Rita Wong's *monkeypuzzle* and the Poetics of Social Justice

Christine Kim

Rita Wong's first collection of poetry, *monkeypuzzle* (1998), is dedicated to "peace, love and justice," a gesture that foregrounds the issues of international justice and human and workers' rights that permeate the poems in various ways (n.pag.). In keeping with this dedication, the poems explore questions of gender, sexuality, race, labour, and globalization in relation to public culture. *monkeypuzzle* addresses the complicated position its Chinese-Canadian female speaker occupies within the social and historical systems that shape contemporary Canadian culture. The poems move between local, national, and global spaces, drawing attention to the ways in which cultural, economic, and geographic positionings disrupt easy identifications with various communities. This paper examines the formal innovations of Wong's collection in relation to and within the context of its broader discussion of the politics of social justice. *monkeypuzzle*, I argue, can productively be read through a framework of postcolonial theory given the poems' interest in decolonizing representation and their demands for, to borrow a term from Diana Brydon, "a politics of accountability" (51). As both a site of aesthetic experimentation and ideological struggle, *monkeypuzzle* challenges the ways in which cultural representations of ethnicity and labour are mobilized by national and international spaces. In this paper, I argue that Wong uses poetic form to draw attention to the overlaps between political, economic, and aesthetic modes of representation — a manoeuvre that is most visible in her use of the metaphor of small change, a trope of commercial, domestic, and global labour exchange — and to reimagine the possibilities for community at local and global levels. Considering the formal structures as well as the subject matter of Wong's text will allow me to tease out the ways in which the poet resists the exploitative logic of capitalism through recourse to a postcolonial language of poetics.

Ethnic Subjects, National Spaces

Broadly speaking, Wong's collection of poems begins by examining questions of politics and poetics within Canada and then moves outwards to consider how these issues operate in other countries. *monkey-puzzle* is divided into four sections, the first of which is entitled *Memory Palate*, a subtitle that foregrounds the reworking of memory into a larger aestheticized vision. The first poem in the collection, "Sunset Grocery," explores the speaker's memories of working as a child in the family grocery store and living in the back of the shop. Instead of nostalgically depicting the past, the speaker frames it as a challenging site, one that led to the development of a critical consciousness fully attuned to the mechanisms of race, gender, and class. While the shop is physically a small space, it is described as one invaded by various products — soda pop, cigarettes, and candy bars — that speak to the long tentacles of multinational corporations. The grocery store is also filled with the hostile comments of "customers making snotty fake chinese accents" and the presence of "men flipping through porn" (11). These invasions by customers cannot easily be confined to the storefront since it is only "a skinny hallway [that] connects three bedrooms in the back" (12). In many ways, the world of commerce shapes the conditions of possibility for the home. While these are distinct social and cultural spaces, made evident, for instance, by the sharp contrast between the processed empty calories sold in the store and the steaming home-cooked food prepared in the family kitchen, they are economically intertwined. Moreover, the storefront remains a constant presence that regulates the lives of those who live "an existence eked out from penny nickel dime tedium" (13). The home depends on the transactions that occur in the store, and the patronage of customers who often terrify the speaker. The discomforting psychic effects of the looming presence of capital are visible in family members who speak freely only while asleep, thus making the night "noisy with all the things never said in the day" (12). This home that cannot guarantee absolute freedom or safety gestures towards the precarious existence of the ethnic subject within national spaces. The dissonance between the promise of democratic rights within the nation and the realities experienced by Canada's 'multicultural citizens' in this poem suggests that the division between the public and private sphere is illusory, or at the very least, a privilege denied to this family.

By drawing attention to the economic injustices endured by ethnic subjects, *monkeypuzzle* outlines the ways in which issues of class are central to those of culture. The speaker in these poems longs for equality, but acknowledges the difficulty, if not impossibility, of ever realizing this desire. The state subordination of the interests of an ethnic working class suggests that economic status largely determines how a population enters into the larger political order and how governing bodies handle the interests of minoritarian groups. The implicit disadvantage of working-class subjects within the public sphere is a problem that Michael Bibby traces back at least as far as Kantian notions of public exchanges. He argues that membership within the public sphere "was predicated not only on economic class but also on education, training, and fluency in accepted modes of articulation" (149). In other words, democracy was never truly envisioned as including all people in precisely the same way. Furthermore, Wong's poems suggest that the Canadian state is marked by neither the disadvantaged labour of the speaker's family nor the ethnic subjects who reside within the country, but by the exploited labour of global workers that infiltrates localized spaces in the form of cheap commodities.

