

On stretching yourself beyond your comfort zone



Poet-scholar Rita Wong on not ignoring the bigger picture, recognizing what might be care for one person is damage to another, and how having a creative practice is helpful for surviving the various systems we find ourselves embedded in.

May 10, 2022 -

As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 2720 words.

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I came across an interview where you say that you think of yourself as a person who writes poems on a good day.

Yeah. Well, I wear a lot of different hats. I teach at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. I'm also very active in the union there for the faculty, and I spend a lot of my time doing work that feels kind of like housework, like it needs to be done, but it doesn't necessarily nourish your spirit. So, I think on a good day... maybe just to backtrack a little: I went to this [retreat](#) years ago for burnt-out activists, and one of the things that they talked about was there are three activities that need to be coordinated for change to happen. One is reacting and protecting the gains that previous generations have made. So for example, union rights, and things like that, and that kind of work is necessary, like maintenance work.. And second there's the need to have a systemic analysis of what you're in, like how things can change, where to put pressure on places, what Donella Meadows calls the leverage points in a system. And there's also the change that you actually want to build and make, or be part of. And so, I think when I feel tapped into that creative part, that's sort of where you can actually work at what you want to be doing, if you weren't busily dealing with all these battles that shouldn't have to be fought, but do.

How do you find the time to write? Do you have to put in an effort, or do you believe the magic moment will just appear?

I think different people have different strategies. I was lucky to take a writing workshop with Dionne Brand years ago, and Dionne suggested trying a very rigorous practice, like every morning, write, wake up, write, don't talk to anybody, don't email anybody back, no other stuff until afternoon, right? The morning is your time. I don't have that. I tried, and I just could not maintain that. So, I think my own practice tends to be much more fluid, I guess, or irregular, is another way to put it. So there are times when I'm very immersed in it, and also times that I feel like I'm far away from it.

Yeah. And do you feel frustration when you're far away from it, or do you have other things?

No, I trust that things come around when they need to. I think when I was younger, I was more anxious and stressed about things like writer's block, but as I've gotten older and life is just filled with so many things to do, it's not been as much of a stress for me. And to be frank, I was just recently reading Amitav Ghosh's [The Great Derangement](#), and he's suggesting that future generations from now will be like, "What were they thinking? Why weren't they writing about and acting on the climate? Why didn't they throw everything they had at this, and what is this great disconnect?" I really believe we're in a very dangerous time. There's a moment in his book where he

opens up with the scene from *Star Wars* where Han Solo flies the Millennium Falcon to what he thinks is a dead asteroid, and realizes that it's alive and it's a creature that's about to eat him, and it's that "aha" moment where you're like, "Hey, this planet that you thought was inert is actually not inert, it's alive. It's moving at a different pace and scale than you little puny humans understand, but it's got its own life for us, and you better understand that fast." And so, I think that's actually great impetus for creative responses, but also a lot of processing that has to happen emotionally to work through that, like grief, anxiety, gratitude for what you experience in the moment, recognition that it may be very fleeting, a lot of those and more.

How do you navigate that, knowing what you can take on emotionally, and knowing when it's too much?

I don't know. I mean, I think there are times when we have to work at stretching ourselves beyond what we're comfortable with or used to, but there's a fine line between that and a breaking point maybe is a way to put it. I don't have an answer to that challenge, but I think what gives me guidance or grounding is looking at how previous generations have worked through things, this idea that we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, and the things that they faced. I think one has to be open to the vastness of what we face, but also careful to pick out what part of it they can work on, and I think it's better to face the larger picture, but also try to think about where you fit within that, and how you coordinate with others around it. So, what I often say to my students is if you're on the Titanic, it doesn't help to panic. You have to figure out how to make lifeboats together. And so, I kind of land there in terms of finding something that's the right size for me to try to work with, I guess, but not ignoring the bigger picture.

Yeah, that's very good advice. You describe poetry as unalienated labor, if one loves words and languages. I found that interesting.

