

Tidal Relations

By

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Abstract

This paper is the theoretical component that accompanies Sidi Chen's Master of Fine Arts project, *Tidal Relations*, at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. *Tidal Relations* is a practice-based relational inquiry from the diasporic perspective of a queer Chinese person. Based on the artist's positionality, Chen concludes two key characteristics of *Tidal Relations* that are entanglement and trans-corporeality. While entanglement informs an interdisciplinary research methodology, trans-corporeality addresses intersubjectivity as a result of the kinesthetic empathy of bodies in *Tidal Relations* that are more than human. And to further orient and navigate the complexity of *Tidal Relations*, Chen interprets and utilizes the Chinese traditional philosophy, 留白, translated as *to dwell in the blankness*, as a relational principle and aesthetic strategy. Based on this principle, Chen explores the embodiment of *Tidal Relations* in three projects from their MFA studies: *Where I Am When I Land Between the Waves*, a contemporary experiment of traditional Chinese painting as a map of navigation; *Pondering (Until It's Water on Both Sides)*, a site-specific performance drawn on locational scores and bodily fables as a way of knowing; and *Mirage Raft (The dream talking Oyster)*, a multimedia performance installation that explores media as extensions of the body and measurement of diasporic distance.

留

留白, pronounced /liu bai/, is a traditional Chinese aesthetic philosophy that is widely used in painting, music, opera, architecture, poetry, and other creative practices.

“留” - to preserve, to remain, to dwell

“白” - the color white, the void, the untouched space, the blankness

In my practice, I translate 留白 to a verb phrase as *to dwell in the blankness* with the emphasis on the position, condition, agency, and affect of the body in relation to *the blankness*.

白

Preface

About Language and Vocabulary

Due to the nature of interdisciplinary research, I have encountered many terms from diverse disciplines and utilized their definitions through a conceptual and artistic method, especially how terms resonate with my bodily experience:

Trans-corporeality – This is a concept developed from New Materialism theories and adapted by Posthuman Feminist theorist, Astrida Neimanis¹ (See page 6 in this paper). I understand it as the physical and phenomenological connections between material bodies at different scales.

Interpermeation – This is a material phenomenon in Physics and Engineering. This term has also been interpreted by Astrida Neimanis² (See page 6 in this paper). I utilize this term to describe the process and impact of the relational exchanges amongst various bodies.

Kinesthetic Empathy – This term is associated with the dance critic, John Martin³. I adapt this concept to explain how trans-corporeality can occur amongst different bodies and be experienced through multiple sensory perceptions, such as hearing, touching, and smelling.

Writing in English as my third language, I interpret and even transform the fundamental logics of different languages (Mandarin, Hokkien, English), venture into the unspeakable space between them, and recognize that they impact my experiences in different contexts. Understanding some of the terms might be literal and easy to adapt in one language but abstract and difficult to grasp in another, even for native speakers, I anchor my writing and research through intuitive responses to specific terms and allow them to open up the possibilities to interact with broader disciplines and studies.

¹ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 95.

² Ibid., page 95

³ Stanton B. Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre: Phenomenology, Cognition, Movement* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 151.

Introduction

My interest in exploring a movement-based relationship comes from my ten-year lived experience as a Chinese queer diaspora. Finding empathies from the tidal movements of the Pacific Ocean that connect the two continents, I anchor my focus of research on the tides, and name such a movement-based relationship as *Tidal Relations*.

Following my diaspora journey that it is still continuous through my MFA study, I have been engaging in site-specific research to interrogate how *Tidal Relations* can be, how they are formulated, how they indicate, and what to do with them. Therefore, in this essay, I will introduce my main research activities, creative practice, and thesis installation in the four main chapters.

In *Tidal Relations*, I reflect how my positionality informs the languages and methodologies that allows me to contextualize the idea of *Tidal Relations*.

In *Dwell in the Blankness*, I explore a traditional Chinese aesthetic concept as the organizing principle for my investigation of *Tidal Relations*.

In *On Sites*, I write about my site-specific enquiry of I generate the scores for performance to tell the locational fables as a research method.

In *Media Embodiment*, I experiment how media installations embody the research process and create a space of relational inquiry.

At the end of the essay, I reflect on the limitations of my research due to the pandemic and the geographical and linguistic barriers, as well as the future directions where I would like to further my research of *Tidal Relations*.

