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"A life of dignity, joy and good relation"

Water, Knowledge, and Environmental Justice in Rita Wong's *undercurrent*

On December 11, 2017, British Columbia's NDP government made a landmark decision to continue construction on the partially built Site C hydroelectric dam, to the dismay of West Moberly and Prophet River First Nations, as well as settlers who reside along the Peace River. The decision also elicited frustration from NDP and Green Party voters, academics, environmentalists, and Indigenous peoples who, while distanced from the immediate fallout of the Site C dam, shared concerns about the multi-dimensional harm the hydroelectric project will cause to the river, to non-human beings, to local Indigenous and settler communities, and to the broader goals of reconciliation and environmentally just energy policies. The provincial government argued that the project, which was initiated by the BC Liberal Party in 2010, could not be halted because of an estimated $2 billion in sunk costs. Located just downstream from the W. A. C. Bennett Dam (Site A), in Treaty 8 territory, the Site C dam will control the Peace River's flow and flood 5,500 hectares of the river's valley (McElroy). Responding to the impending destruction, Chief Roland Willson of West Moberly First Nations is leading efforts to stop the construction of Site C. Cognizant of the harm already caused by the W. A. C. Bennett Dam, he states: "Only 30 per cent of the Peace River is left that we have access to, and they are going to flood half of that to build Site C. We want them to leave it alone" (qtd. in Hunter). For people like Willson, the dam represents a looming environmental justice disaster, in which water's autonomy and life-giving promise to those beings who live in inseparable relation to the river are sacrificed for the short-term economic benefit of primarily settlers who live far to the south.

Rita Wong, the self-described "poet-scholar who works with and for water as she lives on unceded Coast Salish lands" (Wong and Goto), is a vocal critic of the Site C dam and an advocate for decolonial approaches to water.[1] For Wong, Site C is an unnecessary and destructive project. It is also a flashpoint that highlights how different approaches to water make possible radically different futures. While the pervasive capitalist understanding of water—as a resource—has contributed to the creation of the W. A. C. Bennett Dam and subtends the logic used to justify the Site C dam, prevalent Indigenous understandings of water—as a relative who is worthy of respect—encourage a future without hydroelectric dams. Through scholarship and poetry that often begins with self-reflection on her position as a middle-class, Asian Canadian woman, racialized settler, and consumer who was born into the oil-reliant province of Alberta, Wong has long acknowledged her complicity in the colonial project and her marginalization by white settler racism, and has interrogated the relationships between positionality, knowledge, and justice. Aware that the settler tendency to enact a Eurocentric hierarchization of knowledge that suppresses Indigenous and diasporic ways of knowing is used to justify the marginalization of certain groups of people and the destruction of certain environments, Wong wants "to build better relationships than what colonization would consign us to" ("4/4"). She works toward building "better relationships" through poetry and academic work that considers how knowledges may be placed in respectful conversation and how marginalized perspectives may be recovered and deployed in an effort to create a more equitable and less destructive world. In addition to her ongoing academic and poetic inquiry into knowledge systems, water, and justice, Wong supports the water and other beings who are affected by destructive Western approaches to water at Site C by participating in paddling protests, co-organizing poetry readings, and raising awareness on social media.

Wong's compelling environmental praxis manifests most powerfully in her fourth collection of poetry, *undercurrent* (2015). The collection contemplates the intertwined social and environmental harms that occur at Site C, and elsewhere, when settler desires to maintain the status quo discourage people from working with and caring for water; and yet, the poems are also hopeful. They articulate how a shared reliance on water serves as a link between Indigenous peoples and settlers on Turtle Island (North America). Wong's poems imagine how variously self-located settlers can work together to build better relationships with water and each other by considering cautious interactions among different ways of knowing. As a white settler scholar

who values environmental justice, I find Wong's praxis instructive for how it prompts me to reflect on and work from my self-location to mobilize knowledge in ways that encourage settlers to develop respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples and water in the service of justice. In this essay, I consider the many ways that Wong arranges knowledges in support of water: from demonstrating mutually enriching interactions between Indigenous knowledge and Western science to setting Western science in a purely supportive role, and from drawing on the knowledge embedded in one's own cultural heritage to scavenging whatever knowledges are close at hand. I argue that by taking a tentative and flexible approach to the deployment of and interaction among different ways of knowing, *undercurrent* contributes to a decolonial vision of environmental justice that supports mutually sustaining relationships among Indigenous peoples, settlers, and water.

