Martha Addante

Rupturing the Patriarchal Family

Female Genealogy in Disappearing Moon Café

In his renowned text, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Levi-Strauss concludes that social organisation rests upon the exchange of women. Surely this is the case in a patriarchal social system such as that initially represented in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. According to Levi-Strauss, the incest taboo is the codified law of reciprocity through which men form alliances with other men to secure the survival of their group and the institution of social organisation. Within this system, which Levi-Strauss claims is the original model of social organisation, women function as commodities. The Oedipal model of socialisation ensures that women are taught to accept their powerlessness and their status as objects of exchange. Yet there exists an alternative model of social organisation. In opposition to Levi-Strauss, Evelyn Reed in *Women's Evolution* argues that women originally instituted the incest taboo along with various other food restrictions to protect themselves and their young from cannibalistic, male hunters. Within Reed's model, women not only possessed much social and sexual autonomy, but they held political power as the founders of society. In Sky Lee's novel, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, women reclaim their autonomy and status as subjects which Reed claims they once possessed. Her characters challenge the patriarchal establishment built upon the exchange of women.

Disappearing Moon Cafe is the saga of four generations of Wong women as narrated by Kae, the last of the Wong women whose story the novel records.[1] Before engaging in a critical analysis of the novel, I will offer a brief summary of the narrative. Each of the women—Fong Mei, Suzi and Kae—contest and undermine the hegemonic system of social organisation in class-based societies in which descent is traced through the male line. Fong Mei is the first of the Wong women who rebels against the established order. Fong Mei, "a renowned beauty in Chinatown" (Lee, 1990: 34), is bought by patriarch, Wong Gwei

Chang, and his overbearing wife, Mui Lan, to be wife for their son, Choy Fuk. She is purchased and brought to Canada exclusively to bear heirs for the Wong family. Her situation is not unlike those of many Chinese women in the nineteenth century and well into the first half of the twentieth century whose value depended upon their reproductive function without which they were deemed worthless. Only a woman who bore her marital family descendants, preferably sons, could hope to gain "undeniable status in her husband's family" (Wolf, 1975: 124) and escape her lowly existence. Yet Fong Mei does not submit to the system of exchange, but commits adultery and bears three children with her lover, and Choy Fuk's half-brother, Ting An.

Suzi, her youngest daughter, like her mother also undermines the kinship system at the root of patriarchal organisation. She engages in incest through which she reproduces a son. Incest, as I will elaborate, is a subversion of patriarchal continuity since it disrupts the flow of exchange. Women are no longer available for exchange if they marry within the group or family. Kae is the last generation of Wong women to defy the patriarchal establishment. The birth of her son initiates her into a creative project to trace her origins. Her account reveals "the accidents, the minute deviations ... the reversals ... the errors, the false appraisals and the faulty calculations that give birth to those things that ... have value for us" (Foucault, 1984: 81) and in Kae's case, that define her personal genealogy. Thus, in the novel, women's (re)productive power becomes the source of resistance to the patriarchal order. Both Pierre Bourdieu, in his *The Logic of Practice*, and P. Schweitzer in his Introduction to *Dividends of Kinship*, oppose Levi-Strauss, contending that there are no universal rules of kinship or marriage to which a group prescribes. Instead, there are various individual "strategies," as Bourdieu terms them, directed "towards the satisfaction of material and symbolic interests and organised by reference to a particular economic and social condition" (Bourdieu, 1990: 167). Strauss' model is "reductionistic" (Mahon, 1992: 75) as Foucault points out. I would like to take the opportunity then to explain why I have undertaken a western anthropological reading of Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Lee's novel is a critique of male-dominated social systems in both China and the West that have traditionally exploited women. I am interested in the discourses and "technologies of power" (Foucault, 1978: 109) that enable these social systems to operate. Western anthropology is not the objective study of cultures, their social structures and their people, but it is part of a "mechanics of power" (109) that seeks to regulate bodies, especially women's bodies and reproductive labour. In fact, anthropological discourse reproduces "the interplay of relations and maintains the laws that governs" (106) social systems. In this paper, I have sought to examine the inherent bias in traditional, Western anthropology and investigate other systems of social organisation that foster women's autonomy.

