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Borrowed Waters: Water Crisis and Water Justice in Rita Wong's *undercurrent*

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Abstract

In recent years ecocriticism and the environmental humanities have undergone a 'hydrological turn', sometimes referred to as the emergence of the 'blue humanities'. This 'turn' has, however, typically focused on the maritime and oceanic rather than the fresh water essential for the reproduction of much life on earth. In this article I analyse contemporary Canadian poet Rita Wong's 2015 collection *undercurrent* for thematic and formal insights into how dominant ways of understanding water have enabled its exploitation within the capitalist world-system. I argue that Wong's poetry resists a concept that geographer Jamie Linton calls 'modern water' (2010: 14), or water as ultimately reducible to abstract molecules of 'H₂O' circulating within the hydrological cycle. Wong's poems illustrate how this concept has facilitated the exhaustion and contamination of the world's water in the pursuit of profit, amplifying these concerns in formal strategies that situate local Canadian water histories within what Jason W. Moore describes as capitalism's 'world-ecological regime'. I combine world-systems theory with Indigenous, ecofeminist and posthumanist thought to show how Wong's poetry models non-anthropocentric modes of relating to water and other water-dependent beings that move towards environmental justice.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Water Politics, Contemporary Poetry, Canadian Literature, Water Crisis

Additional Information

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Introduction

Our environmental crisis might also be described as a crisis of water: too much, or not enough. Climate change induced sea level rise and increasingly frequent extreme weather events are threats of the present, not of a distant future, while water shortages are often cited as the reason for past, present, and future conflicts and mass migrations. The devastation wrought by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria on Texas, Haiti and Puerto Rico in summer 2017 has been described by climate scientists as a ‘new normal’, while the 1990s discourse of ‘water wars’ has made a return, used to frame shortages in Cape Town, tensions in Israel/Palestine and between India and Pakistan, and to explain the origins of the Syrian refugee crisis. While we should be cautious of the potential for such diagnoses to erase political causes of conflict and migration,¹ water certainly remains, as Mark Zeitoun observes, a ‘victim and target’ of war,² as in Israel’s destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza and the West Bank, and the United States’ ongoing war on black and Indigenous bodies in Flint and Standing Rock. Dramatic predictions of water conflict also obscure the everyday reality of water shortages for much of the global population: four billion people already suffer severe water scarcity for at least one month a year.³

These disparate issues are often gathered together under the heading ‘water crisis’. This phrase runs the risk of naturalising shortages of clean water as a fixed condition of certain environments, rather than, as political ecologists remind us, the product of political decisions and scientific discourses.⁴ The naturalisation of crisis also erases the fact that, as geographer Jamie Linton notes, ‘people think with as well as about water, and these processes are often impossible to disentangle’.⁵ How we conceptualise water is crucial to how we understand the nature and impacts of ‘water crisis’ and to the answers we can envision. Analysing the material effects of ideas of nature in literary study has typically been the province of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. These disciplines are currently undergoing a ‘hydrological turn’, referred to as the ‘blue humanities’. This ‘turn’ has, however, so far been heavily skewed towards the maritime and oceanic worlds. The oceans, of course, hold 96.5 per cent of the world’s water, and saltwater and fresh water are both part of the hydrological cycle. Human histories of the sea are a vital part of our relationships with water and have produced much excellent work.⁶ Still, this oceanic focus neglects the fresh water needed to perpetuate much life on Earth, including human life.

In this article I attempt to offer a critical approach that can account for our relationships with fresh water, arguing that dominant ways of understanding water have enabled its exploitation within the capitalist world-system. I identify Canadian poet Rita Wong’s 2015 collection *undercurrent* as a text that provides insights into how we might live more sustainably with water and other water-dependent life, arguing that Wong’s poetry resists a dominant concept that Linton calls ‘modern water’, or water as ultimately reducible to abstract molecules of ‘H₂O’ circulating within the hydrological cycle.⁷ Wong’s poems illustrate how this concept has facilitated the exhaustion and contamination of the world’s water in the pursuit of profit, amplifying these concerns in formal strategies that situate these practices within what environmental historian Jason W. Moore describes as capitalism’s ‘ecological regime’.⁸ Her

work also forms part of a wider contemporary shift in which poetry has emerged as a key form for the articulation of environmental concern and environmental hope, a trend that has been prominent in Canadian literature.⁹ My reading of Wong develops an ongoing critical turn in the study of what has come to be known as ‘ecopoetry’ away from more traditional representational forms and towards how experimental writing might enact an alternative ‘stance toward the living planet’.¹⁰

In reading Wong’s text as literature of the capitalist world-system, my analysis builds on the work of the Warwick Research Collective (WReC).¹¹ I combine this approach with Indigenous, ecofeminist and posthumanist thought, bodies of knowledge that have not always sat comfortably together. Adherents to older materialisms such as Marxism, foundational to world-systems thinking, have criticised posthumanism’s new materialism for mystifying concrete political conditions in favour of a fuzzy ‘attunement’ to the nonhuman.¹² Indigenous thinkers have been rightly suspicious of posthumanist models of human-nonhuman relations that resemble longstanding Indigenous worldviews while citing only white male philosophers,¹³ a critique that might also be levelled at Moore’s world-systemic notion of the ‘web of life’. While not eliding these tensions, I show that these approaches can be used together in reading Wong’s poetry to foreground non-anthropocentric modes of relating to water that resist its appropriation as a resource for human use, offering potential answers to water crisis that avoid replicating the instrumentalist logics at its root.

