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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Tides, Touch, and Care in Collaborative Fieldwork

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the influence of tides and touch on collaborative fieldwork as a practice of care. I draw from collaborations with clamming communities and connect a history of fieldwork with longstanding commitments within environmental communication to use rhetorical fieldwork as a means of witnessing crises and practicing care. This collaborative fieldwork was also shaped by connecting with Édouard Glissant's critique of knowledge and his poetics of relation as alternative praxis for making knowledge through errant, tidal movements, and touch. I describe how these influences on fieldwork created the context for an evolving digital media effort that has figured how we stay in touch and practice listening to partners and with tides through time.

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Tidal beginnings

Concerns for crisis and care have been swirling within environmental communication (EC) for a long time. Pezzullo describes these circulations as dialectical, or contingent ethical responsibilities to “prevent harm” at the same time that we “honor the people, places, and nonhuman species with which we share our world” (Pezzullo, 2017, p. 8). Though Pezzullo makes this argument in 2017, she and colleagues have been demonstrating how to meet the crisis with care through fieldwork for many years before this.¹ Thinking with care in this way figures history as fluid origins and cyclical beginnings, where disciplinary conversations about the emergence of concerns for crisis and care become impossible to pin down. Care takes timelines, “land lines,” and other linear arrangements like these and multiplies, bends, and diffracts them, again and again (Cram, 2022, pp. 6–7). This figuration has the effect of making such histories fractal, cyclical, and, in the place from which I write, distinctly tidal.

The origin story I want to tell for this focus on crisis and care connects with water because watery, oceanic, archipelagic, riverine, and tidal forces pulse through our commitments in EC as a field.² One watery beginning wells from within the banks of the Mississippi River Delta, a place also known as Gichi-ziibi, great river in Ojibwe, a place also known as “Cancer Alley” by the residents who live there now (Livesay & Nichols, n.d.). This riverine place has impressed on research praxis in EC and shaped how many of us, including myself, turned to fieldwork as a means of witnessing crises and learning with communities about what it means to care. Drawing inspiration from the words of Toni Morrison, within this shoreline place Pezzullo advocates for how practicing presence and listening to “underheard” voices and places can “flood” our nerves and skin” (Pezzullo, 2003, p. 205).³ Flooding, in this sense, is about opening toward the very real material crises that surround us and letting water, the earth, and precarious places guide our practical, imaginative, and justice-oriented choices as methods and ethics (Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018).

Following these and related calls for how fieldwork can make ethical difference, I started showing up in coastal locations in the State of Maine, a place also known as Wabanakik (Dawnland) by those who have lived along these shores for “time immemorial” (Neptune, 2015, p. 94).⁴ Here again, origins roll away even in attempts to choose a place to begin this history of fieldwork. In my experience, showing up for fieldwork is more serendipitous, circuitous, and wandering than singular origins allow. For one thing, the tides had a lot to do with me being there, as tidal forces shape coastal life in infinite ways. Connecting with the work of Édouard Glissant amplified my attunement to how tidal forces invite poetic methodologies, where knowledge makes errant difference. Fieldwork in tidal places is shaped by “rhythmic rhetoric of a shore” where tides “weave a circularity that draws me in” (Glissant, 1997a, p. 122). Learning how to listen to tides thus became formative for collaborative fieldwork as a poetic practice of care.

Listening and staying in touch through fieldwork

I have been collaborating with clamming communities through the course of many tidal cycles and seasons. I’ve learned (am still learning) how to listen and how collaborative fieldwork involves reaching out, making contact, and staying in touch through time. Before going further, I want to take a tidal pause, a brief lingering, to notice how easily metaphors of touch slip into descriptions of listening and collaboration: reaching out, staying or keeping in touch, making “con-tact” and, conversely, falling, being out of, and losing touch (Manning, 2007, p. 11). Listening as a practice of touch figures knowledge in significant ways. Touch is at the heart of Glissant’s poetics of relation which seeks to figure knowledge differently from the myriad, global histories in which knowledge became *grasping* through techniques to measure, comprehend, and define others, cultures, and related *objects* of study (Glissant, 1997a).⁵ Glissant argues that such grasping is tied to practices of categorization that create territorialization, possession, and extraction from land and bodies and through which knowledge takes on a “fearsome repressive meaning here” (Glissant, 1997a, p. 26).