With awareness of the historic and ongoing cognitive and material violence enacted by the colonial implementation of Western knowledge systems, might there nevertheless be moments in the fight for environmental justice when knowledges may be placed in productive and ethical conversation? Scholars such as Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes are rightfully skeptical that people can apply Western and Indigenous knowledge simultaneously without reinforcing colonial hierarchies (iv). Consequently, physical and conceptual spaces in which Indigenous peoples can exist independent from settler presence and non-Indigenous knowledges must be made a priority. Métis artist and scholar David Garneau calls these settings, in which Indigenous peoples partake in "intellectual activities based on Native rather than Western epistemologies," "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" (25). At the same time, Daniel Coleman, Marie Battiste, Sákéj Henderson, Isobel Findlay, and Len Findlay have gathered to consider the feasibility and benefits of placing knowledges into conversation. Drawing on the work of legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos, they propose that the Eurocentric organization of knowledge that underpins settler colonialism can be destabilized when people respectfully engage with multiple knowledge systems (142-43). Notwithstanding the need for irreconcilable spaces, and despite the colonial attitudes that restrict Western knowledge such as science, philosophy, and theology from being placed in ethical relation to Indigenous knowledge, my reading of Wong's *undercurrent* suggests that although moments when knowledges are placed in ethical relation are complicated and tentative, they can contribute to decolonial environmental justice initiatives.

My approach to Wong's poetics is informed by Tania Aguila-Way's reading of Wong's second book of poetry, *forage* (2007), which Aguila-Way describes as a collection that "stage[s] a productive encounter between diasporic, Indigenous, and scientific ways of knowing" (49). While Wong takes seriously Indigenous knowledge by placing it in conversation with other knowledges, the manner in which these ways of knowing ought to interact in order to produce a "productive encounter," rather than to replicate colonial hierarchies, requires ongoing investigation from both poet and critic. Aguila-Way proposes that Wong's early poems depict Indigenous and diasporic peoples facing similar experiences of oppression, whereas Wong's later poems in *forage* interrogate how diasporic peoples are often complicit in settler colonialism, and how diasporic knowledges can be set in relation to Indigenous knowledge (223). This complicated process of reflecting on and articulating one's ever-changing subjectivity is important for Wong and for others who, like Wong, can claim multiple identities that often exist in contradictory and modifying relation—such as how one can claim and alter a settler subjectivity by also claiming an identity that is informed by racialization or participation in a diaspora—because how one chooses to self-locate can occlude or expose power and can generate or sever connections with certain ways of knowing, communities, and non-human beings. In this essay, I extend Aguila-Way's reading of Wong's oeuvre, self-positioning, and approach to the interaction among knowledges by reading *undercurrent* for the way Wong continues to think about diasporic peoples' involvement in settler colonialism, and for the way Wong now centres Indigenous knowledge as the focal point through which productive encounters on Turtle Island occur. In doing so, I suggest that respectful interaction among knowledges is a prerequisite for the emergence of any manifestation of allyship between variously self-located settlers and Indigenous peoples. As such, I provide a different yet complementary understanding of allyship in Wong's work than is articulated by Gillian Roberts, who reads *undercurrent* for the way allies position themselves in relation to settler colonialism and social movements such as Idle No More (78).