"Sunset Grocery" foregrounds concerns that recur throughout *monkeypuzzle*, such as the connection between past and present, the difficulties of effecting change, and the ways in which local social relations are always shaped by global and capitalist forces. These issues are introduced by the first few lines of this poem that describe the ease with which the eight-year-old speaker is able to give change for a customer's purchase: "59¢ from $1.00 gets you back one penny, one nickel, one / dime, one quarter, could do this backwards in my sleep, & probably / have" (11). This transaction introduces a metaphor that recurs throughout the poems, namely the task of making various kinds of change. It draws our attention to the symbolic and material remainder that is left over after the exchange is completed. While the speaker skilfully trades small commodities for dollars, she is less sure how to enact other, more pressing kinds of changes to the work of cultural representation and the regulation of labour. In the next stanza, the speaker explains how she had learned

> the word 'inscrutable' & practice being so
> behind the cash register, however, i soon realize that i
> am read as inscrutable by many customers with absolutely
> no effort on my part, so i don't bother trying any more. (11)

Here, she tries to reshape how she is perceived by customers, but eventually abandons the task as futile. However, it is not just the implicit racism of customers that cannot be altered. The speaker also realizes that while she is able to eventually leave the grocery store and her parents' home, these working and living conditions remain in place for those left behind. The speaker mulls over the situation, noting that "ten years of this means you can one day leave when / someone takes your place" and then asks, "what changes?" (12). That her departure is an act of substitution rather than change is further emphasized when the speaker returns years later. The home of her childhood remains burdened, and she observes how the

> long echoing
> childhood hallway seems dark, crowded, needing new carpet,
> clean linoleum, anything to open it up, clear it of
> so many night words still unheard. (14)

A sense of emptiness is conveyed visually and acoustically through the vowel pattern of "long echoing," a short line that contrasts sharply with the cramped next line of the stanza in which alliterated words are tightly packed and piled up through commas. The linking together of "childhood," "carpet," and "clean linoleum" emphasizes a need for new physical and emotional foundations. These lines suggest that while the speaker's critical consciousness has changed, restrictive structures remain lodged firmly in place and continue to constrain those residing within them.

The speaker of *monkeypuzzle* occupies an ambivalent position within the Canadian state, at once invested in a democratic model of rights and its promise to deliver ideals of justice, fairness, and equality, and also critical of such ideals and the strategies typically used to attain them. As Dipesh Chakraborty notes in his discussion of the production of Indian and European histories,

> What effectively is played down, however, in histories that either implicitly or explicitly celebrate the advent of the modern state and the idea of citizenship is the repression and violence that are as instrumental in the victory of the modern as is the persuasive power of its rhetorical strategies. (21)

Chakraborty's insight into the violence inflicted by discourses of citizenship provides the basis for rethinking the relation between cit-

izenship rights and abstract ideals such as justice. Although the poems render visible a clear need for globally consistent human rights, such a model remains largely unenforceable since individual rights are linked to national citizenship, a structure that works to separate political action from ethical responsibility in the international sphere. As several poems make clear, international disparities in the enforcement of human rights translate into upholding of the privileges of citizens of the West and the ongoing exploitation of those in other parts of the world. To borrow Himani Bannerji's words, "what we have come to call globalization is both an economic and a cultural imperialism" (3). But the poems also make visible the exploitation of individuals and groups within Western nations, thereby emphasizing the inequitable distribution of rights even within North America.

