



“We Need to Live the World that is Possible”: Prefigurative Justice, Creative Collaboration, and the Activism of Rita Wong

HEATHER SMYTH

University of Waterloo, Canada

ABSTRACT *Although many writers and scholars struggle to cross the threshold between literary expressive culture and activism, poet Rita Wong has fostered and bridged both collaborative artistic and direct-action social justice work. Wong’s collaborations with Dorothy Christian, Larissa Lai, Cindy Mochizuki, and Fred Wah illuminate the promise of creative practice in confronting racial capitalism and climate destruction. This essay draws from the social movement theory of prefigurative politics, routed through abolition feminism and Indigenous place-based epistemology, to account for ethical consistencies between Wong’s poetics, collaborative artistic practice, and direct-action interventions. Prefigurative politics conveys “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs, 1977, p. 100). Wong’s work focuses on “Reckoning” at the pivot point of climate destruction: she writes, “our common survival depends on our collective ability to address the environmental devastation that has accelerated in this century, a devastation that will not end unless we learn to live by values that manifest and respect Indigenous relationships to the land and waters” (Wong, 2012, p. 535). Her scholarship and collaborative poetic engagements have attended to “Repairing” with words, performance, bodily engagement, and crafting a paradigm shift in alliance with human and nonhuman others, thinking with and through water. And Wong “Reworlds” through experimental and imaginative building of new relations, telling new stories. In keeping with prefigurative social movement practice, she and her collaborators act as if that new world has already arrived.*

KEYWORDS Rita Wong; social justice; poetry; direct action; prefigurative politics; Indigenous; water

Although many writers and scholars struggle to cross the threshold between literary expressive culture and activism, poet Rita Wong has fostered both collaborative artistic and direct-action social justice work. Wong’s

Correspondence Address: Heather Smyth, Department of English Language & Literature, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1; email: hsmyth@uwaterloo.ca

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collaborations with Dorothy Christian, Larissa Lai, Cindy Mochizuki, Fred Wah and others illuminate the promise of creative practice in confronting racial capitalism and climate destruction. In this essay, I draw from the social movement theory of prefigurative politics, routed through abolition feminism and Indigenous place-based epistemology, to account for the ethical consistency between Wong's poetics, her collaborative artistic practice, and her direct-action interventions. Prefigurative politics conveys "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs, 1977, p. 100). Poetry has a role to play in this element of social change, according to Wong, for activism requires "protect[ing]...the gains" of past generations and "systemic analysis" but also "having the ability to imagine what it is that you want" (Milne, 2009, p. 348) and crafting it in the present. Wong's work focuses on "Reckoning" at the pivot point of climate destruction: she writes,

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Her scholarship and collaborative poetic engagements have attended to "Repairing" with words, performance, bodily engagement, and crafting a paradigm shift in alliance with human and nonhuman others, thinking with and through water.¹ And Wong "Reworlds" through experimental and imaginative building of new relations, telling new stories. In keeping with prefigurative social movement practice, she and her collaborators act as if that new world has *already* arrived. By thinking through, walking beside, protecting, and acting with water, Wong limns a social practice of collaborative poetry guided by "watershed" knowledge: "One water body flows together with other water bodies, a whole greater than its parts: 'What you cannot do alone, you will do together'" (Wong, 2015a, p. 21).

¹ Wong positions herself via the traditional territories she lives on and through the water systems she is responsible to. Taking my cue from Wong, I introduce myself as a white settler scholar who lives in Tkaronto, traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. Tkaronto is covered by Treaty 13 between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit, and is part of the Dish with One Spoon treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee. The Don River watershed surrounds where I live, but I have also spent my life in the Fall River watershed at Sharbot Lake (in Algonquin Anishnaabeg traditional territory) north of Kingston/Katarokwi and have watched the changes to those waters for 50 years. I am grateful for the deep engagement and suggestions offered by the peer reviewers of an early draft of this paper, in particular their invitation to think more fully about water as a collaborative partner in Wong's work.

What follows is an examination of Wong's published collaborative texts (*sibyl unrest*, *perpetual*, *beholden*, *downstream*), public statements, and coalitional social justice praxis through the lens of prefigurative politics and social justice theory, exploring salient rhetorical, poetic, and representational moves in her/ their work. Wong and her co-creators illustrate how poetics can "propel a reader/listener to a different kind of knowledge... animated by the possibility of revolution, love, and world (re)making" (Sharpe, 2022, p. xxi). As Wong puts it, "the question of how to build relationships and alliances is one that poetry might respond to in surprising ways. By making room for difference, for the unpredictable, how might creative practices also link to political actions?" (The Sibyls, 2012, p. 89).

In all her work, Wong pursues a poetics that furthers the ends of justice, even as she notes, "sometimes poetry has taken me into social justice rather than being the vehicle for social justice" (Milne, 2009, p. 344). In an interview with Heather Milne (2009), she reflects, "poetry and activism...[are] complementary rather than... totally separate things" (p. 349). Scholars have observed her attempts to "adjust the way politics and poetics approach each other" (Kim, 2009, p. 167), her commitment to allyship (Roberts, 2017), and the way her poetry can "activate" readers to "imagine, and potentially envision alternatives" (Beauregard, 2019, pp. 572, 576). Max Karpinski (2020) proposes that "the political desire inherent in Wong's poetics" is "a 'reinvention of infrastructures' by modelling joyful ways of being in common organized around the defence of water" (p. 210). Nicholas Bradley's (2021) edited collection *current, climate: The poetry of Rita Wong*, in particular, affirms Wong's conviction that "poetry is a public discourse with the capacity to affect and indeed to create communities of readers" (p. xiii). He notes that "Wong's poems insist that action is both possible and meaningful" (p. xx), but it is Wong's (2021) "Afterword" that foregrounds a shift in practice from poetic creation to embodied action, activism, and witness: "I don't have much energy to write poems these days... I feel a widely shared ecological grief... and I cope with this grief by directing my energy into supporting collective action" (p. 72), referring to her public essays, court witnessing, and civil resistance support of land and water protectors. The trajectory of my essay is this move from poetics to embodied action and the touchpoints between them, as Wong brings principles and procedures of justice to her creative collaborative work in art and direct action.

