RUNNING AWAY WITH THE CONCUBINE:

LESBIANISM AND LARISSA LAI'S WHEN FOX IS A THOUSAND

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is in investigation of Larissa Lai's novel When Fox Is A Thousand. Lai takes to task the idea that lesbian desire is governed by fate, biological determination, or choice. Through her treatment of identity as performative, she reveals a particular investment in the viability of the self-consuming artifact in order to simultaneously chide and invoke tropes of transgression. She does this by creating a lesbian monster-trickster as her main character. By reading the text through and against Zimmerman's definition of "lesbian," I establish the text's lesbian content and form. Lai's insistence upon continual disruptions of prescripted and stereotyped modes of gendered and sexualized behaviour on the part of her characters, coupled with a blurring of narrative boundaries, gives the novel considerable transgressive potential. Her novel sustains a multivalenced argument against absolutes and the assumptions which foster both dominant and so-called subversive positions.

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Introduction

Larissa Lai's When Fox Is a Thousand embodies a range of disruptions. In effect, Lai's novel is an example of a text that reads through and against the tripartite explication of lesbian reading and writing practices identified by Bonnie Zimmerman. This paper demonstrates the ways in which the three narrative strands of Lai's text "disrupt heterosexuality, establish a presence outside the conventions of patriarchy, and [represent] a hole in gender dualism" (Zimmerman 4). Meanwhile, Lai's novel is also very much a consideration of the connections between the body, the mind, and desire, for its locus is events that lead to the execution of a ninth-century Poetess, Yu Hsuan-Chi, in relation to the lives of Chinese-Canadian lesbians living in Vancouver. By questioning and taking to task the impact of historical focus, the text uses the Poetess and the traditional Fox myth as examples of the ways stories about women are used as a means of regulating other women. Through the figure of the fox, Lai uses the mythical past to engage the embodied present. Through an exploration of the Poetess, the novel, also, is about the process of women questioning their sexuality.

It is a series of carefully intertwined lesbian coming-of-age stories that serve to question not only sexuality, but the systems of regulation exercised on women's bodies. Further yet, the novel is about the process of lesbians losing their families, an experience which many lesbians go through upon coming out: the first of four sections of the book is entitled "How the Fox Came to Live Alone." Nevertheless, one of the most striking features of this book is its transformation of the traditionally inauspicious fox figure who, although troublesome, ultimately becomes a likeable heroine. While the text's content disrupts normative codes of sexual behaviour and gender socialization, its form disrupts well-established ideas and theories about narratives.

In this text, Lai transforms the fox of traditional Chinese mythology from a monstrous heterosexual woman-spirit into a monster-trickster lesbian. The figure undergoes a transformation from inauspicious to heroically resistant. Lesbian is characterized as resistant in the sense that she does not neatly fit the categories available to her under patriarchy. This transformation means that women who do not easily fit into or promote patriarchal ends are transformed both for, and by, the reader. Because the novel is written from the perspective of those who do not fit into or support patriarchy, the development of the fox as a likeable character is, simultaneously, the development of the resistant woman as likable and knowable. In order to access the power of the disruption expressed through this text, I choose to focus on the lesbian aspects of its content and its form. Lesbianism is a crucial element in Fox: the text centres on the lives and histories of lesbian characters. It also establishes a way of circumventing traditional narrative structure in a move I will argue as distinctly lesbian.

The novel, itself, is composed of a number of interlocking, interwoven short story segments. Twenty-two of these "short stories" are narrated by the fox figure, and some of these stories have embedded within them totally self-contained short stories, folk tales. The fox introduces these stories as means of both entertainment and education. In fact, the fox reportedly tends to think of herself "as a teacher with certain principles to uphold" (177). Some of the stories she introduces are love stories between women, and these stories are ones in which lesbians survive, "even after the gwei lo came from overseas and tried to convert them to Christianity" (209). These embedded narratives in fox's stories are set in ancient China.

The Poetess, as Lai calls her, has only nine stories, and all of her stories are set in ancient China. She is a mortal living in the ninth century. Her stories, narrated in the first-person, are an account of her life story in relation to her trial and execution date. The stories tell of her romantic affairs with women. They also stand in to affirm the ways

she explained to herself the compromises she made in order to live her life as an independent person.

An unnamed, omniscient narrator narrates the final set of stories. There are twenty-five of these stories, and they all take place between Seattle and Vancouver in the early nineties, with brief foray to Hong Kong. Formally, these stories are often introduced, interrupted, or supplemented by conversations on the phone. The use of phone calls in the novel emphasizes the significance of contemporary pace; for this same reason, there are considerably more characters in this set of narratives. Although this narrative strand deals with the life and experience of many characters, it focuses on Artemis Wong. The reader is privy to her process of coming out. She is in a "relationship" with (someone to whom I refer as) a gay man for some time before they both come out. He does not read as gay until much later in the story, and in this way the novel encompasses his coming-out story; however, it is not the focus of the novel but, rather, serves as a parallel to the histories of the lesbians. Thus, this third narrative strand deals more carefully with the processes of people questioning and negotiating their sexual identities. The text questions the foundations upon which its characters establish, regulate and maintain their identities.

The names of the characters in the third narrative tend to reveal their relationship to Artemis. Artemis means "virgin huntress," and the character ponders over the significance of the very Greek name her Chinese-Canadian birth mother gave her. In the sense that Lai uses the characters' ancient names to invoke a sense of both historical rupture and continuity, the stories in all of the narrative strands are invested with an interest in the process of historicization. Artemis' own past is mostly unknown to her, because she was adopted by a white family shortly after birth; conversely, long after the Poetess's body becomes the body of the fox, the fox and Artemis both want to know more about the Poetess's body, where it came from. In any case, the text explores the

idea of essential, embodied identities by way of asking about the origins of the body and the limitations of an historical explanation.

The novel problematizes the ease with which historical narratives are put together by way of a mise en abyme effect. That is, the workings of the novel's form reflect its thematic concerns (Hutcheon 67). In its treatment of history, the text evinces a "recurring internal duplication of images of [its] artistic whole" (Hawthorne 138). Within the text there is an endlessly reiterated reproduction of historical narrative in miniature within the scenes themselves. Moreover, the novel often addresses the discrepancies between different accounts of singular events. By doing this, the novel begins to grapple with the difficulties inherent in the processes of historiography. In this way, when the contemporary narrative is troubled by conflicts between its characters, and characters are allowed to have radically different accounts of the same event, the novel runs repeats and expands upon concerns expressed in another narrative strand. The fact that the novel is composed of three interwoven short story cycles means that it is invested in what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "many[. . .]fragmentary points of view" (Hutcheon 65). This use of the fragmented voice as a way of interrogating the legitimacy of historical narratives effectively demonstrates a formal aspect of Zimmerman's definition of lesbian, because here the narrative "disrupts heterosexuality, establishes a presence outside of the conventions of patriarchy," disrupting the binary of gender (Zimmerman 4). The text interrogates the interwoven nature of heterosexuality, patriarchy, gender dualism, and hegemonic historicization.

The structure of this paper is based on a combination of Bonnie Zimmerman's definition of lesbianism and the narrative composition of Fox itself. For each of these three aspects of lesbian identity, I present examples from each of the three voices: the first-person narrative of the fox which spans a millennium, the ninth-century poetess, and the third-person narrative set in twentieth-century Vancouver, focalized by Artemis. I set

out definitions and illustrate them with examples from the text as a way of defining lesbianism through and against the text. The range of meanings I forward supports my claim that the lesbianism renders categories of meaning unstable as a way of elucidating and interrogating conceptual, linguistic, and historical containment.

Lesbian

For the purposes of this project, lesbianism refers to the sexual desire for women by women. In order to refer to a work of literature as "lesbian" it remains imperative that it articulates lesbianism in both its content and its form. Admittedly contrary to the imperatives of many contemporary attempts to broaden the lesbian canon so that it includes more texts from much earlier periods, I forward that a lesbian text is one which not only presents women who desire women, but establishes these women with the agency to be central figures in the movement of the plot. In *The Safe Sea of Women*, Zimmerman claims that a lesbian novel is that which "places love between women, including sexual passion, at the center of its story" (15). What I perceive as the urgency with which some lesbian scholars seek to decode lesbian literature from books published before the word and meaning of "lesbian" were acceptable serves only to muddy the already difficult project of allowing continually newer and more refined meanings of "lesbian." Although not specifically with reference to lesbian, Homi Bhabha refers to this same importance of the rewritten term when he says, "if you keep referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in them fully and productively and creatively" (Bhabha 216). The site of lesbian in relation to contemporary literature is characterized by its potential to destabilize itself and its field. In this way, lesbian literature offers resistance, and through the force of the lesbian genre there are inscriptions that push the reader out of complacency. Moreover, lesbian texts provide a formal resistance to traditional narrative encoding, and this connection of lesbian texts to lesbian people is far from arbitrary. Furthermore, it remains clear in contemporary North America that lesbians, as people, represent those who have stepped out of line, opted out of the careful training proffered by the heteronormativity of patriarchal culture(s). Perhaps because lesbians are presented as a threat to the family

and economy, lesbian literature represents an active response to demonization and ghettoization which lesbians suffer. While it is no surprise that lesbians exist outside the confines of the heterosexual, patriarchal economy of so-called "productive" bodies and subordinate gendering, and that lesbians are simultaneously rendered invisible, because they threaten social order, lesbian literature variously recovers lesbian agency.

Thus, one way of beginning to access Lai's text is to take my cue from the careful theoretical work of Bonnie Zimmerman. In 1992 she published an article called "Lesbians Like This and That," in which she notes the many and various changes in the burgeoning field of lesbian theory. Here it is important to note that I have very carefully chosen the rubric "lesbian" for my own theoretical work because my concerns are not adequately addressed by queer theory. Queer theory has its limitations, especially in relation to lesbian literature. One of the main tenets of queer theory is that it embraces a wide range of sexual expression allowing that sexual identity need not translate into lived experience. Queer theory, as touted by critics like Stephen Whittle, is meant to blur distinctions between categories of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. However, this does not serve lesbian interests because lesbian reading and writing practices necessarily assume some degree of discrete categories of femaleness. Questioning the category markers of male/female is not a central concern in lesbian criticism, even though it may play a peripheral role. The most obvious and serious drawback to the use of queer theory is that it cannot offer requisite sensitivity to the specificities of lesbian experience. In *Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vivien Ng writes a chapter, "Race Matters," in which she expresses concern "that when categories such as 'gender' and 'sex' and even 'race' are destabilized, where and how does anti-sexist, anti-racist work fit within the world of theory, in the academy?" (229). Moreover, queer theory may very well incorporate transgender, transsexual, bisexual, lesbian and gay concerns and expressions, but this grouping serves a false sense of security. It would seem that queer theory is too busy

keeping these identities in play to adequately address and refine lesbian interest. Here I note also that although there is oftentimes a refusal of the category "lesbian" by women of colour, I use the term in a strategic move to further refine the complex resonances of the category through the creative work of a woman who identifies herself simultaneously as "lesbian," "woman of colour," and as "woman-identified-woman" (Lai, March 1999). I am conscious of using the term in an academic setting as part of a response to the fact that much academic work is done on texts by white authors, whereas texts by people of colour are ghettoized into the category of "postcolonial." I use the term "lesbian" as a white, lower-working class, lesbian academic interested in refining the use of the term as a way of reinvigorating what I read as the imperative of the novel: the rubric "lesbian" as one which signals the requisite playfulness of destabilization which speaks specifically to lesbians. Thus, Zimmerman's affirmation of a revitalization of lesbian interest in theory provides a good foundation for my argument about the intricacy of the sexuality in Lai's text.

There are valences of lesbianism as Zimmerman defines it, and these require that my definition and exposition of lesbianism in literature refrain from reducing itself to the level of aesthetic. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that at no time can the definition of lesbianism be separated from female bodies, because sexual practice has implications for the ways in which people engage and are read as engaging in society. Again, lesbianism refers to the organization of persons along lines of sexual desire for women by women, and it remains imperative to articulate that a text is lesbian in both its content and its form. As I will demonstrate, lesbian literature offers resistance in terms of its content and its form, and through the force of the lesbian genre there are inscriptions that push the reader out of complacency. Moreover, traditional narratives are not equipped with the necessary structural capacity to encourage the agency of the reader. Lesbian literature is that which unsettles the reader into actively reading for scripts of heteronormativity

and the slippages between so-called discrete categories of gender, sex, and sexuality in relation to women's desire for women, and—as evinced in Lai's text—it often achieves this destabilization by way of multiple narration.

Disruption

To take my cue from Zimmerman, I support and examine her assertion that lesbianism is a "disruption of heterosexuality, a presence standing outside the conventions of patriarchy and a hole in the fabric of gender dualism" (Zimmerman 4) in relation to Lai's novel. In the very first pages, Fox disrupts heterosexuality. Lai's first of three interwoven strands of the novel is narrated by the mythical fox figure, and in Chinese mythology the fox is an inauspicious spirit connoting treachery and rot (Liu 240). Foxes are said to inhabit the dead bodies of young women to use these bodies to enact various kinds of emotional, economic, psychological, and sexual violence on men. As part of her project of writing a history of mythical lesbians embodied by the fox-character, Lai effectively recasts the traditional figure as productively disruptive, thereby questioning the apparatus that gains from and thereby values the Fox as an evil, bodily female. She reclaims the Fox, turning her human guise from so-called fallen woman into a cultural hero for a pro-lesbian readership.

Lai's reshaping of the Fox from Chinese mythology suggests the importance of her work to a lesbian mythical and literary historicity which exemplifies principles expressed in Laura Gowing's article titled "History," in *Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Gowing states that "claiming lesbian and gay history means re-imagining the past, forcing the personal onto the public stage, asking questions of the sources" (53). Hence, when Lai makes the fox sympathetically disruptive, she begins to ask exactly what function the Fox has served in maintaining heterosexism. Lai re-imagines the past as a place in which the Fox can have the agency to disrupt an entire paradigm, not just an individual man's fortune. Again, Lai makes this Fox disruptive of patriarchal, heterosexual economies of the female body, and here it is important to keep in mind that lesbian bodies are often conceptualized in patriarchal and heterosexist paradigms as

lascivious and excessively sexual. While heterosexual female bodies are also constructed as excessively sexual in some paradigms, it is not with the same systematic regularity. Heterosexual women always have recourse to sanctioned expression of their desire; in contrast, lesbians have a more problematic access to desire, because it requires some degree of subversion. Lai draws attention to the historical institutionalization of violence against, and oppression of, women when she divests the Fox of its evil and enlivens its ability to have lesbian-identified, and so female, agency. When Lai exposes the anti-woman systems at work in the cultural encoding that is mythology, she does so in such a way as to reveal injustice while immediately reinvesting the Fox with cultural agency. In essence, Lai dusts off the Fox and finds the symbol as it is conventionally deployed in blaming the victim. In the mythical Fox, she locates the objectification and exploitation of women, and in so doing she re-imagines the fox-character with the power to choose her destiny. What, in effect, Lai has done is pinpoint a logical fissure in the heterosexist paradigm. Here, heterosexism refers to the social and material benefits conferred upon those who actively perpetuate heterosexuality which carries the implicit rendering of lesbianism as secondary. The assumptions upon which the heterosexist paradigm are predicated are those of self-loathing. As is illustrated in the case of Fox, there is an objectification of the female body and of female sexuality through the act of purchasing sex at work in patriarchal mythologies. Throughout the novel there are references to paying for sex. The fox-character visits a Tea House in hopes of finding lesbian sex (104); Eden purchases sex for himself from young boys on Homer Street (99). The Poetess lives in a Tea House where most of her co-inhabitants work the sex trade (32). The objectification of the partner by those who purchase sex is exemplified in the traditional Fox myth which Lai draws attention to as anti-woman. As a supplement to Fox, the Feminist Companion to Literature is a reference text which indicates that while Fox spirits are sometimes considered in traditional Chinese mythology to be agents

capable of supplying sufficient luck for men to win money at gambling tables, they are mostly looked upon as evil. In fact,

> the term 'Fox spirit' is still used as a form of abuse for women who are perceived as sexual temptresses, a view derived from the folklore which also embodies an unwillingness to see women as overtly sexual. As sexual creatures, not only do they stand on the other side of the line from 'virtuous women'—wives and mothers—but they are actually thought of as being non-human. (Liu 240)

The reference text's explanation of "Fox spirits" emphasizes the importance of what Lai does to problematize the foundational underpinnings of this mythical creature. Her text raises the debate over whether or not there is reality to the binary depiction of women as virgin or whore. Her text works actively to destabilize the false dichotomies of female sexuality upon which traditional mythology is founded. The folklore in question is predicated on the notion that prostitutes do not count as people, which is made clear through the mythological conflation of the Fox as the inhabitor of dead female bodies and the Fox as seducer of men. Through the traditional Fox mythology, prostitutes are considered dead virtuous women whose bodies are animated by evil spirits. Indeed, if folklore is based on the understanding of prostitutes as evil and already dead, then there is room for serious abuses of women.

Lai pries open this fissure in heterosexist logic and reveals a chasm wherein the regulation of the female body implies a fear of the female body. When Lai makes the fox-character a heroine, she both redeems and problematizes the position of the so-called whore. What Lai rebuffs is that these mythologized abuses against women could be labeled part of a cultural heritage in order to give credence to continued abuses of women. Lai's text implicitly critiques the *ad hoc* logic at work here, for simply because violence against women occurs in folklore in the form of measures which regulate female sexuality does not mean that such hostile regulation should continue to be actualized. In

line with Jeanne Smith Rosier's use of Estella Lauter's "contention that myth is 'part of the dynamic of history instead of being one of its reservoirs'" (3). Lai's use of the fox-character revitalizes and updates mythology, as she retroactively creates a mythical lesbian backdrop against which contemporary configurations of lesbianism come to life. Lai's own tropes of history revolve around this same idea of history as a reservoir that is made dynamic. The fox claims that "[other] foxes don't know how history gathers like a reservoir deep below the ground[. . .]stars dreaming like sleeping fish at the bottom[. . .until][enough myths have collected to warrant new constellations" (18). Fox rather self-consciously creates new constellations through its use of Fox mythology. Lai's cause is confirmed in the textual moments in which she reconfigures the lesbian as the cultural survivor, the cunning trickster blundering forward and backward in time, appreciating human prudence, but enamoured of human greed. One of Lai's achievements is that she problematizes this construction in such a way as to call into question the foundations of all patriarchal myth.

Even though the Fox is considered clever (Liu 240), it is not traditionally presented as a trickster figure, but in Lai's work this monster becomes one. This is because trickster figures are known for their insistent disruption and questioning of cultural values. In The Trickster Aesthetic, Rosier notes that they are "at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries" (2). Thus, Lai actively recasts the Fox myths as important markers in lesbian history by invigorating the fox-character as an agent of social change. In this move, she reconfigures an historical narrative of heterosexist suspicion and distrust of women in order to effect an active questioning of heterosexist assumptions. However, this investigation is not one-sided, for the interest she expresses in questioning the formulation of social groupings means that she also initiates the interrogation and reevaluation of contemporary lesbian scripts of so-called lesbian-identity. The

simultaneity of these gentle interrogations makes Fox an important site in lesbian literary studies, for the drive here is to draw attention to, and complicate the boundaries between, heterosexist methods of consolidation and lesbian methods of social consolidation. Lai's text is thoroughly disruptive because it simultaneously questions hegemonic and subversive discourses. In fact, in her text, Lai "attempts to go beyond the assumptions upon which [the text] is based and which (if not challenged) it will reproduce" (Hawthorn 250). In this sense, the text is transgressive. Furthermore, the text denaturalizes social conventions by way of the disruptions delivered through content and form.

In order to draw links between the trickster and the disruption which Zimmerman points to as constitutive of lesbianism, I will expand an analysis of the trickster by outlining its shape and function. In fact, the trickster is, paradoxically enough, characterized by an uncontainability that is particularly relevant to contemporary lesbian writing. As lesbian writing refuses to be contained either in terms of its content or its form, so too does the trickster refuse censorship of his/her desires. The trickster is widely understood as disruptive even of categories of gender identification.