For Levi-Strauss, the oppression and exploitation of women are inherent in social systems. The practice of exogamy or the exchange of women and its correlate, the incest taboo, are the founding features of social organisation, and

they are universal, although the specific content of the numerous versions of the incest taboo vary. He also notes that the prohibition often extends beyond "degrees of real kinship", but includes "individuals who use certain terms in addressing one another" (Levi-Strauss, 1949: 29). Strauss concludes then that the invention of the incest taboo was not to avoid the genetic mutations resulting from the close mating between individuals of the family group, but it was culturally imposed "to ensure the group's existence" (32), and culture ensures the group's existence through the exchange of women. Strauss writes: "the prohibition of incest is a rule of reciprocity, for I will give up my daughter, or my sister only on the condition that my neighbour does the same" (62). Under such conditions, men form alliances with other men.

For Foucault, genealogy, the study of origins, is "effective history" (Mahon, 1992: 113) because it challenges the belief in the continuity and coherence of history and offers a "dissociating view that is capable of decomposing itself, capable of shattering the unity of man's being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of his past" (113). In *Women's Evolution,* Evelyn Reed offers an alternative explanation for the incest taboo. She presents a "dissociat[ed] view" of matriarchal social organization, one that not only decenters the male subject, but challenges traditional notions of social organisation that seek to impose present condition on the past in order to "introduce meaning and purpose into history" (1975: 112).

According to Reed, the incest taboo was one part of a "double prohibition" (Reed, 1975: 22) that was actually a taboo against cannibalism. The double taboo was necessary to protect the community from the "twin hazards that confronted early humanity - violence of male sexuality and the problem of cannibalism" (73). According to Reed, it was much more likely the women, "already equipped by nature with their highly developed maternal functions and ... capable of co-operating with other females" (1975: 69), instituted the totem taboos to ensure the survival of the group. Most forbidden, Reed notes, was the flesh of certain birds and animals associated with the female sex (88). A woman was also tabooed so long as she nursed and cared for a child. In this way, she was able to protect her child.

Because of prolonged periods of segregation of the sexes, marriage as it is conceived of today did not exist. Reed explains that "where a wife segregates herself from her husband for years at a time, occupies her own independent household with her children, does not cook for the man or eat with him, we cannot speak of marriage in the true sense of the term" (1975: 139). In fact, according to Reed, in "savage society" (138) there existed much sexual freedom. Neither men nor women restricted their mates' sexual practices. Women were not required to limit their sexual relations to one man and "if they did so, it was voluntary" (139). Furthermore, women were not "compelled" (139) to marry or have sexual relations with anyone with whom they did not wish.

Many feminists support the hypothesis that in pre-class societies women enjoyed greater autonomy. Ernestine Friedl, in *Women and Men: An Anthro-*

pologist's View (1975), argues that in pre-class society or band society, such as hunting and gathering communities, it is possible for women to achieve autonomy provided that they participate in the production and distribution of goods, specifically food, outside the domestic unit. Eleanor Leacock, in *Myths of Male Dominance,* upholds Friedl's argument and draws upon Iroquois society as an example of an egalitarian society. Women in Iroquois society controlled food productions and distribution. This gave them a certain measure of political or public power, for example, to "veto declarations of war and to intervene ... to bring about peace" (Leacock, 1981: 153). Like Engels (1978), she links class development with women's decline in status. In addition, Leacock argues that ethnographic reports and documentation that question the egalitarian quality of pre-class societies are the result of "ethnocentric bias" or else fail to consider the defilement of the band's egalitarianism via colonial contact.

Katherine Gough in "The Origin of the Family," unlike the feminists cited above, questions both the matriarchal theory of the origins of human society and the egalitarian nature of pre-class society. She argues that "there is no 'matriarchal,' as distinct from matrilineal society in existence or known from literature, and the chances are that there never has been" (1975: 54). Gough underscores that even in matrilineal societies where women appear to hold greater autonomy, and where property, rank and group membership pass through the female line, the "ultimate head of the household, lineage, and local group is usually a man" (1975: 54). David Schneider in *Matrilineal Kinship* confirms Gough's findings and notes that men in matrilineal society still possess authority over women and children in both the domestic and descent groups (Schneider and Gough, 1961: 7). In short, whether matriarchy was the original system of social organisation or whether it existed at all is a highly contested issue with little resolution. However, as Gough asserts, "this does not mean that women and men have never had relations that were dignified and creative for both sexes ... nor does it mean that the sexes cannot be equal in the future, or that the sexual division of labour cannot be abolished" (Gough, 1975: 54). Reed's hypothesis, and those of the many feminist theorists who support it, are in fact constructive because they offer a "dissociating view" of history, but also because they encourage us to envision new social relations and practices that challenge oppressive social structures. Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* likewise urges us to dream of new social relations and practices that foster women's autonomy.