Another World is Possible: Prefiguration, Abolition, and Creative Praxis

The rendering of Wong's creative work and public actions demonstrates the value of prefigurative politics. This principle foregrounds how social movements act in the world and organize themselves to embody their ethics and ideal social relations. The motivations behind prefigurative politics are several. There is a moral consistency element: ensuring the process of

challenging hegemonic power does not just rehearse the same hierarchies and oppressions. There is a performative dimension: showing your audience what revolutionary change can look like. As Marianne Maeckelbergh (2011) points out in a study of the alter-globalization movement, "prefiguration is outward-looking with the political goal of transforming governing structures on a global scale, and showing people through doing that this is possible" (p. 14). Prefiguration is also experimental: learning new values and ways of engaging together, so a new social fabric grounded in mutual care evolves as direct action brings that future closer.

Imagining new structures for social relations, like non-hierarchical organizational culture, is a critical component of prefigurative political thinking, and social movements invested in challenging structural oppressions have an affinity for leaderless structures, consensus decision-making, accessibility, and mutual aid (Bierria et al., 2022; Day, 2005; Staggengborg & Ramos, 2016). Contemporary progressive movement structures model "networked practices of horizontality and diversity" and are prefigurative because they empower movement actors during the process and "transform the way power operates in the very process of struggle" (Maeckelbergh, 2011, pp. 9, 13). Wong's commitment to collaborative writing and lateral organizing implements this principle. Those new structures, and ways of relating within them, are "learned through practice" (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 13) – and as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) puts it, "practice makes different" (p. 3).

The feminist abolitionist movement, with its emphasis on mutual aid and community building as alternatives to carceral systems of order and punishment, demonstrates how prefiguration entails creativity and imaginative work. Community organizer and abolitionist Mariame Kaba (2021), when asked, *what does the future look like without police and prisons?* replies, "we'll figure it out by working to get there" by "building a million different little experiments" (pp. 166-167). As David Graeber (2002) writes, one's "sense of human possibilities" can be "profoundly transformed" by participating in prefigurative social action: "It's one thing to say, 'another world is possible.' It's another to experience it, however momentarily" (p. 72). Cyrus Marcus Ware of Black Lives Matter-Toronto describes it as "creating from the ground up: building the kinds of structures, the kinds of ways of relating to each other, the kinds of ways of being and knowing that we want to have ... so the walls are coming down but there's already a garden that's been built in place" (Ware & Dias [Niigaanii Zhaawshko Giizhigokwe], 2020, p. 37). Prefigurative social movements demonstrate the creative potential of what Khasnabish and Haiven (2012) call "collective intelligence" and "radical imagination" in the social justice sphere, "something we *do*, and something we *do together*... as part of collaborative praxis" (p. 411).

Similarly, Wong's writing, amidst its affect of "ecological grief," imagines that "another world is possible." When asked in an interview, "do you still have faith in creative works to fight for climate justice?" Wong refers to her poem "epilogue: letter sent back in time from 2115": "That's a future I work towards"

(He, 2022, paras. 3-4). “epilogue” proposes a future world slowly growing from the damaged present: “here is wonder, despite armies of mistakes” (Wong, 2015a, p. 87). The poem suggests that changed principles manifest in changed social structures: “We live in the world as if it were our only home... spontaneous compassion sprouts in the cracks of collapsing systems... mutual-aid lifeboats emerge” (p. 87). The future vision of “epilogue” mirrors prefigurative principles in the present: “balance quietly returns to the commons,” “nobody is the boss of anybody but themselves,” and “indigenous resurgence slows climate instability and deflates apocalyptic fervor” (p. 87). As Wong’s work demonstrates, the “collective intelligence” of “collaborative praxis” must be engaged to bring that future into being. Indeed, the penultimate piece in *undercurrent*, the prose-poem “holders,” envisions women at the barricades building a world:

The women hold space like trees do, sweet fresh air between their tender branches. unseen roots draw deep down... the women stand in front of army trucks & policemen, uniforms & riot gear with only their soft skin & clear eyes to protect their beating hearts. the mothers, the sisters, the aunties, the grannies, the daughters crack open the ugly pavement of unjust laws & find old rivers underneath. (Wong, 2015a, p. 80)

Water flowing underfoot, released from the concrete, guides the women’s direct action and worldbuilding with its ancient and just laws.