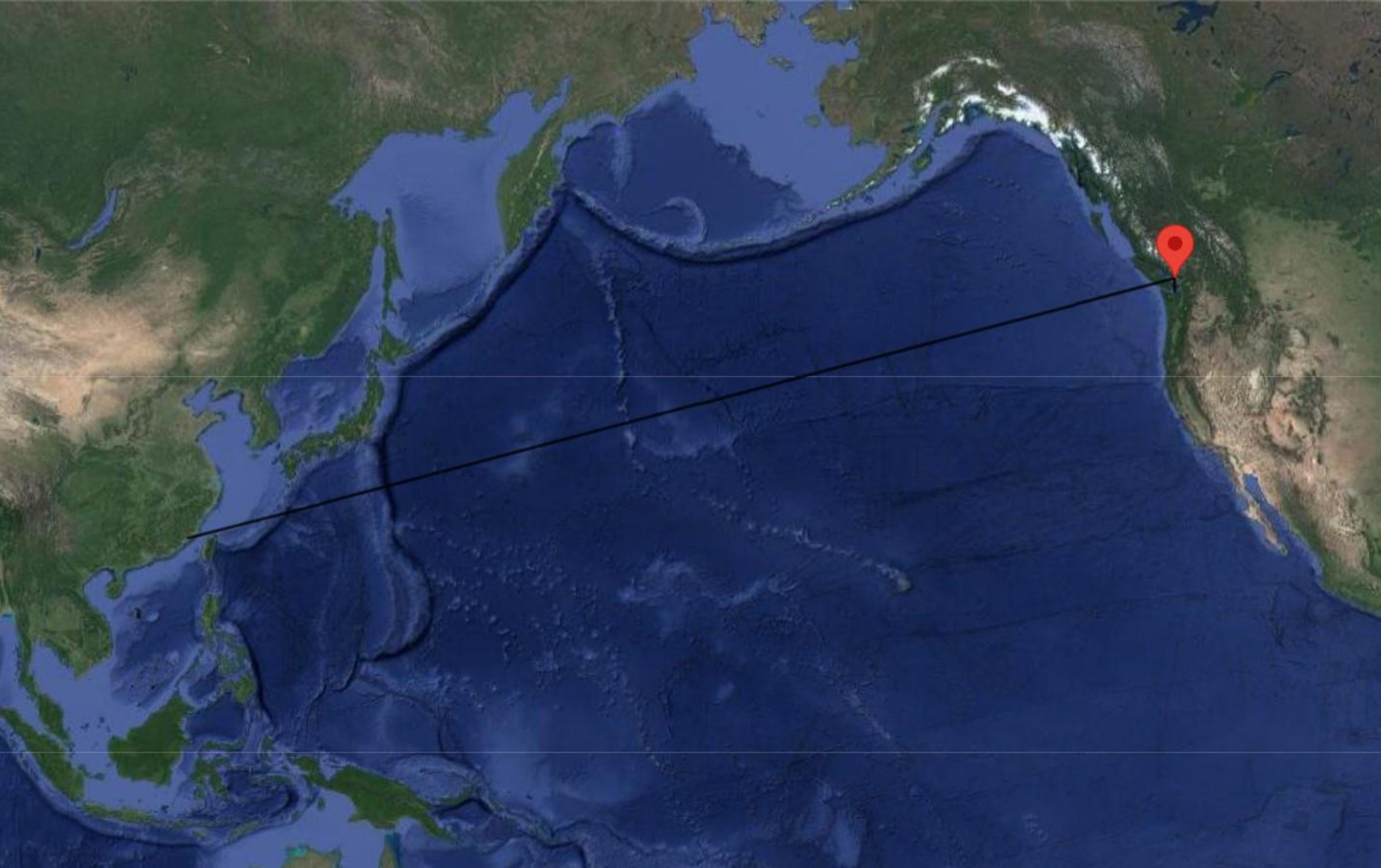


Figure 1 Distance between the shorelines of Vancouver, Canada, and Jinjing, China, my hometown, about 9785 km. Copyright: Google Map Image, under fair use

Tidal Relations

Tidal Land

My Master of Fine Arts study consists of many on-site interrogations at the space between the land and water that took place over the Vancouver coastlines and the Sunshine Coast in B.C., the prairies and fields in Alberta, as well as the communities along the Lake Ontario, O.N.

Depending on the point of entry, the intersection of land and water has many names – it is the foreshore if approached from the land; it is the shallow if accessed from the water. The name of the intersectional space reflects my relations to the lands and waters that I have traversed, as well as my positions where I situate my research.

The intersection between land and water marks my journey across the Pacific Ocean as a Chinese queer diaspora (Figure 1). When I was a child, I used to go to the beach in my hometown. I enjoyed planting my feet in sands and letting the receding tides take

my gaze beyond the horizon and wonder where the tides came from and headed back to beyond the horizon. And now on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, I embed my feet in the sands and feel the ground drifting away beneath again. When I gaze onto the Pacific Ocean towards the horizon my hometown, I wonder the same just as when I was a child:

Where do the tides come from?
Where do the tides return to?

I liken the diaspora journey of my queer body across the Pacific Ocean to the tides – a travelling body of water that rises and recedes between continents, cultures, and languages that cultivate an identity that changes every time I cross a geographical border or a customs gate. It is an identity of uncertainties and possibilities and I echo such a queer diaspora identity to how Astrida Neimanis interprets Luce Irigaray's idea of *liquid ground* – “both essential to life and also always shifting⁴”. While Irigaray originally approaches this term from a

watery perspective that emphasizes on the sexuate difference as the possibility of existence, Neimanis proposes to reconsider *liquid ground* as the logics of difference and connection that “water is at once the originary condition of all possibility, but also its force of differentiation and wellspring of unknowability⁵”.

Inspired by Neimanis, I don't see queer and diaspora as two separate incidents of my journey; rather, they unite in my relational enquiry of a movement-based connection. For me, queer is not only the sexual and social constructions that refers to sexual orientation and gender identity; relationally, queer is to unbind the conventional definition of kinships that are restricted by the bloodlines. And diaspora has thus become the condition of queering through body movements that trespass the artificial border lines on the lands and waters and stop in the in-between, just like the tides.

⁴ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 69.

⁵ Ibid., page 69-78.

Therefore, I call such an intersection the tidal land - a between space, a spaciousness informed by the endless tidal movement – it is both my port of departure and bay of arrival, where my unforsaken histories with the lands and waters anchor my relations on the shifting tides.

Tidal Relations

If through the tides my journey proceeds, on the tidal land my practice and research situate, then it is in *Tidal Relations* where I find the umbilical cord connecting the bodies that are human, ecological, and planetary.

Tidal Relations take forms via various bodies. At the planetary scale, it is the gravity tension between the Earth and the moon; in the ecological term, it is the living condition of many tidal species' habitation; at a personal level, it is the elasticity of distance in space and time, through which I negotiate and navigate the connections between my body and the others.

An important reminder while traversing the tidal land is that *Tidal Relations* are not a



Figure 2 Sechelt Inlet, Sechelt, BC, September 9th, 2022, full tide. Image Credit: Sidi Chen

binary perspective. Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler's criticism on modernist imaginaries suggests that we are not "existing in a flat, two-dimensional space, side-by-side, tracing continuities in relation across linear time into the ever more efficient self-regulation of Resilience⁶"; therefore, in our contemporary moment, to simply observe and engage in the tidal land from either the perspective of the water or the land will inevitably create isolation and tear apart the intersectionality that is at core

of *Tidal Relations*. In this case, I am understanding intersectionality as the simultaneous rooting on the land and water, *Tidal Relations* are the embodiment of planetary rotations, the merging of diverse ecosystems, and the collision of human histories. From such a figuring of intersectionality, *Tidal Relations* indicates two key characters of entanglement and trans-corporeality.

⁶ J. Pugh, and D. Chandler. 2021. *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*. London: Ubiquity Press. 70.

To understand and research the complex and entangled issues in *Tidal Relations* requires an interdisciplinary approach and knowledge because of the interdependence of the bodies (e.g., human, more than human, marine) in the tidal land. For example, from the case of the submerged land bridge in my hometown, I explored the issue of shoreline erosion at Sechelt, BC, a land bridge community on the Sunshine Coast separating the Sechelt Inlet and the Strait of Georgia (Figure 2). Erosion issues are not simply the result of tidal waves; instead, they are the outcome of compounded elements, including city planning, environmental conservation, raising sea levels, and marine economic development. It further is entangled with the indigenous histories and the self-governance model of the Shíshálh Nation as well as colonial legacies on the Sunshine Coast. Therefore, the erosion of the Sechelt land bridge has not only resulted in the conflict between community safety and living space for wildlife (I even ran into a black bear at the Sechelt Marsh during a research trip.)

but also the fluctuation of property values and the rising cost of living, especially for the local indigenous community and the low-income population.

The interdisciplinary methods not only bridge the knowledge gaps between the artificial boundaries of disciplines (e.g., Art, Ecology, Sociology) but also allow me to be in a present moment of the entanglements that are intergenerational and trans-spatial, as how Pugh and Chandler put in *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* that a researcher in such entanglements is not in the directing position but as a part of the processes of creative emergence at the local and micro levels to “shift the focus to concrete interactions in specific moments ... that enable us to see the creativity in the everyday⁷”.

