

The background of the entire page is a photograph of an art installation. On the left, a small, dark, rectangular pedestal holds a single, light-colored, irregularly shaped object that resembles a shell or a piece of coral. To the right of this pedestal is a large, vertical, rectangular column with a highly textured, mottled surface in shades of grey and white. The column appears to be made of a solid material like stone or concrete. The floor is a smooth, light-colored surface, and the walls are a neutral, light grey. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the textures of the column and the object on the pedestal.

The Inner Tide of Bodies of Water
—Living through Ancestral Memory and Celestial Time

BY JIANING LI

BA, Mount Holyoke College, 2021

A thesis support paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Emily Carr University of Art & Design, 2025

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Acknowledgement

My name is Jianing Li, and I am of Han-Manchu heritage, originating from Heilongjiang, China. I moved to Vancouver in August 2023, greeted by the figurative sculptures made by Salish artist Susan Point at Vancouver International Airport. I find myself here as an uninvited guest, temporarily residing upon the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations in the Pacific Northwest, a city widely known as Vancouver. I am grateful for every moment to live, study, and make art on this land that has served as the ancestral home of Indigenous people, and to use my presence here as a reminder, not only to myself but to all who are reading, of the profound significance of acknowledging the Indigenous communities who have taken care of this land for millennia and will keep doing so. I wish to extend this gratitude for the soil beneath my feet, the trees, plants and the food provided by this land that sustains my body and mind. In the continuous fight for Aboriginal rights, I intend to emphasize on the importance of preserving space for Indigenous communities, in respecting their rituals, traditions, and amplifying the voices of Indigenous people in our society.

I'm grateful for all the inspiration from the cohort and mentors in the Emily Carr MFA community. I want to extend a special thanks to my supervisors, Gwenessa Lam and Ingrid Koenig, for their tremendous support.

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Introduction

How does ancestral memory emerge through our bodies? How can the intervention of the photographic surface establish a connection between the present and the past? How does our body act as a permeable vessel, carrying the ancient memory of its material origins from the beginning of time? These questions framed the inception of my MFA research, as I contemplated the body as a site where ancestral memory intersects with the present, probing how the physical form of the body and intangible memories converge.

In this exploration, I examine the dynamics of water as both a metaphor and a physical presence in my artistic practice. We human beings are bodies of water, constantly flowing, containing, and shifting. The fluidity of water mirrors the transient nature of memory—both elusive, ever-changing, and crucial for creating personal narratives to find a sense of self. My artwork seeks to slow down the flow of time that makes us forget our origins and to crystallize moments that, like salt from seawater, might otherwise dissolve into the ocean of the past. My research delves into the relationship between the human body and water, the Pacific Ocean, and the celestial forces that influence our existence. This document traces the evolution of my artistic practice from focusing on familial memory within the human body to exploring its connections to broader environmental and cosmic cycles.

These bodies of work emerge from personal history and challenge the boundaries of time and memory. They invite viewers to ponder their own connections to the past and the landscapes

they inhabit, asking how we are shaped by our ancestors and how we continue to shape ourselves in their reflection.

Central to my exploration are the ideas of ancestral memory and the position of our individual bodies within natural cycles. I view bodies as composed of elements and substances from soil and water, echoing the traditional Chinese mythology where Nüwa(女媧)¹ creates humans from clay mixed with soil and water. These materials will not disappear but will transform into other beings and forms, continuing their existence in nature. If we adopt a broader perspective on time, the matter composing our bodies has existed since the universe began, scattered as stardust² across the cosmos. In this sense, our bodies are ancient beings. In the distant future, when the sun loses its warmth and the Earth can no longer sustain life as we know it, our bodies, too, will return to stardust, continuing their journey in the universe.

Through this paper, I position my work as both a reflection on time and an attempt to anchor fleeting moments in the physical world. My installations draw inspiration from artists and writers who explore these themes, rooting my research in the interplay between memory, the photographic surface, aquatic bodies, epigenetic memory, and celestial bodies.

¹ Nüwa is regarded as the mother of all humans, a significant divinity in ancient Chinese matriarchal culture. The name Nüwa, 女媧, combines the Chinese character for woman, nǚ (女), with a unique character used exclusively in her name, wā (媧).

² The concept of humans and all terrestrial matter as being composed of “stardust” is rooted in astrophysics. Elements such as carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen were originally formed in the interiors of collapsing stars, which later exploded and dispersed these elements into the cosmos, eventually contributing to the formation of planets, including Earth.

Ancestral Memory Across the Pacific Ocean

As human beings navigating the world, we exist not merely as isolated individuals, but as integral links in the continuum of our ancestral lineage. The intergenerational collective memories live quietly within us, influencing our actions and our self-perception in a subtle way. At the same time, the memories we produce not solely belong to ourselves; they are part of a collective memory. The year 2025 is my ninth year living away from my mother, without family. During this time, I've often pondered what has shaped my personality, thoughts, and behaviors. After failing to fully understand myself by reflecting on my personal past, I found the answer by delving into the past of my mother, grandmother, and even their ancestors. Photography was where I began the MFA research, and where it will return with the thesis project. A few aged photos in my family album are all I had when I started my research. I wonder: how can photography serve as a medium for reacquainting and reconstructing fragmented personal and familial histories that have been dispersed over time and space? Photography is an attempt to hold onto time. Things flow, memories fade, people are lost, stories slip away—but by working with these photos, I attempt to throw an anchor, pinning the research down somewhere in the river of time, so that the family's history won't be swept away, quietly lost in some undercurrents beneath the surface.

In the book *On Photography*, writer Susan Sontag discusses how photography, as both a technology and an art form, changes our perception of reality. It has the capacity to freeze time, preserve memories, and become a device for documentation and understanding. "All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability." (Sontag 15) By capturing fleeting moments, photography not only preserves memories but also has the power to shape our understanding of

these moments. In my work, I extensively use photographs of my family. They provide a tangible form of recall that can be revisited and reinterpreted.

