University of Alberta

Creative Foundations: Rewriting in Larissa Lai's Novels

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Comparative Literature

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 2007

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-29877-0
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-29877-0

Abstract

This thesis examines Larissa Lai's novels, *Salt Fish Girl* and *When Fox is a Thousand*, as Asian Canadian fiction that rewrites canonical literatures. After an examination of the current obstacles that Asian Canadian writers face, resulting in a lack of a creative foundation, I discuss rewriting as a strategic narrative solution for Asian Canadian writers, and offer Lai's texts as models of rewriting. Lai rewrites frequent motifs within Asian Canadian literature, refreshing them and demonstrating the ongoing need to mold literary representations of history. Lai also rewrites and inserts William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Pu Songling's *Liaozhai Zhiyi* into her texts, extending the literary and creative materials included within Asian Canadian literature. The necessity of rewriting lies in placing readers and writers within a recognizable history of literature, which is significant for those who are perplexed by multiple and contradictory discourses of identity.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Jonathan Hart for being my supervisor and for seeing me through the process. His encouragement and thoughtful insights are always appreciated. I would like to thank Professor Laifong Leung for her careful attention to detail and for being on my committee. I would also like to thank Professor Claudine Potvin who was also a part of my committee.

I would like to thank my family for their ongoing love and support, especially to my sister Ka Wai Cheung who generously gave of her time and energy during the most difficult times of my writing, and for proofreading and editing my thesis. I would like to thank my sister Ka Won Cheung who has always been encouraging and positive, and my sister Ka Geen Cheung who read my thesis and discussed many ideas with me. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for all their love and kindness.

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Introduction

Asian Canadian researchers and writers are effecting rapid changes in Canadian publishing and political policies correcting literary silence and misrepresentation. However, the available body of literature fails to reflect contemporary Asian Canadian experience. Theorists including Roy Miki, Donald Goellnicht, and Maria Ng conclude that Asian Canadian texts represent only a specific kind of reality, more likely experienced by earlier Asian Canadians who survived exclusionist policies. The Asian Canadian community today has evolved unrecognizably, along with Canada and the Asian nations, but changes are not reflected in literature. There is a lack of original material and a constant revisitation of orientalist[1] stereotypes that are interpreted as representative and anthropological. After analyzing the problems that stunt the growth and development of Asian Canadian literature, my thesis discusses rewriting as a strategic narrative solution for Asian Canadian writers. Larissa Lai utilizes the strategy of rewriting, long employed by feminists for ontological reassertion, in *Salt Fish Girl* and *When Fox is a Thousand.* Since the shortage of material originates from a diasporan disconnection from history, resulting in the lack of a formative foundation on which to write and create, rewriting reclaims historical and literary materials that engender further creativity.

Maria Ng's essays, "Chop Suey Writing: Sui Sin Far, Wayson Choy, and Judy Fong Bates" and "Representing Chinatown: Dr. Fu Manchu at the *Disappearing Moon Café*," stipulate that Chinese Canadian literature involves narrow and historic issues that

[1] Except in direct quotations, "oriental" is not capitalized because it is highlighted as an adjective describing rhetorical choices and perspectives, as opposed to a geographic region of nations and people.

do not justly reflect the diversity of contemporary Chinese Canadian reality. Ng's analysis of the Chinese Canadian literary landscape, involving texts that encompass the twentieth-century, demonstrates an "apparent stasis" that persistently revisits defunct stereotypes of Chinatown as representative of Chinese Canadian experience (Ng, "Chop Suey" 171). A negative depiction of an archaic culture mistaken for Chinese authenticity is contrasted with the modern ways of Canadian society. Cultural differences are placed in opposition, implying a need to control and destroy one another. Acculturated Chinese Canadian narrator-protagonists are young and realistic; they are begrudged with traditional Chinese parents who are superstitious and suspicious. The two generations are pitted against one another as embodiments of opposing cultural norms with rhetoric that divides characters by cultural orientation, pronouncing incommensurable differences between Chinese and Canadian cultures. Behaviour, values, and relationships are ethnicized to confirm cultural and racial polarity, and conflicts and plots arise in the form of a cultural clash between the East and the West. Finally, Western modern norms emerge superior to Eastern eccentricities.

The origin of such a cultural rhetoric is exposed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* as a Western tactic for dominance over Eastern culture. With rhetoric that compares and contrasts, "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a surrogate and even underground self" (Said 3). It is a Western "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [...] by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). Such a discourse depicts "Orientals" as a degenerative population on the basis

of racial origin, in order to justify subjugation and to establish means of control and re-education.

Asian American literary critics Sheng-mei Ma and Sau-ling Wong discuss the ways which Asian American writers have deployed the rhetoric of orientalism. Since writers who employ stereotypes with the intention of debunking them "presuppose an acknowledgment and even internalization" of the stereotypes, it becomes ambiguous as to whether or not the writers are successful (Ma, *Immigrant* 26). That writers spend much effort and attention debunking orientalism demonstrates and inherently empowers orientalism's influence. Ma continues to argue that when cultures are compared and when "racial difference is created, it is rarely neutral and disinterested" (*Immigrant* 2). Representations of the "other" are consciously or unconsciously skewed. Some acculturated writers lack sufficient knowledge of Asian history and literature. This void in knowledge is filled with Western portrayals of the East, which are stereotypical and orientalist. These writers sincerely see non-Western ethnicity and culture as outdated and flagrant, because they do not know otherwise. Some writers reflect that immigrants, repressed and disempowered, abuse those who were more helpless than themselves. Wong explains, "a subjugated group powerless to change the larger society would turn on itself" (43). Problematic behavior is quickly interpreted as specific to an authentic primordial cultural origin—a result of unseemly cultural habits imported, rather than a result of unjust social policies and discrimination. Along the same lines, acculturated writers, also disempowered, seek empowerment as practitioners rather than recipients of offensive cultural practices (Ma, *Immigrant* 25). Having internalized the assumptions of an orientalist discourse, they do not wish to be categorized under the same pejorative

term. They seek acceptance and approval from the mainstream, "on [the] condition of denouncing one's origins" by projecting oriental characteristics onto Asia and Asian immigrants to prove that they are no different from the dominant voice (Wong 44). Their effort betrays a self-internalized racism, while unwittingly creating and perpetuating racist stereotypes.

Multicultural publishers and policies are criticized for soliciting texts that fixate orientalist stereotypes. The policies initiated in 1971, and made official in 1988, promote "a superficial appreciation of minority cultures" by funding only minority artists whose works were exotic and different enough from the mainstream (Li 143). Canadian multiculturalism is unsatisfactory and restricts possibilities of identity formation for the sake of accessibility. Texts identify and capture static cultural markers, declaring ethnicities' absolute difference from an undeclared ubiquitous "norm." Limited selections of texts that reflect marginalized experience create and perpetuate a fixed and stereotypical understanding of minority Canadians. Richard Fung explains that the literary and cultural landscape of multicultural Canada

> champions a notion of cultural difference in which people are encouraged to preserve cultural forms of song and dance they didn't practice before they came to Canada. [...] Ministries and departments of multiculturalism promot[e] 'the ethnics,' with all the baggage and assumptions around non-Western, non-white work as naïve, static and so on. It also goes along with the assumption and the enforcement around the kind of work, the kind of subject matter and the forms that people of colour should work with (18; qtd. in Goellnicht 9; qtd. in Lai, "Corrupted" 44).

Peter Li agrees in *Chinese in Canada* (1998) that "the image of Chinese Canadians as members of a foreign race and the notion that their different cultural values and habits are incompatible with Canada's Occidental tradition have become entrenched in Canadian society" (Li xi). Asian Canadian literature depicts an idiosyncratic minority that is

curious to most Canadians. From an optimistic perspective, such a discrepancy between reality and fiction may spur Asian Canadians to write. But realistically, literature becomes enforced and simplified, triggering resentment from those spoken about, and stifling those who wish to speak.

The reception for Asian Canadian literature from within the community, not surprisingly, remains cold. Asian Canadian "coming-to-voice" literature neither interests nor entertains the Asian Canadians that it speaks about. With increased immigration in the 70's, 80's and 90's from all over the world, Miki asks, "Who is speaking? For whom? Why? In the plethora of discourses formed to answer these simple but profoundly destabilizing questions, allegiances can become ambiguous, even misleading" (Miki 137). The writer, whose work is interpreted as representative of a large community of individuals with diverse backgrounds can only expect dissent from those who do not fit the representation. The dissenting readers feel powerless as they are "spoken for" and represented by writers' distortions (Miki 144). Jim Wong-Chu observes, "a lot of books [would not have been published] if they had to go through the community to get approval" (Goellnicht 34). The Asian Canadian genre is limited and formulaic, laments Kevin Chong, who summarizes it as involving "flashbacks to some ignominious event back in China, an arranged marriage or the Cultural Revolution, and torturous cross-generational exchanges, in painfully rendered broken English, about being 'torn between two worlds.' Boo-hoo" ("Question" H3). Writers seem to be accomplices to mainstream publishers by co-operatively producing static images of minority culture.

In defense of writers, SKY Lee's narrator forewarns in *Disappearing Moon Café*, "The power of language is that it can be manipulated beyond our control, towards

misunderstanding" (180). Re-interpreting Asian Canadian literature, writers are revealed to be less unsuspecting as they might have originally seemed. At the cost of contempt from a misunderstanding Asian Canadian readership, writers have achieved milestones. Goellnicht writes that "to have one's voice heard, one's history read, after decades of silencing is a major achievement" ("Asian" 352). Pioneers of Asian Canadian literature began the process of articulating a kind of minority experience that is still very much in process. With a keen awareness to the tastes and preferences of mainstream Canadian readers, Asian Canadian writers have gained commercial success. Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* entered University syllabi across Canada, Wayson Choy's *Jade Peony* was selected as One Book One Vancouver in 2002, and Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* remained on *Globe and Mail*'s bestseller list for nearly two years. Placing Asian Canadian literature into a mainstream field of vision has directly resulted in the development of Asian Canadian academic courses and programs across the country. Asian Canadian programs develop "structured interdisciplinarity that challenges conventional disciplinary boundaries," offering innovative ways of re-organizing knowledge and tackling social problems and issues (Goellnicht 27).

It is not unlikely that life brought issues to the Chinatown dwellers, for example, that diverged from distinguishing incommensurable cultural differences. But fictional characters, ostensibly fixated upon cultural preoccupations, reflect writers' participation in contemporary cultural debates. Central cultural preoccupations of the texts expose the "covert drama of the writer," working and producing cultural identity amidst furtive racist and exclusionist policies in the era of multiculturalism (Miki 143). Peter Li stresses the importance of understanding the institutional forces that shape Asian

Canadian experiences because social structures define the parameters within which race and race relations are articulated. Li maintains "that one cannot fully understand a minority in the absence of a majority. [...] The majority and the minority are defined and produced by the relationships between them, not by their primordial cultures" (xii). Writers, sensitive of social circumstances are both producers as well as products of the cultural and political landmine they inhabit.

Nearly a century before official multiculturalism, Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton, who published in 1888-1913, had already employed the narrative strategy of a "dual voice" to meet the demands of her targeted readership and to satisfy her own personal writing goals (White-Parks 1, 5). On one level, she provided entertainment by satisfying the popular perspectives that an audience of European descent preferred; and on the second level, she disturbed the stereotypes embedded in those perspectives by pursuing her own personal and ideological themes (White-Parks 5). In fact, double play as a postcolonial strategy of subversion is considered a generic convention. Homi Bhabha writes that colonialists "[speak] in a tongue that is forked, not false" (122). In a postcolonial manner, Asian Canadian writers reciprocate the colonial landscape. Embedded within stories about cultural conflicts is the subversive story of surviving in a backdrop of racist and exclusionist political policies. The revelation of unjust institutional policies is a stone's throw away, eluded by a façade of performative cultural misunderstandings and idiosyncrasies.

Minority narratives might have fulfilled the need of entering mainstream visibility and garnered academic support, but Asian Canadians remain "spoken for" through representative literature (Miki 144). As Miki has predicted, what "appears to be a

solution today becomes tomorrow's problem" (148). Even though early immigrant history has been documented, those specific historical processes have mistakenly become representative, and Asian Canadian culture is fixed into static oriental and degenerative stereotypes. Therefore, new narrative solutions, such as rewriting, must be pursued for reclaiming and recreating a sense of self-identification. Rewriting does not repudiate the history that has been claimed or disassemble the work that has been accomplished, but the strategy builds upon and renovates the rudimentary framework that has been initiated.

As a strategy for ontological reassertion, rewriting has redefined women's relationship to literature, allowing women to achieve inclusion of their creativity into the literary tradition. It gives women an extensive literary history with which to play, because, despite having been neglected, women have always played a role. It is a matter of re-imagining and reasserting those roles through literature. Rewriting is traced back to Virginia Woolf's presentation of *A Room of One's Own* in 1928. She drew attention to the lack of women's writing in literature, and envisioned a version of literature that would supplement men's writing:

> It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking at the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lopsided; but why should they not add a supplement to history? Calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety? For one often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great, whisking away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a laugh perhaps a tear (55).

Woolf draws attention to the absence of women in literature that has traditionally neglected the task of projecting female experience. Rewriting for women begins with imagining and amplifying the roles women could have possibly played through a history

of literature. It has the potential to renew the current cultural discourse and distill the good from the bad of literary historical tatters with which we have, thus far, emerged.

Angela Carter describes the strategy of rewriting with a metaphor, that "intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" ("Notes" 69). Carter's quote, itself, is notably a rewriting of Biblical verse, "Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved" (Matthew 9:17, *NIV*). Not necessarily refuting, but definitely contrasting the Biblical verse that highlights the incompatibility of the new and the old, Carter places her emphasis on using the new to break apart and challenge the old. While the two quotes are not necessarily contradictory to one another, emphasis is relocated. By rewriting, alternative ways are offered to apprehend previously established understandings of the world, highlighting that which was omitted or neglected. Focus is shifted from the central male preoccupations of precursor texts to narrative female possibilities that have been left unwritten, perhaps deemed unsubstantial.

In chapter one, I discuss *Salt Fish Girl* as a rewriting of Asian Canadian immigrant experiences during the exclusionist period. By rewriting the family archive, Lai reimagines the stereotypical depiction of historic immigrants. Errors and inadequacies of precursor texts are corrected, and outdated assumptions and points of view are exposed. Adrienne Rich writes about rewriting for women as a way of unlearning the past in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision:"

> Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural

> history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. [...] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us (11).

Asian Canadian literature has been unable to provide the guidance that many readers have been searching for. In fact, readers have found more problems than solutions in the texts that are published. History is important in placing people within the global order of contemporary society, and although writers have claimed Canadian history for the settlers who immigrated since the mid-nineteenth-century, it is problematic that Asian Canadian settler history has come to possess a representative depiction. Rewriting evolves the literary depiction of Asian Canadian settlers, and transforms readers' relationships to the literature about Asian Canadian settler experience.