To understand the trans-corporeality of *Tidal Relations*, I’d like to refer to Neimanis’s exploration through the watery phenomenon of interpermeation. Contradicting the

Western post-Enlightenment epistemological viewpoints that suggest the bodies as separate discrete, Neimanis see that water not only “digging stealth channels through us all” in the hydrological cycle, immediate or delayed, but to see from a more complex logic of interpermeation other than simply flowing, water changes the bodies connected through it and becomes the difference that facilitates a new kind of bodies and formulates relations that are inextricably interdependence⁸. Thus, through the perspective of interpermeation, in *Tidal Relations*, the trans-corporeality is not the antidote to entanglement, but rather, it transcends the entanglement to empower the bodies in *Tidal Relations* to differentiate and reciprocate, becoming the otherness of relativity, the alterities with intersubjectivity.

Specifically, such intersubjectivity, as an embodiment of the trans-corporeality, comes from the kinesthetic empathy⁹ amongst the bodies in *Tidal Relations*. Originally, kinesthetic empathy is a term used in the

⁷ J. Pugh, and D. Chandler. 2021. *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*. London: Ubiquity Press. 76-77.

⁸ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 95.

⁹ Karan Barad’s concept of *Intra-action* frames a similar concept of constant exchanging and influencing within a system with an emphasis on the materiality. My current research focuses on the coordination of the movements - my immigration journey, my research processes, the tidal movements, and the planetary rotations – from the lens of kinesthetic empathy as a part of the diaspora study. I would like to explore Barad’s idea in my future research.

practices of dance, theatre, and other creative formats with speculations. According to the summaries by Dee Reynold and Matthew Reason, kinesthetic empathy refers to the experience of empathy that can be felt and resonated in the audience by simply observing the performers' movements¹⁰. With the emphasis on the migration of emotions, this concept has thus widely applied in various interdisciplinary research from education to sociology, from media to cultural practices. In *Tidal Relations*, for my queer diaspora body, I would like to expand the boundary of the term to find kinesthetic empathy from the realms of more than human, such as the migrating animals, the travelling ocean currents, the drifting plate tectonics, and the ever-rotating celestial bodies.

Moreover, kinesthetic empathy is not only a way of relating but it also proposes a non-linear method of knowing. Like what Reynolds describes in the book, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (2012), this form of knowing through the practiced-based research process advanced

the notions of embodied knowledge by proposing a non-conventional language and a discursive learning trajectory that allow the bodies, in presence or absence, to be in an active synchronization through movements¹¹. And in *Tidal Relations*, the kinesthetic empathy with the more-than-human becomes the rationale of trans-corporeality and it takes shapes through various embodiments from my research process, project production, to the presentation of the artworks, such as the scores generated through the bodily response to the tidal schedule, the interpermeation of the ink and water on canvas, and the media application that offers inter-species attunements.

The trans-corporeality is an inevitable result of the entanglements within *Tidal Relations*, and like the umbilical cord, trans-corporeality joins the bodies that are more than human and reciprocates the nourishments through the kinesthetic empathy. It is an instrumental notion to proceed *Tidal Relation* not as enclosed systems but how the entanglements are

unravelling through the dynamic bodily negotiations and navigations.

¹⁰ Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012), 248.

¹¹ Ibid., page 195-196.



Figure 3 *Where I Am When I Land Between the Waves*, Sidi Chen, ink, charcoal, pastel, water, oil on raw canvas with mylar installation, 2023. Image Credit: Michael Love

To Dwell in the Blankness

Based on my cultural upbringing and the my contemporary practice of the traditional Chinese painting¹², my approach the concept of 留白 began from a visual perspective. In order to navigate and negotiate the entanglement and trans-corporeality of *Tidal Relations*, I translate the concept of 留白 as *to dwell in the blankness*, and utilize it as the relational principle and aesthetic strategy with the example of the painting¹³ installation, *Where I Am When I Land Between Waves* (Figure 3), as a map of networks.

The Blankness and Dwelling

Deeply rooted in the Daoism philosophy, 白 in traditional Chinese painting refers to the untouched surface of the paper, silk, or canvas. It often represents water, clouds, mist, or sky, erasing or blurring the boundaries of forms within the painting. And

in the enquiry of *Tidal Relations*, I translate the concept of 白 as *the blankness*.

Visually, *the blankness* resides where the water dries clear, the ink dilutes thin, and the brushes leave area -intentionally and unintentionally - uncovered, just like the patches of bear ground in the tidal land. I see *the blankness* as a space for water and ink to infuse and expand upon the surface. As Nathalie Trouveroy interprets in her book, *Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting* (2003), while the materials of ink and water are seen as Ying and Yang, *the blankness* is an essential element where the interactions between Ying and Yang take place¹⁴ - it is both Ying and Yang at the same time and neither of them; it is a third dimension that bypasses the binary boundaries; it is the embodiment the material states as well as the their own processes of making.

This resonates with the line in *DaoDeJing*¹⁵, the Daoist classical text, “the greatest music takes faintest notes, the most sublime image takes no forms¹⁶”, phenomenologically, *the blankness* can be experienced as the abundance of experience and the absence or impossibility in expression; it creates a synaesthesia of sensuousness coupled with the otherness of the recognition. To understand such a complex and paradoxical position in *Tidal Relations* requires a bodily annotation.

One example is what Kathleen Stewart describes as *ordinary affect*, which “can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation ... Rooted not in fixed conditions of possibility but in the actual lines of potential that a *something*

¹² There are many different schools within the traditional Chinese painting. In my practice and writing, I specifically refer to the school of 写意, or *Freehand*.

¹³ The work is created using both drawing and painting techniques, but considering the root of my practice, I will use the term “painting” to describe it.

¹⁴ Nathalie, Trouveroy. “Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting.” *India International Centre Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2003): 5–19.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005838>. Page 7

¹⁵ 《道德经》, the Daoist classical text that is said written by Laozi (571 BC – 471 BC ?), a philosopher and writer in the Spring and Autumn period.

¹⁶ 大音希声, 大象无形。DaoDeJing Chapter 41. Translated by writer.

coming together calls to mind and sets in motion¹⁷”. And such affects as a format of *the blankness* can be experienced in the mundane moments in *Tidal Relations*. From my diaspora experience, *the blankness* is the waiting time between connecting flights, the expiration dates of identity documents, the pending periods of visa applications, the time differences of on the calendars, and the moments of aphasia when speaking my mother tongue.

Those moments may be seemingly transient and temporary, yet they linger within the bodies of *Tidal Relations* as well as the bodily interactions. And to navigate *the Blankness* created through these processes, I want to use the concept of 留 to understand the agencies of the bodies in *Tidal Relations*.

When people approach the concept of 留白, the word 留 is often overlooked, such as Trouveroy’s translation - “the middle

void¹⁸”. Grammatically, it is the adjective that describes 白, meaning the remained, the reversed, the clear, the left, indicating an impartial position. However when researching *Tidal Relations* from the queer diasporic position, I want to refer to the property of 留 as a verb – to stay, to leave, *to dwell*.

Thus, based on the linguistical and conceptual roots, *to dwell* suggests an assimilation of a duality: on one hand, *to dwell* is the process of navigating *the blankness*; on the other hand, *to dwell* is also the process of becoming *the blankness*. From such a duality, *to dwell* is to navigate from within.

