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Filtering Death, Performing Life: Environmental Humanities and the Ecologies of Taiwan's Wetlands in Chin-yuan Ke's Documentaries

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Abstract My paper examines Taiwan's wetlands as thresholds between life and death through Chin-yuan Ke's documentaries *Ebb and Flow* (2011) and *Sea Spray* (2022). It considers wetlands as ecological filters that unsettle modern binaries and host multispecies encounters. The paper shows how film and dance shape a storytelling politics that reframes grief for disappearing wetlands as a prompt for environmental awareness. By tracing these entangled coastal ecologies, the paper highlights how environmental humanities can connect scientific insight with cultural meaning to support wetland conservation in the Anthropocene.

Keywords Environmental Humanities. Taiwan's wetlands. Ebb and Flow. Chin-yuan Ke. Site-specific dance. Multispecies ethnography. Anthropocene. Sea Spray.

Summary 1 Introduction: Ecologies of Life and Death in Wetland Environments. – 2 What Can Environmental Humanities Do in the Anthropocene? – 3 "Storied Waterscapes": Filtering Changhua Wetlands. – 4 Embodying Wetlands: Dancing on the Stage of Species in *Sea Spray*. – 5 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction: Ecologies of Life and Death in Wetland Environments

In the precarious planetary time of the Anthropocene, wetlands stand as powerful emblems of the confluence between life and death.[1] As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, climate change manifests through various crises, including rising sea levels and species extinction, requiring interdisciplinary approaches that extend beyond scientific expertise (2021, 14). Wetlands are dynamic and ambivalent spaces, described by Rod Giblett as "living black waters" (2013, 188) that signify both renewal and decay, and as "valuable and vulnerable" sanctuaries increasingly threatened by urban expansion (185). Occupying a liminal zone between land and water, wetlands embody ecological richness while remaining environmentally fragile, serving simultaneously as cradles of biodiversity and sites of mourning in the face of anthropogenic destruction. This paper examines Taiwan's wetlands as ecological and cultural filters through the lens of the environmental humanities, focusing on Chin-yuan Ke's documentaries *Ebb and Flow* (2011) and *Sea Spray* (2022). Centering on the wetlands along Taiwan's western Changhua coast, I explore how these "storied waterscapes" (Oppermann 2023, 36) function as critical sites where ecologies of life and death intertwine, and how Ke's films render visible the entanglements of human activity, multispecies flourishing, and ecological grief. In doing so, my paper demonstrates the potential of the environmental humanities to illuminate and respond to the precarious futures of these liminal and threatened landscapes.

This paper opens by addressing the critical importance of environmental humanities and demonstrates its relevance for engaging with contemporary challenges in the Anthropocene. Following this, the second section will be enriched by Ke's documentary *Ebb and Flow*, which offers a visual narrative revealing the interdependence between local residents and wetlands. This section examines the impact of industrialization on coastal communities in Changhua, documenting both ecological and social consequences as residents face deteriorating environmental conditions and economic challenges. The third section explores Ke's *Sea Spray*, focusing on the interdisciplinary collaboration between Ke and Min-ni Tsai's Humanity Theater as it relates to communication from an environmental humanistic perspective. While the Fangyuan Wetland prompted Ke to create *Ebb and Flow* a decade earlier, in *Sea Spray*

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he addresses the concerns of a new generation regarding Taiwan's coastal wetlands, emphasizing the necessity of interdisciplinary dialogue in resolving pressing ecological problems. By integrating contemporary anxieties about wetland and seashore encroachment into his recent work, Ke cultivates a heightened awareness of the impending disappearance of these essential ecosystems. Grounded in the theoretical framework of environmental humanities, this paper explores life and death eco-imaginaries and engagements as they are interwoven through the study of human and more-than-human worlds in Taiwan's coastal wetlands. The analysis examines how environmental issues transcend scientific problems to encompass cultural, social, aesthetic, and political dimensions that require interdisciplinary engagement. Taiwan's wetlands offer a poignant case study of ecological vulnerabilities and entanglements as they face threats from industrial development, green energy infrastructure, and climate change impacts.

2 What Can Environmental Humanities Do in the Anthropocene?

Over the past two decades, environmental humanities (EH) has emerged as a key interdisciplinary field for understanding ecological crises. Initially developing from ecocriticism's focus on environmental themes in literature, the field has evolved to incorporate insights from "environmental history, philosophy, anthropology, and cultural geography" (Heise 2017, 6). This interdisciplinary blend has become essential for engaging with environmental problems precisely because traditional scientific approaches alone have proven insufficient.

