

REFLECTION

My Transpacific Life

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IN THIS ARTICLE, I begin to recount my family story. There are many other similar tales just now coming to light, surfacing like a whale coming up for a breath of air. Other West Coast Indigenous people can relate. My tale is real and bittersweet. Recalling these memories has proved emotional and sad at times, yet also joyous as they all contribute to my being as a human person. I share these experiences to remove the words from my body and soul and to leave a legacy for my family.

ROOTS

My transpacific roots originate on both sides of the Pacific – from Zazilkwa, the swirling eddies in the Líl'wat River, to Old Buswang Road in the Philippines. My mother was Stlatumnh of the Líl'wat and my father was Visayan of the Philippines. My grandfather, Chief Alphonse Stager, lived his entire life in Mount Currie, Líl'wat territory, fulfilling his leadership role as a hereditary chief of the nation. He was groomed for this by my great-grandfather, James Stager, one of the original chiefs to sign the 1911 Declaration of the Lillooet Tribe joining the Indian Rights Association, affirming the people's demand for their rights and the return of their lands. My great-grandmother, Madeline, raised the family and wove traditional baskets, instructing my grandmother on how to use these skills.

My grandfather Alphonse chose his wife, Rosie Dickie of Líl'wat/Thompson stock, from a crowd at a Sports Day event in the 1920s. He returned days later with horses to trade for my grandmother's hand in marriage. Rosie grew up in Lillooet on the Texas Creek farm, which was not on reserve. She was raised by her mother and stepfather and had an older sister and a younger brother who was in the armed services. She attended St. Mary's Indian Residential School in Mission, British Columbia, where, upon completing three workbooks, she earned a treadle sewing machine. My grandmother had learned to read and acquired excellent homemaking skills from her mother, Madeline, who had been

the head cook for the Pacific Great Eastern Railway building crew that constructed the line from Squamish to Lillooet between 1912 and 1915. Grandmother Rosie was “married in” and she used her skills and shared her efforts with the community, an affinity I would associate with and come to understand. My grandfather contracted typhoid fever during the year of the Big Flood in 1945 and died, leaving my grandmother to raise their family. Looking out for her seven children (she bore nine), she was an excellent cook, gardener, traditional basket weaver, seamstress, and midwife. Her chicken soup is legendary in our family. Luckily for me, I was able to spend the year 1977 under Rosie’s tutelage, learning to make baskets and listening to her life story. Sadly, for all of us, she passed in 1993, from the effects of several strokes.

My mother, Euphemia Stager, was born on 15 November 1927. She was the third eldest of her siblings Nellie, Rita, James, Hilda, Celina, Myrtle, Allen, and Casper (who died in infancy). All attended residential school. Of my twenty-eight first cousins, nine went to St. Mary’s Indian Residential School. My mother had her first child early, my half-sister Loretta, who also attended residential school. At twelve years of age, while attending residential school, she died of pneumonia when a nun refused her admittance to the infirmary. The profiles of so many others who shared similar traumatic experiences are mirrored in each of my family members.

Urban life was on the horizon for our people, and many would leave the familiarity of reserve life and migrate to the city. In my mother’s case, as a young woman in the late 1940s, she left home to seek employment and moved to Vancouver, working briefly in a Gastown hotel. She then went across the “line” – the American border – to pick berries and hops, and ended up in Seattle where she met, and eventually married, my father.

My father, Salvador Reyes Tirazona, had come across the Pacific on a steamship from Kalibo in the Philippines in 1927. Kalibo is located on Panay, a large island in the southern Philippines. A provincial capital with a population of eighty thousand, Kalibo hosts an annual world-renowned historical celebration, *Ati-Atihan*, and is the portal entry to Boracay, a world-class beach resort. In describing his early years, my father spoke fondly of Filipino country life. His family always had enough food: their diet consisted mainly of rice and regional specialties including seafood, chicken, and pork. He always chose coconut-anything, bananas, and mangoes. His favourite boyhood memory was perching himself between the horns of a water buffalo and riding through the ricefields near Kalibo.