For Asian diasporans in Canada who feel disconnected from both their originary history as well as their adopted one, Lai reclaims both. In chapter two and three, Lai extends the family archive by rewriting both English and Chinese literatures. Perhaps immigrants come to Canada fleeing histories of war or poverty, and in their need to survive an assimilationist society, they have abandoned or neglected their previous history, literature, and culture. Nevertheless, diasporans feel similarly disconnected from the English traditions, in which they have been educated and immersed. Chapter two discusses *Salt Fish Girl* as a rewriting of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and chapter three discusses *When Fox is a Thousand* as a rewriting of Pu Songling's *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (*Liaozhai*). Lai's rewriting of the characters of Miranda and Caliban from *The Tempest* is theoretically informed by the feminist theories formulated by Julia Kristeva. Through a complicated and convoluted process of re-animating the forgotten Fox of

Liaozhai, Lai treads through the cultural battlefields between Western sinologists and Chinese literature scholars.

Simultaneously affirming the authority of precursor texts, Lai concomitantly derives authority and recognition for her own writing. Rewriters participate in a continuous discussion with anterior texts, and their own texts become significant because of their relationships to recognizable histories of literature. For women writers, this is particularly important since these "writers have often been denied [of a high literary status] because they write 'personally' or 'confessionally'" (Ostriker 73). Similarly, diasporan writers have also been assumed to be non-creative agents, incapable of "constructing nuanced fictions which address historical situations" and participate in the formal discourse of literature (Lai, "Political" 148). Writers are understood as spokespersons retelling stories from first hand accounts that speak of a "particular type of historical content [which] are given or take on an anthropological sheen" (Lai, "Corrupted" 41). Rewriting, therefore, safeguards women and diasporan writers from seeming sporadic and orphaned of tradition. Through rewriting, works are received as emergent of a historical past, and the writers are recognized for dealing creatively in literature. Though only traceable to arbitrary points of origin, rewriting affirms a distinct connection to history, revealing the contemporary moment as derivative of a historic past.

For better or for worse, Chinese Canadian, English, and Chinese literatures form the diverse cultural connections of Chinese Canadian literature. Lai asks, "How do we diasporized types make a homespace for ourselves given all the disjunctures and discontinuities of our histories, or for that matter, the co-temporalities of some of them?" (Lai, "Political" 149). In chapter four, I examine the diasporan women in *When Fox is a*

Thousand. Learning about oneself involves knowledge of one's background as a constitution of fragments of existing knowledge. But ignorant of their intimate relationships with the different bodies of literatures, the diasporan women feel lost, suspended, and confused about their histories and literatures that have been confiscated. Through rewriting the *Liaozhai* myths, for example, Lai reweaves mythology into the women's lives, and establishes for diasporans a recognizable literary past. The Fox, with a thousand years' experience, has a few lessons to teach the diasporans as they begin the process of forming community and asserting themselves and the truths of their bodies.

Orientalism, sinology, anthropology, and multiculturalism exist within the repertoire of Asian Canadian literature and experience. Lai's rewriting reminds that writers and readers have an abundant literary tradition in, not only Chinese mythology that remains untapped, but also in the histories of the dynasties, recent developments in Hong Kong and Taiwanese film and popular culture, as well as Western translations and Chinese self-translations. Furthermore, Canadians' literary inheritance includes all the rest of global literature that Canada, as a global nation, has inherited on all Canadians' behalf. There is an abundant treasure trove of literature, and there is no reason why there should be a lack of creative material. Writers, readers, academics, publishers, and policy-makers work collaboratively, engaging in the endless project of re-envisioning representations of history and literature. As Canadian writers and readers, we enter into dialogues with texts that are old and emerge with conversations that are new.

Chapter 1

"Those who don't understand the past may be condemned to repeat it, but those who never repeat it are condemned not to understand it" (Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* 278).

The history of Chinese immigration to Canada is represented from the point-of-view of assimilated Chinese Canadian narrators, looking back at the story of their parents and grandparents who experienced the building of the national railroad. It is a story of cultural assimilation amidst a historically racist backdrop through three or four separate and conflicting generations beginning in the 1850s. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai dispels of the conventional ruts and stereotypes that continue to encumber Chinese Canadian literary historical expression. The tone is set when we encounter the mythical creation goddess, Nu Wa, and learn of her power, strength, and confidence. Yet, unsatisfied with her solitary divinity, she magically reincarnates to the Canton of the late 1800s, and illegally immigrates to the "City of Hope," a city of symbols somewhere off the cliffs and across the ocean. Nu Wa is highlighted as a fictional character who experiences history similar to that experienced by the Chinese immigrating to Canada during the Head Tax and Exclusionist period. Lai's re-portrayal of Chinese Canadian history in literature, through rewriting, refreshes the depiction and demonstrates the ongoing need to mold literary representations of history.

Salt Fish Girl begins before the Shang Dynasty (ca. 1600 BC), and introduces us to Nu Wa. Not all readers have heard of Nu Wa, so Lai begins the chapter, "In the beginning," immediately drawing an allusion to the Biblical creation myth. Between the two myths, readers understand that this is the beginning of time. Nu Wa introduces

herself, oblivious to ethnic or cultural difference because her existence comes "prior to race" (Lai, "Political" 146). She is untainted by social rules of gender and cultural performance. Nu Wa is not described as the "*Chinese* creation goddess." She is simply the creation goddess, as she knows herself. Lai's character is not a cultural other, and none of her actions are described as inherent manifestations of ethnicity.

> In the beginning there was just me. I was lonely. You have no idea. I was lonely in a way even the most shunned of you have never known loneliness. And I was cold, which is not the same as cold-blooded, no matter what they say about me. It was not a philosophical, mountaintop sort of loneliness, the self-inflicted loneliness of a sage in his dark cave. It was a murkier sort of solitude, silent with the wet sleep of the unformed world. The materials of life still lay dormant, not yet understanding their profound relationship to one another. There was no order, nothing had a clear relationship to anything else. The land was not the land, the sea not the sea, the air not the air, the sky not the sky. The mountains were not the mountains, nor the clouds clouds (1).

Nu Wa's narrative authority is established because she is the creation goddess, and all the rest of the world derives meaning through her. Furthermore, she is our guide through the unformed chaos. As Nu Wa forms the land and sea, creating life out of broken chains of amino acids, she strings together words, sentences, and stories, creating a textual world for us to explore. One of Lai's aims in *Salt Fish Girl* is to make connections between stories—"the materials of life"—revealing "their profound relationship" to one another (1). Our narrator, Nu Wa, is the creator of life and also a writer. Our sympathy grows for her primal loneliness that came before philosophy and art.

Nu Wa is a prehistoric mermaid-goddess, and she draws attention to her body as female and monstrous. Women-as-monster revisits the scientific ideal of feminine monstrosity, of "women as a sign of abnormality, and therefore of difference as a mark of inferiority" (Braidotti 63). As half-human, half-fish, Nu Wa represents the "in-between, the mixed, [and] the ambivalent" (Braidotti 61). Although Nu Wa is monstrous, she does

not perceive her body as inferior or as depraved. Besides, she is only monstrous by comparison, and there is not yet another creation for comparison with Nu Wa. So she embraces and revels in her identity. Nu Wa narrates:

> Of course, I have lips, a woman's lips, a woman's mouth already muttering secrets under my breath. Look, I have a woman's eyes, woman's rope of smooth black hair extending past my waist. A woman's torso. Your gaze slides over breasts and belly. The softest skin, warm and quivering. And below? Forget modesty. Here comes the tail, a thick cord of muscle undulating, silver slippery in the morning light (1-2).

She exhibits herself as an object for the audience's gaze. Yet, as the author of herself as an object, she is also the subject and has control over how much she will allow herself to be consumed by her viewer. This super-unnatural being displays masculine strength and authority, as well as feminine charms and wiles.

In her tail lies the greatest power that cannot ever be restrained, and she flaunts the power as if it were an "assertion of the lifeforce of women" (Lorde 55). Nu Wa is an empowered and deviant character, and she has not been socialized to fear or control her eroticism. According to Audre Lorde, eroticism as a resource for women has been consistently "vilified, abused, and devalued" (53). It has been confused with its opposite, the pornographic, which is a "direct denial of the power of the erotic" (Lorde 54). By embracing the power of seduction and eroticism, Nu Wa subverts the status quo of women's sexuality as inferior, and meant to be repressed and controlled.

Nu Wa creates humans in her own beautiful image, molds them out of dirt, and punishes their disrespectful arrogance by splicing their originary tails. However, out of an incurable loneliness, she is forced to surrender her precious tail for a pair of legs to join the walking world. Her tail, as a sign of womanhood-as-monstrous, is ashamedly betrayed for the sake of being a part of the social world. Between the options of divine

loneliness and human community, Nu Wa decides to split her tail. The image of the split tail is evocative of the split text in Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," which will be discussed in chapter 2. Bifurcation of being leads to opposing characteristics and dichotomous thinking that necessarily hierarchizes so that one becomes the privileged term, while the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart. The body is demarcated into territories that compel exclusions and separations, and it is the bifurcation of Nu Wa's tail that sets the story apace, as she walks away from her perfect, yet solitary existence, with her brand new pair of legs.

Reincarnation happens to Nu Wa like a magical fairytale. Her longing to be human is catalyzed when she peeks above her watery domain and falls in love with the slight of a human. Reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" fairytale, Nu Wa's curiosity to become a part of the walking world leads her to encounter a sea witch that, not without immense pain, rips apart her salt fishtail (8). In exchange for the magical favour, Nu Wa barters her divinity to enter the worldly domain. As mortal, she must safeguard a pearl of immortality that is nudged into the back of her throat (8). This pearl is eventually exchanged for another chance at life.

Nu Wa's reincarnation to Canton, also evocative of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, involves a distortion of time and space as our goddess crawls out of the river into a cistern of water, symbolic of birth and experience, where she begins to shrink and is drank up by her future mother in a glass of water.

> Without quite knowing what I was doing, I climbed into [the wide cistern full of water]. To my shock and horror, my body began to diminish in length. My legs fused together and the pain disappeared. I felt a tightening in the pit of my belly. My body narrowed and shrank. Suddenly the cistern was an ocean, as big as the lake I had recently left. At first I struggled, tried to pull myself out of the water,

> but to no avail. Even floating on the surface, half exposed to the air, did not effect a reversal. I let myself drift beneath the surface and sleep (48).

Nu Wa is thoroughly immersed in the place and entangled in the events as they occur directly to her, even when magic is involved. Our protagonist does not observe and judge the situation as a transcendent outsider categorizing cultural incommensurabilities. She does not attempt to describe or explain cultural practices apologetically or "slow down to give boring exposition," because she actively participates in the parallel world (Kingston, qtd. in Goellnicht "Asian" 344). Conscious and expressive, she creates a metaphor to describe her experiences in the cistern. In light of Nu Wa's most natural reincarnation, the cultural "difference" of Canton is not different anymore. Expectations are dismantled in the parallel world, and our judgments of ethnic and cultural "differences" are suspended and recalibrated before we enter Canton.

In Canton, Nu Wa learns the routines of daily life, and she falls in love with the salt fish girl, whose work is to preserve fish with salt. Nu Wa describes her lover butchering a chicken as an ordinary occurrence—not even worth noting, except that it inspired a plan:

> The chicken kept squawking. [The Salt Fish Girl] drew a fish-gutting knife from her skirt and solemnly slit its throat. Blood spurted in a long arc, and drenched me in a dark shower. In the downpour I hatched a plan. "Pack a bag," I said. "We're going to escape." She gave me a mop and some clean clothes. I sopped up the blood quickly, put on the clean clothes... (57).

With a little knife that fits into the pocket of a skirt, the chicken is cleanly and expertly prepared. What our narrator narrates as mundane and commonplace, we indifferently accept. The narrative is task-focused rather than culturally interpretive. It is not an inherent manifestation of difference or ethnicity that the chicken is slaughtered. Then why is the chicken slaughtered? Because, aren't chickens meant to be slaughtered?

Alternatively, in Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children*, chicken slaying is ethnic. That May-ying butchers her own chicken is attributed to her "Chineseness." Events described in an odd judgmental manner are attributed to the very essence of being Chinese. Chong contrasts Chinese and Canadian cultures, setting up a cultural binarism, favoring one over the other.

> The visits with Po-po served as a reminder that we were Chinese [...]. She asked Father to buy her a live chicken [...]. To our wild amusement, Father ended up having to chase the chicken around the oil furnace, finally tripping it up with the crook of an outstretched wire hanger. We couldn't have imagined what followed, Father brought the chicken upstairs to Po-po in the kitchen, which was hot and steamy from the pot of water boiling on the stove. She wielded a Chinese cleaver across the chicken's throat; blood spattered staining the Dutch Lady curtains above the sink (247).

This scenario is written like it were a tribal ritual failed circus act, and with the repetition of the words, "Chinese" and "Po-po," Chong stresses that such a scenario only happened because the family was Chinese. Even the cleaver, the violent weapon of choice, has an ethnic descriptor. Denise Chong, narrating as a child, views such a situation as regressive and as Chinese. Finally, the ethnic ritual results in the contamination of western values, represented by the staining of the Dutch Lady curtains.

To Chong, who presents an orientalist and exotic perspective of the Chinese culture, Canada has redeemed her from the degenerative ways of Chinese culture. However, it is important to emphasize that Chong's memoir only reveals herself and her family as a product of specific historic processes. Chong documents the way in which certain Canadians, including the Chinese Canadians who experience internalized racism, understand and perceive racial and cultural differences during an assimilationist period. It is convenient for those Canadians to explain the problem of racism and discrimination as a result of cultural incommensurabilities. Perhaps Chong, born in the 1950's, was

taught only to experience and perceive Chinese and Canadian cultures in disjunction. Unfortunately, Chong's personal memoir, interpreted as representative of all Chinese Canadians, unwittingly offers to readers little more than a distorted sense of reality.

Published in 1994, *The Concubine's Children* is one of the first novels to enter mainstream Canada dealing with Chinese Canadian content. Despite Chong's historical and cultural specificity, expectations prevail that her book speaks for, explains, and represents all Chinese Canadians who have been heretofore unheard. Problematically, *The Concubine's Children* was also published during the peak of Chinese immigration from Hong Kong. Writing to claim and present an assimilated Canadian identity for the earlier waves of Chinese immigrants who had suffered during the exclusionist period, Chong excludes the newer waves of immigrants arriving from Hong Kong in the 80's and 90's. Although Chong's memoir is celebrated in Canada for its progressive inclusion of characters and stories that have been left out of Canadian literature, the popular success of *The Concubine's Children* also derives from its exclusion of a newer immigrant group.