Wetlands, which are crucial for biodiversity, flood protection, and as possible sources of drinking water, are facing severe crises due to what Serpil Oppermann calls "capitalist regimes of power" that exploit these ecosystems for economic gain (2023, 1). Despite containing "only 0.03 percent of the world's water", wetlands are among the most biologically diverse ecosystems on the planet. However, approximately 50 percent of the world's wetlands have been irreversibly destroyed to make space for housing and agricultural activities (Oppermann 2023, 38). Limnologists Walter K. Dodds and Matt R. Whiles have identified numerous threats to freshwater ecosystems, including wetlands: sedimentation, pesticide and herbicide residues, fertilizer runoff, sewage containing pathogenic bacteria, chemical spills, garbage dumping, thermal pollution, acid precipitation, mine drainage, urbanization, and habitat destruction (Oppermann 2023, 39). These activities demonstrate how modern capitalist practices, driven by an ontological assumption that views humans and other species as self-contained individuals acting in

self-interest, have led to "extractive land relations and managerial practices" that exploit and devastate ecosystems for human-centric gains (Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. 2023). Several key characteristics of environmental humanities make it particularly valuable for understanding wetland ecologies in the Anthropocene.

The framing of the Anthropocene as an era defined by human influence on geological processes is not without controversy (Haraway et al. 2016); rather than a neutral scientific classification, it confronts us with the troubling consequences of anthropogenic dominance and compels critical reflection beyond the confines of geology, climatology, or environmental science. These consequences involve questions of "responsibility and historical roots, anxiety and loss, social behaviors, justice, even ontology", and require understanding how to "think the unthinkable", as noted by Rosi Braidotti and Amitav Ghosh (Iovino 2021, 28-9). As some scholars such as Kari Norgaard and Dale Jamieson have argued, an exclusive reliance on scientific data may prove "politically pointless" (Heise 2016, 24-5), especially when it fails to account for the cultural, social, and ideological dimensions of ecological crises. The environmental humanities address this limitation by embedding environmental inquiry within broader conversations about values, power, and human behavior. In light of this perspective, Sverker Sörlin contends that meaningful sustainability hinges on recognizing the human forces driving "planetary pressures" and reframing our understanding of what constitutes "environmentally relevant knowledge" (Heise 2016, 24-5).

Another distinctive contribution of the environmental humanities lies in its emphasis on narrative as a means of shaping ecological awareness and motivating action. Instead of treating stories as secondary to data or policy, the environmental humanities foregrounds storytelling as a form of epistemology and pedagogy, a "technology for education" (O'Gorman et al. 2019, 448) that encourages critical reflection on the frameworks through which people make sense of environmental realities. Increasingly, this narrative turn has gained traction beyond the humanities, particularly in efforts to imagine more just and sustainable futures. Literature, film, journalism, and poetry all contribute to shaping public perceptions of environmental risk (Garrard 2017, 463). As Heise points out, literary narratives are essential for examining how different cultures conceptualize and respond to ecological threats. Similarly, Greg Garrard emphasizes the pedagogical role of literature in offering metanarratives that help learners grasp the cultural dynamics underlying environmental crises (463). Through narrative forms, the environmental humanities amplify voices often excluded from mainstream environmental discourse, particularly those from marginalized communities disproportionately affected by ecological degradation (463). In doing

so, the environmental humanities contributes directly to the goals articulated in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by cultivating alternative imaginaries and challenging dominant representations of environmental risk (United Nations 2015).

While narratives help frame cultural understandings of environmental risk, the environmental humanities further emphasize the ethical and political implications of multispecies entanglements and environmental justice. A key strength of the environmental humanities resides in its capacity to bring environmental justice concerns into conversation with the entangled relations between human and nonhuman life. Environmental humanities approach ecological crises not simply as consequences of human action but as outcomes shaped by dynamic interdependencies that include material infrastructures, species relations, histories of displacement, and extractive economies. In this view, responding to environmental breakdown involves not only identifying structural injustices but also attending to the more-than-human agencies entangled in planetary change. Concepts like "multispecies ethnography; transcorporeality; intersectionality; intra-action" (Garrard 2017, 464) signal a shift toward reimagining community as a web of relations that includes both human and nonhuman lifeforms. This broader vision of sustainability reflects the principles of intergenerational justice, which emphasize safeguarding the rights and well-being of both present and future generations. Within the environmental justice movement, intergenerational justice has emerged as a central concept, articulated as the right to "the evolutionary space and time required not just for the survival of humans but all species" (Adamson 2017, 126). Confronting climate change effectively thus demands more than technical fixes; a meaningful approach must address structural inequalities through an integrative framework attentive to both marginalized human experiences and nonhuman agencies. From this vantage point, the environmental humanities advance an interdisciplinary approach that confronts the most pressing challenges to collective futures by fostering coalitional alliances across differences. Such alliances raise urgent and generative questions: "How might like and unlike actors partner to successfully transform social and environmental systems and make them more equitable and just?" and "Can humans act collectively as a species for the common good to ensure intergenerational justice?" (Adamson 2017, 130-1).