What actions does *dwelling* entail? Trouveroy offers an exercisable experience where she compares the process of mediating on *the blankness* to “the yogic practice of *pranayama*: breathe in, retain,

breathe out – the suspension of breath is the *Void*¹⁹ where meditation occurs²⁰”. In this case, breathing is the act of *dwelling* that creates, enters, and becomes *the blankness* itself.

Dwelling is not a sedentary pose, rather it is the action that mediates the position. It is not meant to be comfortable nor constructive.

To dwell is to walk, to stand; to listen, to speak; to exchange, to gift; to nurture, to harvest; to land, to migrate; to distance and relate, to lose and navigate.

The duality of such *dwelling* grants and contextualizes the agencies of the bodies in *Tidal Relations*, in Stewart’s articulation, it navigates *the blankness* through the explorations of “what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things [that] are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance²¹”.

¹⁷ Kathleen, Stewart. *Ordinary Affects*. (Durham: Duke University Press), 2007. 3.

¹⁸ Nathalie, Trouveroy. “Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting.” *India International Centre Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2003): 5–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005838>. Page 7

¹⁹ Trouveroy’s translation of 留白, “Middle Void”, Stressing the 白.

²⁰ Nathalie, Trouveroy. “Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting.” *India International Centre Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2003): 5–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005838>. Page 7

²¹ Ibid., page 3.

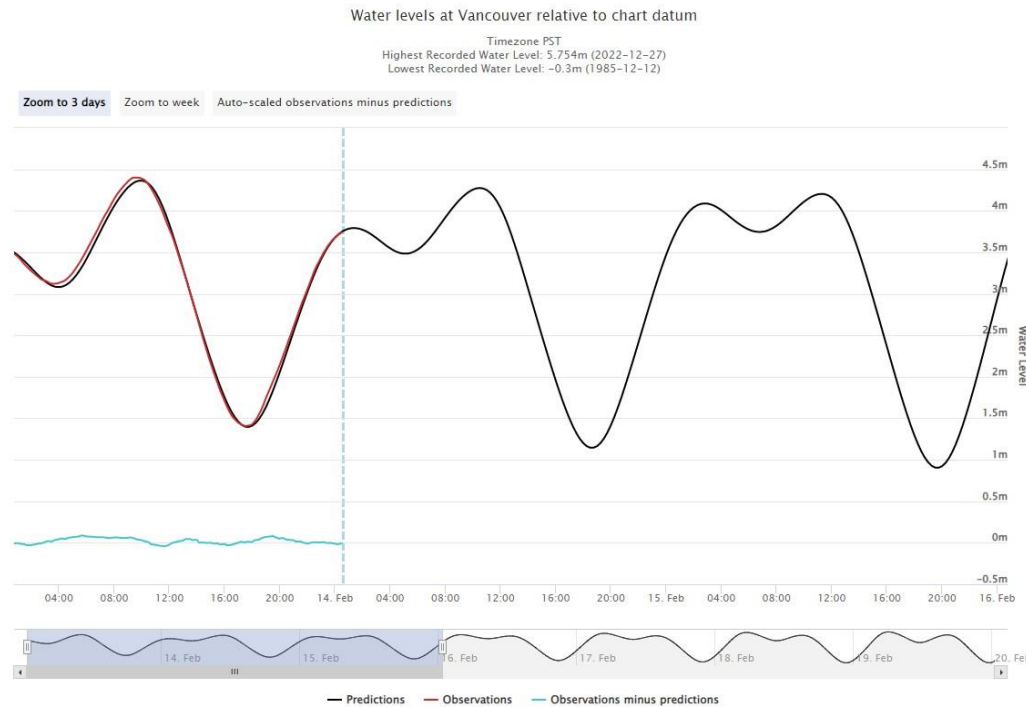


Figure 4 Vancouver Tidal Chart, Feb. 14, 2023

The blankness could be understood as a state of overwhelming affects and relations, but to *dwell* in such a *blankness* is not to remain overwhelmed nor to jump to solution. Thus, in my inquiry of *Tidal Relations*, *dwelling in the blankness* embeds in the navigation and negotiation in the network of the vast relations and ideally nurtures a social

becoming that makes sense not through overt meaning but rather the bodily encounters.

Map of Networks

If the *blankness* of *Tidal Relations* lies in the woven networks, to *dwell* is the orientation informed by the kinesthetic empathies of the bodies in *Tidal Relations*.

Through my MFA research, I have conducted several investigations on various locations to interrogate different embodiments of *Tidal Relations* with site specificities. And at the end of my MFA study, I created a contemporary experiment of traditional Chinese painting as the map and archive the archive of *Tidal Relations*.

In the composition of my painting, I take references and inspirations from my field notes, live sketches, maps, tidal charts (Figure 4²²), soundwave patterns of waves and seasonal winds, as well as histories and stories of specific locations. I don't intend to construct replicas of the data nor to represent a moment of reality. From the perspective of traditional Chinese painting, especially the school of *Freehand Landscape*²³, a painting is composed from the inner realm of the artist's spirit informed by their engagement with the landscape, instead of a representation of the physical location. In the painting, I manifest a network of gestures through my bodily experience with

²² The tidal chart information is obtained on the Canadian Government website: <https://www.tides.gc.ca/en/stations/7735>, on February 14th, 2023.

²³ 写意山水, directly translated "depict the sense of the mountains and water", emphasizes taking the world inward to understand the essence of a landscape.

selected locations (i.e., traces of footprints on the beach and ripples on the water) and my embodied learning from the interdisciplinary, intersectional research. Such a network is not a meticulously categorized database, but where *the blankness* takes shape in the entangled bodies of *Tidal Relations*, and an engagement with research that is individual, communal, and ecological.

For the technical execution, I combined traditional Chinese painting skills and cross-hatching to render this woven network. To prepare the surface for the crosshatching, I apply techniques of traditional Chinese painting, such as the wet painting method - to moisturize the surface materials first and apply ink after, allowing an interpermeation to unfold through the capillarity of the material. This method blurs the intention and gestures of the artist, visually and conceptually, and allows the agency of materials to transform the shapes and boundaries of the composition. For instance, in Canadian artist, Ed Pien's drawing series, *Ocean Drawing* (2017-2018) (Figure 5), he uses white ink to respond to the traces of the

