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# Unsettled Solutions: Petropastoral Poetics in Rita Wong's undercurrent

Max Karpinski

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# Unsettled Solutions: Petropastoral Poetics in Rita Wong's *undercurrent*

MAX KARPINSKI

Digging the bitumen out of the ground, squeezing out the oil and converting it into synthetic crude is a monumental challenge. It requires vast amounts of capital, Brobdingnagian technology, and an army of skilled workers. In short, it is an enterprise of epic proportions, akin to the building of the pyramids or China's Great Wall. Only bigger.

— Stephen Harper, "Address by the Prime Minister at the Canada-UK Chamber of Commerce" (qtd. in Carter 23)

[W]hat must be recognized by those inclined to advocate a blanket "return of the commons" as a redistributive counterstrategy to the neoliberal state's new round of enclosures, is that, in liberal settler states such as Canada, the "commons" not only belong to somebody — *the First Peoples of this land* — they also deeply inform and sustain Indigenous modes of thought and behavior that harbor profound insights into the maintenance of relationships within and between human beings and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity, nonexploitation and respectful coexistence.

— Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (12)

I N "ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER at the Canada-UK Chamber of Commerce," delivered on 14 July 2006 in London, England, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper positions the development of the oil sands deposits in northeastern Alberta as an infrastructural project that has the potential to define the Canadian nation-state. Speaking to foreign investors, Harper collapses the desires and identity of the Canadian state into the predominantly privatized industrial expansion of oil sands operations, conflating "our" identity with the economic flourishing of a select few and the environmental degradation of many. At the same time as his address constructs the nation-state as a unified whole, it obscures the foundation of that unity in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, his

speech ignores the continued deprivation and devaluation of the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable: that is, the Indigenous, racialized, and poor communities that bear the brunt of extractivism's ecological fallout. Harper's address, then, encircles communities with intimate ties to the oil sands while simultaneously silencing or speaking over those communities' concerns and desires. This double move — incorporation and erasure — is emblematic of the logic of settler colonialism and might be understood in the context of Eric Cazdyn's suspicion of those "appeals to universality" that are "nothing more than thinly veiled rationales for domination" (160). Against Harper's address, in this essay I look to Rita Wong's *undercurrent* (2015), which I argue entangles an ecological perspective with an environmental emphasis on the defence of water<sup>1</sup> to unsettle the language of solutions that permeates the response of late capitalism to the exigencies of the Anthropocene. *undercurrent* — which I am tentatively describing as a "petropastoral" text — recognizes the violence that characterizes "the sordid history of so much universalist desire" (Cazdyn 161). In what follows, I focus on the collection's engagement with petrocultures and the Athabasca oil sands. Wong's concern with extractivism constitutes one of the text's approaches to the articulation of a polity for the Anthropocene, one grounded in local struggles for just existence that nonetheless resonate globally. For Wong, the oil sands emerge as a hinge between particular, embodied practices of resistance to extractivism and climatic transformations or reorganizations felt on a global scale.

### The Politics of Petroleum in the Twilight of Oil

For many critics and theorists of petrocultures,<sup>2</sup> confrontations with oil always entwine site-specific and global scales. For Stephanie LeMenager, this centrifugal movement — from the local outward — is characteristic of literary engagements with oil, which maintain a regional focus while "spill[ing] into the world" (14); but it also becomes a formal feature of oil itself, which reverberates across time: "Every oil spill remembers every other" (64). Whereas LeMenager describes the oil encounter as spiralling outward, implicating other beings, spaces, and times, Stacy Alaimo shows how this interconnection constitutes an ontological grounding for the elaboration of an environmentalist ethics for the Anthropocene: "Climate change, sustainability, and antitoxin movements make environmentalism a practice that entails grappling with how one's own bodily existence is ontologically entangled with the well-being of both local and quite distant

places, peoples, animals, and ecosystems” (131). Alaimo’s ontology of the Anthropocene presents the individual subject as always already entangled with elsewheres and others. If we consider the case of petrocarbons and other industrial toxins that enter into “one’s own bodily existence,” however, then her vision of interconnection can be understood to foreground toxicity and the impossibility of emphasizing notions of purity and separation in the contemporary moment.

Alaimo’s ontological grounding for the Anthropocene, which links the subject to myriad places and beings, is echoed by Elizabeth Povinelli, who concedes that to think the Anthropocene “we cannot remain in the local. We can only remain *hereish*” (*Geontologies* 13). I want to offer Povinelli’s “hereish” as a quality that delineates thinking the contemporary. In the context of the pastoral, the “hereish” might be understood as a specifically petropastoral modification of the traditional mode’s investment in the local. In presenting the hereish as symptomatic of the petropastoral’s simultaneously intimate and far-flung temporal and geographic entanglements, I follow Joyelle McSweeney in an attempt to “re-mark[] the pastoral as a zone of exchange” (3). This is to call attention to the “manifestation of the infectiousness, anxiety, and contagion occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classical pastoral”: that is, to engage the pastoral as an always already necrotizing (and therefore lively) tissue with the potential to give rise to “strange meetings” that might unsettle what I call neoliberal-petrolic common sense (3). I deploy the prefix *petro-* in relation to Wong’s poetry for two primary reasons. First, the petropastoral foregrounds her deep engagement with the politics and aesthetics of the extraction, production, and consumption of oil. Second, in its modulation of pastoral for the Anthropocene, her petropastoral intervenes in how the structures of feeling associated with the traditional pastoral mode are harnessed in the service of oil sands development.