Finally, the environmental humanities occupies a pivotal role in transforming our modes of communication about environmental crises by offering expressive modes of engagement that extend beyond the limitations of scientific data and economic metrics. Through creative forms of mediation, the environmental humanities brings overlooked values, affective resonances, and cultural meanings into

public discourse, thereby reaching wider and more diverse audiences, including those in policy and decision-making spaces (Emmett, Nye 2017, 8). Heise cautions that critiques of Anthropocene discourse, especially those aimed at its essentializing assumptions about "the human species", often fail to resonate with scholars outside the humanities (2016, 28). To facilitate more effective communication, she advocates for pairing critique with "constructive alternatives" and actionable visions that can orient collective imagination and policy (28). In this light, the environmental humanities contributes not only analytical insight but also the imaginative capacity to "shape better possibilities", by generating knowledge that is emotionally resonant and socially mobilizing (Emmett, Nye 2017, 8). Beyond simply diagnosing crisis, the environmental humanities supports communicative strategies that catalyze adaptive responses that are attuned to the situated experiences of communities, the symbolic dimensions of environmental change, and the urgency of shaping sustainable futures. This communicative function becomes increasingly vital in contexts such as wetland preservation, where ecological restoration depends on the integration of scientific expertise and compelling narratives capable of inspiring public commitment and driving policy change.

3 "Storied Waterscapes": Filtering Changhua Wetlands

In both landscape aesthetics and modern conservation movements, according to ecocritic J. Baird Callicott, mountains and wetlands historically were feared and despised. However, while mountains have been aesthetically rehabilitated through the influence of landscape painting, wetlands remain largely "aesthetically reviled" (2003, 33). Unlike mountains, which benefited from the development of natural aesthetics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by thinkers like Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Uvedale Price, wetlands did not experience this "revolution in taste" and continue to be considered "the real outcasts of taste in natural objects" (34). Historically, dominant attitudes toward wetlands have been shaped by an instrumental logic that prioritized exploitation over appreciation, encapsulated in the mantra to "drain 'em; make 'em produce" (34). Under a utilitarian mindset, wetlands have been persistently sidelined; they are perceived as neither profitable nor visually dominant; their ecological complexity and sensory richness are quietly set aside in favor of more economically or aesthetically conventional terrains.

In her analysis, Kathryn Yalan Chang examines Sheng Wu (Sheng-xiong Wu) and Mingyi Wu's *Wetlands, Petrochemicals, and Imagining an Island* (2011) through the lens of environmental

humanities with an emphasis on the book's critical engagement with Taiwan's environmental imagination and bioregional identity, particularly along the western coast in areas like Changhua and Yunlin. Wu and Wu's book also documents the collaborative efforts between artists, scholars, and activists that culminated in the successful Anti-Kuokuang Movement, which halted the construction of the Eighth Naphtha Cracker Project in 2011. This moment marked a rare victory in environmental activism, demonstrating the role of cultural narratives in resisting industrial expansion in Taiwan. Yet the cultural perception of wetlands in Taiwan remains largely unchanged. Often seen as desolate mudflats swarming with mosquitoes and flies, wetlands continue to be treated as expendable spaces, frequently allocated for landfill, industrial development, dike construction, or other infrastructural purposes (Lin 2011, 39). Even Da-chen and Fangyuan, which narrowly escaped destruction during the Kuokuang project, have recently been proposed as sites for solar energy development, again reinforcing the perception of wetlands as wastelands. The persistent framing not only devalues the ecological richness of these areas but also legitimizes their ongoing transformation under the guise of sustainable progress. Against this backdrop, the film *Ebb and Flow* invites a reconsideration of coastal wetlands through a more attentive, affective, and relational lens.

As Taiwan's first investigative filmmaker specializing in environmental issues for the Public Television Service (PTS), Ke devoted three years to filming the Fangyuan wetlands with high-definition cameras. He recorded the daily lives of fishermen, the seasonal rhythms of the landscape, and the striking views from both above and below the water along the Changhua coastal intertidal zone.[2] The muddy intertidal zone along the southern Changhua coast is one of Taiwan's most intact natural coastlines, recognized internationally through awards at festivals, including the Houston Film Festival and the New York TV Festival (China Times 2011). This ecologically significant site, long overlooked by mainstream narratives, becomes the focal point through which *Ebb and Flow* reshapes the relationship between local knowledge, ecological vulnerability, and visual storytelling. By centering a marginal ecological zone and giving prominence to the voices of its local defenders, *Ebb and Flow* embodies several key principles of environmental humanities.