Julianne Rock analyzes the tension between varying waves and generations of Chinese Canadians. Effecting each generation differently, the rapid changes in Canadian social and racial policies pique intergenerational conflicts. Rock explains that early immigrants had fought and won many battles during an exclusionist period, and they feel a sense of superiority over the newer incoming immigrants. Given that "Assimilation and integration into Canadian society and culture were absolutely necessary if [the earlier immigrants] wanted to survive and 'get ahead.' It is therefore understandable that established Chinese Canadians would expect the same to be required for Chinese newcomers. [...] Established Chinese Canadians were asserting their authority and power

over the incoming Hong Kong immigrants, while simultaneously proving themselves as 'Canadian'" (Rock 26-27). However, readers who identify with the cultural-national term, Chinese Canadian, and do not identify with Chong's use of the term, are offended by her authoritative and imposing narrative. While the established Chinese Canadians do not want to be mistaken for a maladapted Canadian, the incoming Chinese Canadians do not want to be mistaken for an assimilated Canadian.

Salt Fish Girl offers an alternative reading to the existing portrayals of history, consequently challenging the authority assumed by earlier Chinese Canadians to speak for all Chinese Canadians. Lai offers readers a chance to re-evaluate their understanding of Chinese Canadian history, simultaneously renewing and prolonging the history of immigration. Varying generations of Chinese Canadians are merged within a single fictional character that reincarnates into mulitple time periods, offering the possibility for reconciliation between the differing waves of immigrants. Writing in a non-realistic style, Lai highlights her writing as a work of imagination and creativity, and elides the burden of being misinterpreted as a representative anthropological record of historical and lived personal experiences. As more literary and artistic articulations emerge, stories will lead to more specific and less representative depictions of experience and reality. Rewriting reveals the depiction of Chinese Canadian immigration to be a continuous and ongoing process.

Homeless and hungry, Nu Wa is unable to survive the conditions of late nineteenth-century China—a nation in the midst of a civil war. She begins her pilgrimage in search for a basic livelihood by blindly following a foreigner to a new land. The foreigner is characteristically named "Bird Woman," signifying the unreliable

flightiness of hope that Western feminism offers to "other" women. Similarly, Canada offered an illusion of hope to early Chinese workers, who started emigrating in the 1850's. Like a colony of overpopulated lemmings, Nu Wa desperately runs off the cliffs of South China, through the clouds and fog, illegally immigrating to the City of Hope (124). This magical city symbolizes the experience of immigrants who emigrated to escape strife on home turf, only to find similar confusion and turmoil. Lai symbolically recounts the experiences of early Chinese Canadian settlers arriving to North America, and refrains from specifying time and place to invoke a sense of universal timelessness. She dismisses the discussion on cultural incommensurability, and directly focuses narrative attention on the experience of surviving in a discriminatory environment. Nu Wa's most pressing priority is survival—not cultural expectation, preservation, or assimilation. Troubles and challenges are unjustly allotted to her by corrupt individuals who seek to use her for profit. Antagonists seek ways to take advantage of her, as a disenfranchised individual without the support of community or government.

A stylistic and symbolic depiction threatens to simplify the visceral and painful discrimination endured by generations of survivors. But a representative and dehumanized depiction of an emaciated crowd huddled in a boat, sea sick, cold, and wet effectively distances readers. Poverty, mistakenly interpreted as an immigrant disposition or idiosyncrasy, unashamedly becomes justification for discrimination and racism. Recurrent literary and visual representations of nameless railway men in fading black and white or blurry sepia photographs lose their impact. Discrimination and racism remain "safely ensconced in the past," and segregated from the present (Lai, "Corrupted" 41).

The old photographs contain history in an isolated past, and emphasize our separation from the injustices of an apparently faraway history.

Sanitizing the experience of poverty and immigration through the use of symbolism, contemporary readers are offered an alternative approach to understanding circumstances of social injustice and feelings of displacement and isolation, generally identified with otherness and diaspora. Emerging from the sky "reveals the indifference with which post-colonial subjects are received; where did *they* come from? They have no background, no meaningful existence" (Wilson 221). Nu Wa similarly establishes no connection to the new land. She arrives through the clouds, and although she remains in the City of Hope for decades, it is never established as her home. She loses her old language, learns the new one, and studies statistics. But she finds neither acceptance nor career. She is unjustly criminalized. Nu Wa arrives at the City of Hope without having established any friend or relative, and she leaves the city without having established any sort of meaningful relationship.

After 40 years of sojourning, Nu Wa returns to China in pursuit of a nostalgic dream. The passage costs her the precious gold coin that her salt fish lover gave her before she first left China. Traveling across the Pacific, immigrants save for years to accumulate enough wealth to pay the heavy toll. Many do not accumulate enough wealth to return. Nu Wa returns, but not to the nostalgic home of her dreams. Her lover scorns her without the gold coin, and the villagers ultimately reject her to the point of execution. If the gold coin symbolizes the past, then Nu Wa "sacrifices the past for an idealized future that never comes" (Lai, "Corrupted" 46). Nu Wa falls into a river in Canton, but like the Virgin Mary who "doesn't die but, [...] pass from one place to another in an

eternal flow that constitutes a carbon copy of the maternal receptacle" (Kristeva, *Tales* 243), Nu Wa, too, a goddess, does not die but is transported into her tempestuous third life.

Chapter 2

William Shakespeare glossed over the characters of Caliban and Miranda in *The Tempest*, leaving them as flat and under-developed character profiles. Nevertheless, they have persisted as cultural enigmas, drawing the attention of scholars 400 years on, across oceans, mountains and streams. Diana Brydon's discussion of Canadian rewrites of *The Tempest* identifies Shakespeare's play as a metaphor for contemporary Canadian circumstances. Larissa Lai continues with the rewriting of Caliban and Miranda in *Salt Fish Girl*. Lai's version of Caliban, foreseeably, does not experience the same dormancy, for he is rewritten as Evie. Evie experiences character growth, following Julia Kristeva's chronicle of feminism from the second to the third generations. Evie learns to end the violence and the rivalry between herself and Dr. Flowers, the parallel Prospero figure in *Salt Fish Girl*. Lai's version of Miranda experiences a cyclical journey to self-discovery and empowerment, also following Kristeva's explication of women's separation and reunion with their mothers. Miranda embraces her "otherness," and ends the violence within herself. In Shakepeare's *The Tempest*, Miranda and Caliban remain inert and ineffective. But in *Salt Fish Girl*, Miranda and Evie are given new choices and new voices.

Written during a time of colonial expansion (1611), Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has been interpreted in numerous ways, including a self-conscious and forward-looking perspective on the colonial encounter. The relationship between Prospero and Caliban offers a metaphor for the colonizer and the colonized, and it has been richly rewritten to reveal alternate perspectives on colonialism.

> Post-colonial writers are continually misreading and re-writing their inheritance from the imperial tradition in order to re-define themselves according to their own understanding of tradition. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, interpreted by many critics as a fable of the colonial experience, has proved a popular model for fictional re-writings of that experience (Brydon, "Re-writing" 75).

Prospero represents the privileged imperial power that exploits and controls those who are colonized. Black American and West Indian writers identify with Caliban, who rebels against the imposed dispossession of rights and freedom (Brydon, "Re-writing" 77). Finally, Miranda, silent and absent in most of the original play, is typical of the role women play in colonial patriarchal society. Miranda figures are not usually envisioned as active participants in the colonization process, but are depicted as passively complicit with the colonizer, despite making sacrifices, too.

Diana Brydon's analysis of Canadian rewrites of *The Tempest* reveals the power relations within *The Tempest,* focusing on the precarious and powerless position of Miranda caught as a bargaining chip between patriarchal cultures, polarized by Prospero and Caliban figures. Alliance to Prospero requires Miranda to remain ignorant of her father's violent crimes against Caliban. Loyalty is equated with innocence and faith, while disloyalty is equated with knowledge and disobedience. In Sarah Murphy's *The Measure of Miranda*, the complete innocence of Miranda validates Prospero's power as the

> most important gift power can give itself [...]. The sullying of alien dignity and thus one's own countered only by the knowledge that there is one at home who is unsoiled by such blood or offal or excrement. [Miranda is the ultimate] example of what makes us believe we are the very best of cultures: our ability to protect more people and keep them that much blinder (more innocent more bystander) than was hitherto possible thanks to technology and distance (qtd. in Brydon, "Sister" 176).

Essential to protecting Miranda's innocence, she must not interact with Caliban and discover the "grievances of those whose culture hers is displacing" (Brydon, "Sister" 166). Interaction with Caliban results in a redefinition of values taught by Prospero, and Prospero's image representing a morally superior civilization disintegrates. Miranda's body is interpreted as the battlefield where men's wars are waged (Brydon, "Sister" 180; Zabus, *Tempests* 104), and her alliance to either Prospero or Caliban is essential to the victory and happy conclusion of either of the two polar influences.

According to Brydon, Miranda figures also represent "Canada's participation in international capitalism, and the ways in which women's oppression serves to maintain this inequitable system" (Brydon, "Sister" 169). Rather than changing the system, Canada's participation, like Miranda's participation, is a sign of approval. Since Miranda does not suffer from Prospero's abuse to the same extent as Caliban, she is "denied the luxury of outright rebellion" (Brydon, "Sister" 166-67). Miranda figures, rather than rebelling, identify with Prospero, the colonizer, in their claim for a greater distribution of power. To change the system in place would be inconvenient and uncomfortable, so complacent Canadian Miranda figures remain complicit and responsible for the ongoing exploitation of Third World Caliban workers.

Brydon extends the Miranda metaphor to express the relationship between Canada and British Imperialism, because Canada has never experienced a conspicuous or remarkable revolution:

> Here in this kind of writing we might expect from a country that has never experienced a successful revolution seeking independence from imperialist rule—a literature of the middle ground, but the middle ground itself redefined, not in compromise so much as through endless negotiation (Brydon, "Sister" 180).

But this metaphor can be further extended to reflect the situation of ethnicities in Canada,

such as that of Asian Canadians. Goellnicht explains that Asian Canadian writers have lacked a unifying activist leadership comparable to that of the Asian American movement, which was inspired by the Civil Rights movement and intensified by anti-Vietnam War movements. The "Canadian state has been more adept at containing or diffusing protest from racialized minorities, aided to a considerable extent by the fact that the Canadian polity as a whole has been more fractured and less coherent than its American counterpart" (Goellnicht 6). Global peacekeeping efforts, official multiculturalism, and Quebec separatism has diverted attention away from the "development and (r)evolution of ethnic cultures *in* Canada" (Goellnicht 10). Without the momentum of a significant movement of protest, the development of Asian Canadian literary studies has been gradual, and progress must be made through strategies of subversion and negotiation, such as that of rewriting.

On Evie:

Through the feminization of a conventionally male figure, Caliban is transformed into Evie in *Salt Fish Girl.* Evie represents a feminist alternative apart from the two patriarchal options Shakespeare allots for Miranda. Like Caliban, Evie is connected with fish. In a description of Caliban, Trinculo asks, "What have we here—a man or a fish?—dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; [...]. A strange fish!" (2.2.24-27). Evie, on the other hand, is biologically 0.03% fish (261), and distinctly smells of fish (161). "Salt fish" further makes reference to dead corpses in Chinese, and as such, emphasizes Evie's return from and connection with death and rot. The character's reincarnation is the result of the biological engineering of dead bodies donated to science (160).

The corporate city of Serendipity is offered as a futuristic metaphor for Canada, in terms of its treatment of immigrant workers and its participation in international capitalism. In Serendipity, exploitation and discrimination target the clones, which Lai blatantly links to corruption and greed. Caliban, in the original play, is used by Prospero as a slave; "We cannot miss him. He does make our fire, / fetch our wood, and serves in offices / That profit us. What ho, slave! Caliban!" (1.2.310-312). As a source of cheap labour, Evie and her identical sister clones are manufactured to work in a shoe production factory (157). They have no legal rights and no freedom (158). In fact, they are not legally defined as human, but as patented new life forms (158). A comparison is set effectively between historic immigrant workers, current Third World workers, and the futuristic clone workers. Such a comparison highlights that Canada has continued to employ various forms of slave labour, from the exploitation of Chinese labour in the nineteenth-century, to that currently outside Canadian borders in underprivileged nations. People and societies, despite temporal and geographic locales, remain morally similar generation after generation. New technologies, for example bioengineering, "never create new societies, solve immemorial problems, or conjure away existing scarcities. They simply change the terms in which social and political conflicts are played out" (Tomlinson 204). History repeats itself and corruption and greed continues in various manifestations. The exploitation that was once inflicted upon immigrants workers and Third World workers, in turn, is inflicted upon the manufactured clone workers, in *Salt Fish Girl.*

Shakespeare's Caliban rebels by manipulating the language that he learned under Prospero's tutelage. Caliban uses language to subvert and ridicule Prospero's version of

reality (Brydon, "Re-writing" 75). He says to Prospero, "You taught me language, and my profit on't / is I know how to curse" (1.2.360-61). Evie, on the other hand, manipulates Dr. Flowers' art of genetic engineering by building an alternate clone community. The clones take control of their own procreation by cultivating durian trees, originally engineered to function as fertility therapy for women (256). They aim to be self-sufficient, to reject involvement with the corporations, and furthermore, to free their sister clones from the use and abuse of the corporations.

The dichotomous arrangement of Evie's clone community and Dr. Flowers' corporate city accedes to Kristeva's description of the second generation of feminism. The second generation is unwilling to accommodate the existing system, demanding "recognition of an irreducible identity" (Kristeva, "Women's" 409). However, by reinforcing the "dichotomy of man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities," the second generation is in danger of repeating the patterns of the previously established order (Kristeva, "Women's" 413). "While the second generation's revolt against the established order is understandable, it is dangerous and potentially lethal. Sometimes, by fighting against evil, we reproduce it" (McAfee 99). The clones plan an infiltration of the factories. But rather than achieving their goal of freedom, the coup d'état results in repeated violence and greater destruction, contributing to the ongoing conflict and exacerbating the rivalry between the two opposing groups.

Although violence begets violence and *Salt Fish Girl* does not end with utopia, there is hope and increasing self-awareness. At the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero recognizes Caliban as "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (5.1. 275-76). In *Salt Fish Girl*, recognition of an "other" does not explicitly occur to Dr. Flowers.

But Evie experiences a degree of personal growth upon her arrival at the hut housing Dr. Flowers' self-clones. She realizes that she is "*at once the attacker and the victim,* the same *and* the other" (Kristeva, *New* 223). Rather than murdering them in their sleep, she chooses not to hurt any of Dr. Flowers' self-clones, whom she acknowledges as her cousins (267). Kristeva describes the task of the third generation of feminism as leading to

> an apparent de-dramatization of the 'fight to the death' between rival groups and thus between the sexes [...] in order that the struggle, the implacable difference, the violence be conceived in the very place where it operates with the maximum intransigence, in other words, in personal and sexual identity itself, so as to make it disintegrate in its very nucleus ("Women's" 413).