The youngest of a dozen siblings, my father identified as the “black sheep” of his family. A dispute with his father over future life plans prompted him to take the sea voyage that would mould his life forever. He, too, sought other lands and meaningful work. In those times, the Filipino “boys,” as my father called them, would often start working in the fields of California or secure jobs as houseboys for celebrities or rich folk and then migrate up the West Coast to Alaska fish canneries in the neighbouring season, with stopovers in cities like Seattle. He was representative of the Filipino migration to the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. He became part of the working class, which, in its pursuit of happiness, was challenged by discrimination, racism, and heartbreak. All Asian immigrants – Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese – were considered components of the “yellow peril” or “others” with no status. Between 1898 and 1946, the Philippines was a colonial possession of the United States, and this granted Filipino immigrants limited rights and privileges. As citizens of the Philippines, unique opportunities included the right to an American-style education and the right to migrate to the United States, even though, with the passing of the Immigration Act of 1924, other Asians were barred from entry. My father, proudly, became a naturalized Asian American citizen in 1945.

My father’s siblings were Simeon, Maria, Magdalena, Juliana, Venancia, Susing, Susannah, Mening, Vicente, Isaac, and Angeles. All remained in Kalibo and received their Filipino high school diplomas. Simeon went on to become the superintendent of education for Kalibo, a position that he held until he retired. Most married and had families. Several of my first cousins furthered their education and pursued careers in California with the US Armed Forces and the US Postal Service. My father secured employment with the Boeing Company and worked there for twenty-six years, and so I later came to identify proudly as a baby-boom era “Boeing brat.”

My parents married in a civil ceremony. The horror came after my birth in 1951. The facts surrounding the death of my mother in 1954 have always been vague. Before her death, my father was challenged with securing caregivers when my mother chose to “binge” drink for several days at a time. His Filipino “boys” would often take on this task. Sylvia, my sister who was born in 1953, died from pneumonia at three months of age. My father spoke little of this time. He told me my mother drank too much and that they separated in 1953. The events surrounding my mother’s death came to me through auntie Hilda, my mother’s sister, who at age seventeen was asked to travel from Mount Currie to Seattle

to identify my mother's body and make arrangements to return her remains to Canada. When my aunt recounted her version of the events, she emphasized the stitched neck wound she observed when identifying my mother. Official autopsy reports indicate it was an alcohol-related death, but I'm still investigating. My mother was only twenty-seven when she died. The effects of childhood trauma mark me but do not claim me.

My father then married a Tlingit woman from Alaska, and my half-brother, Salvador, was born in December 1954. When they divorced, my father purchased our family home on Seattle's Beacon Hill and became a single parent of two. He hired a Secwépemc woman for several years, and she became our house "mom." I received my early education within the Seattle public school system. Beacon Hill was adjacent to what was to become the International District, referred to in our household as "Chinatown." Our family was part of the racial blend of Asians, Europeans, black, and Indigenous residents. Racial delineation surfaced periodically, usually when a fellow student would ask, "What are you?" The multicultural makeup of this south Seattle neighbourhood helped shape my life.

In retrospect, I recall this time, particularly my elementary school experience, as being integral to the development of my Asian American sense of citizenship. In many respects, 1960s Seattle was young, innocent, and reflective of the time. Wayne Neupauer called me "ugly" in Grade 3. Lateral violence was clearly evident in the playground environment, but at that time we did not know it had a name. My first-grade teacher, Miss Dombrowski, provided me with my first book, *St. Francis of Assisi*. It was an "aha!" moment that cemented my love of reading. Miss Washington, a greying third-grade mentor, gifted me with an American fifty-cent piece dated from the 1880s. Mr. Neil Hunt was my first male teacher. He was tall and lanky. One morning, he shared: "Don't ever buy a Ford automobile. My wife and I just paid ours off and the next day, it broke down. Whatever you do, don't buy a Ford!" What a lesson. In Grade 6, Beverly Yokobe wept openly while giving her first oral book report. She was really shy. Barbie Ricker was my bestie that year. Following the Second World War, her parents married in Japan. Her mother was Japanese and her father, a US Army sergeant, was stationed there. I was a person of blended heritage who was subconsciously becoming more evidently woven into the fabric of diverse American neighbourhoods. All of these experiences helped mould me into my transpacific self.

