

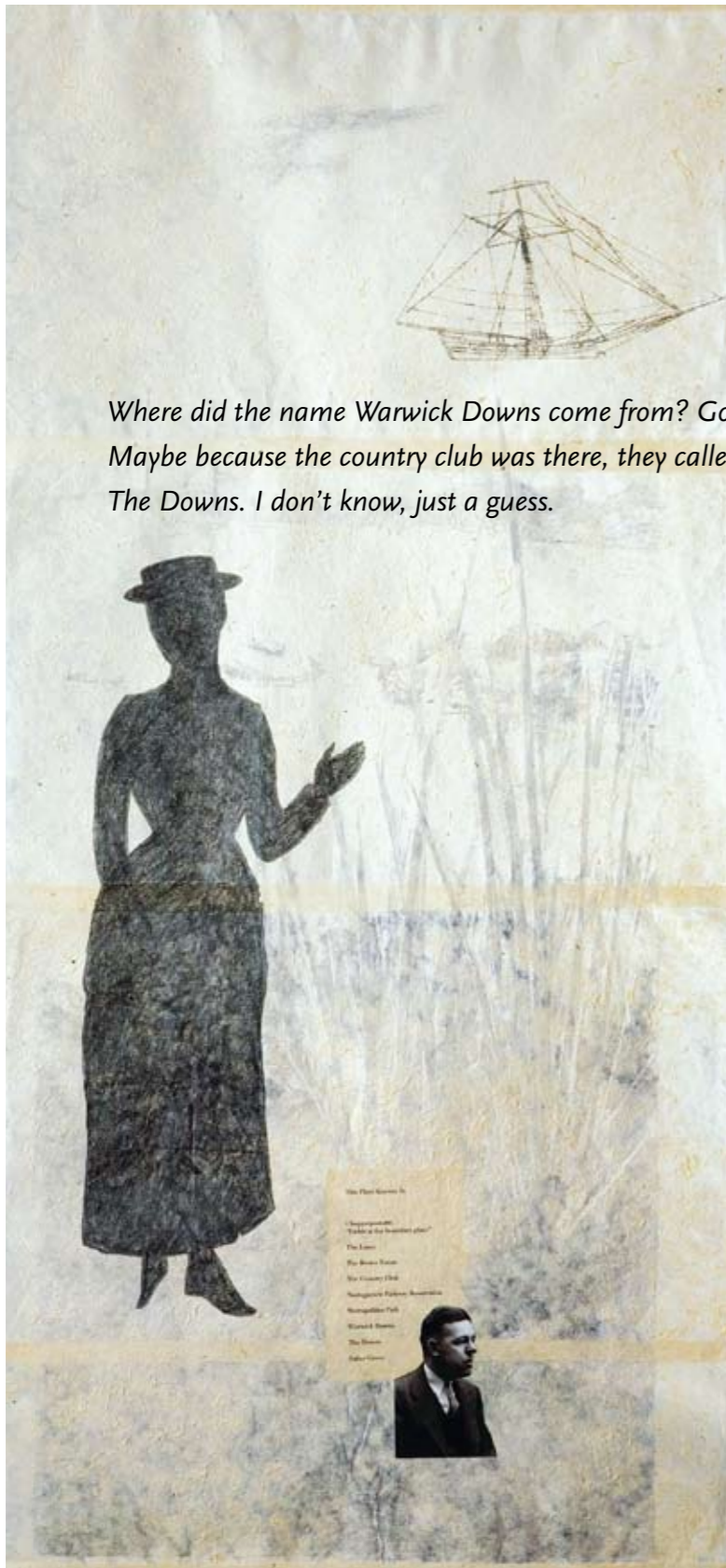
*I feel very connected to the place and I don't know why.
There is something about it that touches something deep inside me that's unnamed.*

It always calms me and centers me down here.

Introduction

Languages of the Land: A Dialogue with the Downs, originally presented as a visual and sound installation, is shared here as a book. Through individual interviews and story circles, people shared their memories and photographs of this bayside park near Pawtuxet Village, Rhode Island.

