn.  
I see everybody learning the language.  
They express respect  
When you can speak the language.  
And if you're teaching it, they think  
That's just great.  
You bring the language back,  
And you teach everybody.  
Épelel*

### *Conclusion and Implications*

Halq'eméylem is a viable part of our modern Indigenous lifestyles. The Halq'eméylem revivalists are making it happen as they work diligently and tirelessly at reversing the trend toward its extinction. During the relatively short period since the Skulkayn Heritage Project was established 30-plus years ago, Stó:lo people have persisted against all odds in developing a multidimensional Halq'eméylem revival movement to "hold our language high." Stó:lo people are speaking Halq'eméylem throughout

S'ólh Téméxw, echoing the spirit of our ancestors, echoing the spirit of the River, the Stó:lo.

The implications of the hatchling Halq'eméylem revival effort are that much work still needs to be done to revive our language and that we need the means to keep the momentum going do it. We need to escalate the work of recording our Elders speaking onto audio and video media so that future generations can enjoy the full benefit of experiencing our language in its purest form. The existing audiotaped resources need to be transformed into accessible learning resources available to all Stó:lo community members. Halq'eméylem needs to be taught in all the schools on our traditional Stó:lo territory and resourced with vibrant, engaging curriculum materials using the best language learning practices known.

Halq'eméylem on Stó:lo territory requires the same attention and recognition as French, considered equal to English and French as an official language, and equally financially supported in the school system. We need to hold the Halq'eméylem revivalists in high esteem by ensuring that they are provided with the best language training available and supported generously to allow them the freedom to pursue the highest levels of Halq'eméylem fluency. Greater numbers of fluent speakers will enable the possibility of establishing language nests similar to those of the Maori in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

*Say, if we had an infant  
A room of infants, and had speakers  
Speaking all the time.  
If these infants would be able  
To put it [Halq'eméylem] away like I had,  
Perhaps we would have a chance.  
Siyàmiyatéliyot*

Highly fluent speakers with quality training in language teaching will enable the possibility of establishing Halq'eméylem immersion schools such as the Chief Atahm School in the interior of British Columbia. More important, we need adequate resources to mobilize programs to raise the consciousness of every Stó:lo man, woman, and child of the benefits of learning Halq'eméylem and of how it can restore wholeness to our identity and self-esteem as Stó:lo people.

Our Halq'eméylem revival efforts need to be financed comprehensively and continually until we arrive at functional fluency in our communities. It is our Aboriginal right to speak Halq'eméylem, a right that was taken away from us through Canadian legislation and policy for which our leaders must seek redress through treaty negotiations. The Canadian government has a moral responsibility to compensate justly the loss of our language by financing revival until it is meets our satisfaction and can be maintained for the benefit of future generations. Our leaders could benefit by being trained in Halq'eméylem in order to gain a deep

understanding of how our language identifies us as the people of S'ólh Téméxw and to understand how thousands of years of living in *harmony with* relationship with the land is evident in how we name our places, sacred sites, and the flora and fauna. Our Halq'eméylem language was born of the land; this knowledge serves to strengthen our land claims, our claims to S'ólh Téméxw. By learning Halq'eméylem and its intricacies, our leaders will be able to advocate for what we need to maintain our unique Stó:lo identity embedded in our Halq'eméylem Riverworld view aesthetic. By reviving our Halq'eméylem language, we serve to strengthen the individual Stó:lo, our families and communities, and society in general.

*Á:ylexw te Stó:lo Shxweli* (The Spirit of the Stó:lo Lives).

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