In contrast, creating knowledge through listening, collaboration, and related practices of touch turns knowledge into a place-based process in which “one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps” (Glissant, 1997a, p. 144). This poetic approach to knowledge figures listening as ecological and wandering movements within places. What it means to listen and stay in touch are not defined in advance; instead, they become emergent practices. Listening and touch involve reaching toward an other, be this person, place, culture, language, and so forth, but where these movements maintain commitments to opacity. This is similar to how “people can listen to poems in foreign languages and be moved by them without understanding the language in which the poem is written.” Through this contact with diversity, knowledge “will consist more of intuition and common sense – that is, shared sense – than of intellectual traditions and clear meaning” (Glissant, 1996, p. 114). In fieldwork, these commitments to listening and staying in touch within never-ending conditions of opacity means we never really know where we are going nor the total differences these movements will make. Glissant calls this wandering approach to knowledge making an expression of “archipelagic thinking,” a commitment to “immeasurability, which is neither disorder nor bewilderment” (Glissant, 1997b, p. 18, 141). For example, while listening sometimes means showing up for intertidal restoration activities and working alongside clambers as we meander through soupy mud, the choices that guide these intertidal actions are less about individual, agentic selection and more about letting tides guide and navigating best we can.

Moving in these ways allows listening for exclusions too, these shoreline rhetorics that have been “denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence we are incapable of not experiencing” (Glissant, 1997a, p. 111). Na’puti demonstrates how such archipelagic “oscillations revolve around place and offer ways to move through articulations of resistance” using rhetorical fieldwork and critical cartography (Na’puti, 2019, p. 16). In this place, clambers often describe feeling underheard within dominant discourses of science and news media, and how the clam fishery

experiences “disprivileges,” especially when compared with those like lobster and aquaculture (Gay, 2022). In communities shaped by intersecting conditions of colonialism, rural poverty, and wealth inequality, negative metaphors are frequently invoked to describe clamming, as a fishery of last resort, the bottom of the barrel, and where the reliance on clams for food is evidence of having fished our way down the food chain. In rural, coastal communities, having a lobster boat confers social standing and having mud on one’s boots typically does not. These inequities are also structural, as intertidal fisheries are systematically underfunded and where water pollution and public health regulations create further injustices and disparate impacts (McGreavy et al., 2018). These articulations of clamming intersect with crisis narratives as well, as climate change has presumably made the clam fishery, as one article succinctly put it, “a lost cause.”

Yet, as place names, stories, and shell mounds remember, clam fisheries have persisted along these shores for millennia (Newsom et al., 2023).⁶ Far from a fishery of last resort, clamming has long served as a source of food, sustenance, spirituality, income, and intergenerational connection. Furthermore, clammers and community partners are leading intertidal restoration efforts that are trying to sustain this way of life in ways that support broader climate adaptation efforts. There is much we can learn from clamming about possible responses to Giovanna Di Chiro’s call that caring invites “a re-thinking and revaluing of the idea of ‘subsistence’ as the mode of living that underpins a more just sustainability for all” (Di Chiro, 2019, p. 308). Collaborating with Tony Sutton has helped me articulate such subsistence as “sustenance livelihood practices” and, along with Tyler Quiring, Gabrielle Hillyer, and many other partners we have used digital media to communicate the multiple and fluid meanings, practices, rhythms, and aesthetic qualities of clamming as a livelihood (McGreavy et al., 2022; Quiring et al., 2020; Sutton, 2023). Through diverse and evolving collaborations, we created a series of videos, photos, and narrative descriptions and we organized these on a public-facing website called Clam Cam which morphed into TheMudflat(.org), and I come back to this below.

