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Departures, Wanderings and Homecomings

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Departures, Wanderings and Homecomings

My intense response to the father’s embrace of his son told me that I was desperately searching for that inner place where I too could be held as safely as the young man in the painting.

Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

This essay discusses filial-father\(^1\) relationships in the biographical accounts of artists, and considers the life and work of these artists from both allegorical and psychological standpoints. Such filial precedents have informed my own art making in relation to past experiences with my late father. In a sense, my art asks to what depths do we create out of, or are influenced by our father experiences?

Part One looks at Eastern and Western artists who give experiential and aesthetical form to filial-father relationships. My observations are framed as both a metaphorical and literal type of filial-father journey, invoking departures, schisms, wanderings and reconciliations. The ‘journeys’ acknowledge, historical, cultural, political, and spiritual influences, and addresses the constant shifting climate causing the ‘filial-father journey’ to simultaneously diversify. Part Two looks at fathering from the perspectives of different fields of social science. It reflects on the possible direct and indirect connectivity between father experiences and an artist’s disposition. In order to delve into the topic’s psychological underpinnings, attention is given to early childhood development in recent research findings; the positive and negative repercussions of fathering experiences in correlation to cognitive and emotional functioning. It focusses on the relevancy of traumatic father experiences in connection with a person’s identity, emotional make up and creative articulation. It touches on topics such as abuse, trauma, self-esteem, trust, and validation.

The focus on fathering and father figures is in no way meant to diminish the important role a mother plays in a daughter’s or a son’s life. The substantiated biological and emotional knowledge of mother-child research is vastly ahead of what scientists and

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\(^1\) Throughout this essay the term ‘filial’ generally refers to the definition of relating to a father as a son or daughter, rather than its other application of a daughter or son who is respectful and dutiful towards their parents. The main exception to this is in the dealing of 17\(^{th}\) Century Chinese artist Huang Xiangjian, where ‘filial’ implies a devoted son.
therapists know about fathering impacts. Science journalist Paul Raeburn laments the recent historical perspective disparaging the roles of fathers in his 2014 publication, “Do Fathers Matter?” Raeburn reports on the general consensus during the 1970’s that, “the irrelevancy of fathers had become an article of faith among researchers.” (Raeburn 6) This ‘irrelevancy’ has slowly begun to be rethought, and this essay in some ways attempts to contemplate and address that imbalance through certain parallels in the creative arts.

Furthermore, the single paternal focus stems from a 2015 photographic research project I began in order to find out about my Fijian-European father who passed away in 1997. The research included interviewing family and friends that knew my father, including three half-brothers and two half-sisters from my father’s first marriage. The fact that we had different mothers but shared the same father meant there was a discernible set of experiences and consistent characteristics, which appeared plainly traceable back to our father. Additional research involved a first time trip to Fiji to meet my family relatives and explore Suva, Fiji, where my father came from. Aside from the interviews, a lot of the photographic documentation is situated around a Rotuman welcoming ceremony called “Mamasa”, which literally means ‘to be dry’. It has traditionally been a celebration for welcoming back those returning from seafaring journeys.\(^2\) Because of the large percentage of Rotumans living on the main Fiji Islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, the ceremony has gradually been adapted to welcoming family kin who may have been born abroad but who make the passage back to visit or reunite with relatives.

Photography has been an important medium for my ‘journey’, not only in documenting this family reconnection but also in a metaphorical contextualisation. The photographic processes of receiving light, photosensitivity, and fixing of images, mirror the processes of my attempts to bridge the familial and personal psychological expanses, and fix an image of my own familial belonging. The chemical wet processes of analogue photography, such as washing and fixing negatives, also find various parallels in the Mamas’s ceremonial symbolism. The journey I embarked on was with an intention to make sense of earlier experiences with my father and how that has affected my identity. Though the record of my sojourn in Suva reveals moments of clarity, it also acknowledges the indistinct opaqueness through which paternal experiences and family histories often veil themselves.

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\(^1\) Rotuma is a Fiji Dependency sitting roughly 600 miles north of Fiji’s capital Suva. The people are known as Rotumans.
Wanderings begin with departures. Often they start as internalised departures and usually commence in the realm of the family. Wanderings are those years where we search and yearn for belonging and identity. Familial departures are the breaking off of connection with mother or father and many times, while under the same roof, the journey takes place even before a step has been taken out the front door. Sometimes the departure is a forced one through rejection, betrayal or absence, other times it is the mutual separation, the moving out of home that is common to all cultures. Occasionally, there are homecomings, and other times comfort is found in foreign substitutes or foreign places. The familial experiences of the artists I discuss, and their artwork, illustrate woven passages of time, finding their connectivity and beginnings in the presence of the maternal and paternal figure. The Eastern departures and wanderings of 17th Century Chinese painter Huang Xiangjian, and contemporary painter Zhang Xiaogang, cross threads with the Western filial journeys of 17th Century Dutch painter Rembrandt Van Rijn, and French-American artist Louise Bourgeois. Their filial-father journeys find authenticity in their artworks and their remarks about life and art.