My father never spoke his language to us: he spoke it only when his "boys," his male Filipino friends, were near. He read the entire daily

newspaper, front to back. I queried him in later years as to his reason for not teaching us. He replied that, in essence, he was practising his English on us. We watched early 1950s television in awe. *The Mickey Mouse Club*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Saturday Night at the Movies* were favourites. Again, the point was to study the English language.

My father mentioned on more than one occasion a makeshift housing development – Hooverville. He noted that the shelters were comprised of cardboard boxes, much like the homeless camps of today. Was he reminded of the economic conditions of his homeland?

Since our house mom had refused to marry my father, he sought out a woman who eventually became my stepmother, another Tlingit woman from southeast Alaska. She was released from a top security prison in West Virginia in 1961 following a conviction for murdering the father of her children seven years earlier in a jealous rage. She had used a firearm. My father had known her stepfather, a fellow Filipino, when both worked in the fish cannery. A year after they married, her three children arrived, expanding our household considerably. My half-brothers were born soon after: Bobby in 1962 and Randy in 1963.

Beacon Hill Elementary was renamed El Centro de la Raza in the 1970s, when a Latino group took control and used it to house various programs of the day. My fellow classmates transitioned to Asa Mercer Junior High with a dance at year's end. I wore my first pair of nylons and a borrowed dress.

MY NOOTKA MAN

I first heard the word “Nootka” in a Grade 4 geography lesson about Canada. My only recollection of that lesson was that the east coast Nova Scotia winters were harsh and that Maquinna was a proud, powerful, and respected chief of the Nootka people on the west coast of Vancouver Island. I loved history and was totally enamoured when I actually met a Nootka man. By then I was in my early twenties, had graduated high school, had worked for the local phone company, and, at the urging of my father, had returned to school at the local community college.

One day my cousin, visiting from Vancouver, insisted we go for a drink downtown and that's where I met my Nootka man, Arnold James, or Zorro as he was known at the time. Arn presented himself as very friendly and charismatic, with a charming street-savvy way about him. I was smitten. The year was 1973. We shared pitchers of loganberry wine, played pool, and the rest became our history. It was the period

of the Red Power movement. We wore bandanas, braids, and attended rallies protesting John Wayne (who had come to town) and challenged the way he portrayed “Indians” in his movies. In our small talk, Arn had often spoken about Friendly Cove and how special it was. His early days at Friendly Cove were the best of times and the worst of times. His recollection of events that happened there were always heartfelt and meaningful. When he told stories of the way things were, I could sense the love he had for all of his family. I could feel the love he had for his community. This bond melded our lives.

That same year, Arn brought me to Yuquot, or, as the world knows it, Friendly Cove. It is only accessible by boat or plane. We went by way of the *Uchuck*, a converted minesweeper. It was a trip that would forever change my life. When we pulled into the cove, it was magical. I was awed by the coastal beauty, the remoteness, and the fact that there were fewer than a dozen inhabitants there at the time. Yuquot means “where the wind blows from all directions” – a term that captures the natural seaborne essence of the area. It is the main village of the Mowachaht people.

As we learned more about each other, it turned out we shared similar traumatic life experiences in our early years. We were both four when our mothers passed. We had come from large immediate families: Arn had seven siblings and my family included three younger brothers and, at one point, three additional stepsiblings. Of my transpacific heritage, he once told me: “I didn’t marry you because you’re Indian!” He was funny.