Fong Mei is the first in a series of Wong women to rupture the law or patriarchal order that depends upon the exchange and exploitation of women. She arrives in Vancouver as a young Chinese native whose parents sell her in exchange for wealth and power. Gayle Rubin in "The Traffic in Women" highlights that "kinship and marriage are always points of total social systems, and are always tied to economic and political arrangements" (1975: 207). In a letter from her sister, Fong Mei, learns of the riches and power her marriage has brought to her natal family: "with the money, our parents purchased one

hundred barrels of store bought brides cake.... There hasn't been a neighbour within ten li who hasn't stopped by and commented on your Yeh's generosity ... Father is just full of himself these days" (Lee, 1990: 46-47).

While her father benefits financially and gains prestige and respect in the community, Fong Mei remains miserable. In a letter to her sister, Fong Mei laments her misery and loneliness: "now, I wouldn't be able to claw my way home as a beggar. I'm lost among strangers ... there's no one to turn to, as I think of home constantly" (Lee, 1990: 44). Yet Fong Mei's loneliness is the least of her problems as she hints, "even at night in my sleep, I must be on my guard. There's a strange man in my bed now ... " (Lee, 1990: 145)—a man she will later come to despise. Fong Mei's greatest enemy, however, will become her mother-in-law, Mui Lan. Fong Mei must fulfil her family's side of the contract and provide Wong descendants. Her failure to do so gains her a tyrant for a mother-in-law. It is Mui Lan and not the "patriarch," Gwei Chang, who presides over marital negotiations in which Fong Mei is purchased on behalf of the Wong family. It is she who bargains and schemes to obtain Fong Mei and who later hires another mistress to reproduce Wong descendants when her daughter-in-law fails to become pregnant. Mui Lan holds domestic authority. All too often, as is evident in Lee's novel, women's reproductive function comes to represent the woman as a person. She is no longer a complete subject with other needs and desires, but she fulfils a function as the vessel who bears male heirs. This is dangerous and destructive to women. In her essay, "Kinship, Reciprocity and the World Market," Jenny B. White highlights that in certain communities, such as the working class neighbourhoods in Turkey, kinship is about "doing" (2000: 124) rather than "being" (2000: 124). One is a member of the community so long as s/he contributes labour and resources to that community (2000: 125). Fong Mei's "belongingness" (2000: 125) is contingent on whether she contributes her labour, that is, (re)produces a son. Mui Lan makes this clear: "the past five years, you have learnt and worked a good deal ... but no matter how much you do, you have done nothing until you have given a son to us" (Lee, 1990: 61). If Fong Mei fails to fulfil her duty as a daughter-in-law and produce male heirs, she is disposable and no longer "belongs" to her husband's family. In fact, her marriage contract is void.

Mui Lan is what Irigaray terms a "useful Athena" (1980: 12) who serves the patriarchal order or those "who spring whole from the brain of the Father-King, dedicated solely to his service and that of the men in power" (1980: 12).[2] Her desire for "a grandchild to fulfil the most fundamental purpose to her life" (Lee, 1990: 31) in whom she could "claim a share of that eternal life which came with each new generation of babies" (31) is understandable and even desirable to ensure the continuation of the family. The problem is that Mui Lan partakes in the exchange of women for the sole purpose of reproducing a "little boy who came from her son, who came from her husband, who also came lineally from that golden chain of male to male" (31), while her daughter-in-law remains an "unidentified receptacle" (31).

Although Mui Lan envies the closeness between two laundresses, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, each of whom carried "a baby strapped to her back" (Lee, 1990: 24), she fosters a relationship with Fong Mei based solely on motherhood. In contrast, the two laundresses share a closeness that "gave an impression of strength" (25). This "annoys" Mui Lan partly because it reminds her of her own longing for the network of village women she left behind upon immigration to Canada, but also because it appears to her as if "they knew something that she didn't" (25), or at least something that she has forgotten. Mui Lan and Fong Mei become rivals because they have not established a bond, mutual love and respect for each other as women. Irigaray warns that this is often the case when women do not love and respect one another as subjects or as women. She writes, "if they [women] ... become rivals, it is often because the mystery of their personal status remains imperceptible to them. Except in motherhood ... but that is not necessarily a human identity" (Whitford, 1991: 192). Since it is not a genuine closeness between women for which Mui Lan longs, she has no qualms about hiring another woman to reproduce Wong descendants nor about participating in the trade of women. Thus, she becomes an accomplice to the patriarchal order which subjugates and exploits women because of their reproductive function.