After spending eight years in China, immersed in Chinese culture, I was exposed to the filial duty and expectations that Chinese sons and daughters demonstrate. Its pronounced cultural emphasis caused me to be aware of my own thinking about filial-parental relationships and the inescapable emotional components that exist in the family and which contribute to who we are. Helping to inform those thoughts led me to look at the Bowen Family Systems Theory, named after psychiatrist Murray Bowen, and is a,

Theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit. It is the nature of a family that its members are intensely connected emotionally. Often people feel distant or disconnected from their families, but this is more feeling than fact. Families so profoundly affect their member’s thoughts, feelings, and actions that it often seems as if people are living under the same “emotional skin.” (Kerr)

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1 Immersed as opposed to living in the bubble of expat communities. I lived in shared accommodation with a Gansu native for two years and spent six years living with a Taiwanese family in China. I am now married to a Taiwanese citizen.
In relation to art making, it is that “living under the same emotional skin” whereby familial subjects can be an obvious source for drawing stimulus from. But even when this is not the case, it seems almost implausible to suppose that creative thought processes happen independent of the experiences from Bowen’s described ‘emotional unit’. Starting with an example where familial relations are a source for creativity, I look at the odyssey of 17th Century Chinese artist Huang Xiangjian. Huang created a significant body of site-specific works illustrating a journey to rescue his father and mother in the distant southwest province of Yunnan. His father who had taken up an official government post was stranded during the tumultuous upending of the Ming dynasty. Today, Huang’s painted hand scrolls and leafs from his travel journals can be found in all the major Chinese museums. Interestingly though, it is not his paintings that he is so much remembered for, rather it was his filial reverence towards his mother and father. Huang’s story illustrates the filial piety upheld in Chinese society for many millennia.

“Huang used the topography of his Southwest odyssey to narrate his filiality.” (Kindall 172) The journey was fraught with bandits, wild animals and impasses of immense natural blockades. Huang’s site-specific paintings capture forests of limestone peaks, impenetrable bamboo clusters, and unnavigable torrid rivers that crash through deep gorges. Clouds sit below mountains, forming scarfs that wrap peaks on the fringe of the Himalayan uplift, giving the sense of a great sea. The large landscapes dwarf and threaten small figures that usually come to life in several strokes or dabs of Huang’s brush. (See Appendix A) “In each work he presents a small, undistinguished figure battling through antagonistic natural, social and political elements.” (Kindall 173) The figure of Huang himself appears traipsing the heights and depths of Sichuan’s mighty breadth. The extreme summits reflect the lofty emphasis of Chinese filial piety.

Though many historians ascribe filial piety to Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and Confucian thought, familial honour and respect is evidenced much further back to the bronze age Shang Dynasty and earlier. The Erligang culture (1600-1300 B.C.) was located in today’s northern Henan province and reveals archaeological evidence of “a number of nuclear settlements (Yi) [stretching] across the landscape.” (Thorp 64) Confirmations of patriarchal family life and burial sites attest to the importance of familial lineage. Huang’s 17th Century filial motivation for embarking on such an endeavour would be rooted in this ancient history, which is marked even in the ancient pictorial language of the Chinese bronze script. Filial piety is represented by the character xiao孝 written with the construction of lao老 (old) and zi子 (son). The older part of the character sits on top of the lower character of the son, inferring “the old are supported by the young(er generation).” (Ikels et al. 3). Huang paints both at the feet and on the peaks of mountains. In his diary leaf, an ink work titled Mount Jizu, depicts towering pinnacles standing over him like the lao (old) in which, he maintains a filial respect and subordination. At other times Huang comes out from under the foot of the mountain and stands on the peaks of ‘lao’ (old) like an excited child surveying his inheritance.
An alternative meaning of the ‘elder’ on top of the ‘son’ can mean, “The young are burdened by the old or even that the young are oppressed by the old.” (Ikels et al. 3)

By the 17th Century, the noble obligation of supporting one’s parents was regarded as an official title and status. For Huang the elevated filial expectations are mixed with fortified tradition rooted in the Classic of Filial Piety by Confucius, and the possibility of economic provision for himself and his family:

A primary goal of this campaign was to earn Huang Xiangjian the socially generated title Filial Son in order to aid his impoverished family on their return with immediate material benefits, such as monetary gifts, and the societal advance of status that such a title could elicit. (Kindall 14)

Huang’s goal was ambitious because of the concealed dangers, and his ‘campaign’ also consisted of mixed self-motivations due to the tension of time-honoured obligation and tradition conflicting with his genuine feelings.

Huang would have been aware of the possible encounter with warlords, bandits and inhospitable ethnic tribes, before journeying from sheltered Suzhou to the collapsing Yunnan prefecture because the Ming dynasty government was renowned for its orderly administrative infrastructure. News from different prefectures was widely communicated and available. His leaf journals and site-specific paintings were to testify to that ‘campaign’. Interestingly, many of his written accounts of dramatic and emotional events were never illustrated. Instead Huang seems to reveal the dolomite, limestone, and gypsum topography of Yunnan and Guizhou. The topography featured sub-terrestrial trenches, sinkholes, and caves, merging with plateaus and sharp vertical cliffs with cascading waterfalls. A 2,800 mile trek to rescue his parents, containing foreboding views and obstacles that paralleled the ancient, towering filiality that “had served as literary and pictorial subject matter from the late Eastern Zhou (ca 551-479 BCE) era onward. (Kindall 312)

It is mainly through Huang’s writings that the dangers of untamed wildlife were attested to. His paintings often belie the bestial reality of the southwest jungles of Yunnan and Guizhou. Lurking predators such as Indochinese tigers, leopards, bird spiders, Chinese cobras, and rabid domestic dogs all made the journey that much more precarious. The inimical natural, social and political situation conceivably emboldened Huang to set out from Suzhou due to the ingrained filial reverence of his time. “Filial piety could only be eloquently, legitimately, and formally addressed through the performance of ritualistic acts (often involving physical suffering)” (Ikels et al. 21). To think of a contemporary equivalence of personal sacrifice is quite difficult. Perhaps the only immediate examples that come to mind are those daughters and sons who take it upon themselves to nurse ailing parents until their passing, or financially supporting parents because of a country’s nonexistent welfare system.