For an example of this latter type of pastoral appropriation, we can turn to Mark Simpson’s reading of a Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) advertisement that “associat[es] Canada’s bitumen industry with an idyllic national future” (297). A 2012 ad depicts “rolling grassland and gleaming water, bright gold under a setting sun — an image evoking the pastoral’s heartwarmingly smooth mood” (297). The fine print, however, reveals the image as “a reclaimed Syncrude mine site: wilderness not unspoiled, but rather reconstituted from ruin” (297). As Simpson’s reading suggests, the CAPP advertisement reproduces a mode of naive pastoralism

in which the retreat to an idyllic wilderness operates as an exit from the political that nonetheless depends on politics. The ad makes an implicit argument about the excessiveness of mobilizations against extractivism. In its adoption of pastoral imagery, it seeks to deflect and deflate concerns about local ecological devastation and global climatic destabilization that issue from an entrenched petrodependence. At the same time, however, the sanitized pastoral fabricated by CAPP argues for the possibility of a return to a pristine landscape. In other words, it romanticizes, idealizes, and aestheticizes wilderness, a corporate strategy that refashions the settler-colonial dream of *terra nullius*, a landscape emptied of Indigenous people. Here we can begin to discern the contours of a pastoral for the Anthropocene; in the work of Wong, the oil sands make apparent the impossibility of the pastoral *locus amoenus* as a utopian space beyond or separate from this world. The petropastoral refuses the figures of “purity,” separation, and “soundness of body” (McSweeney 8), choosing instead to celebrate the intimately entwined. Foregrounding the unexpected entanglements that constitute our everyday lives, the petropastoral attends to local struggles for justice with the knowledge that any world to come will carry the traces of toxicity that this world has produced.

The recognition of the inherent toxicity of any world to come demands a consideration of the afterlives of oil: that is, the ways in which the effects of fossil fuel consumption are felt on temporal and spatial scales difficult to comprehend. This recognition counters the excessively rosy visions of the future that characterize what Imre Szeman names “techno-utopianism” (812), which posits the arrival of remarkable technological advances that will simultaneously open previously inaccessible or precipitously expensive oil reserves, thus staving off peak oil, and concoct effective measures for managing the carbon emissions that are a by-product of this technologically dependent, increased burn-off. Although Szeman and others who argue for the acknowledgement of limits to consumption remain skeptical about the feasibility of “exhaust scrubbers” or “carbon sequestering” as saving graces (812), the former aspect of techno-utopianism — new technologies that increase the availability of oil previously considered inaccessible — is a reality in the contemporary moment. Indeed, it is the rise of such “tough oil” that leads LeMenager to open her landmark study with the sentence “Reports of oil’s death have been exaggerated” (3). For LeMenager, “the problem isn’t that we’re running out of oil, but that we’re not,” primarily because of the viability of new and extreme extractive processes: “Tough

oil is tough not just because it's hard to get, but because of the devastating scale of its externalities" (3). Whereas the toxic future names the stubborn *persistence* of fossil fuels in their petrochemical cast-offs and atmospheric residues, contemporary political mobilizations against the acceleration of extractivism are continuously coming up against the dogged *insistence* of the oil industry on opening new or expanding existing carbon frontiers.

The oil sands of northeastern Alberta constitute one such frontier of "tough oil." Geo Takach offers an overview of oil sands extraction, which is performed either via strip mining or in situ steam injection: "Beyond the two tonnes of earth that must be excavated, it takes two to six barrels of water from the Athabasca River to produce one barrel of crude from the thick, bituminous sands, and almost none of that water is returnable to the watershed" (86). The "two tonnes of earth" that Takach indicates are land that must be removed prior to extraction via strip mining. This process tears up boreal forests, referred to by industry via the obfuscatory term "overburden." The extractive process in northeastern Alberta thus depends on the wholesale reorganization and transformation of the landscape and the consumption of massive amounts of fresh water — by Takach's estimates, three to nine million barrels of water each day (86). This added expenditure contributes to the status of the oil sands as an "especially dirty source of energy, with an extremely low energy return on energy invested (an EROEI of about 3.0)" (Wilson et al. 13). It is precisely in the knowledge of the abysmal EROEI of the oil sands that we begin to recognize the dangerous paradox inherent in LeMenager's statement about the persistence of oil in the contemporary moment. As we consume more and more fossil fuels, we engage in ever more dangerous and dirty modes of extractivism — including those currently under way in the Athabasca oil sands — in order to satisfy consumer desires.

Scholars of petrocultures, however, argue further that the material organization of a community — what might be termed its "infrastructure" — also furnishes structures of feeling or affective attachments that contribute to the reproduction of petrodependence. LeMenager, for example, links the consumption of fossil fuels to the simple joys of human sensory experience:

The petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the soles of one's feet are incorporating practices. . . . Decoupling human corporeal memory from the infrastructures that have sustained it may be the primary challenge

for ecological narrative in the service of human species survival beyond the twenty-first century. (104)

LeMenager positions the infrastructural not just as the physical networks or grids on which we depend but also as shared, embodied experiences that spring up wherever and whenever we navigate the material organization of the community. In this way, her articulation of petroleum infrastructure echoes Lauren Berlant's assertion that "the question of politics becomes identical with the reinvention of infrastructures for managing the unevenness, ambivalence, violence, and ordinary contingency of contemporary existence" ("Commons" 394). Through Berlant's claim, we can arrive at an understanding of the political desire inherent in Wong's poetics. Hers is a poetry that exceeds a critique of the oil sands industry and offers instead a "reinvention of infrastructures" by modelling joyful ways of being in common organized around the defence of water.