Fong Mei, alone in a foreign land, tormented by an overbearing mother-in-law and trapped within a loveless marriage, retaliates not only against her marital family, but indirectly also against the social system which is responsible for her misery and exploitation. Shortly after Mui Lan reveals her plan to hire a mistress to bear a Wong descendant, Fong Mei commences her affair with Ting An, Choy Fuk's stepbrother, although the latter is unknown as such to all except patriarch, Chang. Fong Mei does not turn to Ting An out of revenge, but rather out of "silent desolation" (Lee, 1990: 182). The exchange of women not only ensures alliances between men and the division of labour that divides women, but it also sanctifies, through marriage, men's sexual access to women. By committing adultery, Fong Mei regains power over her woman's body, over her sexuality, and makes herself accessible to a man who has not acquired her within a contract, but who is of her choosing.[3]

Out of her transgression, Fong Mei reproduces three children. Her womb is the site of her oppression, but it also becomes a means to rebel against a patriarchal order that exploits women and appropriates their reproductive labour. Fong Mei, in Kae's story at least, realises the power of her woman's womb: "I was given the rare opportunity to claim them [her children] for myself", but she also realises, "I sold them each and every one, for property and respectability" (Lee, 1990: 189). Fong Mei is unable to endure anew the wretchedness of poverty and hunger and so she eventually abandons Ting An and sells out her children. She too becomes what Irigaray calls, a "useful Athena" (1980: 12), who upholds the patriarchal system for economic security and for the social prestige that accompanies it.

In Kae's rendition of the story, however, Fong Mei realises the full

implications of her transgression. She also imagines that she could have transgressed further; she "could have run away with any one of those lonely Gold Mountain men ... if men didn't make me happy enough, then I would have moved on. Imagine, I could have had children all over me ... And in turn, they could have chosen whomever and how many times they fancied and I would have had hundreds of pretty grandchildren" (Lee 188). Like Reed, who hypothesizes the prior existence of a sexually autonomous society, Fong Mei dreams of establishing a dissident community in which women are not the objects of exchange, but subjects articulating their desire and claiming rights to their bodies, to their (re)productive labour, and to their children. It is through this utopian projection that she, or rather Kae, imagines an alternative model of social organisation and perhaps more "dignified" relations between the sexes than is possible within a patriarchal social system.

In *Eroticism: Desire and Sensuality*, George Bataille, in conformity with Levi-Strauss, argues that the incest taboo and the exchange of women are not a set of rules prohibiting close mating to avoid genetic mutation, but rather they are a set of "rules intended to share out women as objects of desire" (Bataille, 1986: 213). Bataille expands the aspects of Levi-Strauss' model that he considers undeveloped. He argues that the distribution of women was necessary to contain the violence of the flesh that could incite great disorder. Bataille writes that "everything suggests that these regulations deal with the play of deep seated impulses ... a sort of inner revolution of violent intensity ... this movement is no doubt at the bottom of the potlatch of women, exogamy" (211). In short, if these "urges of the flesh" (92) were not controlled they "might have disturbed the order to which the community desired to submit itself" (52). Marriage is the institution that brings order and restraint to a "madness" or sexual frenzy that could otherwise, cause havoc.[4]

During intimacy, Fong Mei and Ting An experience what Bataille refers to as "urges of the flesh" (Bataille, 1986: 92): "Ting An braced himself ... ready to be seized by her feverish passion.... Fong Mei tore into his body like a starved woman. Wave after frenzied wave of pure pleasure consumed her; she couldn't stop until she felt him spent inside her. And afterwards, there was more hunger" (Lee, 1990: 184). However, contrary to Bataille's (1986) or Levi-Strauss' (1949) argument(s), social order is not contingent on the exchange of women. Fong Mei envisions an alternative, matriarchal order which is not based on the trade of women. Within this social system she and her children control their own sexuality and reproduction which, according to Reed, was once the norm for women. Exogamy and incest, necessary to ensure the distribution of women, are relevant only in a patriarchal system of social organisation. In short, Fong Mei's brief fantasy supports Irigaray's (1985) and O'Brien's (1981) conclusion that patriarchy is not the result of a desire for social order, but rather the outcome of men's desire to appropriate power.[5]