In *Hand Over What You Left Me* (Fig. 2), I explore ways to connect with the intangible past by sewing fragments of handprints onto fabric that has been printed with family photos from my mother's side. The series consists of one large piece (11 x 17 inches) and eight smaller ones (6 x 8 inches), arranged in a line just below eye level. The transparent fabrics, in shades of white, beige, and tea-stained yellow, feature faded black-and-white family portraits. I stitched thread through the surface of the fabric and portraits, leaving long strands to hang loose towards the ground like hair or plant roots. The larger piece features a water tower from my hometown. Its industrial appearance evokes a strong sense of home, matching the impression of my hometown in my distant memories. Next to it are smaller pieces featuring family members in group photos. Transparent fabrics reveal the sewing's reverse side adding tactile layers to the intangible memory.

The memory of our ancestors also lives within our bodies. As I navigated the process of maturing as a young artist, I gradually realized the significant influence my parents had on me—from their lifestyle habits and ways of thinking to their approaches to perceiving and managing emotions. I recognize these traits originate from their interactions with their own parents. They are also living with the unresolved inner pain passed down from previous generations. My grandparents were born during the Japanese occupation in Northeast China. The health issues, violence, poverty, and social upheaval they faced generated traumatic memories that manifested in various ways and were reborn in my parents' bodies, and now again in mine.

Researcher Marianne Hirsch's book *The Generation of Postmemory* introduces the concept of postmemory, a term she coined to describe the relationship of the 'second generation' (Hirsch 103) to the experiences of the previous generation that have been transmitted so deeply that they seem to constitute memories on their own. 'Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch 103). Although Hirsch originally focused on Holocaust survivors' descendants, she has since extended the concept to include other groups. In the book, Hirsch emphasizes the role of photography in transmitting trauma across generations. 'Photography's promise to offer an access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power, makes it a uniquely powerful medium for the transmission of events that remain unimaginable' (Hirsch 103). Artifacts like photographs carry not only the weight of actual memories but also the emotional impact of the scenes they depict. She suggests that photographs serve more than a documentary purpose; they bridge generational gaps through emotional resonance, rather than through direct experience.

Photographs can serve as a medium for postmemory. They can act as both historical records and emotional catalysts. In my work, the family photograph is a central medium in bridging the gap between past traumas and present memories. It functions as a record of this intergenerational memory being reborn. As a young artist, I try to find clues in these old photographs, which bring me closer to a past from which I almost want to run away. Hirsch helps me understand the pivotal role of imagery and photographs in forming postmemories. While working with these old photographs, I attempt to expose myself to this traumatic past in order to

honor what my ancestors have been through, and also to engage in a dialogue with these memories.

The act of creating art can serve as a dynamic interface with memory, particularly ancestral memory. I have re-contextualized family photographs in my artwork. These images have shaped my thoughts and understanding of ancestral memory, and conversely, in the process of making art, these photographs have become a site for me to reinterpret and reimagine our family's memories. By stitching together family photos that feel distant—both temporally and geographically, I am also reconnecting with memories that often seem so intangible and can easily slip away. Yiyun Li's novel *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, profoundly influences my understanding of time in relation to migration, traumatic memory, and solitude. In her book she reflects extensively about the precarity of existence and the elusive nature of time passing: "The past I cannot trust because it could be tainted by my memory. The future is hypothetical and should be treated with caution. The present—what is the present but a constant test: in this muddled in-between one struggles to understand what about oneself has to be changed, what accepted, what preserved (Li 5)." As someone who also navigates the experience of migration from China and creates work on foreign soil, her biographical writing resonates deeply with my experience. Like Li, my memories often seem intangible. The paradox of seeking to anchor myself in the sense of instability brought by an untraceable past is what drives my work, a quest for certainty in an uncertain world.

This past summer, I brought a photo album back with me from Beijing to Canada. It traveled across the Pacific, shaking in my carry-on suitcase for a day, and now sits quietly on a shelf in my apartment. Since I brought it back, I've barely touched it. There is some unfathomable

tension between the album and me, something heavy, something that leaves me feeling at a loss (Fig. 1).

The album holds my family's memory from my mother's side—pictures of her as a child, photos of her posing in front of a camera with her mother and sister, a picture of my grandmother's sister sitting at a table, her face tightened in concentration with daylight shining across on her face. And then there are faces I don't recognize, people that my mother might have mentioned once, or not at all. While the photo album might seem to offer some concreteness to what Li found intangible, it also presents a problem in what those photos represent.



Fig. 1. Jianing Li, Photo Album (blurred for privacy)

As photographer Odette England explains, the photograph has a connection to faded and intangible pasts. In one of her artist talks, she spoke that "photography exemplifies

photography's inescapable connection to death and the role that photographs play in reimagining our past in search of meaning...these images deal with trying to rescue the past from the loss of memory"(England, 13 May 2021). In her project *Damaged Negatives* she bound together photo negatives, which her family took more than 20 years ago, to the soles of her shoes and walked across her family's farm. She sewed them together and showed these damaged negatives after they were torn during the act of walking. The gesture of sewing the damaged negatives reflects an attempt to attach and reclaim lost memories while exploring the impossibility of fully preserving the past. While England works to reclaim memories through walking on the photos, in *Hand Over What You Left Me*, I approach this kind of alternative engagement with photography by sewing into family photos to interfere with the fragmented and intangible nature of ancestral memory. Like England, whose view of photography is deeply tied to death and loss, my work involving family photographs serves as fragile traces of the stories of people lost to time. The photograph becomes one of the few physical pieces of evidence of their existence, allowing me to engage with it through the creation of artwork.



Fig. 2. Jianing Li, *Hand Over What You Left Me*, Sewing on Inkjet prints, 2023.

When I work with my family photos, I aim to rescue ancestral memories and it feels like I've pulled them out from the depths of the river of time. The family memories have lost their original shape after lying in the riverbed for so long; they are soaked in dampness, parts of them have been eaten away by time, the rest of them blurred. I'll never truly know the whole picture of what happened in their lives with only these photos, what they thought about as they took the photo, or how they sensed the world around them. In my work, it becomes my task to complete the story, to fill in the rest of the narrative. Is it foolish to think one can resist time? Perhaps instead of seeing time as an enemy, I can work with it, letting the work become an anchor in time—an act to fix something that might otherwise drift away, to rescue family memory from slipping into obscurity. The work reaches across generations, holding fragments of the ancestral memory, keeping the connection to our history steady even as time presses on, to remind people that we had a past, long before our own existence.