The rivalry between Evie and Dr. Flowers crumbles with the introduction of Dr. Flowers' self-clones. In Evie's willingness to protect Dr. Flowers' self-clones, she seems to realize her responsibility to bring about a "new ethical vision" for everyone (McAfee 102). Brydon writes, "We need to move beyond thinking solely in terms of insiders and outsiders if we are to understand the complexities of colonial and postcolonial discursive systems" ("Sister" 168). For Dr. Flowers to extend his own existence through mechanisms of cloning, he possibly recognizes his "self" as not entirely pure, and that the clones are not entirely "other." Hopefully, the future generations of Dr. Flowers' self-clones will settle and reconcile even greater rivalries. The novel's ending is inconclusive and readers are left with an overbearing sense of cyclical corruption, while the potential for change and moral improvement persists.

On Miranda:

Like Prospero's original obedient daughter, Lai's version of Miranda begins as a young girl—passive and innocent, non-confrontational and complacent. She is

incognizant of social oppression and possesses only limited knowledge and choices. However, she gradually develops social awareness as she realizes her own unhappiness. Her innocence begins to shatter and she gains experience of the world. Symbolic of Canadian circumstances, Miranda is the protagonist to whom we relate. Further, she is not to be underestimated because she will determine the ultimate ending of the story. Miranda's character interrogates, how did the violence begin and how can it end? Her system of values is continually challenged, and she constantly loses and revises her sense of right and wrong. Finally, she is forced to recognize and absolve the violence that began within herself in hopes of creating a better world around her.

According to Kristeva, the status quo of oppositional hierarchies originates at birth, when a child is forced to turn away from the illusory unity of the mother in the prelinguistic realm, for the compensatory love for the father in the linguistic world. For Kristeva, the opposition is founded in language, between the semiotic and the symbolic, where the semiotic is associated with the maternal, from which the child must separate in order to establish an autonomous identity in the paternal and symbolic world:

> At the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification (the symbolic). But the symbolic constitutes itself only be breaking with this anteriority [...]. Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother (*Desire* 136).

To bolster the separation between mother and child, an undecidable boundary exists that leads the child to perceive the maternal body as threatening to his or her autonomy. In order for the child to finally form a unified identity, the abjection of the maternal body is the first "biological and psychic necessity [...]. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation" (Kristeva, *Black* 27-28). The symbolic becomes

possible for the child only by breaking an archaic attachment with the mother, and repressing a radical dependency on her. However, the abjection of the maternal body is mistakenly projected against the feminine in society, and all that is perceived to be threatening to the fragile boundaries of the self—all that is "other." In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva illustrates the possibility of reconnecting with the archaic maternal. Her text, separated by two columns represents, among other things, the disunion and potential reunion of the "self" and the "other," which is an experience possible only for women during pregnancy and childbirth.

Following upon Kristeva's psychoanalytic notions of childhood development and identity, Miranda experiences separation from her mother in three crucial stages. Separation from mother is an inconsolable experience, described by Kristeva as "the disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me" (*Black* 5). The first separation occurs before Miranda possesses the language with which to understand and identify the lost:

> As for the precise nature of my conception [...] I know nothing [...]. From time to time I get an inkling, enough to sense that there was something I knew before this moment, but whatever it was flooded away from me in that instant, before I could grasp a sense of what it was that was leaving (15).

The first separation takes the form of loss of "an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable" (*Black* 13). Once Miranda realizes that she is separate from the maternal body, it is already too late for satisfaction, and in searching for "reconciliation with the loss of the Thing, [...] a compensation for the Thing," she "wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves" (*Black* 13). Miranda moves into the symbolic order in search of gratification.

Miranda's second experience of maternal separation is reminiscent of the mirror stage in the psychoanalytic process. Although Kristeva establishes that the mirror stage occurs during the first six to eighteen months of the child's development, Miranda is four when this modified incident of the mirror stage occurs (*Revolution* 47):

> My mother remained fixed in front of her vanity table. In the mirror, her face was still and hard as a mask, but because of the light that flickered from the computer screen, I could see the glitter of tears silently running down her cheeks (20).

According to Miranda, her mother's melancholy is the result of a single "unkind look" directed from her husband (18). Miranda begins to perceive her mother as unfulfilled, "lacking," and dependent upon her husband for gratification. Hence, the relationship between mother and daughter is effectively severed by the father. The child's dependence on the mother dissipates, and she looks for satisfaction in the symbolic, with the father. Prior to this incident, Miranda's childhood has been one of complete bliss. According to Miranda, since birth, her family had entered into such a "new-found state of bliss that they didn't [even] notice changes happening in the outside world" (17). So engrossed with the unity she felt with her mother, perhaps it was only Miranda who did not notice the changes. Following this experience of the mirror stage, Miranda is befittingly launched into the world of the symbolic as she begins school, where her classmates' exclusion places her on the margins of the sociosymbolic order.

The final experience of separation from her mother occurs when she accidentally drops a case of durians on her mother.

> I felt more sick than sad. I had done this. I had killed my mother. It was a crime with no witnesses, and of course no one would ever suspect me, but I had done this. And there was no taking it back. I ran to the bathroom and vomited (88).

Literally, rather than emotionally or psychologically, Miranda experiences matricide. After this experience, Miranda is completely launched into the social world, where her identity is founded on the control and rejection of abject "others," and she experiences a division in her identity and loyalty more severely than before.

Despite her best efforts at being a "good" person—a person who contributes positively to the world and to the people around her—Miranda fails repeatedly. She finds herself torn between contributing to the corporate city, to the dismay of the clone community; or sabotaging the corporate city, to the chagrin of everyone still part of the social order, including those left of her family. Caught in the dilemma, Miranda oscillates between the clone community and the corporate society. Women, arguably, face a similar double bind, that if they identify themselves as women, they ensure their exclusion from and marginality in relation to the patriarchal order. On the other hand, if women identify with the patriarchal order and make themselves in "his" image, then they end up supporting the same patriarchal order that excludes and marginalizes women. This double bind is constituted through social and symbolic structures within which we all learn to speak and think. Unavoidably, we raise and educate generations into and through these structures.

The sociosymbolic contract, as discussed by Kristeva, positions its members in specific ways, and Miranda literally signs contracts on three occasions. The first time, she signs Dr. Seto's papers of confidentiality to work at the blood lab with Dr. Flowers (100). She then signs Adrien Wither's contract selling him the rights to her mother's song (199). Finally, she signs Darling Tom's contract to work at the Pallas advertising agency (238). Working with Dr. Flowers, Miranda directly aids his research on human

genetic engineering. Selling her mother's song, Miranda grieves her father, who is still mourning his wife. It is sold to advertise for Pallas Shoes, the corporation that manufactures clones to work in sub-standard labour factories (215). In solitude, Miranda rationalizes that circumstances were beyond her control, and that she had no choice but to sell her mother's song in her attempt to escape Dr. Flowers—which she fails to do—despite having sold the song (199). However, Miranda's guilt ends at her father's grief; she eventually signs a contract to take the job writing advertisements for Pallas Shoes, where her gain is directly linked to the loss of the clone-workers.

When Miranda is not contributing to the corporate city, she is sabotaging society. She joins Evie on a trip to the mountains, implicating herself in the stealing of Dr. Flowers' Volvo. When Evie discloses Dr. Flowers' illegal acts of cloning, Miranda's innocence shatters completely. She reflects, "My world had suddenly become something quite different from what it had been mere moments ago" (161). Miranda realizes that she cannot return to Dr. Flowers' lab. But without Dr. Flowers' job, she is unable to contribute financially to her family and bemoans, "Everything is getting worse" (186). Unemployed, she prints and distributes anti-corporation pamphlets (188). Then she begins stealing toys to sell (218-19). For fear of exclusion from the corporate order altogether, Miranda returns and settles for a job writing advertisements for Pallas Shoes. Miranda realizes that working for Pallas implies an exclusion from Evie. "It was obvious that she [Evie] was the kiss of death to my family life, and besides, I didn't want her leaning over my shoulder as I set to work blackening my own soul [for Pallas Shoes]" (236). Miranda is given two choices—to be with Evie at the exclusion of her family, or

to live and work within the corporate society, remaining complicit with the ongoing abuse of the clone community.

How can Miranda break out of the cycle of oppression, when everything is connected, and everyone is part of the system? From Darling Tom, the advertising agent for Pallas Shoes; to Chang, the genetic technician at Dr. Flowers' aquarium (259-61); to Jane, the girl on the bus (165); all the characters are positioned within the corporate social order without any intention of changing it. Miranda seems to be an unlikely figure for change or empowerment, but hope for ethical change endures. Miranda's potential to break out of the oppressive cycle lies in returning to the original strength and wisdom of Nu Wa, the creation goddess. Miranda explores her memories of Nu Wa, obscured by her education of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" (186-87). Her memories are diagnosed as a symptom of the "dreaming disease," apparent in people who have fistulas on the side of their heads (108). Miranda believes that her fistulas serve the "function of memory," effacing boundaries and connecting the past with the present (108). Dr. Flowers considers the fistulas, along with the dreams and memories, an unaccountable defect in his work on human genetic engineering (163). The dreams, usually of historic and literary content, may be violent, romantic, or trivial (101-102). Highlighting the risks of memory, one girl diagnosed with the "dreaming disease,"

> could recall and recount every death, every rape, every wound, every moment of suffering that had ever been inflicted by a member of her ancestral lineage [...]. The stories she told were terrible. She told her family she was going to drown herself. Already in deep despair over the content of her stories, her family did nothing to stop her (85).

Despite the society's attempt at denying and dismissing memory and history, it returns with great force through uncontrollable gaps and aporias. Citizens, not knowing how to accept and deal with the violences of history, are compelled to suicide.

As Miranda continues to interact with Evie, Evie helps to reacquaint Miranda with the otherness of her own psyche. Evie, threatening to the order and identity of the corporate city, is the social abject, the foreigner and "other" of society, who "draws attention to the fragility of the law," and whose very existence questions what constitutes life and citizenship (Kristeva, *Powers* 4). For Miranda, durian is the abject of her "self." Durian, unfamiliar to mainstream Canadians and negatively depicted as "strange" and "foreign," has been rejected by the Asian Canadian diaspora, in their strive to assimilate. Perhaps, certain foods, because of ingestion, are perceived as threatening to the formation of an assimilated identity. For Miranda, durian is even more significant as it threatens to engulf her entire person. In fact, her identity is indistinguishable from the durian fruit. Her birth was a result of her mother consuming a birth-inducing durian, and the smell of the durian has haunted her relentlessly:

> My sour body stank up the whole house. The unpleasant cat pee odour oozed from my pores and flowed into every room. It swirled around the coffee table, glided smoothly over the couch and poured over the rug. It crept up the foot of my father's favourite armchair and dribbled over the fat armrests. It coiled [...]. It gushed [...]. It sneaked [...]. It crept [...]. It flooded [...] and wafted [...]. That foul odour of cat pee and pepper not only infused the external fabric of our house, it seeped into the skin of all my family members. It rushed up their nostrils and in through their ears. It poured down their throats when they opened their mouths to speak (15-17).

The odour is disrespectful of the boundaries of her body, traversing them freely and uncontrollably. It is uncontainable, causing her not a small amount of embarrassment and shame. In her need to negate and repress the abject that consumes her very being,

she has always refused to ingest durian, castigating it to "an improper past" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 183).

Ceremonially, Evie brings Miranda to consume durian, and Miranda begins her process of self re(dis)covery as boundaries merge and melt.

> That delirious smell rushed into the air. The yellow pieces glistened like fresh organ meat. [...] I had always thought there was something cannibalistic about eating it, and so I never had. But this time an overwhelming sense of wonder compelled me. I scooped the creamy yellow flesh into my mouth, felt its taste and odour merge with my own (223-24).

With blind courage, Miranda partakes of the durian flesh in a cannibalistic act of communion. Miranda re-embraces the "other" that has been sacrificed so the "self" may live. Suppression of the "other" within has been attended with tremendous tension, and Miranda finally feels relieved as boundaries dissolve, and she experiences wholeness again.

> Confronting the foreigner, whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel 'lost,' 'indistinct,' 'hazy' (Kristeva, *Strangers* 187).

Internal differences are overcome and reconciled. Miranda recognizes her strangeness, so that she shall not suffer from it. Miranda internalizes the rivalries of the structure, realizes the plurality of her selves, and learns to accept diversity and "otherness" within herself. Embracing the stranger within herself, she embraces the stranger in society.

As a key to social change, the experience of motherhood brings about a utopian agenda for society. In *The Tempest,* Caliban bemoans of not having consummated with Miranda and peopled the island with little Calibans (1.2.346-50). Implying a marriage of the margins, Evie succeeds in the impregnation of Miranda, in *Salt Fish Girl.* Kristeva explains maternity as the embodiment of "alterity within" (Oliver 183). Pregnancy and

childbirth result in the splitting and redoubling of subjectivity in the woman's body, leading to a spitting out and expelling of an "other."

> Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other (*Desire* 237).

> Then, slowly, a shadowy shape gathered, became detached, darkened, stood out [...] just bony, sleek, yellow, misshapen, a piece of my body jutting out unnaturally, asymmetrically [...] frozen placenta, live limb of a skeleton, monstrous graft of life on myself, a living dead. Life... death... undecidable (*Tales* 242).

The child is depicted as waste violently expelled from the mother's body. Similarly, Miranda's experience of childbirth reflects the experience of expelling an "other:"

> I howled with the pain of womb spasming deeply, and then there was a dark head between my legs, a human face. Evie reached under water, guided the thing out, black-haired and bawling, a little baby girl (269).

Following the grotesque description of pregnancy and childbirth, motherhood is an experience of unconditional love directed toward an "other." "The mother's love is also the willingness to give herself up, to embrace the strangeness within herself" (Oliver 183). The arrival of the child "leads the mother into the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for an other" ("Women's" 411). The new mother loves the child as "other," as she has never loved an "other" before, for she has only ever abjected "others."

Kristeva asserts pregnancy and childbirth as the only available way for women to re-establish their identities with the maternal body, from which we have split since childhood. "The mother's oscillating union-disunion with her child recalls her own union with her mother. [...] And she loves her mother not only as an Other, but also as herself, now a mother" (Oliver 65-66). By reuniting with mother, we reunite with the abject in

our selves and society. A daughter's love through identification with her mother, coinciding with her love for her newborn child is the love that founds herethics. She realizes "the other is the flesh of her flesh, natural loved. She knows that the Other is [...] within. [...] She realizes the other is the same, that the gap is not absolute" (Oliver 68). Love for the "other" within the "self" and within society should be like a new mother's love for her child. It is this love that completes.