Reckoning: “Learning With and Through Water”

It is from a reckoning with climate disaster, in alliance with Indigenous water protectors, that Wong’s trajectory into prefigurative politics in her creative work and public actions takes shape. She writes, “I find it increasingly urgent to respect and attend to the commons, by which I mean shared stewardship, management, and use” (Wong, 2012, p. 533), guided by Indigenous relational values. Wong cites her relationship with Dorothy Christian (Secwepemc/Syilx) as a catalyst for her commitment to living responsibly as a settler guest on Indigenous land. In 2004, she attended Christian’s talk at the “Walk with Women Warriors” workshop in Vancouver’s Chinatown. That speech (published in 2008) addresses lateral relationships within colonialism that need attention – relationship-building between Indigenous peoples and racialized settlers like the Chinese Canadian community: “How do we support each other? How do we learn each other’s protocols ... [and] stand together against social and political injustices?” (Christian, 2008, p. 19). Christian (2008) concludes with words that echo throughout Wong’s work: “Who is going to be standing next to me when an army tank is coming at me?” (p. 19). Mochizuki’s startling illustration of Rita Wong raising her hand in answer in *perpetual* (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, p. 82) affirms this moment as a step in Wong’s commitment to action and alliance with Indigenous peoples. In keeping with

prefigurative politics, Wong advocates for a commitment to solidarity as a critical step toward facing the climate emergency.

Wong articulates prefigurative politics through water, pointing out the imperative to "organize our cultures and social systems around water" to acknowledge our "hydrocommons" interdependency but also as a means to survive (Wong, 2015b, p. 211). In "Waters as potential paths to peace," she proposes that "the sociality and materiality of specific waters can teach us a lot about ourselves and our relations to the world in which we live," with "implications for the kinds of futures we enable" (pp. 209, 211). Wong (2015b) maintains that new relationships and solidarities arise through "water-related alliance building" (p. 215) and through watershed thinking that embraces our interconnectedness with nonhuman living beings and environments: "it is very late, but not too late, to find a focus for solidarity and peacemaking through the water-based ecology that connects, not just humans, but animals, plants, and life at the micro and macro scales" (p. 219).

I argue, then, that Wong's prefigurative politics is guided by her "humbly learning with and through water" (Christian & Wong, 2017, p. 10), and her commitment to collaboration includes collaboration and kinship with both human and nonhuman partners, including water itself. In their collaboratively edited *downstream: reimagining water*, Christian and Wong (2017) write, "when we tell a story of water, we are also telling stories of ourselves, our societies... We need and deserve better stories, ones that will restore our relations with one another and ourselves" (p. 7). Water as grounds for knowledge offers models for social organization, ethics, and values through how it moves, how it sustains, and what it requires. In her work, water is not simply a metaphor or ethical model but is also an agent: it is "unstoppable," "millions of small drops making contact everywhere," and an "anonymous agent of all that we, unwitting beneficiaries, do" (Wong, 2015a, p. 42). Astrida Neimanis (2017) claims water teaches that "knowledge is always a partial and collaborative project," and asks, "If I think *with* water rather than *about* it, and if I invite water to be a collaborator or an interlocutor in how I imagine and theorize the world, might I also treat water better?" (pp. 51-52).

Wong's relationship with water, then, like Neimanis', is focused on the *with*: the engagement with water as a collaborator and as coterminous with all human and nonhuman vitality and agency. Chandler and Neimanis (2013) maintain that water "models a mode of sociality that we, as human sovereign subjects, repeat – dissolving the sovereign self in a becoming-responsive to others, both human and more-than-human" (p. 62). They also assert that water is "gestational," which resonates productively with my paper's focus on prefiguration: "a gestational orientation turns toward bringing into existence that which is 'not yet'... providing the conditions for an unpredictable plurality to flourish" (p. 62). Wong's work addresses these roles for water: as collaborative and agential partner, as a model for reciprocal social relations, and as the catalyst for turning "not yet" into reworlding and future flourishing. As she writes in *undercurrent*, "another world is not only possible, she is

already here, carrying/on underneath our feet... /so we can aspire to a wiser, wider story” (Wong, 2015a, p. 26). Echoing the wisdom of abolition feminism and the alter-globalization movement – “another world is possible” – Wong envisions that other world in water itself, guiding the way.

The fact that Wong’s collaborative social justice ethic is guided explicitly by water, and that she views water as an agential collaborator, requires thoughtful theorization. Scholars such as Max Karpinski (2020) and Morgan Cohen (2021) have productively used new materialism and posthumanism, including work by Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad, to account for Wong’s challenge to the human/nonhuman divide. Milne (2018) examines Wong’s work through the lenses of posthumanism, affect theory, neoliberalism, and new materialism, arguing that these theoretical frames “offer vital models for challenging the colonialist, masculinist, and anthropocentric legacies of humanism and conceptualizing subjectivity, biopolitics, and political action” (p. 10). Ryan Fitzpatrick (2020) identifies how Wong and other “ecologically invested poets strive to move their words off the page” and “[work] at the limit of poetry’s ability to address the material world through expressive means” (pp. 182-183). Sonnet L’Abbé (2011) calls *sibyl unrest*’s challenge to the authorial “I” a broader posthumanist challenge to the centrality of the human next to nonhuman worlds (p. 176).

At the same time, as Marie Carrière (2023) notes, Wong honours Indigenous knowledge in her work. While new and feminist materialisms can be analogous to and sometimes coterminous with Indigenous place-based epistemologies, there are significant differences. Carrière (2023) proposes that philosophers Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi) and Chris Cuomo find “common ground” between “Indigenous environmental ethics” and “feminist care theory,” including material feminism, and their insights enable a reading of how Wong’s poetry “push[es] notions of ontology (being) and agency (the capacity to act upon) beyond their solely human or anthropocentric meaning” (p. 3). However, the “spiritual and community-based dimension” (p. 3) of this ethic needs attention: “care is... a form of located, material, and distinct knowledge, an embodied basis for environmental and decolonial justice work” (p. 4). Jen Clary-Lemon (2019), too, asks:

What might be gained by rhetorical new materialism if we were to resist the reproduction of colonizing worldviews in our excitement and haste to embrace nonhuman agents and what they tell us about being, knowing, and persuading in the world. How might the material turn be enriched by the overt acknowledgement of Indigenous materialism, rather than surreptitious borrowing? (para. 2).