Wong has published five collections, including a collaborative long poem with Larissa Lai, *sybil unrest* (2008), and an ‘image-poem’ with Fred Wah, *beholden* (2018). Her work is distinctive for its formal experimentation, combining concrete poetry, collage and largely dispensing with lyric conventions. Wong’s poetry has received critical acclaim and popular recognition. Her 2007 collection *forage* won the 2008 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize and was nominated for the Asian American Literary Awards, as well as winning the first Canada

Reads Poetry competition in 2011. *beholden* was shortlisted for the Dorothy Livesay Prize in 2019. Nevertheless, she is less well-known outside North America and relatively under-examined in an academic context.¹⁴ All Wong's collections speak to her concern with questions of gender, power, ecology and justice, and as Heather Milne writes of *forage*, 'the land, water and lives that have been sacrificed for the sake of capital, and the global and national structures of power that persistently devalue the lives of women of colour and Aboriginal women'.¹⁵

Wong is also a prominent activist, campaigning alongside Indigenous land and water protectors. In August 2019 she was sentenced to 28 days in prison for peacefully blocking the entrance to a work site for the highly controversial Trans-Mountain pipeline the previous year. The pipeline, which transports oil from the Alberta tar sands to the British Columbia coast, was bought by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau from Texas-based multinational Kinder Morgan in 2018, in the face of significant opposition from environmental and Indigenous groups. In 2019 Trudeau reapproved a massive expansion plan that will create 980 kilometres of new pipeline and triple its capacity from 300,000 to 890,000 barrels per day.¹⁶ The extension will intensify the exploitation of the tar sands – already home to 220 square kilometres of tailings ponds containing one trillion litres of toxic sludge – increase the risk of devastating spills on land and water, and endanger Vancouver's marine environment with a seven-fold increase in tankers. Wong has also campaigned against the similarly controversial Site C hydroelectric dam on the Peace River in British Columbia. The dam, currently being constructed by BC Hydro at a cost of \$10.7 billion, will flood over 5,500 hectares of First Nations lands within protected Treaty 8 territory in an act that Roland Willson, chief of West Moberly First Nations, describes as 'cultural genocide'.¹⁷ The electricity to be produced by Site C has not been proven to be needed. It has one certain market, however: the tar sands.¹⁸ Trudeau's continuation of these devastating megaprojects

indicates that, in spite of the optimism that followed his 2015 election, he is as committed to entrenching the Canadian petro-state as his Conservative predecessor Stephen Harper.¹⁹

Forgotten Water

The primary way in which water appears in *undercurrent* is as closely entangled with day-to-day life. Wong makes visible what Erik Swyngedouw calls the ‘urban hydrosocial cycle’, showing the extent to which the city ‘is predicated upon some system of circulating water’.²⁰ This dependence is often concealed by the architecture of the urban metropolises of the global core, in which pipes are hidden below the streets and water appears from the tap as if by magic. In this context water becomes, as Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis note, ‘relegated to a passive role as a “resource”, and subjected to containment, commodification, and instrumentalization’.²¹ In ‘take a stand’ (60) water networks are hidden from view, only perceptible as a minor smelly unruliness: ‘sewage wafts up at the corner of fifth and st. george’ escaping from ‘indifferent pipe grid pipe grind/your teeth pipe miles and miles of pipe underneath our feet’. In this city:

one pipe carries drinking water

another carries away your toilet flush

pipe down, pipe plastic, pipe slime, pipe

time

The almost tedious repetitiveness of these lines, of which Wong indicates knowing awareness in the phrase ‘grind/your teeth’, mirrors the reliability of water supply in this rationalised modern city. The order of the ‘pipe grid’ sits in contrast with water’s tendency to spread and flow. These grinding teeth and the suggestion of silencing in ‘pipe down’ indicate an

impatience with the incuriosity of the city's inhabitants about the flows that sustain their lives and where their euphemistic 'toilet flush' might be going.

Wong links the invisibility and instrumentalisation of water in the modern urban landscape to the violent and ongoing erasure of Canada's Indigenous peoples and ways of life, particularly ways of living with water. Street names ('st. george') and, crucially, river names in the Squamish and Halkomelem languages ('Snauq Staulk, te Statlōw') identify the poem's setting as the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood of Vancouver, a city founded by European settlers on unceded Coast Salish territories, and Wong's home. Disruptions to the ordered infrastructure reveal and resist Vancouver's violent history, with a line break heralding the unexpected arrival of water: 'corner the hydrant bursts chlorinated/water shoots exuberant into sky/coincidence, haunting, or the stubborn stream's refusal to be confined?' Even 'chlorinated' in accordance with the norms of the sanitary city this water out-of-place raises deeper questions about the imposition of 'miles and miles of pipe' and 'manhole covers', particularly alongside the word 'haunting', hinting at violently ended lives. The poem's location offers further guidance: St. George Street is the site of an older network of streams that are the focus of an ongoing 'deculverting' or 'daylighting' campaign, The St George Rainway Project, alluded to by Wong in her call to 're-pair tributary with daylight/twin riparian zone with home'. These 'unceded streams', stolen 'from the salmon who swam them', suggest alternative ways of living with water to those of the 'pipe grid' in which neither water nor fish are commodified as 'resources' within ongoing settler colonial and corporate extraction, but acknowledged as inhabitants of a shared 'riparian' home.