### The Foreclosures of Neoliberal-Petrolic Common Sense

Before turning to *undercurrent*, I want to briefly describe what I identify as the object of the text's critique: neoliberal-petrolic common sense. Following Cazdyn and Szeman's notion of "common sense," developed in *After Globalization*, neoliberal-petrolic common sense names a series of interrelated concepts that normalize and naturalize the status quo (7). In the Canadian and Albertan contexts, I want to suggest, common sense is bundled together with neoliberalism, petroleum, and extractivism. Indeed, Randolph Haluza-DeLay traces how the extractive economy has collapsed into precisely this discourse of "common sense." For example, "The Alberta Enterprise Group, [an] industry advocacy group," claims to "challenge all levels of government to make *common-sense* decisions in the interest of all Albertans.' . . . [I]ts website declare[s] that energy is 'common sense' and 'It's what makes us Albertans'" (40). Haluza-DeLay shows how "common sense" is deployed as prescriptive and disciplinary, with the intention of precluding the possibility of articulating dissent by recourse to economic well-being. Petrocultural analysis positions oil as a hegemonic energy resource and points to the ways in which government and industry refuse to seriously consider the possibility of alternatives or transformations to the dominant energy system. Instead, public discourse about energy futures continues to advance what Luc Semal describes as "*continuist*" narratives for the Anthropocene "based on 'techno-fix' solutions such as geoengineering technologies" (88-89).

Across a vast array of contemporary critical thought related to the Anthropocene, a number of theorists are skeptical of this prevailing discourse of “solutions.” Writing in the wake of the Fukushima meltdown, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that “What remains to be considered . . . goes beyond the range of solutions. For a solution . . . remains caught in the orbit of the totality of technological arrangements and behaviors within which our lives are lived” (18). In other words, and in the context of ecological thought, continuist and managerial narratives collapse back into neoliberal-petrolic common sense. Allan Stoekl deploys a similar claim to counter the parroting of “sustainability,” presenting it as the inverse of unrestrained production and consumption that underwrite anthropogenic climate change. In sustainability, “The quantified, mechanized destruction of Earth becomes the quantified, mechanized preservation of Earth” (133). Put differently, corporate-inflected sustainability is devoid of radical promise in that it changes nothing. The nonhuman is still a standing reserve to be tapped, consumed, and managed; the human subject is still elevated and detached, “master of its domain” (133).<sup>3</sup> Povinelli echoes this critique in her suggestion that late liberalism “says that we can change and be the same, nay, even more of what we already are” (*Geontologies* 29). I read her statement here as an indictment of how neoliberal-petrolic common sense delimits the horizon of available futures. By locating salvation exclusively within and through the structures of capitalism — that is, within and through innovation and entrepreneurship — the narratives that promise “solutions” only serve to reinforce what Berlant would call the “reigning terms” (*Cruel* 231).

I want to underline that the poetic and political project of *undercurrent* does not end at a critique of neoliberal-petrolic common sense. Recalling Berlant’s notion of the “reinvention of infrastructures,” I argue that Wong unsettles the “continuist” and techno-utopian discourse of “solutions” through the pun on its second meaning, related to liquid mixtures. Wong offers this other “solution,” a fluid collective composed of disparate parts, as a redistributed model for living together in the Anthropocene on land thick with the reverberations and ongoing manifestations of settler colonialism. In part, this unsettled solution incorporates aspects of Mark and Dianna McMenamin’s notion of “Hypersea”<sup>4</sup> and Karen Barad’s call for the exercise of “*ethico-onto-epistem-ology*” (185). Barad draws on her background in theoretical physics to develop a theory of reality that opens onto an understanding of ethics as intimately linked to our ways of

knowing and being. I want to offer Barad's ethical model in the context of Alaimo's assertion that, in the Anthropocene, "Ethics and politics flow into each other" (10). For Barad, the ethical is "not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part" (393). This is an ethical model that seeks to account for those far-flung entanglements heralded by the current geological epoch. It is also an ethical model that speaks sideways into those discourses of techno-utopianism discussed above. Indeed, Barad opens her text by avowing the search for "ever new possibilities for living justly" and suggesting that "*There are no solutions*; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action" (x; emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Barad refuses to privilege a managerial approach to futurity, emphasizing instead an open and improvisational quality to be cultivated in the everyday.

But over and above these critical and theoretical frameworks, the unsettled solution offered by *undercurrent* grows from Wong's decades-long solidarity work with Indigenous water protectors. In the introduction to their jointly edited collection *Downstream: Reimagining Water*, Wong and Dorothy Christian — a scholar and storyteller from the Secwepemc and Syilx Nations — argue for the necessity of "build[ing] relationships" between Indigenous epistemologies and "Euro-Westernized systems of knowledge" (6) and articulate a "challenge to reimagine ourselves beyond our skins, as a living part of a larger watershed" (7). This latter phrase in particular resonates with Alaimo's call for "scale-shifting" (11): that is, the attempt to think again the individual body as always "hereish," always "extend[ed] through vast geographical and temporal expanses, affecting countless species" (10). As suggested above, the Anthropocene makes apparent the intertwining of local, political decisions with global phenomena that carry ethical implications, such as climate change, ocean acidification, and intensifying mass extinctions; put differently, the Anthropocene concretizes the notion of a world in common. In parallel, Wong and Christian offer their own version of "solutions":

[W]e propose that solutions arise with a paradigm shift that puts Indigenous core values of the four R's of "respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility" that Barnhard and Kirkness have articulated, along with "reverence" offered by Archibald, at the centre, not the margins, of the dialogue regarding how we coordinate and co-operate through

our perceptions of and practices with water — a radical approach to ensure everyone's well-being. (8)

These alternative “solutions” emerge from what Wong and Christian identify as the process of “taking responsibility for our inherited cultures” (6). They not only critique the vacuity of techno-utopian “solutions” — always located externally and deferred in the service of maintaining the status quo — but also redirect the term into a collective vision that constitutes an “ethico-onto-epistem-ology” for life in the Anthropocene.