Arn’s roots were of mixed heritage, Mowachaht and Muchalaht. His parents, Dismas James and Margaret Harry, had seven children. After having her children, his mother was among the group of Indigenous people sent to the Nanaimo tuberculosis hospital. Sadly, that disease was what took her. Arn had several roles that began with his being the youngest son. His siblings were Gloria, Katherine, Bill, Timmy, Andy, Virginia, and Mary-Anne. After a mother’s death, it was customary for relatives to share responsibility for the upbringing of the children. Arn changed households several times during his early years. He also attended the Nootka Day School at Yuquot. In his teens, he played for the Nootka Natives, a skilled group of baseball players renowned throughout the West Coast. At sixteen, it was on a visit to Ahousaht, the largest Nuu-chah-nulth nation down the coast, where Arnold met and eventually married Veronica Titian. It was a marriage that ended in separation after two children, Eva and Pat, were born. He eventually left Yuquot, working as a logger in Nanaimo and Port Alberni before I met him. Arn knew his language but he wouldn’t speak it spontaneously.

In our everyday life, if he had thoughts in his language he would share them but he would often say, "That's hard to translate."

Arn told me stories of spirituality and supernatural beings. On a moonlit night, when the church at Yuquot was in the process of being built, the villagers looking towards the hill spotted a man entering the church. Aware that none among their group was missing, the young men surrounded the building to capture and determine the identity of the intruder. They waited and waited. No one ever came out. Arn also shared tales of the Nootka Natives and how strong leadership, will, determination, and the power of the peoples' spirit led them to being the best baseball team in the region. Time and time again, this theme was repeated throughout our history, and it echoes in my mind today: the Nootka people were always the best at whatever they did. The historical record supports that claim.

The decades following the legalization of public consumption of alcohol for Indians was evident in my mother's lifestyle and, later, in Arn's. She died as a result, and he became submerged. My drinking habits were not quite as intense as theirs. After Nick Tirazona, a cousin of my father's, visited from California when I was six, he looked at me, and his first words were, "Your mother was a drunk." This terse remark toned down my thirst for the drink. I took a back seat to Arn's style, tried once to binge, but preferred to limit my celebrations to Friday or Saturday nights.

We both worked for the Seattle Indian Center, Arn in security and me as executive secretary to the director. Arn had "quit" drinking when he had a serious bout with his liver. This was the bingo era, and we enjoyed playing in the hall down the street. Many fellow players were Indian Center clientele, colleagues, and Arn's street friends. Because of our sobriety on the weekends, we often "stole" friends' children as well as my niece for the weekend, leading us to become foster parents, eventually adopting our son Jamie through the Center Foster Care Program. Arn had known of Jamie's biological parents from the streets. His mother was of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe and his father of the Blackfoot.

My job with the King County Pretrial Services (the jail) started around this time, but Arn and I were also talking about moving to Canada and establishing our life together there. Arnold had wanted to reconnect with family and his two children from his previous marriage. These children would make me a grand- and great-grandmother many times over, according to Arnold – the Indian way. In addition to adopting a foster son, we had two children of our own: Marissa was born in 1983 and Jordan in 1985. We also raised my nephew and several grandchildren,

one of whom recently became a provincial teacher. When Arnold and I traditionally adopted our foster boys into the community, I was honoured to be given the name Yaakap, a traditional name from a Mowachaht/Muchalaht female family member who was known to share her hospitality with visitors.

THE LAND OF MAQUINNA

We married in 1980 and, a year later, made the big move to Ahaminaquus, a reserve near Gold River, British Columbia. Moving to Yuquot was not really an option because by this time only the Williams family resided there. Several hundred residents lived there until a number of events brought major changes to the community. Many families moved from Yuquot after the band signed a lease agreement with the Tahsis Pulp Mill in 1962. Clause 17 committed jobs for members who lived in Gold River. There was a lot of alcohol consumption – “heavy drinking” – and some wanted to be closer to liquor stores. The Nootka Day School could not provide further education to the adolescents as a high school curriculum was not offered. Even the day school closed in 1968. So Ahaminquus became the centre for most Mowachaht/Muchalaht residents. However, the deterioration of living conditions on the Ahaminaquus Reserve was severe, with the reduction in fish stocks, poor air quality, and noise pollution prompting the Mowachaht/Muchalaht to enact the first Indian pollution by law in 1979.