In *Ebb and Flow*, Ke highlights the concept of ecological filtering as both a literal ecological function and a symbolic narrative thread that anchors the film's engagement with environmental humanities.

2 See Public Television Service (2018). "Ke Chin-yuan Film Series". http://awakening.pts.org.tw/?lang=en.

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Wetlands are presented not only as biologically rich ecosystems but as dynamic filtering systems that sustain ecological balance, trapping sediments, breaking down pollutants, absorbing agricultural runoff, and regulating hydrological cycles (EPA 2001). The Da-chen and Fangyuan wetlands exemplify these capacities, functioning as vital ecological infrastructure that reduces environmental contaminants and supports biodiversity comparable to that of tropical rainforests and coral reefs. Through the specific example of oysters, which are shown to filter estuarine water within just two days (Ke 2011, 0:53′14″-0:53′25″), *Ebb and Flow* materializes this ecological function and draws attention to the often-unseen labor of nonhuman organisms in maintaining ecosystem resilience.

Importantly, Ke's ecological framing resists reduction to technical data by incorporating the voice of Taiwanese biologist Hsing-Juh Lin, who argues for a precautionary approach to conservation. Lin emphasizes that oyster shells may contain genetic or biochemical resources of future medicinal value, which remain beyond the reach of current scientific knowledge (Ke 2011, 0:53′28″-0:53′46″). His intervention underscores a critical dimension of environmental humanities, namely the ethical imperative to protect what we do not yet fully understand, a stance that reflects the precautionary principle of preservation ecology (0:53′47″-0:54′00″). In other words, the intervention shifts the focus from mourning 'already known' losses to the ethical imperative to safeguard uncertainty. Instead of relying solely on instrumental logics or utilitarian calculations, *Ebb and Flow* invites viewers to recognize ecological value as distributed, speculative, and entangled with uncertainty. This move translates passive witnessing into an active ethical commitment to intergenerational justice, a demand to protect what benefits those yet to be born (Adamson 2017; Heise 2017). By drawing attention to ambiguity and affect rather than certainty and control, the documentary creates a space for reimagining human–nature relations beyond extractive paradigms. In doing so, *Ebb and Flow* illustrates how environmental humanities contributes to ecological discourse, not by opposing science, but by expanding its temporal, ethical, and imaginative horizons through narrative and visual media.

Just as natural systems continuously adjust and filter changes, cultural and social filters shift narratives and perceptions of wetlands. Ke's film elucidates how wetlands can be viewed through cultural, economic, and political lenses that affect their value and management. Colonial and industrial perspectives have historically viewed wetlands as wastelands or obstacles that must be drained and developed, while economically, wetlands' value is often filtered through the lens of resource utilization and development potential. *Ebb and Flow* captures local residents' narrations about the Kuokuang Petrochemical project, their concerns regarding its impact

on their traditional way of life, and their fears that the wetlands' ecological balance will be compromised. As one fisherman states at the beginning of the film, "If the Kuokuang Petrochemical is built, it will cut off our chances of survival" (Jiang 2011). Ke elevates personal anxiety and grief into a collective environmental justice concern. This narrative amplification was integral to the successful Anti-Kuokuang Movement. The documentary form, by giving prominence to these local defenders, facilitates the translation of affective lament over imminent loss into direct political resistance.

Throughout *Ebb and Flow*, marginalized communities affected by environmental deterioration, including residents of small villages along the Changhua coast, voice their concerns about wetlands that are fundamental to their livelihoods. Ke's interpretations of the lives of the fishermen and their entangled relationships with wetlands and other species illustrate how the politics of storytelling operates as a central concern of the environmental humanities. His cinematic approach diverges from economic or policy-driven narratives by attending to what Serpil Oppermann describes as "storied waterscapes" (2023, 36), environments that are not only ecologically significant but also saturated with memory, perception, and cultural meaning. Ke's attention to place is deeply relational. In his own words, he has spent over two decades observing fishing villages along the Changhua coast, developing what he describes as an intimate understanding of "the pulse of life in the intertidal zone" (Ke 2022b). This long-term engagement allows him to depict wetlands not as static landscapes but as dynamic protagonists.