'Hewers of Wood, Drawers of Water'

Wong's poetry reveals the extent to which water's instrumentalisation is crucial to the capitalist world-system both as a resource itself and a means of enabling wider resource

extraction. Even in the era of ‘liquid modernity’ and financialisation over 80 per cent of global trade by volume and over 70 per cent by value still travels via container ship.²² In ‘unsung service’ (34-35) Wong highlights the continuing and often forgotten role played by waterways and ocean logistics in ‘servicing’ the global economy, situating the contemporary neoliberal moment within a longer history of capitalist accumulation through her focus on Canada. As in ‘take a stand’ location is indicated by river names but also by activities described. The poem is dedicated to ‘*Stalaw, the Fraser River*’ (34) and Wong depicts a visit to a steam-powered ‘paddlewheeler’ named ‘*Samson V*’. The Samson V was launched in 1937 as a ‘snagboat’, clearing debris from the Fraser River and maintaining its usability for ships travelling from Canada’s interior to the docks. Now retired, it is a floating museum in New Westminster, Greater Vancouver, close to the historic Fraser River Port and the Port of Vancouver, Canada’s largest port. With its ‘constant container activity’ (34), as Wong writes, the Port of Vancouver represents one of the ‘regional sites of capital production and transshipment’ at which Stephanie LeMenager notes that ‘the transnational, as the fundamental if elusive space of economic globalization, tends to be most visible’.²³ This port setting is crucial to the poem’s negotiation of Canada’s internal ‘metropole-hinterland’ dynamics and the country’s semiperipheral place within the world-economy.²⁴

Wong’s reflections on Canada’s historical and ongoing role in capitalist resource extraction and exhaustion are sparked by the presence of an otter, recalling the pivotal role of the fur trade in Canada’s economic history and the devastating impact of European settler colonialism on Canada’s animal populations. She writes:

perched on a paddlewheeler, typing on my freight laptop
 on the Samson V, in the midst of freshet
 big puppy-eyed, sleek river otter silently glides.
 together otter & i witness raw logs floating down the Fraser

accelerated export to empires south & east of us

As Harold Innis writes in *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930), waterways ‘occupied a vital position in the economic development of northern North America’.²⁵ The river systems of what would become Canada allowed European colonialists to open new commodity frontiers in the interior once animal populations of the more accessible coastal regions had been exhausted.²⁶ The violent expansion of these frontiers was led by European corporations whose role is memorialised in the landscape: the Fraser River is named after North West Company ‘explorer’ Simon Fraser. Wong lists the river’s Halkomelem name *Staləw* first, foregrounding the Indigenous meanings and lifeways attached to Canada’s rivers that were overlaid as they were incorporated by European settlers into the process of extracting the region’s resource wealth. Wong’s otter marks the incorporation of Canada into capitalism’s world-economy and world-ecology, providing the basis for her analysis of the present.

The positioning of the paddlewheeler unites Canada’s past and present as part of the world-system’s semiperipheries: ‘she faces the port where mazdas &/audis enter/as raw logs exit’ (34). The export of ‘raw logs’ to ‘empires south & east’ recalls Canada’s history as ‘hewer of wood and drawer of water’; supplier of staple commodities to the United States and Europe. The ‘mazdas &/audis’, along with the reference to ‘creosote beside’ the river, hint at Canada’s newer role in supplying the unceasing demands of petromodernity through the ongoing catastrophe of the tar sands, a recurring theme of Wong’s collection. Wong aligns human interests with those of the otter and other native species in her use of the first-person plural, which allows her to perform shared ‘witness’ to the harms of capitalist extractivism: ‘we/the moose & the/murrelets want/the trees here, alive/tree care is self-care’ (34).

Bodies of Water

The threat of bodily contamination through the unwitting exchange of water is key to the ethical force of Wong's resistance to water's instrumentalisation. Water links all life on earth materially and metaphorically as it shifts between chemical states and crosses bodily, national and species borders. It enters and circulates around our bodies through permeable membranes, a process vital to our survival as beings that are around 60 per cent water, yet hazardous in its potential to cause the body to absorb harmful substances.²⁷ Recognising our identity as 'bodies of water' may, Neimanis suggests, hold the potential for new ethical alignments that reject human exceptionalism by foregrounding our place in a web of relations with water-dependent life.²⁸ Neimanis' account of an embodied watery ethics recalls Stacy Alaimo concept of 'trans-corporeality'. Alaimo argues that "the environment" is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves', identifying food as '[p]erhaps the most palpable trans-corporeal substance' because it is incorporated into the body of the consumer.²⁹ Wong's poems indicate that water may be an equally, if not more compelling candidate on which to found a transcorporeal ethic not just because it is absorbed into the body, but because of many of its symbolic associations.

In 'for Gregoire Lake *which way does the wind blow?*' (68) Wong offers an example of the invisible hazards attendant on contact with contaminated waters. Gregoire Lake is found on the traditional lands of the Fort McMurray First Nation which include Alberta, notorious as the centre of Canada's tar sands industry and site of its greatest ecological devastation. Wong describes a visit to the lake on a 'Healing Walk', an event that took place annually from 2010-2014, organised by activists including Cleo Reece (Fort McMurray First Nation), Jesse Cardinal (Kikino Metis) and Chelsea Flook. On these walks, Indigenous communities and their allies 'witness[ed] the immense industrial devastation and conduct ceremonies for the healing of the land and waters'.³⁰ The poem juxtaposes a first-person lyric address to the lake with a parallel list of chemical elements and compounds justified on the right of the page,

sourced from reports on tar sands contamination of the Athabasca River System produced for the Government of Alberta in 2011. The focus of the poem is Wong's contact with the lake:

in the fresh morning	<i>hexavalent chromium</i>
i dip my hands into you tentatively	<i>arsenic</i>
thankful to camp on your shores	<i>aluminium</i>
amidst mosquitoes, mud & grass	<i>zinc</i>
knowing you hold airborne toxins	<i>thallium</i>
from the tar sands	<i>nickel</i>