After we arrived, Arnold secured employment with the local logging company, and I became interim band manager for the Mowachaht-Muchalaht First Nation (MMFN). Thus, I began my journey into the lives of the Nootka people and the Land of Maquinna. As the interim band manager, I got involved in the trend among Indigenous nations to develop their own basic administrative practices. For us, establishing initial business practices was key. An early “make-work” project was sorting boxes of stored documents, including band council resolutions, and creating a filing system. Among the records was documentation of 1962 band meetings held to ratify a new land-use agreement with the Tahsis company to lease part of Ahaminaquus – a requirement of the Indian Act. The Tahsis company’s parent company, the East Asiatic Company, wanted to construct a pulp mill, and it secured a provincial tree farm licence in the 1950s. Participating members who voted in favour were listed as attending participants. Sadly, in reviewing the list, it became apparent that deceased individuals had been listed as having voted in favour

of the proposal. It was agreed by the group at our band meeting to seek legal counsel and file a lawsuit against the Department of Indian Affairs over this blatant falsification of records. There were several examples of these agreements with Indigenous groups and the Department of Indian Affairs. Around this same time, the Musqueam First Nation won a \$10 million lawsuit over a lands issue in the *Guerin* case.

As parents raising a family on reserve during the 1980s, I fondly recall the memories created. At that time in our lives, we did what we felt we had to do to raise a happy family. As parents, we had similar upbringings, but mine was transpacific and Arn's was Nootkan.

Not long afterwards, the first Annual Yuquot Campout took place in 1984. This tradition came out of many discussions by members of the community who, like Arn, remembered the good times they had at Yuquot and how they missed being "home." Yuquot was the number one reserve of the eighteen that the Department of Indian Affairs designated in Mowachaht/Muchalaht traditional territory after Confederation. And in 1923 the government officially designated Yuquot as a historic site – the Site of First Contact between Aboriginal Peoples of Canada and Europeans when Captain James Cook met and traded with Chief Maquinna's people, the Nootka. Other traders and explorers followed suit, coming from countries such as Spain, the United States, Russia, and France. The government of Canada, through Parks Canada, sponsored an archaeological excavation at Yuquot in 1966, revealing that there has been continuous human habitation for approximately forty-three hundred years. Parks Canada wanted to develop Yuquot into a Disney experience with traditional costumes and a visitor program. The community declined its offer. Yuquot was the heart of the people, yet they were seldom able to visit. Most families have availed themselves of the opportunity the annual campout affords them to return to Yuquot for a weeklong visit to their ancestral home. Out of this came my lifelong passion for promoting Yuquot's unique heritage.

In the years following the Lease Agreement, the environmental conditions continued to worsen on the Ahaminaquus Reserve. Subsequently, in 1993, the Mowachaht/Muchalaht received a court date for the following year with respect to the lawsuit regarding the rigged voting for the lease. In the interim, negotiations ensued at an unprecedented pace between the federal and provincial governments and the negotiating team of the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council and the Mowachaht/Muchalaht Council of Chiefs. In the end, our nation agreed to drop the lawsuit, and the government agreed to pay \$9.6 million to relocate the twenty-eight

existing households on Ahaminaquus IR 12 to a new reserve, Tsaxana, where I live to this day. Today, living at Tsaxana can be as challenging as it was living at Ahaminaquus. Arn and I had parted ways as alcohol seeped back into our lives, and we eventually separated and divorced. Till his death in 2009 of pancreatic cancer, he was staunch in his support of all of the Yuquot initiatives, for which I am humbly grateful.