Fig. 3. Jianing Li, *Hand Over What You Left Me*, Sewing on Inkjet prints, 2023.

Novelist Ruth Ozeki explores the intangible ways that ancestral memory is carried forward as she explores generational connections. Her novel inspired me to reflect on my own family history and ancestral memory. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki offers a framework for exploring time, memory, and migration. The novel centers on Nao, a young Japanese girl, and Ruth, a writer living on Vancouver Island, whose lives connect through the ocean's currents when Nao's diary migrates through the Pacific Ocean after the 2011 tsunami. In this diary, Ruth discovers the life of Nao, who grew up in California but had to move back to Japan due to her father's unemployment. The story spans across three generations of Nao's family, touching on themes of displacement, war and grief: Nao's struggles with bullying and familial trauma mirror the experiences of her grandmother, a Buddhist nun, losing a son in WWII and her uncle, a kamikaze pilot that committed suicide by crashing his plane into the sea.

Ozeki's exploration of generational connections helps me understand how my ancestors' stories mirror my own, despite the vast distances in time and space between us. Ozeki's writing further inspired me to explore the act of stitching as a way to connect with the intangible past. This process of reworking family photos with thread and needle makes me relive and engage these images with the tactile sense of the texture and weight of fabric. It is a physical exploration of loss, nostalgia, and the substance of the photographs, marking how our recollections are embedded in the materials.

In *Hand Over What You Left Me*, I explore generational connections and the ways in which my own stories mirror those of my ancestors. The artwork carries fragments of my past, the past of my ancestors, and the past of this body I inhabit. My work is deeply influenced by my studying and living across borders. My experience moving between my birthplace of China and North America has made me think about the belonging of this body I carry through life. These pasts all exist in China, on the other side of the Pacific, intangible to me now. Yet they have settled into the soil and water, traveling from one edge of the Pacific to the other. Instead of feeling torn between the place where I was born, where my family roots are, and the place where I've developed a sense of self in adulthood, I began to feel that my body could belong to the Pacific Ocean itself. It is more than just a vast body of water; it symbolizes a transition and connection between two worlds, China and North America, and also represents an uncontrollable force akin to the nature of memory.

The Body as a Deep Well

People often perceive memory as residing in an intangible void, a past beyond reach. However, memory and the past are tangibly present, constantly manifesting through our bodies in the fabric of time and space. I am interested in the ways in which our bodies carry memories. In *Slow Water* (Fig.4), I installed a life-sized sculpture woven from rattan hanging at the centre of the space. Its form resembles something in between a chrysalis and a human torso, with skin made from kozo paper featuring natural dissolving patterns resulting from the papermaking process.



Fig. 4. Jianing Li, *Slow Water*, Paper made from Kozo, sea salt harvested from pacific ocean, flax paper, rattan reed, waxed linen thread, platinum print, 2024.

Scholar Katharine Young explores how personal memories, emotions, and familial memory are encoded in the body. She explores the concept of the "family body," a metaphor for how bodily habits are passed down through generations, acting as carriers of collective familial experiences. In "The Memory of the Flesh: The Family Body in Somatic Psychology", Young writes: "The body presents itself as a version of the family body, as memory made flesh. It is a puzzle to be deciphered, not in order to solve a mystery or to retrace a past, but in order to bring to awareness the way the past traces itself on the body, to acknowledge the body as an aspect of one's own intentionality" (Young 26).

To Young, these corporeal dispositions are not just biological inheritances but are actively reconstructed by individuals. Young's analysis of the body as a storage of familial and personal history emphasizes the idea that our physical forms are not just vessels of existence but active archives of past experiences and emotions. In my work, I embrace this concept that inexpressible emotions and unattainable memory are embedded within the body—emotions tied to my mother, family, and the journey of growth. The mind may have forgotten and the memories of ancestors may not be fully retrievable, but many of these feelings and ancestral memories are deeply ingrained in my body.

Artist Marley White's latest work, *A Well Made of Skin, I am at the Bottom. There is no Bottom* introduced me to an innovative use of materials. In this work, she shaped pig intestines and carbon nanotubes into the form of bricks and assembled them into a well structure. Unlike traditional wells, the structure of the well is composed of organic matter destined to decompose, thus providing the installation with both monumental and transient qualities. It embodies a combination of warmth from the organic matter and deep emotions contained within, contrasted with the clinical coldness of its appearance and the imagined coolness of the brick-like intestines.

Her work incorporates complex somatic experiences using bodily remains. The way she transforms materials led me to reconsider material in my own practice; in particular the process of making salt from the Pacific Ocean and its connection to our own human form. By using salt, I aim to contemplate how emotions may be embedded within bodily remains, as it becomes a crystallized trace of memory and grief, distilled from the ocean as if drawn from the body itself.

The body itself is a repository of ancestral memories and emotions. In *The Body in Pain*, essayist Elaine Scarry delves into the ways in which the body acts as both a receptor and a reflector of pain, and how this suffering, while often inexpressible, can be transformed into language and creation. "Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story that it tells is about the making and unmaking of the world." (Scarry Introduction) Scarry's insights into the body's ability to externalize internal states have helped me understand how experiences such as stitching, papermaking, and salt harvesting have physically manifested memory and the passage of time through labor. When traumatic memory is expressed, it can transform and shape our understanding of and interaction with the world.