If Indigenous peoples and other beings affected by settler colonialism are to find redress from environmental injustices, Indigenous approaches to justice must be centred. Self-defined and culturally appropriate responses to environmental harm are justice imperatives, the likes of which are enshrined in the Principles of Environmental Justice that were adopted at the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 in the early years of the environmental justice movement. According to the delegates,

the Principles aim "to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves" (299). Indigenous activists have taken culturally specific approaches to justice that are informed by their understanding of their nations' intellectual traditions and contributions to Indigenous knowledge—which Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor describes as the knowledge that has, over millennia, encouraged people to enact responsibilities to ensure that "the relationship with Creation and its beings . . . [is] maintained and enhanced" (33). McGregor proposes that an Indigenous notion of environmental justice shares similarities with the American environmental justice tradition that addresses the disproportional amount of environmental harm faced by marginalized communities, but it differs because it draws on Indigenous knowledge and thus advocates for "justice for all beings of Creation, not only because threats to their existence threaten ours but because from an Aboriginal perspective justice among beings of Creation is life-affirming" (27). McGregor explains that while people have a role to play in justice, so too do other beings: "In the Anishinaabe world view, all beings of Creation have spirit, with duties and responsibilities to each other to ensure the continuation of Creation" (27-28). For example, McGregor writes that people must "respect and treat water as a relative, not a resource," and that "water has a role and a responsibility to fulfil, just as people do. We do not have the right to interfere with water's duties to the rest of Creation" (37-38). Learning Indigenous approaches to water and justice that encourage people to support the "continuation of Creation" is not only part of becoming a better guest on Turtle Island but can also help settlers work toward an alternative to the colonial present, in which all peoples and beings thrive.

Differently self-located settlers on Turtle Island who are trying to build relationships with water and Indigenous peoples by listening to Indigenous thinkers who generously share their knowledge are participating in acts that can disrupt the widespread settler practice of centring Western thinking. Settler colonialism has long involved discrediting Indigenous knowledge and championing Western ways of knowing in an effort to further settler aims (Haluza-DeLay et al. 4). For example, governments and corporations who are in favour of megaprojects, such as hydroelectric dams, regularly deploy science to generate environmental mitigation plans to appease concerned settlers. Although mitigation processes may limit environmental damage, such efforts perpetuate settler colonialism and do not amount to Indigenous visions of environmental justice, which would align more closely with Stó:lō

writer Lee Maracle's understanding that "*we do not own the water, the water owns itself*" (37, emphasis original). According to Santos, although aware of "marginal or subordinate versions of modern Western thinking which have opposed the hegemonic version" (45), users of Western knowledge often participate in the harmful act of "abyssal thinking," which

> consists in granting to modern science the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false, to the detriment of two alternative bodies of knowledge: philosophy and theology. . . . These tensions between science, philosophy, and theology have thus become highly visible but, as I contend, they all take place on this side of the line. Their visibility is premised upon the invisibility of forms of knowledge that cannot be fitted into any of these ways of knowing. I mean popular, lay, plebeian, peasant, or indigenous knowledges on the other side of the line. They vanish as relevant or commensurable knowledges because they are beyond truth and falsehood. (47)

The challenge, for settlers who have adopted abyssal thinking, will be to replace this epistemologically limiting and thus destructive approach to knowledge and start to take seriously visions of justice that are informed by Indigenous and other knowledges that have long since been placed on the other side of the abyssal line.