While it is true that Lai rarely refers to the fox-character as female, she never refers to her as male. On pages sixteen and seventeen the fox narrator reports the traditionalist consolidation of her fox peers: in so doing she reports her gender. She starts out by saying "[o]ther foxes are strange not me" (16). This statement prepares the reader for the sarcastic and pained autobiography of the narrator. She goes on to report that her peers are fearful of seeing themselves too much in her for they say, "'See, here are the things that make us civilized, here are the things that make us *not like her*'" (Fox 17). What the fox-character parodies, here, is the mentality of a majority concerned with the careful delineation and maintenance of its homogeneity.

While it may be possible to argue that the fox retains the ambiguity of her biological sex as part of a trickster identity through her animation of female human

bodies, this argument certainly is not evident in the work of critic Lynn Van Luven who unabashedly refers to the fox as male (Van Luven 270-71). Certainly the fact that the fox does not have a human body of her own makes her sexual congress with mortals complex. The fox animates young, most often beautiful, female bodies. However, Van Luven's treatment of Fox ignores the fact that these female bodies are animated in order for the fox to seduce women. Moreover, the fox reports other foxes of her community refer to her as female, or at least as "she" or "her" (Fox 17). Again, the fact that the biological sex of her fox body is not mentioned may very well mean that Lai questions the regulation of the boundaries between sex and gender, for the two are not necessarily synonymous. However, Van Luven does not do Lai justice when she so carelessly refers to the fox as male. In fact, the move Van Luven makes here reeks of the very kind of homophobia the text takes to task: invisibility. It would seem that Van Luven's assumption stands its ground firmly. When she claims that the fox is male she overlooks one of the main foci of the text, in effect, claiming that any character that desires sexual intimacy with a woman is male. This is problematic in a text which so carefully delineates the challenges lesbians face, past and present. The fact that Van Luven insists on the fox as male means that she gives a grossly negligent misreading of the entire text. Van Luven's reading of the text refuses to concede that there is any value in a lesbian reading of the text, and she omits mention of the undeniably lesbian content of the text, as well. While Lai may problematize the intersections of gender and sexuality by way of the fox, she does not do so explicitly, and Van Luven does not acknowledge the possibility of this reading.

The fox is known as female by her choice of body, as she is known as lesbian by her desire for women. In fact, the fox is most clearly marked as female and lesbian in the scene in which the fox mistakes a cross-dressed man for a woman. She states that she has forgotten her prosthetic, her olisboi. Thus, the character most certainly retains the

fluidity of her sexual preferences because she does have sex with the cross-dressed person and she tells the reader she is penetrated by him (107). The disruptiveness evoked through this use of a trickster figure lends vibrancy to the precarious "balance of chance and design" on which the trickster's composite questioning of assertions of cultural authenticity is predicated (Smith 107). Lai transforms her from the traditional and loathsome Fox to a contemporary, charismatic fox-character. Similarly, this signals interest in the reconceptualization and reevaluation of lesbian as culture. The theoretical and literary reclamation of lesbian as clever signals the recuperation of lesbian people. Lai's transformation of the fox makes it possible for lesbians to participate as citizens of a heterogeneous nation. Again, the move from loathsome to charismatic serves as an historical account of the treatment of lesbian people.

The neat containment of female and lesbian bodies has a long-standing history. Whenever the female body is highly regulated this phenomenon is related to the power of the female body continuously to transgress its own boundaries. In "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," Peter Stallybrass genders Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of class as female. Stallybrass refers to the Renaissance assumption that the female body is grotesque, and he says that the female body is always and naturally on the verge of "transgressing its own limits" (126). In Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives, Marilyn R. Farwell points out that because the female body is perceived as on the verge of transgression it must always be policed (33). Hence, female sexuality is perceived as equally excessive when it produces a child and menstruates, and when it engages in non-procreative sex. In the case of non-procreative sex, the female body refuses to function within a contained and regulated field: patriarchy. This sexual transgression of patriarchy is represented as monstrous in the case of the mythological Fox. The perceived excess of female desire, even for heterosexual sex, is institutionalized as monstrous in order to sensitize male and female subjects to the regulation of female desire. The move to make

this monstrous character less loathsome and more charismatic signals lesbianism in the form and content of the text because the lesbian monsters are the furthest extreme in heterosexist patriarchy, and making this monster charismatic serves to reclaim her. The charismatic monster simultaneously sheds her usefulness to the dominant system, her cultural capital, and retains her culturally inscribed heritage when she becomes authoritative. Lai's move is distinctly lesbian because she reconfigures lesbianism from monstrous to something necessary to cultural production. The fox becomes interesting, rather than a perilous deformity.

Lai rewrites the Fox out of the historical scrap-heap of figures who served to reinforce patriarchy, and in so doing she releases the supposedly tamed monster as a disruptive force. Rather cunningly, she tames the xenophobia in the readership. In fact, Rosier-Smith's description of the trickster as reconceptualized and utilized by North American women of colour surmises that "[t]he trickster's power lies in disruption of pattern, in an ability to negotiate between the known and the inchoate, reminding us that all human design is arbitrary" (107). In light of Smith's account of the tricksters in Louise Erdrich's works, I hold that Lai's use of the trickster negotiates between patriarchy and lesbianism as the known and the inchoate, respectively. Thus, Lai's fox-character actively disrupts the binary of known and unknown by making the lesbian knowable, giving her a history. The pattern that the fox disrupts is that of heterosexism and patriarchy. The fox's autobiography, as it is presented in the first narrative strand of the novel, gives a detailed account of her experiences of discrimination, because she describes the other foxes as afraid of being too much like herself (17). The fact that the fox- character reports on the reactions of her peers means that Lai is filling in the gaps between what is known and what is not known about discrimination from the point of view of the culturally encoded deviant, the lesbian. The fox is disconcerting to her family and community precisely because they see themselves in her. Hence, Lai provides a link

between the known position of the majority and the supposedly inchoate position of the lesbian. This is to say that the lesbian fox is unknown relatively, but she is also unknown in the sense that she does not have the same ideological imperatives as those with whom she lives for so long. Lai does more than attempt to describe the life of the fox; neither does the fox describe her life to the reader. Here I use "describe" in the sense that Uma Narayan uses it. I refer to the details of experiencing discrimination. What Lai does is have the fox simultaneously "describe" her experience and "explain" it. In Narayan's text the ability to explain one's oppression is almost exclusively reserved for the educated oppressor; whereas, the ability to describe the oppression is necessarily the prerogative of the oppressed (36). In effect, Lai manages to undercut the containment of the oppressed by way of this continual move on the part of the fox to move from the position of the inchoate to the known. By giving the fox the agency to write herself a history and make herself knowable, Lai effectively alters the trajectory of a dominant cultural pattern founded upon the systematic oppression of women. While the compulsion to make the fox knowable may seem counter-intuitive in terms of the importantly disruptive role all such tricksters play, the fox lesbian is already marginalized in relation to heteronormativity, so the move to have her take an active part in the discourse makes for a meaningful occupation of her disruptive space. If Lai were to refuse the fox the agency necessary to make herself knowable, she would only objectify an already disenfranchised subject position. The trickster figure may traditionally disrupt the very idea of there being a "knowable," but in the case of the lesbian fox it is a necessary expression, one which makes her able to be lesbian. When she changes the fox from an inauspicious omen of evil to a liberatory "trickster-inspired view of identity," Lai shifts the grounds of heterosexist, patriarchal regulation of the female body (Smith 73). The charisma of the fox suggests that no female cultural figure should be used to regulate women's sexuality. Meanwhile, the instability of the fox's identity is evinced literally in the sense that she is

continuously in search of new bodies to inhabit and socially in the sense that she engages other characters with a cunning penchant for role play. In this way, the fox registers as a sign of excess, for she has—quite literally—to exceed the boundaries of her body and into others in order to survive. Moreover, the fox registers as the embodiment of disruption, because the fox successfully makes the "inchoate" knowable in such a way as to render heterosexist patriarchal homophobia "arbitrary."

When she casts the fox as trickster more than monster, Lai does two things. First, she gives agency to the fox/lesbian. Where foxes are associated with prostitution and debauchery, she recovers the agency of female resistance to patriarchal configurations of woman. Not only does the novel embody a reconfiguration of prostitution and stealing, but the text facilitates a closer look at the conflation of this Fox as simultaneously dead, spirit, and prostitute. The fox is considered a spirit in traditional Chinese mythology, because she inhabits newly dead young women's bodies. The conflation at work here means that Chinese mythology suggests that prostitutes are not alive, and that the spirit that animates them is not their own. This denial of humanity to prostitutes allows for myriad abuses, physical, sexual, psychic. For, again, if folklore is based on the understanding of prostitutes as evil and already dead, then there is room for serious abuses of women as part of a cultural heritage. Lai's text works to establish room for women to reconsider the conditions under which all women are dehumanized, but she manages to do so in such a way as to ensure that women maintain agency. The novel establishes that there is an alternative way of looking at one's cultural and social history. Lai reconstructs myth in such a way as to foster the important realization that there is no reason for women to believe that the fox spirit engages in activity destructive to anything but patriarchy.

The fox-character is lesbian, so this transformation of the fox from purely monstrous to emphatically trickster-like facilitates a critique of the heterosexist

constructions of lesbianism. Lai makes the fox less a monstrous *object* and more a monstrous *subject* when she makes her more trickster-like. Certainly the fear inspired by the monster is based on her agency as a subject, of sorts. However, the degree of agency given the fox is drastically different in Lai's text than in traditional Chinese folk tales. The fox in Lai's text has a history and a series of motivations to which the reader is privy. Despite the fact that lesbian monsters are, with Lai as a distinct exception, denied access to the roles as narrators, contemporary lesbian theorists have made room for the monstrous drudge-object as lesbian in lesbian reading practices.

This accommodation draws attention to the timeliness of Lai's move from object to subject, for the transformation from monster to monstrous trickster marks an innovative move in lesbian narrative. For example, in "The Lesbian Narrative," Farwell asserts that "the lesbian hero must be the monster, but also the monstrous female must be read as lesbian" (166-167). Again, the lesbian is perceived as monstrous because her sexual activity affirms an excess in the heterosexist sexual economies. Here the theorist identifies the monster and claims her as a symbol of lesbian experience: the chastized lesbian rendered invisible and voiceless in heteronormative patriarchal paradigm becomes taboo, a monster, but Farwell theorizes her way around the negative stereotyping of lesbians as evil by including the monster in theory rather than abandoning her. There is a celebration of sorts at work here. Farwell claims the lesbian monster, even though the construction of the lesbian as dangerous and monstrous is a patriarchal projection and conveniently created other. In this move there is a hint of the grotesque because Farwell claims a monstrous lesbian as a way of reclaiming the patriarchally defined and contained lesbian. In effect, her theory recognizes lesbians' disruption as empowering.

Clearly, lesbian experience of patriarchy reports exclusion, suspicion, and dislocation. Here, there are important distinctions between where Farwell locates

exclusion and where Lai achieves an interrogation of suspicion itself, for where Farwell strives to include the monster, Lai transforms the monster. The traditional myth uses suspicion of women's sexual drives to socially regulate women's sexual and social relationships. When Lai disrupts monstrosity she transforms and updates lesbian theory. No longer a one-dimensional pariah, the monster becomes an active agent of a cultural unlearning. When the monster becomes a monster-trickster in Lai's text, the literary definition and agency of lesbians necessarily changes, for there is now a certain amount of authority conferred upon the lesbian. Through Lai's text, lesbians become questioners of cultural assumptions whose questioning forms the basis of cultural unlearning. Here unlearning refers to the process by which a culture reassesses and renegotiates its values.

In particular, the fox questions the sanctity of the connection between mind and body. By animating female bodies and engaging in mostly lesbian sex, the fox questions clichéd arguments of biological determinism: that lesbians are "born that way." This questioning simultaneously addresses the equally clichéd, polarized position that lesbianism "is a choice." The fox seems to be both born lesbian and choosing to be lesbian. The fox-character draws attention to the impulse on the part of her family to draw all-too-neat lines around her sexuality. Her interest in animating women's bodies in order to engage with women sexually is simultaneously a trait that has run in the family for generations and a choice. The implication is that she could, as a lesbian, inhabit male bodies in order to sexually engage with women, but this so-called option does not exist for the fox. The fox's narrative challenges the usefulness of trying to apply these vague and ideologically loaded categories of genes versus choice. Thus, the fox lesbian as a monster-trickster functions to problematize the easy generalizations. Through Lai's transformation of a lesbian monster to a lesbian monster-trickster, lesbians are reevaluated and newly valued. Where Lai endows the traditional Fox's monstrosity with trickster-like inquisitiveness, lesbianism in literature makes an important move from a

resistant, but invisible and subordinate position, to a resistant, visible, and disruptive way of being.

Fox is not the first work of fiction to reread the lesbian as monster, but it stands out as an overt complication of the trope of the lesbian as monster and monstrous. Lai does more than mobilize a monster; she mobilizes a trickster-monster. This distinction means that the monster-trickster has not only the agency of the monster, but she has the imperative of the trickster as questioner and teacher. While the fox's monstrosity is a trope that locates the novel within lesbian literature, Lai's innovation is her refining of the figure to be a trickster-monster.

Further in support of Farwell's interest in recognizing and claiming the monstrous female sexuality, "not as a substitute man[. . .]but as lesbian" (166-67), I will outline the ways in which this particular "lesbian narrative, then, can be defined as a disruptive story in which the female is given subjectivity[. . .]as an oversized, monstrous woman" (166-67). However, in order to maintain the integrity of this project I have also to demonstrate that "the narrative system, not simply the character images, must be the site of transgression" (166-67). While the fox-character and narrator are monstrous lesbians, so—too—are they trickster-like lesbians in their interest in disruption. The fox refuses to be entirely trustworthy, and this serves to keep the story in the hands of the reader. Hence, even the subjectivity of the skeptical reader is preserved in Lai's narrative, for it vigorously refuses a discourse of dominant-subordinate, the known and the inchoate, and yet it makes itself known. In this simple move, the "narrative system, not simply the character images [are] the site of transgression" (166-67). From the outset, Fox is disruptive.

The text opens with an instance which is of the disruptiveness to heterosexuality that Zimmerman identifies as a particularly lesbian characteristic in literature. In this case, the fox narrator does not instigate or suggest that the actions of the characters are

directly influenced by any suggestions made by her. In the opening scene, the fox narrator retells a story in such a way that she cannot be held accountable for the sudden deviation of the female characters she outlines as being otherwise in her counsel. The fox narrator disrupts a heterosexual and patriarchal economy by counseling an unhappy housewife to buy the "cold, calculating finger[ed]" husband a concubine (3). Once the concubine is well at work, the housewife realizes that her own authority in the household wanes. In an effort to regain her domestic authority, the housewife takes advice from this fox that inhabits an ugly body. After appearing in beautiful robes before the husband and the concubine, housewife runs into a bedroom chamber: the two lovers follow the newly ravishing wife. At this moment the concubine raises one "curious eyebrow" (4) to the housewife to foreshadow the fluid sexuality that makes it possible for the housewife and concubine to run away together (5). In this retelling of a story that takes place in ancient China, the fox figure confirms that her project is to retell stories of the disruption of heterosexuality.

Catherine Stimpson says that a lesbian text is not determined by political sympathy but by the body, what "partakes of the flesh"(264). This quote has amusing resonances in relation to Fox because the fox actually partakes of women's flesh in a more literal sense than the metaphoric implications of the quotation. Here Lai has overdetermined symbols of female sex in the sense that the fox has quite literally to inhabit a female body—or partake of the flesh—in order to live. Also, the way in which she reports doing this metaphorically stands in for lesbian sex. In the final lines of the text, the fox relays her discovery of Ming's body and her consequent animation of it: "I nudged the mouth open with my snout and blew my soul inside" (235). The fox is read as female throughout the text, especially in this accessible metaphorical report of cunnilingus. Lai has complicated lesbian literary theory with this metaphorical use of the body, and in so doing she draws attention to arguments about what constitutes

lesbianism. Further, in relation to this quotation, the fox narrator presents a complex series of arguments for embodied lesbianism. Here the text confronts, and confirms the prevalence of, various assumptions and essentializations of lesbianism. The fox narrator's first argument is that her family may not be supportive of her behaviour, but they cannot "disown [her] for a trait which has run in the family for generations" (3). While the narrator is talking about the haunting of female bodies, the text draws attention to and problematizes lesbianism as a biologically determined identity because Lai uses the trope of the temporary body to emphasize that there are spaces in between the fox's periods of embodiment as a human and as a fox wherein she has to go beyond the confines of her "natural" body in order to successfully experience desire. This problematizes the idea that lesbians are biologically determined because the fox has to engage the so-called "unnatural," and biological determinism seems to demand a certain degree of discreteness and simplicity that the animations disrupt. Here lesbianism is presented not as a choice, but as in relation to a genetic disposition. While I concede that the text does not make this link explicit, this allegorical move in the novel foreshadows interpretations of lesbianism. As it does so, it prepares the reader for a transformation of lesbianism from monstrous to monstrously trickster-like, for not only does the fox animate female bodies to haunt scholars, but she counsels women who wish to "escape that wifely duty that had become increasingly disagreeable" (3). In order to perform what Farwell would call a "political sympathy" with lesbian characters, the fox inhabits a lesbian body(264). One important note here is the work the text does in terms of disrupting categories of sexual identities. Lai goes some distance to question the meaning of the word "lesbian," because the fox-character may animate female bodies, further female plots, and feel desire for women, but nowhere does the magical fox character openly engage in lesbian sex. However, the way in which this move in the narrative is accomplished is interesting, because Lai makes the fact that the fox has had

sex with biologically male people an event the fox deems worth recounting. Hence, Lai writes the fox-character in such a way as to make her read as lesbian. The fox extends political sympathy to female characters in the text, but she does so as a lesbian figure whose very means of embodiment metaphorically stands in for lesbian sex. Breathing a female soul into another female body is a transparent metaphor for oral sex between women. The literary tenor here is lesbian sex and the literary vehicle is the animation of a dead body by breathing.

By addressing modes of lesbianism and homophobia, the text voices the anxiety of lesbian readers in the first paragraph, and it calls attention to and disrupts the insensitivity of heterosexism. For example, the fox reports a clichéd response from her parents: "'Don't you know your actions reflect on us all? If you keep making these visitations, other...families will talk about us. They will criticize us for not raising you properly'" (3). The parents go on to suggest that the fox take up a more respectable occupation, and at this point they are reported as thinking that almost anything would be more respectable, for they suggest she consider "fishing or stealing chickens"(3). This is analogous to the stereotypical response of parents of lesbians suggesting that their daughters keep quiet about their supposed "lifestyle." A very simple reading of the text reveals that the novel reads as a problematization of the "lifestyles" argument, wherein heterosexists claim that homosexuality is a fad-like choice, as opposed to a biologically determined identity—the supposed truth-claim of heterosexuality.

When the novel goes on to introduce the unhappy housewife, it begins to elucidate another argument for lesbianism. The fact is that the housewife is "handled[. . .]the way [her husband] handles money, with cold, calculating fingers" (3). Through her text, Lai offers resistance in the face of heterosexual economies predicated on the objectification of women. The housewife "respond[s] the way one does to winter, drawing the blankets tighter and waiting for it to end" (3). What Lai presents here is

something similar to the constuctionist view that sexuality is socially produced, not innate (Lewis 21). According to Lewis, what is stressed are the "discontinuities of homosexual experience and social role, arguing that the very concept of lesbian[. . .]is socially contingent, produced by the emergence of an individualism and a socio-medical discourse of sexuality" (Lewis 21). She does not argue in favor of this particular position, and neither does Lai, per se. However, the thematic concern with the innate versus socially constructed is reflected in the very opening pages of the novel. In this instance, lesbianism as a social construct in response to the patriarchy of heterosexual economies reads as a more radical argument than the biological determinism also introduced in the novel's opening; hence, the novel does not try to give a definitive answer to the nurture-nature debate, but it draws out and nuances some of the complexities in the field.