In his letters Huang reveals his remorse at abandoning his father and immediately set off in search of him. “The true practice of filial piety required giving up one’s physical
well-being, material interests, public obligations, and political ambitions when such sacrifices were required in order to serve one’s parents.” (Ikels et al. 22) This profound loyalty towards his father was produced through the largely patriarchal society of Chinese culture. ‘Loyalty’ is still a term that remains deep-seated in eastern culture and is a way of expressing honour. Though younger generations are increasingly challenging the traditions of filial piety, there is still a wide spread regard for sacrificing for one’s parents. When considering the fine arts in education, it would not be unrealistic to imagine the inclusion and exclusion of students in a class based on following in the footsteps or wishes of a parent.4 For Huang Xiangjian, his father Huang Kongzhao was proud of him and supportive of his campaign to gain the title of ‘Filial Son’. The father “apparently orchestrated the introduction of the works into various social networks.” (Kindall 165) High ranking officials and even the emperor saw his works. Kindall calls it the “Huang family propaganda campaign.” (165) There is a veritable sense that the motivation of father and son kinship existed for the purpose of attaining the “imperially acknowledged” (Kindall 162) status of filial son as a means to ensure their physical survival.

It is intriguing to observe the massive undertaking of reconciliatory efforts both father and son exhibited. Huang’s geographical 1,400-mile separation from his father demanded ardent commitment and physical conditioning in order to cover the walking distance to display filial piety. For the greater part of human history, the fastest mode of land transport has been the horse. Familial departures and homecomings have been slow affairs or limited to meagre amounts of mileage. Huang’s epic journey would have been historically unique. In the last two centuries, with the advent of public air travel, and the airports where a conglomerate of aviation technologies convene, the terms ‘departures’ and ‘arrivals’ have defined the tangible centralised space where separations and reunifications take place. Geographical distance is no longer an impasse to most familial reunions or farewells, as people can afford lengthy train journeys, domestic and international flights, or other inexpensive modes of travelling such as hitchhiking and freight hopping. The ease with which to disconnect from one’s family and reconnect is also sped up through new modes of communications, especially affordable phone and computer technologies.

Rather, it seems the impasse has remained less an outward obstacle as it has an inward working of emotional distancing, cut-offs, or numbing of sensitivities. The suppression of emotion, continues to be a prevalent behaviour in modern Asian societies, and is still very much rooted in its historic tradition of filial piety.

The Confucian framework of father-son relationships . . . blocks any outcome of ambivalence except a submission to a pattern of personal relationships that is held to have ultimate validity. (Ikels, et al. 191)

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4 As I was teaching in China it was common to come across children and adults whose educational subjects were the reflection of what the parents envisioned for them. Numerous times I encountered students who were exceptional illustrators or painters, but whom would never consider it any more than a side hobby.
The filial journey of Huang was undergirded with obligations and embodied in the “honorific” paintings, leaf journals and scrolls that he produced. To some extent his display of familial loyalty is encouraging. To another extent his filial piety prevents us from knowing whether his actions are more out of ritual subordination or if they emanate from a free, personal desire, or agency.

Filial Schisms of the Cultural Revolution in the Work of Zhang Xiaogang

The impasses to Huang’s filial reconciliation with his parents were a source for artistic inspiration and writing, and in China’s frenzied 20th century, another filial-parental schism found expression. In 1958 a boy named Zhang Xiaogang was born in Yunnan, the very same province where 300 years earlier, Huang Xiangjian had ventured, in order to be reunited with his father and mother. The following passage looks at texts and thoughts around the work of Zhang, and considers his use of symbolism to express paternal connection and disconnection.

Huang’s search for his parents brought him face to face with rebel armies, warlords, and bandits. Just as these oppositions threatened to hamper Huang from fulfilling the filial act of honouring them, so did the catastrophic Cultural Revolution bring opposition to traditional filial relationships. Stone statues of cult-leader Mao Zedong bulked skyward across the country, as the country began to pledge allegiance on a level that surpassed familial loyalty. The factions and fervour of student Red Guards emboldened by Mao’s urging often resulted in the betrayal of their own mothers and fathers, in struggle meetings and denunciations. “During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of filiality was attacked as feudal” (Ikels et al. 36) It was with the same intensity of zeal that Huang displayed in filial piety, that the student Red Guards eerily demonstrated the lengths to which they would go, to outdo one another’s destruction of feudal and bourgeois ideals. It was in these conditions that Zhang grew up and eventually became an artist.

Born during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Zhang draws on objects of traditional significance as well as visual agents typical of the era of Mao Zedong. Items like the Chinese Penzai, (literally meaning ‘tray scenery’) a type of miniature landscape featuring the crafted trees (we usually associate with the Japanese Bonsai craft), photographic re-touching marks, furniture, and 60’s technology populate his work. These objects and formal devices convey Zhang’s personal recollections and family bloodlines.

Zhang is perhaps best known for his Blood Lines-Big Family portrait series. The series often shows cold, stoic expressions of family members, dressed in the equally drab national uniform typical of the Cultural Revolution period. In Blood Lines-Big Family
No.3, the young boy wears the infamous Red Guard armband and, like his mother, a Mao Zedong badge over the heart. The father figure does not don the revolutionary symbol. (See Appendix B) From 1968-1972, Zhang’s father was sent to a labour camp for socialist re-education, and only allowed to visit his family once a year during the Chinese New Year. This deep interruption between father and family was an emotional schism not too dissimilar to the gaping ravines and distances that spanned Suzhou to Yunnan, separating Huang Xiangjian from his stranded father.

Zhang adopts lacklustre and sombre greys contrasted with vivid greens, reds and yellows, as a way of dividing parents and their offspring. The rupture in palette emulates the political hammer that splintered the nuclear family unit. During the Cultural Revolution, an estimated 12 million were relocated. There was a particular phenomenon of parents either being separated from their children because they were committed to the causes of the Revolution, or because they were labelled Reactionaries and sent away to re-education camps in distant locations. The Red Guards were permitted free train travel over the country giving incentive to leave one’s family. Others were involuntarily sent to far-flung places such as the deserts of XinJiang in the remote western corners of China. Grandparents in turn usually raised children, preserving familial ties, but the chasms between mother, father and child were carved out and cataclysmic.