In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault converts Bataille's (1986) self-repressive social scheme into a scene of production; in other words,

the process of exchange is itself productive insofar as it comes to constitute the social. The exchange process or system is traced, enacted, across and through the human body, so that Bataille's primeval categories of desire, violence, energy are assimilated to a productive model of social interaction and identity construction. From the seventeenth century onward, under evolving economic conditions, sexuality is integrated into the productive system as a component of its own. The body is disciplined and sexuality regulated. The "deployment of sexuality," says Foucault, begins to supplant "the deployment of alliance."

Foucault examines the process by which women's bodies, for example, are not merely exchanged, but also sexualised. Sex is accorded utmost value in western society. It is the "imaginary point ... each individual has to pass in order to have access ... to his identity" (1978: 155-156). Via psychoanalytic discourse of the nineteenth century and the hysterization of women, sex is redefined "as that which belongs to man, and hence is lacking in women, but at the same time, as that which by itself constitutes women's body, ordering it wholly in terms of the function of reproduction and keeping it in constant agitation through the effects of that very function" (1978: 153). In short, sex identifies women as lack, but also, conversely, it defines them in terms of their reproductive function. Foucault underscores the fact that social practices "normalise human behaviour" and human sexuality via the regulation and appropriation of bodies, and in this case, specifically through the sexualization of women's bodies. This new system of power networks, particularly psychoanalysis, reinforce the alliance system as Foucault notes, "with psychoanalysis, sexuality gave body and life to rules of alliance by saturating them with desire" (1978: 113).

Gayle Rubin in "The Traffic in Women" illustrates how the psychological model of the Oedipus complex upholds the kinship system. She argues that the Oedipus complex is an instrument for the socialization of children: it "is an apparatus for the production of sexual personality ... [and makes it possible for] societies ... [to] recalculate in their young the character traits appropriate to carrying on the business of society" (1975: 189). Prior to the Oedipal phase, the child's sexuality is unbound or unstructured. She holds "all the sexual possibilities available to human expression" (189). Although a number of sexual possibilities are available for human expression, a society will cultivate a selected few. In a patriarchal society, Rubin argues that little boys and girls are taught that the mother, the original incestuous object of desire, is unavailable to them, but belongs only to the father. If boys are willing to renounce the mother, in time, they too will possess the phallus, "the symbolic token which can later be exchanged for a woman" (193). Conversely, society teaches little girls that she will never possess the phallus or a penis. It may "pass through her" (195) and leave behind a child, but she can never exchange the penis for another woman or man. By the conclusion of the Oedipus complex, children are socialised and little girls are made to accept their "castration" (195) or powerlessness and acknowledge that certain relationships are not permissible.[6]

Unlike her mother, Suzi totally rejects and rebels against the restrictions

and exploitation inherent in a patriarchal exchange system. She protests against society's rules of mating. Suzi inhabits a pre-Oedipal-like phase where there are no limits on sexual expression. When explaining her feelings for half-brother, Morgan, to her sister, Beatrice, she justifies that "there was a way in which he refused to be sucked in. He could see that I wouldn't play the game either … Nope, for me, it was too much like selling my soul" (172). Suzi refuses to accept her own castration as the Oedipal model prescribes for women, and chooses to be with Morgan. She also refuses to accept that certain relationships are not permissible. Hence, she is unwilling to participate in the whole system of exchange and chooses a mate from her own group rather than willingly accept to be contracted away to benefit her natal or marital families.

When Suzi becomes pregnant with Morgan's baby, a symbol and real manifestation of their transgression, "higher" powers cannot allow the baby, the product of a transgression, to survive. As Mary O'Brien observes in *The Politics of Reproduction*, "modern obstetrics, as opposed to ancient midwifery, has been a male enterprise" (1981; 46). This male enterprise must eliminate the product of a rebellion against the patriarchal system. It is no accident that the product of Suzi's transgression against the patriarchal system should die in the care of a "male enterprise." Suzi's baby is "a Doctor Dean special!" (Lee, 1990: 207) It suffers a head haemorrhage when the doctor "tried to turn the baby's head with forceps … and punched it a bit too … much" (208). The healthy baby boy is disposed of by the male dominated patriarchal medical institution. One of the nurses observes, "wouldn't you know it though … that this would have to happen to a baby that nobody wanted. Like it was an act of God or something. The mother's an unwed teenager" (208). The "accident" did not have to happen nor was it an act of God. Since the baby boy was evidence of a couple's transgression or disregard for society's norms, even though he was healthy, he had no place in a patriarchal society.