The novel makes narrative space for lesbian desire: it does so in the opening passages. The female characters are immediately endowed with more agency than male and or heterosexual characters. The housewife "ran off with the concubine"(5), and in so doing expresses more agency than the husband. In The Lesbian Body, Monique Wittig claims that the lesbian body's entry into the text signals a struggle with the narrative because the lesbian is neither traditionally male nor female and the traditional narrative structure cannot absorb her vision (Lesbian Body 150). Fox centres not on "female" experience in Wittig's sense of the traditional, but it focuses on lesbian experience, for the housewife becomes a hero in its opening. She breaks the bounds of the narrative expectation. In relation to this notion of female and lesbian agency in lesbian texts, it is important to take into consideration the work of Teresa de Lauretis. In her groundbreaking text entitled Alice Doesn't, de Lauretis discusses the importance of female agency in a novel. The agency of female characters is traditionally reserved to support the success of male characters. Moreover, male characters are traditionally

represented as the hero, and if there are female characters then their role is to support the success of the hero. If a female character is "good," she works to further the cause of the male-initiated plot, and if a female character is "evil" she works to inhibit his success. In this case, Lai's transformation of the fox spirit from monster to trickster makes a new kind of sense. If a novel is to centre on the female experience that means there is room for the female character(s) to impede larger, systemic male plots, and this means a reevaluation of so-called "evil" female characters.

Lai's text produces a form of lesbian revision of an entire tradition of myth-making otherwise interested in furthering female subordination. The traditional evilness of the Fox is due to her reluctance to aid in male-identified, patriarchal projects. Thus, the redemption of the fox-character as ever-questioning trickster relays the message that the lesbian history of myth-making has just begun. The fox moves from evil to fascinating in this transformation, and this move is facilitated by the focalization of the text through the fox. Now, rather than shun the counterproductive fox, the narrative takes up some of her questions, for a border has been crossed. Through this brief narratological foray I intend to relate one aspect of the significance of the fox-character's charisma. Lai's text is partly made up of an autobiography by the fox. Indeed, in this section the fox relates her exploits, and as she does so her reasoning, impulses, and sense of humor surface. In this sense, the character, both through whom and by whom the story is told, takes on a great deal of import. In the case of the fox character, she simultaneously tells the story in her own words and relays emotional responses to her environment. This is important because the traditional history of myth making and myth telling has objectified the Fox and made her into an object. This has happened because the Fox has been discussed in the third person; thus, the traditional narratives have not focalized through the Fox (for further discussion of focalization see Hawthorn 169-170). In order to take an example from the text at hand, I will consider the third narrative

strand, narrated in the third person in order to nuance the significance of moving from an object, to a focalizing subject, to a narrator. When a character focalizes a narrative, his or her emotions and responses are at the forefront: the character's responses are somewhat subtly woven into the narrative in third-person narratives by way of sentences such as, "For a moment, [Artemis] could have sworn someone was watching her" (Fox 7). This sentence reports some of Artemis' inner workings, and—in effect—the story focuses through her experience of the social and physical setting. It is possible to tell a story in the third person without focalizing, but such a text reads like a historical chronicle rather than a novel (see Bal and Scholmith). The point here is that the fox narrates her own story, and in so doing she conveys more than the bare facts and more than subtle inner workings. An integral part of her first-person narrative is that she reports on the world around her in her own words. The fox both focalizes and narrates, and in the context of the tradition of myth and story, fox's narratological agency is radical. The overall focalization is not male, heterosexual, patriarchal; instead, the project is the establishing of a lesbian centre from which it is possible to elucidate the social value of femaleness as heroic. When female characters further only female plots it is fair to wonder if indeed there is lesbianism afoot. Again, lesbian space in narrative depends on the valences of lesbian form and lesbian content.

It remains important not to separate form from content, nor to separate the use of lesbian as a literary term from its real-life application. At no time is it fair to dismiss the importance of lesbianism's reference to two female bodies. Their very union disrupts heterosexuality, because it is anchored in sameness. Lesbian/ism is not primarily an aesthetic value; it is a form of desire and an embodiment of resistance to various patterns of subordination. Lai addresses the idea that lesbian writing has had to persevere under the pressures of censorship by both family and community. In the case of the fox herself, she is chastized for writing about her life and experiences as trickster and lesbian.

Indeed, "the foxes of [her] hole got used to what they called [her] unnatural behaviour in due time. 'But,' they said, 'do you have to write about it?'" (5). Heteronormative conceptions of lesbianism see it as an excess: the idea is that two supplemental, subordinate bodies cannot have agency. Thus, lesbian writing such as Lai's articulates a response to these perceptions. Her text is an inscription of the refusal of lesbians to remain silent. Hers is of particular interest because it introduces and repeatedly rehearses the trope of the lesbian as writer through the fox's report that her community got used to her so-called "unnatural behaviour" (5) but nonetheless asked, "'do you have to write about it?'" (5). This kind of metafictional moment signals recognition of the silencing which lesbians have experienced, while it seizes the opportunity to give voice to the demonization of lesbians as agents.

The playful parody in the voice of the fox is a revealing, if not scathing, criticism of historical narrative. Earlier on this same page, the fox claims that "[h]uman history books make no room for foxes" (5), and in keeping with my earlier reading of foxes, here, Lai points to the absence of lesbians from historical narrative. The text makes a clever recoup in its assertion that "any gossip on the streets or any popcorn-munching movie-goer[. . .]will tell you that foxes of my disposition have been around since before the first dynasty" (5). Here the text continues to disrupt the heteronormativity of historical narrative by presenting it as biased not simply toward foxes but "foxes of *my* disposition" (5). Hence, the first chapter of Lai's text establishes the historical importance of lesbian texts while it makes room for lesbian form and content. The opening of Lai's text revels in the importance of lesbian bodies locating historical recognition.

Lai's text is a complex weave of narratives. What I refer to as the second narrative is also narrated in the first person, and this time the narrator is entirely human, a ninth-century poet, Yu Hsuan-Chi. Dealing with the strands of narratives in terms of

their type of narration, rather than their order or frequency in the text, more easily facilitates my examination of the text in terms of Zimmerman's summary of the modes of lesbianism. For the second narrative strand of the text also narratologically disrupts heterosexism and heterosexist assumptions of male access to the female body.

One of the most obviously disruptive characteristics of the Poetess's narrative is the fact that it is predicated on the re-imagining of a specific historical narrative. Where in the first narrative strand the fox is re-imagined as a monstrous trickster, the second narrative strand begins to question the authority of historical narrative by reevaluating the story and actual figure. In this second narrative, the Poetess's actual history is invented because the records from that period do not keep careful enough track of her for a contemporary writer to report her circumstances accurately; instead, Lai invents the circumstances of this woman's life and death. However suspect it may be for a writer to want to reconstruct a historical moment, Lai's project pieces together an important analogy to contemporary women's lives. The fact that Yu Hsuan-Chi is a poet is clear enough, but few of her works have survived. What becomes interesting is her relative absence from record. Here there is a link here to Monique Wittig's claim that, "for all its pretension to being universal, what has been until now considered 'human' in our Western philosophy concerns only a small fringe of people: white men, proprietors of the means of production, along with the philosophers who theorized their point of view as the only and exclusively possible one" (Straight Mind 46). Although this part of Lai's text centres on the experiences of a woman in ninth-century China, the East-West construction in Wittig may prove a false dichotomy in this instance. Thus, Lai seems to highlight the fact that the regulation and production of historical narrative and scholarly work is a class-based, male domain. The biases of record keepers had—before Lai—effaced this perhaps lesbian poet. Hence, this narrative is based on the problem in asserting that there is any true story of a poet executed for the murder of her maidservant,

and the text retells the somewhat conflicting accounts of her arrest and execution while it also refashions these accounts to fit the fox-spirit presence. Here, not only does Lai give Yu Hsuan-Chi's story depth by exposing the possible narratives one could construe, but she meshes the rehistoricizations: she places the fox and the Poetess in a relationship, of sorts.

Lai's mythologizing of history demonstrates another instance of Zimmerman's disruption because it enables a lesbian reading of the historical accounts where historical narrative is otherwise carefully heteronormative. Lai writes fiction based on historical records in this second narrative as a way of foregrounding history's claims to objectivity. The problematizing of historical narrative is particularly compelling in Fox, for through it Lai questions the scripts that perpetuate patriarchy. She makes the Poetess dynamic, the focus of the narrative, whereas traditional historical narrative reserves the interesting roles for male and male-identified heroes. Again, with reference to de Lauretis' work on the Oedipus story and Medusa, the so-called good female characters are made out to be those who forward the male quest, and often times this is accomplished by the presence of a deranged princess who stands by in hideous obscurity. The Sphinx and Medusa are fearsome and loathsome, like the Fox of Chinese mythology, and in her text Lai reclaims the agency of the Fox in tandem with the agency of the historical figure: Yu Hsuan-Chi, the Poetess.

The poet is given a full—and admittedly imagined—biography in Lai's novel, and the fact that very little of her poetry survives speaks to the seeming importance of the project of rewriting lesbian history. Lai is right to point out that the fact that very little of this woman's poetry survived is indicative of a lost or forgotten history. As I have introduced through Wittig's remark, men are traditionally funded to do scholarship, and their lack of interest in Yu Hsuan-Chi has meant her works are largely lost. This obscuring of the Poetess is foregrounded in Lai's text, as the reports of her biographical

information are wildly incongruent (Fox 225-27). Lai's text works to situate the Poetess as a lesbian figure, and she links her with the fox by detailing the narrating fox's interest in animating and inhabiting the woman's body.

While the fox inhabits bodies almost at random after her fiftieth birthday, she chooses the body of the Poetess for herself as one to which she will return for centuries. Eventually the lesbian fox confronts the lesbian Poetess and takes over her body. All the same, the fox does not lose interest in the origin of her body. Although she chooses not to pay attention at the time, the fox later expresses a good deal of energy reconstructing the historical conditions under which she acquired the Poetess' body. This interest in the Poetess's history cannot be satisfied because even in a work of fiction focalized by, and mediated through, a creature who is both magical and lesbian, there is no access to a complete view of history. Once the fox gains her immortal powers she goes to the "Library of the Western Heavens" (224), but she finds out that "in those days very few records were kept on women, if any at all" (224). In this exploration of the fox's interest in her Poetess body, the text indicates that patriarchal record-keeping takes place even in the realm of the divine. Thus, the disruption in this part of the text is a disruption of the sanctity of heterosexually controlled historical record.

Lai creates a replacement for a missing record, and it cannot be any further astray than the fragmented heteronormative accounts of the Poetess and her virgin maid. Interestingly, the conviction of the Poetess rests upon the virginity of the maid. The assumption is that if male villains or thieves were responsible they surely would have raped the youth (227). Lai both confirms and refuses the simplicity of this analysis. The Poetess's account as written by Lai serves as a testimony to physical violence in lesbian families. Here Lai's text makes one of its strongest claims for anti-utopian images of lesbians. She bases one narrative of the novel on an incidence of violence against women, perpetrated by a woman. Lai's attention to violence is very important. Rather

than supporting a lesbian feminist model of lesbianism wherein it is possible to assume that when women are in relationships with women they do so as a conscious rejection of subordination of women and are, thus, somehow immune to brutalities. Lai's text acknowledges violence against a partner as a distinct possibility in the case of the Poetess. To portray the Poetess as entirely innocent of the violence which led to her lover's death would not be altogether fair, for much of Lai's project centres on the disruption of assumptions about lesbians while writing a history of lesbians that includes mythology. Lai's text disrupts heterosexism, but it also disrupts misleading configurations of lesbians.

Further, in terms of the Poetess' narrative's investment in disruptions of heterosexuality, the text affords a certain amount of latitude to fatalism. As part of the blending of content and form, the earliest of the Poetess's narrative strands refers to a promise made while she was as yet unborn. Her parents were herbalists, and they establish a contract of marriage with oil sellers whose baby was also not yet born (25). Both mothers give birth to girls, and the families are said to be cursed or haunted by Foxes. This moment of the Foxes possibly having an impact on biological sex is interesting because it implies that Foxes would intentionally create lesbians, and in this moment lesbians are given a mythological history, a place of origin in folklore.

The text is again explicitly disruptive of heterosexuality when the Poetess sells herself to a teahouse. She does this in order to relieve her father of the burden of having to come up with a dowry for her, because her own mother is dead and her father has lost his business in his grief. When the Poetess sells herself to the teahouse she does so with the agreement that the housemother will not encourage her to sell her body. Instead, the Poetess sells her patrons visits of poetry and singing. The fact that her virginity is preserved begins later to speak clearly to the class to which she is permitted to attain, for the Poetess is wooed by a visiting professor who plays chess with her, and whose strange

hands intrigue her (53). One night the professor shows up in a typhoon, and the Poetess—contrary to the services she is accustomed to providing—offers a warm bath. Here the book is again explicitly lesbian in its content, because the professor turns out to be a woman dressed in man's clothing, and the two fall into the bath together (55). The cross-dressed lesbian comes to be known as Lu Ch'iao, and she arranges for her so-called twin brother to buy the Poetess. As with the opening story told in the fox's narrative, the economy of heterosexuality is foregrounded, and again the women manage to escape. This is very clearly a case of disruption to the systems of heterosexuality because the women escape from both a heterosexual market—the Tea House—and a heterosexual institution: marriage. The added twist in this story is, however, that this time the women escape from a family of Foxes rather than as in the first story in which women escape with the aid of the fox-character (72). The fact that the heterosexual Foxes are the dangerous ones is an interesting turn because homosexual characters are traditionally conceived of as deranged, murderous, and self-loathing. Furthermore, through the text, Lai builds on earlier imagery of heterosexual sex as cold. In effect, this functions to disrupt the homophobic view that lesbian sex is somehow not as "real" or as interesting as heterosexual sex or that lesbians just need to find the "right" man. The description of heterosexual sex reports a cold touch: "[n]ot ice cold, but just a thought colder than comfortable, like the still warm fingers of a man just moments dead[. . .]no warmth came to it even as the hours wore on" (68). Although this is a report of a woman having sex with a dead man's body (because the so-called twin brother of Lu Ch'iao is actually a Fox animating a dead body), the trope of coldness is carried over from the husband in the first story. In this sense, the text presents heterosexual sex as unpleasant, while it presents lesbian sex as a spiritual union. The text is explicitly disruptive of heterosexuality because it carefully illustrates instances where women are forced to flee it in order to keep themselves safe from misery. Thus the text goes a long way to present

lesbianism so that it makes itself visible not merely as an alternative to heterosexuality. Through no uncertain amount of irony for the lesbian reader, lesbianism is presented as a free-standing identity which only circumstantially constitutes a liberatory act. Overall, the second narrative provides a radically disruptive lesbianism. Not only does lesbianism rewrite historical figures, but it reconfigures the marketability of bodies in a heterosexual economy: the Poetess is saved from working in a Tea House by a woman who manages to trick Foxes. The fatalism, signaled by their marriage contract, works in this thread of the novel, or series of short stories, to resist heterosexist expectations of meaningful long-term commitments between lesbians. The lesbian characters in this narrative thread of the text are presented as investing in a particular kind of serial monogamy and this is in direct conflict with charges of promiscuity levied against all "deviant" women through the traditional Fox mythology.

The third narrative strand is reported by an unnamed third-person narrator, and it disrupts heterosexuality in the sense that the main character seems to try to align herself in a heterosexual manner, but she cannot buy into the roles available to her as a Chinese-Canadian heterosexual woman. In this portion of the essay I will discuss the implications of Artemis' relationship with Eden. The two seem initially to configure themselves as a heterosexual couple; however, it later becomes somewhat more likely that both parties are homosexual. The disruption that happens here happens in terms of the seeming parallel tack that the friends take in relation to heterosexuality. The two are not sexually active. Notably, one of the things Artemis likes best about being with Eden is that they share a quiet akin to that after love-making, save for the fact that they are never physically engaged, so the "lull [goes] on uninterrupted, gentle and continuous" (20). The pivotal scene for their understanding of one another's sexual socialization takes place while the two watch the movie Blade Runner. The scenes that play out before Artemis on the screen serve to objectify her as they terrify her. The signals she sends to Eden as

they lie side by side on his futon are those of fear: she sees a Cantonese man killed, a rape scene presented as heterosexual lust and sex, and a Geisha advertising breath mints (15-16). Eden squeezes Artemis's hand; he throws his leg over her (16). Eden reads cultural markers—or social scripts—which implicate him in a mode of heterosexual masculinity wherein objectification and potential violence is a response to women. The scene in Blade Runner conflates violence, heterosexuality, and objectification through this unacknowledged rape sequence followed by an advertisement for breath mints. Eden sees the rape of someone he is not obliged to think of as a human. He is permitted to think of Rachel as a replicant, a machine, so her rape does not read as a serious crime. At the same time, Deckard does not read as a rapist because he is the film's hero and the audience is to invest their desire in his goals rather than Rachel's. Lai points out the objectification of Rachel in this scene and the way in which it is compounded for Chinese-Canadian women by mirroring elements of the scene in her novel. In this scene, Eden grabs at Artemis in what he perceives to be the normal male behaviour reinforced by the film. This can only be read as a threat by Artemis. When Eden realizes the script that is laid out before him and he chooses to act on it he attempts to subordinate Artemis by initiating so-called sexual play. However, in this same moment, Artemis reads the script laid out before her, one of subordination, commodification, and dehumanization. The moment Eden is lured by the power of male heterosexual dominance, Artemis rejects the subordination of women that confers privileges to men. As a protest, she falls asleep (16).

Blade Runner provides an access point to much of the novel's thematic concern. The mention and discussion of the film take up only two pages in Lai's text, but these pages reveal that the characters are on the verge of the crisis of negotiating multiple categories of identity. They are coming of age in a transracial, supposedly heterosexual relationship, so the film provides necessary cultural context for the quandaries that the

friends will encounter. The fact that the film clip discussed is also very short points to the acuteness of its impact. Through the scenes mentioned from the film, Lai foreshadows the novel's concern with the formulation and regulation of sexual scripts. The scene also emphasizes the interconnected nature of violence against women, people of colour, and lesbians.

The first act of violence is tied up in a perhaps not-so-subtle racism. Leon and Roy, the characters questioning Cantonese Tyrell, eventually crush his skull (Fox 16). As an action movie, this scene glorifies if not directly motivated racial violence, certainly something which strikes a chord with systemic racism. Tyrell is the suspect in the scene; he seems to be withholding information. Here, Artemis sees a person of her own race killed, and she seems grateful that her friend Eden is there to hold her hand. However, Eden's act of friendship is soon blurred by the sexual script played out on the screen before them. There is a sleek packaging of oppression at work in this series of scenes, and Lai foregrounds the interlocking nature of racism and sexism. Her critique is implicit. First, the Cantonese man is killed; then there is a rape scene. The rape scene qualitatively compounds Artemis' discomfort. Deckard slams Rachel into a wall saying "Kiss me" (16), and eventually rapes the woman. In my presentation of this scene to a lecture of three hundred first-year Women's Studies students (Autumn 2000, University of Guelph) I found that this scene is not widely read as a rape. As students began to question exactly who it is who gets to decide when a rape is called a rape, they were better able to access this scene as representative of a patriarchal discourse. Indeed, this scene is indicative of the heterosexual monopoly over what counts as sex and what counts as sexy. The scene, itself, opens with Rachel kissing Deckard but then trying to leave the building. Deckard forcibly stops her (Blade Runner 1:11:08). At this point in the novel, Artemis is in Eden's apartment building, and the assumption is that the film and Eden's behaviour tell her she cannot try to leave. As Deckard attacks Rachel the music track in

the film changes from the standardized escape-track to a likewise standardized romance-track, complete with saxophone. The shift is abrupt. The scene is made into a love scene, when actually it is a rape.