Zhang’s oeuvre recalls “the traumas of China’s Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and the poverty and deprivations of a childhood that was in turns nurturing and troubling” (Fineberg and Xu 9) His mother, whom he was also separated from, relocated to Chengdu for re-education, and was able to visit home once a week. The dislocation of the nuclear family broke down thousands of years of filial loyalty. In the untempered period of 1966-76, betrayal of parents by adolescent children had become prolific. The flow of angst incited by Mao Zedong himself, meant often children had no choice but to appear loyal by denouncing one’s mother or father, if they were suspected of bourgeois tendencies.

In Father and Daughter,⁵ Zhang Xiaogang, “explores a closeness and warmth that he himself never had as a child.” (Fineberg and Xu 111) Even in that exploration of intimacy, Zhang seems only to be able to come so close as to portray a physical nearness, still the drab palette and blank stares seem to speak of clinging on, brokenness and generational schism caused by the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. The roadblocks to reconciliation between parents, daughters and sons, manifest in a multitude of ways. In Kindall’s Geo-Narratives of a Filial Son, Huang Xiangjian’s main objective is to traverse the hazardous geography in order to reconcile with his parents. The relationship between parents is only portrayed in terms of the social climate of the time—the high standing respect that may be bestowed on son or daughter who exhibits

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¹ Zhang often uses a daughter as subject to reference the further separation due to the fact that his mother actually wanted a daughter after having two sons already. Also Zhang himself has experienced times of estrangement from his own daughter due to depression, alcoholism and splitting up with the mother of his daughter.
filial piety. The tradition appears steeped in dutifulness and expectation, and the emotional charge is somewhat weighted by the formalities of the time period and language. For Zhang’s situation it is a stressful political trauma resulting in a psychological roadblock.

Zhang’s father returned from re-education in 1972, but in Zhang’s autobiographical paintings, geographical reunion with his father brings him only partially back to a restored relationship. In My Father, Zhang portrays the difficulty in approaching his now present father. (See Appendix B) Daughter and father sit separated by a Penzai tree. Fineberg and Xu quote Zhang’s explanation of the Penzai symbolism: “The very trees and rocks have become the storage of memories and emotions from different eras.” (Fineberg and Xu 203) Because of the traumatic nature of so many of those memories, the Penzai tree marks the obstructing rift between father and daughter.

Detachment is lodged in the stoic eyes of the father. In fact the blank eyes adorn the majority of the figures painted in Zhang's Big Family series, and are perhaps the defining feature that sums up the memories from the Cultural Revolution. The abyss of emotional disengagement, horrors and despair illustrate the fissures that became so prevalent amongst the Chinese nuclear family. The interruption of father and mother roles through collectivization programs or re-education punishment were an impediment to the identity development of daughters and sons:

Standardization and the deeply embedded idea of collectivization contradicted the need to establish personal boundaries around an integrated image of the self, to build the self from parental models and social interaction. (Fineberg and Xu 86)

In many of Zhang’s works he incorporates the heads of adults on to the bodies of infants indicating a metaphorical cultural malnourishment. The retarding of the ‘self’ is caused by the absence of parental sustenance and affection, and also the need to deal prematurely with adult issues when still a child. The Cultural Revolution’s collectivization policies overstepped the needs for privacy and personal familial space, contributing to this emotional ‘starving’ and psychological impact.

Psychiatrist Murray Bowen states in his book, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, that even “under the best conditions, the substitute family and outside relationships are poor substitutes for original families.” (Bowen 383) An estimated 17 Million high school and university students, known as the sent-down or rusticated youths, were sent to live with famers and peasants to learn from them. It wasn’t until 1980 that they were allowed to return home to their families. Zhang’s autobiographical oeuvre examines the dissolution of the family unit and familial difficulties that arose once parents and children were reunified.
In *Disquieting Memories*, Fineberg describes the generational psychological schism:

Her apprehension is palpable... The little girl in this painting is poised as if to reach across time to her father, but she holds back. Her eyes express her uncertainty about how such a gesture might be received. (20)

The separation of generational time is represented in the contemporary clothes of the daughter and the Maoist uniform of the father. It reveals the unbridgeable gap between generational experiences and perspectives characteristic of traumatic historical episodes. The impasse lies in the inconceivability of what the other person has experienced. A child trying to reconnect with a father, who has been separated and denounced, sent to a labour camp for re-education, returning home rigid and defeated. Zhang’s *My Father* painting was completed in 2012 and speaks of the inability to rescue his father out of the sombre past into the present. Zhang too is unable to take flight from the narrative, as the girl remains pictured in a 60’s-70’s Mao era, green coloured room, which was a decorative colour typical of its time. The father’s inability to show emotion is encased in a stone posture with eyes unable to acknowledge the daughter. The father’s inability to connect is also echoed in the real life event of Zhang’s father’s disapproval in pursuing a career in the arts. Returning home in 1982 to stay with his objecting father, Zhang slipped back into the “dysfunctional patterns of his childhood, and he quickly sank into depression and hopelessness.” (Fineberg and Xu 34)

The father also maintains the required pose that was expected of photo-sitters, during Mao’s era. One was expected to pose with restraint and political correctness, prohibiting jovial expressions or exuberance. During the period of revolution the propaganda bureaus controlled the arts including mediums like photography and painting for the purpose of projecting a heroic Nationalist spirit. The Cultural Revolution influenced photography not only aesthetically but also in its content. The destruction of family photos was very common. Government censorship extended into absurdity with multitudes incriminated because of photographic subject matter deemed counter-revolutionary.