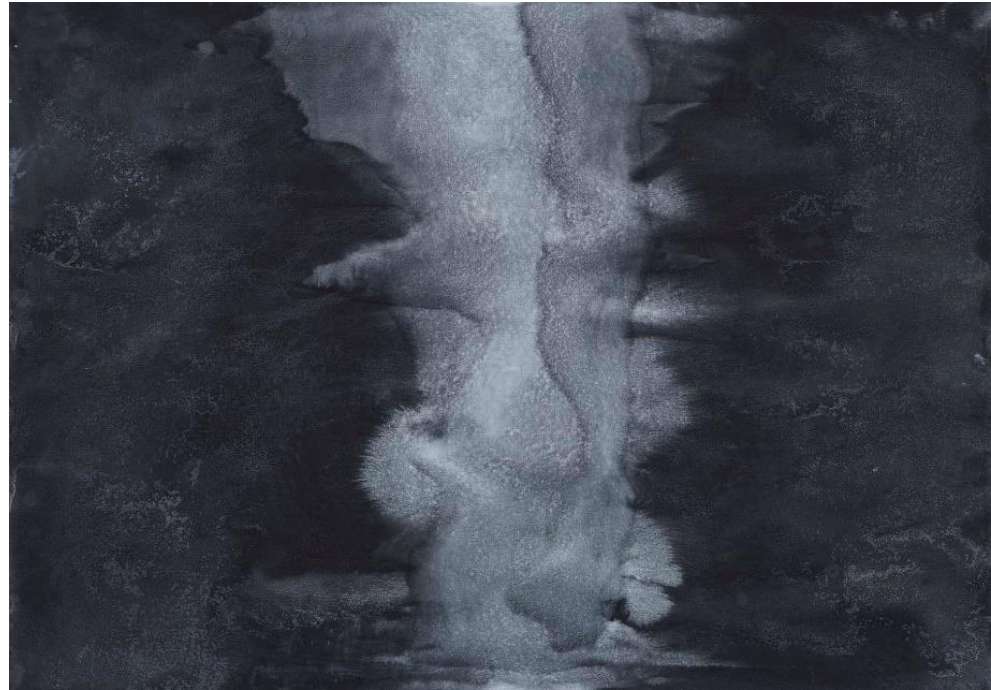


Figure 5 *Plume*, from the series of *Ocean Drawing*, Ed Pien, white ink and ocean water on paper, 2017-2018. Used by permission of the artist.

ocean water as it expands upon and evaporates from the paper. Through this approach, Pien sees water as a collaborative body and celebrates the sentience, creativity, liveliness, and the agency of the water²⁴.

Furthermore, for me, cross-hatching resembles the ripples on the water. For example, in Icelandic artist, Finnbogi

Pétursson's installation, *Infra-Supra* (2014-2023) (Figure 6), the artist uses three speakers and low-frequency sound to create patterns of concentric ripples in a large and shallow pool of water. Through the strategical lighting, these ripples are then reflected onto a wall to form lines and patterns that dance to the sound design. The artist allows the audience to hear and

²⁴ Ed Pien, "Ocean Drawing," ED PIEN, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.edpien.com/oceandrawing>.

appreciate the sound through a fourth, high-frequency, speaker that is located outside the pool. Although working with multiple media, Pétursson refers to his installation as drawings with the seemingly intangible elements of lights, sounds, and water²⁵.

In my painting, as a result of the combined techniques of cross-hatching and the wet painting method, the creative process is steered by a bodily collective – myself, the ink, the water, and the canvas, where droplets and bleedings stain the surface discrete areas offer up beautiful accidents

amidst the blankness. From the perspectives of trans-corporeality, the materials interpermeation becomes more than a physical reaction but a relational phenomenon – an embodiment of collective agencies and imaginations. Such collectivities transform the material relations where the process of painting becomes *the blankness* itself.

And for *dwelling*, I utilize the installation of a mylar layer that offers a new dimension to orient of *the blankness*.

Since my on-site research Wreck Beach, Vancouver, at the low tide hours, I have been fascinated by the illuminating and reflective surfaces of the tidal pools (Figure 7). For me, the tidal pools become portals to travel through time and spaces measured by the element of water. Therefore, I install a layer of reflective and semi-transparent mylar film through three locations in my thesis installation, which include a projection, a monitor screen, and the painting, as a reference to the tidal pools.

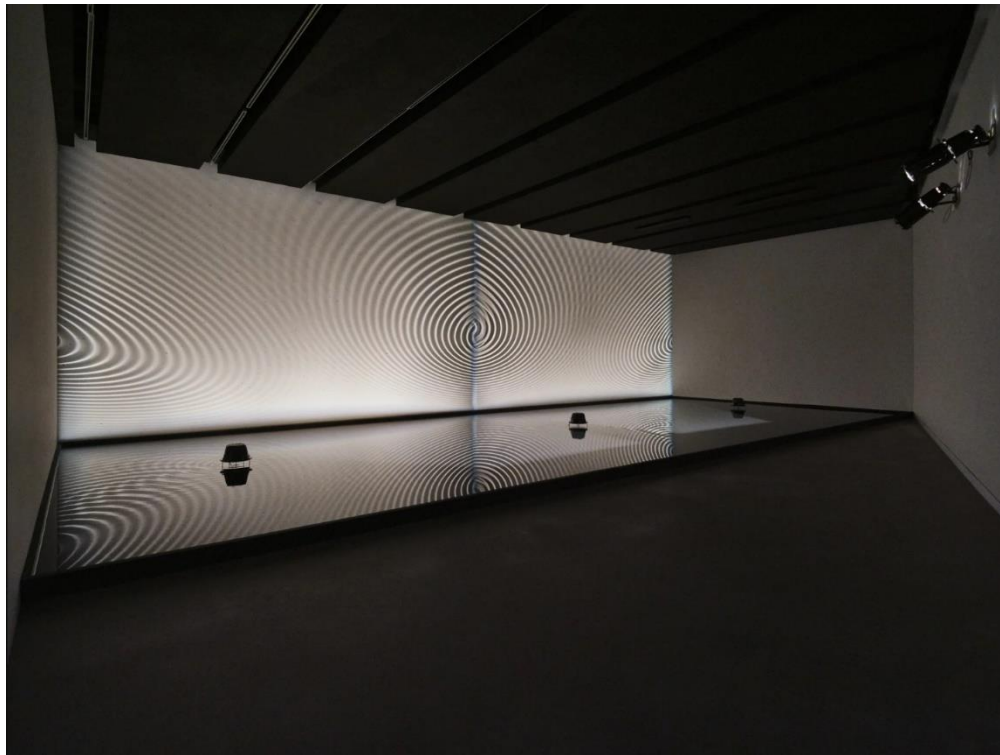


Figure 6 Infra/Supra, Finnbogí Pétursson, multimedia installation at New Media Gallery, 2023.

Used by permission of New Media Gallery

²⁵ Donald Brackett, "Earwitness: Looking at Sound with Finnbogí Pétursson," Earwitness: Looking at Sound with Finnbogí Pétursson (Critics at Large, November 10, 2016), <https://www.criticsatlarge.ca/2016/11/earwitness-looking-at-sound-with.html>.

Physically, the mylar layer not only serves as a visual indication that links the installations in three locations but also offers a physical barrier and channel for the painting to be seen through another perspective, where a barrier that distances the audiences from the painting creates a more immersive engagement in return (Figure 8).

Conceptually, the reflection becomes a portal to engage *the blankness* through a new perspective that disorients and reorients the viewer's position, action, and direction. like Pétursson's installation where the reflection "chart(s) he trajectories of time through the experience of light, shadow and silence²⁶". In this installation, the exterior reflection embodies the duality of the *dwelling* that is the making and the navigating of *the blankness*.

Together with the juxtaposition of the painting as well as its mirrored images in the mylar installation, I intend to create a space between physicality and affects to inquire the attunements and transitions between the presence and absence of the bodies in *Tidal Relations*.