If the split and reunion of the columns of text in "Stabat Mater" represent for Kristeva her dis/connection with the Virgin Mary, the two columns, for Miranda, represent her split from Nu Wa, a source of empowering and creative energy. Through "giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother, [...] simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently more negatory of the social, symbolic bond" (Kristeva, *Desire* 239). Miranda returns to "a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject" (Kristeva, *Powers* 6).

> I imagined a thousand tiny ocean creatures swimming in the rock beneath, leaving the ancient imprint of their bodies to sleep beneath ice and snow, smelling faintly of salt [...]. I felt a strange sort of longing, that feeling again of being on the verge of remembering something I did not know I had forgotten (*Salt Fish Girl* 268).

Troubles began when Nu Wa split her tail to join the sociosymbolic order. With Miranda, her legs reunite as the singular tail it originally was.

By informing Shakespeare's Caliban and Miranda with Kristeva's herethics, Lai demonstrates the potential that Canadians have in bringing about a new social ethic. Rather than reinstating previous hierarchies or apathetically conceding to unethical global social conditions, Canadians play an important role in the world. Lai gives Miranda and

Caliban/Evie each a journey of self-discovery and empowerment, leading them to an understanding and reconciliation of rivalries internally and within humanity. Learning to re-embrace the multiplicity of their natures, even the parts that have been repressed and condemned as "other," they recognize the illness of society and possess the potential to create a better world.

Chapter 3

"It [the fox] would pick up a skull and put it on its head. It then would shake its head, throw the skull away if it fell down, and choose another. It tried less than four or five and finally found one that fit perfectly. Then it covered its body with leaves and flowers [...] they all turned into clothes. In no time, the fox turned into a woman" (*Taiping Guangji*, "Seng Yen Tung" 10: 451.3691).

I "loot and rummage in an official past, specifically a literary past, but I like paintings and sculptures and the movies and folklore and heresies, too. This past, for me, has important decorative, ornamental functions; further, it is a vast repository of outmoded likes, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based" (Angela Carter, "Notes from the Frontline" 76).

"*All* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating the Dead* 156).

Returning to classic fox narratives, long dead, forgotten, or unknown to contemporary Canadian readers, Larissa Lai gives the *Liaozhai* Fox another lifetime, even immortality. However, challenges face the diasporan writer who revives literature that is not here, but there, not now, but then. To presuppose what is unknown would risk obscurity, while to explain that which is already known is redundant. This chapter is about the process of retrieving the classic fox narratives for the purpose of reviving them into the present. Firstly, there is the problem of access—Lai is stepping into the haunted house of fiction, that has been sold and resold, appropriated and re-appropriated time and time again. She is looking for footprints and clues of women who have inhabited the past, buried beneath ideologies implicated within classic texts since the time of their writing and publication. Lai treads through the politically interested chambers of sinology and translation studies. Secondly, there is the issue of rewriting to correct outdated ideologies. Lai's strategy is to present the old stories from the fresh perspective

of a neglected extant character. Finally, the *Liaozhai* Fox becomes a palatable, recognizable literary construct, which Lai uses to write new stories. Readers are given a set of fresh eyes with which to perceive the fox, perchance we encounter one ourselves, for Lai frees the forgotten fox to walk among contemporary men and women—to bite, to trick, and to make new stories.

With respect to access, Benzi Zhang stipulates that the global epistemological framework for Chinese studies is set outside of China by Western translators, sinologists, and anthropologists ("Culture" 126). Zhang rearticulates the debate between ethnographer Rey Chow and sinologist Stephen Owen. Owen criticizes contemporary Chinese poets like Bei Dao for allowing their "self-interested" dream of being translated into English shape the direction of their poetry (Owen 29). Owen seems to expect a certain historic, linguistic, or cultural quality, which contemporary poetry lacks. Chow explicates that, given Owen's expertise in classical Chinese poetry, he is unreasonably expecting from contemporary poets greater "fidelity" to the "grandeur of [their] own cultural past. (*Writing* 4). Chow continues by criticizing Owen's lamentation over the loss of "Chinese authenticity" as a "self-interested" attempt at maintaining authority over Chinese literature, unjustly appropriated in the first place. Contemporary Chinese literature is developing in a direction inconsistent with the methodologies and interests of Western sinology, and when non-Western scholars and poets export their own cultural products into the world market, inevitable "conflicts" occur because of contradictory ideological positions and representations (Zhang, "Culture" 125).

Chinese literature in China is not without disruptions, but given the historic circumstances of Chinese studies in the West, it is particularly difficult to access Chinese

literary knowledge for a diasporan in Canada—add to that a language barrier and cultural and temporal disjunctures. As Chinese literary scholars and Western sinologists wrestle over the authority of Chinese literary and cultural studies and its global presentation, what is the position of diasporan writers? When all that a diasporan writer can access are tatters of literary history that have been appropriated and re-appropriated, what discourse can be constructed? Chinese Canadian writers possess the precious task of filing through materials left by Western sinologists and anthropologists, and Chinese self-translators and auto-ethnographers. Through this process, the goal is to produce a recognizable literature that identifies the significant relations that lie behind the production and translation of literature, and acknowledges its own precarious position—in some ways powerful, and other ways powerless—in the production of literature.

Lai's (not so) unique diasporic dependence on Western translators and sinologists demonstrates that, though sinology may be limited, it is not only immensely integral to the production of diasporic literature and identity, it is simply reality. Lai, who lacks access to original texts in Chinese, must read through the lens of a third person's interpretation and translation. She writes about her research scouring through texts that employ different systems of transliteration reflecting translators' political and historical place and time. "Perhaps one can only say that the hodgepodge trail of [...] transliterations marks the disruptions in our (super)natural journey from past to present, from 'there' to 'here'" (Lai, *When* "Acknowledgements"). As such, her access to classic texts is intercepted by time, language, and politics.

Though Lai likens the Fox's act of transformation to the diasporan act of assimilation, the Fox's imperfect transformation similarly reiterates the diasporan endeavour for an abstract origin:

> the Fox breathing life into the bodies of the dead is like an Asian woman trying to breathe life into the assimilated almost-white self required by the social pressures of liberalism. She can never do it perfectly. There are always moments where the synapses don't connect, where there are understandings missing ("Political" 153).

Breathing life into the fox tales that have yet to be animated into Canadian literature, Lai questions the ideal of historic authenticity. Culture and literature exist not to entrap the individual into certain archaic modes of behaviour or identity, but serve the purpose of survival and longevity, through evolution and adaptation. In fact, Lai writes, "I see a kind of liberation in fakery and its acknowledgement, especially in contradistinction to notions of pureness and authenticity, which in the end produce only fascism and violence" (*When Fox* 257). Rather than getting lost in literature's multiple interpretations and translations, literature is a tool usable for understanding and explaining reality. For the Fox, manipulating cultural and gender norms brings her to live a thousand years, ultimately achieving immortality.

Another aspect to accessing classic literature involves treading through historical and ideological implicated in their ongoing discourse. For example, although only Pu Songling (1640-1715) is identified in Lai's research sources, she manipulates an entire body of fox narratives, which includes the work done by a variety of writers, compilers, editors, and translators. Before Lai begins her manipulation of Pu's *Strange Tales of Liaozhai,*[2] the text has already been through numerous editions, reflecting identities and

[2]"Liaozhai" refers to a specific study or den fondly used by Pu Songling for leisure and conversation among scholars. Eventually, "Liaozhai" also became a literary sobriquet used by Pu Songling. Some translators do not translate "Liaozhai." Herbert Giles names his translation, *Strange Tales from a Chinese*

ideologies that have crossed time and space. The *Liaozhai* is a compilation of "stories of wonders" by Pu Songling involving ghosts, spirits, monks and nuns, and, of course, foxes. As compiler, instead of writer, Pu Songling destabilizes conventional notions of authorship. Moreover, the manuscript was not published until 1766, half a century after the author's death, with entries rearranged, deleted, and edited.[3] Thereafter, every new edition of the book has been reinterpreted and altered with accompanying commentaries and the *Liaozhai* has gained increasing critical attention and appreciation. Zhang Youhe's 1962 edition is considered the first modern edition spurring contemporary criticism and analysis (Chiang 75). It is a four-volume publication of the *Liaozhai* and consists of 494 stories in twelve scroll-divisions.

During the Qing dynasty, increased interest in "stories of wonders" resulted in the publication of several narrative collections of supernatural and unexplainable events, such as Pu Songling's *Liaozhai*, and the republication of the *Taiping Guangji,* originally published in 981 of the Song Dynasty. To demonstrate the intricate interconnectivity of fox stories as a body of work manipulated by Lai, the novel quotes Robert Hans van Gulik's *Sexual Practices of the Ancient Chinese* (210):

> When a fox is fifty years old, it acquires the ability to change itself into a woman. At a hundred it can assume the shape of a beautiful girl, or that of a sorcerer.... At that age the fox knows what is happening at a distance of a thousand miles, it can derange the human mind and reduce a person to an imbecile. When the fox is a thousand years old, it is in communication with Heaven, and is then called Heavenly Fox, 't'ien-hu' (*When Fox* 92).

Studio (1968), and Denis Mair and Victor Mair name translation version *Strange Tales from a Make-do Studio* (1989).

[3] For information on the narrative influence of Pu Songling and the pre-1766 manuscripts of the *Liaozhai* refer to Barr, Allan. "The Textual Transmission of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44.2 (1984): 515-562.

Although commonly quoted in publications about classic fox narratives (Huntington, *Alienkind* 1; Huntington, "Foxes" 80; Wu, "Part I" 122), the above text, *Xuanzhong ji* by Guo Pu, survives only as a work compiled within the *Taiping Guangji* (9: 447.3652). As the title suggests, the *Taiping Guangji* is an extensive compilation of works written during a peaceful era. It was compiled under the Song reunification of China, and meant to promote political and cultural hegemony legitimating Emperor Song Taizong (r. 976 – 987) as the rightful successor to the Tang heritage. The Song bureaucrats employed and assimilated frustrated scholar officials of the late dynasty, such as Li Fang (925 – 996), to collect Tang and pre-Tang stories dated from 221 BC – 960 AD for the *Taiping Guangji*. The 1961 Zhonghua Shuju (Beijing) publication of the *Taiping Guangji* consists of 10 volumes, out of which only 88 fables involve foxes.

Although compiled and worked upon by scholars, "stories of wonders," including those about supernatural foxes compiled in the *Liaozhai* and the *Taiping Guangji*, are known to occupy a marginal place outside of official history and scholarship because they are said to be based on false reports and hearsay. Typically, fox narratives enjoy a popular status, circulating among commoners, and playing important roles as "popular deities, aspiring immortals, household poltergeists, romantic heroines, and scholarly friends" (Huntington, "Foxes" 79). Their historically marginalized circumstance is a detail not omitted in *When Fox is a Thousand:*

> Human history books make no room for foxes. But talk to any gossip on the streets or any popcorn-munching movie-goer, and they will tell you that foxes of my disposition have been around since before the first dynasty (15).

Scholars contrast Pu Songling with orthodox historian Sima Qian who wrote *Records of a Historian* (Han) about state affairs and political figures. Pu Songling, echoing "Grand

Historian" Sima Qian, refers to himself in his commentaries as the "Historian of strange events," and sets up a rhetorical authority similar to that of the historian (Chiang 31; Zeitlin 1).[4]

Despite their paradoxical textual reputation, fox narratives and their discourse possess an extensive textual history, and scholars continue to catalogue, analyze, and historicize themes, motifs, agendas, genres, and interpretations. Perhaps, recent interest in border crossing and marginalized peoples and literatures has resulted in an increase of scholarly attention to the fox figure. The fox as a marginal entity intruding upon a centre is a theme not neglected in scholarship. Rania Huntington's *Alienkind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narratives* (2003) discusses foxes intruding into human homes and into sexual and romantic relationships. In Judith Zeitlin's *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (1993), one of her chapters deals with foxes intruding into the most private of human dreams. Given that the center is defined and maintained by the borders formed against the marginal and the strange, Sing-Cheng Lydia Chiang's *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China* (2005) investigates the construction of identity in three separate anthologies of "stories of wonders" published during the Qing.[5] Chiang's text is also extended to introduce the identities and agendas of Western translators of the *Liaozhai*.[6]

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[4] Another compilation of supernatural wonders published during the Qing is entitled *Teachings omitted by Confucius* compiled by Ji Yun. Contrasting the orthodox teachings of Confucius, *Teachings omitted by Confucius* collects stories left out by Confucius regarding supernatural foxes and other unexplainable events.

[5] Chiang focuses on *Liaozhai Zhiyi* by Pu Songling (1640-1715), *Zi buyu* by Yuan Mei (1716-1798), and *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724-1805).

[6] For example, British sinologist Herbert A. Giles (1845-1935) published the first extensive Western language translation of *Liaozhai* under the title, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (1880). He selected 164 stories among the 455 entries contained in the 1766 edition, deleting all overt references to sex and violence and dedicating the result to his wife and children.

Therefore, Lai's impersonation of the fox icon merely accounts for one of the many past appropriations. She writes:

> The history that I'm going to write, I told myself, may be ideologically interested, but no more so than what's already out there (Lai, "Political" 150).
>
> I want to be firm that the idea of the traditional itself is highly constructed and highly ideological. This version is one among many. There is no original, only endless multiple trails that point into the past. We can never grasp that past. These stories are always about the present (Lai, *When Fox* 257).

The classical fox is a malleable icon with an unresolved history, susceptible to multiple re-appropriations. As such, the fox possesses the potential for understanding and communicating contemporary reality. Since fox narratives serve the purpose of defining the center, they have been rewritten every time the center evolves. From a conventional point of view, the fox is an animal that inhabits the margins of society and their narratives possess an adulterated origin. In *When Fox is a Thousand*, the classical fox is selected by Lai to represent the marginalized diasporan writer. Lai directs the spotlight onto the fox tales and inverts the relationship between the center and the margin. Even though the margin becomes the center when Lai focuses on the perspective of the fox, by associating with the fox, Lai emphasizes diasporan marginality. Emphasizing the value of living on the border, Lai concurrently builds up the margins, beginning with the retrieval of a literary genealogy.

For popular readers without any intention of digging through library stacks for world literature in translation, Lai is responsible for the reception and perpetuation of the classic fox tales. In their classic Chinese or translated English forms, these tales are "labelled as too intellectual, too academic, incomprehensible. They are circulated within certain small if thoughtful circles, but do not reach the audiences which novels reach"

(Lai, "Political" 148). To Lai, the fox fables must become accessible and empowering, especially to young diasporan women readers.