Anti-western sentiment meant a rejection of anything held to be excessive. This meant that photographic studios existing during that time were scrupulous about what they were photographing to avoid incriminating themselves. It was forbidden to hold flowers, have permed hair, western suits, laced shirts or make-up. These were all considered counter-revolutionary. Li Zhensheng, who was a photojournalist for the proletarian propaganda machine spent much of his time re-touching images to avoid showing Mao in disrespectful renderings. One example shows a girl reading Mao’s *Little Red Book* with an elderly peasant woman. The original photo reveals a blurry portrait of Mao in the background. Obviously attributed to the camera’s aperture setting. This had to be corrected, “as such was the reverence for the great helmsman that you couldn’t publish a blurry portrait.” (Sheng)

Zhang began to look at old family photos and re-touched vintage photos with piqued curiosity. Photography became an influence in Zhang’s paintings not because of the
traditional view of photography as being merely indexical or representational, but because of photography’s metaphorical allusiveness. “His ‘Family’ paintings resembled retouching because of its concern with the modification of experience by social and political norms and by the perpetual revision of the past through memory.” (Fineberg and Xu 88) It is possible to physically re-touch an old photo and it is also possible to ‘retouch’ it in the sense of visiting past familial experiences with hindsight. The old retouching techniques in analogue photography utilized ink, and paint. Sometimes even bleach was used to slightly wash out parts of the image. In Zhang’s Father and Son painting (See Appendix B) he re-touches the cheerless formal portrait. Revisiting the painting adds another layer, another interpretation and another ‘retouched’ memory. The separation of monotone and dulcet yellow flesh tone remain connected by the bloodline and obviously mismatched retouch colours. “Two very clear pictures from completely different psychological and temporal spaces come improbably together on the picture plane.” (Fineberg and Xu 112)

Though Zhang was older when his father was sent away for re-education he revisits the physical separation of father and child by contrasting the two monochromatic figures “with a deliberate sensation of dissonance.” (Fineberg and Xu 112)

The dissonance is only slightly harmonized by the red bloodline and by the inference of affiliation through family portraiture. In many of Zhang’s Blood lines- Big Family paintings the ideology of the time is pinned to the sitters clothing in the form of Mao Zedong badges. A symbol of the infiltrating dissonance, the badges tag families with uniformity, and paradoxically represent the image of the great divider Mao Zedong.

Not only was Mao considered the great helmsman, but in many respects he had also hijacked the filial traditions normally reserved for parents. For Zhang “the nationalist ideology of Maoism shaped the experience of childhood for Zhang’s generation.” (Fineberg and Xu 86) The gradual erosion of the nuclear family prior to the Cultural Revolution, during the Great Leap forward and earlier, had a weaning off effect on the younger generation.

By the time Mao was inciting the destruction of the four olds—old customs, old habits, old ideas, and old culture—he had not only attained a deistic reputation, but he also had become a paternal archetype to the masses of loyal students who eventually formed the Red Guard. “We all live in a big revolutionary family” became the new national mantra. In a well-documented incident Mao Zedong sparked a new trend after a young girl called Song Bin Bin approached him to place a Red Guard armband on his arm. On hearing her Confucian influenced name (Song Bin Bin means ‘prudence’ and ‘modesty’) Mao said she should change her name to Aiwu meaning ‘to love militancy’. Traditional feminine sounding names that were normally given to girls, changed. “The tendency to give children revolutionary names became hegemonic and names used along with the surname became slogan-like.” (Dutton 170)
Filial piety during the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reign, disintegrated to the point where the burial traditions of family members were even altered. Afterlife realms, extravagant burial plots and tombstones were considered bourgeois and superstitious. “In its efforts to promote the rational utilization of resources, the CCP [had] forbidden burial of the corpse and construction of elaborate tombs sited according to geomantic principles.” (Ikels 91) Centuries of mortuary conventions were unceremoniously and legislatively prohibited. Huang Xiangjian’s 17thCentury political antagonists once embodied in Yunnan’s rebel armies now took the form of Red Guard student factions. It was a national movement brandishing red armbands, and preventing any filial journey, reconciliation or show of filial piety.

Chinese film director Zhang Yi Mou possibly attempts to bridge this historical gorge in his 1995 film The Road Home. The film looks at both the difficult circumstances faced in consummating a relationship during political upheaval, and the filial actions of a son in post Cultural Revolution China. The son, Luo Yusheng, returns to his home village to help his mother give his father a proper burial. The flashback chapter of the film is implicitly set during the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-1959) of communist China. A lengthy road connects the village with the home of the young Zhao Di. Going back and forth along this road she intermittently encounters and becomes infatuated with the local village teacher, Luo Changyu. Shortly after their relationship begins to develop Luo is suddenly summoned away by governmental authorities. Film reviewers surmise he was called away for investigation or re-education. The film eventually shifts forward to the present day where the son organises porters and a procession to carry his father’s coffin along the emblematic road for burial. The son leads the procession walking the several-mile-long trek. The son fulfils the mother’s request in an act of filial respect towards his deceased father. It was a fulfilment that would have been impossible to fulfil during the period of her younger days because of the Revolution’s limitations on burial policies.

In the late 1970’s Scar Literature and the consequent Scar Art movement emerged after Mao’s death in 1976. The movement was named after the wounds inflicted by the events of the Cultural Revolution. Artists began reflecting on the era of Mao with a desire to faithfully and artistically represent the reality and traumatic effects of the 60’s and 70’s. It might be thought of as a return journey of sorts, sons and daughters lost in the frenzy of ‘red’ loyalty, other children victims of anti-rightist campaigns and those that were sent down, some willingly, others under compulsion. As recently as 2014, there have been a number of cases where formal apologies have been made concerning injustices committed during the Cultural Revolution.