Both film characters are meant to be something called Replicants. That means that they are not really human. An interesting note here is that these veritable robots are, then, parroting human behaviour back to the film audience. However, at the same time they are encoding certain scripts of heterosexuality predicated on rape narratives. The final component of this streamlined package is the immediate cut to the next scene wherein a video billboard displays a Geisha advertising breath mints. Lai focuses on this final scene. Intertexually I note that the woman puts a mint into her mouth three times in the few seconds she is on screen. In these few seconds, the woman is recognized as a sexual commodity in a heterosexual economy of sexualized bodies. She is constructed as a commodity selling sexual allure via breath mints, but what she is actually selling is the Orientalization of women. Women are conveniently Other in this scene, for Rachel is a Replicant when it serves the interest of the audience to dehumanize and violate her. Here, Rachel is a means of consolidating heterosexual male violent perpetrators, because Deckard's rape is supposedly forgiven as male (human) sexiness, because the audience gets to choose when they do or do not want to think of Deckard as Replicant, too. He is the consumer, and he symbolically consumes Tyrell, Rachel, and the Geisha. In her positioning of this scene, Lai disrupts normative scripts of heterosexuality. Artemis chooses to fall asleep in the face of the culturally condoned threats transmitted to her through both the film and Eden. In so doing, she quite literally opts out of the heteronormative script. Rather than struggle with Eden and thus seemingly condone and even provoke the now rehearsed chase and rape, Artemis keeps her eyes closed: "In a few more minutes she [is] asleep" (Fox 16). In this moment they are both effectively excused

of their obligatory adherence to compulsory heterosexuality, because she feigns sleep. Consequently, they never talk in detail about what happened.

Lai further disrupts heterosexuality by presenting this same couple in a reevaluation of their roles and the meaning of their relationship. This disrupts heterosexuality in the sense that the so-called couple seems to have given heterosexuality an arena, because they have rather graciously entertained the idea that they might be heterosexual. For months on end they sleep beside one another. Lai disrupts heterosexuality but also the sexual economy that goes with it in the scene in which Eden finally says, "[i]t can't be like that between me and you" (77). When the topic of why it is that they continue to sleep together does finally come up, they decide to stop doing it. In fact, at this point Eden is presented as the hunted, rather than as the pursuer in the Blade Runner scene. Indeed Lai casts him as "a deer through the sights of a rifle" (77). However, the hunting metaphor, here, is not that simple. This is not a mere reversal. Eden produces and exercises a gaze very similar to the Orientalist gaze he trains on Artemis in the earlier scene. Here, it is important to take note that "his eyes froze hers" (77), for again Eden has the agency and the power. The fact that Eden has the power while Artemis is portrayed as the hunter indicates an important complexity in the text. Lai's use of Artemis' name adds some depth to the reading of this scene. "Artemis" means virgin huntress, and she is presented as a huntress of sorts in her relationship with Eden. The theme evident in this moment is that of the conspicuous empowerment of contemporary women. She may be the one to put her hand on sleeping Eden's belly for the first time, but Eden is the one who has already decided that the two of them cannot work outside the script of heteronormative violence. Their relationship runs parallel to heterosexual norms, less the sex act, for months. When they witness the sexual script, as evident in Blade Runner, Eden decides that because they cannot act out the script of violence that they cannot be in a heterosexual relationship. One way of reasoning this is

that the characters need an excuse not be heterosexual, and this one serves them well. The characters have reached a crisis point in their relationship when they begin to realize that they are not interested in one another sexually. I read this scene as indicative of a barely conscious decision by Eden not to rape Artemis. However, Eden does not seem to experience the scene as rape: instead, he seems to be looking very hard to access eroticism and ignore its conflation with violence in Blade Runner. Lai's use of this scene effectively liberates both characters, but Lai duly notes Eden's use of the controlling gaze in this same scene. He tries to cover up the racist comment about Artemis's "authenticity" (78) by giving her a pair of valuable ancient Chinese robes which she and her newly made friend, Diane, model in an artsy photo shoot for him. The lesbian love interest has been introduced, and Eden pays off Artemis in order to dismiss her. This sequence disrupts heteronormative sexual scripts of violence by articulating them through characters only barely aware of the complexity of their actions.

Although it is Eden who does the gazing in this scene, the moment of his and Artemis' separation is carefully focalized through her by a third-person narrator. Narratologically, this focalization through Artemis accentuates the effect of a disembodied contemporary woman, because she is expressed in dialogue rather than producing the discursive field through which the account relays events. Lai's use of the third-person narrative in this section vivifies the disenfranchisement of contemporary women. Artemis resorts to using her body to escape Eden's psychic infringement on her in this moment: "[h]is eyes ca[tch] hers like a surveillance light. She struggle[s] visibly to get free of his gaze: "We shouldn't do this anymore" (79). In this moment Lai finally casts Artemis as an agent capable of disrupting heteronormative scripts predicated on the subordination of women. Artemis has said that they shouldn't engage in the power dynamic that victimizes, punishes, and subordinates her. In effect, the use of third-person narrative in this particular scene eventually works to emphasize the difficulty of the move

Artemis makes in removing herself from the heteronormative, violent script so neatly laid out before her. Once Artemis leaves, this last narrative of the novel's three voices no longer assumes heterosexuality. Artemis trundles to the bus with her symbolic oppressor—the robes—in "an elegant brown paper bag" (17); here the character carts off signifiers of the heterosexual economy, and Lai describes the bag as "ha[ving] the weight of flesh" (79). I note that she has not slain the oppressor, but she has evacuated the vulnerable signifiers of oppression. She makes the transformation implicit in this sequence accessible in the sense that the character frees herself from violent, heteronormative scripts and commodification by taking hold the robes, "like little rabbit carcasses, quite limp and dead" (79). Artemis has rejected Eden's Blade Runner-induced advances and she has taken hold of the robes so much like those of the video-billboard Geisha. She has recaptured the robes and through his capturing she has somehow neutralized the tools of her oppression.

The robes feel like a dead weight in her hand, because Lai repeatedly focuses on characters who cannot, in Audre Lorde's words, use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (380). The robes can be read here as both tools of oppression and tools of commodification and exoticization. The character cannot use these garments to dismantle her oppression, because by deciding to sell them she re-inscribes their authority, authenticity. In effect, Artemis only temporarily decommissions the robes from their oppressive tenacity when she takes them from Eden as a parting gift; thus, she only temporarily disrupts the sexual economy of an exoticizing heterosexuality. The point here is that within the discursive bounds of heteronormative myth, lesbian access to power is restricted to decommissioning signifiers of subordination. Lai's text draws attention to this discussion of lesbians' ability to use the master's tools when she presents a Chinese-Canadian woman questioning her own sexuality and in possession of robes whose sale could finance a trip which distances her from the contemporary pressures of

declaring her sexuality. The robes are, thus, *heterocolonially* charged, because they imbue the owner with the interrelated privileges of heterosexism and colonialism. The heterosexist privilege of the robes is that they are symbols of compulsory heterosexuality because the robes are a vestige of possessing and controlling the women who wore, and wear, them. The robes are associated with heterosexuality through the text because the Poetess reports that her fox father-in-law would suspect her of theft if she wore the robes furnished her by a former patron, and the fact that she worked in a teahouse must remain secret in order to avoid dishonoring her new family (69). When Artemis has control of these robes she has control of her sexual identity. In order to obtain money from these robes, Artemis has first to find a collector who will buy them. She is introduced to a collector's son by Diane, whose name Latin version of her Greek name implies the relation between the two women. The women mirror one another as virgin-huntresses in the text. They are not virgins in the physical sense, but in a spiritual sense. Here, Artemis goes to an extreme in her new-found control of her sexual identity and her sexual activity when she is ready to dispatch with the robes: she has casual sex with one of Diane's so-called boyfriends. Diane's interest in dating men is almost purely financial, for she refuses to "borrow" money from anyone other than these rich boyfriends: to Artemis she says "'You don't want to be lending me money, babe'" (62). In this scene Artemis' interest also seems to be related to money; however, it is also a way of mourning Diane's departure (112). When she reenters these robes into the economy of collectors through Saint's father, she reinstates a colonial and Orientalist interest in so-called foreign women's bodies. Artemis' disruption of the sexualized economy is temporary.

The weight of the robes further emphasizes their historical significance, because these robes are symbols of the social divisions that separated the aristocracy who wore robes much like these from the women who more frequently and systematically suffered

servitude, rape, and assault for being female and therefore always of a lower class than men in patriarchy. For instance in the Poetess' narrative the butcher's daughter is forced to leave her family because she is raped by a government official who makes threats on her family's survival to insure her silence (176). This young woman is not able to speak out against her attacker because her family's livelihood is on the line, and the family seems not only to accept her sacrifice, but to demand it while punishing her. In this way, not only does she work in her father's butcher shop: part of her servitude is to endure rape and the verbal assaults of the villagers. Even though the robes may not come from the butcher's daughter, they are emblems of the struggle all women endured, including her. When Artemis decides to sell the robes Hawkesworth, the collector, asks if she is of aristocratic heritage (115). This indicates that the robes are considered to be of some value, perhaps a particularly fine material. Thus, they may belong to the Poetess who houses the runaway. The moment in which Hawkesworth asks Artemis about her heritage marks a conflation of Artemis' racial signification and her background. In this moment the old man performs a mode of symbolic rape: he denudes her of her individuality, her agency, and her right to be as ignorant about her heritage as many non-Asian Canadians claim to be. Servitude weighs heavily on the shoulders of oppressed women. The robes mark rigidly maintained categories of identity based on biological sex as gender and physiological signifiers as race. Thus, the robes signify East Asian women's socially constructed inferiority and consequent abuses. Rape and assault are likewise evoked through images of sexually accessible women in these robes. These robes function as reminders of women's humility and guilt for supposedly inherent inferiority, especially as vulnerable rabbit carcasses. The robes are loaded markers of patriarchal organization of women as subordinate. In a sense, the character passes on the residual bodies of women who would have had no names of their own and no grave

markers, and in so doing she disrupts an age-old economy of sexualized and carefully contained female bodies.

When he offers her the robes, "[h]is eyes ca[tch] hers like a surveillance light. She struggle[s] visibly to break free of his gaze" (79). By gazing at that which he simultaneously fears and wishes to conquer, Eden expresses a range of the privileges conferred upon him that are historically linked to the subordination of women. However, in this case, Artemis' silence does not make her complicit. The fact that she falls asleep during Blade Runner signals her protest: when she accepts the valuable robes from Eden she lays claim to the symbols of an uneasy legacy of containment. When she takes the robes she expresses agency, and she also faces the guilt inherent in the social construction of her greed. The character eventually develops the agency to dig the robes out of her closet and sell them to a collector in order to finance her first trip to China. Artemis decides to attempt to use the master's tools to her advantage, but as I have demonstrated she cannot do that without compromising herself

The text nuances complex systems of power, and disruption is one way of raising consciousness about unearned access to power. Lai disrupts mechanisms of maintaining power by developing characters who are not entirely aware of their own self-regulation. Thus, she achieves literary irony when she presents characters who slowly become conscious of the systems of privilege and oppression. For instance, in Artemis and Eden's last conversation as a so-called couple, he makes her breakfast and she rather dramatically insists upon the curtains staying closed and his giving her a cigarette, "but she knew when she lit it that all she really wanted was to see the match flare briefly in the cup of her hand" (78). The trope of the flaring match is one Lai carefully rehearses at other moments on the text. Here it is used to signify the longing Artemis has for socially sanctioned, heterosexual desire. The implied meaning is that she just wanted to see what desire for a man would feel like, or that she wanted to see if she could access the

privileged sites of signifying as heterosexual. The fact that in this instance she has actually to see a match flare signals a qualitative difference between the allure of heterosexuality and the reality of homosexuality for both of these characters. Indeed, every time Artemis kisses a woman it is described as a "match flaring in the dark" (50), and the use of the match flaring here signals her first recognition of desire. In this case, her desire is misplaced as heterosexual and is unconsummated.

As the story progresses Eden "comes out," but only in the loosest sense of the phrase, because the text subtly questions the act of coming out. Although Eden is eventually reported to have found a certain niche in the gay community he does not come out to Artemis, per se. Likewise, although there are sex scenes between Artemis and other women, there is no one scene in which she declares herself "lesbian," per se. Other characters go through distinct "coming out" processes, but in the case of Ming and Diane's brother, the characters do not live to the completion of the process. Through the use of the flaring match, Lai foregrounds the unmediated desire felt by the characters. While the characters experience the sensation of the match flaring when they feel passion, the exaggerated proportions of the sensation seem to indicate that there is something suspect about the argument that lesbians choose their sexuality more than heterosexual people do. Lesbian desire is naturalized in the novel through the use of the flaring match imagery. However, at the same time, Lai presents the reader with characters who seem to come to terms with their desire by way of a process of elimination. Not only are Artemis and Eden not passionate about one another, but also they seem to realize that they cannot participate in the scripts of heteronomativity as they are set out before them through Blade Runner. Through the intertexual references to the film, heterosexuality is rendered rather transparently as something culturally encoded to mean a specific kind of predatory behaviour. Thus, the symbolic allure of the flaring match is in part its capacity to burn up the holder's residual self-doubt and in part its capacity to

alarm the dominant heterosexist paradigm. The flaring match signals the rupture of tidily delineated categories of containment by undeniable desire. The limitations on heterosexuality which Lai announces, in terms of a systematized series of violent scripts of dominance and submission, are aptly captured by the flaring match. Through her text, she very clearly announces that heterosexual scripts such as the one so sleekly presented in Blade Runner are predicated on cultural mythologies of consuming the Other through various forms of physical, sexual violence. The trope of the flaring match relies on same-sex desire as a consumption of the self, just as a match consumes its own stick. The characters experience desire along lines of same sex sexual object-choice, and through their recognition of the undesirability of violence and their realization that they are not necessarily contained by particular modes of violence: they come to recognize homosexual desire in themselves. This is experienced as a sudden realization, a light of self-recognition turns on somewhere. A match flares. Lai's focus on Artemis coming to terms with her lesbian sexuality reveals emphasis on issues of heterosexual privilege in relation to the lesbian experience of coming of age. This particular aspect of the text resonates with Adrienne Rich's arguments in "Compulsive Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," because the characters assume initially that they themselves are heterosexual. Once they experience something as unmistakable as the sensation of a match flaring, they seem more ready and more inclined to realize their desire.

In the scene in which Eden and Artemis break up, the discursive inclination toward consuming conveniently constructed Others found in Blade Runner is inverted. Instead of Eden playing out the role for which he has so carefully been socialized, he refuses to consume Artemis' "exotic" allure. In fact, she is the one who consumes the trophies of Orientalist practice: valuable robes. However, the fact that Chinese-Canadian Artemis takes these valuable ancient Chinese robes from white, male, upper-class, colonialist-descendant Eden again asks the reader to consider how possession of these

robes actually works in terms of cultural capital. Clearly, the robes lose their power once in Artemis' possession: she doesn't use them as costumes or decorations, for—to her—they are at once very much alive and very dead. As Artemis leaves Eden, she heads for the bus with the smocks "carefully rolled, like little rabbit carcasses, quite limp and dead" (80) in the bottom of her bag. In some senses, Artemis lays the robes to rest when she removes them from Eden's care, a mercy killing.

When Artemis takes the robes from Eden, however, there is a further complication, for with the robes and their breakup comes a surveilling gaze from Eden. He is no longer her sexual predator, nor she his, but he continues to levy a heterosexually enforced patriarchal and Orientalist gaze against her. In one instance, "his eyes froze her like a deer through the sights of a rifle" (77). The gun simile, here, makes the violence latent. No longer invested in quite literally occupying Artemis, revealing both heterosexual and colonializing drives, Eden has still an interest in controlling Artemis' movements.

Again, Lai presents a female character who, in this case, takes the robes and all the power they signify out of circulation, only to show the limited choices available to women. Lai pushes on the myth that women are more moral than men and that lesbians are more moral than straights by presenting a complicated greediness in Artemis. However, she challenges the premise of the myth, for Artemis has no means other than selling these robes to get to China, to break away from Eden. So while the novel does present Artemis as greedy and crude in her treatment of the robes, she is very clearly making a decision based on the options with which she is presented. The complex system of power that Artemis navigates makes her choice a disruption of the heterosexist economies.

This section demonstrates the ways in which the text can be read through and against the idea of disruption. The rest of the paper refers to the novel as disruptive in

order to assemble a multivalent analysis of its modes of lesbianism. For instance, the paper goes on to discuss the ways in which the novel is read as disruptive not only of easily identifiable modes of patriarchy, heterosexism, and so-called "gender." My argument is that the text uses a disruptive form in order to emphasize disruptive content. All of this disruption is part of Lai's ability to enliven the reader from the complacency of prescripted and stereotyped roles, whether they be especially heterosexual or lesbian. The fact that she disrupts the idea of lesbian is crucial to a broad understanding of the term "lesbian" itself. Lai mobilizes the literary lesbian as trickster-like in her commitment to disrupting assumptions and constantly reevaluating so-called social norms.

Presence

Artemis actively establishes her presence. While she may be a relatively passive agent in the expression of a lesbian disruption to institutional heterosexuality, she does assert herself as a presence. Within her active role as a presence outside patriarchy, the emphasis is on the difference between disruption and presence rather than any distinction between heterosexuality and patriarchy. There is very little difference between heterosexuality and patriarchy, whereas the difference between disruption and presence is made clear through Lai's novel. A further note, however, is that there is no reason to hold that heterosexuality and patriarchy are entirely synonymous, for gay male communities have the power to impose values and prejudices on lesbian communities through, for example, systems of gender bias and salary discrepancies. The idea here is related to Zimmerman's discussion of lesbian as privileged signifier (10). Indeed, lesbian may very well be in a position which is more privileged in terms of its position from which it can critique patriarchy, because lesbians cannot "pass" in patriarchy to the same extent that gay men can. However, this technical distinction between heterosexuality and patriarchy aside, I note that within Fox Artemis is more actively "present outside the conventions of patriarchy" than she is "disruptive of heterosexuality" (Zimmerman 4). I have discussed the disruption of heterosexuality as evinced in Fox, and I have demonstrated the ways in which Lai carefully nuances normative scripts in order to derail a hegemonic discourse through disruption. In order to facilitate a transition into Zimmerman's second phrase delimiting lesbianism—"presence outside the conventions of patriarchy" (4)—I need here to point out that Artemis' trip to China serves also as a link to a thematic interest in reclaiming space in a dominant discourse. That means that when Artemis goes to China she reclaims what her white adoptive parents earlier present to her as a package tour with all of the accompanying trivializations (96). Artemis refuses to go with her parents to China when she is a teenager, but as a young adult she

decides to go there on her own. Her trip functions as a symbolic reclamation of her agency, heritage, and personal history, working to dispel any myths of any golden age, a time when she supposedly fitted in to life in China. She is an awkward foreigner in every way but her features: "[i]t's not so much that she is small as that she walks as though she were. Having lived so long in the land of giants, perhaps it's hard to adjust[. . .s]he knows these are things that a Western tourist would see. This disturbs her" (118).

