On t’iptukilhiwat’tputu’ini, where are you from and where are you going?

k?imit’i, we are far away. ts?iqiʔ, the tides are low.

qšimuʔ, like many words in tinismuʔ tilhinktit’u, explains a story rather than a fixed or singular vocabulary. [1, 2] Olivella biplicata has a gorgeous shell, with colors that smoothly transition from stark white to milky lavender to rich honey golds, in combination or alone, along a softly curving spire. A being reflecting spiritual wealth and a symbol of exchange from our homelands spanning mountain ranges east to nitspu nakota kt’iʔu, south well beyond recently imagined lines of occupying nations, and along margins of the sea north to nitspu unangan kt’iʔu, qšimuʔ grounds yak tit’u tit’u yak tilhini in a vast network of relation. [3] yak?itinismuʔ wa yak?itotomol, which echo the cadence, vocabulary, and sewn-planks of many other nations, extend these connections well across łpasini, the one ocean. [4]

imagining
distance
in
constellations

Most of my family is living in diaspora from our homelands due to dispossession – matriarchal lands now submerged by dammed rivers once glistening with rainbow trout, enclosed with barbed wire to herd the cattle that replaced us, or mediated entirely by military bases and removal to private collections. [5] Though privileged to be a visitor at xučyun nitspu chochenyo kt’iʔu, within the range of extended neighbors, cousins, and kin, I make the four hour drive regularly to watch freshwater bloom in saltwater tides and gather along beaches our family has since time immemorial. We have always been well-traveled people.

that tether us
to the spring
of who
we are
qšimu? also situates us within the mirror of the sky. The word is also used to describe stars, each relation an anchor in constellations of movement, navigation, shifting tides, and shared ceremony. Indeed, it is this movement that iterates across waters and continents that brings me to this place again and again. Epeli Hau’ofa explained in *Our Sea Of Islands* that the “once boundless world” was transformed into a mythology of confinement. This extends to the edges of what is designated as “Pacific,” or “Atlantic,” “Carribbean,” “Arctic,” or otherwise – in yak?itinismu?, as in many of our languages, we know it as one connected being. In all our rupture and resilience, some have forgotten about the full expanse of relatives on other shores. But like the tides that call multitudes of stars to the softly churning surf at tsitxala, yakitspułhitsʔiša?, our world is in continuous motion, wa yatsnatšaqinismu? tsʔ isaqwa yakʔikitʔaninitspuspu, and this knowing makes our worlds whole. [6, 7]

kʔitutʔinaha, we are returning.
tsʔilhini, the tides are full and high.

Notes:

2. Renée Pualani Louis, author of *Kanaka Hawai’i Cartography: Hula, Navigation, and Oratory* offered this understanding of ‘Ōlelo placenames in a conversation at University of California, Davis on October 24, 2019.
3. nitspu nakota ktitʔu (in the the land/world of Nakota people [Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan]; nitspu unangan ktitʔu (in the land/world of Unangan people (Tanam Unangaa [Aleutian Islands, Alaska and Kamchatka Krai]); yak titʔu titʔu yak tilhini (the people of tilhini (place of the full moon [San Luis Obispo, CA]).
4. yakʔitinismu? (our language) wa yakʔitotomol (and our tomols). Tomols are sewn redwood plank canoes used throughout the Santa Barbara Channels Islands and the southern stretch of Chumashan cultural areas in the Central Coast of California (namely smuwič [the language of Santa Barbara region] and mitsqanaqa’an [the language of Ventura region] speaking relations and cousins on Limu’w [Santa Cruz Island] and Wi’ma [Santa Rosa Island]).
5. Namely, the dam on the Nacimiento River (tributary of the north-flowing Salinas River in Central California), Hearst Corporation, Camp Roberts National Guard Outpost, and the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at University of California, Berkeley.
6. tsitxala (place of the big red ants [Cayucos, CA]), one of the author’s home villages.
7. Original artwork: Sarah Biscarra Dilley, ʔiptkihlíwiwatʔiputʔiʔni [where are you from and where are you going?], video collage, 9:33, 2018.