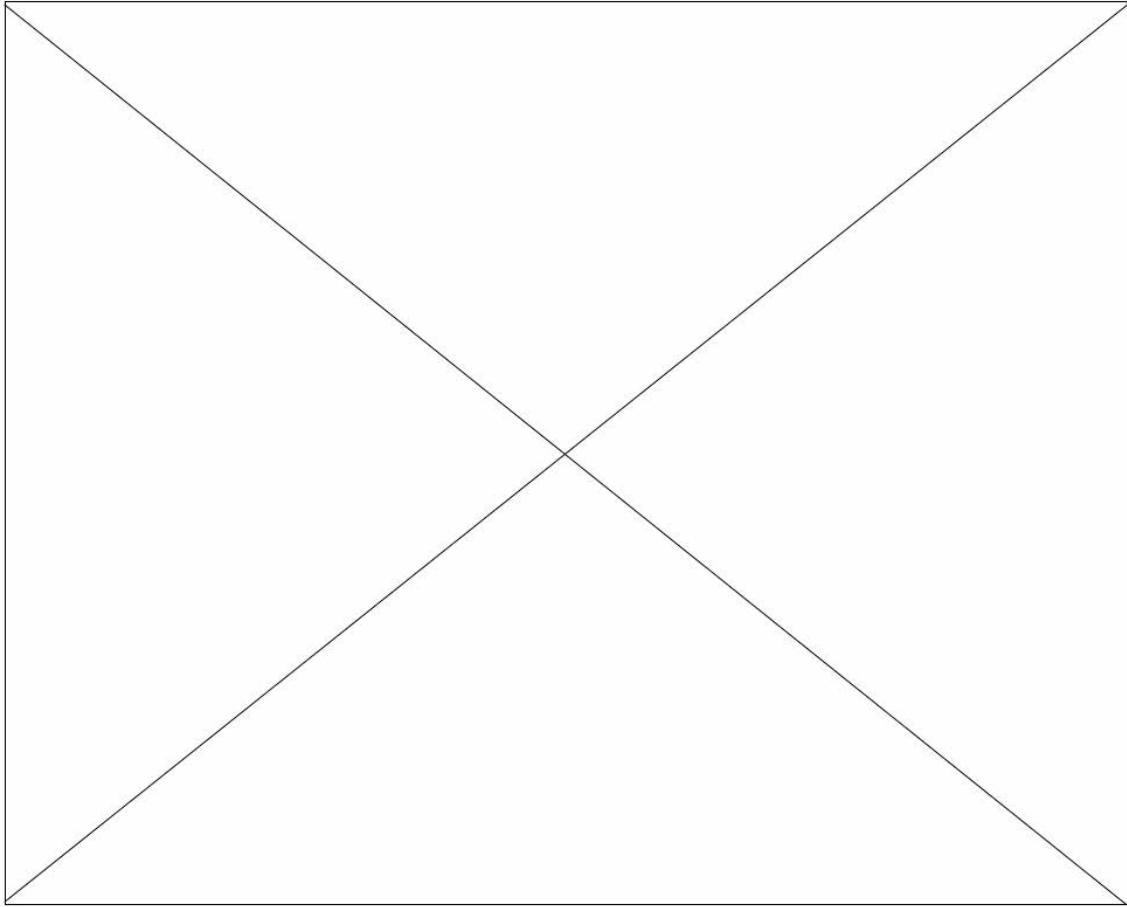


Fig 5, Marley White, *A Well Made of Skin, I am at Bottom, There is no Bottom*. Pig intestines, carbon nanotubes. 2022

White's artwork, Young's and Scarry's papers invite us to consider how our bodies carry and communicate the weight of memories and emotions. They compel us to recognize the body not just as a physical being but as a subject of our ancestors' narrative, where every cell is imbued with the stories of who we are and where we come from. This ongoing dialogue serves as the context for my own creative practice, pushing me to delve deeper into how the intangible past announces itself through our body.

Aquatic Body in Time

The life of our bodies extends far beyond our own. We often think that human life ends when people are gone. We believe we cease to exist as our consciousness vanishes. However, the materials that compose our bodies existed on this earth long before our birth and will continue to exist in other forms long after our death—transforming and returning to the earth, the air, and the sea. In *Slow Water* (fig. 6), I aim to express the prolonged existence of our bodies and the symbolic continuation of our memories within these materials. I see the body as an archive, reflecting on how the ancestral stories would still be carried in the body. In the process of harvesting salt for this piece, I explore the concept of generational trauma and memory, considering how these elements are transmitted through time. By rendering the salt from the water, I also consider the eventual dissolution of the physical body, reflecting on the idea of the body as sediment, destined to return to the earth.

In this work I create a series of salt piles distilled from water drawn out of the Pacific Ocean; they are suspended from the ceiling by fishing wire and supported by flax paper. Each pile of salt is equivalent to the salt contained in a single human body. The salt is white, rough, with grains larger than the fine crystals of table salt. If you look closely, you'll see specks of dark rock and sand scattered among them. By creating stacks of salt from the ocean to represent bodies, *Slow Water* is also an artwork that views the human body as a dynamic body of water, actively engaging in material exchanges with the external world. It explores the body as a site of ancestral and celestial memory that interacts with natural cycles, and becomes a vessel for preserving and reimagining memory across time. The work is situated on the concept of the body as an aquatic vessel in constant interaction with its surroundings.



Fig. 6. Jianing Li, *Slow Water*, sea salt harvested from pacific ocean, 2024.

The idea of seeing the human body as a body of water challenges the traditional view of the self as an isolated entity. In my work, I envision this self not as an isolated person but as part of a larger, fluid network of life that encompasses both human and non-human elements. Water is a metaphor for connection and continuity. Just as water cycles through various forms and unites disparate ecosystems, it symbolizes the potential for reconnecting individuals. This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of life within the broader environmental and ecological context.

In *Bodies of Water*, cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis explores the concept of the human body as a body of water, emphasizing the interconnectedness and fluidity of bodies and environments. Neimanis states that bodies are not isolated entities but are instead intimately

connected to other bodies and the world through the medium of water. She challenges traditional humanist views that see bodies as autonomous and discrete entities. Instead, she proposes a view of the body as permeable and continually interacting with its surroundings. Neimanis explains this connection as "Our bodies are hydrophilic, through and through. Water infiltrates and inhabits the vapour we breathe, the land we work, the animal, vegetable, meteorological and others with whom we share this planet. As embodied beings, we are, primarily, bodies of water in a watery world" (Neimanis 66). This reflection has significantly influenced my research. It encourages me to think of our bodies as part of the ongoing circulation of water and transformation of materials.