China’s political unrest during the Cultural Revolution caused an expansive familial rift as vast as the physical distances that exist within its territorial borders. This was a radical departure from China’s familial histories that stretched back to Neolithic times. Family therapy specialist Murray Bowen states:

> An average family situation in our society today is one in which people maintain a distant and formal relationship with families of origin, returning home for duty visits at
infrequent intervals. The more a nuclear family maintains some kind of viable emotional contact with past generations, the more orderly and asymptomatic the life process in both generations. (383)

The ramifications of Mao’s policies, the re-education programs and the ‘Down to the Countryside Movement’, resulted in the absolute antitheses of an, ‘orderly and asymptomatic life process’. The Cultural Revolution cast the bleak palette over the works of Zhang and those of his generation, and to this day its reverberations are still being felt.

Louise Bourgeois’ Fabric Reconciliations

All the work I’ve done, and all the subjects I have ever worked on, find their source in my childhood. (Xenakis 11) Louise Bourgeois

Louise Bourgeois’ Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father gives an insight into the Freudian psychological underpinnings of much of her self-examining work. Much of it is derived from childhood memories especially the trauma in connection with her father’s rejection and betrayal through infidelity towards Bourgeois’ mother.

Bourgeois is probably less remembered for her fabric works then for her immense maternal spider sculptures. These workings with thread and fabric were created in the latter period of her life, and express ideas around mending, forgiving and reconciling the familial departures of early life. In 1938, Bourgeois departed to America where she created works in a kind of self-imposed exile. In an interview with Trevor Rots, she confirmed, “one of the reasons for coming to America was to get away from [her] father figures.” (Bourgeois 191) alluding not just to her father, but also to artistic father figures like Marcel Duchamp and Andre Breton. But it could be said that Bourgeois’ departure found its general beginnings in the earlier event of her mother’s pregnancy and her birth.

Departures are usually a slow unfolding, unnoticeable phenomenon, with no one fixed point of reference. The earliest causative reasons are possibly negative in-utero signals a mother can send to the foetus. Prenatal and early parenting specialist Ann Diamond Weinstein explains the sensitivity of those early seasons:

Optimal foundations of secure attachment and healthy relationships are predicated upon optimal relationships during the pre-conception period, during pregnancy, the birth experience and the first year of life.” (19)
The branch of human embryology studies called morphogenesis, which in Greek means the “beginning of the shape” has increasingly validated research around in-utero experiences.

In Louise Bourgeois’ 2007 work, ‘The Arrival’, a limbless breast-milk filled mother, gives birth to child. In a similar manner to Zhang Xiaogang, Bourgeois’ birth carried the weight of disappointing her father because of her gender. The disappointment weighed heavily on her throughout her childhood and was always a reoccurring topic when being interviewed. Bourgeois commented, “My father provoked in me a continual loss of self-esteem” (Bernadac 176). This provoking had already set the wheels turning for Bourgeois’ inward departure.

In her 2000 work, ‘Rejection’, the words written on a handkerchief in red reads:

Rejection
Rejected
Reject
Rebound (Bernadac 90)

This first signalling of forced departure she received at birth is revisited through a magic marker pen at the age of 89 years. Her birth was a rejection, but in the ebbing years of her life she had come to a place of realisation that she had in some ways learnt to cope. Hope hung in the power of her last word, “Rebound”. The word “Rebound” carrying with it all the possibilities of reconciliation or overcoming. Her memories as a child are particularly indelible, the absence of her father, the inconsolability of her weeping mother and the eventual arrival of the English mistress Sadie.

Exile, for her, was a second deep, emotional shock that was crucial to her artistic development insofar as it paradoxically gave her the necessary energy to struggle, in vain, to overcome the sense of absence. However crucial and beneficial, separation from relatives and country (coming after the “break” with her father), nevertheless provoked irremediable suffering within her. (Bernadac 55)

But in the same manner that all the familial conditions were ripe to trigger departure, rejection, or repudiation, there also lay the foundations for a reunification. An artist’s method perhaps finds a genesis in familial settings in childhood developments through observation and acquiring of fine motor skills alongside childhood experiences. Some obvious examples would be Louise Bourgeois’ sewing sculptures and fabric works. “My mother would sit out in the sun and repair a tapestry or a petit point. She really loved it. This sense of reparation is very deep in me.” (Bourgeois 226)

The previous sculptural actions of chiselling, cutting away, violent gestures and therapeutical breakings helped her deal with childhood trauma, the betrayal of a father and rejection of her gender she felt from him. These biographical events are clearly forged in her life’s oeuvre and were the catalyst for the generative years of creative
sculpting, drawing and installation. However, her later works took a malleable turn as she returned to repairing tapestries and using sewing techniques. It seemed to be for Bourgeois a turning point taking place in her dealing with the past. Her attempt to ‘return home’ had found itself allegorized in the techniques of fabric restoration she learnt as a child. After World War I, the Bourgeois family had entered the tapestry business, sourcing and repairing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century textiles. Cold marble, wood, and burnished bronze gradually became replaced or integrated with reels of thread, stretchable wool, pleated bed linen and supple cloth. New gestures through needlework and sewing echoed a kind of homecoming. The threading and weaving of materials, patching and tying up ends, using finer more controlled hand movements, brought a healing, and loosened the taut aggressive actions of construction which characterised earlier work.

Bourgeois’ words also seem to hint at and confirm the step in the direction of reconciling the traumatic childhood memories and paternal schism.