Like Reed (1975) who challenges Strauss' model of social organisation, Luce Irigaray, in *Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother*, calls for the re-evaluation of the Oedipal model especially in its resolution in relation to the mother. According to Irigaray, the renunciation and repression of the mother, which in traditional psychoanalysis is imperative for the successful completion of the Oedipal phase, actually results in "madness" (Luce Irigaray, 1980: 15) for the child of either gender. The violence of the flesh, which Bataille (1986) reasons is the basis for exogamy and the exchange of women, is, for Irigaray, the consequence of a child's repression of the mother. For little boys, negating their primary caregiver in exchange for the phallus, "the instrument of power" (Irigaray, 1980: 7) through which they will become "organisers of the world" (14), ensures that as adults they will "constantly … seek refuge in any open body, and forever nestle into the body of other women" (15). However, when the mother, moreover when female identity, is valued and no longer sacrificed to establish "the cultural domain of the father" (16), man will find escape from the "insatiable"(15) nature of his desire and become "capable of eroticism and

reciprocity in the flesh" (17).

It is equally important for women to re-connect with "the mother in every woman and ... the woman in every mother" (17). For Irigaray, women are always mothers "just by being women" (18). They give birth to many things aside from children, such as, "love, desire, language, art, social things, political things, religious things" (18). Irigaray (1980) also cautions women against identifying with each other solely in terms of "motherhood, relations with children and nurturing function that is not necessarily a human identity" (Whitford, 1991: 192). Instead, women must improve relations among themselves and develop the intimacy that will foster their unique individual and female identities. Irigaray urges women to resolve "the problem of women-amongst-themselves [*l'entre-femmes*] and the problem of their human identity" (192) or develop what she and other feminists refer to as "'verticality' in the female identity" (Irigaray, 1993: 94). For Irigaray, "verticality" refers to women's right to foster their own "spiritual becoming" (94) and to realise their "grandeur" and "importance" (95).

Yet to develop and sustain a female identity, women require a "genealogy of women" (Irigaray, 1980: 19)—connection to their mothers and other women. Irigaray stresses, "each of us has a female family tree: we have a mother, a maternal grandmother and great-grandmother ... because we have been exiled into the house of our husbands, it is easy to forget the special quality of the female genealogy ... let us try to situate ourselves within that female genealogy so that we can win and hold on to our identity" (19). Female genealogy has much in common with Foucault's notion of genealogy. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," he argues that genealogy cannot pretend to offer an "unbroken continuity" (Foucault, 1984: 81) or a coherent account of events gone by. Rather it reveals events as they occurred in "dispersion" (81). Because the study of history has often been a male enterprise, it is difficult for women to discover the stories of their foremothers and to situate themselves in relation to other women.

In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Kae does not offer a coherent account of her family history or an "unbroken continuity" by tracing her descent "lineally from the golden chain of male to male" (Lee, 1990: 31). Rather she offers to write the story of her mothers—the stories that are often forgotten or erased because they are incongruent and conflict with patriarchal history. In short, she chooses to investigate the point of fissure, the breaks, the "accidents" and the "deviations" (Foucault, 1984: 81) that constitute her personal genealogy. The written reproduction of her history, her creative project, her "baby" in a metaphorical sense, challenges the notion of origins as traced through patrilineal lineage. In fact, her very creativity is a challenge to patriarchal order in which the father traditionally held authority over the written word.

Kae Ying Woo, Fong Mei's granddaughter and Suzi's niece, is the last in a series of Wong women to refuse and disrupt the patriarchal order. Kae's very decision to become a "poor but pure writer" (Lee, 1990: 216) and her project

to trace her matrilineal lineage incited by the birth of her son, are both creative acts that rupture the patriarchal culture. In a letter to Hermia, Kae equates becoming a writer to committing suicide: "where did I read that suicide is a declaration of ultimate bankruptcy? Hey, something I understand very well ... Nope, I am afraid that I am just as vulnerable as Suzi to having my first real creative expression thwarted. Aborted. Then like her, where would I be but nowhere?" (215). Kae immediately recognises that becoming a writer is like committing suicide or going bankrupt in a tradition historically dominated by men. Like Suzi' s baby, her creative work is in danger of being "aborted," or rejected by the patriarchal establishment. Still, like Suzi, with whom she identifies, she is willing to die "with the same passion with which she lives" (214).