### Rita Wong's Watery Syntax: “Hydrocommons” and Toxic Accumulation

Drawing connections across these various critical and theoretical discourses, Wong's *undercurrent* turns to the “lingua franca” (MacLeod 265) of water as a means through which to imagine the possibilities of the “solution” otherwise. The opening line of the text's first poem, “pacific flow” (*undercurrent* 9; see fig. 1), gestures to the potential of water as form and foregrounds the speaker's commitment to ongoingness: “water has a syntax      i am still learning.” The notion of water as form is echoed by the paratextual formatting (the shaded wave that appears throughout the collection at the bottom of the page) as well as the shape and lineation of the poem. Indeed, Guy Beauregard makes a similar argument about “*sort by day, burn by night*,” from Wong's earlier collection, *forage* (2007), when he suggests that “the irregular indentation of the poem's typeset text evokes the movement of waterways” (574). Returning to “pacific flow,” alongside this immediate concern with the poem's form as it relates to water, I want to read the speaker's admission of incomplete knowledge in the context of Barad's ethics, which, as noted above, entail “responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.” “pacific flow” immediately invokes the “Hypersea” and catalogues species interconnection: “salmon streams      double as human & bear lifelines.” Later the speaker reminds us that “plankton provide half our oxygen / what we cannot see      matters as kin.” The syntax of water appears as a language shared across organisms, a kind of “hydrocommons” that makes apparent the interrelations and strange kinships obscured by neoliberal-petrolic common sense (Neimanis 4).<sup>6</sup> This is a critical stance that resonates with Alaimo's concept of “Dwelling in the dissolve, where fundamental boundaries have begun to come undone, unraveled by unknown futures,” and that constitutes “a form of ethical engagement that emanates from both feminist and environmentalist practices” (2).

## PACIFIC FLOW

water has a syntax	i am still learning	9
a middle voice	pivots where it is porous	
foraminifera punctuate	ocean floors	
salmon streams	double as human & bear lifelines	
an underlying platform	marine reclaims its own	
from trough to crest	hypersea rolls through meme	
tidal rhythm	sings convoluta roscoffensis	
silica circuits	iodine invokes thyroid	
saltiness grows over eons	plankton provide half our oxygen	
what we cannot see	matters as kin	
fever speeds us up	churns soluble toxins, insoluble plastics	
strikes gulls	spikes trawls	
choppy waves warn	hazardous passages	
abound from	city sewage	
mess amasses	dissonant grammar	
wail overfished	bluefins tune	
benthic beholds	watches & weights	
learning curves	gurgles to the surface	

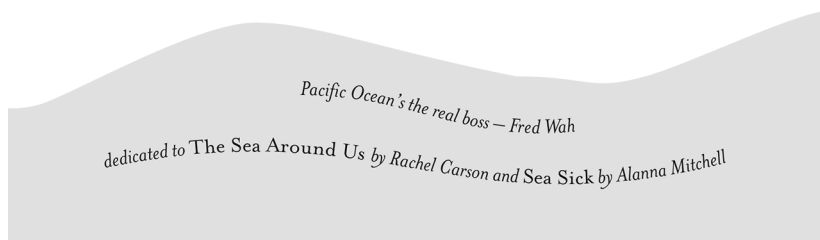


Figure 1: “pacific flow” by Rita Wong, *undercurrent*, Nightwood Editions, 2015, p. 9, [www.nightwoodeditions.com](http://www.nightwoodeditions.com).

But “pacific flow” shifts immediately after invoking plankton kin: “fever speeds us up churns soluble toxins, insoluble plastics / strikes gulls spikes trawls // choppy waves warn hazardous passages” (9). Rather than a symbol of purity, the hydrocommons appears to be precari-

ous and contingent. Indeed, “dada-thay,” a later poem (*undercurrent* 70) that traces the histories and presences of uranium mining in northern Saskatchewan, makes a similar claim. Walking along the shores of Wollaston Lake, Wong’s speaker is struck by the recognition that Saskatchewan’s “hundred thousand lakes” are “overlooked & underestimated / by those down south / who desecrate the water for the mines.” “dada-thay” shifts from Wollaston Lake, “home of the Hatchet Lake Denesuline,” to the Sahtu Dene communities “further north” and the “village of widows” who “apologize to the survivors / of Hiroshima / & Nagasaki.” A quiet, eminently pastoral moment is redirected into a consideration of the histories of uranium mining in Dene territory and the gesture of “responsibility” undertaken by the “widows” of Dene miners.<sup>7</sup> Against the decontextualized representations of pristine wilderness offered by CAPP, Wong’s poetry shuttles between the individual, sited body and other, far-reaching temporalities and geographies. Instead of figuratively washing her hands from within the sanitized confines of a pastoral retreat — as the oil industry does with its “reclaimed” sites — the speaker sees interconnection and entanglement at scales ranging from the historical to the cellular.

Another early poem in *undercurrent*, “declaration of intent,” makes explicit the relationship between what might be termed Wong’s “watery syntax” and what I have described as the text’s unsettling of the language of solutions. The second section of the poem turns the word solution over and over, churning through multiple iterations of a similar sentence:

because i am part of the problem i can also become part of the solution  
 although i am part of the problem i can also become part of the solution  
 where i am part of the problem i need to be part of the solution  
 while i am part of the problem i can also be part of the solution  
 one part silt one part clear running water one part blood love sweat  
 not *tar* but *tears*, *e* inserts a listening, witnessing, quickening eye (15)

In the context of the Hypersea or hydrocommons, I want to suggest that Wong’s invocation of the “solution” operates here in opposition to Harper’s universalizing address. That is, “declaration of intent” does not contest the platitudes or corporate speech of sustainability (“become part of the solution”) but defines the “solution” as a unified mixture of divergent parts: “one part silt one part clear running water one part blood love sweat.” Wong’s “solution,” then, is a collective fluidity, a becoming that is processual and continually unsettled. This is a refusal of the “solutions”

imagined by geo-engineering and continuist narratives, which might be better understood as aspiring to absolution. Rather, Wong's "solution" foregrounds the subject's complicity ("i am part of the problem") while recommitting to the transformation of "tar" into "tears" or the search for "ever new possibilities for living justly."