Visually, *Ebb and Flow* resists conventional environmental documentary formats. Instead of relying on voiceover or expository narration, *Ebb and Flow* centers ambient sound – "hymns, harmonicas, wind, and waves" (Tsai, Yu, Ke 2013, 172) – and emphasizes the presence of both human and nonhuman actors. Migratory birds, cows, dogs, and villagers appear during receding tides "as if scheduling a rendezvous" (Eslite.com n.d.), forming what Ke portrays as multispecies commons. By minimizing external commentary and privileging sensory immersion, *Ebb and Flow* enables what Oppermann calls a "terraqueous imagination", revealing the aesthetic and emotional textures of coastal life (2023, 36). As such, Ke's film does more than document an ecosystem; it stages a cultural intervention that reclaims the wetland as a place of belonging, where "curiosity, fear, and wonder" intersect (36). It is through this storied lens that *Ebb and Flow* challenges the dominant filters shaped by economic, political, and aesthetic forces that have historically rendered wetlands as marginal or expendable.

Despite the ecological and cultural value of the Changhua wetlands, they continue to face opposition from stakeholders who prioritize industrial development. As Renbao Xu, president of the

Da-chen Township Chiefs' Association, argues, the area has "no national-level wetland, only barren mudflats where nothing grows" (Li 2024). This rhetorical dismissal aligns with a long-standing utilitarian perspective that treats wetlands as vacant lands awaiting conversion. Xu warns that wetland designation would "severely restrict industrial development", a statement revealing how economic narratives often take precedence over environmental and cultural concerns. In contrast, the stance of Fangyuan Township illuminates the complexities of ecological conflict. Chief Baoling Lin emphasizes the region's unique biodiversity and the globally recognized "sea ox" tourism culture, stating that over 200,000 people had engaged in "ox cart oyster picking" by the end of 2023 (Issue Center and Trust Center 2024). These cultural practices are inseparable from ecological preservation and reflect a model where wetlands serve as both habitat and heritage. By juxtaposing these positions, *Ebb and Flow* reveals that the conflict is not simply economic; it arises from two incompatible understandings of what wetlands are. The ongoing local contestation over the basis of the wetland's existence (ontology) challenges Western EH narratives of aesthetic rehabilitation, showing that the ontological status of wetlands remains a matter of political struggle. Decisions about land use thus unfold within a dense field of political claims, affective attachments, and ethical commitments, an arena where the meaning of the landscape itself is contested.

However, as Ke's film makes clear, threats to the wetland are not limited to petrochemical projects. Under Taiwan's "non-nuclear homes" energy transition, the same landscapes previously protected from industrial extraction now face encroachment from so-called green infrastructure. As reported in July 2024, Changhua's coastal wetland, spanning over 12,000 hectares, faces the risk of being "transformed into a landscape dominated by industrial structures" (Jen 2024). Residents have voiced alarm: "this will not only devastate the wetland but also ruin the village" (Jian 2024). In Fangyuan Township, solar panels have already replaced clam farms, with local shellfish farmers reporting that clams "shrink too quickly after experiencing a shock" from construction vibrations (Hung, Chien 2024). The transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy does not inherently resolve environmental justice concerns but frequently reproduces them in new geographic or sociopolitical contexts.

Ke's storytelling revitalizes these contested spaces by restoring their cultural and ecological significance. Drawing on Aldo Leopold's insight that emotional connection to a place "cannot be purchased with either learned degrees or dollars" (1949, 174), *Ebb and Flow* calls attention to what is lost when wetlands are reduced to zones of utility. As James L. Smith argues, ecological degradation results in "prolonged pain, anxieties, and traumas" for both nonhuman inhabitants and the human communities who rely on them (2021,

245). *Ebb and Flow* responds not with technical solutions, but with narrative repair, reviving the stories sedimented in Changhua fishing villages and insisting that conservation is not only about species or soil, but also about memory, justice, and intergenerational care.

Set against the backdrop of some of Taiwan's most extensive and ecologically significant mudflats, *Ebb and Flow* offers more than documentation; it performs a cultural and ethical meditation on sustainability, memory, and justice. Ke's storytelling links local histories with global futures, echoing concepts such as intergenerational justice (Adamson 2017) and transgenerational justice, which Heise defines as addressing "how climate change will affect those now young and those yet to be born" (2024, 4). In response to the rising popularity of green energy and the environmental toll of coastal industrialization, Ke has initiated collaborations with younger generations, notably through contemporary dance, to express the emotional and political urgency of wetland disappearance. Ke's use of the Taiwanese example provincializes the universal Anthropocene crisis narrative, demonstrating that environmental encroachment persists even in the pursuit of "better possibilities". The next section explores how *Sea Spray* (2022), Ke's follow-up documentary, expands this environmental humanistic vision through the integration of new media and performance to reimagine ecological futures along Taiwan's disappearing shorelines.