Kae's decision to become a writer is an act of defiance in a literary tradition in which women in the West have traditionally felt "crazy, neurotic, splenetic, to want to be a writer" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 61). According to Gilbert and Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic*, "when seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women writers and some nineteenth-century literary writers did not confess that they thought it might actually be mad of them to want to attempt the pen, they did usually indicate that they felt in some sense apologetic about such a 'presumptuous pastime'" (61). Because of the social stigma against women developing as writers, they were made to feel guilty, remorseful and even insane for pursuing their vocations. They suffered what Gilbert and Gubar term "anxieties of authorship" (1979: 57). This anxiety was only aggravated by the fact that they were also working in "male-devised genres" (72).

In patriarchal China, women writers not only "had no tradition behind them," but they also had to combat a tradition that "kept her in place" (Feuerwerker, 1975: 146) by perpetuating oppressive and limiting images of women. For example, women were femmes fetales who would bring men to their ruin, women as the objects of desire or women as sentimentalists (146-147). Many women writers, both in the West and in China, did, however, manage to work well in "male-devised genres" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 72). They also managed to tell their own stories by appearing to "conform to and yet subvert patriarchal literary standards" (73). Like her predecessors, Kae too works within a male-dominated discourse, genealogy and origins, but rather than focus on the image of the father and the tradition that traces the inheritance of the son passed on by the father, she traces her matrilineal legacy.

In short, Kae's creative project, and the narration of the story, is about tracing the mother's line, what Irigaray terms, "female genealogy" (1980: 19). She is looking for her origins, for her identity which is undeniably linked to her foremothers: "individuals must gather their identity from all the generations that touch them - past and future" (Lee, 1990: 189). Kae's search into her past is a study of genealogy in the Foucauldian sense too, for she discovers both the "happy and unhappy accidents and coincidences" (Prado, 1995: 34) that do not yield a cohesive and orderly family history. For example, she discovers her grandmother's secret affair which brought the latter fulfilment, but was

detrimental for her aunt Suzi. Kae does not "go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity" (Foucault, 1984: 81), but accepts "the miscellaneous and discontinuities of her origins" (Prado, 1995: 35). Her only certainty is that of her maternal legacy.

Kae's search for her origins is subversive because it is an alternative to the father/son paradigm in which the son, "assuming the father's name, becomes his double and thus his extension beyond death" (Aiken 184). Unlike the traditional narrative text that traces the son's succession from the father, she traces her maternal legacy.

Like the genealogist, she "sees the present state of affairs as ... a result of struggle and relations of force and domination" (Mahon, 1992: 112). Her very existence is the outcome of a transgression and not the result of a "meaningful development" (112). She is the product of a struggle in which the exploited forces were victorious. In short, her genealogy, like Foucault's analysis of descent, works to "displace" and "disassociate" (110) the subject, particularly the male subject. Rather than present an "unbroken succession of fathers begetting sons" (Aiken, 1984: 157), she introduces into female consciousness the silenced participant, the mother, and traces the succession of mothers who in some way struggled against patriarchal oppression.

In Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, women's reproductive power is a source of resistance to the patriarchal order. Fong Mei conceives her children outside the marriage contract, a contract built on the "exchange of women," while Suzi commits incest and conceives a child within this forbidden union. Kae's "baby," her creative work, is a challenge to a literary tradition dominated by men. Simone de Beavoir (1997) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) have located women's oppression in women's biological and reproductive function, and perhaps this is so in a patriarchal system where women are exploited biologically, economically, and politically. It is, however, in women's power to challenge the patriarchal order and, if not (re)create the matriarchal order that Reed hypothesises as the original system of social organisation, then forge a reality that is, at least, equitable for their daughters.

---

[1]For reasons of length, I will limit my focus to the stories of three Wong women. The novel commences, however, with the story of Kelora Chen, a Native who is eventually rejected as a suitable partner for Gwei Chang because she offers glimpse of a matriarchal, and possibly egalitarian, society. Her ways threaten the patriarchal and economical foundations of class-based society.