Wong's poetry enacts this processual and unsettled watery syntax in its profusion of gerunds. A later poem, "inner compass, outer radar," signals the link between the "verbing" (*undercurrent* 62) of language and the hydrocommons in its epigraph from Astrida Neimanis: "We embody the hydrological cycle, but this is not a cycle of mere addition and subtraction. Rather, it is a cycle of continuous becoming and transformation" (qtd. 63). As visible in Figure 1, the epigraphs in *undercurrent* almost exclusively appear at the conclusions of the poems, in a shaded footer. As a formal tactic, the placement of the epigraph invites rereading, returning to, or rethinking the language that has come before. More generally, the epigraphs can also be linked to Wong's concerted efforts to document her quotations and inspirations, as evidenced by the six-page reference list that appears near the end of the collection; this citational inclination might be understood in the context of David Farrier's description of "citation" as a trope that enacts "a poetics of kin-making" (12, 13). Both of these notions resonate with "inner compass, outer radar," which lists sites and activities in and through which the speaker "seek[s] shelter": "swallowing water tasting honey sitting restaurant walking-in closet . . . mountain hiking rendez-vous lovers' arming parade overhang bus stop video project strike annual general meeting quilting" (62). As these examples demonstrate, the poem is heavily paratactic, with no punctuation to separate actions or experiences. This flattening of the page might also suggest a refusal of the subordination of grammar, instead enacting a commingling of language constantly in movement. The "solution" on the page — in the senses of both mixture of language and response to crisis — represents the dehierarchization of relations. But the gerund also suggests a specific temporality that attaches to the poem and to the political: "inner compass, outer radar" never closes or completes an action. In its foregrounding of open-endedness and continuity, Wong's poetics suggests that the political inheres in the everyday and is marked by ongoingness rather than spectacular eruptions.

In my reading of *undercurrent*, Wong's watery syntax self-consciously rebuts the language of fluidity that runs through neoliberal-petrolic com-

mon sense. Povinelli suggests that a defining feature of late capitalism is the belief that “nothing is inherently inert” or that everything can be extracted (*Geontologies* 20). In its dehierarchization of relations, the profusion of gerunds in “inner compass, outer radar” might be understood as an aspirational countermodel of linguistic movement, one that offers an otherwise to the moments in the text that index the impossibility of containment of those chemicals and toxins associated with petroleum and mass consumerist production. Given the unbearable recognition of “everything leaking everywhere it wasn’t meant to go” (*undercurrent* 17), Wong’s petropastoral rejects the traditional pastoral mode’s idealized spaces and pivots instead to a critique of all capitalist modes of accumulation as inherently toxic. Yet I want to suggest that this tactic becomes a critique with a difference precisely in its refusal of critical superiority and its recognition of the self as exposed. This is to follow Roy Miki, who suggests that Wong is concerned about “an escalating biopolitics. At stake is the ownership of the body as an object of commodification and control, including as its prize the power to manipulate its genetic make-up” (194). In this understanding of the self as exposed or the body as commodifiable, *undercurrent* articulates the “slow violence” of all life in the Anthropocene, which is a dwelling in the dissolve of our contemporary chemical wash.

I want to begin to address this thread of *undercurrent* with Rob Nixon’s original definition of slow violence, now canonized as a landmark concept in ecocriticism. Writing in 2011, Nixon exposes the chemical and criminal wrongdoings of corporate actors. Slow violence is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). One aspect of it is precisely “[c]hemical and radiological violence . . . [that] is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that — particularly in the bodies of the poor — remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated. From a narrative perspective, such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow paced and open ended, eluding the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat” (6). As an early contributor to the field of resource aesthetics, Nixon premises his argument on the notion that environmental or chemical violence is and has been overlooked. He advocates for an approach to environmental catastrophes that replicates narratological responses to spectacular violence and that might be understood as a poetics of witnessing. The witness is important

in *undercurrent* — among other moments, Wong details her involvement in oil sands healing walks (18), her tracing of the networks of pipelines across “so-called ‘protected wilderness’” (65), and her participation in the Keepers of the Water IV Conference in Wollaston Lake, discussed above (72) — but I contend that these texts exceed simple documentation. Whereas Nixon yearns for a formal “tidy closure” or “containment” of sites and experiences of slow violence, Wong moves in *undercurrent* in the opposite direction, formally embodying this “slow-paced and open-ended” mutagenic theater (Nixon 6).

At the same time, there is much in Nixon’s claims about “chemical and radiological violence” that resonates with *undercurrent* and recent theorizations of environmental racism. Slow violence is a violence of the minor, of the microscopic and cellular, but it is also a violence that is normalized and becomes chronic. LeMenager invokes the chronic condition when she suggests that instances of oil “leaking” can be understood as “the quiet, slow accidents that become too ordinary to conceive as accident or threat” (188). The impossibility of containing oil, then, might be understood alongside Povinelli’s notion of the quasi-event, the “small breakage” set against the “catastrophic rupture” (*Economies* 134). In defining the quasi-event, Povinelli is concerned with the Australian government’s manufacturing of inequality in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Everyday life, she argues, is composed of the “ordinary” or “quiet, slow accidents.” These “small breakage[s]” need not be understood as agentive or targeted violent acts; rather, they demonstrate how the material organization of the community parcels out and delimits ways of being and living in the contemporary. Each of these three theorists — Nixon, LeMenager, and Povinelli — might be understood as addressing, from a different angle, what Berlant would call the “impasse” of living under neoliberal-petrolic common sense (*Cruel* 8). Stuck within the impasse of slow violence, consistently failing oil infrastructure, and environmental racism, Wong enacts a double movement in her poetics: she performs a critique that indicts the reigning terms, and she posits an unidealized sociality to come that emerges through a shared water system and carries the toxic traces of the way we were.