Wong depicts an embodied gesture of gratitude which in its morning timing resembles a form of prayer. The terse list of often unfamiliar chemicals provides a constant and jarring reminder of the harms the lake may contain because of tar sands extraction upstream. As Janine MacLeod writes, 'a waterway's cargo of petrochemical toxins often complicates feelings of closeness and intimacy'.³¹ Wong's impulse to touch the lake, one that many of us would share, is complicated by the possibility that the interaction may leave her taking home more than a trace of the lake's 'cargo', with this sense of the private being invaded by the public mirrored in the juxtaposition of the intimate form of a lyric poem with a list of contaminants. Contamination is not just a risk faced by Wong after placing her hand into the water: Gregoire Lake flows into the Athabasca River, which eventually flows into the Beaufort Sea on the western edge of the Arctic Ocean, while the lake's water forms part of the global water cycle. These lines indicate the hazards to which Wong, walk participants and local Indigenous communities are exposed through the permeability of their skin but also the potential vulnerability of all 'bodies of water'. While Wong's gesture contains risk, her performance of it despite this knowledge makes her it an act of embodied, transcorporeal

solidarity with the lake and all ‘bodies of water’. This hope is emphasised in Wong’s use of a found document, with the form of the poem mirroring the ecological ethic of its content in its repurposing of waste, just as many poems in *undercurrent* are framed by recycled clippings from activist, poetic, scholarly and scientific works.

Wong deepens her portrayal of transcorporeality in ‘body burden: a moving target’ (40-41), focusing on body parts that mediate the exchange of fluids. The title foregrounds her concern with invisible contamination: a ‘body burden’ is the chemical load carried by an organism, measured using tests including samples of bodily fluids, hair, or fingernails, or biomonitoring and genetic tests. ‘body burden’ invokes ‘skin’, ‘eyes’, ‘armpits’ (40) and ‘benthic bowels’ (41), all of which secrete or take in water in ways that are crucial to our physical and, in the case of eyes, emotional wellbeing. Wong’s addition of ‘benthic’ to ‘bowels’ emphasises the centrality of water to bodily function, linking the ‘depths’ of two ‘bodies of water’. A concern with porosity in ‘body burden’ is reiterated elsewhere in references to a burst ‘cell wall’, ‘bellies, breasts, bladders, intestines’, and ‘kidney’s confusion’ (46, 52). The body described by Wong is strangely agentless:

eyes float in moist sockets
while body sweats
& sweats, porous
ongoing experiment (40)

The lack of pronouns— ‘eyes float’, ‘body sweats’, never ‘my’ or ‘your’ – emphasises our lack of control over water’s flows across our membranes. It also distances the poem from any individual, or indeed species. While Wong’s reference to ‘fourteen facial bones’ indicates a human subject, this body is described in terms of needs and processes shared with all life. It is also a body barely separated from the world, covered by ‘a seven-pound skin, well distributed/so light i don’t feel what i carry’, which ‘rashes, scars, bruises’ and ‘eczema’

remind us is a ‘fragile barrier, easily broken’ (40). While our skin gives ‘the illusion of impermeability’, water flows constantly in and out of bodies: ‘we perspire, urinate, ingest, ejaculate, menstruate, lactate, breathe, cry’.³² Wong’s emphasis on our permeability reveals that we are constituted by flows of water and rendered, like all ‘bodies of water’, the ‘ongoing experiment’ of corporate and state pollution.

Wong extends her critique of the corporate causes of water contamination in references to specific chemicals, indicating substances that may (or may not) be present in the body through a series of questions:

atrazine in your armpits?

pcbs in your pelvic core?

furans in your feet?

dioxins in your diaphragm? (40)

Atrazine is a widely-used herbicide, while furans and dioxins are by-products of industrial processes including herbicide manufacture. PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are synthetic petrochemicals used in manufacturing electrical equipment that persist in the environment long after use. All have been linked to cancer and immune disruption, while atrazine, furans and dioxins can change animal hormone levels, causing concern about their human impact. As in ‘for Gregoire Lake’ the combination of these likely unfamiliar terms with body parts creates unease, amplified by alliteration and repetitive questioning. Wong’s listing echoes the process of bioaccumulation through which contaminants slowly inscribe the violence of capitalism within our own bodies and notably, in the case of PCBs, the bodies of people of colour; PCB disposal near to black communities was a major impetus behind the American environmental justice movement.³³ The insistent quality of these lines might be read as a dark inversion of the entreaties to consume made to us by corporate culture, showing their hidden long-term impact in our ‘body burdens’.

Wong uses what we might call a ‘hydropoetics’ to situate localised harms within a wider world-ecology, mobilising metaphors of the water cycle to highlight the systemic and global nature of threats experienced at the level of the body. In ‘body burden’ Wong writes of:

itchy lymph
 fluids that came from
 swallowed water
 that came from
 a river that came from a lake
 that came from a glacier
 receding from industrial glare (40)

The repetition and lack of punctuation in these lines mirror the smooth flow of water from melting sea ice to poisoned body, revealing a common but hidden origin of both harms in the circulation of industrial by-products. ‘[G]lare’ suggests intensity of production and the heat of a climate-changed world, alliterating with ‘glacier’ to heighten the sense of entanglement of a cause and effect usually obscured.