My work takes ocean water as a body of water that connects us all, both across space, and through the bodies of water that we each are. The water of the ocean is a solution of salt. From the ocean, I harvested salt from the ocean in early spring. I took walks alone on the beach at night. The sound of the waves as I walked felt like a meditative experience, drawing me back into my own body, feeling it resonate with the rhythm of the waves. I took off my boots and stepped onto the sand, letting my feet sink into the chilling water. In March, the sea is still cold. I lowered the bottle I had brought into the water, submerging it until the seawater flowed in and pushed the air out. Bubbles rose to the surface, gurgling softly as the bottle filled. The close interaction with the sea prompted me to consider my current sense of place.

The seawater I collected carried grains of sand with it. Back at home, I poured the water into a pot and boiled it down. The water evaporated, returning to the air, leaving behind a white powder in the pot: raw salt. Looking at the salt, a pile of white powder, I couldn't help thinking of death, when the water in our bodies gradually dissipates over time like sea water. What remains is the sediment of our lives—our thoughts and physical substance settling into this form.

Sedimentation, a fundamental mode of existence, can symbolize the ultimate destination of material that accumulates layer by layer, like stones or even the foundational substances of planets. It represents an accumulation of life or metaphor of time passing.

My exploration of memory in relation to the corporeal was profoundly shaped by Binh Danh's *Immortality, The Remnants of the Vietnam and American War*. In this project, Danh transfers archival war photographs onto tropical leaves using chlorophyll and light, merging the memory of the war with the natural landscape of Vietnam. The memory of the dead, stored in the body of leaves, will decompose and be incorporated into the landscape of Vietnam through the cycle of life and death. These matters will eventually transform into other life forms just as the tropical plant leaves served as a photographic surface in this project. While Danh's work transforms memories into physical matter, in *Slow Water* I distill the metaphorical physical material from our bodies to examine how memory is carried across generations. In my work I consider how memory does not simply vanish but is preserved within our physical form, transforming into other energy forms and eventually returning to the earth. This perspective underscores the enduring, tangible impact of memory on both our bodies and the environment.

Julie Tolentino is an artist who also works with these ideas. Her recent works, *The Flood*, *The Vessel*, *The Commune—how do we find each other?* and *Crush*, further expanded my exploration of bodily sediment. In *The Flood*, *The Vessel*, *The Commune*, she uses human hair collected from companions and other artists, along with coconut husks and various fiber-based materials—considered corporeal wastes—as a foundation to grow large crystals. Each crystal is suspended from the ceiling in a nebulous form over a large barrel of murky mineral solution, and every day before the gallery opens, the staff roll down the suspended crystal to the barrel, and soak the sculpture in the solution, emphasizing the physicality of the body in absence. This

approach influenced the suspended salt piles in *Slow Water*, which reference bodily remains while leaving the human body itself absent. Tolentino's use of suspension and weight inspired the inclusion of my rattan chrysalis sculpture in *Slow Water*. The fragile, transient quality of kozo paper, reminiscent of decaying fallen leaves, underscores the body's transformation and decay.

In *Crush*, Tolentino invites the audience to drink wine. The wine was brewed by the artist herself before being poured into ceramic cups. Audience members are invited to shatter the cups against rocks, making themselves participants in the work. In this process, the body of the audience becomes a vessel to absorb the wine, which eventually passes through the human digestive system, and exits the body as waste to complete the cycle of transformation and decay. Such perspectives focus on everyday corporeality and also consider the body in its cosmic entirety—a continuum that originates from and ultimately returns to the material of the universe.

Our bodies are ancient beings. The materials that compose our bodies are derived from the Earth's environment and solar energy. Just as they originate from these elements, they will one day return to the soil, water, and air through the natural process of decomposition. They will not disappear but will transform into other materials, continuing their existence in nature. If we take a broader perspective on time, the matter that makes up our bodies has existed since the universe began, as stardust scattered across the cosmos. "The hydrogen in your body, present in every molecule of water, came from the Big Bang. The carbon in your body was made by nuclear fusion in the interior of stars, as was the oxygen. Much of the iron in your body was forged during supernova explosions that occurred long ago and far away."(Dunbar 1) In the distant future, when the sun loses its warmth and the earth can no longer sustain life in its current form, our bodies, too, will return to stardust, continuing their journey in the universe. On a more local, planetary level, I feel a connection to the water and the salt, thinking about how the seawater that

touched me has traveled all the way from the eastern edge of the Pacific Ocean to Vancouver. I, too, have made my way across the Pacific, from China to North America. The water leaves a trace, as a visitor in transit, and in many ways, so do I.

Slowing Down the Water

Our bodies are living entities, existing in the here and now, constantly in flux. Hearts steadily pump, fueling the circulation of blood; neural impulses help us to sense and think; liquids continuously adjust their concentration gradients to regulate the movement of substances. We inhabit a society dominated by efficiency, where, for the most part, we see our bodies as merely tools for living and creating. In the course of everyday life, we often forget that our bodies are living creatures; we utilize them like accessories. And our bodies mostly remain silent as we treat them in such ways.

In addition to using the element of salt as a way to understand the connectedness of water across bodies, I use papermaking for its materiality. Papermaking, as a significant aspect of my art practice, has profoundly raised my understanding of the body as a living entity. It is a creative process that involves working with water and fiber. This process has heightened my awareness of how water flows—a metaphor that reminds me to consider the internal movements of bodily fluids. This awareness is crucial as it connects the external flow of water with the internal dynamics of my body, fostering a deeper perception of our intrinsic connection to the natural world.

The papermaking process begins with holding a bundle of cooked kozo tree bark, soft and beige, that has been soaking in water. When I hold the bark, it feels heavy and wet, water dripping from it to the floor. The raw kozo fibers need to be softened by beating before they can be used in papermaking. To examine if they are ready, I hold the fibers against the light, where they spread out and float in a flocculent cloud—a sign that they are ready to be made into paper.