This description comes from the narrative of the fox, for at this point in the novel, the fox actively spies on her. The narratological definition of focalization is the technique in which the narration reports on the inner workings of a character. Thus, the narrative focuses through a character, and the narrative is seen through the experiences of a character despite this character not having a voice beyond dialogue. The kind of focalization which takes place here, where the fox reports on what "disturbs" the Vancouverite, reveals a shift in the development of the narrative, for it evinces a transgression of narratological boundaries or categories. The narratives are no longer discrete. The text achieves this crossing of otherwise distinct lines through the fox's magical powers. The Fox of ancient Chinese mythology has insight into people's desires, and so the fox narrator reports Artemis' experiences. In this move, Lai complicates ideas about appropriation of story, perhaps because Artemis does not report on her trip to China in the same way the fox does. Further, the reason Artemis does not reflect on her trip to China in the third narrative is closely related to the constraints of third-person narration. Thus, in order to access Artemis' experiences in ways other than the retelling of events, the text pushes the fox into the life of the young woman in a more tangible way than to report that Artemis feels she is being watched from the branches of a tree (7). When the fox and Artemis seem to have sex in a dormitory in China, the fox presumes that "a memory rushes at [Artemis]" (123). The fox goes on to detail the contents of the memory. The trickster-like monstrosity at work calls attention to the rigidity of narrative

constructions by transgressing them. This subtle prodding of narratology encourages a reevaluation of Nellie Diengott's claim that narratology is a scientific study which has no relation to the field of interpretive poetics (42), because in Fox the structure of the narratives and their intermingling foci impact on what the text means as well as how the text means. Artemis becomes increasingly aware of exactly how she does not fit in to life in China in the contemporary narrative. The reader becomes increasingly aware of the fact that Artemis cannot report how she feels about the experience. This is not so much because of the constraints of the narrative, but because the narrative form stands in for the idea that Artemis is not well able to articulate the complexity of her position. When she meets an old acquaintance of her adopted father, Artemis' distance from an essentialized, locatable self is emphasized. The aged woman's granddaughter translates their conversation,

"[s]he wants to welcome you back"

"Back?"

"She knows you've never been here before but she means it as a compliment" (120).

The woman who does the translating also has a classical Greek name, Leda. The fact that one of her contemporaries who is born and raised in China has a Greek name speaks to the role this generation plays in terms of spanning temporal planes. Lai presents women who link the past to the present as though it were the divine to the mortal, by giving these women ancient names. The choice of name is interesting in this case because Leda is not a virgin huntress, like Artemis or Diane of Vancouver. Instead of belonging to no one, Leda—in fact—belongs to many, as she is considered the mother of so-called bad wives, like Helen of Troy (Smith 75-76). Leda was raped by Zeus, who had turned himself into a swan in order to sweep her away. Myth has it that Leda is already pregnant with twins when Zeus rapes her, and so she gives birth to two sets of twins: one set mortal, the other immortal. Leda's immortal daughter is Helen, known for her beauty and her infidelity.

So while Artemis and Diane are free and singular entities in the west, Leda—by virtue of her name—is ripe with the potential for chaos. In Hong Kong, Leda can be read as emblematic of the island's double allegiances to China and England. Here Lai's text has a few things happening at once, but the fact that Leda is the "interposing body between the human and divine" (118) ties this passage to the previous one in which the divine fox reports on human Artemis. Again, this passage reveals the complications of longing for a homeland, as it simultaneously problematizes and nuances the act of claiming and reclaiming space.

Lai complicates Artemis' trip to China by reporting on the state of mind necessary to submit one's self to the Orientalist gaze so interested in buying the garments which finance the trip. While in the den of a collector, Artemis is reported to "cast her eyes to the flowered carpet so as not to see those long fingers wandering over the fabric, the small bright eyes missing nothing" (115). The experience is akin to submitting one's self as prey in a hawk's nest, for indeed the collector "took [the robes] in those hawk's hands" (115), and "he sat perched" (115), and Artemis is presented as though she "suddenly felt sorry for the little rolls of fabric in her bag, as though they were alive, as though she was delivering them to an unknown unpleasant fate" (115). She sells them to this collector, all the same. The gaze with which Eden stares at Artemis as he gives her the robes in the earlier scene is here reinstated, for, as the collector, Mr. Hawkesworth, takes the first robe he "scrutinize[s] it with an almost pornographic gaze that made her shiver" (115). The fact that the collector is presented as using a pornographic gaze is reminiscent of Eden's gaze in the earlier scene that relies on similarly interlocked heterosexual and colonial histories of privilege, but here the gaze is labeled pornographic. The perplexing part of this construction is that the gaze is not reported as pornographic when Eden turns his camera on Artemis and Diane. Later on, when he gazes at Artemis, before giving her the robes, his gaze does mediate his own access to power. However,

the earlier scene is one the reader might expect to read as "pornographic," because it focuses on lesbian bodies newly infatuated with one another. The scene is not labeled pornographic because it does not generate the dehumanization or objectification characteristic of pornography, but the scene is not entirely unproblematic. For the gaze is reportedly something Eden orchestrates between the women, even though he is the one to own the image. Eden "placed them face to face, staring into one another's eyes," saying, "'I know it's awkward. You won't have to hold it for long," and Artemis reportedly "could see oceans bubbling behind Diane's brown irises [and s]he wondered what Diane saw in hers" (25). The eroticism commissioned by Eden is composed of potentially pornographic components, which become charged as such when monetary value is assigned to the robe. Again Lai disrupts assumptions about power over lesbians. The text refuses to posit lesbian desire as pornographic; instead, it focuses on the commodification and erotic exoticization that serves as the foundation for a pornographic mind.

The link between violence and pornography is made implicitly through the likeness between the Geisha in Blade Runner and the rolled-up robes presented to Hawkesworth. Again the lesbian women who look deep into one another's eyes are not pornographic, even when they sport robes which are symbols of women's oppression (24). In this same scene, Artemis' experience of the robes as somehow alive renders in her both a fear and an attraction. As she changes into the robe in Eden's studio she experiences the conflicting encoding on the silk: "[i]t's fleshiness shocked her. Like a nipple, rolling between her thumb and index finger" (22). She is reluctant to change into the robe and wishes she had on a bra to remind her of the separation between herself and the garment, herself and the original "owner" (22). The fact that she experiences the top button of the robe as a nipple enlivens the sense that lesbians cannot access the master's tools unproblematically, for lesbians are immediately implicated in the objectification of

any woman. In order to constitute a presence outside of patriarchy, lesbianism is often framed within the dominant discourse of sexuality and so is never entirely independent of this dominant discourse of patriarchy and heterosexism. In light of this further complication, the photo shoot can read as a complex reclamation of female sexuality, mediated by a gay man invested in stepping outside what I have, through Lai's disruptiveness, nuanced as heterocolonial violent scripts of oppression that otherwise implicate him. Artemis' agency increases as she becomes increasingly more aware of her sexual and symbolic containment.

Thus the transition needed here relates the act of reclaiming a physical space, for the second part of Zimmerman's outline of lesbianism refers to it as a "presence standing outside the conventions of patriarchy" (4). In the contemporary narrative focalized through Artemis, the reclamation of space takes the form of radical lesbian sex: fisting. Just as Artemis forcefully "returns" to China to visit a space from which she has quite arguably been colonized through the poverty of her birth-parents' immigration and subsequent posting of her for adoption, so too does Artemis use force to reclaim the vagina itself as a space otherwise quite literally occupied and figuratively colonized by patriarchy. Through the novel Lai implicitly problematizes the slogan "might equals right." In relation to reclaiming space, she does this by showing the simultaneity of (re)visitation and re-inscription of forms of colonialism. That is, in order for a Chinese-Canadian woman to (re)claim her heritage she need not go to China; likewise, a lesbian woman need not take part in fisting in order to (re)claim the vagina. Lai demonstrates this perceived need for reclamation through her text as she presents characters coming to terms with their identities. These characters seem to go through a period of reaction to their various experiences of colonization before they come to respond to their colonization. That is, as a reaction to her transracial adoption, Artemis refuses to go to China with her parents, but later decides to go to China on her own.

While she is there she finds that she both feels and looks like a foreigner: "she knows these are things a tourist would see. This disturbs her" (Fox 118). The trip marks the beginning of Artemis' response to colonialism because she comes to realize that she does not have unproblematic access to a homeland (see Ang). Her insistence upon going to China is similar to her interest in fisting: both are radical acts involving a supposed reclamation of an otherwise colonized space. Through this series of story segments, Lai unfolds the idea that rushing back to a never before visited, so-called homeland is neocolonial. In this way she also says that fisting is neocolonial. What I refer to here as neocolonial acts represent one mode of establishing presence. Lai points out that these modes have particular repercussions.

Arguably a radical stance, fisting can be read as a symbolic and literal reclamation of female agency and female space. This so-called radical lesbian sex is, indeed, a presence outside patriarchy. Lai positions the fisting scene in the context of one lesbian sharing her story of gang rape and incest with another (146). In so doing, she facilitates a series of questions about the implications of sexual aggression in lesbian relationships; however, the love-making scene which ensues is presented as a necessary act of healing. Lai describes the women's love-making: "[f]ucking the way horses or other large creatures fuck, Claude's many broad fingers inside Artemis' hollow sucking cunt and the wind outside wailing. There was something about the largeness of it that was gentle" (147). That Claude's name seems unusual for a woman indicates that her name and her role in the sexual act question gender stereotyped roles. Lai is not evasive: her contextualization of the sex scene makes connections between patriarchal violence, heterosexual control, and colonial greed. Colonial greed is evoked here because the scene is a literal replacing of presence, dominant presence. The characters are lesbians whose heritages include regulation by the interdependent colonizing presences of the Crown and heteronormativity. This heteronormativity crops up in the story when Claude

is brutalized by her brother because he catches her "making out with [a] girl in the cloakroom [at age thirteen]" (146). His violence is related to his sense of ownership over female bodies, and his repeated rapes of Claude relate back to Wittig's critique of heterosexist systems of knowledge which "theorize their own point of view as the only and exclusively possible one" (Straight Mind 46). The violence the brother enacts on Claude is symbolic of the violence historically visited upon lesbians constructed as deviant. While Lai does articulate some of the complexities of the violence inherent in this act, the initial presentation of fisting is an affirming one. The scene represents a dislocation of female bodies from the patriarchal sexual economy, because through their engagement in what often is assumed a radical lesbian sexual practice (by non-lesbians and lesbians alike), Artemis and Claude construct themselves as outside patriarchy.

The violence inherent in fisting as a sexual and political practice is made clear in the last line of this segment. Lai foreshadows the later emotional and psychological violences Claude will perpetrate against Artemis when she writes that, "somewhere, at a low level like a sound so deep you can't hear it, there was a violence that travelled from one to the other as surely as violence always passes between those who love each other" (147). Thus, Lai problematizes this sexual practice, while at the same time normalizing it. In the same moment she foregrounds the idea that all sex is related to violence and this facilitates a questioning of the idea. Here she presents violent lesbian sex as a reaction to female subordination within patriarchy, and yet the text maintains its disruptive integrity by not giving definitive answers to these power ambiguities in sexuality.

These two characters further animate this presence through their intimacy. Artemis and Claude recognize the societal expectations, especially an expected interest in white people as lovers, employers, and teachers. Furthermore, the two women see their relationship as a confrontation of racist social expectations. Lai emphasizes her

problematization of violence through the following passage, for the couple is on the brink of a break up. The women have been in an abusive relationship, and if it were not for the fact that Artemis has just missed the last bus, the two might not have had sex again. The verbal violence Claude exercises on Artemis seems related to the sexual violence expressed through the earlier fisting scene. However, through this next scene, Lai links violence to the excitement of their relationship as reportedly in some senses related to the very fact that they are not a transracial couple. The sex itself is less violent, but according to the preceding scene wherein Claude dismisses Artemis with "Go home, why don't you" (170) it would seem the love is gone, and oddly therefore the violence, too, is gone. According to the earlier sex scene, violence passes between people who love each other, so in this scene where there is no sexual violence there is love rewritten. The love between these two women is earlier dependant upon violence, and as the beginning of the end of their relationship it seems to mark the end of their kind of love. The women are bound together only through their supposed recognition that there is something illicit and desperate about their sex. The scene problematizes violence where it locates desire in abuse and subordination. Here, the third-person narration allows for an explanation of the significance of their sexual relationship:

> In the breath and in the warmth that moved from hand to belly, history itself passed between them. Impossible that they should be here like this, in this place where they were meant to compete for white people's attention, for white people's money and knowledge. They talked about this as a defiance of gender and racial expectations, and this made their passion illicit and dangerous, which in turn made it weigh more like a water-heavy melon, bursting with sugar about to turn. (170-71)

Rather than address the pattern of verbal abuse, the women choose to revel in a sort of naughtiness. That is, they decide that there is something arousing in the blurring

of stereotyped gender roles and racial expectations. In place of expressing love with one another, they express their anxieties. In effect, they invite the figurative colonizer into the bedroom when the literal occupation has ceased. Their relationship is not doomed because they are Asian Canadian lesbians but because they decide to stop seeing each other as individuals and start seeing one another as political symbols, which Lai exposes here is an insidious form of objectification. This does not read as a presence outside of patriarchy precisely because it is more political than personal.

Artemis' agency is much more active in the expression of her presence than in the earlier section devoted to disruption. Lai continues to disrupt readerly assumptions about lesbians throughout the text by establishing and problematizing the perceived desire for consolidation of a stable set of roles conferring identity for lesbians. In fact, the project parodies this desire for consolidation, and one way in which it does so is to portray some of the complex drives compelling various kinds of sexual intimacy.

Yet another form of expressing presence outside patriarchy is the practice of signifying as lesbian. The idea that there is a lesbian aesthetic appears in many forms in Fox. The text demonstrates the difficulty with which lesbians take on recognized forms of identification. These become stereotypes as demonstrated through Lai's depiction of a Vancouverite called Mercy. She is renamed by Artemis' friend Diane while Artemis is in China. The humour in this event of renaming is that the practice of naming a person is one of the ultimate acts of colonizing, so for one lesbian to rename another seems neocolonial in many ways. However, at the same time the act of renaming one's self seems meant to be a disruption of the patriarchal economy which claims to own women through its practices of naming (in marriage for instance). The humor extends farther than this, for Diane renames Mercy "Ming". In Chinese, "Ming" is the temporary name given to Chinese girls before they marry and further lose individuality as they are seen in relation to their husband. This may seem appropriate in the sense that "Ming" will want

to change her name at a later date, but it more strongly signals an interest in parody on the part of Lai and her use of Diane. Artemis doesn't speak Chinese so she doesn't understand the significance of the name, and it is unclear whether or not "Ming," herself, would understand the name. However, in another section, the novel also very carefully reveals that Diane does not necessarily speak Chinese, but she is familiar enough with the language to identify one dialect from another. In one scene, Diane's gay brother and his librarian partner arrive at the family house for dinner. The partner asks Mr. Wong about the correct pronunciation of a title, and Diane yells from the kitchen, "[m]y father doesn't know. It's not his dialect" (46). Lai makes it possible that Diane speaks Chinese. Of the three women involved in renaming "Mercy," Diane is the one most likely to understand what she is up to when she names her "Ming." Either way, it seems as though the text is laced with jokes meant especially for Chinese-speaking Canadian readers. The text does not pretend to teach the reader in the sense of "informing" her/him. The irony of Ming's name is not only informed by the probable ignorance of the characters but also by the more than probable ignorance of the "majority" readership. This clever move further sensitizes the reader to the simultaneous buttressing and questioning of identities. For instance, here the text implicitly asks who counts as Chinese-Canadian: is this cultural identity socially constructed and reinforced? Or is it a biologically determined identity? What does it mean that there are slippages between the two concepts? Does Diane parody Ming's quest for a new, "non-western traditional" identity? Lesbian Diane names lesbian Ming, and in this sense, the text quite clearly establishes a presence outside patriarchy, even though the presence in many ways mimics patriarchy or exists in a purely relational way, in terms of dominance and submission. Diane's joke takes away Ming's individuality and it places Ming parodically in the economy of the marriage market. The name indicates that she is a virgin, just as Diane and Artemis' names mean "virgin." However, "Ming" means young virgin, while "Diane" and "Artemis" mean

virgin huntress: thus, Diane puts Mercy/Ming into a somewhat exaggerated position of vulnerability. Ming is lesbian, so placing her in the economy of the marriage market signals a reference to various narrative strands within the text that refuse this traditional configuration of women as wives. Lai also parodies questions of authenticity when Diane renames Ming. If lesbian is signified as "a presence outside the conventions of patriarchy," then Ming utterly and categorically fails to establish herself as lesbian. She refuses to leave the home of her upper-class family. Although she seems to renounce the Anglo name that goes along with her father's capitalist ambitions, she really only reinscribes patriarchy through this neocolonial act of renaming. Furthermore, Lai foreshadows an interest in "Ming" as a short-lived character when the character is given a name connoting the urgent and temporary state of virginity as it is constructed by sexual economies.

"Ming" makes major changes to her life while Artemis is away. She comes out, but in so doing she grasps for tropes of rebellion, seemingly cut and pasted on her through her shaved head, leather jacket, and tattoos. These seem to be a way of assuring herself that she signifies as lesbian. The idea that lesbians need to signify in order to form a presence outside patriarchy is problematic because this seems to imply that there are very specific ways in which lesbians access power: relationally. That is, the idea that lesbians have to don markers of their lesbianism assumes that lesbians are a supplemental identity to a dyad of heteronormative expectations. Where heteronormativity assumes that lesbians exist only in relation to itself heterosexuality becomes heterosexism. Lai responds to the idea that lesbians have to establish a visible presence through Ming's struggle to come of age. The fact that Ming attaches herself to stereotyped tropes demonstrates that the narrative struggles with the powerful seduction of preformed and scripted roles within any community, especially the lesbian community where the image

of the female body seems always immediately co-opted by the male gaze (Mulvey 158). Ming attempts to locate her agency through a stereotyped and very readable presence.

Lai's text also focuses on the disruption of assumptions about lesbians, and so the emergence of a lesbian who embodies all of the stereotypical characteristics of a "lesbian" seems to threaten the momentum and integrity of the plot. In order to contain the momentum of the plot and its interrogation and harsh critique of the process by which various so-called national identities are consolidated, Lai offers another perspective of her anti-utopian vision by having Ming kill herself. That is, Lai levies a weighty penalty against a character who subscribes to prefabricated markers of identity. In effect, Ming is represented as not being original enough. At the same time, Ming is presented as an example of what can happen when people leap head long into a fetishized appropriation of markers of lower-working-class identities as though they are a matter of style. When Ming trades in her school knapsack for a leather jacket she has not made any real changes in her life. She is still living at home with her mother, brother, and tycoon father. Ming expresses a good deal of discontent when her father's factory in China burns to the ground, killing hundreds of underpaid workers; nevertheless, she refuses to move from her father's home, nor does she refuse his money. Thus, she is only visually a presence outside patriarchy. Granted, this could be because she takes care of her ailing mother, but the fact remains that Ming makes only superficial changes. In many ways, Ming's suicide serves as reminders that attaching one's self to a certain look does not automatically mean access to the freedom or power of the socially constructed personae. Also, the suicide functions as a public-service announcement of sorts in the novel. Ming seems to think that there is no way out of her predicament, that killing herself is the only way to get past the outrageous contradictions of her family's expectations and her desires for rebellion, freedom, and women.

The fact that Ming commits suicide is kept from the characters, which can be read as a means of prioritizing the reader's information. By way of this literary irony, Ming's suicide is coded as very important. The reader knows of Ming's suicide before the characters, and this forces the reader to interpret the suicide before the characters do it for her. The suicide is foregrounded in this way because—indeed—the suicide rates for lesbian youth are more than twice as high as those for straight women, and this is very much a novel about women's "sexual passion" and fear of censorship (Faderman 54). The text demands agency of its readers when Artemis first hears rumours of a young Asian woman with a leather jacket having been killed (203). In between hearing the rumour and receiving a phone call from the morgue, Artemis is lured to the fox's house for dinner, drink, and storytelling, and the shift back to concern with Ming and the rumour is stark: "She woke in the morning to find herself surrounded by the familiar walls of her own bedroom—Your phone number was in her pocket. She wasn't carrying any ID, so you're our only lead. I'm sorry to inconvenience you like this, but you do understand" (209). The reader already had some sense that Ming has died, so the willingness on the part of Artemis to ignore her sense that something may have happened to Ming is heightened in the active reader. Artemis' congress with the divine, the fox, is somehow much more frivolous in light of Ming's death. The death is not at first a suicide, so the reader is led to assume, along with the characters that this is an incident of bashing. The characters do not seem to know that Ming commits suicide, for on the last page of the novel the fox reveals to the reader that she found Ming's body and that she buried it after animating it long enough to visit Artemis (235-36). The reader is privy to information that the characters are not, and in this way Lai emphasizes the fact that suicides are often invisible as such.

