

## INTRODUCTION

*Everyone has the responsibility to respond to this crisis.*

– Rita Wong

## BACKGROUND

The seed of this project was planted at a protest. On September 7, 2019, Kathryn Mockler organized a reading with eight writers for an environmental group hosting a protest at Simcoe Park during the Toronto International Film Festival. The day-long event included music, readings, and art performances. As the sky threatened rain and most people in the area were enjoying the festival, the event itself was small – about fifteen or so were in attendance along with a few passersby.

But that didn't matter. Once each performer took the mic, the size of the audience and the greyness of the autumn day fell away. It was just the writers, their words, and their messages, which were captured on video. The readers included Margaret Christakos, Adam Giles, Catherine Graham, Hege Jakobsen Lepri, Khashayar Mohammadi, Terese Mason Pierre, Rasiqra Revulva, and Todd Westcott.

An online platform was needed to share this moving and powerful event, and so *Watch Your Head* was born at [watchyourhead.ca](http://watchyourhead.ca). The title comes from the language of caution signs that warn those in the vicinity of known and preventable dangers in the hopes of avoiding a catastrophic event that could lead to injury or death. This seemed like a fitting title for a project about the climate emergency.

Once the site went live, several writers and artists offered to lend their support to the project, forming an editorial collective that would publish creative works focused on climate justice and the climate crisis. Alana Wilcox from Coach House Books approached us about publishing a print anthology and several editors from the *Watch Your Head* collective joined the print anthology editorial team: Madhur Anand, Stephen Collis, Jennifer Dorner, Catherine Graham, Elena

Johnson, Canisia Lubrin, Kim Mannix, Kathryn Mockler, June Pak, Sina Queyras, Shazia Hafiz Ramji, Rasiqra Revulva, Yusuf Saadi, Sanchari Sur, and Jacqueline Valencia.

At the heart of the *Watch Your Head* project in all of its manifestations – website, print anthology, readings, events – is a desire not only to draw attention to the present and future implications of the climate crisis, but also to inspire people to get involved in climate justice action and solidarity initiatives.

## CLIMATE JUSTICE

Climate justice acknowledges the fact that the radical ecological and biospheric transformation currently unfolding on our planet is predicated upon social inequalities, and embeds future inequalities. In other words, the extractive industrial practices driving global warming and all its associated depletions are an extension of a historical colonization built upon the theft of the lands and bodies of Indigenous and Black peoples, which continues today by displacing largely Indigenous peoples from their lands and will, as the climate warms, disproportionately impact racialized communities, so-called developing nations in the Global South, and other marginalized people. A climate-justice approach insists that questions of colonization and decolonization, racism, anti-Blackness, and other forms of forcibly maintained social inequalities, exclusions, and persecutions cannot be separated from the question of the climate and the planet's eroding natural environment. It is not insignificant that we write these words in the midst of a global pandemic, which has most severely impacted racialized communities, low-income communities, migrant workers, long-term-care residents, and other vulnerable people. It is not insignificant that at this moment some of the largest and most intense anti-Black-racism protests in decades, and concomitant police violence, are happening. Climate justice, and much of the work in this anthology, acknowledges these complexities, contradictions, and convergence points.

In part, this leads to a questioning of the Anthropocene – a term you will not frequently encounter in this anthology – as a lens for understanding the present. The Anthropocene proposes a universal: human activity did this; we all did this. As Kathryn Yusoff writes in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, “To be included in the “we” of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations.”<sup>1</sup> *Watch Your Head* strives to avoid such silencing universalism, offering instead a diverse and wide-ranging response to the experience of the current crisis.

Poet Rita Wong’s public statement upon her sentencing (to four weeks in jail) for defying a court injunction and blockading the entrance to the Trans Mountain Pipeline’s Westridge Marine Terminal can serve as a paradigm for climate justice, directing us to new frames of allyship within our fraught condition. It is also a powerful inspiration to hear a writer speak so directly of the necessity of action: ‘I did this because we’re in a climate emergency.’<sup>2</sup> Her declaration of responsibilities – to ancestors, to the salmon, to the trees, the ocean, and to the life-giving waters all around us – is the basis of her redefinition of justice. Justice, Wong argues, from the unceded territories upon which she stands and lives, must at the very least acknowledge the equal validity of the rule of natural law and Coast Salish Indigenous law, alongside the sentencing court’s colonial rule of law. Wong’s climate justice is thus predicated upon a ‘reciprocal relationship with the land and water,’ and ‘is a rule of law that works primarily from a place of love and respect, not from fear of authority and punishment’:

Our ceremony that morning was an act of spiritual commitment, of prayer, of artistic expression, of freedom of expression, an act of desperation in the face of climate crisis, an act of

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1. Kathryn Yusoff. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. University of Minnesota Press. 2018.

2. Rita Wong. ‘Rita Wong’s Public Sentencing Statement.’ Talonbooks. 18 August 2019. <https://talonbooks.com/news/rita-wong-s-public-sentencing-statement>.

allegiance with the earth's natural laws, and a heartfelt attempt to prevent mass extinction of the human race.<sup>3</sup>

## SCIENCE, SOCIETY, AND LANGUAGE

The scientific basis of climate change dates back to 1896, when Svante Arrhenius proposed a connection between fossil-fuel combustion and increases in global temperature. Perhaps better known are Charles David Keeling's observations taken at Mauna Loa Observatory in the late 1950s, which gave rise to the Keeling Curve.<sup>4</sup> The impacts of climate change on the earth and its inhabitants are also very well known. Numerous reports have been issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the most recent of which calls for 'rapid, unprecedented, and far-reaching' changes to all aspects of society.<sup>5</sup>

Our predictions of climate change come from global circulation models, which conceptualize the complex numerical biogeophysical underpinnings of climate, but these modes of prediction can only go so far in terms of effecting societal change. It is important to refine these models, particularly in examining how global changes can have local impacts that are easier for humanity to act upon, but, even then, human behaviour unfolds at different levels and in different dimensions from the computational logic of such models. The science of climate change has been communicated to governments and society time and time again, through all sorts of media, but the messages are not being acted upon. Predicting dire future consequences is not working, which places science at a strange standstill. This is not because science is uncertain or inadequate, but change is impeded by the power and privilege of the sectors of

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3. Ibid.

4. Charles D. Keeling (1960). 'The concentration and isotopic abundances of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.' *Tellus*, 12 (2): 200–203. doi:10.3402/tellusa.v12i2.9366.

5. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 'Global Warming of 1.5°C.' United Nations. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>. Accessed 11 June 2020.