Oceanic listening, breathing

Through listening to, learning from, and staying in touch with partners, I began to learn how to listen to tides too. Moving and digging alongside clammers, knee-deep in mud, I noticed tidal changes by a shift in the smell of the ocean and how the air pauses as if perched on the top of a hill before making a descent back to shore. Tides flow into the videos we created, as clammers periodically stand up to face the ocean, to see where the tides are at and thus how much time before their workday is done. We feel and hear the tidal change in the slosh around our boots as the tide washes in; the clang of the rake hitting rock as clammers move into the upper intertidal where the digging, as one clammer says, “is brutal”; and in the subtle change in the rhythms – moving, breathing, and hearts beating – as clammers start digging faster to “finish out the tide.”

This approach to listening is distinct from the dominant, western model of listening as linear information transfer, non-verbal nodding, and otherwise ableist performativity. Instead, listening is a condition of flooding, an ecological orientation to how the earth and tides are always already at work on us, in us, as us. This flooding is akin to breathing, which is how Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes the relationship between listening and breathing in *Undrowned*. She opens this book with a question: “What is the scale of breathing?” and her initial responses in the chapters that follow is first “Listen” and then “Breathe.”⁷ This ordering matters for how listening and breathing become entangled and embodied as touch. Listening is an ecological condition that shapes relations across bodies, ecosystems, and scales and through which, as oceanic beings, breath connects us. Breath finds body through listening in ways that make fixed categories and territories – body, land, scale – permeable, fluid, (inter)tidal.

At the same time, the ways in which listening, breath, and body come together are also precarious and contingent. Remembering the precarity and contingency of these relations is about recognizing how we are always already “Breathing in unbreathable circumstances,” as Gumbs says. In this sense, listening, breathing, and related practices of touch as care become daily acts of survivance “in

the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism. We are still undrowning. And by we, I don't only mean people like myself whose ancestors specifically survived the middle passage, because the scale of our breathing is planetary" (Gumbs, 2020, p. 2). Listening within fieldwork as a practice of care allows breath to find body in ways that remember these histories, this flooding, these conditions of undrowning that Glissant describes as shared abysses.⁸

Returning to the rhythms of clamming above, listening and breathing in the incoming tide speeds up digging. These changes in pace are as much influenced by neoliberal, colonial, and capitalist forces as they are to the pull of the tides. In this instance, the tidal pause becomes an "ephemeral fissure," as Endres and Senda-Cook (2011, p. 268) say, in which neoliberal time begins to flood tidal time, dampening and submerging yet not erasing this cyclical, fractal rhythm. As linear time takes hold through listening, breathing gets faster, more frenetic. Clammers rush to finish digging so they can get to the shellfish dealer station before it closes because, if they are late or run out of time, they may violate the state regulation for how long they can possess clams. Notice the neoliberal and colonial naming of these relations, the linear temporal arrangement through which sustenance becomes possession.

Of course, these contingencies and abyssal conditions fold into collaborative fieldwork too. Here questions of ethics are endless, as ethics and choice-making come together in collaborative fieldwork in complex ways. This complexity is, in no small part, a tidal condition in which the choices we presumably make are situated and shaped within broader ecologies that are not of our own making and that we do not control. Being drawn in by the tides and "giving-on-and-with [donner-avec]" (Glissant, 1997a, p. 142) in fieldwork refigures what ethics come to mean. This concern for ethics in knowledge making is also at the heart of Glissant's critique of knowledge and a motive force for poetics of relation. In this, ethics are not determined in advance but emerge within and as place-based relations and where knowing an other is a process of moving together from shared abysses and by respecting mutual opacities. This is a call to "Let the right to opacity, whereby Diversity will be best preserved and acceptance strengthened, be a lamp watching over our poetics" and through which we can listen for how to become tidal and ethical together (Glissant, 1997b, p. 17).

Ebb tide: digital, ethical (dis)articulations

Returning to Pezzullo's call to approach EC as discipline of crisis and care, she seeks to proliferate what responding to this call could, and should, mean and at the same time she also demonstrates the potential for the unique ways that digital media can create "spaces for a wider number of voices and stories" and "intervene in unsustainable and unjust patterns" (Pezzullo, 2023, p. 16).⁹ Digital media can guide flows within the places "we touch, swim in, walk through, drink, eat, and gain life from into digital formats to tell new stories," as Cordes and Huff (2023, p. 91) demonstrate.¹⁰ I have similarly noticed how digital media can shape collaborative fieldwork, and in this outgoing reflection, I share a few things we're learning about working with digital media for listening and making ethical difference.