Although Indigenous knowledge is central to generating ethical relations between beings and cultures on Turtle Island, decolonial environmental justice requires more than outright rejection of all non-Indigenous perspectives. Writer and critic Larissa Lai argues that "it does absolutely no good for settler folk to appropriate Indigenous practices, but if we can have our own practices that work in solidarity with Indigenous ones, then that strikes me as hugely relation-building" (266). Relation-building practices, which contribute to intercultural, decolonial environmental justice activism that works to support the "continuation of Creation," can emerge when non-Indigenous knowledges are cautiously placed in respectful relation to Indigenous knowledge. For example, Wong's understanding of water is informed by Indigenous knowledge as well as by watershed ecology. While Wong acknowledges that "Western science is only beginning to articulate" the connections that Indigenous knowledge keepers have long since known ("What" 86), watershed ecology's focus on the interdependence between beings and watersheds can be used alongside Indigenous knowledge to advocate for increased care and respect for water. As a poet, Wong makes her home in the uncomfortable yet valuable water where knowledges meet. Immersed in this confluence, Wong considers how settlers can work across knowledges and self-locations in support of water, Indigenous peoples, and decolonial relationships.

As a self-described "settler" and "unsettler" (Wong and Christian 2), Wong regularly listens to and respects Indigenous thinkers in an effort to unsettle abyssal thinking. Splatsin, Syilx, and Anishnaabe scholar Dorothy Christian and Wong have argued that doing so is "not only a matter of justice and principle, though it is certainly that, but it is also a practical matter of developing the cultural fluencies, actions, and philosophies needed to navigate together in a spirit of peace, friendship, and respect" (Wong and Christian 8-9). At the same time, Wong also finds value in arranging Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges in different ways, in order to disrupt the colonial hierarchization of knowledge and to engender new ways of knowing. For example, in "declaration of intent," from *undercurrent*, the speaker states,

> water is a sacred bond, embedded in our plump, moist cells
> in our breaths that transpire to return to the clouds that gave us
>   life through rain
> in the rivers & aquifers that we & our neighbours drink
> in the oceans that our foremothers came from (14)

Embedded in this stanza is the scientific concept of the hydrological cycle that describes the circulation of water from rain, to runoff, to evaporation, to condensation, and then back to rain ("Water Basics"). Also embedded in this stanza is Indigenous knowledge that, for Christian, involves understanding that "everything within Creation is sacred and interrelated" (Christian and Wong, "Untapping" 238). Implicit in Wong's poem is an intervention into science that relies on Indigenous knowledge to enrich the concept of the hydrological cycle from one that excludes people and is not sacred to one that includes people and is sacred. Meanwhile, the scientific approach that delineates the precise movement of water through cells and breath, as well as through the hydrological cycle, enriches an Indigenous approach to the world that celebrates water's movement and its inseparability from life. By embedding two knowledges within the same passage in a way that allows each perspective to complement the other, Wong generates a decolonial interaction between knowledges that is facilitated by water.

Also implicit in *undercurrent* is a different yet equally important interaction between knowledges, in which the value of science may reside in its modest ability to support an Indigenous approach to water. The speaker of "for Gregoire Lake *which way does the wind blow?*" tries to build a relationship with water that is informed by Indigenous knowledge and encouraged by what scientists know about chemicals. In the left-hand column of the poem, the speaker talks to the North Albertan lake and approaches it tentatively with thanks,

thereby indicating that the water is a being who has agency and deserves respect, just as McGregor and Maracle have argued. The left column reads:

> in the fresh morning
> i dip my hands into you tentatively
> thankful to camp on your shores
> amidst mosquitoes, mud & grass (*undercurrent* 68)

Here the speaker's interactions with the lake seem to represent an effort to build what elsewhere Maracle calls a "good relationship" with water (37). While building a mutually supportive relationship with water is always a good practice, it is made even more urgent and necessary by scientific studies that reveal the lake has been harmed by tar sands extraction.