I use a plastic tub, half-filled with water, adding a formation aid, a chemical that helps fibers to slow the water's movement, giving it more resistance. When I dip my hand into the tub, I feel the water push back slightly, and when I lift my fingers, the water doesn't drip but instead flows in a steady, controlled stream. This slowed water allows the kozo fibers to gather on the screen. Papermaking has its unique movement. I balance the deckle in my hands and push it beneath the water, scoop up a mix of water and fibers, and shake it with my whole body. With this movement, water ripples in the deckle, and the fibers settle on the screen, forming the structure of a new sheet of paper. It is precisely through the making process — observing the minute activities involving water, carefully watching how water forms, and listening to the sound of water being rapidly shaken — that I have developed an immediate sensitivity to the qualities of water.

I place the handmade kozo paper on the window to dry. The paper has a semi-transparent quality, allowing light to pass through. As I look closely, I can see every fiber within it. From afar, it appears as one complete piece of paper, but up close, it is fascinating to realize that every fiber captures the tiny movements of water during the papermaking process. The water that once sustained the life of the kozo tree now guides its fibers, moving to shape this piece of paper. Working with water and using it to make paper gives me endless inspiration. It prompts me to reflect on the different behaviors of water movement in rivers, lakes, seas, and in our bodies.

The Silent Moon

In response to the precarity of time, I introduced the moon as a motif in my practice—a greater force that counters the slipperiness of time and memory. The moon’s gravitational pull serves as a metaphorical anchor, offering stability in the flux of time, as my art seeks to settle these elusive memories and reconnect the past to the present. The moon³ has a substantial presence in my research, consistently manifesting as a recurring element within my MFA artwork. In *Slow Water* (Fig. 4), the landscape of the moon is printed on kozo paper, where each sheet contains a fragment of the lunar surface. The photo was captured during the Apollo missions in the Cold War era by the United States, marked with photographic registration crosshairs. These registration marks reflect a scientific attempt to frame and measure the ungraspable scale of the lunar landscape and by extension, the desire to map what lies beyond touch and comprehension. The concept of measurement appears frequently throughout my work and holds deep significance: blueprints from my mother’s factory days; the weight of salt piles in my installation; as well as the registration marks of these moon photographs. When engaging with subjects as unquantifiable as the embodiment of memory and time, the visual language of mapping and measurement serves to anchor my inquiry into the otherwise immeasurable.

These sheets are arranged into grids, together forming the backdrop of the installation. Due to the lightweight nature of kozo paper, as viewers walk closely past it, air currents cause the paper to ripple, introducing movement into the stable landscape of the moon’s surface. Similarly,

³ This presence of the moon also acknowledges its geopolitical context as a contested extra-terrestrial territory, made explicit through my use of Cold War-era American photographs of the lunar surface. These images, often created for scientific and military purposes, carry with them a history of surveillance, conquest, and ideological projection, which complicates their poetic resonance in my work.

in *Flood; Dryland* the moon again becomes the center of the work. Its landscape is printed along long vertical handmade kozo papers, creating a moonscape through layers.

The presence of the moon has anchored my research and emerged as a frequent component in my artworks; it becomes a keeper to the countless thoughts that don't belong to any particular time or place. In reality, it creates a gravitational pull on Earth, influencing its tides. Bodily and celestial phenomena are not distinct categories but are part of a continuous fabric of existence. In the book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze delves into the concept of time as a multidimensional and dynamic entity, continuously interacting between different scales—from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. "Folds are always folded within other folds, like a fabric that extends infinitely and where each region echoes or finds a correlation across scales." (Deleuze 6) Time is not uniform; it folds and unfolds, with each fold containing multiple layers of time and space. This concept inspires me to think about how internal rhythms and external forces are fundamentally interconnected within the infinite folds of time. Metaphorically similar, I consider the human body as a smaller body of water, enfolded by extension, experiencing this gravitational pull, hinting at a deep, unspoken call from the moon.

My research originates from my body and branches into two directions: one contemplates the cycle of human bodies and materials through water, and the other explores how ancestral memories are reborn in the bodies of successive generations. Both lines of thought focus simultaneously on the body. In *Seminar on Leibniz and the Baroque – Principles and Freedom*, Gilles Deleuze states “the zone that I express clearly is what concerns my body. What I express clearly, in the world, is what relates to my body. We again find the idea of rapport. The clear predicate included in the monad, or the aggregate of clear or special predicates that defines my subdivision, my zone, my neighborhood, is the aggregate of events that pass through my

body.”(Deleuze 7) These ideas relate to my own thoughts on beings as bodies that have finite lifespans, wherein we have limited life experiences and personal narratives. In my work, by introducing the moon, I not only address our confinement by this 'finiteness' as a single narrator but also extend the narrative to encompass the time before birth and after death, connecting our personal stories to the vast celestial forces.

The gravitational force of the moon concretizes our perception of the vastness of time. In the book *Chaos, Territory, Art*, philosopher Elizabeth Grosz discusses Deleuze's ideas about artistic expression, citing his book *The Logic of Sensation*. Deleuze reveals how art makes invisible forces of the cosmos perceptible to visual and auditory senses, forces such as “pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation, and germination.” (Deleuze 48) Grosz states that a common goal of art is to capture the force of time, opening our sensations to the “power of the future”. Art should not only reflect on time as a linear progression but also as a cyclical and celestial phenomenon. I am inspired to connect these ideas to my work, exploring how the moon's potential influence on our existences and perceptions on earth can extend into the future.

Grosz's writing deepens my understanding of using salt in my practice, as a metaphor for the body's return to the earth. Salt represents not only the past but also potentially the future body. Further to this, she reveals art's role in making the force of time sensible, illustrating how sensations can be extracted from invisible gravitational forces that have a long-term affect on the body. As an example she refers to artist Francis Bacon's paintings: “Bacon extracts a kind of gravitational force, the force that, in the long run, convulses and contorts bodies, not through torture but through everyday positions that have collapsed upon themselves, until flesh descends from bone into meat. Bacon generates meat-sensations from capturing the force of an invisible, unheard gravitational pull.”(Grosz 86) My work may not depict physical distortion directly but,

similar to Bacon's, captures the essence of bodily transformation over time influenced by natural forces, by linking salt—a material both of the earth and essential to life—with the body. Both Deleuze and Grosz's writings help me further understand my own work, to perceive the transformative powers of time and nature, and to comprehend the imperceptible forces of decay and renewal within the human experience.