Figure 7 On-site research at Wreck Beach, Vancouver, August 12, 2022, low tide. Image Credit: Sidi Chen.



Figure 8 Reflections of *Where I Am When I Land Between the Waves* in the mylar layer. Image credit: Michael Love.



²⁶ Donald Brackett, "Earwitness: Looking at Sound with Finnbogi Pétursson," Earwitness: Looking at Sound with Finnbogi Pétursson (Critics at Large, November 10, 2016), <https://www.criticsatlarge.ca/2016/11/earwitness-looking-at-sound-with.html>.



Figure 9 *Pondering (Until It's Water on both Sides)*, Sidi Chen, image still, 2022. Copyright: Sidi Chen.

On Sites

I produced several site-specific works during the MFA program. Each one allowed for experimentations through themes, performative gestures, and navigating the challenges of working with the tidal movements. While conducting on-site research, I often work with locational specificities to generate scores for bodily movements that fabricate fables for the body-site relations.



Figure 10 Wreck Beach Breakwater Vancouver, BC, March 16, 2022, rising tide. Image Credit:

Sidi Chen.

²⁷ Such as the 八分算潮法, roughly translated as “Eight Divisions of Tidal Calculation”, a method to calculate the high tide hours on the east coast of China based on the lunisolar calendar, known as the traditional Chinese calendar, a combination of the Gregorian calendar and the lunar calendar. It is the first method that I’ve learned to engage with the tides.

²⁸ Wreck Beach is a clothing optional beach, before the legalization of homosexuality in Canada, Wreck Beach was not only the cruising location for the queer population but also a gathering place for queer community development in Vancouver.

Scores

In researching *Tidal Relations*, I use the tidal movements to inform the scoring or scripting of a piece. The tidal movements are not only what can be calculated and predicted through the tidal charts²⁷; they are imbued with characteristics and sensorial qualities of the site.

For example, in the work, *Pondering (Until It’s Water on Both Sides)* (Figure 9), I conducted on-site research at Wreck Beach, Vancouver, BC. Separated from the investigation on the ecological conditions of the cliff slides and social histories of the queer²⁸, my attention was drawn to the breakwater that separated the beach and water into two sections. This phenomenon created differences in the water level – one side always had water and the other exposed the seabed at the low tide point (Figure 10). The breakwater also changed the schedule and heights of the tides. Together with the cliff harbor geography, which slowed down the wind waves approaching from the sea, this manmade structure delayed the tidal currents for approximately 15 minutes and lowered the tides’ heights compared to other beaches on the Vancouver coast.

This manmade structure functions not only as a safety design but also serves a

commercial purpose. By separating the water and creating a high-water pool, the commercial logging companies use it to float and store logs before they are transported by cargo boats. In this way, Wreck Beach is a site that entangles queer histories, marine economies, and environmental challenges. The tidal movements here reflect the interpenetration of human interventions, the ecological phenomena, and my own subjective connections to this particular tidal land.

Through observations of the tidal movements and water levels in the moon cycles alongside interdisciplinary research on this location from my positionality as a queer diasporic person, I found a kinesthetic empathy formulate inside my body, calling for re-connection. All these elements informed the score for *Pondering (Until It's Water on Both Sides)*.

The scores I composed through the tidal movements were instructions to transport

water from the high-water pool over and across a rock jetty to the bare seabed on the other side as low tide approached and until there was water on both sides. My actions included scooping water with a pail, carrying it while climbing up and down the breakwater, pouring it on the other side of the structure, and repeating these gestures until the seabed was submerged (Figure 11).

With all of my work, what I hope to discover through *Tidal Relations* is not a simple solution or representation of these entanglements. These scores do not aim to perform a savior miracle and aid the progress of the tides although my efforts may be read as such. Instead, the performance based on the tide-generated scores becomes my research method and process to experientially interrogate *Tidal Relations*. In this process, it empowers a mytho-poetic navigation within a larger arc of bodily encounters with land and water. My desire is to embody and navigate an intersectional path of the entangled tidal bodies as a means

of re-joining, re-attuning, and re-worlding through my own bodily knowledge.

Fables

To interpret and understand the purpose of the scores, I utilize the idea of fables as vehicles of relational enquiry. I encountered this word in a published email correspondence (2005) between Belgian artist, Francis Alÿs, and American writer and critic, Saul Anton, while discussing Alÿs's site-engaged performance work, *When Faith Moves Mountains*²⁹. Created for the Third Ibero-American Biennial of Lima in 2002, Alÿs organized five hundred local volunteers to form a line and shovel a 500-meter sand dune in Ventanilla (near Lima), and effectively moved the sand dune a few feet away from its original location (Figure 12)³⁰. Through this action, Alÿs's intention was to stage a social allegory that might translate and infiltrate the social tension and anxieties that permeated the country at the time³¹.

²⁹ Alÿs's Francis and Medina Cuauhtémoc, *When Faith Moves Mountains = Cuando La Fe Mueve montañas* (Madrid, Madrid provincia: Turner, 2005), http://francisalys.com/ebooks/FrancisAlys_WhenFaithMovesMountains_Turner_2005/#page=1, 12-27.

³⁰ For the video reference, please visit Alÿs's website: <https://francisalys.com/when-faith-moves-mountains/>.

³¹ Ibid., page 18-24



Figure 11 *Pondering (Until It's Water on Both Sides)*, Sidi Chen, image stills, 2022. Copyright: Sidi Chen.



Figure 12 *When Faith Moves Mountains*, Francis Alÿs in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega, image still, 2002. Used by creative common liscense © Francis Alÿs

Alÿs used the term “fables” to describe how the social allegories created through the community engagement with the site were elevated and then transcendent into an urban myth through an “almost alchemical process that turns a script into an action, an action into a fable and a fable into a rumor by the multiplication of its storytellers³²”.

Inspired by Alÿs’s concept, I see fables as the relational aspect of my art scores. They are a mythical and ethereal translation of the language of coded sounds and patterns. In this way, fables accrue their own language and meanings through the collective choreographies of the bodies in conversation with the site. And such collective movements are the fabrication, transcription, and becoming of the fables themselves.

As described by Alÿs, fables are “not validated by a physical trace or an addition to the landscape³³”. Building on this, I see the fable in *Pondering (Until It’s Water on Both Sides)* not the outcome of whether or not the course of the tides has been altered

due to my actions, rather, it resides in the relationships that were created, negotiated, and navigated through the collective movement between my body, the water, the rocks, the wind, and the angles of the sun. I understand that my own actions made little difference to the movements of the tidal waters, and yet they changed how my body experienced and remembered the site. And like the interpermeation of the ink and water on the canvas, the trans-corporeality of the fable reciprocates my intervention to the site to the site’s intervention to me. It is an exchange of intimacy and a binding of kinship emergent between tidal bodies that can only be felt, not translated.

Admittedly, the fable generating for *Pondering (Until It’s Water on Both Sides)* projects a certain exclusivity as it can be read as puzzling and futile gestures for the viewer, which I hope to accommodate through media production and installation as means to translate this bodily knowledge.