The speaker of *monkeypuzzle* repeatedly queries how she is to operate within these various systems when she is confronted by multiple structural limitations. In "reading my dinner," a poem that explores "the violence of everyday transactions" through the politics of food production and consumption, the speaker notes how it is

> difficult to nourish justice
> on the supermarket shelves
> every choice
> a link in the fault chain. (49)

In this poem, justice is personified as a living but emaciated entity. The use of this device draws attention to the difficulty of feeding both the ideals and citizens of the West without exploiting other regions of the world, a moral quandary that is emphasized by the poem's ironic movement between "fault" and "food chain." The poem suggests that it is impossible to act ethically when Western consumption is regulated by a global economy that sacrifices non-Western rights and lives for the bottom line. This paradox is also acknowledged in another poem, "chinese & not chinese," which inserts a quotation by Jeff Derksen into a footnote: "The structure I hate also hates me, but it makes me, and that's where the problem starts" (69). This contradictory relation to the ethical imperatives and political structures of citizenship draws our attention to a widespread leftist crisis, one that has arisen because, as Wendy Brown observes, "while both sovereignty and right have suffered severe erosions of their naturalistic epistemological and ontological

bases in modernity, we have not replaced them as sources of political agency and sites of justice claims" (3). Wong's poems are conscious of this problem and grapple with the question of how individuals and groups are to move politically and poetically without illusions of progress, unifying leftist goals, or familiar narratives of modernity to guide them. When faced with such disheartening circumstances, the speaker of *monkeypuzzle* struggles tenaciously to find possible ways of acting in the world and moving beyond the stasis that threatens to engulf a beleaguered left.

monkeypuzzle urges us towards a narrative capable of reconceptualizing the limits and contents of a universal language of citizenship and justice. For Wong, poetry becomes a vehicle through which she is able to enter into this leftist political debate and work through its various problems. It is because the speaker of ":meeting implies purpose" believes "it is possible to decolonize / to recognize the aperture within opening" that she is able to "carry the day forward once more" (104). The internal linking of "possible" and "decolonize" with the vowel "o" suggests that the potential for future social and political change might lie within language. While this clinging to a discourse of universalism may be the result of a melancholic attachment to modernist narratives of emancipation and democracy, the poems do not lapse into a nostalgic mourning of the past. *monkeypuzzle* focuses on how such lofty promises can be realized and how we might begin to speak globally without being hampered by the flaws of liberal politics. Instead of simply longing for what once was, or what once was imagined as having been, the poems harness this desire and use it to analyze present and future prospects. The poetic language and form of *monkeypuzzle* marks the beginning of this project of imagining an alternative global social order and interrogating the politics of our current situation. Wong's use of the poetic form to analyze the workings of globalization promotes new ways of perceiving relations both inside and outside the nation. Unlike a language of corporate accountability that measures the world in terms of economic value and utility, poetry offers ways of rearticulating interrelations between people and places.

Working in the family business constructs the speaker simultaneously as both racialized and working class, a doubled positioning within identities that contradict as often as they uphold each other. The poems speak to a marxist politics at the same time that they explore a politics

of race, and often search for ways to articulate these social struggles collectively. It is precisely this kind of intersection of race and class that Rey Chow explores in her recent theoretical work, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as she interrogates the discursive construction of the ethnic subject in America. While Chow's argument focuses on the positioning of ethnicity in relation to an American identity, her theoretical framework can be used to demonstrate how a similar process is at work in the production of a Canadian national identity. Building upon Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics, Chow demonstrates how certain subjects, in this case, racialized ones, are discursively located outside the nation even as they are physically contained within its borders. The displacement of symbolic and material violence onto a foreign space reconfigures and maintains white privilege in the contemporary moment. The foreignness of ethnicity is visible in the logic that underlies American identity, which constructs itself on the basis of "abstract, idealist principles that are supposedly inclusionist and universal" (Chow 29). The hyphenated American is the "coupling of two separate identities, one culturally particular, the other presumably ideologically universal" (Chow 30). In other words, the ethnic American is a different and subordinate kind of American. This hierarchy of national citizens is key to understanding the link between ethnicity and labour, a phenomenon rendered visible by the large numbers of ethnic bodies that constitute a working-class population. The presence of a hardworking but underpaid body of workers allows capitalism to maintain its fantasy of equality as well as its reality of inequality. Thus, while the ethnic is located outside the parameters of the national subject proper, it is still shaped by the economic and ideological workings of North American capitalism.