Another inspiring element of lunar influences can be found in Haruki Murakami's novel "1Q84" in which the moon indicates an alternate reality for the main characters, Aomame and Tengo. They sense each other's presence yet cannot find one another in a parallel universe. They notice that two moons appear in the sky in the alternative reality, signaling that their world diverges from the known reality. In the story, the moon becomes an indicator of another world, serving as a witness of their personal stories and a silent listener to their hidden emotions, fully embracing their sentiments to each other.

The moon had been observing the earth close-up longer than anyone. It must have witnessed all of the phenomena occurring - and all of the acts carried out - on this earth. But the moon remained silent; it told no stories. All it did was embrace the heavy past with a cool, measured detachment. On the moon there was neither air nor wind. Its vacuum was perfect for preserving memories unscathed. No one could unlock the heart of the moon. Aomame raised her glass to the moon and asked, "Have you gone to bed with someone in your arms lately?" The moon did not answer. "Do you have any friends?" she asked. The moon did not answer. "Don't you get tired of always playing it cool?" The moon did not answer (Murakami 314).

In the story, the two protagonists tell the moon the words they couldn't say to each other, and the moon fully embraces their feelings. In both "1Q84" and my artwork, the moon transcends its role as a mere celestial body to become a reflective surface for the inner thoughts and unspeakable personal truths. In Murakami's narrative, the moon is a constant, silent observer; symbolizing both the isolation and connectivity of the two characters. In my work the moon serves as a

witness to the inexpressible aspects of my heritage and personal history. Here, the moon embodies a bridge between the past and present, speaking of the isolation and loneliness of each of my ancestors across time, but also the connectivity among all of us. The moon acts as a constant force that bridges over vast distances and eras, linking my ancestral roots in Heilongjiang, China to my current life in North America.

Researching contemporary art, I found my work in conversation with Katie Paterson's artwork "Earth-Moon-Earth." In this work, Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" is translated into Morse code and sent to the moon. When it reflects back, parts of the notes are lost in the journey due to the uneven lunar surface, which creates a moment of silence in the playing. The silences within the music mirror the moon's own surface shadow cast by lunar craters or valleys, places where the original signal might have vanished.

I am deeply moved by the intimacy and romance of this art. Writer and curator, Ben Tufnell writes that this work "reminds us that we are part and parcel of the flux and flow of time and life. We live our brief lives on a small lump of rock swinging through the infinite darkness and emptiness of the universe. It is a terrible reality. Yet, somehow, perversely, also comforting." (Tufnell 1) In my works *Slow Water* and *Flood; Dry Land* the salt piles are suspended from the ceiling with thin fishing line, creating an illusion of a different gravitational field. Just as some notes of the Moonlight Sonata scatter across the lunar surface where they belong, my ancestors' stories also roam and belong to the realm of the moon, like what Tufnell describes as, "through the infinite darkness and emptiness of the universe." (Tufnell 1) I chose to print moon landscapes that were recorded on the moon directly, rather than using full moon photos taken from Earth since I wanted to emphasize the closeness of moon as an intimate space. This suggests an

alternate reality where emotions and memories reside; my hope is that the moon's space can hold and rewrite the transmission of ancestral memories.

When this work brings the audience's attention to the Moon, it invites people to imagine an alternative narrative of time. As the current world is filled with precarity due to increasing geopolitical turmoil, the Moon serves as a warm and imaginative presence. It offers a space where we can connect with both our personal and ancestral pasts. The silent Moon, with its ancient force, provides a space for public imagination, and also acts as a medium accepting our most intimate, personal emotions.

Flood; Dry Land

Flood; Dry Land is the final work in my MFA research that explores how individuals, confined within their own bodies, connect to family memories and celestial forces. This installation comprises various elements. In the final thesis exhibition, it is installed as follows: Family photos from the artist's maternal side, transferred onto driftwood, are displayed on the left wall. The right wall features a landscape of the moon printed on handmade kozo paper. The title "Flood" refers to the human body and generational memory as an overflowing, uncontained body of water, while "Dry Land" illustrates our bodies in their final form when they return to the earth after water has drained away.