The poem also demonstrates the risks associated with using science to support an Indigenous approach to water. The same science that helps the speaker realize that building a "good relationship" with water is an urgent task also threatens to disrupt the speaker's ability to articulate this newly emerging relationship. The interruption occurs when the right-hand column of the poem, comprised of italicized scientific terms for pollutants found at the tar sands, is read alongside the left-hand column that holds the speaker's narrative. When each line of the poem is read in full from left to right, rather than column by column, the scientific terms disrupt the narrative:

> in the fresh morning *hexavalent chromium*
> i dip my hands into you tentatively *arsenic*
> thankful to camp on your shores *aluminum*
> amidst mosquitoes, mud & grass *zinc* (*undercurrent* 68)

The terms that Wong has extracted from a study on the tar sands interrupt the speaker who is building a relationship with water. While the right-hand column offers important information—like the fact that when the speaker touches the water the speaker is also touching arsenic—it does so in a way that interferes with the speaker's story. That words describing chemicals disrupt the narrative is troubling because the speaker's relationship with water is informed by Indigenous knowledge and could exist, in all its richness, without the help of chemistry. Here, Wong's poem provides an opportunity to consider the risks associated with placing science and Indigenous knowledge in ethical relation: scientific knowledge may overshadow Indigenous knowledge and if this unnecessary imbalance occurs then the possibility of a mutually beneficial dialogue and exchange of ideas becomes difficult. However, for Wong this approach is worth the risk because science cannot be left in its current entanglement with colonialism. By attempting to sever

science from colonialism and connect it to Indigenous knowledge, Wong joins a growing group of writers who are encouraged by the new ways of knowing and being that emerge when Indigenous knowledge and science are combined. Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer explains that she works cautiously to create "a new species of knowledge, a new way of being in the world," in which "the beauty of one [knowledge] is illuminated by the radiance of the other" (47). Kimmerer understands that science has limits and has been used to restrict Indigenous knowledge. She explains that science only knows with the mind, but from an Indigenous perspective "we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit" (47). Rather than dismissing science entirely because it is often tied to abyssal thinking, Kimmerer, like Wong, tries to disentangle science from colonialism and place it into productive conversation with Indigenous knowledge.

While science certainly needs to be unsettled, Wong places this responsibility on the people who have benefited from the type of science that is used to silence Indigenous peoples and harm environments. Indeed, the people who live in good relation with water should not have to bear the brunt of the work needed to heal the world. The final half of "declaration of intent" encourages those individuals who benefit from and perpetuate settler colonialism, whom Maracle calls the "ordinary people" who "did the work of destruction," to create an alternative to the unjust present (36). The speaker proposes: "because i am part of the problem i can also become part of / the solution" (15). The phrasing and the "i" pronoun create a bond of identification between speaker and reader, through which readers are encouraged to think of themselves as "part of the problem." Although not everyone is part of the problem, the poem's abstract diction in words like "problem" and "solution" allows many people to locate themselves within these broad categories so that they can work toward a solution. For some readers, the problem occurs when science is used to support colonialism and harm water, and the solution involves severing science from colonialism; but for others, who each work from unique self-locations, knowledge bases, and connections to settler colonialism, the solution to injustices will differ. Through its inclusive and abstract diction, Wong's poem encourages participation and dialogue as an essential step in the process of justice.

Wong encourages readers to partake in solitary acts of self-reflection; however, she also encourages those "ordinary people" who are working to "become part of / the solution" to learn from Indigenous thinkers and from

the plants and other beings who already know how to be good relatives. Another poem, "medicines in the city," reveals that people can learn from horsetail and the wind as these natural elements enact their responsibilities to water. Wong's poem describes how horsetail resides in urban locations and cleans the poisoned water, with the wind's help:

> horsetail hints
> at abundant water beneath
> transformed into fine green nodes
>
> sprouting up from cracks in pavement
> near Main & Broadway
> atop what was once Brewery Creek
> horsetail hails the sturdy spore, the perpetual wind
> its ally in propagation
>
> scrub brush, toothbrush, remover of toxins
> horsetail ever-so-slowly heals inflictions
> a living fossil who quietly outlasts our cities
> soaking up the acid soil we leave behind (36)

Here, the wind helps horsetail propagate, thereby contributing to the plant's effort to clean the wet soil. That horsetail, aided by the wind, cleans the mess made by settlers is an act of decolonial responsibility to land and water. Wong's depiction of the relationships between horsetail, wind, water, and soil exemplifies McGregor's belief that all beings have "a responsibility for justice" (27). Not only are these beings responsible for working toward justice, but they can also teach people how to act. Kimmerer asserts that from a Potawatomi perspective, many entities are animate and can teach people how to live. She writes that elders

> remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides. . . . Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don't have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. (58)

The beings in Wong's poem who each rely on their own unique skills to work together in support of the "continuation of Creation" teach that people who have different perspectives, skills, and responsibilities can cooperate to achieve the common goal of caring for water.