Yeah. The definitions of work and play are a little odd, and there's a way of thinking about work, as just when you say unalienated labor, as a form of play. So not commodified, not extracted, not for transaction, but just having basically intrinsic value. I also teach environmental ethics, and I like to think a lot about intrinsic value and how different the world would be if we built it around that concept of intrinsic value, rather than quid pro quo transactions. There's something about writing or art that I hope remains a gift, right? It's given freely, no conditions, you trust that it will land where it needs to land, and it has its own life, in a sense. You're part of its journey, hopefully, in say, writing a poem, or making a project happen, but it brings together, I think, or as it moves in the world, it hopefully activates other things, or other forces, or energies, or people.

For myself, I know that reading the work of poets like Audre Lorde, Joy Harjo, Chrystos, and many others I could name, was really helpful to me at an early age when I was feeling insecure and kind of unsure of what kind of life I could imagine. So, they helped make imagination, keep it alive, keep it open, and helped me to kind of move toward a path that I could live as in a meaningful way. I think growing up in Calgary, Alberta, there's this sense that you have to be practical, you have to make a living, all of that, which can really shut down a person's spirit, and I think that's a very sad and a kind of unfortunate place to be. So, I don't know where the poetry goes, I just hope that it ends up where it needs to go.

Yeah, I think it does. It does have a life of its own, and people who feel called to it will find it. And how did water find you?

Well, my friend, Dorothy, who I co-edited the anthology, *Downstream*, with, we organized an event in 2012, and a few years prior to that, she and her friend Denise Nadeau organized an event called Protect our Sacred Waters. The vision of that event was to bring together people from four different directions, from all directions of the earth, for the sake of water, because it was felt that we're in a dangerous time, and that we need to work together to survive. So, when that happened, she invited people from the Chinese community, which I'm part of, to come, and they, unfortunately weren't able to make it, and I was at the time living in Florida, and so I wasn't able to attend either, but I heard the call, and I decided to take it up in a pretty serious way. So, I started developing courses around water, contemplating water, wrote some grants, and we managed to get that gathering happening. I've continued to basically just pay attention, like follow the water.

How does listening and learning manifest for you when you spend time with water, or when you do research?

Well, with Sto:lo also known as the Fraser River, I've written about it in essays and things, and the sacredness of water is something that is hard to tell people about. I feel like it just has to be experienced. Years ago, I made a journey following the river to get acquainted with it and to introduce myself to it as well. During that journey, up near the headwaters, close, in the region near the headwaters of the Fraser, I came across a warning years ago, a pipeline crossing warning. So, there's a pipeline, formerly owned by Kinder Morgan, now known as the Trans Mountain Pipeline, that is endangering this river. It's a pretty difficult situation here, because there's been so much resistance and opposition to the pipeline that Kinder Morgan actually bailed out of it, but then the problem was that the Canadian government then purchased it. So, when the Canadian government purchased it and continued to build it, despite all of the opposition, especially from Indigenous peoples who never consented to it in the first place, then it was pretty depressing, because this was a federal government that one day declared a climate emergency, and then the next, purchased a pipeline. And so, the cognitive dissonance, and the hypocrisy, and the contradictions of all of that are just a lot to work through. I wrote an essay about my time in jail. I spent 18 days in the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, because I was in ceremony and prayer against the pipeline, and here we are in 2022 and it's being delayed, and there's lots of problems, where floods in BC that actually stopped it for a number of weeks. I feel like Mother Nature or the earth is speaking loud and clear in the language of forest fires, floods, heat domes, and listening and learning isn't just a kind of abstract thing, I'm serious. It is really obvious to me that the colonial governments aren't listening. They have their narrative of what they have to do, and they're stuck in it.

That's the heartbreak of the moment I think that we're living through, that sense that the earth is a more powerful system, and we need to work with it, but there's so much habit or disconnection. I don't know if habit's the right word, but so much lack of momentum, or stuckness, or whatever, that it feels like we're wasting the time that we have to change our behaviours to align with the earth's limits or parameters.