Perhaps the clearest representation of the “quiet, slow accidents” of toxicity appears in “bisphenol ache.” Bisphenol A, or BPA, is an industrial chemical, often present in food and beverage packaging, that has been shown to seep from the package to the product. The title’s linguistic

play — from “A” to “ache” — might be taken as one such slippage or small rupture or perhaps a lexical mutation: “bisphenol ache bursts a cell wall leaks plasma limp, laden with toxic gifts courtesy of duped ontology — corporate cancer embedded in diets, morsel by muscle, blight by bite, gradually accumulated illnesses blossom in our bellies, breasts, bladders, intestines testify to trace amounts hoarded in blood & bitumen . . . a slow song of poison by a thousand exposures” (*undercurrent* 46). “bisphenol ache” positions the body as invaded by what would appear to be undesired actants. Rather than lament the *impurity* of the individual body, however, the poem emphasizes the relationship between capitalist accumulation and the proliferation of toxicity. The “bisphenol ache” is a “corporate cancer” that is “gradually accumulated” until it is “hoarded.” Wong’s tactic here testifies to the political ineffectiveness of a critique of toxicity grounded in aspirations to purity. The response to that petrol-specific exigency, “everything leaking everywhere it wasn’t meant to go,” cannot be to recapitulate a discourse of borders and purity as a mode of defence. Rather, toxicity must be understood as a by-product of capitalism or linked to the drive to accumulate. This is to reroute the profoundly personal — the breakdown of bodily autonomy in the recognition of “how [toxins] seep intimately, expertly, into the creases we didn’t know we had, into our cracked lips & sweating armpits” (*undercurrent* 46) — into a systemic critique that opens onto the otherwise. Toxic accumulation, then, becomes both the marker of the impossibility of the continued exercise of neoliberal-petrolic common sense and the grounds on which to begin to articulate a future collective, composed of those exposed bodies, intimately bound to the past and to one another.

### Treaty Rights, Anti-Oil Mobilization, and Speculative Returns

In her attention to the afterlives of petrochemicals and toxins, Wong posits a sociality to come composed of compromised individuals. Elsewhere, in a critical essay, she borrows the phrase “toxic accumulation,” via Masao Miyoshi, as a spur to imagine anew how we conceive of our relationships to the land, the planet, and one another: “In the face of widely dispersed contamination that we share through winds, watersheds, and food networks, I find it increasingly urgent to respect and attend to the commons” (“Cultivating” 533). Here, then, is a way to imagine the petropastoral’s version of the world in common: as a unity comprised of the compromised, together in the promise to imagine otherwise. In

describing the political work of Wong's imagined collective or "solution," I have endeavoured to foreground its contingency, provisionality, and need for constant unsettling in an attempt to address the contradictions of invoking the common(s) in a settler-colonial context. Craig Fortier has recently explored the "long history of radical left settlers claiming the commons as resistance to the state and capitalist social relations" (23), suggesting that "moves towards claiming the commons . . . seek to renegotiate social relations in a radically democratic and egalitarian way in a particular space" but must be mindful of the possibility of being "embedded within the logics of Indigenous dispossession and elimination" (21). Fortier's project, in a sense, develops from Yellowknives Glen Sean Coulthard's assertion, reproduced in the second epigraph at the beginning of this essay, that theorists and political organizers — particularly settlers — must think critically about their deployment of the concept of the commons when writing within settler-colonial frameworks or structures. Coulthard moves beyond simply pointing out the danger of romanticizing the commons as the response to the "neoliberal state's . . . enclosures"; rather, he emphasizes contemporary Indigenous political mobilization as "inspired by and oriented around *the question of land*" — that is, informed by how "the land *as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations*" redirects or "structure[s] our ethical engagements" (13).<sup>8</sup> This is the reorientation of the settler commonsensical framework — the neoliberal-petrolic state that appropriates land as resource — into a reimagining of ways of being together in the Anthropocenic present.

This is also the vision that Wong advances in "dispatches from water's journey": "an imperfect dance can still bring together / the broken, the dead, the scared & the scabbed, the makers & remakers / the children, the elders, the families, the storytellers, the witnesses" (*undercurrent* 64). She returns to the hydrocommons and invokes the collective pronoun: "underneath all the words, we are one troubled water, learning to heal ourself" (65). Wong's language recalls the opening of Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, which claims that, in the "thick present" of the Anthropocene, "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (1). Wong, of course, is attentive to potential echoes of the language of settler colonialism, adopting the term "unsettler" (*undercurrent* 13) to describe the work of extractivism and to counter the benign senses that might attach to Haraway's "settle."

Nevertheless, Haraway's description is valuable for its suggestion that the present demands both critique and composition. However, even further, the injunction to "rebuild quiet places" returns us to the pastoral's fabrication of the *locus amoenus*, that utopian and idyllic retreat, while also recognizing, with the verb "rebuild," the impossibility of a pure beyond and the intersection of the past with the present.