In ‘borrowed waters: the sea around us: the sea within us’ (10-11), Wong offers a vision of interconnection that makes visible the lifespan of plastic from before its creation to long after disposal, foregrounding its effects on water. She describes the famous Great Pacific Garbage Patch as ‘not just a mass of floating plastic junk’ but ‘a manmade network, toxic magic in the making, branching into your bathroom’, ‘embedded’ in plastic commodities including ‘hospital food trays & squeezable honey bottles, lighters & lipstick tubes’ and more abstractly, but crucially ‘nestle, coca-cola, pepsi, visible tip of the corporate iceberg’ and ‘mutual funds and stock investments’ (10). Much of the Patch is ‘microplastics’ – tiny, confetti-like pieces of larger objects – and a significant proportion of the bulk is fishing equipment, presenting difficulties in both clean-up and representation.³⁴ Wong’s Patch-as-

‘network’ rather than isolated disaster confronts the latter problem by reminding us of the origin of microplastics in seemingly trivial, often single-use consumer objects that take hundreds of years to decompose, reminding of us of their long disposal at the moment of consumption. It also counters the common assumption that the ocean is ‘so vast and powerful that anything dumped into it will be dispersed into oblivion’.³⁵ Wong’s reference to ‘hospital food trays’ gestures to the extended burden of expensive medical care attendant on invisible bodily harms. As Moore notes, the health impacts of ‘cheap’ growth may prove a ‘significant nexus of systemic crisis in the coming decade’,³⁶ even with capitalism’s ongoing exploitation of the unwaged and underpaid socially reproductive labour of women, particularly women of colour.³⁷ Wong indicates our complicity in ecological harm in her references to consumer objects and the ‘magic’ of their convenience, yet avoids simply blaming individuals by reminding us of the corporate and financial interests in maximising consumption as part of the conditions of capitalist accumulation. Her habitual lack of capitalisation serves here to suggest the circulation of cause and effect within the capitalist world-ecology, also recalling the circling gyres that cause marine waste to accumulate in the Patch. In this way Wong ties her vision of transcorporeality into a wider account of the incorporation of individual bodies within a system of circulating, multi-scalar harms, ‘far away & intimate, outside & inside, all at once.’

Uneven Impacts

It is impossible to discuss these poems and many in *undercurrent* without reference to Rob Nixon’s concept of ‘slow violence’. Nixon’s term denotes modes of harm that are not immediately visible and often escape the international press and government attention that attend more ‘spectacular’ catastrophes.³⁸ His descriptions of ‘industrial particulates and effluents [that] live on in the environmental elements we inhabit and in our very bodies’ (8) and the operation of violence across scales ‘from the cellular to the transnational’ (46) clearly

resonate with Wong's vision of transcorporeal environmental harm. Like Nixon, Wong is concerned with contamination and duration. In 'mongo mondo' she writes of the 'unplanned aftermath, ongoing agony/mostly unseen' of this 'funky plastic age', asking 'how long will it take the clan to learn?/convenience not worth cancer's long soft leak' (12). On the following page Wong describes 'so much short-term gold, long-term arsenic/short-term bitumen, long-term cancer/short-term packaging, long-term polyethylene' (13). These lines point towards the tension between capitalism's drive to accelerate production and consumption and the capacity of its 'free-riding on the lifeworld'³⁹ to undermine capitalism's own conditions of reproduction.⁴⁰ The repetitive refrain of short-term/long-term once again suggests bodily chemical accumulation, while Wong's reference to 'brittle shreds in feathered corpses' invokes the notorious images of burst seabird stomachs spilling plastic, blurring borders between gull and cancer victim, and human and nonhuman. In these moments we see Wong's preoccupation with the violence 'low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects' of capitalism as ecological regime,⁴¹ with her darkly comic title suggesting a surfer's slacker awe at the shoreline transformed into industrial waste zone.

Water shortages and contamination are paradigmatic forms of slow violence; frequently invisible, they threaten access to a substance so fundamental to life that it is often, as in the chants and placards of Standing Rock protesters, equated with life itself. They are also much more likely to affect populations rendered similarly invisible through racialisation and poverty, adding weight to critiques of the notion of the 'Anthropocene' in which all of humanity is presented as equally responsible and equally vulnerable. As Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg note, this term fails to recognise the vastly 'differentiated vulnerability' of human society to ecological risk,⁴² and, we might add, the 'cheap lives' essential to capitalist accumulation.⁴³ This unequal burden is borne out in in access to water among Canada's Indigenous communities. As of July 2018 there are 72 long-term drinking water advisories in

effect in First Nations communities; water must be boiled before being drunk or used in food preparation, or not consumed at all.⁴⁴ The longest, in Neskantaga First Nation, northern Ontario, has been in place for 22 years.⁴⁵ Canada's tar sands continue to endanger First Nations, Métis and Inuit access to water; communities who share the Athabasca watershed, which includes Gregoire Lake, report increased rates of 'illnesses and cancers associated with petroleum waste and by-products'.⁴⁶ The ecocidal violence of the tar sands is part of a longer history of colonial violence in which the disruption of Canadian Indigenous relations with place threatens not just health and communal identity but as Vanessa Watts (Mohawk and Anishinaabe) highlights, the 'ability to think, act and govern'.⁴⁷