SUMMERFEST

I shared my skills and worked with the band until 1988, when I entered the business administration program at City University in Seattle. I returned to Yuquot in 1990 to head the economic development project. Our goal was to develop an economic vision for the nation, and my teammates were Sheila Savey and Wayne Lord. One project was a summer event in August 1992, which became the first Yuquot Spirit Summerfest. The theme was a bicentennial celebration of the meeting of Captain Bodega y Quadra, Captain Vancouver, and Chief Maquinna at Yuquot on 28 August 1792. Invited guests included the Spanish ambassador, the British consulate general, Senator Pat Carney, Tribal Council President George Watts, the local member of Parliament and member of the Legislative Assembly, and the mayors of Tahsis, Gold River, and Zeballos. We served a traditional salmon barbecue lunch. There was traditional singing and dancing and gifts for all. And for all intents and purposes, it was a huge success. An authentic Mowachaht/Muchalaht tourism experience that shared the natural beauty of the area and the traditional culinary resources of the traditional territory, it bore witness to what a wonderful, spectacular, and awesome place Yuquot was – and remains. Once you visit, you are never quite the same. It is special and unique: “It’s not just a place, it’s a feeling!” That was the economic development team’s first branding and marketing mantra, and it was used on the first promotional brochure. Themes for Summerfest have ranged throughout the spectrum, and, in 2012, as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada projects, we raised a Welcome Pole at Yuquot during our Summerfest, celebrating with ceremony, feast, and song.

The success of the first Summerfest prompted the community to schedule the Campout and the subsequent Summerfests to coincide. During the last weekend of Summerfest, MMFN members fished, providing the Summerfest lunch. Campers were settled in and were at home. It was a good mix, to come together at home and share the bounty of the *hahuuli* (our lands and riches) with our guests.

Since 1992, after Parks Canada and the provincial Ministry of Tourism became aware of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation's desire to focus its economic development efforts on Yuquot (through the Tourism Action process, a provincial planning strategy in which MMFN was the first Aboriginal group in the province to participate), the MMFN and Parks Canada have continued to collaborate to forge a new path forward for Yuquot. We succeeded in having the plaque for Yuquot's historical designation replaced so that it would commemorate Indigenous history, not simply present the past through a European lens. Chief Maquinna and the Elders wanted to ensure that Yuquot is and always would be the home of the people. Chief Maquinna (then Ambrose, now his son Mike) opened Yuquot to the world. In 1998, as director of cultural and heritage resources, I was Spain's guest. Their acknowledgment of our historical ties became an opportunity to share, and they gifted us with a set of reproductions from the expeditions of the late 1700s. My visit was monumental to some, who viewed it as the first time a Mowachaht had visited Spain. On learning of my transpacific heritage, my hosts noted Spain's long history in the Philippines. This role as director led to my becoming the president of the Land of Maquinna Cultural Society, a non-profit arm of the MMFN whose purpose is to promote Yuquot's heritage. I am honoured to hold that position to this day and to carry on the late Ambrose Maquinna's legacy of preserving the cultural heritage of the Nootka people at Yuquot by organizing the annual Summerfest event as well as by promoting the MMFN application for a World Heritage Site designation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

The 2018 Summerfest was particularly memorable for me as it honoured the transpacific tale of Comekela, the younger brother of Chief Maquinna, who returned to Yuquot 230 years ago, after having lived in China for one year. His story, and that of the Chinese and Hawaiians who came to Yuquot in 1789, is recounted in John Price's article in this special issue. What was particularly memorable was the fact that a large delegation of Asian Canadians, organized by the University of Victoria, the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia, and the University of British Columbia's Asian Canadian and Asian Migration (ACAM) Program, came to Yuquot to commemorate these events – a first in the history of Summerfest. The delegation received and bestowed gifts, with ACAM director Chris Lee gifting our queen, Gloria Maquinna, with a blanket woven by Louie Gong, a Coast Salish artist of Nooksack, Chinese, Scottish, and French ancestry – truly a transpacific moment of

blended history. The delegation also included Chef Clarence Tay, who prepared a wonderful Chinese dinner that was served to the MMFN campers in the church that evening – a gesture of solidarity and gratitude for the hospitality offered by the people of Yuquot, then and now.

This moment at Yuquot echoes my own transpacific story, which I have now begun to tell. It recalls the special moments of common Indigenous values of *heshook-ish-tsarwalk*, of oneness, respect, sharing, and appreciation, bringing meaning beyond words.