I turn to *Staying with the Trouble* in part because it shares a formal parallel with Wong's *undercurrent*. Both Haraway and Wong close their texts with a marked generic shift into the speculative. Whereas Haraway's final chapter is an "ongoing speculative fabulation" that traces the story of a child, Camille, through five human generations (136), *undercurrent* ends with an "epilogue: letter sent back in time from 2115":

here is wonder, despite armies of mistakes. . . . we live in the world as if it were our only home, loving dreamtime & full breath. spontaneous compassion sprouts in the cracks of collapsing systems. . . . gradual & magical, the syntax of hope percolates into bathrooms & basements, glistens in alleyways turned harbours. . . . treaties mature, deepening respect like old-growth roots. springwater protection, fogcatchers, cedar, all thicken, as does birdsong with the return of habitat & empathy. . . . balance quietly returns to the commons. (87)

I quote this final prose poem at length in order to emphasize the formal changes apparent beyond the generic. The watery syntax from earlier has "percolate[d]" into "the syntax of hope," which appears as a stubbornly present tense. Even as the poem presents itself as something returned from the future, its form signals presence. Indeed, the reader is called into presence from the first word of the poem, the deictic "here." The "world" that Wong's "epilogue" imagines, then, is not adjacent to ours or somewhere beyond this one. Rather, it "sprouts in the cracks of collapsing systems"; it emerges presently from the ground on which we stand.<sup>9</sup>

As a general conclusion, I want to focus on one aspect of Wong's future world: the "treaties" that "mature" alongside the emergence of a more just way of being together. In petrocritical analysis, treaty rights-based resistance has been theorized as a primary avenue through which to challenge the accelerations of extractivism. Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, listed by Wong as one of the "References and Influences" at the end of *undercurrent* (83), suggests that "Indigenous rights — if aggressively backed in court challenges, direct action, and mass movements demanding that they be respected — may now represent

the most powerful barriers protecting all of us from a future of climate chaos" (380). But there is something uncomfortable in this positioning of Indigeneity as the "last line of defense" (387) or the "ace in the hole" (qtd. 380) by global environmental movements, predominantly directed by settler activists.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the tactical deployment of settler-colonial structures is a much more fraught and controversial strategy than Klein's activists make it out to be. This is especially true in British Columbia, where, in many places, there have never been treaties between Indigenous nations and the Canadian government.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the potential contradictions of organizing around treaty rights surface in *undercurrent*, particularly in "#J28" when Wong's speaker urges the reader to "remember we are all treaty people / unless we live on unceded lands" (78).

Wong's intimate knowledge of Indigenous anti-extractivism mobilization on unceded lands suggests that the "treaties" in *undercurrent's* "epilogue" resonate more expansively than they do for proponents of treaty rights-based resistance. In framing treaty agreements as "real" challenges or "the most powerful barriers" to unfettered extractivism, Klein's (settler) activists — no matter their intentions — risk instrumentalizing Indigeneity and operating within Coulthard's "politics of recognition" (3). For Coulthard, "colonial rule [has] made the transition from a more-or-less unconcealed structure of domination to a mode of colonial *governmentality* that works through the limited freedoms afforded by state recognition and accommodation" (15-16). Put differently, the invocation of treaty, though potentially effective in pausing or delaying the expansion of a variety of energy and infrastructure projects, necessarily reproduces the state's colonial framework. I want to suggest that, in comparison, the "epilogue" to *undercurrent* advances a concept of treaty beyond its capacity as a colonial and governmentally recognized structure. Here the "treaties" demand a "deepening respect" while literally grounding the sociality to come "like old-growth roots." Their cultivation and maturation offer one path toward the revitalization or "return of habitat & empathy." For Wong, then, the "treaties" operate outside an exclusively legal register; they signify both the development of those "relationships between Indigenous and Euro-Westernized systems of knowledge" called for by Wong and Christian's collaborative essay (6) and the cultivation and celebration of the relationships between the human and nonhuman.

Wong's expansive vision of the shape of the "treaties" in the future returns us to the "reinvention of infrastructures" that Berlant argues is

“identical” with the “question of politics” (“Commons” 394). I want to suggest that this political imaginary is made possible by the form of *undercurrent*. Adjacent to critiques of neoliberal-petrolic common sense as well as mobilizations of anti-capitalist and environmentalist organizers, the poetic emerges as a kind of supplementary utterance. This is to follow Stoekl in his reading of Georges Bataille and to imagine “an ecological future not of Man or God but the body and recalcitrant energy — not quantifiable, not refinable” (xx). It is to take seriously the non/utility of cultural production, which labels poems as “gifts” or wastes of energy in the sense of a refusal of expenditure toward any end (33). In this way, perhaps by virtue of its circulation outside “the orbit of the totality of technological arrangements and behaviors within which our lives are lived” (Nancy 18), an understanding of the poem as gift constitutes the most straightforward intervention into neoliberal-petrolic common sense, underwritten as it is by the techno-utopian discourse of “solutions.”

To close, then, on the possibility of the gift: Wong’s poem “q’élstexw” weaves “Halq’eméylem, Ktunaxa, Gitsenimx, Nisgaa, Kwakwala, and Secwepemc words” into the space of the page (*undercurrent* 59; see Fig. 2). The title, which translates as “return” in Halq’eméylem, returns us to the question of pastoral. I want to suggest that “q’élstexw” deploys this notion of the gift to reorient the pastoral return, transforming it from a movement of retreat into a question: *what might pastoral give back?* Wong’s poem is composed of individual, observational lines; in each, an everyday object is replaced by the corresponding word in one of the Indigenous languages listed above. The final stanza catalogues these terms in translation — “thqa:t,” “pta:kwem,” “kwukemels,” “p’xwelhp,” and “skwówéls, *also known as* qukin, gaak, gwawis, setsé7” — and notes that there is “*more to tree & bracken & cucumber & oak & raven than meets the stiff I*” (59). The pun — “more than meets the eye” — initially suggests the recognition that objects signify differently to different people.<sup>12</sup> This recognition, however, resonates in multiple ways. On the one hand, we might understand the “*stiff I*” — which I read here as the settler, rigidly stuck in the worldview generated by that neoliberal-petrolic common sense — cracking open to ways of seeing and being otherwise: that is, to the presence everywhere of Indigenous languages, geographies, and epistemologies. On the other, “q’élstexw” also provides another articulation of that “unsettled solution” or “larger watershed.” Beyond recognizing different ways of seeing, Wong’s poem locates the “*stiff I*” within a collective of humans and nonhumans,