³² Alÿs’s Francis and Medina Cuauhtémoc, *When Faith Moves Mountains = Cuando La Fe Mueve montañas* (Madrid, Madrid provincia: Turner, 2005), http://francisalys.com/ebooks/FrancisAlÿs_WhenFaithMovesMountains_Turner_2005/#page=1, 24

³³ Ibid., page 24



Figure 13 *Mirage Raft (The Dream Talking Oyster)*, Sidi Chen, image still, 2022–2023. Copyright: Sidi Chen.

Media Embodiment

The interrogation of *Tidal Relations* not only addresses the subject but is also embodied through the media production and installation.

Media Production

As a result of my interdisciplinary research, I often apply several media devices to conduct and document on-site research,

including the digital camera, contact microphones, binaural recorder, as well as a device call ©TouchMe, produced by the company Playtronica³⁴. ©TouchMe is an electrical musical instrument that generates sounds through the electric circuits of various conducting mediums, such as flesh, water, and metal.



Figure 14 With/Holding, Sidi Chen in collaboration with Anthony Minichilli, image still, 2022.

Copyright: Sidi Chen.

The variety of the media appliances offer the possibilities to connect, extend, and transform the bodily sensory experiences. For example, in my mixed media performance, *With/Holding* (Figure 14)³⁵, I experimented ©TouchMe with Canadian musician, Anthony Minichilli, to transform the invisible connections that took place through the physical touch into an audible experience. And the audio is not simply a transcription of the visual information; it also provides an alternative dimension for bodies to reside, navigate, and negotiate.

Similarly, in my research for *Tidal Relations*, the various media devices offer channels for me to connect with other tidal bodies that are often more than human. In my multimedia performance installation, *Mirage Raft (The Dreaming Talking Oyster)* (Figure 13), such connections are layered through materials, music, scores, and projection.

³⁴ More information about the company and product can be found in the link: <https://shop.playtronica.com/products/touchme>. This essay does not commercially endorse the company or product nor is financially supported by the said company.

³⁵ For the audio experience, please visit: <https://www.sidichen.com/video/with-holding>.

To start with, I chose an oyster shell that I found in the tidal land of my hometown and held onto during the last 10 years of my diasporic journey. My fascination with oysters is not only their hermaphroditic body but also for their behaviors that respond to tidal cycles and the planetary rotations. Working with, I generated sounds by caressing the oyster shell submerged in ocean water with the extended sensors. Together with the water, the sensors, and my motions completed the electronic circuits that sent signals to ©TouchMe, through which the information was transcoded in software to various musical notes. The audio produced through this process reflect my physical touch against the texture of the oyster shell. Added to this, the nonconductivity of the shell makes the sounds an acoustic cast of the negative space of the oyster shell, where the body of the oyster once resided³⁶.

I translated the sounds generated by the shape of the oyster shell into scores for my body movements. By responding to the

audio scores, the choreography became embodiments of the shell's textures as well as translations of the absent oyster body. Lastly, in media installation, I overlapped the imageries of the oyster and my bodily movements together to create a translucent projection where the floating oyster shell became a raft that cradled for my gesticulating/dancing body.

The layered media applications stimulate the kinesthetic empathy connecting my body in presence and the oyster in absence, through which I encountered the ontological questions expressed in the fable of Chuang Chou dreaming of a butterfly³⁷ - Am I the embodiment of the oyster through electronic transformation, or did the oyster have a digital phantom that haunted and transformed me?

Media Installation

Apart from the applications of multiple media, media installations are where and how I imagine an audience navigating and negotiating their own *Tidal Relations*

through their physical distance and proximity to each installation.

In the installation *Mirage Raft (The Dream Talking Oyster)* (Figure 15), I specifically chose to project the work from the Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons atrium across the open space above the staircase onto the opposite wall. I find this particularly fascinating as there is no way of accessing the open and empty space. Its inaccessibility indicates a certain distance that can not be physically broached.

It is in this expanse of space, present yet absent that the entanglement of *Tidal Relations* resides. I am inspired by Jin-me Yoon's *Turning Time (Pacific Flyways)* (Figure 16), where multiple screens were suspended in the rotunda of the Vancouver Art Gallery. The videos explore a coexistence of the human and non-human via traditional knowledge of the land and water that are entangled with the colonial

³⁶ For the audio reference, please visit: <https://www.sidichen.com/video/mirage-raft-dream-talking-oyster>.

³⁷ 庄周梦蝶, a Daoist classical story that Chuang Chou had a dream where he became a butterfly, and after he woke up, he asked if it was him who dreamt of the butterfly or it was the butterfly who dreamt of him.



Figure 15 Installation view of *Mirage Raft (The Dream Talking Oyster)* at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, 2023. Image credit: Michael Love.

and diasporic histories as well as climate catastrophe³⁸. In Jin-me Yoon's work, the open space around the hanging monitors, fenced off by the circular railing creates a sanctuary.

I think that working with space and distance as artistic materials are perhaps a symbolic representation of the diaspora, a tearing apart between the body and its birthland. Writing from the perspective of colonial legacies, French scholar, Édouard Glissant in *Poetics*

of Relations (2010), describes such a distance as the open boat of the slave trade. The openness at the belly of the boat and the openness of the vast ocean outside of the boat are both abysmal volumes that vanish the world of one's origin via deportation³⁹.

³⁸ Jin-me Yoon, "Turning Time (Pacific Flyways), 2022," vanartgallery.vag.yourcultureconnect.com, 2022, <https://vanartgallery.vag.yourcultureconnect.com/e/jin-me-yoon-didactics/turning-time>.

³⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 6-7.

The installation of *Mirage Raft (The Dreaming Talking Oyster)* is different from Yoon's installation. In her work, the monitor screens stand in for the inhabitants within the expansive space. In my piece, the projected imagery of a diasporic body standing in the tidal land resembles a mirage on the ocean, a ghostly body that exists as a phenomenon as well as a physical entity.

Through the unreachable distance between the viewer and the imagery projected, there are no amendments to be made to close the distance. While the only reconciliations to be found are through the distanced gaze whether of longing or inaccessibility, the unreachable distance also offers an antidote to itself by hosting viewers' gaze as witness in the space to the circle of bodies that appear, rotate, fade, and reincarnate.



Figure 16 *Turning Time (Pacific Flyways)*, Jin-me Yoon, multiple video installation at Vancouver Art Gallery, 2022. Used by permission of the artist.