4 Embodying Wetlands: Dancing on the Stage of Species in *Sea Spray*

A decade after completing *Ebb and Flow*, Ke once again focused on wetland issues in 2022, driven by concerns over the government's green energy plan and the environmental deterioration of coastal seashores. In *Sea Spray*, he expands his focus to include Taiwan's coastlines more broadly in a way that takes into account the past, present, and future of wetlands and seashores throughout the island. Collaborating with choreographer and director Min-ni Tsai and her Humanity Theater dancers, Ke sought to increase the visibility of environmental issues among the younger generation. *Sea Spray* consists of five parts: "Beginnings", "In the Name of Love", "Where River Meets Sea", "Is the Sea Still There?", and "Sattva (Sentience)". The film combines staged performances, dancers' interpretive reflections, and footage of dancers in various settings along Taiwan's coastal wetlands. Through this interdisciplinary approach, *Sea Spray* demonstrates several key aspects of environmental humanities' engagement with ecologies of life and death.

After years of engaging in environmental advocacy through newspaper columns, documentary films, and even public speeches

delivered from harbor platforms, Ke confessed that he had reached an impasse in his efforts to inspire environmental concern (Ke 2022b). Turning to dance as a new communicative form, *Sea Spray* marks his shift toward conveying ecological insights without overwhelming viewers with factual information. Instead, he seeks to evoke an embodied response, encouraging audiences to *feel* the coastal rhythms with their hearts (Ke 2022b). Rather than relying on rational, data-centered communication, Ke turns to embodied artistic expression. His approach complements existing environmental humanities work by offering a mode that stimulates civic awareness through affect and imagination. As Liping Yu, producer of PTS's *Our Island*, observes, *Sea Spray* channels Ke's ecological reflections through artistic expression to stimulate civic awareness and engagement, departing from more traditional modes such as exposé-driven storytelling, logical argumentation, or information-heavy discourse (Chen 2022).

Dance, as an embodied and relational art form, offers a distinctive mode of environmental communication rooted in the principles of environmental humanities. Rather than translating ecological knowledge into an abstract argument, dance engages the body as a site of perception, feeling, and response. As Lauren M. Butler suggests, if art allows scientific knowledge to be transformed into meaningful "action", then dance becomes a medium that "creatively communicat[es] the physical world" and "embodies" emotional connection and situated understanding (Butler 2018, 194). *Sea Spray* puts this potential into practice by presenting ecological awareness, political expression, and sensory engagement as interwoven dimensions of movement situated in wetland and coastal environments. Ke's work responds to a broader cultural silence that Bill McKibben identifies in the context of climate change. McKibben asks, "Where are the books? The poems? The plays?" – pointing to a noticeable absence of artistic responses to global warming, in contrast to the vibrant creative production during the AIDS crisis (McKibben 2005). In turning to dance, Ke addresses this gap not by delivering facts or logical appeals, but by inviting audiences to feel ecological relationships through bodily motion and attentiveness to place. Defined as "a type of movement language" (Fleming 2023, 47, 60), dance engages both visual and bodily perception as a means of conveying the dynamics of human-environment relationships. Moving through "the land's topography, inhabitants, and infrastructure" (Fleming 2023, 62), the dancer not only inhabits space but also reacts to it, shaping meaning through motion. This form of engagement enables the audience to participate emotionally, as Butler notes, "When an audience watches dance, their mirror neurons ignite", producing a sensation as if they themselves were performing the movements (2020, 186). This is a concrete neurological mechanism

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that translates abstract visual witnessing into a visceral and felt registration of the wetlands' fragility and vulnerability. The neurological resonance helps explain Ke's use of dance in *Sea Spray* as a way of allowing spectators to register the fragility, dynamism, and vulnerability of the wetlands on a visceral level.

Ke's project centers on a practice known as "site dancing". Ke and choreographer Tsai collaborate with the Humanity Theater to perform improvised dances in ecologically sensitive locations, such as tidal flats and estuarine zones. These performances are not only situated in outdoor spaces but emerge from direct engagement with the site itself. Karen N. Barbour defines site dance as a practice of "creating dance that engages with specific sites" and "cultivating responsive relationships and dialogues between places and dancers" (2019, 114). Expanding this idea, Melanie Kloetzel argues that site-specific dance employs "practical and hands-on tactics" to give political expression a spatial and embodied dimension (Kloetzel 2019). Ke's *Sea Spray* picks up on this logic through the adoption of site-based dance as a mode of activating the coastal landscape while framing the landscape not as an inert backdrop but as a space shaped by ecological struggle, multispecies movement, and embedded histories of resistance.