In *undercurrent* water crisis is represented as a universal 'slow' threat with an uneven distribution, with its origins in the uneven and combined development of the capitalist world-system.⁴⁸ Wong uses the global movement of water to connect forms of harm experienced by communities around the world 'sacrificed for the development of others' in capitalism's endless cycles of accumulation'.⁴⁹ Wong's poem 'dada-thay' (70-71) focuses on Canadian uranium mining, taking as its title, as Wong explains, from the 'Dene for "death rock," uranium'. Uranium mining and nuclear testing in North America has had a dramatic impact on Indigenous populations, leaking into groundwater and causing cancer and illnesses with little official recognition or compensation. Wong shows how Saskatchewan's water and the Indigenous communities who use it are made invisible together in the mind of Canada's faceless decision-makers, 'overlooked and underestimated/by those down south/who desecrate the water for the mines'. Wong makes this 'slow violence' visible by drawing it into dialogue with the 'spectacular' violence of the nuclear war it enables, describing apologies issued to 'survivors/of Hiroshima/& Nagasaki' by Canadian widows who too 'mourn husbands/lost to the brutal industry/for atomic warfare' and the 'cancer-ridden Navajo' in the U.S., both rendered expendable by the imperialism of the core.

Wong's focus on water allows her to jump between national contexts, producing the 'unlikely likenesses across barriers of language, period, territory' that the WReC describe as characteristic of literary registrations of the capitalist world-system.⁵⁰ In 'dada-thay' Wong calls Saskatchewan 'the Saudi Arabia of uranium mining' (71) while in 'too long a sacrifice' (24-25) she describes 'mammoth gashes extracted till abandoned/like so many arrogant american swimming pools in the desert/or chinese dams big enough to make the planet tremble for days' (24). This 'expanse of hidden relations disregarded for distraction' (24) is made visible through Wong's attention to the intertwined flows of water, oil and power, usually hidden by 'plastic glasses caught under/petroleum by-product lenses'. Wong highlights structural connections between different modes of instrumentalising nonhuman nature, showing how China's ascendance to the status of world hegemon is premised on mirroring the ecologically devastating model of 'development' founded in the US and exported around the world.⁵¹

In 'for bing ai' (54) Wong amplifies her analysis of the uneven and combined effects of capitalist modernisation by turning to the ecological and human impacts of Chinese megaprojects. She dedicates the poem to Zhang Bing'ai, a Chinese peasant woman who refused to relocate for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The opening lines identify features of Bing'ai's home that show her rootedness:

whose orange tree

whose window

whose bedroom

whose hearth

The distinctive anaphora and domestic simplicity suggest the stability of earlier routines and ways of life, with the orange tree and hearth framing Bing'ai's home as a site of nourishment and warmth. The lines that follow are disjointed:

submerged beneath
dam
three gorges
dammed
yangtze

This structural disturbance mirrors the dramatic disruption to Bing'ai's life and the well over one million people displaced in the construction of the dam,⁵² pointing towards the psychological disruption of losing ways of making meaning through place. The pun 'dammed/yangtze' suggests through its homonym 'damn Yankee' the pervasive influence of American models of development, in this case the megadam.

The suggestion of a disrupted flow of water and local ways of life in the construction of the dam points towards a wider disturbance in the world's 'natural balance' through such displays of environmental mastery, given the common symbolic association between water and harmony.⁵³ This formal irregularity allows Wong to gesture beyond this local situation to the greater violence of the incorporation of internal peripheries and their human and nonhuman populations into processes of metropole-led capitalist accumulation, drawing together the experiences of Chinese megadam refugees and Indigenous peoples exposed to the brunt of Canada's resource extraction. These parallels are underscored by Wong's juxtaposition of the poem with a black and white photograph of Chinese immigrants to Canada on the deck of a ship called the 'Black Diamond', which we are told was taken in

around 1889, identifying Bing'ai's experience as part of a much longer history of displacement, migration and globalisation connecting the two countries.

Wong intersperses her poems with terms from different languages, reminding us that the effects described are situated within a single and unevenly developed world-system. In 'for bing ai' and other poems Wong includes Chinese characters and interrupts her text elsewhere with words from the languages of Canada's First Nations: 'the city paved over with cement English cracks open, stubborn Halq'eméylem/springs up' (59). The hegemony of English is linked here to the imposition of ecological harm on Canada's landscape, suggesting their shared colonial origins, while the energetic resurgence of Indigeneity ('springs up') is associated with rewilding. Through her use of language, as Milne writes, Wong 'enact[s] a poetics of decolonization'.⁵⁴ The circulating languages in *undercurrent* mirror what we might describe, borrowing from Amitav Ghosh on oil, as water's 'bafflingly multilingual' nature.⁵⁵ In *undercurrent* water itself has a language: 'water has a syntax/i am still learning' (9), underscoring a sense of water as a 'person' to whom we owe moral responsibility. The flow of water is often metaphorically associated with speech,⁵⁶ an association that is crucial to Wong's solutions to water crisis. Wong encourages us to acquire 'climate fluency' (14) through learning languages with which we can move beyond Western schools of environmental thought, with the disruptions in the flow of her text to Anglophone readers similarly decentring Anglocentrism. Wong calls on her readers to acquire 'the languages we need to interpret the sea's rising voice' (14), with water's boundary-crossing nature modelling a way of thinking globally in Wong's call to 'respect living coasts & fluid watersheds, not murderous imperial borders' (23).