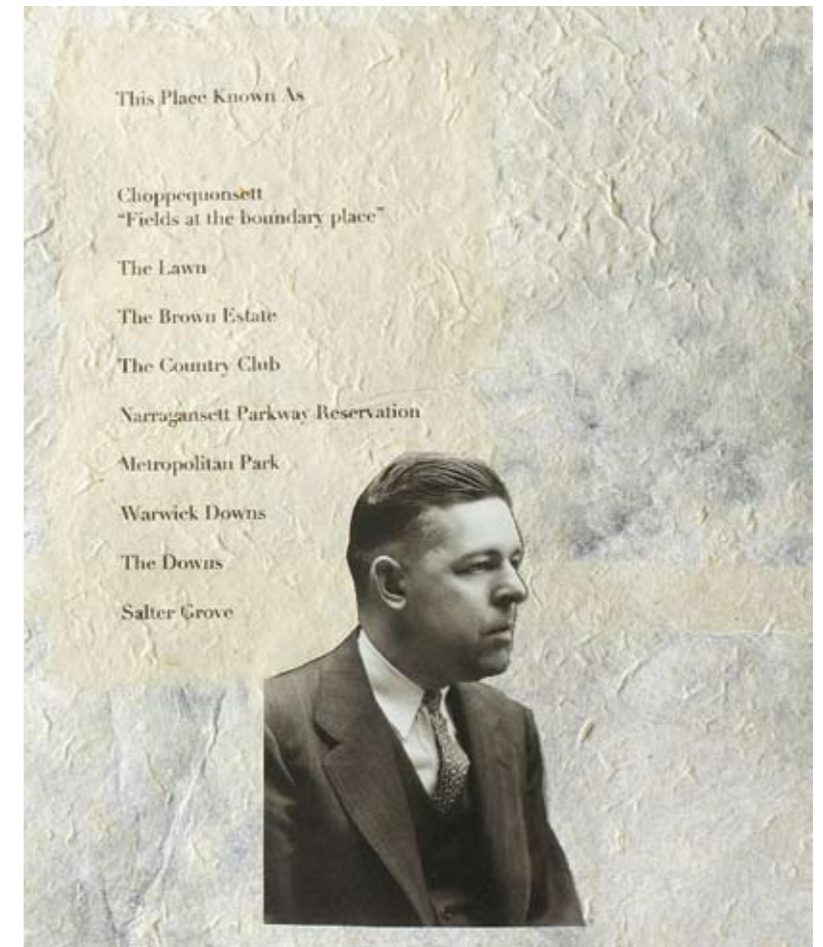




Where did the name Warwick Downs come from? Good question. Maybe because the country club was there, they called it a fancy name, The Downs. I don't know, just a guess.

I've always called it "My Grandfather's Park." Other people have called it "The Metro," "The Downs," "The Grove." Nope, I've always called it "My Grandfather's Park," like I owned it, right? The reason the park was named in his honor? My grandfather, George Salter, was very politically involved in the city of Warwick. He was a Councilman, Police Commissioner, Fire Commissioner. He was very well known, very well liked.

Before its name was spoken in English, this place was guarded and belonged to the royal Narragansett people. It was known as the Council Rock.