[2]Irigaray's term is in reference to the play, *Oresteia* where Athena, instead of punishing Orestes for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, allows his crime to go unpunished and becomes "the virgin goddess, born of the Father [alone], obedient to his laws at the expense of the mother" (1980: 13).

[3]Choy Fuk also forfeits his marriage contract yet his violation is not a transgression; that is, in Chinese tradition it is permissible that a man turns to

a concubine when his wife fails to (re)produce an heir. His first wife then becomes "first mother" (Lee, 1990: 60) to the child.

[4]The legitimisation of sex within marriage need not include the oppression of women. In fact, Bataille's (1986) transgressive model maybe transposed into a (feminist) critique of patriarchy. However, Bataille builds his theory upon Strauss' model of kinship and marriage and as a result, his position too remains bound by the androcentric discourse and ideological limitations inherent in Levi-Strauss' model.

[5]For men, Irigaray maintains, sexuality entails "the appropriation of nature [women], in the desire to make it [them] (re)produce, and in exchange of its/ these [their] products with other members of society [men]" (Irigaray , 1985: 184). Mary O'Brien in *The Politics of Reproduction* explains that behind this appropriation lies "the intransigent impotency of uncertainty, an impotency which colours and ... brutalises the social and political relations in which it is expressed" (1981: 191). O'Brien theorises that patriarchy is men's attempt to resolve their alienation and exclusion from nature and the reproductive process.

[6]Foucault's argument differs slightly from Rubin's here. He argues that psychoanalysis, or any social practice in the deployment of sexuality, does not repress or prohibit sexual expression rather it produces sexuality. Yet like Rubin, Foucault agrees that the Oedipus story is "not the secret content of our unconscious, but the form of compulsion which psychoanalysis wants to impose on our desire and our unconscious ... Oedipus is an instrument of power" (cited in Mahon, 1992: 177).

References

Aiken, Susan Hardy. 1984. "Dinesen's 'Sorrow-Acre': Tracing the Woman's Line." *Contemporary Literature* XXV (2): 157-186.

Bataille, George. 1986. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

de Beauvoir, Simone. 1997 [1947]. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and Ed. H. M. Parrshley. London: Vintage.

Engels, Fredrick. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd Ed. New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 734-751.

Feuerwerker, Yi-Tse. 1975. "Women as Writers in the 1920's and 1930's." *Women In Chinese Society*. Ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 143-168.

Firestone, Shulasmith. 1970. *The Dialetic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurly. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1984. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *The Foucault Reader*.

Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon. 76-100.

Friedl, Ernestine. 1975. *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. 1979. *Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gough, Katherine. 1975. "The Origin of the Family." *Toward An Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York & London: Monthly Review Press. 57-76.

Irigaray, Luce. 1980. *Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother*. Fifth Conference on Mental Health entitled "Women and Madness," May 13, 1980, Montreal.

Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Irigaray, Luce. 1993. *Je Tu, Nous: Toward A Culture of Difference*. Trans. Alison Martin. New York: Routledge.

Leacock, Eleanor Burke. 1981. *Myths of Male Dominance*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Lee, Sky. 1990. *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1949. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard Von Sturmer. Ed. Rodney Needham. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mahon, Michael. 1992. *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject*. New York: State University of New York Press.

O'Brien, Mary. 1981. *The Politics of Reproduction*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Prado, C.G. 1995. *Starting With Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy*. Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press.

Reed, Evelyn. 1975. *Woman's Evolution*. New York: Pathfinder Publisher Press.

Rubin, Gayle. 1975. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *Toward An Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York & London: Monthly Review Press. 157-210.

Schneider, David, and Katherine Gough, 1961. eds. *Matrilineal Kinship*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schweitzer, Peter P. "Introduction and Conclusion." 2000. *Dividends of Kinship: Meanings and Uses of Social Relatedness*. London: Routledge,

White, Jenny B. 2000. "Kinship, Reciprocity and the World Market." *Dividends of Kinship:Meanings and Uses of Social Relatedness*. Ed. P. Schweitzer. London: Routledge. 124-150.

Whitford, Margaret. 1991. *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*. London: Routledge.

Wolf, Margery. 1975. "Women and Suicide in China." *Women in Chinese Society*. Ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 111-141.