The lesbian community on which the novel centres begins to split apart just as Ming commits suicide. She has just taken part in the vandalism of Artemis' apartment

because Diane is jealous of Artemis's trip to China (195-96). Ming gives herself away by saying, "I didn't think it would be this bad" (196). As Artemis throws Ming out of the house, Claude calls, angry that Diane knows about their possession of her letters. Claude yells at Artemis, and Artemis hangs up on her: the community is as much as dissolved. No one speaks to anyone else.

After Ming's death the fox tries out her new-found powers in Artemis' apartment. She journeys to an underworld in search of information to give to Artemis concerning the circumstances surrounding Ming's death. What the fox does not tell Artemis is that she knows Ming was not murdered, per se. In this moment of exclusion, it becomes clear that the fox has quite possibly interfered with Artemis and Ming's relationship in order to secure Artemis's affections for herself. Much earlier in the text the fox's narrative is prefaced with a quote from Hsuan-Chung-Chi which reveals that mature foxes have the power to "derange a human mind and reduce a person to an imbecile" (88). Hence the text presents the fox as untrustworthy. What also happens in this moment of the text is a signalling of suicide as a form of violence against women. Lai makes it possible for the fox to have taken some part in Ming's death. However, the text later reveals that the fox haunts Artemis: "It was never my intention to haunt like this. I came for the warmth, the breath" (233). Still, it is possible that the fox haunts Artemis all the better once Ming is no longer there.

When the fox goes into the underworld for Artemis the text explores the brief statements of a number of newly dead women, none of whom is Ming. Each of the five women dies at the hands of racists and gay bashers. "[t]heir faces are identical, right down to the mole beneath the right eye" (216), like the Fox's own Poetess body (146), like Ming's. All of the women in this underworld space look like Ming and in this way she is a symbolic presence. However, at the same time Ming is not present, because her death seems not to count as violence against women. Here Lai signals the lack of

recognition of suicide as an internalization of homophobic and racist attitudes. Again, what is implicit here is that Ming is a victim of random violence as much as the bashed women are. Ming's suicide signals the symbolic and very real punishment of lesbian bodies and lesbian codes; however, what is of interest is that Lai should conflate violence directed at women with violence women direct at themselves. The move to acknowledge internalized oppression of women in the novel is clear in Lai's representation of Ming.

Reading Ming's suicide as part of a presence outside patriarchy is problematic because suicide is hardly an affirmation of lesbianism. Ming's suicide is rather clearly an expression of the failure of lesbianism in this novel. The fact that Lai problematizes lesbianism thus is indicative of her interest in divesting lesbianism of its cachet. When I read Ming as establishing a presence outside the conventions of patriarchy it is particularly disturbing because Ming's death makes her literally outside patriarchy, but not as a presence. The kind of containment Lai enacts on Ming is not an original move in a female-authored, lesbian plot, but it speaks to a problematic tradition of containing female agency in stories. By killing off their protagonists, authors like Lai make it clear that there is not yet any way to sustain bold, forthright women, and/or lesbians. It takes a certain amount of boldness to disrupt heterosexuality, establish a presence outside patriarchy, and make a hole in the fabric of gender dualism (Zimmerman 4). Ming fails to do these things, and—thus—she fails to be lesbian. In killing herself, Ming erases, rather than establishes, her presence. She seems to kill herself because she does not have the resolve to work her way around the hold that patriarchal economies have on her family. While it may seem that Lai eliminates the problem of having to imagine a space for Ming, she, in fact, has before her a task a degree more difficult than imagining the utopia in which someone like Ming can live undisturbed. Again, this is an anti-utopian novel. It is not about the lives of lesbians who have particularly privileged lives. Lai reports a social climate in which someone like Ming cannot fully recognize or cope with

the contradictions of her life. Lai imagines life after Ming's suicide. For a demographic at risk of suicide, Lai moves unafraid into the anguish of those surviving the suicide of a friend. In so doing, she warns young lesbians not to cut and paste together an identity.

Lai's text functions in some ways like that of the traditional fox story because there is a kind of regulation of female expression that takes place. However, this regulation is very different. The message is that acting out through preformed scripts of social deviance is not necessarily acceptable. It seems the reasoning behind this distinction is that the calculation necessary to live within the confines of preformed social scripts is not freeing or otherwise productive. Rather than encourage the reader to imitate, the text functions to motivate readers to divine their own media. Shaving one's head, buying a leather jacket, donning tattoos of Chinese hieroglyphics, and taking photos of naked women does not necessarily a liberated person make. The point here is that Lai has Ming kill herself as a way of containing lesbian expression, but this containment only reminds the readership of the perils of pushing stereotypes.

The fact that Ming commits suicide is important in terms of the power which she, as lesbian, has access to in contemporary Canada. In the final section of Volume One of The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault comments on the cultural power of suicide. Leading into his discussion of bio-power, he historicizes governmental interest in killing and keeping alive populations. In this section he makes a useful observation about ways in which suicide signifies, for suicide became a crime because "it was a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone, whether the one here or the Lord above, had the right to exercise" (138). Foucault presents suicide as a pre-capitalist form of resistance to the regulation of and control over death. However, in a contemporary context more invested in "administering life" (138), suicide—especially by a lesbian—is more usefully read as resistance to the regulation of the female body as a site of production. That is, in Fox, suicide reads as an escape from a narrative schema bent on

romantic fatalism. Ming's inability to take part in a romanticization of lesbians means a rather literal protest of the plot. Ming's resistance is to the pacification of the lesbian into the type of soul-hungry, spiritually predestined creatures churned out by the end of the text. While her story would demand a good deal more from the author, Ming quits the narrative all too literally. The link I make here between pre-capitalist laborers and contemporary lesbians is not arbitrary. For, like the serf body, the lesbian body is commodified and marketed in order to manifest its own subordination. In a contemporary context, suicide signals an anti-participatory "escape" from techniques designed to govern life (Foucault 143).

Foucault's construction of suicide is richly romantic. Perhaps it is apt that Ming escapes the romantic closure of Fox only to be consumed by Foucault's own fetishization of the lower-working class, for she fetishizes a contemporary lower-working class aesthetic in her supposed transformation in the novel. Thus, through Foucault, I posit Ming's suicide as establishing Zimmerman's "presence outside the conventions of patriarchy" (4) in a very limited sense. Combining this reading of suicide with Judith Roof's argument that absence signals lesbianism reveals another axis along which lesbians cannot completely escape fetishization. However, the traceable retraction of presence is different from absence. Roof asserts that lesbian images are immediately appropriated by the heterosexual narrative and made into fetishes that "phallicize and control the sexuality of the scenes" (Roof 67). Ming's suicide is interesting because it is preceded by her invigoration of so many stereotypically lesbian signifiers, so much so that the preamble to Ming's suicide reads as an almost masochistic fetishization of her own body. However, Ming does not ever achieve or realize a tangible presence outside patriarchy, and Lai exposes the logical fallacies at work in the construction of such a rehearsed resistance. The narrative treatment of Ming's suicide comments on the tenacity of the drive among lesbians to create a presence outside of patriarchy. Ming fails to

construct a sustainable identity outside patriarchy and her suicide is an appropriately problematic symbol of her disavowal of patriarchy; her absent presence outside patriarchy is as ineffectual as her investment in stereotypes.

Similarly, Diane attempts resistance as a presence. She does so in the form of a pay-back scheme for social wrongs, but her attempt does not achieve presence because it participates in the very patriarchal economy it claims to eschew. Diane quite literally buys into and inscribes patriarchal systems of privilege. Yet Lai addresses ways in which lesbians try to establish presence outside patriarchy when Diane decides to woo Artemis by stealing a man's credit card and taking her new friend on a shopping spree. Diane reconfigures the heist as "[j]ust creatively balancing one of society's more glaring inequalities" (36). However, balancing a system that systematically disadvantages women is not as easy as stealing a credit card. In fact, here Lai foregrounds the fact that women make less than men, and in so doing she implicitly addresses the fact that lesbian couples make less than heterosexual couples. She presents the machinations of institutionalized patriarchy, but she does so without devoting an explicitly rigorous analysis to patriarchal systems themselves. Instead, she focuses on the foundations of the excitement available to those who work within but not in favor of the system, like Diane.

The scene setting up Diane's heist is an example; it exposes the ways in which stereotypes about East Asian women feed into a patriarchal, Orientalist economies. In this scene she tells a man that she is studying to be an opera singer because her mother sang the part of "Iseult" (sic) in Tristan and Isolde by Wagner in Tokyo (35). "The image of a small Asian woman battling the octaves through two and a half hours as a tragic Germanic blonde must have been too much for the man. A confused grin bloomed across his face. 'You'll excuse me. I have to go to the john'" (35), and as he turns his back Diane palms the card. Diane's insistence that her mother sang Isolde comes up in response to the man's assumption that her mother "must have made a lovely Madame

Butterfly" (35). Diane refuses to be contained by the man's backhanded flattery, for Madame Butterfly very clearly sets out a discourse of the Orientalized woman in need of regulation by the Westerner. As with the earlier discussion of Blade Runner there is, here, a purposeful conflation of Orientalism, commodification, sex, and colonization.

The fact that the man says he has "to go to the john" (35) cannot simply be read as idiomatic, for he is declaring himself interested in a woman who he may well assume is a prostitute. The narrator reports that "[o]nly Diane could look so smashing in a lime-green spandex dress as she shimmied up to the bar and drew her legs over a high chrome stool, donning a forlorn look" (34). She attracts the attentions of a man interested in her as a sexual commodity and she tricks him out of his credit card. This is where Lai's implicit analysis is a little more explicit. Diane may take the card from a rich, white man whose sideline hobbies include sexual commodification of women through boudoir photography, and she may spend much of it on her lesbian love interest, but she does not completely step outside or beyond the confines of patriarchy, for the system which assigns credit will not necessarily suffer, and—in fact—the women boost the very economy which privileges already over-privileged, white men.

Lai repeatedly turns around the judgement of evil, for in this scene she presents a man whose other interests include the romanticization of colonialism. In fact, the moment in which Lai's narrator divulges the man's interest is funny precisely because the reader is aware that the very cultural violence he presents as unproblematic to Diane is very nearly the root cause of the economic violence she is about to enact upon him. He says he has "'got this idea for a Western, about a homesteader who falls in love with an Indian woman. But he has killed her brother and she doesn't know.' He laugh[s]" (35). Meanwhile, Diane has Artemis waiting at a table within ear-shot, and the two are more than ready to counter his smug assertion of control over the means of cultural production. This man assumes the authority of a long history which affirms his way of seeing the

world as the "only and exclusively possible one," to borrow Wittig's phrase (Straight Mind 46). He sees himself as the rightful recipient of ruling power over all things he can construe as female: land, people, bodies, etc. The man is not presented as at all innocent, despite the fact that a recognized crime is perpetrated against him.

In this scene Diane stands in for the traditional conception of the Chinese Fox, and Lai is unable to write her as entirely evil, for the rich, white man reeks of the top-heavy, oppressive formulas designed to accrue increasingly unnecessary amounts of power. He is unabashedly Orientalist in his desire to further commodify and racialize the female body. His fantasies of interracial desire are based on oppression and disenfranchisement of women, for the western movie he wants to produce is a tired plot, entirely devoid of originality. The fact that his proposed movie plot is a cliché lends to a readerly recognition of institutionalized racism. Colonial fantasies of dominance are disseminated through this standard western plot. Not only does the white man in the proposed film want to steal land, but he is set up as the hero only on account of his whiteness. The fact that the white, male character is, by definition, always the one to either focalize or outright narrate such stories means that he is the one privileged with the authority to establish discursive fields around what is otherwise noted as outright rape and murder. The plot he suggests is one all too well known, and this kind of expansionist propaganda is so noted in Lai's text. When Lai presents a sexualized woman in Diane, she makes this woman likable by contrasting her with a man obviously both socially and economically invested in rendering the world around him subordinate.

Surely the gluttony of this man, in his power tie, wanting to further rehearse the fantasy of the vanishing Indian reads as an instance of institutionalized access to dominance. Diane's heist does not change the way this man thinks about the world around him. Thus, although this contemporary colonizer may end up with a gigantic bill from his credit card, Diane does not establish a sustainable presence outside patriarchy,

Contrary to what she says, she does not "balance one of society's more glaring inequalities" (36), for it is not possible to balance anything in an economic system predicated upon the subordination of female bodies.

While the story presents some sense of women needing to try to establish a presence outside patriarchy, it also divulges the fact that existing outside patriarchy is not likely possible. In fact, this scene reads as another instance of the author invoking Lorde's idea that the "master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house" (380). Diane and Artemis seem to realize that they cannot change the economy of their raced and sexualized bodies; they cannot change capitalist economy which gives long lines of credit to men somehow deemed respectable and worthy. However, what they do when they steal Allan's credit card embodies an attempt to make a presence outside patriarchy. They know that he will notice the violence they enact on him, and to them this represents a presence.

In the second narrative strand, Lai returns to this idea of redirecting the flow of capital in order to establish presences outside patriarchy when she presents the Poetess as able to buy a temple with the money given to her by Lu Ch'iao. This turn at redirecting capital is more successful because the Poetess actually establishes residence on the outskirts of town. She can, in effect, manifest a presence outside patriarchy. The gold she receives from her first lesbian lover is enough to secure a temple. She very literally inhabits a space outside patriarchy, for she is not governed by any one individual male. However, Lai makes it clear that the Poetess earns her living by a form of prostitution, and in this sense the Poetess is very clearly buttressing patriarchy: "In exchange for my company, [the official in charge of expurgating foreign religions] made many handsome donations to the temple[. . .]he asked to stay the night[. . .]he tried to force me" (176). This is another instance in which the novel includes the most unusual instance in order to establish what is expected, or normal. This quotation indicates that the Poetess does not

sleep with men to make her living; she visits with them. However, even as such, Lai has complicated the idea that lesbians represent a presence outside patriarchy. She very clearly outlines the fact that patriarchy is dependent upon a dichotomized conception of female sexuality. The virgin/whore dichotomy is the idea that "good" women are those who stay at home and raise children while "bad" women sell sex to these same men who have "good" wives at home. Without the virgin/whore false dichotomy patriarchy is destabilized. Without myths such as the evil-because-sexual Fox, patriarchy could not so easily oppress women.

Lai addresses the false dichotomy of the virgin/whore split in the temple itself, which goes from housing nuns to housing lesbian "prostitutes." The Poetess says, "[w]e used to be reluctant to admit we enjoyed the company of men. It was a living. But lately it has been more a question of spite[. . .]A casual observer would say we care for each other, although we amuse ourselves with men and quarreling" (229). In this instance, Lai writes of a lesbian couple who establish a presence outside patriarchy while they remain a part of maintaining it. Thus, Lai problematizes the idea that there is such a thing as an "outside" in reference to a hegemonic system of social organization. The couple seems to think of themselves as entertaining male guests for their own amusement rather than as a way of reinforcing the virgin/whore dichotomy upon which patriarchy is founded. When the Poetess refers to enjoying men's company as a way of making a living she refers specifically to the monies paid to her for visitations with men. Early in the text, the Poetess character moves from her father's house to a Tea House. There she is not expected to sell her body, but she falls in love with a cross-dressed woman who frees her from the Tea House. Once she is free from the Tea House and the Foxes, her lover leaves her with enough money to buy a temple (175). However, the Poetess seems eventually to resort to selling her company to men. Lai presents this as problematic in the sense that the Poetess falls into a known pattern of survival when she decides to sell her body, for

the author does not lend the allure of the inchoate made knowable: prostitution is the scripted, the known. The Poetess does not develop an alternate plan, and she ends up relying on male officials as her clients, because she needs their approval to continue to live on the outskirts of town. Her temple-cum-brothel needs the clientele of men, and yet the woman insists that men are her own form of entertainment. In reference to Zimmerman's articulation of lesbian, the Poetess is not able to establish a presence outside patriarchy except in the sense that she is literally outside town; however, she is able to establish a presence outside patriarchy in the sense that she thinks of men as a secondary element. Her real relationship is with her maid servant, for she falls in love with this so-called subordinate.

Lai draws attention to the patriarchal nature of definitions that serve to regulate female sexuality in a way that assumes heterosexuality as the norm. This serves to reinforce patriarchal ways of conceiving of the world. The fact that the maid servant is a virgin when she dies is taken to be a form of evidence against the suspected Poetess. The fact that virginity is measured in terms of hymen draws attention to the assumption that lesbian sex does not count in the same way. The maidservant is discovered to have her hymen intact in her autopsy, and this is the judge's reasoning for sentencing the Poetess to death for murder: "He reasoned that if robbers had murdered the maid, they would certainly have raped her first" (227). Here Lai draws attention to the idea that a rape within patriarchy positions the female as an object that is akin to property stolen to robbers. The judge presumes that female virgins can die only at the hands of other women. However, with this assumption comes the revelation that the patriarchal construction of female sexuality is such that a woman would be expected to lose control over her body or the bodies of her subordinates if she were "robbed" in other ways. The idea is that virginity is a commodity that women seek to safe-guard from men, and that rape is a form of vandalism that bolsters patriarchy. This is an important distinction to

make, for Lai carefully presents the threats patriarchy makes against lesbians, against women trying to live outside patriarchy.

Lai also draws attention to the conflation of institutions occurring in the ninth century, because this conflation of institutions is indicative of the violence seemingly inherent in contemporary institutions. For example, she informs the reader that the Chinese armies were removing all non-indigenous religions at this time, which is how the Poetess comes upon a temple to purchase. The fact that the temple becomes a brothel of sorts indicates that there is a relationship between violent expansion and the virgin/whore dichotomy. The interrelated corruption of the framework which Lai reveals makes it difficult to imagine just what a presence outside patriarchy would look like; however, the point here is that the Poetess reports being able to imagine herself outside patriarchy.

As discussed earlier, Artemis and Claude also imagine themselves outside patriarchy. This imagining happens while having sex. In this way, lesbianism exists as something outside of patriarchy. Women in both narrative strands are keenly aware of patriarchy, and both sets of women act outside the pre-scripted norms of that paradigm.

In the fox story, lesbians are allowed the kind of absence so rarely granted in contemporary media representation. While the text explores lesbian sex scenes in the first person and in the third person, the fox narrative refuses to objectify lesbian sex. The fox at least pays more than lip-service to the importance of privacy. Lai makes it clear that the act of lesbian sex deserves a private space, and that lesbians themselves need to be rewarded for their tenacity, because surviving on the fringes of patriarchy often means an obscurity and poverty not equal to a couple's level of education or talents. For instance in the narrative of the fox, she tells a story of happening upon a lesbian couple who live on the outskirts of town. One of the women invites her in for dinner, and the socially starved Fox accepts (91). After realizing that she recognizes one of the women from the novel's opening scene, because it is the woman who ran away with her

husband's concubine (93), the fox sleeps. She wakes in her sleep to the sound of "two women breathing in unison...[she] look[s] at them as little as possible, to respect their privacy...the basin is filled with small gold coins. Pleased, [she] revert[s] to [her] four-legged self and leap[s] out the window" (93). The fox has very carefully respected the women's privacy, and she rewards them. She gives them money, and they are perhaps saved from having to sell themselves to the local officials as a source of income. Whatever the outcome, the fox's narrative in this scene locates women who live outside patriarchy, women who have faith in their success as lesbians. Lai effectively recast the fox so as to make her a just character invested in maintaining the integrity and privacy of lesbians. The fox is a lesbian hero, and her beneficiaries prove themselves worthy of her attentions. In some ways the fox is a match-maker figure, because she is the one who made it possible for the two women to be together in the first place. However, this formulation does not entirely work because the women are invested with the agency to continually surprise the fox. The privacy which the fox respects and rewards in this level of the narrative relates closely to Roof's claim that lesbians are defined by their absence, because any presence of lesbianism is immediately reconfigured under a phallic sign and usurped through a patriarchal lens (Roof 67).