Contextualizing Wong's poems within this order, which locates ethnicized labour simultaneously outside of the discursive parameters of the nation and firmly within the capitalist system of discipline and rewards, sheds light on the complicated workings of globally connected symbolic and material economies. *monkeypuzzle* shows how aspects of the everyday — cornerstores, blue jeans, and fruit — are artifacts that testify to the ongoing machinations of colonization, but ones the speaker is positioned against in shifting and contradictory ways. For instance, in the poem "denim blues," the speaker begins by describing the excessive quantity of denim jeans she has accumulated over the years. The

poem shifts its attention from documenting the consumption practices of the speaker through a description of the contents of her closet to the production of these trousers:

> nothing comes between me &
> the labour of the garment workers
> their fifty cents a day sweat
> hugs me tight every morning. (52)

The substitution of 'exploited labour' for 'Calvin Kleins' transforms advertising copy into social insight and juxtaposes first-world practices of consumption against third-world conditions of labour. The discursive distance between the speaker and the garment workers, however, is undercut by the next stanza of the poem, which describes her

> auntie's fingers nimble
> with the demands of piecework
> how she churns dozens of jeans by dim lamplight
> one more casualty for casual wear. (52)

The hurried pace of piecework labour is replicated by the poem's short lines and frequent use of d's and short i's. The choppy rhythm of these lines evokes a sense of the aunt's dogged but quietly desperate efforts to satisfy capitalism's need for rapid turnover even as she works in dismal conditions. The aunt's labour reterritorializes the division between developed and developing worlds as it resituates these spaces of production and consumption within a more complicated and closely linked global market. The speaker now has an ambivalent relation to her jeans, given the various kinds of identifications the work of her aunt — physical and poetic — has made possible. The poem's punning on "casualty" and "casual wear" suggests that the spaces of consumption and production are closely linked, but obviously radically different for their inhabitants. That the reader is never clear as to whether the aunt resides within the first or third world also suggests that unequal living conditions exist in both places for workers unprotected by labour laws. In this poem, elements of the everyday are denaturalized in a politicized light as connections between various local spaces are made visible.

Diasporic Disconnections

monkeypuzzle raises questions about how ethnic subjects are articulated

and about the kinds of links between individuals and larger social bodies that might be forged. The speaker initially presumes a connection between herself and those in Asia because of a shared ethnicity, but quickly learns the limits of this fantasy. Once outside Canada, it becomes clear that discourses of common ethnicity are inadequate and artificial constructions. Travelling to various parts of Asia encourages the speaker to rethink how class and culture might be yoked together in a global context and to consider just what work the language of ethnicity performs in the Canadian context. Indeed, these insights uphold Bannerji's claim that official policies of multiculturalism "functio[n] as an epistemology of occlusion which displaces the actual living subjects, their histories, cultures and social relations, with ideological constructs of ethnicity" (11). This reading of geopolitics is conveyed formally by *monkeypuzzle*'s consistent refusal to capitalize the beginnings of sentences and proper nouns, a technique that challenges the rules and hierarchies of linguistic and cultural grammars. The link between ethnicity and geography is complicated in a poem such as "chinese & not chinese" which describes the push and pull of the lure of diasporic homecomings. In China, the speaker simultaneously feels at home in a crowd of people "whose skin & hair" mirror her own, and out of place because of "the currency of foreign birth" (69). The fiction of a shared ethnicity that easily transcends the limitations of geography is shattered by locals who repeatedly query the citizenship of the speaker and her travelling companion. The speaker describes attempts "to pass, to quietly sneak by as possibly chinese from / some other part of china, modernized shenzhen or guangzhou — just / one generation removed from truth" (71). They cannot avoid the fact that "here in this little wind-dried town, we are clearly foreigners with / big backpacks," and this dispels assumptions about diasporic identity that have been ingrained into her (71). Instead of claiming ethnic identity as a kind of cultural passport, the poems encourage locating markers of ethnicity within particular social and historical systems of power. *monkeypuzzle* critiques the ideological work of multicultural notions of ethnicity that simplify individual and collective identities and isolate them from the larger economic and political orders to which they belong. Constructions of ethnic identity are framed as being specific to particular sites and shaped by social relations.