In creating a relevant contemporary context, Lai's protagonist Fox obtains citizenship to Canada through immigration (15). The Fox offers her family's situation in Canada as an allegory to the ostensible Chinese Canadian situation. Though immortal and animal, the Fox suffers from the same mundane issues of family life and expectations that afflict young people: choice of occupation, pressure to succeed, and pressure to fit in. Human preoccupations are re-framed by the farcical personification of foxes. The fox family remonstrates our protagonist Fox:

> Don't you know your actions reflect on us all? If you keep making these visitations, other fox families will talk about us. They will criticize us for not having raised you properly. It would be better if you chose a more respectable occupation, like fishing or stealing chickens (13).

As the fox family adjusts to Canada, it becomes strict and anxious about fitting in and maintaining social security.

The self-narrated experiences of Lai's contemporary Fox—from her independent adventures in China and Canada, to her relationship with Artemis—follow recognizable traits and trends that intersect with the classic fox tales and their permutations. Through rewriting, Lai "put[s] an old story into a new context in such a way that the audience can grasp both the traditional version and [her] remaking of it, in a single move" (*When Fox* 257). The classic *Liaozhai* tales must be retold so that they contextualize the *new* fox tale, which Lai ultimately creates. Certain characteristics are preserved so the Fox remains recognizable, while "offensive" aspects are altered or omitted in support of the writer's goal of retrieving a "corrected" version of literary history for the contemporary

generation of diasporan Canadian women. The fox narratives must be ideologically updated, beginning with its representation of sexuality.

In the *Liaozhai* telling of "Heng Niang," a housewife is vying with a concubine for the attention of their husband (Pu 4.7.1432; trans. in *Renditions* 97-101). The wife consults a neighbour for advice to win back her husband's affection. After the wife succeeds in winning back the husband, the neighbour reveals her own identity as a fox and departs. The *Liaozhai* tale blames the wife for losing her husband's sexual and emotional interest. It begins by describing Heng Niang, in her thirties, who "was only average in looks" while the concubine is a "very good looking girl in her twenties" (*Renditions* 98). The fox neighbour incriminates, "Alas! How can you blame your man for a neglect you brought upon yourself? If you nag him day and night, you are like the hawk that drives the birds towards the depth of the bushes" (*Renditions* 98). The story continues with lessons and tricks on femininity and seduction, such as batting eyelashes and throwing glances from various angles.

In Lai's re-adaptation of "Heng-Niang," Lai's women characters are ultimately uninterested in participating in the male-centred household. Lai's Fox explains that the wife never wanted the affection of her husband. "She responded [to his cold hands] the way one does to winter, drawing the blankets tighter and waiting for it to end," eventually buying him a concubine in order to "escape that wifely duty that had become increasingly disagreeable" (13). The wife realized her mistake when the husband forgot about her altogether, because without his affection, she lost authority over the household servants—a practical preoccupation. Our protagonist Fox remains as the educator of seduction and femininity, teaching similar lessons as the original *Liaozhai* fox. However, the story ends

with the wife successfully winning the favour of both the husband and the concubine. The wife and the concubine decide to run away together, both of them leaving behind the husband with the cold hands.

Thematically, "Heng Niang" finds its place among other fox tales where vixens represent the pinnacle of femininity and seduction. Vixens are more attractive than human women, and are accredited to defining femininity. For example, an imperial concubine of the Shang dynasty, Consort Daji is identified as possessed by a fox and responsible for the invention of footbinding. Since she had not transformed her paws into feet, she used bandages to hide them, and women thereafter imitated her (Huntington, *Alienkind* 177). The fox spirit that possessed Consort Daji eventually brings about the fall of the dynasty. Women's sexuality, regarded as dangerous to society, is associated with foxes, prostitutes, and kingdom destroying imperial concubines. Rania Huntington opens her essay, "Foxes and Sex in Late Imperial Chinese Narrative," with two quotes that express the "standard judgment" that "the shape-changing fox is the embodiment of lust [and] dangerous sexuality" (78):

> The fox is a lustful creature, and it seduces people with its lustfulness (qtd. in Huntington, "Foxes" 78).
>
> ...the shape-changing fox is the embodiment of lust... especially the vixen, as the embodiment of dangerous sexuality... as a derogatory term for a seductive, loose, and cunning woman (qtd. in Huntington, "Foxes" 78).

The same fox spirit that possessed Consort Daji returns to Earth during the Han dynasty, taking the form of a beautiful woman and becoming an imperial favourite of Emperor Han Chengdi. Consort Zhao Hede, the fox reincarnate, and her sister Consort Zhao Feiyan, a swan reincarnate, are sexually indomitable, and, soon enough, they bring about the death of the Emperor who dies by an overdose of aphrodisiac.

In anthologies about famous women, fox narratives are often included, each explaining one another (Huntington, "Foxes" 84). Consequently, women's sexuality, and especially the socially "transgressive" aspects of women's sexuality, is linked closely to foxes. For example, the following quote explains fox transformation as a result of consuming menstrual blood.

> Shape-changing foxes are common in the north [...] because northern women throw their soiled menstrual rags in the gutter, where foxes eat them, gaining the ability to transform (qtd. in Huntington, "Foxes" 84).

Women's sexuality is a "transgression linked to pollution: menstrual blood itself, and its presence in the public gutter. Women whose bodily fluids are not properly contained indoors produce creatures who violate species boundaries" (Huntington, "Foxes" 85). Fox narratives demonstrate the anxiety and preoccupation involved with controlling women's sexuality in society.

Though sexuality does not reflect the entirety of the fox tradition, it is a persistent theme that many writers, including Lai, focus on and retell. Of the 86 fables in the *Liaozhai* pertaining to foxes, only 34 of them involve a sexual liaison with a fox.[7] These 34 fox fables, nevertheless, are among the most famous and influential stories in the collection, and the proportion of these stories becomes higher in imitations of *Liaozhai* (Huntington, *Alienkind* 175). Though our protagonist fox enjoys homosexual encounters, "Feng Sanniang[8]" is the single example of a lesbian fox romance in the *Liaozhai*

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[7] For a complete list of fox fables *in Liaozhai,* see Gu Meigao 辜美高"Tan Hu 談狐' in *Guoji liaozhai lunwen ji國際聊齋論文集.* Eds. Gu Meigao and Wang Zhizhong 王枝忠. Beijing: Shifan xueyuan chubanshe, 1992. 251-64.

[8] "Feng Sanniang" is a story about a female fox that begins a sexual relationship with a human woman (Pu 2.5.610). The fox arranges a marriage for the woman, scheming that if the woman is secured to a man, she could never move away and leave the fox. The woman also realizes that to keep the fox nearby, the fox must also marry the same man. The woman plots to get the fox drunk, and her husband molests the fox. When the fox wakes up, she declares that the encounter has ruined her chances for immortality and runs away.

(Huntington, *Alienkind* 217). This story is omitted in the translations cited by Lai, including those by Giles, Lu, Mair,Yang, and in *Renditions*.

Emphasizing romances between women in pre-modern fiction, Lai creates sexual possibilities for the neglected homosexual female fox. Thus, Lai assumes a sexual perspective that is twice marginalized. Women straddle the boundary of humanity, while lesbians straddle the boundary of womanhood. Lai reiterates Robert Hans van Gulik's interpretation of female homosexuality as an accepted standard in ancient Chinese culture. This permissible attitude towards female homosexuality is also reiterated in Lai's narrative of Yu Hsuan Chi, demonstrating Lai's reflection and re-appropriation of sinology and translation studies. Van Gulik reasons that a "tolerant attitude" towards female homosexuality existed in pre-modern China because "when a number of women are obliged to live in continuous and close proximity, the occurrence of sapphism can hardly be avoided" (*Sexual* 48). Van Gulik's idea is that given the polygamous nature of households in pre-modern China, women could only be sexually satisfied through homosexuality.

Another *Liaozhai* tale rewritten in *When Fox is a Thousand* is the "Merchant's Son" (Pu 1.1.125). In the classic telling of the "Merchant's Son," attention is focussed on human anxieties, and the dangers that a fox spirit poses to a human family. The classic version is interpreted as a coming-of-age experience for the young boy as he proves his masculinity by trapping the trickster fox while the father is away on business. Lai's version, told from the perspective of our protagonist Fox, focuses on the excitement and suspense felt by the young, reckless, trickster foxes. A cousin fox, seeking revenge for the death of their grandmother haunts a human family and circumvents their traps. The

cousin fox loses her tail in the beginning of the escapade, and her life by the end of it. The story, in both versions, indicates the dangers of fox-human encounters, and how the encounters must, at all costs, be strictly avoided. Fox hauntings usually continue until the fox is exposed and captured or killed, or until the human dies. Therefore, witnessed by our protagonist Fox, she learns an important lesson about dealing with humans, which she brings into all her future haunts. As the survivor who lives to tell the tale, our protagonist Fox learns from past casualties not to push her limits when seducing humans, and to take care of herself and of the human she seduces.

Again, sexual parasitism is neither a constant nor a singular preoccupation in fox narratives. For foxes to achieve immortality, there are two options. Foxes can drain their human partners of sexual energy, or they can remain loyally bound to their human lovers and achieve immortality through moral advancement. Those under the spell of parasitic foxes lose judgement and self-control, become mad, and their energy levels deplete, eventually leading to death. Where the fox remains loyal and dutiful, she is a great aid to her human lover, and they live happily together forever. Our protagonist Fox is an embodiment of both harmful sexuality and of moral advancement. Her affair with Artemis results in Artemis' emotional and physical disintegration. But as Artemis remains aware of neither her affliction nor the symptoms involved with being haunted by a fox, it is up to our protagonist Fox to take meticulous care not to kill Artemis through over-indulgence. Eventually, the Fox even aids Artemis in dealing with issues over her lost biological mother and the death of her friend, by attempting to find the truth behind both mysteries.

The relationship between the Fox and Artemis is contextualized through retelling anecdotes of a classic fox haunt—beginning with their dream encounter, to their consummation, and finally to their separation (Huntington, "Foxes" 82). Illusion is followed by seduction and deception leading to a loss of will and disintegration. After the Fox stalks Artemis through a busy Hong Kong marketplace, observing and investigating the habits of her prey (123-25), she enters Artemis' life through the conduit of dreams (128-29). Reality and fantasy blur when the Fox intrudes upon Artemis' most private thoughts. Zeitlin identifies dreams as one of Pu Songling's major fascinations, and she devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of dreams in the *Liaozhai.* Of all the *Liaozhai* tales, 80-odd stories involve dreams, though not of all these dream tales involve foxes (Zeitlin 135). Dreams are a possible means of communication between parallel worlds, and between people for whom ordinary avenues of communication are blocked. Artemis' unconscious spirit responds to the fox dreams by restlessly following the Fox, seemingly demanding attention for years of neglect (168-69).

The consummation of the Fox and Artemis is finally actualized by the Fox's cruel and deceptive impersonation of Artemis' mother. As Artemis enters deeper into her relationship with the Fox, she gradually departs the social world, beginning with a break-up with her then-girlfriend, Claude (187-88). Lai preserves the classic characteristic of fox-human relationships as distinct from the rest of the human lover's life. The Fox's deception also imitates "Little Red Riding Hood," the well-known North American fairy tale of European origin, involving the next of kin to foxes, wolves. Artemis' interview with the Fox in the forest and entrance into the home occupied by the Fox echoes "Little Red Riding Hood" (214-19). Artemis rapidly falls into the Fox's fantasy world of poetry,

chess, and scotch. Recognizing the symptoms of a fox haunt, the Fox departs in an act of self-exorcism.

An encounter with spiritual beings such as monks, nuns, ghosts, or foxes results in an enlightening revelation changing the course of human events. Scholars interpret that because Pu Songling lived during a politically tumultuous time—witnessing the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the rise of the Manchu Qing Dynasty—his stories are political allegories that criticize corrupt officials and unjust affairs. The interpretation continues that according to Pu, the performance of the government is so unsatisfactory that the intervention of fox spirits is needed to correct and expose corrupt human affairs and to solve unjust murders. Once order returns, the fox is usually ready to take her departure. Lai's Fox plays a similar function. Her visitation occurs at the time of Mercy/Ming's murder. She visits the Underworld to fetch information on the death of Mercy/Ming, and goes to the Heavenly libraries to research the dead poetess. But Lai, as the writer, makes a decision on neither the verdict of Yu Hsuan Chi nor the murder of Ming/Mercy, because the act of returning to the past is never whole or complete. Given all the women who remain unwritten mysteries, a writer can only dream or imagine possibilities of truth.

The Fox's nightly haunts re-animating dead human bodies at the cemetery textualize the writer's experience of retrieving forgotten and lost narratives. The Fox literally embodies Carter's description of looting and rummaging through official histories, looking for reusable parts. Accessing classic Chinese texts for a diasporan like Lai, is likened to exhuming the graves of the dead asking for answers, which Atwood describes as "a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or

someone back from the dead" (Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating the Dead* 156). Lai also describes the Fox's desire of returning to the dead:

> There's a tree in Stanley Park I would like to visit. Hollow inside and full of ancient, untouched spirits. The perfect place for a first lesson in twentieth-century haunting. It is history I'm interested in. History, and, I suppose, the future. If I'm to receive a birthday gift, I think that's what I'd like. The ability to read from the air who has breathed it in the past, and who will in the future. The accumulated emotions of any point in space (197).

Through the Fox's temporary visitation into Artemis' life, she inserts herself into the narration of the "unnamed narrator speaking of contemporary twentieth-century life," and she brings along with her the accumulated emotions of any point in any space. She is no longer an icon restricted to the past that can only be rewritten or re-perceived by readers looking back into a literary past because she has made her debut in twentieth-century Canadian literature.

The Fox completes her quest for immortality, but how is she relevant to women like Artemis, Diane, and Mercy/Ming who live in contemporary Canada? Chapter 4 will discuss the generation of women living in the twentieth-century in *When Fox is A Thousand.* If the aim of (Western) translation is to bring back a cultural other, serving to appropriate foreign cultures for domestic agendas, what would be the aim of re-appropriating those translations? Lai's re-appropriation of the Western translations of Chinese sources does not aim at returning to a fixed pre-translated identity, nor does it aim at ameliorating Western translations with greater credibility or authenticity. It does not take sides in the cross-cultural debate between the East and the West, though the debate is inevitably furthered. It seeks to pick up the re-usable pieces, and discard the irrelevant ones for generations of women from the past, in the present, and into the future.

Chapter 4

"Indeed, there is a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences" (Katie Conboy et al., "Introduction" 1).