In *Sea Spray*, Ke transforms Taiwan's wetlands and coastlines into sites where environmental trauma becomes both visible and affectively perceptible through dance and cinematography. Over the course of more than a year, Ke and the performers from Humanity Theater traveled across a diverse range of coastal regions, including Fangyuan in Changhua, Mailiao in Yunlin, Dongshi in Chiayi, and Bali in New Taipei City, each representing different stages of industrial development and environmental degradation. These landscapes functions as more than physical settings because they hold layers of ecological memory and loss, exposing a tension that environmental humanities identify between the cyclical patterns of nature and the disruptions imposed by extractive modernity. The opening segment of *Sea Spray*, titled "Beginnings: Tidal Rhythms, an Evolving Stage", establishes this contrast vividly. Ke juxtaposes the Fangyuan Wetland, where dancers move in sync with the ebb and flow of oyster-field tides, with Mailiao's industrialized coast, home to the Sixth Naphtha Cracker Complex. At Mailiao, the dancers are confronted with overwhelming sensory cues, including "the smell of swimming pools, dead mice, and hydrochloric acid", accompanied by "a strange, unsettling scent" (0:10′55″-0:11′40″), all of which trigger both bodily unease and emotional disturbance. These embodied reactions register the affective toll of environmental damage by illustrating that industrial pollution inflicts physical deterioration as well as psychological and perceptual imprints that manifest as environmental trauma through bodily experience.

Throughout *Sea Spray*, Ke reflects on the passage of time not solely as chronology, but as a measure of ecological endurance and cultural mourning in the Taiwanese context. By focusing on three ecologically compromised seashores, the disappearing algal reefs at Datan in Taoyuan, the crumbling windbreak forests and flood-stricken homes in Dongshi (Chiayi), and the congested tourist coastline of Kenting, Ke maps a geography of loss shaped by decades of developmental sacrifice. These wounded landscapes become, in Fredric Jameson's terms as cited by Hal Foster, examples of a "geo-aesthetic atmosphere", where aesthetic composition (such as black-and-white cinematography) communicates collective grief over sites that are disappearing or irreparably altered (Foster 2018, 320). Through monochrome cinematography, *Sea Spray* channels an elegiac tone that functions as both artistic expression and ecological witnessing. Rather than presenting nature as pristine or timeless, *Sea Spray* reveals coastlines and wetlands as fragile environments shaped by exploitation, chemical intrusion, and infrastructural violence. In doing so, Ke's work contributes to a form of geo-aesthetic documentation that does not simply represent ecological crisis but immerses the viewer in its atmospheric weight. The visual and choreographic strategies employed throughout the film allow spectators to encounter environmental trauma not as abstract data, but as a layered experience involving place, memory, and bodily sensation.

Additionally, *Sea Spray* demonstrates the potential for mutual healing between people and the sea in the sections "Where River Meets Sea" and "Is the Sea Still There?" These parts explore spiritual loss and renewal by showing how performers turn to seascapes for healing when facing difficulties. Instead of seeking one-sided solace, the dancers are prompted to reflect on what they might offer in return. As one performer states, "Only after experiencing [the ocean] can you appreciate how beauty and positivity become ingrained and influence your body and mind; It nourishes you" (Ke 2022a, 0:33′01″). This notion of reciprocity echoes Raffaele Rufo's proposition that trees, or by extension, any part of nature, "are not there only to heal and save us", but instead prompt us to engage with the "wounds of modern civilization" through sensory awareness and memory (2023, 110). Ke's direction guides this process. In Bali, a riverside district in New Taipei City, he instructs the dancers to "use your body to respond to it, speak to it, use your body to communicate with it" (Ke 2022a, 0:24′35″), setting in motion an interaction with the sea that is at once physical, affective, and reflective. This dialogue between bodies and seascapes leads the performers to recognize their previous disconnection through the realization that they had not made "true contact" (0:25′12″) until they chose to trust the sea. One describes the moment of surrender as when "things fall away one by

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one until there [is] nothing left" (0:26′30″), a moment of decentering the self in favor of openness to environmental presence.