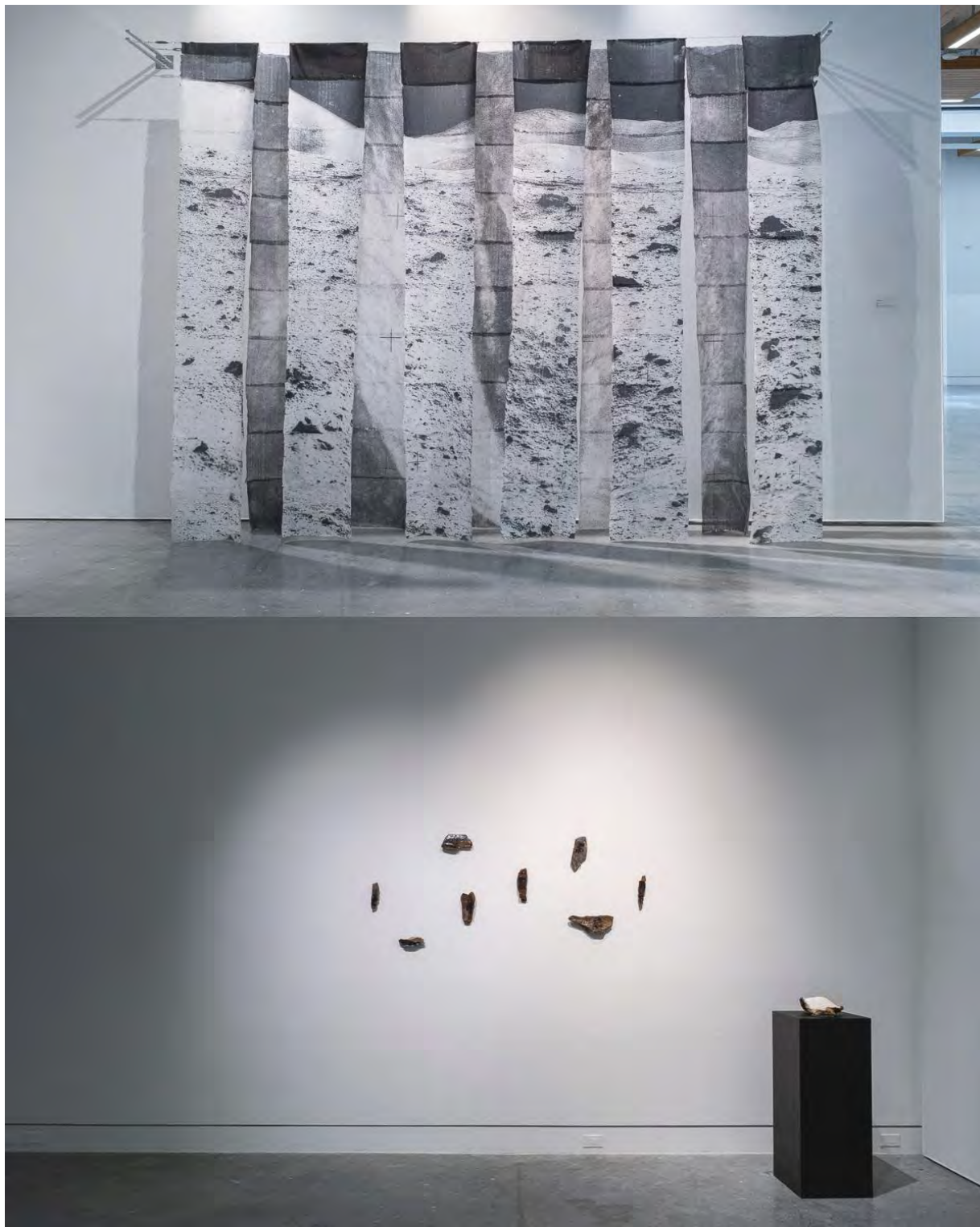


Fig.7. Jianing Li, *Flood; Dry Land*, Driftwood, handmade Kozo paper, salt harvested from Pacific Ocean, 2025.

As a continuation of *Hand Over What You Left Me* and *Slow Water*, this work extends my investigation into the materiality of papermaking, salt making, and family photographs, each embedded within different materials. I have introduced the imagery of a flood to depict the uncontrollable surge of buried family memories within the body, and the concept of dry land to further suggest human mortality. The salt, harvested from the Pacific Ocean that separates me from my ancestors, acts as both a literal and metaphorical remnant. Each pile of salt references what is left behind after water evaporates—after time passes, after bodies perish. They stand as quiet monuments to ancestral memory, carrying the sediment of familial trauma across generations. Just as trauma seeps into the body, salt clings to the skin, forming a film of what remains after the surge has passed. I attempt to make visible what often escapes language: the heaviness of postmemory, the somatic presence of grief, and the possibility of transformation witnessed by material. This work advances the narrative of family history intertwined with the natural cycle of materials, further exploring the quest for the origins and eventual resting places of our bodies and memories.



Fig.8. Jianing Li, *Flood; Dry Land*, sea salt harvested from pacific ocean, 2025.

Conclusion

In the thesis, I contemplate how humans can view memory that transcends time, connecting us to our ancestors. I consider how physical connections can be made across geological distances, with other non-human entities on Earth, as a way to deal with the precarity and isolation brought by turbulent times. Through the process of making, including sewing, papermaking, and salt harvesting, I find a sense of certainty. The intention to acquire bonds beyond the individual begins with connecting to the memories passed down from my mother. This connection gradually extends to the matriarchal line and starts with the water in our bodies, connecting us with other life forms on Earth.

Old family photographs prompt me to consider how postmemory can be conveyed through images. People often think that memory starts at one's birth, but the inherited life narrative I share with my parents and ancestors, hidden within our bodies and subconscious, leaves a mark of postmemory. Although these marks are not often mentioned, they are an invisible yet powerful presence in the underlying backdrop of our lives.

In my creative process, I engage with different materials as if I would be visiting friends—paying full attention to their own agency. I feel the resistance as the needle pierces through the fabric during sewing, hear the crisp sound of water trembling during papermaking, and sense the humidity and heat from water evaporating while making salt. The meditative quality of making brings me back to my body, allowing me to feel the vitality of these materials and recognize a similar life force living deeply within myself.

Ultimately, I turn my gaze to the moon. Its continuous celestial force allows me to see the vast expanse of time. This contemplation of prolonged time quiets the feelings of loneliness and the sense of precarity. This calmness turns to strength that anchors my artwork, prompting me to consider that human mortality is not an endpoint but merely a part of the cycle of material transformation. The memories of my ancestors and my own memories persist in another form, never being lost to time.

Final Reflection

After the thesis exhibition, I've begun to consider how my deeply personal narratives—rooted in ancestral memory, water, and bodily sediment—can be expanded beyond the self and into broader ecological contexts. Anthropologist Zoe Todd's *Protecting Life Below Water* profoundly resonates with this shift. Her writing challenges the artificial division between land and sea, reminding us to recognize all lives as entangled through water. Her discussion of Métis principles like *wahkohtowin*⁴—which emphasizes kinship across human, non-human, and ecological worlds—inspires me to deepen my attention to the water systems I already engage with. In future work, I hope to situate my material research—such as salt harvested from the Pacific Ocean—within the urgent realities of environmental degradation, including water pollution and climate trauma. As suggested in my defense, the salt in my work that contains microplastic is not only a remnant of memory but also a trace of ecological imbalance. Moving forward, I want my practice to extend from matrilineal, embodied memory to a planetary consciousness that acknowledges the interconnectedness between personal grief and global water systems, Indigenous cosmologies, and environmental justice.

⁴ *Wahkohtowin* is an aboriginal notion that centers on the deep interconnectedness between all forms of life, including humans, animals, land, water, ancestors, and spiritual beings beyond immediate human relations.

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