Wong is guided by Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle’s (2017) insights: “We do not own the water. The water owns itself” (p. 37), writes Maracle, and from her Wong learns that “if [you are] on Coast Salish land, [you are] Coast Salish citizens and [have] a responsibility to this land and its peoples” (Goto et al., 2022, para. 12). In *Memory Serves: Oratories*, Maracle (2015) teaches:

The earth...[is] an intelligent being with its own journey, its own way of resolving illness within itself...It is up to humans to become familiar with the patterned behaviour of the earth and ally ourselves with these patterns to augment our life or suffer the consequences. (p. 146)

These patterns of the earth – like the flow and requirements of water – foster “cooperative and...collaborative” (p. 41) ways among Stó:lō and a belief that the human and nonhuman worlds “are not separate” (Maracle, 2015, p. 53). Ethics of relational and reciprocal kinships and care, as “located... distinct knowledge” (Carrière, 2023, p. 4) grounded in radical Indigenous political organizing and longstanding spiritual practice, guide the many dimensions of water-based collaboration and prefigurative justice that help us understand Wong’s work.

Rather than repeating and extending the helpful theorizations of Wong’s water ethics through new materialism, my paper focuses on Wong’s own account of how her responsibilities to water guide her collaborative practices and world-building. As Christian and Wong (2017) put it, their text *downstream* is about “build[ing] relationships between Indigenous and Euro-Westernized systems of knowledge” as a means to form a “culturally inclusive, participatory water ethic” (pp. 6, 18). Their collaborative editorial work draws from this water ethic and from coalitional solidarity, as do Wong’s creative collaborations with Larissa Lai (*sibyl unrest*), Fred Wah (*beholden*), Cindy Mochizuki (*perpetual*), and others. In the collaborative projects discussed in the following section, the writers envision a future world and create a microcosm of it in the present through intentional practices of nonhierarchical and respectful relationships in writing, especially centring Indigenous knowledge and stewardship.

Repairing: Thinking Together, Playing Together, Re-commoning

Prefigurative politics entails rethinking social relations in the present as a means to imagine an ethical and sustainable future. Lateral, collaborative organizing principles for both social movements *and* creative engagement are the foundations for the repair work that Rita Wong sets out to do. The long poem *sibyl unrest* weaves together Lai and Wong’s (2008) scathing critique of global neoliberalism, biochemical and capitalist intrusions into bodies and lands, and gendered violence. The poet-friends bring their own poetic vocabularies, but in the exchange, a new composite voice is shaped, a declaration of civil unrest that the sibyls diagnose and call out. Composed via email over four years, the poem was formed “in a renga spirit” (Lai & Wong, 2008, p. 127), referencing the Japanese genre of collaboratively written and formally structured poetry. In *sibyl unrest*, the face-to-face writing process of traditional renga becomes a geographically distant, though personal, electronic relationship. *sibyl unrest* explores the connection between challenging authorial subjectivity – through collaboration – and challenging the political

status quo as racialized subjects, framed as an anti-capitalist and queer intervention. Wong and Lai's public performance as "The Sibyls" alongside other racialized and Indigenous writers at the 2008 "Tracing the Lines" conference in honour of Roy Miki demonstrated the intended expansiveness of their coalitional project. The Sibyls (2012) theorize the connection between collaborative writing and coalition ethics through the fertile trope of mycorrhizal relations:

We begin with the human and find mycorrhizal continuity with [the land]. We begin with Asian and recognize relation to Indigeneity and Blackness as differently empowered sites of potential alliance... we nudge language into relations of becoming, in which the past might be imagined differently in order to produce the future differently. (pp. 87-88)

Water was their focus, both from an ecocritical perspective and as a symbol of flow and relation, linking the Middle Passage, Indigenous relationships with land and water, and diasporic migratory movement.

sibyl unrest exemplifies the politics, poetics, and cultural work of such coalitions. In their "Acknowledgements," Lai and Wong (2008) answer Fred Wah's question, "Where did the 'I' go?": "'We' gesture towards how the personal sparks this dialogue. 'Ours' is not so much an individualized 'i' but rather a range of 'i's' emerging and fading back as instances that unsettle the (capitalist) time and space we occupy" – a "hopeful reaching towards friendly coexistence of multiple tactics/perspectives" (p. 127). The poem itself confronts the ecological devastation of capitalism with a lesbian erotics of multiplicity and coalition. They are "goddesses [who] sign in triplicate/'the pleasures of being multiple'/hailed wonder of being several" (Lai & Wong, 2008, pp. 57-58). Multiplicity marks their social justice politics and their poetics: they engage poetic activism in *sibyl unrest* through using "i" to "resurrect 'oui'" (p. 54) – that is oui as in *yes*, but also oui/we as in *us*. As Sophie Mayer (2009) points out, they challenge the capitalist meaning of "corporate" with an alternative: "[in their poem] to be corporate is to be collaborative, collective, consensual, and corporeal" (para. 8).