Making Kin

Wong draws on Indigenous and posthumanist thought in her account of a non-exploitative human relationship with water. These schools have much in common in their decentring of the human, even if, as Todd pointedly notes, this is rarely acknowledged by posthumanist thinkers. As Salma Monani and Joni Adamson write, many Indigenous groups understand human life within a ‘cosmos of relations’ in which we are ‘intimately related to the sun, moon, stars, earth, and water’.⁵⁷ The Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth, produced at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2010, states that ‘Mother Earth’ is ‘an indivisible, living community of interrelated and interdependent beings with a common destiny’.⁵⁸ In postcolonial contexts this scepticism towards the normative power of the ‘human’ registers historical justifications of colonial violence on the basis of the exclusion of Indigenous and racial minorities from its borders.⁵⁹ It is in this context that Simpson understands colonisation and capitalist extractivism as part of the same process:

Extraction and assimilation go together. Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating. My relatives in the plant and animal worlds are seen as resources...The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning.⁶⁰

Instead of a hierarchical system in which humans are at the top, Anishinaabe thinking emphasises ‘a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of that difference’.⁶¹ This produces ‘a balanced relationship of mutuality’ in which nonhuman nature has agency over its material provision for humans and offers valuable lessons about behaviour and both personal and communal decision-making (a concept known as *gikinawaabiwin* or *akinoomage*).⁶² Water, like all elements of the nonhuman world, is viewed as ‘a being with which we conduct a relationship’, so alterations to water’s flow must only be made with good reason and with reparations paid to water and

other beings.⁶³ We might view Neimanis' concept of the 'hydrocommons' as a complementary way of acknowledging our rights and responsibilities to water and these other beings.⁶⁴

Kinship relations form a crucial part of Wong's vision of our relationships with water. In the first poem 'pacific flow' Wong writes that 'plankton provide half our oxygen/what we cannot see matters as kin' (9); later she writes of 'kindred water' (46). Repeated associations between water and blood foreground material similarities that reach back to the oceanic evolutionary origins of life. In 'declaration of intent' Wong urges her reader to 'listen for the salty pulse within, the blood that recognises marine ancestry' (14); in 'borrowed waters: the sea around us, the sea within us' she writes that 'our blood plasma sings the composition of seawater' (11). 'Kinship' has been an animating concept in recent posthumanist thought, notably in the work of Donna Haraway. Haraway argues for 'making kin' as a key strategy for reformulating relations with nonhuman nature, arguing that this need not necessarily indicate a biological or familial relationship, but that 'all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense'.⁶⁵ For Haraway, kinship is a way of foregrounding life on earth as an interconnected assemblage. '[K]in', she writes, 'is an assembling sort of word', within which we have a responsibility to other 'persons', defined not as 'individuals or humans' but as parts of a whole,⁶⁶ mirroring the Indigenous worldviews described above. Wong emphasises the shared watery origins of life on earth, writing 'both the ferned & the furry, the herbaceous & the human, can call the ocean our ancestor' (11). By listing 'the human' alongside other types of life, both plant and mammal – and, crucially, last – Wong flattens hierarchies that have formed the basis of assumptions of human superiority, presenting humans as beings within a whole in ways that are reinforced by the periodic irruptions of a chorus of human and nonhuman voices into the text.

The common oceanic origins of all ‘bodies of water’ are explicitly foregrounded in the poem from which this article takes its title, ‘borrowed waters: the sea around us, the sea within us’ (10-11). While the first half of the poem on the recto describes the contemporary condition of the contaminated sea (‘the sea around us’) the text on the verso foregrounds ‘the sea within us’ through direct references to American palaeontologists Dianna and Mark McMenamin’s 1994 theory of ‘hypersea’. In an argument with echoes of James Lovelock’s Gaia thesis, the McMenamins describe the exchange of fluids between life on land as a crucial adaptation that allowed organisms to replicate the conditions of their oceanic origins. Life on Earth is a ‘hypersea’, composed of ‘webs of physical intimacy and fluid exchange’ (15) between organisms ‘which are all primarily water’ (4).⁶⁷ This is mirrored in Wong’s line, ‘we are liquid matrix, streaming & recombining through ingesting one another’ (11). For Wong this intimate implication in other bodies bears an ethical dimension. She asks: ‘what do we return to the ocean that let us loose on land?’ (11). This vision of dynamic exchange and connection as source of ethical responsibilities mirrors Simpson’s ‘compassionate web’ and Neimanis’ ‘hydrocommons’, producing what we might see as an ‘ethics of immersion’ in which linguistic play (‘because i am part of the problem i can also become part of the solution’ (15)) shows our embodied relation with water as part of reimagined moral responsibilities.

As in Simpson’s vision of connection and mutuality, Wong’s gesture towards our reciprocal relationships with water becomes the foundation for new forms of behaviour, crucially in the organisation of the world economy. Water provides the basis for so many economic metaphors – capital flows, stocks float, companies are liquid, wealth ‘trickles down’ (or doesn’t) – that Christopher Connery termed it the ocean ‘capital’s favourite myth-element’.⁶⁸ Wong uses water’s flow as the basis for imagining life beyond capitalism and the artificially induced scarcity experienced in peripheralised regions of the capitalist world-system. She repurposes economic language into a vision of water abundance: we receive ‘multiple gifts

from the clouds' (42), 'rain replenishes as withdrawals/accelerate' (49) and in the final poem, which imagines life a hundred years on from the book's 2015 publication, 'people live & watch water's journey the way they used to watch the dow jones' (87). Water's generosity contrasts with capitalism's hidden ecological terms and conditions, embodied in 'bloodstream's poisoned gift/giving & giving & giving' (44). Wong suggests that if we prioritise 'honouring sacred debts' and ask 'what better gifts can we offer?' (27) we may find that 'water will return what we give it' (14). Her reframing of human relationships with water provides the basis for a transformed and emancipatory economic structure.