I’ve always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair the damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it’s not a pin. (Mayer-Thoss 178)

In her work In Respite, (See Appendix C) a thin steel structure supports a fleshly pink rubber object that hangs from a protruding hook. Black thread reels sit at different levels drooping thread, which weaves itself through the eye of several needles piercing the rubber surface. In an interview with Bourgeois, Francesco Bonami makes the statement that “hanging” appears very important to her. Bourgeois replies, “Hanging” is important because it allows things to turn around, it is very helpless.” (Bourgeois 266) The question remains, what is the respite from? Is it respite from the unresolved past, the “licking of wounds”? (173) Has it all been crucified on the steel tree, the piercing for transgressions and a conscious decision made in moving on?

Bourgeois is commonly remembered for her matriarchal protective spider sculptures, and her disdain for patriarchal social structures. Part of her journey and departure is reiterated in interview comments and works. There is a visible trail where we can see how far the filial-father chasm extends, contracts and eventually diminishes. After her father’s death, Bourgeois fell into depression and began what would be an on and off 30 year treatment of Freudian psychoanalytical therapy. Her journey seemed to be a brief departure followed by an elongated homecoming. Her efforts to reconcile are undisputable and lie in each stitch, thread and knot.
Homecomings in the Works of Rembrandt

When I look at arts works that I consider ‘homecomings’, there appears to be a falling away of tension, a freedom that was absent prior, an altruism. Often the humbling of life’s winter years stirs up the heart and mind with thoughts of familial experiences and possible reunifications—perhaps the creative hand loosens, control concedes, and a refocussing of priorities occurs. The seed of the egoic self dies, and lets in a new lease of familial possibilities. Rembrandt’s late period works notably shifted in style as if embarking on a type of ‘homecoming’. It was in his final years of painting where he began using broad, harsher strokes. Known for his careful, technical attention to detail, he started to paint more haphazardly; with a “deliberately rough, seemingly unfinished style” (Perlove and Silver 327) He now appeared less interested in the detailed, denominations of outward material, religiosity and world of art as he now was in the human interior of his life, circumstances and subjects such as forgiveness and mercy. British author and broadcaster, Kenneth Clark speaks of Rembrandt in his publication Civilisation:

Rembrandt, although in fact he was a profound student of the classical tradition, wanted to look at every episode as if it had never been depicted before, and try to find an equivalent for it in his own experience. (203)

The records of different biographies mention the long list of offences and troubles Rembrandt became embroiled in, his indifference to church authorities at the time, and outwardly distasteful behaviours. But the tragedy of witnessing the intermittent deaths of each of his children must have levied brokenness of unimaginable depths. It was in his waning years where he painted the Return of the Prodigal Son (See Appendix D) and where we observe a reconciling of spiritual sorts born out of his personal hardships and experiences.

Rembrandt Van Rijn’s familial reconciling does not occur in the same flesh-and- blood manner of Huang’s reuniting with his parents. There is no earthly father figure either. Instead Rembrandt’s paternal reconciliation occasions itself through the father in his Return of the Prodigal Son painting, an allegorical image representing the spiritual Father in Christian faith. Thirty-two years earlier, Rembrandt had made a humbled-sized etching of this biblical parable, but it was premature, suitably illustrating the vast distance that remained between him and the ‘Father’. It would be in the absolute brokenness of his languishing years that a large-scaled oil-canvas would blazon his ‘homecoming’. In Return of the Prodigal Son, Rembrandt portrays the father’s hands in two very distinct renderings. The father’s right hand is soft with long lissom fingers, tenderly placed on the son’s back. The left hand reveals sturdy thick fingers, gripping,

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6 In particular the church authorities summoning Hendrickje for fornication with Rembrandt. Also Rembrandt’s refusal to appear before the church council, while Hendrickje appeared before the church council and was punished.
and sure of its placement. It is in these twilight years of Rembrandt’s life that he prophetically brings forth the gentle, nurturing father almost coded in the muted symbolism of a right hand. In those dwindling years where Rembrandt is still being described as at the mercy of his creditors, he manages to paint the hand of the divine father. A father who is able to forgive and cancel all debt, and whom embodies the maternal compassion that distinguishes a mother. The late Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen wrote:

> The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds and she caresses. He confirms and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present. (99)

Rembrandt is consoled—symbolised through his sermonized chiaroscuro of feminine painted hand—quite in contrast to the flinty and unyielding theological understanding and patriarchal structures of that time. He fathoms the generosity of the father, able to take pity, able to soothe, while the left hand validates and strengthens.

Another of Rembrandt’s last paintings was the uncompleted *Simeon’s Song of Praise*. Gregor Weber, one of the authors of *Rembrandt, The Late Works*, warns against interpreting this painting as Rembrandt’s personal testimony of faith because it was understood “that this painting was commissioned” (Bikker and Weber 267) However, what was not commissioned was Rembrandt’s own interpretive rendering. It seems to reveal the essence of Rembrandt’s own familial journey. A senescent Simeon portrayed more or less blind nearing the final stages of life. In Luke’s Gospel, his words are recorded, “Lord now you are letting your servant depart in peace” (New King James Version, Lk. 2. 29). Nowhere in the Biblical scripture does it record Simeon as having his sight impaired, but Rembrandt had attributed physical blindness to his aged subject. Simeon’s imminent departure is accentuated by the dimming of worldly light that enters his eyes. Similarly, Rembrandt’s homecoming is a gradual dimming to the desires of the world, and an increased ‘seeing’ into the dominion of eternity.

> As Rembrandt’s own life moves toward the shadows of old age, as his success wanes, and the exterior splendour of his life diminishes, he comes more in touch with the immense beauty of the interior life. (Nouwen 94)

The journey from birth to death, vulnerability and humility are all represented in the elderly Simeon with babe in arms. Birth and death are two junctures of transition that demand the presence of another— a mother to embrace a newborn, a son or daughter to accompany a dying parent. For Rembrandt his departure was a lonely unmarked grave buried alongside the poor.