If the conflict were a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on their bodies, then the action revealing character would be the ways which women behave and react, given the circumstances of this conflict. In *When Fox is a Thousand*, Larissa Lai writes Artemis, Diane, and Mercy/Ming as they encounter standard constructions of femininity, from which they deviate. Since gender and identity are understood in terms of embodying cultural and historic possibilities, my task is to examine the ways that our heroines' identities are constructed through specific corporeal acts. Multiple and contradictory discourses of identity befuddle our compatriot diasporans, who are left suspended and perplexed. Being constantly read as juxtapositions of cultures, the resolution for these women comes when the Fox gathers them in community to assert the truths of their realities, and to tell their stories.

Involving body-as-text metaphors, feminist theorists examine the female body as the physical site on which cultural assumptions of gender are written. Actively performing unspoken, yet encompassing, practices of femininity, the body achieves the feminine ideal of "woman." This circumstance has led Simone de Beauvoir to ask in 1949, "What is a woman?" (xiv). Revealing "women" as an unnatural and constructed category, de Beauvoir famously instructs, "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman" (267). Femininity is "an artifice, an achievement" by women in terms of body size and configuration; gesture, posture, and movement; and as an ornamented surface

(Bartky 132). Judith Butler continues that gender "is not passively scripted on the body" but rather "put on invariably, under constraint, daily, incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure" ("Performative" 415). Gender is constituted by performative acts that are "renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" ("Performative" 406). Deciphered as a construction, gender is an internalization of cultural metaphors expressed through one's body, movement, and orientation in the world.

The potential to reinvent identity begins with the knowledge of and dissatisfaction for past discourses of identity. Having lost a sense of self-realization, the process of bodily retrieval and re-assertion involves apprehending and redefining one's reality and one's history. Returning to a literature of bodily discourse is one of the first steps in finding and "rediscovering the self that has been made strange" (Plate, "Visions" 385). By rewriting literature and history, women repossess the dispossessed female body, and reappropriate a discourse that defines their behaviour and self-determination.

As the power of identity invention is redirected to its owner, the elusive ideal of femininity is unmasked as a strategy for social control. Subverting feminine identity and representation, the writer asks why those identities were constructed to begin with, and for whom they were constructed. Women who deviate from normative constructed characteristics and assumptions of femininity demonstrate especially well that cultural configurations of identity are not definite, but are rather constantly shifting. Monique Wittig writes, "by its existence, lesbian society destroys the artificial (social) fact constituting women as a 'natural group'" (309). Probing bodily representations that have gained a hegemonic hold, possibilities of challenging the assumed fixedness of gender identity are opened up. Innovative reconceptions of identity destroy the normative status

of previous representations, and women can creatively write themselves into the text, into the world, and into history through writing.

If their identities as homosexual Asian women in Canada were a historical situation, then Artemis and her contemporary compatriots find themselves in a historical vacuum—dislocated, lost, and without guidance. It is not that the Asian Canadian female body has been left untouched by current bodily discourses, but that the given characteristics do not adhere to these deviant women, leaving them dispersed, confused, and in search of continuity. Artemis and her compatriot diasporans appear in a juncture of time and place lacking a coherent history and literature. Having been repeatedly uprooted and transplanted, the culturally positioned identity of the diasporans is fragmented by forces of discourse outside of them. Diasporans "live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive arrangements along emerging routes" (Chambers 6). As beings socially constituted through literature and history, it is problematic for these women to find themselves without a coherent story to imagine and narrate their identities. These diasporan women lack a discourse with which to speak of their subjectivity that is borne and renewed through storytelling. Without self-identification, multiple and contradictory identifications are consequently imposed on these women. They must retrieve old stories and create new ones to speak for and about themselves. New models of sexual and racial identity must be established, where these women can be situated and valued in relation to themselves.

Patricia Williams, writing about her experiences as an African American, also identifies the necessity of history to one's survival:

> I, like so many blacks, have been trying to pin myself down in history, place myself in the stream of time as significant, evolved, present in the past, continuing into the future. To be without documentation is too unsustaining, too spontaneously ahistorical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but my future as well. So I have been picking through the ruins for my roots (Williams 156).

The importance of writing history and literature as a method of establishing and asserting control over one's identity, is confirmed by Lai:

> I was interested in my own generation's relationship to history, myth and spirituality, precisely because these were things that we'd been cut off from. [...] I am trying to produce a consciously artificial history for those of us who come from histories that are broken, fragmented and discontinuous, histories that exist in multiple languages and that have survived multiple traumas and multiple acts of forgetting (Lai, *When* 253, 257).

To establish a literary past, a literary present, and a literary future, it is imperative for diasporans to participate in literary creation. Lai continues, "My strategy [...] has been to make a project of constructing a consciously artificial history for myself and others like me" (Lai, "Political" 149). The rewritten *Liaozhai* Fox gathers the scattered diasporans, and they return to one another as outsiders. De Beauvoir explains that women have had problems organizing because "they have no past, no history, no religion of their own" (xxv). A common literary genealogy through the Fox establishes a sense of community for the scattered women.

Artemis, as the main character of the narrative set in the twentieth-century, refrains from making decisions throughout most of the novel. She refuses to take a position because the available positions and perspectives are jarringly unsuitable to her. They describe her as a juxtaposition, a contradiction—a difficult body to embody, and a body that engenders constant mental and emotional states of insecurity and indecisiveness. Gloria Anzaldúa explains that "the clash of voices results in mental and

emotional states of perplexity" which brings about a personality that is "plagued by psychic restlessness" (234). However, there are options, if Artemis invents them. Problematically, Artemis lacks the tools and knowledge with which to tailor a position and perspective for herself. That she is Chinese is the only thing she knows of her past. She does not understand Chinese, and lacks a discourse of literature and history with which to speak of her Chinese female body. Her involvement in history and literature has been effectively cut off from her, through a process of immigration and adoption. Indifference and inaction are symptoms that mark Artemis' problems of contact with herself—that she lacks a discourse to understand and to speak of herself within a sociohistorical place, relative to others.

An early description of Artemis begins, "Her name is Artemis Wong, and it suits her, since she belongs to no one" (20). Her ambivalence allows her to maintain a degree of ownership over herself, rather than losing herself to opposing arguments. A constant sense of alienation and separation is involved in Artemis' navigation of the world. She is apathetic towards history, and disinterested that it continues to be appropriated and re-appropriated, serving only the purposes of those with the power to write and rewrite history. St. Clair, for example, begins a conversation with Artemis after the Tienanmen rally in Chinatown (88-92). Referring to Canada's position on the foreign rally, and revealing his father as a collector of Far East artefacts, St. Clair asks Artemis, "Don't you have a position on it? Everyone else seems to" (92). Artemis does not respond. She is powerless in the creation of history, and withholds her participation. Her reaction to the positions vying for her loyalty is to remain morally and politically disinterested. Artemis admires St. Clair for his ability to critique his own position. But the prerequisite for

critiquing one's position is to first formulate a position; Artemis, contrarily, lacks even a position that could be critiqued.

The novel interrogates the possession and proliferation of culture and identity, where oriental clothes symbolize cultural commodities on exchange. During a photo shoot with Eden, Artemis asks to whom the traditional costumes belong, but Eden can only respond that they belong to his father, ignorant of the original owner who wore them (32). Eden eventually decides to give the dresses to Artemis, considering Artemis their rightful owner (82). However, without a narrative with which to understand the dresses, Artemis is lost as to what do with them. Consequently, she trades the oriental clothes for money with another collector (118-21).

Readers may disapprove of Artemis for yielding what scarce historic ornamentation that becomes available to her. However, like a dismembered limb, what use is there in keeping dismembered curios? In a fox tale retold to parody the Vietnam War, a cousin fox loses her tail and then her life at the end of a haunting escapade (85-86). Similarly, Eden's father, who fought in the Vietnam War, first loses his arm, then his life (30). Eden unapologetically confesses that he mourns the loss of his uncle's arm more than he mourns the loss of his uncle's life. Losing an arm in war is doubtlessly traumatic. Perhaps Eden's displaced priorities may be excused since many of us know the value of our arm more than we realize the value of our lives. We use our arms everyday, while life is taken for granted when it is not threatened. Our compassion is limited to our personal priorities and preoccupations. It speaks of Eden's privilege that he can mourn the loss of a limb more than the loss of life.

The limb, once a part our bodies, that formed our identities and defined us, becomes useless once it is dismembered. Like the lost limb, the oriental clothes that were once loved and cherished by their owner, become refuse once dismembered. Taking inventory of an old chest left to her from her birth mother, Artemis' understanding of her past is limited to a few pieces of garments that smell of disintegrated mothballs. The smell bothers Artemis, and calls upon "myriad things she had no name for, and didn't particularly want to know about" (100). The clothes remind Artemis of what has been lost—a mother and a literary and cultural history that is shrouded in mystery, without words or names. As difficult as losing the past might have had been, a future must still be forged. For the sake of the future, the past must be reconciled. New identities and new livelihoods must be formed for both the body and the dresses separately. As the clothes come to find new meaning in museums and in treasure troves of collectors, the owner's body must also find new meaning. Even in *Salt Fish Girl,* Miranda tears her late-mother's old dress (199). Miranda loses the old dress unsentimentally, in an attempt to save her own life. What use would clothes be without a body?

In *When Fox is a Thousand,* despite having sold the oriental dresses, they continue to taunt Artemis. They become the wedge that anchors itself between Artemis' relationship with Diane. Diane argues so adamantly that the dresses were stolen by Artemis, that Artemis, herself, begins to wonder whether or not she had stolen them from Eden (164). Artemis turns to Eden, seeking reassurance that the dresses were a gift to her, but Eden would have had already left the room (164). A conflict is sparked between the two women, a conflict that might not have occurred, if the dresses had not slipped from the forgotten owner. After all the historical displacements, to whom do cultural

antiquities belong? The contemporary narrative of *When Fox is a Thousand* opens with the story of an English priest pillaging a Greek Orthodox temple for religious relics, which are now safely encased at the Museum of History in Seattle (16). Although Artemis relinquishes the oriental dresses, contrarily, she steals an antique replica being sold at the Seattle museum gift boutique because she finds significance in and identifies with the Christian artifact. Potentially, everyone has a stake in cultural curios, except for those who had owned them, long passed along.

Eventually, Diane re-signifies the oriental clothes for Artemis. The oriental clothes with the eerie smell of mothballs, which had held no coherent meaning, end up telling the story of Artemis' relationship with Diane. Diane moves out of Artemis' apartment silently, leaving not a hair behind (122). Huddled on the couch wrapped in her birth mother's old quilt, the pungent odour of mothballs becomes comforting to Artemis, because Diane was once wrapped in the same blanket (100, 122). Artemis, who had never wrote her identity, never discovered her preferences, and never asserted her existence, feels absent and disoriented in the empty apartment she never inhabited.

> [Diane] was gone. On the walls a few of Artemis' own uncomfortable posters remained. Here and there were furnishings that she had bought, and things that never seemed to belong to her (122).

Luce Irigaray describes a similar feeling of being disoriented and without identity, like a body or a house that was never occupied:

> I was your house. And, when you leave, abandoning this dwelling place, I do not know what to do with these walls of mine. Have I ever had a body other than the one, which you constructed according to your idea of it? Have I ever experienced a skin other than the one which you wanted me to dwell within? (Irigaray 49).

Like an empty house without furnishings, Artemis is an empty body without stories. Each of the diasporan compatriots lack self-affirming stories, but Diane and Mercy/Ming,

contrasting the acute passivity of Artemis, take different approaches, though similarly self-destructive.

Diane succeeds in embodying prescribed personages. Clothes, as material extensions of one's identity and a part of one's lived bodily experiences, communicate nationality, age, status, and other markers of cultural expressions. During the photo shoot with Eden, Artemis is unable to embody and enact the characteristics of Chinese feminine "authenticity," though she is able to recognize the oriental icon materialized by Diane. While Artemis is unsure of her own comportment in the Chinese traditional dresses and feels like a clumsy child, Diane looks "utterly regal" in the same dresses (35).

However, Diane's reading and enactment of social and cultural norms problematically imposes on herself a kind of split subjectivity. By claiming that her mother had sung operas such as *Tristan and Iseult* in Japan, Diane succeeds in filching the stranger's credit card and continues to commit credit card fraud (44-49). She understands the pervading reality of the iconic xenophobic man, and willingly affirms his reality through lying. Diane does not understand Asian culture, yet shes tries to co-opt it, in her attempt to get ahead. She derives feelings of power from the heist, and rationalizes, "Just creatively balancing one of society's more glaring inequalities" (47). Through her lie, she perpetuates the man's incorrect and false reality, yielding the rectitude of her own. Therefore, the sense of power that she derived through lying only compromises the integrity of her reality and identity.

It is untenable to explain or to defend Diane's compulsive lies. She might simply be a malicious evil character, willing to sabotage the reality of others for the sake of her own expediency. Diane explains that her family has hardened her for independent

survival. She describes the priorities of her family, explaining, "I have a family that looks after itself. It looks after me only insofar as I'm part of it" (52). Consequently, Diane has isolated herself from her family with which she is dissatisfied. She is not accountable to anyone, and there is no foundation, no moral high ground on which to base her actions and decisions. The Fox raises the question of moral accountability, apparently sympathetic to Diane's plight:

> But the line between morals and personal interest has gotten a little murky of late. A newly loosed spirit [...] said it was a sad characteristic of the age that people can't tell the difference between what is right and what is self-serving, but I'm not sure. I think the world has always been like that (187).

To the experienced Fox, Diane is merely enacting the worldly standard, and people have never distinguished "between what is right an what is self-serving" (187). Adrienne Rich explains women lying as a manifestation of their defencelessness. Rich writes, "Women have been forced to lie, for survival" (34). Nevertheless, Rich compels women to "take seriously the question of truthfulness between women, [and] truthfulness among women, [...] as we cease to lie with our bodies, as we cease to take on faith what [has been] said about us" (34). Women must unabashedly stake an interest in their identities, take control of their bodies, and develop a voice with which to speak of their reality.

Mercy/Ming is stubbornly unwilling to compromise the integrity of her identity and reality. In a dramatic act of self-reinvention, Mercy becomes Ming. Ming fiercely attempts to control the way others read her body by writing tattoos on her body. Literally, Ming alters her body in an attempt to repair what she perceives to be an incompatible relationship between her body and her "self." She explains, "Nothing in my life has ever been ordinary, but now I'm in control of it" (145). Nevertheless, she cannot guarantee that her self-inscribed texts are read in the ways that she intended for them to

be read. For example, despite Ming's "bravado" at the bathhouse, Artemis reads Ming's movements as "nervous," and Ming's new tattoos remind Artemis of American sailors in Hong Kong (145-46). After Ming's death, police and investigators have even more trouble deciphering her body, attempting to solve the mystery of her death.