Lai and Wong's (2008) formal poetic strategies in *sibyl unrest* also demonstrate the collaborative intentions and coterminous human-nonhuman interdependence that my paper identifies in Wong's work. The myriad puns evoke playfulness with multiple connotations. Yet, in the context of the work's treatment of permeable subjectivity, the punning also takes multiplicity beyond the linguistic. The poets seek a language to shape their poem's world-building, notably embedding indicators like "metonymy" (p. 62) and "contiguity" (p. 56) to show how figuration can echo social relations:

we attempt to swerve from
fatal to natal, seek mère, metonymy
hope for graceful anatomy,
a womb with a view, passage

for coming generations (Lai & Wong, 2008, p. 62)

The substitution or adjacency that characterizes metonymy invokes the interchangeability of persons on a frontline or within a leaderless movement or the adjacency of overlapping coalitions; contiguity recalls the tactic of distributed action. Experimental poetry like this reminds us of prefiguration as an experiment. The puns become incisive critiques of rapacious capitalism and offer the poets homophonic connection points to amplify their alliance. L’Abbé (2011) argues that Lai and Wong’s (2008) fragmentation of the subject “i” syntactically confers agency and subjectivity on nonhuman beings and objects in lines such as “nerves want a happy ending” (p. 12) and “ruptured cell cooperates” (p. 106). Though *sibyl unrest* precedes Wong’s more recent shift to “watershed thinking,” their puncturing of an authorial subject “I” to denote collaborative thinking prefigures Wong’s commitment to distributed agency across human and nonhuman spheres.

As an experimental process in collaboration, the poem begins with a renga-like handing of images, assonance, and homophones back and forth between the poets, “the stroke of midknife” (Lai & Wong, 2008, p. 7) becoming “fish wife mothers pearl” (p. 8) in the next stanza; “none left/butt the roaches/global swarming encroaches” (p. 9) giving way to “couched in no uncertain germs/warfare’s new upholstery/the empire’s new caves” (p. 10). If these initial prompts between the poets suggest bridges or gifts, they slowly become sustained images built across stanzas as the poem proceeds. This collaboration process is central to the ethics and politics that *sibyl unrest* calls for. They write, “we politic our firm hands certainty... find navigational instruments/we loved once... when the root was there... resuscitate/old earth knowledges or die trying” (Lai & Wong, 2008, pp. 63-64). Old earth knowledges include “sapidilla, durian, lotus leaf, rambutan, eggfruit, custard apple/swell[ing] from earth” and “fungal earth regenerating beneath asphalt” (pp. 126, 119). The poets ask, “what song could dispel fire and strafe, unholy waste?” and answer, “plant your feet on this earth and flex your sandy toes to the sky/stay alert to remain handy/night trippy & day tricky” (p. 115). The navigational instruments require embracing the interdependence of human and nonhuman entities and earth knowledges, formalized tactically through the collaborative work of the poem.

Near the end of *sibyl unrest*, a critical shift occurs around the thrice-repeated word “mycorrhizal.” Mycorrhizal root systems underlie trees – as symbiotic and mutualistic plant-fungal systems, they are a particularly apt way to describe the collaborative social organization, lateral networks, and mutual aid of prefigurative politics. In this poem, hope lies in the poets’ invocation to:

make the bridge as you walk
back & forth, scratch & score
the page for more
murrelets, mycorrhizal mats
hail all blue wails

to walk strangers home (Lai & Wong, 2008, p. 117)

The foraging Haida Gwaii seabird murrelet, the play on “blue whales,” and the symbiotic mycorrhizal roots emphasize the old earth knowledges that guide the future but also specifically mark the prefiguration of that future, the building of the bridge “as you walk,” through the sustenance of mutualistic relationships (Lai & Wong, 2008, p. 117; emphasis added). “Coalition floats” like “spores,” “under the radar and/over the rainbow,” connecting the solidarity of coalition with “mycorrhizal love across international airspace” (p. 120). And in the third instance, the poets imagine Phan Thi Kim Phúc: “the girl in the picture... napalm naked,” who is “not the girl in the picture she is/every fish the acid river coughs up every eater of fish every arsenic atom pulsing/ or poisoning every breath you take...every mushroom every murrelet every mycorrhizal mat every lightning strike/in the cameras of the world/every day” (Lai & Wong, 2008, p. 124). Here the murrelets and mycorrhizal mats are victims of capitalist poisoning of the means of life, and also indicate the navigational instruments required to build the bridge as we walk it: the web of fish and fish-eater and river and poison and breath and mushroom spore is known by old earth knowledges, and one way through is “what remains to be seen: redress” (p. 125).

Outside the poem, Wong and Lai affirm that their collaboration builds knowledge and sustains the self amid challenging political action. In an interview with Fazeela Jiwa (2014), Lai says, “Rita and I know things together that we might not know individually.” Wong adds in an email to me, “the challenge of responding to what we witness... is better borne together, than alone. dialogue, renga, are a way to keep speaking and working through the violence of history-in-the-making” (R. Wong, personal communication, June 10, 2014). She writes further, “friendship/sisterhood is important, as a way of living through the capitalist dystopia in which we find ourselves, because it poses ways of sharing, thinking-together, even playing-together, that cannot be bought and sold, that are non-hierarchical, that offer a process of recommoning perhaps” (R. Wong, personal communication, June 10, 2014). Their insights on the politics of collaboration resonate for my analysis – because they propose a lateral, rhizomatic, or mycorrhizal structure of relationship amongst racialized, settler, and Indigenous groups; because of their emphasis on the commons; and because of how they explore this in poetic form. *sibyl unrest* addresses the horrors of the colonial and capitalist present, the complicity and paralysis it engenders, and the importance of critique and action, including the collaborative modes Wong and Lai envision for building a bridge to the future. To counter the depletion of the commons, the poets commit to the collaborative process to create an ethics of community and coalition in the process and product of writing.