Lai's use of presence is very different from her use of disruption, becuase in her use of presence she seems to affirm lesbian as a constant. Indeed, from the outset it is clear that the text engages in a re-imagining of the past and a retelling of myth. Lai bases her retelling of myth on the combination of disruption and presence. This is unusual because the attention given to disruption means that she works rather constantly to destabilize categories and assumptions that propagate systematic disadvantage. Lai by no means promotes one singular definition of lesbian, neither does she leave unproblematized the scripts she reveals as common. Modes of lesbianism as disruption and presence work to interrogate assumptions made by the stereotypes about lesbianism

that reify patriarchy's investment in a discourse of margin and centre, Other and self, black and white. Patriarchy relies in part on its own construction of "lesbian" in order to define itself. In her introduction to Inside/out, Diana Fuss discusses heterosexuality's dependence on homosexuality. Fuss states that "the homo in relation to the hetero, much like the feminine in relation to the masculine, operates as an indispensable interior exclusion—an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such" (3). Lai disrupts stereotypes which serve only to bolster patriarchal aims.

These disruptions of patriarchy arise in both form and content because the lesbian as a monstrous figure is revealed as a construction which subordinates and marginalizes women for the distinct advantage of patriarchy. Lai transforms the monstrous lesbian into a trickster as a way of updating configurations of social regulation. In fact, the fox creature becomes a benefactor to lesbians rather than the detriment to men she is in ancient Chinese mythology. This paradigmatic shift informs the tone of contemporary lesbian literature, for this re-imagining of the lesbian means a reevaluation of social scripts, who exactly these social scripts benefit and how they function.

Fox reveals a complexly layered critique of both heterosexuality and patriarchy. The disruptions to heterosexuality make it conceptually possible to imagine the emergence of a fascinating presence outside patriarchy. While Lai makes it clear that there remains no way of entirely opting out of patriarchy, she does also note that those who have faith enough in their desire will live their lives in such a way as to be fully present outside patriarchy. For instance, the Poetess does not emerge free of patriarchal constraints, even though she has never to marry, because she supports herself and her lesbian partner, the so-called maid servant, by working as a prostitute. She is a presence outside patriarchy, but patriarchy depends on prostitution for its systematized subordination of women. However, the Poetess does create some space for herself and

her lover. In some senses, in order to have some space outside patriarchy, lesbians engage it, and this requires some degree of complicity. Thus, Lai problematizes the idea that women can live "outside" patriarchy simply by living outside marriage, for clearly—as in the case of the Poetess—dependence upon an economic system which capitalizes on an economy of dualistically sexualized and desexualized female bodies cannot bear real independence. While women who work in the sex trade are free from the limitations of married life, they are far from free from patriarchy. They are vital to its "success."

In the third part of this examination of the presence outside patriarchy, I examine how Lai nuances the ways in which lesbians re-inscribe patriarchy as they work to establish a presence outside it. For instance, the unnamed woman who runs away with her husband's concubine knows that she has to remarry a man if she wants to live with another woman: she knows that there is no socially sanctioned way in which she can express herself as lesbian outside the patriarchal system in which she lives. She is complicit in the sense that she remarries in order to have the sanctions needed to choose a concubine for her husband who is a partner for herself. She has to resubmit herself to the patriarchal system in order to renegotiate her position on its rather literal fringes, for in the first story she runs away with the concubine (5), and in the later story she has killed and run away from another husband with a different concubine to live on the outskirts of a village (93). At this point the first portion of the examination of presence feeds into the analysis because it can be argued that the type of lesbian sex described as taking place between Artemis and Claude in the contemporary narrative is indicative of a limited presence outside patriarchy. The level of complicity in the ancient narrative of the wife who chooses herself a concubine is different from the contemporary scenes in many ways, but the fact that both navigate their way through patriarchal codes in order to be with their lesbian partners means that both are complicit with patriarchy and do not exist outside it. The argument that fisting is a manner not only of re-inscribing but of quite

literally re*placing* the patriarchal phallus serves the analysis' sense that lesbianism is often marked as contingent upon both heterosexuality and patriarchy. Had the Poetess and her servant been engaged in a fisting relationship the judge would have ruled that robbers had killed her and the murderer would not have been executed and the fox would have been without this particular lesbian body. Lai effectively problematizes what could be called neo-patriarchal sexual scripts of prostitution, marriage, and fisting by presenting characters who fall prey to fits of their own violence. The fox rewards lesbians, such as the first "wife" and her second concubine, who work to maintain their individuality and privacy. Thus, Lai transforms the Fox from inauspicious monster to a monstrous-trickster, dangerous only to heterosexuality and patriarchy. The fox is able to question not only heterosexuality and patriarchy but that which she seeks to support, for—as a trickster figure—she is permitted the latitude to transgress boundaries of socially constructed politeness. That is, the fox can question lesbianism because her project is to strengthen through destabilization, and this is in direct opposition to traditionally restrictive practices which are loyal to unjustifiable causes.

Through the fox, Lai asks about the value of locating a presence outside patriarchy as disruptive to heterosexuality, for the assumption here is that heterosexuality and patriarchy are synonymous, when in fact heterosex*ism* and patriarchy are synonymous. For, indeed, there may not be a patriarchy that is not based on heterosexual scripts of male and female gender stereotypes, but it is the assumption that the world operates in relation to a heterosexual norm that perpetuates patriarchy. Patriarchy relies on subordination, and heterosex*ism*'s regulation of gender identity makes the regulation of sexuality and gender expression the same thing. Where the text disrupts heterosexuality it also disrupts heterosexist and heteronormative assumptions. Through this disruption Lai establishes for her text a sense of presence. "Lesbian" becomes that literature which gives lesbian characters the agency to forward their own

plots, and it demands a particular commitment to both multiple voices and multiple perspectives.

Absence

In order to better to understand the repercussions of viewing lesbianism as contingent upon hetero and patriarchal constructions of sexuality and social order, I will demonstrate the ways in which the text occupies a positive space in relation to the dismantling of coercive reductions. Thus, modes of lesbianism are present in the sense that they are represented as an ability to escape a limiting system in such a way as to leave a traceable route for others. That is, Zimmerman claims that lesbianism is characterized as "a hole in the fabric of gender dualism" (4), and as such, modes of lesbianism as forms of presence are invested in animating a disruption of socialized binaries, but along with this complex and somewhat contingent sense of presence comes the need to not occupy an easily commodified location. Modes of lesbianism disrupt the codes of heterosexuality which themselves maintain rigid borders of patriarchal regulation of the female body.

The performance of transgression in Fox takes place in both form and content. Not only do narrators cross over the boundaries of their own narratives, but characters step across the boundaries of their socially constructed gender as a sort of play. In fact, this manipulation of borders takes place so often in Fox that it seems that the trope of transgression is worn thin. In this way, Fox reads as a text which playfully ridicules the allure of unsuccessful transgressivness. In order to be truly transgressive a text needs to be more than an example of border-crossings. The text has to function as a somewhat modified "self-consuming artifact." That is, the text destroys the affects it produces (Hawthorn 209). In the case of Fox, the narrative thematizes boundary exceeding and slippage to the point that it forces a transgression: it goes beyond the assumption that

simply crossing into forbidden spaces is enough. In order to achieve this, Fox's sites of transgression also have to work to forward the idea that Lai sign-posts the interrelated nature of form and content in lesbianism. Form and content inform one another very closely in lesbian narrative as evinced in Fox. Where characters cross-dress as a performance of a third space, so too do narratives disrupt one another in order to establish a presence outside the limiting conventions of traditional narratological configurations. In the following section I examine the various modes of lesbianism. By way of close readings of some of the scenes in which characters cross-dress and places where some of the narratives seep through, and transgress, their boundaries, I establish the purposeful instability invoked through Lai's text as lesbian.

Perhaps in line with Roof's supposedly postmodern claim that lesbian reading practices look for absence to establish lesbian presence, Zimmerman posits lesbian writing and reading as contextualized absence. The idea is that something cannot be an absence unless there is something that is a presence. Here Zimmerman's assertion is that gender dualism is the presence, and—indeed—it is the ever-present paradigm. She sets up lesbian reading practices and lesbian writing as, in some ways, contingent upon a binarized norm of gender expression. In fact, the claim seems quite clearly to be that gender expression, when rigidly binarized, is not actually an expression but a highly regulated, somewhat coerced compliance of sorts. This is compliance to a system that rewards its adherents and suppresses its transgressors, for transgression constitutes resistance to a social order predicated upon the systematic subordination of feminine by masculine. Thus, where lesbian is read as rupture, Zimmerman reads lesbian as an expression of that which is suppressed by the dominant cultural paradigm.

The fact that she chooses this particular metaphor for what I have chosen as the third major axis of my analysis reveals an interest in the costuming of gender, and this signals binary gender identification as a performance. In order to keep from regulating

the actual expression of gender. Zimmerman's phrase mobilizes the image of a hole in fabric. Lesbians have knowable ways of signifying, so lesbian as signifier is not exactly opposite to the costumes of male/female, it does have a presence. However, the scripts of what would be the lesbian uniform are regulated in terms of lived experience, as in the case of Lai's Ming. Lai writes toward a questioning of the scripts of lesbian signification, and she writes a type of regulation of the tenability of standardized signs. She writes against lesbian as style, as aesthetic. She does this in terms of both form and content.

In terms of content, Lai seems further to push the idea that lesbian as a traceable and sustainable escape from the confines of stereotyped roles means that people seem to wear gender more often than they wear clothes. This idea goes in more than one direction at a time. In one way, gender as purely superficial renders sexuality something other than gender expression, for there is the possibility that once binarily gendered people are out of their costumes they act differently than their gendered role in public life, and this is the case when the fox accidentally seduces a transgendered sex trade worker in a Tea House (104). Fox uses cross-dressing to introduce play into the idea of rigid binaries. In this play, roles are questioned for their usefulness and their social function. One part of recognizing that gender roles serve particular ends is to recognize that they are, to a certain extent, a chosen sequence of behaviours. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler claims that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (270). In order to be effective, performances of binarized gender are repeated in day-to-day life, and through repetition they establish a sense of continuity in the performer. Eventually the performer believes that she is not performing her gender as feminine but the roles are natural. Through Fox, Lai

emphasizes the performativity of gender roles. Lai's text pays close attention to the performance of gender as a way of demonstrating the uses to which one can put such a performance. At times the performances are disruptive, but most of the time it seems the performances are part of a strategy for survival. For example, in a Tea House in ancient China a female-bodied character dressed as male can seek out lesbian sex with the prostitutes who work there. However, even this idea of "passing" is played with in Lai's text. Lai uses various instances of drag to draw attention to gender as "an historical situation rather than a natural fact," as Simone de Beavoir would have it (38). Through a repetition Fox establishes the slippages inherent in navigating gender as separate from sex. Indeed, many characters cannot quite manage roles they recognize as performative, and they slip back into the time-worn and more familiar performative roles, as in the case of Artemis's visit to a man-only bar.

In terms of performing a gender supposedly opposite to one's sex in order to express sexuality, Lai's text provides many examples. The text foregrounds these examples as note-worthy. The fox, for instance, often roams the city for female company, and she often finds it. This she does not deem as note-worthy as encountering someone who is as cross-dressed as herself, for she reports only what she finds unusual. The fox character reports roaming around the Western market of the city late one night, and she is struck by the beauty of a woman who appears to be a scholar (104). It turns out that the woman in the window is not a scholar; she is a sex-trade worker waiting for the brother of her last client (104). The location of this episode in the story emphasizes the fox's almost exclusive interest in female scholars. At this particular point in the narrative, Lai presents a scenario in which male/female sex is not at issue, but the traditional performance of heterosexuality is. The characters have sex, but their attraction to one another is initially based on the assumption that each one had in some way negotiated a same sex experience. For here the cross-dressed fox ends up having sex

with someone who "had something which I had not, and she discovered, since I had no olisboi with me that night, that I lacked something which she had" (107). The playfulness of the language here is evidenced in its circumspection and celebration, for nowhere does the fox refer to the sex trade worker as "he," because indeed she lives as "she." At the same time, there is no absolute dependency on the penis for penetrative sex, because if the fox had had her prosthetic with her it is possible that this would have been a different story segment. The reader can infer that had the fox her prosthetic she would have penetrated the Tea House worker. The fox seems to only sometimes have her prosthetic with her, which means that she regularly has non-penetrative sex with women. Thus, the note is also, perhaps, that had the fox met with a person more physically like herself, she would not have needed the olisboi. Lesbian sex is not necessarily penetrative. Again, the assumption that lesbian sexual practice is predicated on the replacement of the phallus is repeatedly challenged in this narrative. In the scene between the fox and the sex trade worker, this particular instance of gender bending is narrated as though it is the most rare of experiences for the fox. However, the experience leaves the fox newly inspired, and—indeed—she goes away with a sense that the rigid gender dualism which she has abided by is used by others very much like her: she "went home dreaming of all the possible disguises the future held" (107). This instance of gender bending also substantiates the claim that "passing" constitutes a transgression by way of very close adherence to gender dualism, whereas another way of challenging gender dualism comes more in the form of an expression of gender that does not "pass" as either male or female. However, for the purposes of this paper I will use the idea of lesbian as disruptive of gender dualism to signal that there are freedoms available to those who recognize that gender is a performance which allows specific and coded freedoms. Because of assumed male predators, the fox could not roam the Western market if she were dressed as a woman, just as the sex-trade worker could not meet with men if she

were forced to adhere to a male dress code. Lesbianism is a hole in the fabric of gender dualism in the sense that lesbianism necessarily draws attention to and transgresses the binary in order to survive, and this proves that the binary is far from a "natural" split.

However, there is value in asserting that lesbian is read and reads as an expression of non-traditional gender. In line with this assertion, then, is the idea that gender expression does not take place within the binary of gender dualism: what takes place is gender compliance. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler claims that drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed[. . .] it implies that all gendering is an impersonation and approximation" (Butler 21). This quotation further points out that all gender is a performance, emphasizing the idea that gender is a social construct which is regulated through performance and repetition. In relation to Fox, the instances in which the characters perform types of drag function to draw attention to gender as a system. In Fox gender is destabilized and its naturalization is called into question.

A good example of a lesbian character who performs a kind of drag on a regular basis is Claude. Her masculine name foreshadows her tendency to disrupt the tidy distinctions between male and female. Claude's mode of drag is expressed in her violence and in the way in which she occupies space. When she is first introduced into the contemporary narrative strand, she reads as rehearsed, teasing Artemis and Saint: "then the woman gave her a slow wink, the co-ordinated kind, where nothing on the person's face moves except for one eyelid" (87). Claude is performative from the start, and she is initially interested in disrupting the heterosexual script playing itself out between Artemis and Saint. Two seasons later, Claude's "grace was that of a dancer, although she had none of a dancer's slenderness, but took up space comfortably, without worrying how much of it she occupied" (143). The fact that she takes up a lot of space speaks to her confidence and it affirms that she is not traditionally feminine. In the same

scene. Claude doubles Artemis on her bike: Claude rides the bike but "Artemis sat side-saddle" (144). The two represent an oppositionally gendered scene, although they are clearly both the same sex. Later, when Claude first verbally abuses Artemis during an afternoon paddle, the violent urgency of their love making is revisited in the repeated trope of sugars changing. This time it is the "burnt-sugar smell of summer," and fox transgressing her narrative boundaries sits silently at the next table, wearing a notably feminine "single long diaphanous scarf around her neck in sky blue" (169). The fox seems to be teaching Artemis to value the performance of gender in terms of the feminine as well.

When Artemis moves into her new apartment she meets her upstairs neighbour Joanne. It is in the treatment of Joanne that Lai's parody of the performativity of gender amongst lesbians achieves perfect clarity. Lai writes that "Like Ming, only more successfully, Joanne cultivated a tough-girl image. Her hair had been shaven down to a blue-purple scalp. Thick rings of surgical steel shot through her lower lip and left eyebrow" (154). However the piece-de-resistance comes in the next line, oozing satire. "A switchblade and a recipe for Molotov cocktails hung out of her back pocket" (154). Lai draws attention to the performative nature of gender and lesbian as a performative and constructedly resistant gender.

Another instance in which the hole in gender dualism plays itself out in the case of Fox is in story in which contemporary Artemis goes to a gay night club dressed as a gay man (100). One part of the intrigue in this section of the text is that Artemis is coming to terms with the fact that her former "boyfriend," Eden, is gay. Perhaps in order to impress upon him that she is more than simply accepting, she goes with him and his friends to a club. For the other men in the group, her presence is both a novelty and a naughtiness perhaps mistakenly conceived of as a transgression. Here the text thematizes its involvement with the trope of transgression. Artemis and the gay men are—on some

level—aware that she is not sexually involved with men, and thus, they have little in common. Artemis is not sure how to read her companions: "She couldn't read his eyes, was he amused or was he angry that she had invaded a territory not meant for her and wanted to make sure she got her comeuppance?" (100). She senses that the men are ill at ease, and that they will not come to her rescue if a man *does* actually proposition her. In effect, she shares nothing in common with her companions; further, she is intruding upon space in which she cannot belong, for she is a lesbian invading a male-identified space.

Perhaps as a reaction to her sensing this hostility on the part of her companions, over the course of the evening Artemis becomes used to the idea of being in the male gaze. She is at first frightened when she is cruised by a gay man in the gay bar (100). This changes when later the group has relocated to a less exclusively gay space, and she is unable to read the gaze of a lesbian (101); in fact, she ends up going home with the phone number of a heterosexual man in her pocket (102). In this section the disruption of gender is undercut by Artemis' clumsiness and self-doubt. She is perhaps so traumatized by the potential consequences of "passing" in a gay bar that she rushes back to the safety of her socially constructed gender. The sense of Artemis' failure is not lost on the reader, because when she rushes back to binarized gender she has exercised an expression of fear and privilege, and this coupling is crucial to understanding the value of lesbian as an expression of a way not around but through gender dualism. In this scene, Artemis also signals an exploration and rejection of queer garb and queer theory. On their way to the second bar Artemis reportedly "unbound her breasts and shook her hair loose" (101). And in this moment there is a certain amount of naturalizing of her socially conditioned gender role. In order to "pass" she had to bind her breasts, but she also had to tie back her hair and "tucked it under a skull cap" (99). In order to play the part, she has to hide the vestiges of her gender. By reading Fox through Butler's paradigm of gender, I draw attention to the ways in which Lai addresses gender as performance. Lai goes so far as to

demonstrate that the delineation of gender roles is so firm, even within systems like the gay bar, that transgression takes more than one night's half-hearted effort. Nevertheless, "drag," such as Artemis', "is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler, "Burning" 125). However, the fact that she unbinds herself on the way to the second bar signals that she is not interested in attracting anyone who would read her as male; her experience is performative. Artemis seems to realize that she is not attracted to gay men through this experience, and in this sense the text internally grapples with the notion of self-consuming artifacts. Moreover, the text thematizes its interaction with successful and unsuccessful transgressions. What is claimed as transgressive in queer theory may not in fact be transgressive, and Lai signals this through the novel's parody of transgression. That is, Lai presents various models of lesbianism only to subvert them.