As *monkeypuzzle* confronts the fantasies of diasporic homecomings,

it also encourages considerations of the social and economic systems that connect individuals in disparate places. The poem "denim blues" thinks through the global exploitation of workers and the denial of human rights, an issue Wong has also explored in her critical work. Her essay, "Partial Responses to the Global Movement of People," discusses the plight of illegal immigrants who sustain North American lifestyles via their cheap labour, but are denied entry into the country. National borders are used to filter out bodies while enabling the global exchange of goods. In the poems, processes of exchange and identification are further complicated by the cultural representations of Asians that circulate within the nation. Later poems revisit the topics of migrants, travel, and circulation as the speaker travels to various parts of Asia. As a Canadian visitor, she is able to move across the same borders that refuse to accommodate exploited workers. Global systems of capitalism allow "Western capital [to] rov[e] in a world without borders, with trade agreements such as GATT and NAFTA ensuring their legal predations, while labour from third world countries is both locked in their national spaces and locked out from Western countries, marked by a discourse of illegality and alienness" (Bannerji 4). And in this particular exclusionary context, the speaker's statement in the poem "chinese & not chinese," that she is merely "one generation removed" makes these labour regulations seem especially arbitrary and the speaker even more uncomfortable with her Western privilege (Wong 71). The poems use the formal technique of irony, most obviously in the title "chinese & not chinese," which asserts and undercuts a claim to ethnicity to underline the absurdity of contemporary global political relations and policies.

The metaphor of small change that recurs throughout Wong's poems accumulates yet another layer of meaning here as it speaks to the subaltern who is typically left over from global transactions. The subaltern *monkeypuzzle* documents is denied access to forms of political representation usually taken for granted by dominant groups. The poem "i was dreaming my geography but it's time to wake up" describes the exploitative practices of tourists who first haggle with local merchants for "goods they can easily afford" and then snap endless "photographs of hungry / children" (68). Goods and visual images of impoverished Chinese individuals are severed from their difficult moments of acquisition and then eagerly transported home as souvenirs of an exotic vaca-

tion. The poetic inclusion of these groups compels the reader to reassess the political and ethical implications of modes of global exchange that rely on the exclusionary mechanisms of national citizenship. The subaltern must thus be read as a kind of "remainder, necessarily betrayed as it enters the world of civil society. And it leaves something behind that cannot be accounted for, remains unknown, and can only be imagined, in the strife created by worlding" (Khanna 19). That the subaltern exceeds literary and political representation asks us to imagine new avenues to reach justice and alternate logics to regulate global relations. Instead of seeking ways to insert the subaltern into dominant positions within the economic and political order, *monkeypuzzle* implies that we must rewrite the structures that regulate the movement of labouring bodies between international spaces. The task then is not to make the marginal dominant, but to reterritorialize the dominant and transform it into what Rinaldo Walcott has called "a new universality" (n.pag.). Such a move involves rethinking how the human is defined and the ways in which individuals and groups are allowed to inhabit national spaces. Building on Derrida's work, Walcott argues that the current law of hospitality that governs Canadian social and political practices must be overturned and a pure form of hospitality adopted instead, one that refuses to distinguish residents as host or guest, Canadian or immigrant, citizen or refugee. He writes that such a revision "moves beyond the invitation as safety, that is the host retains the power of the invitation" and that a new "understanding of hospitality would open up the host to the unknown and uncertain consequences" given the extension of invitations without restrictions (n.pag.). Walcott's proposition is risky but potentially rewarding as "to offer an unconditional welcome or unconditional love is to place oneself in a place of paradox (thus refusing the laws of hospitality while extending them unconditionally) and simultaneously opening up the terrain of ethical relationality" (n.pag.). Wong's poetry advocates a similar rethinking of the relations that bind social and political spaces together. *monkeypuzzle* articulates precisely this kind of dissatisfaction with the global order when it chastises Western nations for their inability to recognize and rectify social and economic inequalities, most overtly in the third section of the text which opens with an epigraph taken from Laiwan: "this work is not about the third world. nor is it about colonialism. / it is about us in the first world & where & how we fail" (66). Prefacing "transidual" with

these words makes it clear that the poet believes the West must begin to address its multiple shortcomings.