In a series of italicized prose vignettes that are scattered throughout *undercurrent*, Wong encourages people, who act and think in ways that ignore the vital relationships and welfare that water makes possible, to join horsetail and the other beings who are building good relationships with

water and with each other, by extension. The vignettes are spoken from the perspective of a group of beings whose desire to live well together is predicated on access to unpolluted water. The collective proclaims, "*We are the beings who need clean water in order to live a life of dignity, joy and good relation. Maybe you are part of 'us' without even knowing that you are*" (16). This water-loving multitude is comprised of many different beings, from "coyotes" and "grandmothers" to "thunderstorms," and is always growing as forgetful people begin to remember that they also rely on unpolluted water (16). Even as the collective grows, some people selfishly resist participation. The multitude appeals to these self-interested people by arguing that they have obligations to their relatives who make existence possible: "*We are your relatives. . . . We call upon you to remember your ancient oaths, your debts to all realms that enable your existence, your obligations as earth-dwellers*" (35). By foregrounding the relationships among relatives, Wong challenges a Western perspective that, according to Christian, "imagine[s] the individual as primary, as being more important than community" (Christian and Wong, "Untapping" 238). Through these vignettes Wong underscores the reciprocal relationships that all beings have with one another and especially with water. As such, recovering and enacting forgotten relationships with and responsibilities to water are a communal effort.

At the same time that the multitude celebrates community, and proposes that "*[w]e need kinship that builds peaceful relations*," they also oppose uniformity (47). Rather, they advise that "*[w]e need to respect our differences without letting them kill, destroy, displace, incarcerate and oppress us*" (47). Wong follows their directive in three of the italicized prose vignettes, in which she uses the first-person singular, instead of a collective voice, to discuss her relationship with water. In these seemingly autobiographical passages, Wong recounts participating in the tar sands Healing Walk, Salish Seas Festival, and Keepers of the Waters conference. In each of these instances Wong listens to and works with Indigenous peoples in support of water, thereby following their long-standing "requests that non-Aboriginal peoples walk beside or behind—but not in front of—Aboriginal peoples" (Haluza-DeLay et al. 5). Wong approaches water by way of Indigenous peoples' environmental justice activism because she realizes she cannot have a good relationship with water unless she has a good relationship with Indigenous peoples. She declares, "*There is still a long way to go in my journey with water, which is also a journey of becoming worthy to live as a guest on these sacred lands of the Coast Salish peoples*" (*undercurrent* 22). In

these vignettes, Wong reveals how she works from her location as a settler on Turtle Island to build relationships with water and Indigenous communities in an effort to help support environmental justice.

Wong works from a site of intertwined settler privilege and racialized marginalization to recover aspects of her cultural heritage that have been disregarded by white settler ways of knowing, in order to develop relationships with water and Indigenous peoples. In one of the vignettes, she describes being invited to participate in a canoe ceremony by the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, but she is worried that she may fail, until she states her Cantonese and English names. She writes, "*What if I tipped the canoe by accident? What if I didn't pull my weight? As I entered the canoe, I said my name out loud in Cantonese and English, then put my fears aside*" (22). She is concerned that she may not be able to pull her weight physically, but perhaps also intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. However, by saying her Cantonese and her English names, Wong becomes supported by her cultural heritage that offers rich approaches to water. Christian and Wong explain that names provide a powerful source of pride that can connect individuals with their water-loving ancestors. They state that "when we acknowledge our ancestral and gifted names, we are asserting the continuance of cultural heritages that predate and survive through the imposition of colonial paradigms and naming practices. When we go back far enough in our familial lines, we find ancestors who lived in relationship with the lands and waters" (Wong and Christian 2). By remembering her Cantonese name in particular, Wong gestures to her ancestors and the knowledge that allowed them to build good relationships with water. Together, Wong's seemingly autobiographical and collectively voiced vignettes articulate that settlers on Turtle Island should listen to Indigenous peoples and also recover the aspects of their individual cultural heritage that encourage people to relate to water.