The language of healing continues throughout the film, as performers speak of digging their feet into the sand, synchronizing their breath with the waves, and being "touched" by the earth (Ke 2022a, 0:28′06″). These somatic exchanges echo Pegge Vissicaro's notion of nonhuman collaboration in dance, where "sensate bodies rhythmically twisted and turned" (2023, 5). One performer even recalls becoming "an animal during the pas de deux" (0:06′45″), highlighting the fluid boundary between human and nonhuman subjectivity. Such interspecies intimacy also draws on Kim Satchell's concept of "intimate others", which replaces radical otherness with ethical proximity, encouraging "closer and deeper relationships between organisms in their environment" (2008, 208). At the heart of this ethical practice is what Kloetzel and Pavlik call "attending to place", where "attending" means both paying close attention and taking care (2009, 7). In the final segment filmed at Nantien in Taitung, the dancers' slow movements and tactile engagement with the cobblestone beach reflect this attentiveness. One performer describes the cobblestones as having "a rhythmic 'sound'" that "conveys the energy of the ocean" (0:49′53″), while another observes the shore as a place to "listen to [her] true self" (0:50′41″). Such embodied experiences resonate with Miriam Marler's understanding of somatic engagement in place, which frames stillness and slow movement not as passive state but as conditions that generate "micro-level responses in the body" and invite relational attention to the subtle elements of their environment (2024, 73-4). For Ke, these tactile and sensory immersions are not aesthetic choices alone but necessary means of countering what Pauli Tapani Karjalainen contrasts as the cold detachment of "remote sensing" with the rich, immersive quality of "intimate sensing", a mode of perception that involves "the body, soul, and mind" (1999, 5). It is through this immersive contact that the wetland and seashore become not just scenic backgrounds, but co-agents in a process of mutual transformation. In one particularly moving black-and-white sequence, dancers stand atop breakwaters while a voice from the sea laments: "You have excavated my spirit, occupied my body, and severed my connecting nerves" (Ke 2022a, 0:44′42″-0:45′14″). Here, the sea is not only a witness but also a co-agent of grief. By modeling this shift from seeking one-sided solace to expressing care and commitment, *Sea Spray* translates trauma witnessing into the practice of ethical engagement. This voice, emerging from layers of environmental trauma, gives shape to what Rufo calls "embodied memories" (2023, 110), placing the landscape in dialogue with human perception and historical injury. In this relationship, healing becomes possible not through transcendence but through shared vulnerability.

Sea Spray concludes with a return to personal narrative, as performers reflect on what the seashore offered them. One speaks

of "an immersive feeling", another of "becoming one with this place" (0:50′48″-0:51′00″), and yet another emphasizes that "every encounter in this world is an encounter with one's self" (0:51′09″). As the director Tsai notes, the coast holds "a wealth of stories to tell" (0:51′23″), a claim that positions dance with place as a catalyst for both ecological reflection and personal revelation. Aurora Brown Lagattuta's insight that dancing with specific locations has the potential to "shift, transform and uplift" the performer, the land, and the multispecies community (2019, xi) finds vivid realization in *Sea Spray*. The performers' embodied exchanges with intimate others not only gesture toward an ethics of care but also model how ecological trauma might be approached through reciprocal sensing, shared presence, and collective creativity.

5 Conclusion

Taiwan's wetlands, like those described by Judith Lewis Mernit, are entangled in ongoing struggles over conservation, development, and ecological meaning (Mernit 2015). As liminal sites positioned between land and sea, wetlands offer a vivid illustration of what Giblett calls "the quaking zone", a threshold space where ecological tensions and cultural perceptions collide (1996, 3). These spaces operate beyond the role of background scenery but emerge as sites shaped by contestation, temporality, and cohabitation. Throughout this paper, I have examined how wetlands resist binary classifications of value and waste. Ke's *Ebb and Flow* and *Sea Spray* contribute significantly to this rethinking by reimagining wetlands not only as ecological systems but as spaces of embodied knowledge, cultural memory, and emotional intensity. In *Ebb and Flow*, ecological filtering is visualized through the oyster's role in sustaining biodiversity, while cultural filtering emerges through the voices of Changhua residents negotiating conflicting visions of industrial expansion and local heritage. The site-based performance sequences in *Sea Spray* extend this vision through what Eno calls "ecological integration", in which performers and places become entangled in reciprocal acts of sensing and healing (2018, 4).

Rather than framing wetland spaces solely through loss or exploitation, Ke's two documentaries engage affect, memory, and somatic presence to produce what Timothy Morton describes as an "ecological lament" (2007, 186). The result is a cinematic mode of mourning that, instead of paralyzing, motivates collective action and public dialogue. Wetlands and seashores in these films are portrayed not only as ecologies to protect but as narrative and affective terrains through which people come to terms with their place in the world. In the Anthropocene, where the life and death of wetlands and seashores unfold as intertwined ecological and cultural struggles,

Ke's films offer not solutions but sensibilities that invite us to witness, to remember, and to respond.

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