Conclusion

In this article I have drawn out Wong's critique of dominant modes of viewing water as an abstract resource to be governed by the technical calculations of scientists, politicians and engineers. In *undercurrent*, Wong shows how water's instrumentalisation as a resource has formed the basis of its exploitation and exhaustion within the capitalist world-system, with her position in the semiperipheral Canada affording her a crucial perspective on capitalist world-ecology. Wong's vision of transcorporeal contamination suggests we may be living on borrowed time, yet this connection, which reminds us that all water in our bodies is only ever 'borrowed' from other bodies of water, may also offer a way out of capitalist resource crisis.

In this piece I have engaged in a critical borrowing, drawing heavily from petrocriticism. This may seem counterintuitive when we know oil as the bringer of planetary death and water as the source of life, yet petrocriticism offers useful critical resources for those invested in what we might call 'hydrocriticism'. These include methods for seeking a resource where it might be 'otherwise unspoken or unspeakable', or for locating the 'profoundly uneven distribution' of its 'benefits and consequences'.⁶⁹ I suggest that *undercurrent* can be read as a 'hydrofiction', manifesting a concern for water in both its content and aesthetics and making

water visible in ways that enable a rethinking of our relationship with this vital substance.⁷⁰

By analysing a text saturated with water, this article has provided a model for further comparative work in which water might be drawn to the surface in texts that appear less obviously hydrological, but that may offer equally valuable insights into living with water.

Notes

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² Mark Zeitoun, *Power and Water in the Middle East: The Hidden Politics of the Palestinian-Israeli Water Conflict* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), 4.

³ Mesfin M. Mekonnen and Arjen Y. Hoekstra, 'Four Billion People Facing Severe Water Scarcity', *Science Advances*, 2.2 (2016), e1500323.

⁴ Jamie Linton, *What Is Water?: The History of a Modern Abstraction* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 7.

⁵ Linton, 38.

⁶ A snapshot of recent 'blue humanities' criticism includes Steve Mentz's work on early modern shipwrecks and edited collection on New York's oceanic histories; studies of Scottish island writing by Alexandra Campbell and Pippa Marland; and Elizabeth DeLoughrey's accounts of Cold War geopolitics at sea, building on earlier work on Caribbean 'tidalectics'.

⁷ Rita Wong, *Undercurrent* (Gibson, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2015); Linton, 14. See also Alec Follett, 'A life of dignity, joy and good relation': Water, Knowledge, and Environmental Justice in Rita Wong's *undercurrent*', *Canadian Literature* 237 (2019), which was published as this article was going to press and covers related themes.

⁸ Jason W. Moore, 'The End of the Road? Agricultural Revolutions in the Capitalist World-Ecology, 1450–2010', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10, no. 3 (2010): 391. It is important to note related but distinct analyses of capitalism and the environment by Marxist ecologists, notably John Bellamy Foster. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). On the debates between Moore and Foster, see Fred Murphy and Ian Angus, 'Two Views on Marxist Ecology and Jason W. Moore', *Climate and Capitalism*, 2016 <<https://climateandcapitalism.com/2016/06/23/two-views-on-marxist-ecology-and-jason-w-moore/>> [accessed 26 September 2019].

⁹ See, for example, the work of J. R. Carpenter, Craig Santos Perez and Juliana Spahr, and in a Canadian context, Jordan Abel, Lesley Battler and Adam Dickinson. On ecopoetry, see Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (eds.), *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018); Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street (eds.), *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2013); Samantha Walton, 'Ecopoetry', in *Companion to Environmental Studies*, ed. by Noel Castree, Mike Hulme and James D. Proctor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). On Canadian environmental writing, see Catriona Sandilands, 'Introduction: Environmental Literatures and Politics in Canada', *ISLE* 25, no 2 (2018)

¹⁰ This turn is identified by Hume and Osborne in 'Introduction: Ecopoetics as Expanded Critical Practice', in *Ecopoetics*, ed. by Hume and Osborne, and the citation is Jed Rasula, cited in Hume and Osborne, 9.

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- ¹³ Zoe Todd, 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: "Ontology" is Just Another Word for Colonialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 4–22.
- ¹⁴ Recent sources on Wong include Follett; Heather Milne, *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), Ch. 4; Gillian Roberts, 'Writing Settlement after Idle No More: Non-Indigenous Responses in Anglo-Canadian Poetry', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 51:1 (2017), 64–89.
- ¹⁵ Heather Milne, 'Writing the Body Politic: Feminist Poetics in the Twenty-First Century', in *Public Poetics: Critical Issues in Canadian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Bart Vautour and others (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 42. Wong reflects on the position of authors racialised as 'Asian' in relation to authors racialised as 'Indigenous' in 'Decolonizasian: Reading Asian and First Nations Relations in Literature', *Canadian Literature* 199 (2008): 158–180.
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- ¹⁹ Catriona Sandilands, 'Introduction: Environmental Literatures and Politics in Canada', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25, no. 2 (2018): 282.
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- ³⁹ Nancy Fraser, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care', *New Left Review*, II, 2016, 101.
- ⁴⁰ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015). See also Foster's related notion of the 'metabolic rift', which he derives from Marx's notion of 'social metabolism' and analysis of nineteenth-century industrialised capitalism's exhaustion of the soil. Foster uses this notion to understand our current ecological predicament as having arisen from a 'rift' in the 'metabolic relation' between humanity and nature that would be restored in a socialist society. See Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, Ch. 5.
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- ⁵⁰ WReC, 17.
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