## Q'ÉLSTEXW

the city paved over with ~~cement~~ english cracks open, stubborn Halq'eméylem 59  
springs up

among the newspaper boxes and mail receptacles in the shade of the thqa:t

along the sidewalks lined with grass and pta:kwem waiting to grow anywhere  
they can

around the supermarkets full of transported food — kwukemels, tomatoes,  
chocolate and chicken.

under the wet green shelter of chestnut and p'xwelhp leaves

carried on the tricky wings of skwówéls, also known as qukin, gaak,  
gwawis, setsé7 and more in the languages of this land

more to tree & bracken & cucumber & oak & raven than meets the stiff I  
root & stomach & seed speak glottal, gut & gift

return

\* Halq'eméylem, Ktunaxa, Gitsenimx, Nisgaa, Kwakwaka, and Secwepemc  
words from <http://www.firstvoices.com>

Figure 2: “q'élstexw” by Rita Wong, *undercurrent*, Nightwood Editions, 2015, p. 59, [www.nightwoodeditions.com](http://www.nightwoodeditions.com).

drawn together by the circulation of the water system and exceeding its constituent parts. Finally, then, we can arrive at an approximation of the political work of the petropastoral. Wong's poetics not only intervenes in neoliberal-petrolic common sense, shocking the “*stiff I*” out of its myopic worldview, but also offers in its stead an aspirational, compositional

mode that begins the work of imagining an alternative sense of the world in common.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Naomi Klein notes that “what has emerged in the movement against extreme extraction is less an anti-fossil fuels movement than a pro-water movement” (344). Similarly, Janine MacLeod positions water as “the lingua franca of the biosphere” (265) and offers an extensive footnote that details how “water is invoked as a basis of unity — and sometimes even as a site of shared identity — defined against colonial extractive activities and the neo-liberal state” (286n58).

<sup>2</sup> A simple definition of “petrocultures” is “the social imaginaries brought into being by the energies of fossil fuels” (Wilson et al. 14). Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden similarly present oil “as the central concern of a vast network or ‘assemblage’ of interlinked technological, commercial, financial, and political initiatives” while also locating “oil culture” as “the foundation for a whole phase of capitalism premised on cheap energy, petrochemical goods, and risky modes of accumulation” (xxiv).

<sup>3</sup> Alaimo reads “sustainability” similarly as “a plastic but potent signifier, meaning, roughly, the ability to somehow keep things going, despite, or rather because of, the fact that we suspect economic and environmental crises render this impossible” (170).

<sup>4</sup> Mark and Dianna McMenamin elaborate an argument about the origins of life on land that links all individual land organisms, via fluid transfer, to a biogeophysical entity that they name “Hypersea.” For Wong, Hypersea offers a model through which to think interconnectivity that resonates with contemporary environmental struggles for the protection of water.

<sup>5</sup> Barad’s coinage “intra-action” “*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*” and is used in place of “‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction” (33). For Barad, “distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (33).

<sup>6</sup> Neimanis initially defines the hydrocommons in relation to what I describe above as the pivot or hinge between sited resistance and global entanglement. In *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, she develops “an understanding of embodiment as both a politics of location, where one’s specific situatedness is acknowledged, and as simultaneously partaking in a hydrocommons of wet relations” (3–4). Furthermore, and in the context of the opposition between the settler-colonial universalism imposed by Harper’s address and Wong’s poetics of “unsettled solution,” Neimanis thinks through “the conundrum of difference in the hydrocommons” (143). For her, “In acknowledging our commonality, we risk succumbing to the idea that our embodied debts are fully knowable”: that is, we risk “familiariz[ing]” difference, which becomes “a problem that is ‘solvable,’ something that can be assimilated” (143).

<sup>7</sup> Wong has written elsewhere (“Decolonizasian,” especially 168-71) about this history in relation to Marie Clements’s *Burning Vision*. In language that resonates with Wong’s poetic, critical, and political practice, Larissa Lai suggests that the “expansiveness” of the gesture by the Dene, travelling to Japan to meet with survivors of the atomic bombs, “takes us beyond questions of individual accountability in the eyes of Western individualist law” and grounds “a logic of respect” (114-15). Also see Peter Blow’s 1999 film *Village of Widows*, cited by Wong in the “References and Influences” section at the end of *undercurrent*.

<sup>8</sup> Coulthard names “this place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice *grounded normativity*” (13); also see Mark Rifkin’s concept of “emplaced and emplacing stories” (45).

<sup>9</sup> To reorient the pastoral utopia as immanent is to follow Michael Hardt in his attempt to square the differences between ecological and anti-capitalist protesters at COP15, the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference. Hardt identifies a central antinomy between the two movements. Whereas ecological thought emphasizes limits (“There is no Planet B”), anti-capitalist mobilization emphasizes alternatives (271). For Hardt, this leads to a reorientation from the anti-capitalist slogan “Another world is possible” to “This world is still possible, maybe” (271). Wong rephrases this further: “another world is not only possible, she is already here” (*undercurrent* 26).

<sup>10</sup> The full section in which Klein gives this quotation describes “anti-coal activists” in Washington State who “talk about the treaty rights of the Lummi as their ‘ace in the hole’ should all other methods of blocking the export terminals fail” (380-81).

<sup>11</sup> Klein herself notes that “roughly 80 percent” of British Columbia “remains ‘unceded,’ which means that it has never been relinquished under any treaty nor has it ever been claimed by the Canadian state through an act of war” (340).

<sup>12</sup> The superimposition of Indigenous words in the text, as well as the notion of objects signifying in different ways depending on the observer’s subject position, calls back to Beaugregard’s reading of *forage*. Beaugregard identifies a “poetics of supplementation” in the “handwritten . . . Indigenous place names and languages [that] call attention to geographies . . . simultaneously present and erased” (574).

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