By including an extended quote from Bruce Lee that concludes with his famous saying, "Be water my friend," as an epigraph for *undercurrent* (5), Wong works to recover the profundity of a part of her cultural heritage that has been oversimplified by its circulation within North American popular culture. Rather than use Lee's saying as a catchphrase, or focus on his stardom and martial arts manoeuvres, the saying informs Wong's poems in a way that gestures to philosophical underpinnings of gung fu, which for Lee involves Taoist and Zen philosophy and advocating for self-preservation by acting like water (Lee, *Artist* 13). Writer Maria Popova contends that the genesis of Lee's famous quote is revealed in his essay "A Moment of

Understanding," in which he recounts his early attempts to learn gung fu. As a student, he struggles to grasp his instructor's message, "preserve yourself by following the natural bends of things and don't interfere. Remember never to assert yourself against nature; never be in frontal opposition to any problems" (Lee, *Artist* 16). Frustrated, Lee strikes the water and it moves to make space for his fist then returns to its initial state, unharmed. In this moment, Lee realizes, "was not this water the very essence of gung fu? Hadn't this water just now illustrated to me the principle of gung fu?" and thus he decides "to be like the nature of water" (17). Lee's journey to preserve himself is intertwined with his journey to understand and emulate water.

Lee helps Wong develop her relationship with water that exists independently from, but alongside, Indigenous peoples who also have culturally specific relationships with water. Lee's insights are embedded in a section of "declaration of intent" that reads,

> i will learn through immersion, flotation & transformation
> as water expands & contracts, i will fit myself to its ever-changing
> dimensions (14)

In these lines, the speaker intends to learn like Lee by immersing the self in water. The speaker also desires to match water's movements, just as gung fu artists match their opponents' movements. If the water expands the speaker contracts, and if the water contracts the speaker expands; but in either case the movements of speaker and water are inseparable, and if each being moves in accordance with the other, neither will be harmed. By using Lee to help the speaker develop a humble relationship with water, Wong demonstrates how variously self-located settlers can draw on parts of their cultural heritage that are compatible with Indigenous approaches to water. Both gung fu and Indigenous knowledge demonstrate interconnections between water and people, and involve the notion that people should learn from and respect water's movements. While all settlers can follow Wong's method of relation-building by evoking water-centric aspects of their cultures, Wong's tactic may provide specialized encouragement for Asian Canadians who, to critic Janey Lew's frustration, have not always supported Indigenous peoples' fight for and with water (281). By modelling how Asian Canadians can recover parts of their cultures in an effort to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, Wong enacts her earlier proposal that Asian Canadians shift away from an oversimplifying and harmful identification with whiteness and instead forge connections with Indigenous peoples by considering "[w]hat happens if we position indigenous people's struggles instead of normalized

whiteness as the reference point through which we come to articulate our subjectivities? How would such a move radically transform our perceptions of the land on which we live?" ("Decolonizasian" 158).