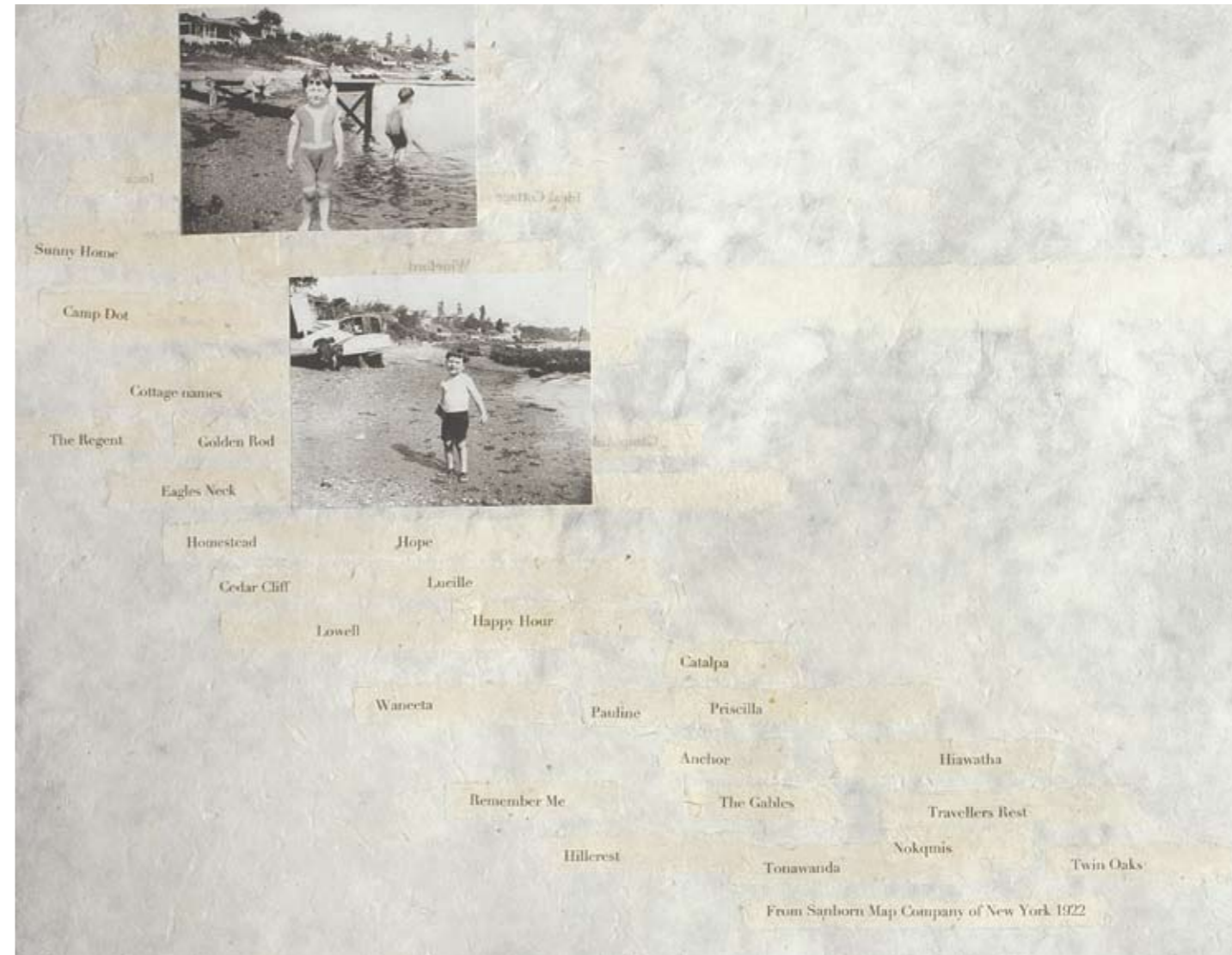


They used to come down with a wagon, load their stuff, and pitch a tent. Of course, people used to pitch tents all around that area, come down for the summer. I talked to one fellow and he said he first came by wagon in 1902. His father rented a wagon up by the Providence railroad station. He'd load it with hay and five, six kids, and the team would drive down to Gaspee Point. He said his grandfather would give them a spot. Took some of the straw and put it underneath the wagon and tether the horse, and they'd sleep underneath the wagon. They would go clamming and boil clams, play ball, and just run around on the beach.

The Hurricane of 1938 had a great impact on Warwick Downs. My friend who lived there said that three large waves came in. He said, "The first wave, it shook the bank. And the second wave came in and the house began to crumble. And the third wave just took everything out. Everything was just hanging wires."

There used to be a market right next door to Warwick Downs, where the Narragansett condominiums are. This small shack was called Lena's. It was a penny candy store. You could buy Lady Fingers and those wax coke bottles. All the junk candy.