What does care mean to you in your practice?

I think it means respecting people's agency, and being honest with them. Sorry. When you asked me that question, I'm kind of coming at it from a slightly negative institutional experience with the use of terms like "duty of care," which are sometimes weaponized against us. I work at a place where there has to be a certain amount of spontaneity, creativity, agency, back and forth, and sometimes with the corporatization of the public education system, we are being pressured, I would say to be more cautious, less spontaneous, under the guise of duty of care. And it can feel oppressive when people who are really committed to creative processes and the open-endedness of them, and the unconventionalism of them, are basically being middle managed by administrators who don't have that in them. Their intentions may be good, but they're disconnected from what we do. They may be harmful to us, and they don't even recognize how harmful they can be, under the guise of care or safety as the highest priority.

Kai Cheng Thom writes in *I Hope We Choose Love*, that "Safety is I believe an inherently classed, raced and gendered experience that frequently runs the risk of being used for regressive ends—ironically, for restricting the freedoms of the vulnerable, those who are never really safe. Often, we see the call for safety actually reinforce the power of oppressive institutions, like the police and the prison system, in our lives. When we choose safety over liberation, our movements fail." (22-23)

If I temporarily set aside my misgivings around how good language can get deployed in bad ways, I would say that we do need to move toward a society of actual care, whatever that looks like, like mutual aid. Arundhati Roy has written about not returning to normal, Dionne Brand has written an amazing essay about the response to the pandemic, and that sense of societal care. There's a group of people in Canada working on something called the care economy, an economy based around education, healthcare, healing the land, environmental wellness, all the things I can get behind, but it also involves reducing our consumption, right? We need a radical shift away from an extractive, resource intensive, tech-heavy economy with inequalities built in, to something that's more based in voluntary simplicity, sharing, mutual care, less is more kind of thing. So, I think that that would be a livable economy or a livable society. There's a building in Vancouver downtown that says "Unlimited growth increases the divide," and that's kind of what's been happening under capitalism for the last, god knows how

long. Having the ability to know when is enough, and to respect other people's differences, and to recognize that what might be care for one person, might be damage for another. Care is relational. One of the things I often say to my students is, "My work is to help you become more yourself," and I don't mean that in an egotistical way, but in a way where you're more able to serve other people. I feel like when we're in tune with our own gifts, that we're more able to share them. In short, care means listening more, slowing down, respecting and relating to the land, its life, and each other. It also involves a systemic redistribution of wealth and resources so that people's basic needs are met (starting with a baseline of healing the land and the climate regardless of whether it is profitable or not under current economic models).

Do you see ecology and art as being really intertwined?

I do see them as intertwined, but I also see that art by itself is not enough, that we need other responses as well, like through economic systems, political systems, social relationships, et cetera. And so, it's hard to diagram out what that relationship looks like, because I think it's alive and dynamic, it's changing, as opposed to a static object. I wouldn't necessarily call it art, but I would say that having a creative practice is helpful for navigating and hopefully surviving the various human systems that we find ourselves embedded in, that are dangerously at odds with ecological systems. By hope, I mean an unconditional commitment to moving towards a livable future for all life (not just humans), not necessarily an expectation that it will happen. In short, hope is not about knowing what an outcome will be; rather, it's about commitment to basic principles (care and respect for the land's health and one another), without guarantees as Stuart Hall would have put it.

Rita Wong Recommends:

5 recommendations of water protection efforts to support:

Tsleil Waututh Sacred Trust - <https://twnsacredtrust.ca>

Unist'ot'en Healing Centre - <http://unistoten.camp/>

Gidimt'en Checkpoint - <https://www.yintahaccess.com/>

RavenTrust solidarity with the Dane Zaa people of the Peace Valley - <https://raventrust.com/campaigns/sitec/>

Fairy Creek Blockade - <https://laststandforforests.com/>

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Vocation

poet

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