The privileges of Western citizenship and relative wealth trouble the fantasy of simple diasporic identification and position the speaker as an uneasy tourist. "i was dreaming my geography but it's time to wake up" reminds us that while Western dollars bestow certain privileges and forms of symbolic and material power within this new cultural landscape, they cannot easily be separated from memories of the labour that painfully earned them. The poem suggests that the currency of monetary exchange connects practices of exploited labour in seemingly dissimilar contexts. The speaker tells us that these social spaces are, in fact,

> two faces of the same heavy coin.
> the coin sits cool on my palm.
> a merchant's daughter raised on a
> practical diet counting change day in
> day out, i can smell how money snakes
> along the city road, only occasionally
> meandering to leak a few coins into the
> surrounding countryside. (67)

While the coins provide the illusion of freedom in this Chinese landscape, the speaker realizes that she continues to circulate within restricted economies that allow her to experience a paradoxical sense of profound connection and dislocation.

The struggle to understand the connections between geographic, cultural, and economic space is reflected in the overall form of the poems. These individual lyrics act as a collection of fragments that, as M.L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall note in their discussion of the lyric sequence in general, "cohere as a system of tensions, modulations, and reciprocal tonal forces" (26). As the title of the collection, *monkeypuzzle*, suggests, the poems can be read as a kind of puzzle. Unlike conventional puzzles, however, this one cannot be assembled by fitting pieces together to form an already familiar image. The overarching ideals of international justice crumble when the speaker tries to read the political conditions of individual nations together. The fractious Tibetan-Chinese relations, for instance, pose a particular kind of problem:

> chinese & not chinese, i hate what my beloved china is doing to tibet.
> how a million tibetans have died under this occupation over the
> decades, how their homeless roam, settling in pockets around the

> world, to wait, to pray, to remember. how millions of chinese are denied truth, hearing of economic progress but nothing of genocide. (72)

The speaker struggles to understand how China can be both the object of cultural and economic imperialism by the West and responsible for violations committed against the citizens of Tibet. In other words, she is puzzled by the picture these pieces threaten to form when perceived together. The problem of contradictory relations to a single social space is further complicated by the speaker's reflections on Canada. Instead of listing its violations of the citizens of other nations, the speaker rattles off a list of infractions committed by the state against its own inhabitants. I quote this passage at length because it suggests that perhaps what currently links internal and external spaces together is a sense of shared injustice rather than collective possibility:

> november is pepper spray in students' faces, remembering first nations soldiers who fought in world war II only to be denied veteran rights in canada, the rain that falls & falls, november is the cruelest month as dictators dine in vancouver on taxpayer dollars, as the media erases political prisoners like leonard peltier & mumia abu jamal one more year as i shiver on the picket line witnessing the decay of workers' rights & learn the value of a thermos when we are locked out, as men who have fallen out of the crumbling education system break into another car, as another friend dies of AIDS, november is the cruelest month … when the act of imagination is all that keeps the soul from collapsing into itself. (62)

The speaker struggles throughout the poems to produce a social vision that she can move towards through her political and poetic work. The juxtaposition of political events such as the incarceration of Peltier and Jamal and allusions to the cruelest month of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" demonstrate the ways in which Wong's social conscience and artistic imagination are fused together. While the text's final utopic end is not clearly in sight, her poems do suggest that any hope of making sense of the disparate experiences of globalized workers requires a disavowal of the privileging of fictions of individual identities and freedoms in favour of politically engaged collectives. And as the last lines of "excerpts from a diary of resistance" suggest, imagination is key to the success of this project of social justice. Wong's poetry, as an act of aesthetic and social resistance, can itself be read as a gesture of hope.