Salter's Grove, when they took that for the park, I think there were thirty-seven cottages. Mrs. Morrison was the last one. When she got put out down there, they tore the store down.



My grandfather, his grandfather walked down here from Nova Scotia and built two fishin' boats. And that's where we came from: the ocean.

I was there all day, just running around, back and forth, across the rocks. A school of blues goes to one end and then it comes back. I'm chasing after it. There was several other people casting with a fourteen-pound line for skipjacks. Just then, a huge splash. A striper jumps out of the water, crashing. "Oh, my God, what is that!" It took me about half an hour to reel it in, because I know that if I try to just reel it in, the fourteen-pound line would snap. I was kind of afraid. He was so big. I think it was like forty-six, forty-seven inches. It came up over past my waist. It took me about twenty minutes to walk over to the car because it was so heavy. I had all these things going through my head, like, it's a really old fish, he must be a grandpa, I feel so bad. I gave it to my mom.





until I started to work in my own community of Pawtuxet Village that I saw a way for my art to be a setting for other voices.

Integrating my work with the stories of the people really began coming together with the Languages of the Land project. For example, I handed out cameras and asked people to share their favorite spots or views with me, which in turn influenced some of my imagery. Inspired by the project, a neighbor of mine organized a clean-up of the park. I had often found objects washed up on the shore in my visit, so I asked each of the volunteers cleaning up if they would select a “treasure” from their trash to give me for inclusion in the final installation.

The text portion of Languages of the Land was derived from audio field recordings that I made in three different contexts. On-site interviews took place in the natural setting of Salter Grove. We talked to people as they were fishing, playing with their children, or just relaxing at the park. Ambient sounds, such as birds, wind, waves, airplanes and motorcycles, brought the environment onto the recording, which captured the natural atmosphere. We also convened group interviews. These “story circles” focused on certain topics and usually were held in a public space. We asked people to bring items that would help prod memories and stimulate discussion. Finally, for more in-depth interviews, we recorded individuals, often in their own homes. They contributed insights they had gained from documented history, collective oral traditions and memories of personal experiences.

The voices of the people who share their stories with me obviously are essential in my work, but during my thirty years as a folklorist, I can't recall ever letting them be heard or read without my own interpretation and commentary. So I did feel somewhat out of my element when we made the decision to assemble a collage of voices that would reflect--and be reflected by—the visual images you created. Without a scholar's explicit interpretation of various contexts—historical, cultural, social, for instance--the work would be self-contained.

Oh, so you mean the work would be free to be interpreted or reflected on by the viewer or reader?

Well, yes. I had to relinquish control, become a silent ethnographer, and that was, frankly, a daunting challenge. On the other hand, relaxing the constraints of my academic training gave me permission to be a scholar and artist at the same time. My intention was to remain in the background and allow people to tell their stories and convey their sentiments directly. Working with you has shown me that, like community-based narratives, themselves, their interpretations can be expressed indirectly and artistically, as well as directly and explicitly.

Even though the contexts you found in your research do not appear directly, they gave me lots of raw material to work with. I've always tried to create art that gives viewers a tantalizing image to enter into, engage with and, reflecting on their own personal experiences, create their own stories. I hope that the community work I do incorporates that invitation to reflect and share. In the installation of *Languages of the Land*, I wanted to create a life-sized book where people could walk inside and be with their own memories of seaside places. And on another level, be in this particular place with the details of audio memories, old photographs and silhouettes of past inhabitants. Like history, the installation presents multiple layers to walk through and decipher. I also chose a specific paper for the installation prints (scanned, enlarged and digitally printed from wax collages) that was fibrous and translucent and allowed the shadows from the images on one side to show through on the other side, like an echo.

The impulse to create a handheld book from the installation came from a love of books and the intimate world one enters when reading or looking through a book. And it opens a vast universe of imagination. I wanted people to have this world to take with them, unlike the installation, which is a one-time experience that is held in memory. I chose to make it a printed version rather than a handmade artist book with wonderful papers so that it would be accessible to a broader audience and, hopefully, inspire others to look closer and dig deeper into the layers and shadows of their own places.