Wong demonstrates how cultural heritage can be a valuable tool for settlers who want to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples; however, she follows the water-loving multitude's reminders that although differences are valuable they should not "oppress us" (*undercurrent* 47). Accordingly, Wong finds freedom from any undesirable limits that her cultural heritage would impose on her by engaging with a wide variety of approaches to water, beyond those embedded in her heritage. For example, Wong's poem "flush" uses a quote by Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who also views water as a teacher. The quote reads: "Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody. . . . Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, the rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen" (42). Like Merton, the poem's speaker is willing to listen to the rain, even though the speaker is faced with the challenge of hearing the rain in water that has been distanced from the hydrological cycle due to its movement through public infrastructure. By reframing shower water as "post-chlorinated rain," the speaker "refus[es] the inertia of amnesia" that occurs when mundane interactions with water in a settler society separate it from rain and from the human body (42). Instead, the speaker who

> welcome[s] the memory of rain
> sliding into sink and teacup, throat and bladder, tub and toilet

is reminded that water is a

> bountiful abundant carrier of what everyone emits into the
> clouds, be that exhale or smoke, bleach or chemical combustion,
> flame or fragrance, the rain gives it all back to us in spates (42)

In other words, the speaker learns that what people do to the rain, they do to themselves. By placing quotes from differently located thinkers throughout her collection, and by including a lengthy bibliography, Wong demonstrates how a great many ways of knowing encourage people to build good relationships with water. In *undercurrent*, Wong continues a practice she developed in *forage* that Catherine Bates calls a "foraging poetics." Bates explains that Wong "explicitly situates her own writing within the creative and critical work she has found rummaging through the writings of others" (199). While foraging for knowledge is certainly an important part of *undercurrent*, it is only one of several tactics that Wong uses to encourage people to develop good relationships with water.

Six years prior to the publication of *undercurrent*, Wong described her poetics as a process in which she sifts through, and rearranges, the poisoned language of English in an attempt to understand the harm it causes. She writes, "immersed in the muddy, polluted stream that we call the english language, i still need the stream to live, even as i filter the pollutants, rearrange them in funny shapes in order to try to understand what they are doing to my body . . . this dirty water is what i have to drink, what i have to give back, you can call it ink" ("seeds" 22). Although some of the poems in *undercurrent* address the violence caused by the English language, the collection also sees Wong immersed within a stream polluted not only by English but with other violent ways of knowing, from Western science that is used often to support settler colonialism and the capitalist belief that water is a resource, to abyssal thinking. And yet, the stream holds a diversity of knowledges, many of which provide insights that can make possible an alternative to the unjust present. Wong filters out the pollutant knowledges and returns the insightful knowledges. She gives these knowledges back to the stream in different configurations—she splices Indigenous and scientific ways of knowing to enrich both, uses Western science to support Indigenous perspectives, draws on her own cultural heritage to work alongside Indigenous approaches, and forages around for any knowledge that may be useful. In doing so, she encourages settlers to interrogate how knowledge systems and knowledge synthesis can be both part of what Wong calls "the problem" and "part of the solution" (*undercurrent* 15). There is hope in Wong's poems that certain arrangements of knowledges will allow variously self-located settlers to work toward the common goal of supporting water in moments of crises like Site C and during everyday actions like showering, because to support water is to support life.

Interrogating harmful ways of knowing and humbly arranging knowledges in different ethical configurations are a necessary task that settlers must take up; however, Wong's poems also remind settlers who want to support water and Indigenous peoples that listening is a task that must also be prioritized—as Lai states, "there are still moments when settler folk just need to stand aside and exercise their listening skills" (266). Indeed, Wong's poems direct settlers to listen to Indigenous peoples and to water; to drink the knowledge that has been so generously shared, for this knowledge is life-sustaining and can encourage good relationships on Turtle Island that support environmental justice, or what McGregor calls the "continuation of Creation" (28).

NOTE

1 Wong's decolonial environmental advocacy extends beyond her opposition to Site C. On August 24, 2018, Wong read poetry while blocking a Kinder Morgan construction site to demonstrate opposition to the Trans Mountain pipeline, which she contends will harm the land and place Indigenous women in hazardous situations. Wong was arrested for her actions and if sentenced will be imprisoned for two weeks.

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