Contrasting the electronic genesis of *sibyl unrest*, Wong’s collaboration with Fred Wah in *beholden: a poem as long as the river* is embodied, haptic, and sensory. During their compositional process, Wah and Wong (2018a)

journeyed beside the Columbia River, “listen[ing] to the river to hear what resonations were available... with a sense of openness and just trying to pay attention” (pp. 139-140). *beholden* is a poetic intervention into the Columbia River Treaty negotiation, the destruction caused by dams, and incursion on Indigenous land and languages. Part of a multimedia installation called “River Relations: A Beholder’s Share of the Columbia River,” their poem is a 114-foot banner with poetic lines following above and below the image of the Columbia River’s mapped curves. The published version of the poem is a quarto-size book colour-printed in landscape orientation, each page illustrated with a section of the river map with the poetry following its path. Online, the “River Relations” site overcomes the interruption of pages by offering an interactive image of the poem flowing forward or backward with the reader’s cursor (<https://www.connect.ecuad.ca/~riverrelations/>). Wong handwrote her line of poetry in *beholden* because “I just had a feeling I wanted to stay with the hand, with the flow, with the body... to write as long as I could” and to “give back” to the river (Wah & Wong, 2018a, pp. 140-141). Wah recalls “the experience of trying to get close to the river... it is the body, touch, and sensation, that sense of the materiality of the river itself. Looking for language that represents that materiality...it was one of the most amazing compositional experiences I’ve ever had in my writing life” (Wah & Wong, 2018a, p. 141). Wong expresses hope that the poem will have a “future life” and be part of a “paradigm shift” to get through the “very dangerous or precarious time that we’re living through,” and she imagines its lesson is one of “reciprocity,” modelled in the collaboration between the two poets (Wah & Wong, 2018a, p. 142).

Wong and Wah’s poem/s flow/s through the 114 feet of the banner and 137 pages of *beholden*, embodying Wong’s invocation to learn – or write – through and with water, and in every frame the river itself – its mapped bends, narrowing, and branching – guides the poetic lines as the poets collaborate with the river. Wah’s poem begins, “Listen –” and the sounds of the water, trains, work yards, and silence inflect the poem, prompting the “buhdum, buhdum” of feet or heartbeats or waves (Wah & Wong, 2018b, pp. 1-2) and sounds of singing, breathing, “sloshin” (p. 14), “scat song” (pp. 59-60) as he tries to “hear what the River says” (p. 77). “The River’s voice is the sound our body makes when we’re sleepwalking through the abyss of our own presence in the world,” he writes (pp. 81-83). Phrases from Wah’s oeuvre weave into the curving line bracketed by the presence of the river; the river’s sounds and associations guide his revisiting of these poetic memories. The exigence of the poem – to “work with the river and its peoples through whatever skills and capacities we happen to carry,” to “look for the right language” to address “this historical moment” (Wah & Wong, 2018a, pp. 139-141) – appears as Wah’s line references the originating colonial moment of ecological harm and land theft: “the fork of tongue talking treaty” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, p. 64), the Doctrine of Discovery, and reconciliation, asking, “how we gonna dislodge the fishing weir of nation long enough to regain sincerity” (pp. 64-65). In response,

the map of the river changes colour abruptly at the Canada-U.S. border (p. 53), the settler border asserting itself even as the river continues uninterrupted. Wah affirms, “this flat water doesn’t need to listen to that thirst for nation” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, p. 68). He grounds himself: “this River is the way home the return to what we have left... this is the place where I come from” (pp. 133-134). Wah’s collaboration with the river emerges through sound, language, and memory, producing this “amazing compositional experience” (Wah & Wong, 2018a, p. 141).

Wong’s line begins, “sacred starts here” as “water fills eyes” and she lists the First Nations of the Columbia River neighbours, “first in time, first in right” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, pp. 1, 5), fish species, plant species. If Wah’s line is charged with a sense of the present sounding moment, echoing with memories of other poems, Wong’s reflects on the ancient and cyclical time of “thousands of thunderous water years” (pp. 3-4). At Kp’itl’els floodplain where the Kootenay River meets the Columbia River, Wong’s line of poetry crosses over Wah’s at Castlegar-Robson Bridge, citing, “Kp’itl’els calls for right relations to be learned with the steadiness of stone along shore, driftwood honed by the jostle of unceasing waves, generation after generation” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, pp. 50-51). Against that cyclical time, she juxtaposes “the incomprehensible speed & scale of logging, unforestry... burning us up faster than the glaciers could cool us down” (pp. 52-53). Wong listens for the river’s memory of sustainable life to find a blueprint for how we might live differently: “the land’s memories of nomads gathering medicines, children picking huckleberries, autonomous communities in balance with what a solar budget provides, life’s brilliance before the artificial stop, the stagnation, the invasion” (pp. 47-49). Wong invokes the river running through the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and through “sagebush, scree, bitterroot... deer, grouse, hawks” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, pp. 63-66). Wong’s contribution to *beholden* frequently uses this technique of catalogue or inventory, for example lovingly naming each fish species: “sticky lamprey, mysterious sturgeon, dogged chum, noble chinook” (p. 92); the litany invokes the life forms along the river as “medicine in the midst of disaster” (p. 89), reminding of the “wisdom” of “always remembering the water” (p. 90), and using the lateral representation of a list to amplify the non-hierarchy of that medicine. She asks, “how can the river bring us together? for without it, we will die” (pp. 72-73). The river shares knowledge of mutuality: “the trees need the river and the river needs the trees and we both need river and trees in ways that are buried in bone and sinew, uncanny returns” (pp. 24-25). This vision of “water justice enter[ing] our pumping hearts beat by elemental beat” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, p. 83) is a map to a sustainable future built on a present recognition of mutual interdependence as an ethic and praxis, “a big enough *we* to turn reservoirs back into a mighty river” (p. 91; emphasis added).