Cultural Translations

The poems also reframe the problem of how to reconfigure the relation between global politics and ethics by asking how such an intervention might be written. The negotiation of systems of meaning and cultural authority is highlighted by a number of poems in which Chinese characters appear alongside English ones. The moment of mediation is perhaps most visible in the untitled first poem of the section entitled "monkey-puzzle." In it, a column of text snakes around two short italicized stanzas which indicate the speaker's desire to use her Chinese mother tongue. The first stanza, which begins with the words "write around the absence, she said," literally writes around the faded Chinese characters that run down the middle of the page, as well as the speaker's right-justified statement "*this is / the sound of / my chinese tongue / whispering*: nei tou / gnaw ma? *no / tones can / survive this / alphabet* " (29). The left-hand column of text then crosses over to the other side of the page with a passage that describes how language

> fall[s] hard
> on my stuttering tongue, how its tones &
> pictograms get flattened out by the
> steamroller of the english language. (29)

Both sections of the poem explore the condition of bilingualism and the difficulty of maintaining fluency in Chinese without having English, with "its etymology of / assimilation," completely colonize the speaker's linguistic capabilities (29). For the speaker, language is a means of communication and an instrument of domination, with its "arrogant nouns & more nouns, punctuated / by subservient descriptors" and "grammar is the invisible net in the air, holding your / words in place. grammar, like wealth, belongs in the hands of / the people who produce it" (29). The hierarchical logic of language demands that certain words be perceived as more central to meaning than others. At the same time, this system of value is undercut by an understanding of the ways in which meaning is also produced through that which is not said. The presence of Chinese writing underneath the English stanzas suggests that Chinese is a conscious absence, one that structures the speaker's transactions in English. The tension between these two languages demonstrates both the limitations of language itself, and the possibilities of moving beyond those limitations.

The task of cultural translation is approached from a slightly different angle in the poem "seoul, 1989," in which the speaker writes of her travels to Korea. The four stanzas of the poem are numbered by a Korean numeric system that has been phonetically transcribed using the English alphabet. The rewriting of Korean into English makes this particular transaction between languages different from that between Chinese and English described in the unnamed poem in *monkeypuzzle*. This shift draws our attention to the work of cultural translation performed by the speaker at precisely this moment. Korea proves to be a culturally distinct space for the speaker, one that requires competency in many different kinds of spoken and unspoken languages. The representation of cultural difference in "seoul, 1989" resists the West's homogenization of Asia. For instance, the speaker notes that her corporeal grammar is corrected by her pen pal, who "warns me not to hold hands with / another woman, the way men here hold each other, / or i'd be taken for a lesbian" (100). The speaker thinks of responding to the obvious homophobia of this comment, but does not. Despite the fact that she has managed to cross languages and spaces, the suggestion remains that she has not been able to communicate with people across a cultural divide rarely noticed by non-Asian writers. Thus the poem draws our attention to the aesthetics of politics that limit how we perceive the contemporary moment. The vocabulary of liberal democracy and the grammar of nation-states dominates the ways in which social relations and the flow of global capital are typically articulated, but need to be reconfigured if productive exchanges are to take place. That the poem ends with "o," a transliteration of the Korean number five, but does not provide a completed stanza, suggests that the potential for dialogue continues to exist.

As a work of poetry and social commentary, monkeypuzzle draws our attention to the circulation of economic and symbolic capital. Wong's poems use the perceptions of their female speaker as she travels within and between various social and geographical spaces to unpack the complicated relationships between capitalism and ethnicity. In particular, the poems closely consider how labouring bodies and markers of ethnic identity are central to understanding how local and global economies operate. The collection of poems challenges liberal assumptions about the politics of race as well as the machinations of global politics on the levels of form as well as content, thus suggesting an intimate connection

between aesthetic innovation and social change. Part of the cultural value of poetry such as Wong's, texts that often generate little economic value in contemporary culture, lies in its ability to encourage readers to rethink the work of cultural representations and notions of value that shape the contemporary moment on multiple levels.

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