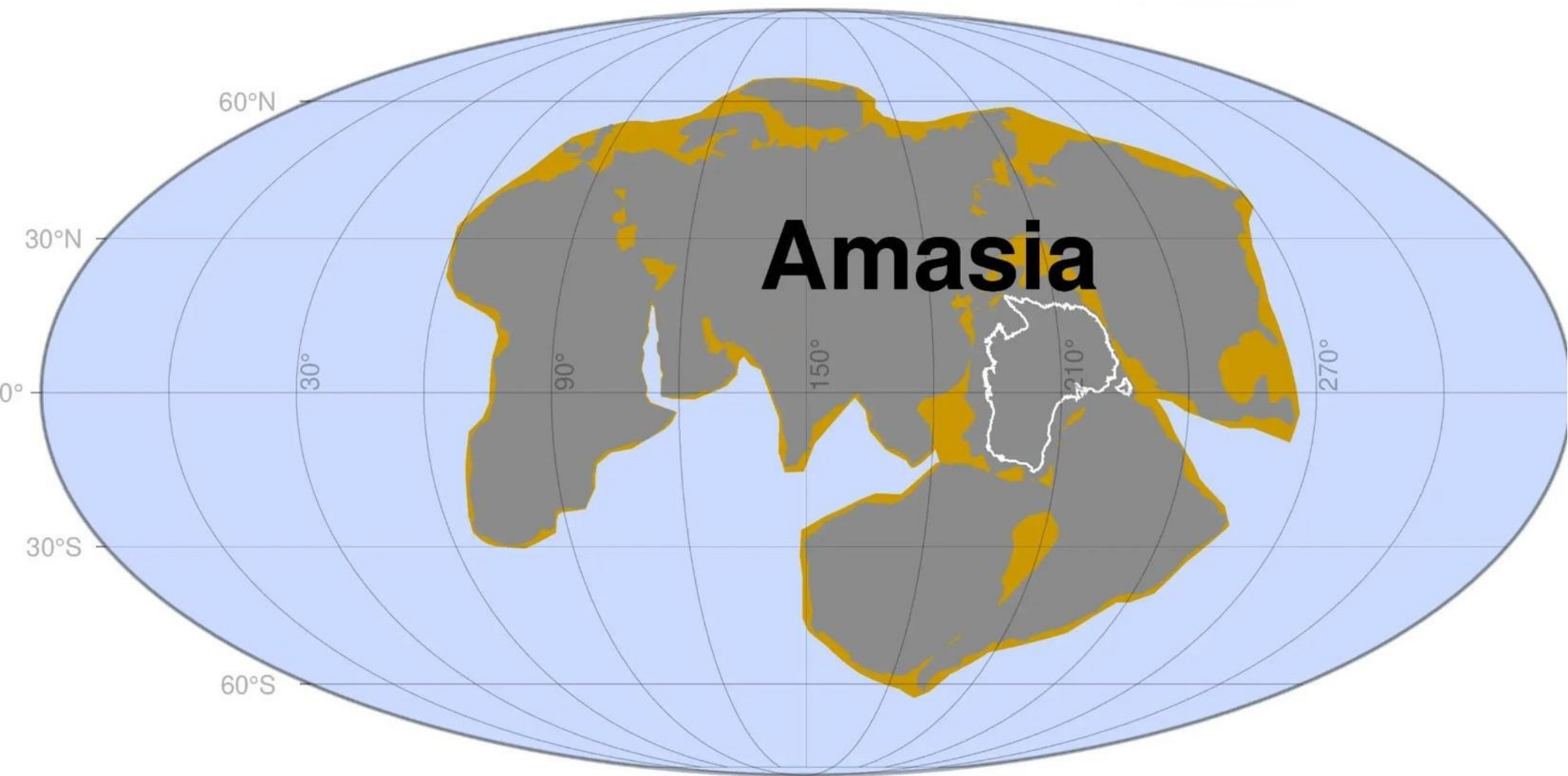


Figure 17 Map of Amasia. Image credit: Curtin University.

Reflections and Future Developments

Reflections

Over the course of the thesis exhibition, especially the planning and the installation of the three projects at separate locations across the Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons, I have come to realize that the installation created a triptych-like structure that further interrogates the relational component of the space. Following the pathway of the Exhibition Commons, the projection of *Mirage Raft (The Dream Talking Oyster)* leads to the painting installation of *Where I Am When I Land Between the Waves* and further extends to the 90-inch monitor where *Pondering (Until It's Water on Both Sides)* screens, with the mylar installation connecting three locations.

This arrangement collaborates with the physicality of the architecture by utilizing the Exhibition Commons pathway and the space between each installation to maintain the necessary distances between the viewer and the artworks. It also provides the resting space between different aesthetic experiences and emphasizes *dwelling in the blankness* as relational principle. The watery reflections from the mylar layer also offers a

poetic and ethereal experience to linger across the three works.

There were also many limitations presented for the research. Due to the travelling restriction over the COVID pandemic, the part of the research to be conducted in my homeland in the original plan was not able to be realized. The pandemic also limited the possibility of community engagement in researching *Tidal Relations*.

Many of the theories I engaged with in this essay are from the perspectives of feminist psychoanalysis, especially from the Caribbean region. I am humbled and inspired to deepen my understanding of those perspectives, especially the gendered knowledges and positions that draw references to the female anatomy and the gestation process.

While writing from a queer diasporic perspective, I recognize the shortfalls of my research over past two years in the limited exploration of queerness and its implications in *Tidal Relations*. These gaps will inform the directions of future research.

Future Developments

While I have not been able to thoroughly engage in and deepen the relationships with the people, ecosystems, and the land and water that were developed over the course of my research process, many of those relationships were born out of brief yet unforgettable exchanges. How can I describe them? Are they friendship, mentorship, fellowship, or a type of kinship that is alien to categorical definitions. I would like to further my relational interrogation on this emergent kinship from the collision of worldviews, cultures, languages, memories, and emotions through the interactions of the tidal bodies, a transformation of the world, bypassing the normative narratives.

With my current research focused on the negotiation and navigation of the distance via bodies in *Tidal Relations*, as a component of diaspora study, I would like to continue utilizing the interdisciplinary research method and the concept kinesthetic empathy to develop an artistic strategy to interrogate how to communicate with the more-than-human.

I will continue developing my interdisciplinary methodology vis a vis *Tidal Relations* that are human, ecological, and planetary as it enables me to understand and research a variety of viewpoints within their own ecosystems.

Through the research on *Tidal Relations*, I am building the theoretical foundation for the concept of *Queer Worlding*, a relational enquiry that intersects *Queer Ecology* and *Diasporic Futurism*.

I would like to utilize *Amasia* (Figure 17) as a model to envision an alternative future of diasporic relations, especially in the pan-Pacific region. *Amasia* is a speculative future supercontinent born from the reorganization of the Pacific Ocean and the merging of Asian, Australian, and North American continents, based on the Plate Drift Theory⁴⁰. Through this model, I want to engage a wide range of discourses, such as ecological catastrophes and intergenerational traumas, in their own

ecologies (linguistic, social, cultural, natural, and spiritual) and to bridge the discourses via a diasporic perspective. With this model, I imagine *Queer Worlding* as a means to nurture alternative perspectives and an Earthly kinship through a sustained engagement with land and water.

⁴⁰ Chuan Huang, Zheng-Xiang Li, and Nan Zhang, "Will Earth's next Supercontinent Assemble through the Closure of the Pacific Ocean?," *National Science Review* 9, no. 12 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/nsr/nwac205>.

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