Though the river image separates their poetic lines and Wong’s handwriting adds a visual difference from Wah’s serif typeface, the poets are responsive to each other’s words and to landmarks they walk past together: both poets

inscribe the sounds of the train, the hydroelectric dams, each First Nation whose territory they walk, the historical sites, the impact of reaching the Pacific Ocean. At bridges, the lines of poetry cross over and change places, intersecting each other. At Mile 290, Wah’s poem calls out, “hello Rita nice to see you on the other shore” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, pp. 102-103) just before changing places with hers. Their friendship frames this collaboration with an ethic of care foundational to a prefigured future. In “Afterwords, a Dialogue,” Wah writes, “one of the great things for me about doing this project with you... was just being around one another and talking” (Wah & Wong, 2018a, pp. 140-141). Their collaborative effort and the reciprocity and relationship they model mirror the river’s example of balance, connection, and care.

Wong’s collaboration with Cindy Mochizuki in *perpetual* similarly links the text’s collaborative form with water’s lessons about mutuality as an invocation of prefigurative politics. The poetry draws on Wong’s previously published essays about water, now adapted as poetic extracts and images illuminated by Mochizuki’s drawings and graphic detailing. The scope is both global – noting that “turtle island (north america) is not separated from asia by the pacific ocean we are connected... by ocean” (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, p. 30) – and very local. Wong follows an ethical citational practice that identifies scholars, knowledge-keepers, and water-walkers who have influenced her thinking. Narrating a “Lost Stream” walk in Vancouver organized by Celia Brauer, she asks her readers, “you know Famous Foods on Kingsway near Knight? It had a creek flowing under it, according to Dan Fass” (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, p. 9). Calling on her readers to have local knowledge makes them neighbours, brings them closer. Bruce MacDonald shows evidence of a creek behind Naam restaurant; Terry Slack tells of a small waterfall once flowing behind the IGA (p. 9). Mochizuki’s drawings imagine a scuba diver and fish moving past cars and stores in this neighbourhood, now underwater, the streams reclaiming the paved-over space. *perpetual* shows the necessity of connection and community for beginning this healing, and in particular, following the lead of Indigenous peoples. Starting the section titled “ethical waters: reflections on the healing walk in the tar sands,” Mochizuki illustrates a lone and reflective image of Wong at her laptop, asking, “how do you respond to devastation? alone & small, you look & listen for others” (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, pp. 45-48). She joins a healing walk led by Indigenous Elders Nancy Scannie of Cold Lake, George Poitras of the Mikisew Cree, and Violet Cheechum Clarke, who tells of the “sustainable balance” (p. 55) lived before the oil industry devastated the area.

Mochizuki and Wong (2015) invoke bodies of water as mentors and knowledge-keepers of this sustainability, like the Stal’ow River, a “12 million year old elder” (p. 28) who is “in perpetual circulation” (p. 27). “The ocean gives us life,” writes Wong, and “our survival follows [water’s] fate” (pp. 34, 31). Mochizuki’s illustrations amplify the water cycle as a warning and promise. Spirals and circles appear as wave movements, as the flow of schools of fish, as the liquid in stirred pots and cups of tea. Mochizuki’s drawings

breach their panels and gutters, connecting images across ideas and connecting with Wong's words in conversation. Wong points out that "water has two kinds of molecular bonds holding its atoms together... stable covalent bonds (like those of marriage) and looser, ionic bonds (constantly moving, like random kindness to strangers)" (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, p. 16). Her parenthetical comments amplify the symbolic possibilities of both covalences – formed by two atoms sharing an electron to gain fuller stability – and ionic bonds, where electrons are exchanged, and a difference in charge holds ions together. As a map to the relational forms needed for change, the imagery and multivalent symbolism of water in *perpetual* show the need for connected thinking, remembering the mutual interdependence of humans and other living species, the strength of gifting and sharing, and the necessity of caring for both friends and strangers across difference. It's a model for values of social organization and care on which to build a sustainable future.

perpetual intervenes to help guide readers to a "paradigm shift" (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, p. 73), a recognition that we are in a "watershed moment" (p. 74) that can be actualized by "untapping watershed mind" (p. 67). "Change is inevitable," writes Wong; "the question is what kind of changes we make for future generations" (p. 58). To the question, "what can you do?" she replies,

educate yourself, educate others.

...

talk, write, organize

ready for the battle

get out there on the land, with respect

...

get ready for the next world (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, pp. 62-63)

This "watershed moment" will "require us to be conscious, to be mindful of our actions," to "stay connected to your own histories, cultures" (Mochizuki & Wong, 2015, pp. 78, 63). It's a call to action – engaged, direct action – in the form of graphic-art poetry, modelled through a non-hierarchical collaboration and humble acknowledgement of the reliance on and indebtedness to many others. These insights are achieved in *perpetual* by thinking through and with water, acknowledging a hydrocommons interdependency.

Reworlding: A Different Rule of Law

"Get[ting] ready for the next world," far from being millenarian thinking, relies upon radical hope conjoined with action that affirms a core strategy of prefiguration: to act as if that future is imminent and possible, and thereby begin following its values in the now. Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's (2022) collaboration *Rehearsals for Living* demonstrates an acute awareness of being poised at the necessary ending of a world – "no[t] Anthropocene, only a racial capitalocene" (Kelley, 2022, p.