> The newspapers insisted on drugs. It was the only way they could explain the tattoos. They devised an extensive map of meaning [...]. For them, Ming's change of name and appearance was a wilful attempt at deceit, to hide illicit activity. Her friends were not sure. The drugs they found in her bloodstream were prescription, but that explained nothing (246).

Despite Ming's attempts at controlling the writing of her body, she has no control after her death. Her death remains missolved, with the media favouring a socially coherent storyline that contradicts reality. Perhaps Ming's stubborn will was the cause of her demise.

Having lived a thousand years, the Fox has a few tricks and lessons on survival to teach the diasporans. The Fox, marginalized in literature and history, has been interpreted as a juxtaposition of ideals: animal-human, dead-alive, ghost-human, man-woman. However, in *When Fox is a Thousand,* the Fox's story is narrated by herself, and she does not allow anyone else the chance to perceive her as a contradiction. She is the storyteller, and she tells her readers, "It is other foxes who are strange, not me" (27). The Fox sets an example for the diasporan compatriots to speak for themselves as fluid and ambiguous subjects. While other foxes are defined by their inability to cross borders, our protagonist Fox is "defined by her very capacity to cross borders" (Butler, "Transformative" 85). Other foxes are photographed as glamorous icons and cheaply reproduced in glossy calendars sold at discount bookstores (196-97). But our Fox is not susceptible to photography because her essence cannot be captured (145). Photographs

embody the photographer's reality—the way the photographer perceives the foxes, and not necessarily how the foxes might wish to be perceived. Our Fox would find the photographs too "intimate" and too "intrusive," if they were photographs taken of her (196). But temporarily, the pictures of the wild foxes will keep our Fox company.

The Fox manages to manifest herself to Artemis because of Artemis' predisposition to fantasy, literature, and dream. Artemis, who repels interaction with people and withdraws from reality, prefers, as the Fox describes, "[to stick] her head into a book for answers, eschewing the problematic world of experience" (133). In the classic *Liaozhai* tales, foxes visit scholar-writers and judges through the conduit of dreams blurring the boundary between reality and fantasy. Scholars and judges access untold truths revealed by spirits only through dreams. In *When Fox is a Thousand*, many deaths and many lives are unaccounted for, such as those of the Poetess, Mercy/Ming, Diane's brother, Artemis' mother, and the workers in sub-standard labour factories. To the dead Poetess, the Fox writes:

> You wonder about someone's life when they've occupied the same body as you do, but a thousand years and many journeys lie between us, so nobody's memory will serve either of us half as well as the dreams that come to me sometimes at night in the rain (154).

Many female bodies have been lost in history, their stories incoherent and baffling. Writers in the twenty-first-century can only dream, and perhaps the women's spirits will come to reveal the truths of their bodies. The Fox and the diasporans possess separate histories of tragedy and loss, but the process of recovery and creation can be the same.

When the Fox entices Artemis under the guise of her biological mother, Artemis asks, "[My mother] hasn't had anything to do with me for 20 years. Why should I be interested?" (143). The Fox can give to Artemis what neither her birth mother nor her

adoptive mother has given her: history and literature as discourse and language with which to speak of reality and create community. Common literature and history locate readers and writers within a shared narrative reality, providing ground on which to stand for all. They "give materiality to the complexities of being young, brown and female at the present time" (Lai, *When Fox* 253). The classic fox stories, like any oriental curio that has been dismembered from the diasporans, can become intimately rewoven into diasporan lives in *When Fox is a Thousand.*

If the Fox gathers the diasporans on common literary ground, then the diasporans gather a new readership for the Fox. The Fox, herself, also seeks community with the diasporans. She confesses,

> the more time I spend in human form, the more human I become. And the more human I become, the more I want a human past of my own—festivals, candy, costumed dancers, and simple magic that can be easily and delightfully disassembled like an acrobat's tricks (29).

She is lonely and unsatisfied with the paltry company of fox calendars, like "The undefended individual, fragmented from the group, [she] is a hundred times more available for persuasion than is the person possessing group values, access to past experience, consciousness of legitimacy in class terms" (Devereux 234). Therefore, a mutual and symbiotic relationship exists between the diasporans and the Fox, one that involves a process of cultural retrieval for the diasporans, while bestowing upon the Fox another community of readers.

Even though the Fox and the diasporans have momentarily reconvened, the community is young, and its traditions unformed. The Fox, for example, is unsure of the celebrations involved with reaching one's thousandth birthday. She ponders, "I'm not entirely sure what to expect, not having had anyone to instruct or support me since

shortly after my arrival in Canada" (197). Yet she organizes her own birthday party, delighted with the companionship of Artemis. Likewise, the diasporans, having been isolated for extended periods of time, are uninformed of the customs and practices of the larger community. "The ceremony [for Ming] was Claude's idea. None of them knew what they were supposed to do, what their ancestors might have done on a similar occasion" (246). Attending the wake for Mercy/Ming, the diasporans reconcile the past and improvise the future.

As Artemis and her compatriots solemnly gather into their rented caravan, on their way to visit the site of Mercy/Ming's death, the future remains to be ascertained. Hopefully they will work together, live responsibly, and establish a past and a future that articulates possibilities of truth. Dionne Brand observes that in Canada, "Fabulous possibilities exist, things haven't been worked out, and we see the becoming of it. We're in the middle of becoming, we have these yet-to-become people, and that's interesting, definitely" (da Costa). *When Fox is a Thousand* is Larissa Lai's contribution to the modest formation that is gradually becoming the diasporan literary community. The Fox is unleashed as a resource that may be used by writers in our contemporary struggles. Through excavating the past and exhuming the bodies that have been buried through time, the Fox, like the writer, plays the role of a conduit to the past. The Fox makes sense of, reclaims, and rediscovers bodies and stories that have belonged to women.

> If I want to continue like this, new life must come from the reaches of the earth, from the sweet mouths of women who have passed on before their time. Each night is an experiment in survival (28).

Writers liberate evidence that has been hidden or denied, establishing possibilities for the future by imagining a radical and new reality unfettered by cumbersome roles.

Conclusion

"All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. [...] The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react" (Anzaldúa 235).

"There's no place to be. This world is good enough for you because it has to be. Go ahead and love it" (Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* 209).

In Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, she writes about the plight of Canadian literature and its writers and readers. First published in 1972, it continues to offer a relevant point of departure for writers and readers today and was republished in 2004. *Survival* identifies literary ground for exploration, and offers a provisional map for navigation:

> having bleak ground under your feet is better than having no ground at all. Any map is better than no map as long as it is accurate, and knowing your starting points and your frame of reference is better than being suspended in a void. A tradition doesn't necessarily exist to bury you: it can also be used as material for new departures (292).

Atwood continues by identifying traits and trends, offering to prospective readers and writers points of reference in encountering Canadian literature. Atwood writes, "Naming your own condition, your own disease, [which] is not necessarily the same as acquiescing to it. Diagnosis is the first step" (*Survival* 54). My thesis has examined some of the conditions that afflict young Chinese Canadian women in literature.

To varying degrees, Chinese diasporan writers must consider a literary landscape that includes issues involving mainstream publishers defining multiculturalism, western sinologists preserving Chinese classicism, and even cultural activists re-appropriating orientalism. Writers and readers are encouraged to engage in honest intimate encounters with literature. Lai writes, "We must have the power of construction, as long, of course,

as we behave as responsibly as we know how in the act of construction" ("Political" 150). Her strategy is to rewrite old literature that involves ongoing issues, and to repair broken relationships with literature.

Emphasizing a symbiotic and continuous relationship between past, present, and future literatures, Canadians need to create personal relationships with history, so that the past may live alongside the present, directing the passage to the future. But if history becomes boring, Canadians must find out why, and ask what can be done to chase away the fatigue. Interrogating the representation of history, as an ongoing project, is a solution for history to maintain its pertinence in contemporary lives. Questioning overwhelming interpretations of history offers the possibility of creating personal connections with history.

> Opening representation is a way of constantly wanting new kinds of knowledges to be produced in the world, new kinds of subjectivities to be explored, new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by systems of power which are in operation (*Hall*).

In participating in the process of interrogation, those who feel bored with and disconnected from history intimately wrestle with the image to discover what they want to see, hear, and say.

The "authentic" Chinese Canadian immigrant experience offers a point of departure that has become recognizable. But it is not a finished narrative from which writers and readers have departed. The anthropological interpretation of Chinese Canadian railway men in black and white photographs as historical victims imposed on the study of history and literature is resented. In *Salt Fish Girl,* Lai interrogates the image of the authentic immigrant by rewriting in a symbolic magic realist style. By

defamiliarizing a singular overbearing representation of history, readers are offered a chance to re-imagine history.

> If [...] the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him but someone else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself, he will get a very distorted idea of what he is really like. He will also get a distorted idea of what other people are like: it's hard to find out who anyone else is until you have found out who *you* are (Atwood, *Survival* 23).

To forgive the offense of distorted representations of history, it must be read generously so a degree of reconciliation may be established. Chinese Canadians of the early 21st Century must come to a meaningful encounter with Chinese Canadians of the early 20th Century, so that the future may survive and the past be revived. The singular and fixed representation of Chinese Canadians in literature that is overwhelmingly distributed needs to be altered, evolved, and rewritten, so that the stories maintain significance. Through a convoluted analysis, perhaps it can be discovered to whose service certain readings of history have become privileged. But it will be discovered that more than one party has been responsible, each possessing separate politics.

Chinese Canadian literature exhibits a bittersweet pride in staking a history of 150 odd years in Canada. But it should not be overlooked that available to Chinese Canadian writers is a literary history that surpasses the 150 odd years of temporal and geographic history in Canada or China. In rewriting, Lai excavates a grand history of literature that is both long and wide, fulfilling the writers' responsibility of prolonging the discourse of traditional texts. Literature in Canada is comparative and global:

> A reader cannot live by Canlit alone, and it is a disservice to Canlit to try it. [...] The study of Canadian literature ought to be comparative [...]. To know ourselves, we must know our own literature; to know ourselves accurately, we need to know it as part of literature as a whole (Atwood, *Survival* 24).

In rewriting William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Pu Songling's *Strange Tales of Liaozhai*, Lai transforms Canada's connection to classical, canonical pieces of literature. Lai positions the present generation as derivative of an identifiable past and responsible to a perceivable future. Dionne Brand writes, "We always have to apprehend ourselves in the fullness of the historical moment in which we live" (da Costa). We need to know where we have come from, and how we got here, so that we know where we will be going next.

With reference to an ambivalent parentage, Asian American literary critic, Sheng-mei Ma depicts Asian American literature as adolescent, "That Asian America is more than 150 years old but rebels like a misguided fifteen-year-old attests to its stunted growth, having been orphaned by the parent countries and then abused by the (step)parent of the United States" (*Deathly* xv). Borrowing Ma's metaphor for Asian Canadians, perhaps writers and readers may revel in the youthful creativity and playfulness of adolescence that is never permanent. As adolescents who are learning the tradition, learning the rules and breaking them, diasporans are beginning to play a part building the brave new world. Asian North Americans have inherited great wealth from multiple parentages, and it is a rich and beautiful landscape. Atwood urges, "we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive" (*Survival* 27). Therefore, the question remains if the contemporary generation of diasporan compatriots in *When Fox is a Thousand* will take positive action, or if the world will fall into the dystopia of *Salt Fish Girl* and require the second coming of Nu Wa?

In *When Fox is a Thousand,* a fox transforms into women, and in *Salt Fish Girl,* a fish reincarnates into women. Transformation and reincarnation undermine the concept of a coherent, unified self, and depict identity as an unstable, multiple or shifting construct. That the Fox and the Fish are not stable unitary subjectivities, but are fluid and morphous, illustrate their openness to change. Transformation and reincarnation open up identity as a continuing process.

> if we undergo the experience of dialogue, then we enter the conversation as one kind of person but emerge as another kind. This is simply to say that the best kind of dialogue is that which offers the possibility for each participant to be transformed through the process itself. Indeed, why would I have come [...] if I did not want the chance to be transformed by what I encounter here? (Butler, "Transformative" 82).

In welcoming an encounter with the Fox and the Fish, we accept a degree of risk because encounters are unpredictable. We engage in meaningful encounters with literature, and transformation occurs to readers, writers, and texts. The Fox and the Fish have entered the Canadian literary cultural sphere, and they provoke further creative efforts, perpetuating the cycle of creativity. The Fox and the Fish also enter into our lives, and we take them along with us on our individual journeys. Perhaps our nostalgia for the past may never be satiated because we cannot return to the past, but we can certainly bring the past along with us into the future.

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Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms

Bei Dao	北島(1949 -)
Consort Zhao Feiyan	趙飛燕(? - 1 AD)
Consort Zhao Hede	趙合德
Consort Daji	妲己
Emperor Han Chengdi	漢成帝(51 - 7 BC)
Emperor Song Taizong	宋太宗(939 - 997 AD)
Emperor Tang Yizong	唐懿宗 (833 - 873 AD)
"Feng San Niang"	"封三娘"
Grand Historian	太史公
Guo Pu	郭璞 (276 – 324 AD)
"Heng Niang"	"恆娘"
Historian of strange events	異史氏
Ji Yun	纪昀 (1724 - 1805)
Li Fang	李昉 (925 – 996 AD)
Liaozhai Zhiyi	*聊齋誌異*
Lu Chiao	綠橋
"Merchant's Son"	"賈兒'
Pu Songling	蒲松齡(1640 - 1715)
Records of a Historian	*史記*
"Seng Yen t'ung"	"僧宴通'
Sima Qian	司馬遷(c. 145 - 90 BC)
T'ien-hu	天狐
Taiping Guangi	*太平廣記*
Teachings omitted by Confucius	*子不語*
Wen Tingyun	温庭筠 (812 - 870 AD)
Yu Hsuan Chi	魚玄機 (844 - 868 AD)
Yuan Mei	袁枚(1716 - 1798)
Yuewei caotang biji	*閱微草堂笔記*
Zhang Youhe	張友鶴 (1907 - 1971)
Xuanzhong Ji	*玄中記*

Appendix 2: Chinese Dynasties

Xia (Hsia)	2205 - 1766 BC
Shang	1766 - 1122 BC
Zhou (Chow)	1122 - 770 BC
Spring & Autumn Annals	770 - 476 BC
Warring States	476 - 221BC
Qin (Chin)	221 - 206 BC
Han	206 BC - 220 AD
Three Kingdoms	220 - 265 AD
Jin (Tsin)	265 - 420 AD
Southern and Northern	420 - 580 AD
Sui	589 - 618 AD
Tang	618 - 907 AD
Five Dynasties	907 - 960 AD
Song (Sung)	960 - 1280 AD
Yuan	1280 - 1368 AD
Ming	1368 - 1644 AD
Qing (Ching)	1644 - 1911 AD
Republic of China	1911 - 1949 AD
People's Republic of China	1949 AD