While this essay has focused on how tides are a constituent force in coastal communities, digital media are a force in these ecologies too. In the context of municipal and state-based shellfish management, digital media intersect with western science and news media to create structures of power in which clammer voices and intertidal ecosystems become "underheard." Furthermore, as rhetoricians, we are attuned to what digitality can do and possibilities for (dis)articulating dominant structures through digital interventions. Despite this potential, I've had experiences where the rush to digital media and building something like a website doesn't seem to do much at all. Taking a collaborative approach in fieldwork that is guided by listening, breathing together, and practices of touch as a poetics of care makes a significant difference for how digital media can (dis)articulate existing arrangements of power. For example, it mattered that ClamCam emerged in response to what we were hearing from clammers, that creating this website was a response to questions they were asking and that we heard as we listened and moved together within intertidal places. It made a difference to create this site while staying in touch and hearing from partners what else this site could do.

Constituting knowledge through touch – listening, breathing, moving together within tidal places – created the context for the digital media efforts to emerge and to take on a life of their own. When we first co-created the method of wearing body-mounted cameras to amplify this livelihood and disrupt dominant discourses, we didn't know what the response would be. However, listening for what would be meaningful to partners created “the living tissue” of ethicality, a relational trust in what we were attempting to do.¹¹ In this sense, digitality helped figure a “network that expresses the ethics” (Glissant, 1997a, p. 193) that shaped responses and guided the contingent choices we made. This relational, networked ethicality continued to make difference beyond the digital media projects as these conditions flowed into emergent efforts to create a learning network organization, a small grants program to support intertidal restoration, and a collaborative policy effort to change a state law in ways that also (dis)articulated state power within this fishery.¹² We can't say that collaborative fieldwork caused any of this to happen, as our collective movements were much more ecological and errant than linear. But we can trace how practices of touch figured these differences and we can keep moving with the tides to notice how care in collaborative fieldwork floods into what we become together, through knowledge as poetic relation.

Notes

1. Pezzullo and de Onís (2018, pp. 103–106) reference key articles and influences in this history.
2. For example, see Druschke (2013), Milstein (2011), Na'puti (2019), and de Onís (2021) for fieldwork-based approaches to engaging with water.
3. See also Morrison (1990, p. 305); “Underheard” draws from Pezzullo and de Onís (2018, p. 105).
4. Geo Soctomah Neptune (Niskapisuwin Nil) is a Two-Spirit Passamaquoddy basket maker, artist, and educator. This layered approach to naming Maine as Dawnland responds to Na'puti's call to challenge “colonial cartographic violence” in mapping by destabilizing “continental, static, and landcentric vocabularies to instead theorize fluid, shifting, interconnections among land and water,” in Na'puti (2019, p. 3).
5. See Silva (2022, pp. 59–60) for how practices of determinacy and categorization racialize knowledge.
6. Bonnie Newsom is a citizen of the Penobscot Nation and Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Maine. This article describes both her research on shell heaps as well as Wabanaki perspectives about collaborative fieldwork as a practice of “wicuhketuwakonol,” or the shared responsibilities for care and good relations.
7. Gumbs asks this question in the preface (1). The title of the first chapter is “Listen” (15) followed by “Breathe” (21).
8. Glissant (1997a), see “The Open Boat,” pp. 5–9.
9. See also Communicating Care, <https://communicatingcare.buzzsprout.com/>.
10. See also Cordes, “Storying on the Coquille River,” <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/3678bc6932c74332b0d57adf3434aa55>.
11. Translation of “tissu du vivant,” Glissant (2009, p. 29).
12. We are describing these efforts in a book project and have shared parts of this work in McGreavy et al. (2022), on TheMudflat.org, and in Hillyer (2023).

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