In the midst of the confusion of the scene and its engagement of the cultural pull which gender roles have when conflated with sexuality, Artemis relaxes into the privilege of being approached, and this time she is approached by a straight man. Like the gay man cruising in the first bar, this man is interested exclusively in sex with her, but the second man reads her more as she seems to want to read herself. When she comes to terms with the fact that Eden is not going to call her as often as he once did she calls this heterosexual man, and she finds that he is only too eager to have sex with her (102). Despite the fact that the novel relays characters' experience of heterosexual sex, the text still reads as lesbian in both its form and its content. For, as I have noted, the text mentions the incidences of heterosexual sex as the exception to the rule. As I demonstrate with the scene of the fox in the Tea House, heterosexual sex does not a heterosexual make. However, in the Tea House scene there is some attention paid to the value of the fox's purpose in relaying this experience, for it seems a means of

establishing that male/female sex is unusual for her. It takes place under rather specific circumstances. In this retelling she distances herself from men as sexually intriguing. Hence in this adjacent scene, the text presents Artemis as engaging in heterosexual sex for a similar reason. That is, Artemis has casual sex with a heterosexual man in order to dislocate herself from Eden, while finding out for herself what he likes so much about men. She is reportedly interested in the experience in "more than a vicarious curiosity about Eden's life" (103), which implies that she is to some degree invested in a vicarious experience. She finds in the casual sex partner a confidant of the sort she has never known, for "[l]ater she couldn't have said why she felt compelled to tell him things she had never spoken of before" (103). In this scene, again, the man's touch is reported as "cold and clumsy" (103). So then, despite his proving a site on which to unfurl many of her anxieties, he is not interesting to her, sexually. What has happened here is that the text has repeatedly asserted that lesbians engage in heterosexual sex with heterosexual men at times, but they respond to the experience of this sex and its incumbent power dynamic as chilling. Lai rehearses this moment throughout the text, demonstrating that women across centuries and classes report the same experience of heterosexual sex as unacceptably uninteresting.

In this segment of the contemporary strand, I run the risk of troping the trope to point out that Artemis literally plays in the fabric of gender dualism. This play-acting serves to rupture the fabric by virtue of the performativity itself, but the play-acting also reveals to her that the rigid construction of gender dualism will not ultimately serve her own interests or desires. When she cross-dresses in the gay bar she attracts men; when she crosses back into the fabric of her gendered role she has already torn a hole in the fabric, and this rigid role does not any longer seem to fit her. Whereas earlier her gender role seemed to fit her, heterosexual sex with a heterosexual man only serves to affirm that she is not interested in men, at all. The hole in the fabric of gender dualism is the

location and strategic anti-location of lesbian. Lesbian becomes a third space: the process of questioning the binary. In this sense, lesbian is that for which there is no room within gender dualism—despite the role lesbians inadvertently play in reifying the model. By cross-dressing and, consequently traversing the dualism, the lesbian creates a paradigmatic rupture in gender binarizing. In this scene Artemis explores and rejects the queer garb and, in turn, queer theory. Hers is a brief engagement of cross-dressing and it serves simultaneously conflicting aims reifying and rupturing both dualism and "queer." After investigating gay male sexuality Artemis investigates heterosexual sexuality—for a time skipping over lesbian sexuality.

Artemis cannot find her way out of hole in the fabric of gender dualism well enough to see the fox's interest in her. The lesbian gaze trained on Artemis in the second bar belongs to the fox. Here the third-person narration is particularly advantageous because Lai figures both the fox and Artemis as subjects in the sense that they are not objects to one another, while it equally distances them from positions of privilege. In this scene the unnamed contemporary narrator reports that "[i]f Artemis had cared to look she might have seen a well-muscled stomach undulating smooth as water beneath a little T-shirt cut off at the midriff, and small dark eyes watching her every move. Nose twitching" (101). The fox appears in the contemporary strands of the novel in order to emphasize the possible attraction of Artemis to the fox, and to remind the reader of fox's interest in Artemis. For it is fox who hides in the tree above Artemis in the opening scenes of the contemporary strand: Artemis is at the museum and the fox watches her (7). This is an example of the many instances where the fox steps beyond the boundaries of her narrative confinement. While the fox has her own narrative strand, she begins to appear with some regularity in the contemporary strand. The disruption which this signals in the narrative relates back to the idea that lesbian is disruptive of performatively maintained binaries of gender. The transgression of narrative spaces takes place in order

to facilitate the attraction of one lesbian to another, and the assumed gender of each these lesbians as feminine, and even as masculine and feminine, constitutes a breech of the rigid binary system constructed as gender dualism and heterosexuality. This is an appropriate place to make this assertion for Artemis' sexual experience with the man she meets in the second bar marks the end of the period in which she is uncertain about her sexual orientation. When the fox crosses into the contemporary strand in the second bar it is the last time in which she transgresses to find Artemis still invested in seeing herself as heterosexual, or—at least—interested in men sexually: she has not declared her sexuality.

The text uses lesbian drag to illuminate the performative aspects of gender dualism. This move informs the last narrative strand as well. The narrative of the Poetess is given considerably less space in the text, overall. While the fox has twenty-two short stories and the contemporary narrative has twenty-five short stories, the Poetess has only nine. However, the text seems to focus a great deal of its energy on the Poetess in the sense that it is her physical body that the fox inhabits for much of the novel. As I have already noted, the fox reports to Artemis that she is very interested in finding out more about the origins of this body: meaning, she wants to determine the circumstances of the Poetess' death. Hence the text is organized in such a way as to provide another entry point into the question of just how lesbianism is manifest in women, for the Poetess lives her life as lesbian. The conflation of the lesbian body and the lesbian mind takes place through the transformation of the lesbian body into a lesbian spirit: Poetess into fox.

One way in which the Poetess reads her life as lesbian is that her narrative, much like a series of letters, tells the stories of her affairs with women. Not only is she involved with the cross-dressing professor, Lu Ch'iao (57-61, 66-72), but the novel follows the Poetess' attraction to the cross-dressing Lu Ch'iao when she is first presented

as a rich female patron of a temple (27, 53). In this scene the Poetess and the novice nun attendant share a moment of appreciation for the very beautiful patron. The Poetess reports that "[a]s she breezed past me, something cool flooded through my bloodstream like a thousand tiny birds. My breath darted out of my mouth before I could stop it. The novice gave me that funny half smile again, but I pretended not to notice" (27). This is not only an instance in which the Poetess experiences a flicker of lesbian attraction, for a nun substantiates what she feels. This is not only a disruption of heterosexuality; it is also a presence outside patriarchy (Zimmerman 4). The nun's affirmation of Yu Hsuan-Chi's attraction to Lu Ch'iao questions the assumption that nuns are any less sexual than separatist, or radical, lesbians. Lu Ch'iao is so beautiful that the nun conspires with the Poetess in appreciation of her beauty. Thus, Lu Ch'iao passes very well as female. Again, the fact that Lu Ch'iao cross-dresses to visit the Poetess at the Tea House indicates that the "hole in the fabric of gender dualism" (4) is also in play. The narrative of her affair with Lu Ch'iao again focuses on the disruptive potential of lesbian cross-dressing to constitute lesbian as a traceable rupture of strict binaries. When the Poetess sells herself to a Tea House in order to lessen the financial burden on her old and widowed father, she is repeatedly visited by a cross-dressing lesbian, Lu Ch'iao. The visitor passes undetected because she is assumed male, and through this scene Lai engages with the idea that the category of "lesbian" disrupts other categories.

Lai challenges the category of "woman" in the sense that it is contained through a heterosexist paradigm, and she does this by way of Lu Ch'iao's visits to the Tea House. The lesbians do not function as "women" within the patriarchal economy. Cross-dressed, the lesbian woman eventually becomes the Poetess' lover, and she eventually frees Yu Hsuan-Chi of both the Tea House and the marriage arranged to get her out the front door of the Tea House. While, quite clearly, this scene reads as a disruption of heterosexuality, it simultaneously informs a reading of lesbian as a disruption of binary

gender. Again, lesbian drag serves as a way for women to move freely within a rigid patriarchal society. Thus, in this sense, the scene does triple duty as another instance of how lesbian establishes a presence outside patriarchy (4).

There are other moments in the Poetess's narrative in which she expresses her desire for women. In fact, the Poetess's narrative is very much about the ways in which she loves other women as a way of keeping herself emotionally alive in an otherwise chilling heterosexist cultural climate. For example, she also pledges her devotion to a pregnant novice nun at her own temple (176). This particular novice is the daughter of a meat cutter in town, and when she is raped by a government official she keeps the secret to herself. The townspeople decide that the young woman has been impregnated by an enormous pig, and while in an abstract sense they are right, the literal meaning of this rumor humiliates the young woman into leaving town. The Poetess takes her in until the baby is born, and the Poetess seems to fall in love with the girl's plain features, her shaven head (176). The Poetess is a presence outside patriarchy because she shelters the young woman from the almost institutionalized expectations of the town. These expectations are institutionalized in the sense that the man who rapes the young novice is a high-ranking government official, and the townspeople are suspicious of the girl because she is not married. In the end, the Poetess' generosity is not enough to win the young woman's affections, and the young mother leaves. This anecdote draws attention to the fact that lesbianism is not something in which all women can participate. This scene, aptly set in a temple, refutes the irrational patriarchal fear that lesbians have the power to transform women into lesbians, even though they may have the intent. Thus, this anecdote makes it rather clear that it is the state that converts people, not lesbians. For this is a time in which only state religion is sanctioned, and this explains how a woman such as the Poetess can buy a temple. However, the Poetess's narratives also tell the story of her relationship with her servant, and this relationship is—in fact—the reason

she is executed. Thus, the story of her relationship with her servant forms one of the central foundations for the novel (225-30). If it were not for the Poetess's relationship with her servant, the fox would not have such a special lesbian body. The Poetess makes a traceable but problematic—temporary—escape from the confines of patriarchy, heterosexism, and gender role stereotypes, for she uses them to her advantage in cases where she is subjected to their scrutiny. She is compliant only in order to survive again for a time.

Conclusion

Lai's use of a fantastical trickster who animates human bodies signals the mythic in history as not mere "facts" but as fundamental elements that propagate culture. Where Lai's novel uses the mythical in order to engage the present she mobilizes a destabilization of history as linear. In this way she uses her text to interrogate the ways in which historical discourses are shaped. Lai's choice of names for her characters emphasizes her interest in disrupting the convention of linear history and establishes her interest in the role of myth as history, as providing the foundation for narratives of history. The text clearly foregrounds an interest in the authority of history, for not only does the notion that there is a more "traditional" Fox story permeate and shape this novel, but so too do the short stories that the fox character tells Artemis; in fact, the lesbian folk tales the fox makes up for her problematize the idea that there is a fixed, complete, and knowable history just out of reach. The fox tells Artemis stories based in the oral tradition, and the emergence of a character who is a writer and a story teller reveals a thematization of story and history in the novel. This is the way in which the fox emerges as a producer of culture as well as a recorder of experience. In this sense, Lai employs a kind of metafiction with the express result of emphasizing the historical silence and invisibility of lesbians. Moreover, the character of the fox is one who both tells and records stories, and these stories take place within a narrative that retells the traditional story of the Fox in such a way as to make her knowable as complex and playful. Suddenly the fox has access to a new level of agency in the sense that Lai invests her with the power to describe herself. Thus, the thematization of the intersections of history and story is such that the fox occupies multiple sites. Lai's text rewrites the term "lesbian" when she recasts the fox as literate.

Lai not only draws attention to the historical institutionalization of violence against and oppression of women when she divests the fox of its evil and enlivens its ability to have lesbian-identified agency, but also re-shapes contemporary concerns about historical authenticity by presenting a fantastical monster-trickster, one made real by her earthly body. As Jeffery Cohen puts it: "the monster's body is both corporal and corporeal: its threat is its propensity to shift" (Cohen 5). Lai rewrites the figure of the Fox as one which can shift from marginal scavenger to disruptive shape-shifter: the inauspicious Fox of traditional Chinese mythology becomes the character of the fox, a teacher of critical thinking. Meanwhile, Lai's use of the monster-trickster simultaneously questions and fulfills any perceived need for historically present lesbians. The fox is disruptive and problematic because her presence demands recognition of history as a social construct. Also, Lai very playfully maintains the importance of continuous destabilization of categories. In effect, Lai's novel reads through and against Zimmerman's tripartite explication of lesbian reading and writing practices. It pushes readers out of complacency and into active reading practices that simultaneously challenge the idea of norms while presenting lesbian-identified characters whose narratives rupture their own boundaries and whose narrators are as unreliable as patriarchal record keeping practices. The text focuses on and through lesbians as a way of disrupting and as a way of challenging stereotypes maintained in lesbian and non-lesbian culture.

Through her text, Lai takes to task the idea that lesbian desires are governed by fate, biological determinism, or choice. She puts the performativity of identity into play with these considerably less sophisticated and less liberatory senses of lesbian. Here, she reveals a particular investment in the viability of the self-consuming artifact and parody in order to simultaneously invoke and chide what in queer theory have become mere tropes of transgression. The novel's many and fragmentary voices emphasize the

disruptive value of destabilizing both social and literary expectations. One particular expectation that the text addresses is that lesbian literature will complacently remain within the realm of content. Thus, by reading the text through and against Zimmerman's definition of "lesbian," I have established the necessity of lesbian content and lesbian form. Lai's insistence upon continual disruptions of prescripted and stereotyped modes of gendered and sexualized behaviour on the part of her characters, coupled with the blurring of narrative boundaries, gives the novel considerable transgressive potential. Her novel sustains a multivalenced argument against absolutes and the assumptions which foster them. Hence, this paper has also established that Lai uses her text strategically to refuse to resolve the issues it raises, for the text encourages active reading practices as part of the disruptiveness that is its organizing principle.

Like any other category of identity or sexuality, lesbian is inherently unstable. In order to emphasize this instability, the novel is told in three ways. As I have noted, this multiple approach also foregrounds the model of history as one of non-linear progress because the character of the fox is within history a trickster and a myth. In effect, imaginative literature through history becomes the actual and material world in which one lives and is at the same time fantasy. The novel is insistent on historical contexts and this intersection of socialization and biological determinism which play out as the repeated performances which constitute identity.

Butler and Fuss argue rather fundamentally that heterosexuality is dependant on, indeed constituted in part by, lesbianism. Butler seems also to claim that lesbianism is dependent on heterosexuality in the sense that it is "constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its specificity is to be established, not *outside* or *beyond* that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription" ("Imitation" 17). Thus, I maintain that Lai rewrites rather than reinscribes the parameters of lesbian history. Lesbian is primarily defined as desire

between women, and the disruptivness of this definition and the urgency of its literary expression tells the reader more about the hegemonic paradigms governing their own interpretation than it does about "lesbian" itself. Lai's recasting of the traditional Chinese Fox as a monstrous lesbian trickster signals a self-awareness of acting within patriarchal economies, and her fox marks out a traceable and playful rupture of stereotyped roles.

In order to emphasize my commitment to the investment I have made in the term "lesbian" through this thesis I would again like to rehearse the importance of the difference between "lesbian" and "queer." Lai's novel makes room for variously "queer" content, but it is centred on the implications and investments of living and dying lesbian. As I have stated earlier, the rubric of "queer" cannot adequately address the specificites of lesbian. I argue that the novel considers and rejects the usefulness of "queer" when Artemis goes to the gay bar in drag. Furthermore, Sagri Dhariyam's "Racing the Lesbian, Dodging White Critics" comments on the type of slippage I am working to reveal by choosing the term "lesbian" over the term "queer" for my exploration of Lai's novel. As Dhariyam puts it,

> the rubric of queer theory, which couples sexuality and theory and collapses lesbian and gay sexualities, tends to effect a slippage of body into mind: the monstrously feminized body's sensual evocations of smell, fluid, and hidden vaginal spaces with which the name lesbian resonates are cleansed, desexualized into a "queerness" where the body yields to intellect, and a spectrum of sexualities again denies the lesbian centre stage. (Dhairyam 30)

Lai locates the female as bodily by way of rewriting the traditional story of the fox. In her novel she posits the lesbian as both body—the Poetess—and mind, the fox. However, the interplay she enacts between body and mind functions to accentuate the current debates over the supposedly purely bodily lesbian. Again, the fox is not very neatly representative of mind because she is increasingly devoted to pleasure between

lesbians, female bodies. As I have demonstrated throughout this essay, Lai's text grapples continuously with the slippage between mind and body through the exploits of the traditional and contemporary fox and the fox's obsession with the body of the Poetess, as the body of history and fiction both.

Likewise, the character of the Poetess can stand in for the novel itself, because the fox character as trickster and monster transmits its disruption through both her body and the medium of this novel. The Poetess is represented as the highly literate character through whom the fox disrupts. She is an historic figure who has been neglected badly by historiographers. In this way the text addresses the relatively closed reception of contemporary literature by lesbians of colour. Furthermore, when the Poetess stands in for the novel itself, the fox is more clearly an entity unto herself: this is part of her propensity to shift in terms of form rather than content alone. In this light, the fox inhabits and seduces in different registers, occupying various forms. This embodying trickster enters the body of a historical figure and this relates to Lai's insistence that biological determinism and social context are equally important. Not only does the fox inhabit a lesbian body, she variously inhabits the lesbian media of the body and the text, parodying the idea that it is possible to locate lesbian as purely biological or intellectual. Lesbians have some element of biological determinism, but the novel thematizes the importance of the social context and the relationship between the two. The importance of the social context is best exemplified by my earlier discussions of Ming. It is the fact that she is caught in contradictions of biological and social impulses that leads to her suicide. If Ming had not had a wealthy father she may not have committed suicide, because she may have been better able to reconcile the socially constructed markers of lesbian identity with her material reality. She very clearly could not manage the disparity between the readability of her desire and her class. Here again Lai emphasizes the interpenetration of the social and the material.

The text offers the coming out stories of a variety of people. All of these people are relatively young, and in this way the stories serve as coming of age narratives. Lai's text certainly includes more than lesbian sexuality, but her work focuses on the impressions and experiences of lesbians coming of age. Here the text is also usefully read as contemptuous of the bildungsroman or coming of age novel. In an essay on the "The Remasculation of Chinese America: Race, Violence and the Novel" Viet Thanh Nguyen states that the bildungsroman is "an enduring if contradictory subcategory[. . .] because so much of the literature is concerned with the education or formation of the individual and the community as hyphenated [citizens]" (134). Lai's characters are hyphenated in a variety of ways. For instance, my earlier discussion of Artemis' trip to China points out that she recognizes herself as "Chinese-Canadian," not just "Chinese" after her experience as an outsider in China. What is at issue here is the idea that if I were to categorize Fox as a bildungsroman—or coming of age novel—I would have to contend with the fact that the text tells a very troubling story of coming of age in a homophobic, racist setting. I am interested in applying Nguyen's comments to Fox's conclusion as well, for Lai seems to offer "an attempt to prevent the narrative closure associated with the bildungsroman despite formal similarities [it] shares with the genre" (135). Lai's novel may focus on the lives of young women coming of age in Vancouver, but the lesbian Chinese-Canadian characters cannot be presented as engaging in the ultra-tidy ending typical of the genre. In fact, Lai seems to parody the tidiness of endings when the fox says that she will not have to miss Artemis for long because the two are old souls, fated to one another (Fox 236).

Overall, this project addresses "lesbian" in a way that is not utopian. It recognizes what are the socially produced limitations of lesbian. While the novel disrupts gender dualism, it also acknowledges that only in a very limited sense is lesbian outside patriarchy. One example of textual self-awareness of, and attentiveness to, the limited

access lesbians have to acting outside patriarchy is evinced in my earlier reading of the parodic scene in which Diane steals a credit card. The scene draws attention to the fact that a credit card can only afford a certain kind of freedom. Through scenes such as this, Lai asks how transgressive it is to steal credit cards, because the characters remain very literally within the patriarchal economy which they seem to want to disrupt.

Lai also asks how useful it is to ignore the material and social limitations imposed through patriarchy on lesbians, because pushing on these limitations blindly serves only reify them. Furthermore, she playfully renders the trope of transgression suspect by exposing it as a mostly unchallenged script equal to hetero–patriarchal scripts in its seeming readiness to reward passivity. Lai's text is lesbian where it engages a lesbian reader through a lesbian-centered plot which, in turn, critiques homogenization of lesbian social and material expression.

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