268). Their goal and hope is “to help transform the source of this dread into a place from which we can, instead, plot, conspire, dream, and attend to life, *otherwise*” (Maynard & Simpson, 2022, p. 8), using lessons learned from radical Indigenous and Black political organizing. “Rehearsals for living” are prefigurative actions and ways of studying the plots and dreams that can bring about that life, *otherwise*. A critical feature of these rehearsals is a refusal to accept the current hierarchical ways of organizing human and nonhuman life:

The refusal to take things as they are as inevitable or a given: this *itself* an act of radical imagination, of conjure work. It is its own form of warfare, and of life-making, as well...It is insisting on the possibility of a new timeline, and suggests, too, that they may already be on the horizon. If we care to look. (Maynard & Simpson, 2022, p. 157).

The remainder of this paper explores Wong’s direct-action measures in 2018 as a form of reworlding, the assertion of a new timeline, and the radical imaginative act of living *otherwise*.

Rita Wong’s participation in collective action against B.C. Hydro’s Site C Dam in the Peace Valley and Trans Mountain Pipeline construction in British Columbia on August 24, 2018, bridged the vocations of art and action. Wong joined others at the Westridge Marine Terminal in Burnaby, B.C., to honour Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and to protest the man camps and the federal government’s purchase of the Trans Mountain Pipeline project. It was the end of five days of action organized by Protect the Inlet (“Poet, three seniors arrested,” 2018), a coalition of Tsleil-Waututh leaders and other Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies that launched their campaign in March of that year (Smith, 2018). On that day in August, they “sang, prayed, and sat in ceremony for about half an hour” (Wong, 2020, p. 258), defying a court-ordered injunction to not block access to the Kinder Morgan work site. The RCMP arrested Wong, Mairy Beam, Kathryn Cass, and Deb Wood (“Poet, three seniors arrested,” 2018). On April 15, 2019, she stood trial in the BC Supreme Court along with Barry Morris, Mel Lehan, Kyle Farquharson, and Will Offley, charged with criminal contempt for breaching the injunction, and was sentenced to 28 days in Alouette Correctional Centre for Women.

The “not guilty” plea of the four water protectors invoked a “defence of necessity” grounded in the claim that “the imminent disaster of climate change, and decades of government inaction, had left them no alternative but to engage in civil disobedience” (Wong & Richards, 2020, p. 26). Civil disobedience is the refusal to obey an unjust law. Wong identifies the injustice of the law and the sentence in her essay “Lessons from Prison”: “The court’s and the Crown’s failure to prevent climate crisis is made clear by contrasting my four-week prison sentence with the few pitiful fines paid for the Trans Mountain pipeline that has had so much larger an impact on the land than my small action” (Wong, 2020, p. 260). More than this, though, Wong argues that she and the other water protectors were, in fact, following another set of laws. Wong’s statement to the

court at her sentencing hearing deserves close attention for its modelling of prefigurative politics:

I respect the court's concern for the rule of law... There are more aspects of the rule of law that I would ask you to consider before sentencing me. Natural law and Indigenous law rely on mutual aid and cooperation, qualities that require maturity and a deep love for one's community, recognizing that we are all equal. It is a rule of law that works primarily from a place of love and respect, not from fear of authority and punishment... Such an understanding of rule of law... could strengthen our sense of democracy. It could make our commitment to reconciliation a sincere one. (Wong & Richards, 2020, p. 28)

In this sentencing statement, Wong invites the court to consider and apply a different rule of law that would generate a different set of relationships with the land and each other. She also insists that she *is* following rules of law not recognized by the courts: her responsibilities to her ancestors, to the salmon, to the ocean, and Coast Salish laws:

I do intend to ask the court to respect Coast Salish laws that uphold our responsibilities to care for the land and waters that make life, liberty, and peace possible for everyone. I sincerely ask the court to take our reciprocal relationship with the land and water into consideration because we are on Coast Salish lands, where everyone is a Coast Salish citizen. (Wong & Richards, 2020, p. 27)

Wong's invocation of Coast Salish law here is not just symbolic or aspirational – she asserts that Coast Salish law is preeminent, for the lands are unceded and Coast Salish and other Indigenous Nations' sovereignty is ongoing. Rather than take colonial interruption as a given, Wong follows the laws and values of a shared community that her actions in the world are directed to bring about – she reworlds by acting as if that new world has *already* arrived.

Wong's decision to engage in nonviolent direct action at Westridge Marine Terminal and many times before and since is integrated with her creative collaborations and compositional practice in intentional ways that a focus on prefigurative justice illuminates. To prefigure means to anticipate, but also to imagine and create. Collaborating creatively together, on the frontlines or on the page, instantiates what Christian and Wong (2017) call “cultivating courageous, democratic practices that foster solidarity and respectful relations through understanding how the creative commons as a whole is dynamically greater than all the pieces constituting it” (p. 15). The coherence of this alliance between the creative arts and revolutionary politics makes sense as a way to build a sustainable future starting now, for as we read in *downstream*:

Surprise and creativity are needed to shake us out of the status quo, out of the regime of profit, numbers, and corporate control... [and] the challenge for us is to reconnect those elements to ethics, to relationship, to long-term thinking, ecological literacy, to the careful commons, and to Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty. (Christian & Wong, 2017, pp. 17-18)

By thinking with and through water, and her community of human and nonhuman others, Wong helps imagine and craft that commons as a vitalizing force, a “big enough we” (Wah & Wong, 2018b, p. 91) to reckon with the present historical moment, repair its relations, and bring another world into being.

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