> “No staging of either temple setting or officiating priests is evident” (Perlove and Silver 327) in *Simeon’s Song of Praise*. It was a leaving of the stifling religiosity and outward piousness, turning inward to the seat of the heart. Perhaps Rembrandt had trusted
himself into the hands of the ‘father’ whom had never left him nor forsaken him⁷. Various bibliographies over the centuries convey the dejected, broken and impoverished painter, in the same breath as they describe him as one of the greatest painters. However, it is in this physical, earthly ‘sight’ (that Simeon no longer possessed) that people see and judge Rembrandt. But with the perpetual ‘spiritual sight’ Rembrandt paints the Return of the Prodigal Son allowing the “relentless tenderness of [the Father] to invade the citadel of self” (Manning 21)

Throughout history artists have portrayed the figure of Christ in such biblical narratives as his death on the cross, resurrection, ascension, and other obvious literal representations of the works and life he lived out. What is less portrayed and also difficult to show, as a representational image is Jesus as the image of the Father. In the gospel of John and the book of Hebrews, Jesus is recorded as being the express image of the Father. If hermeneutics were to view all the scriptures in the New Testament accounts through this lens, it would be a colossal digression from the traditional interpretations that had a habit of producing stern and harsh Christian father figures. In the words of Jesus, he appears to reveal a gentle and compassionate⁸ father image.

Church history displays a long succession of patriarchal abuses “a dominant theology that has very much been underpinned by misogyny” (James 16). The abuse of authority and power, domination and control has been the paternalistic pattern of Church history. The records of the life of Jesus show an opposite attitude in that he was highly respectful of women and was willing to divulge deep spiritual insights with women. In the case of the Samaritan woman at the well, it was a cultural anomaly that Jesus, a Jew, conversed with her.⁹ The Jewish population vehemently despised Samaritans at that time. Jesus broke with conventions and prejudice and shared with this Samaritan woman the deep message of what true worship was. This revelation was not imparted to the religious elite of the day and not in the man-made temple at Jerusalem, but to a rejected woman of Samaria. It was this shift that Rembrandt gravitated towards in his last paintings—no evidence of temples, priests or Pharisees. Instead Simeon’s decrepit physical failings, the human brokenness of the prodigal son, and an elderly forgiving father came to represent the tender image of the Father, which, according to Christian scripture, Jesus came to reveal. Rembrandt was well aware of the theological tendency’s of Dutch Christianity to focus on God as Judge, King, and Lord. But in his grief, poverty and societal rejection he had come to know the “Offices of love—brother, father, mother, son, daughter, bride, and bridegroom—mostly kinship titles. (Soskice 78)

Isaiah the Old Testament prophet spoke of one who would come who would not bruise a broken reed or put out a smouldering wick. Christian theology has traditionally regarded this prophecy as being fulfilled by Jesus and thereby also being a description of the Father and his gentleness. A smouldering wick is a flame that is already on the verge

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⁷ Heb. 13. 5.
⁸ Referring to the words Jesus spoke of himself. Mt. 11. 29.
⁹ The Samaritan woman at the well is found in Jn. 4. 4
of going out. This metaphorical picture speaks of the broken and hurting people that are on the verge of absolute despair. Jesus’ prophetic fulfilment was through compassion of such magnitude that it could not crush or bruise any who approached him. How thoroughly and utterly the world has seen anything but that displayed in the patriarchal history of the church! It has been a far cry from the Father image Jesus claimed to represent.

Today, it would seem somewhat of an aberration to associate the word gentle with the image of fathers. The psalmist and king, the Old Testament David wrote of God: “Your gentleness has made me great” (New King James Version, Ps. 18. 35.) David understood that it was not the authoritative, power wielding, stern father that wrought and taught greatness in his life. Rather he understood that it was the gentle grasp of a father’s hand on his shoulder, a father who led, counselled, guided, modelled and showed mercy and forgiveness, which made him great. David’s transgressions and offences were reciprocated with justified consequences but there was also the girding of gentle restoration. In the Old Testament book of Hosea, the prophet reveals how God stooped low to feed his people and drew them with bonds of love. It seems somehow Rembrandt encountered and understood this gentleness by embodying it in the image of the welcoming father. Rembrandt was under no illusion that he was the prodigal son, impoverished and broken. He also portrayed the elderly, aged, half blind, frail, and on their deathbed, yet he could not help but come back to seeing them as fathers. He himself journeyed back to the father through depicting the prodigal son, or innocent babe in the arms of Simeon, or as a son receiving a blessing. His longing for a fathering experience further found its voice in the portraits of the aged Jews of Amsterdam he painted. More than that, Rembrandt placed himself in the father’s role too. Knowing the tragedy of outliving his own children, he alleviated the pain through painted hands that nurtured, blessed and held. His image of the invisible father was manifested through the characters of the later works in his life marking his ‘homecoming’.

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10 New King James Version, Hs. 11. 4
11 Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph (1656)
Father Image and Photography as Metaphor

*We can only learn by what is done to us. We are essentially receivers.*

Denise Jordan, *The Forgotten Feminine*

In my own filial-father journey, photography has been the expressive medium I have used to inquire into memories, and to recount the sojourn in my father’s Fijian homeland. It has also functioned as a type of metaphorical agency where the mechanics and processes of photography echo the world in which we live. In “The Miracle of Analogy”, art historian and critical theorist Kaja Silverman contests the traditional view of photography as being merely indexical or representational, putting forward her assertion that photography can be seen as:

The world’s primary way of revealing itself to us —of demonstrating that it exists, and that it will forever exceed us. Photography is an ontological calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies. (11)

Silverman’s discourse on photography as analogy enabled me to make several connections in regards to photographic processes and the 2016 journey to Fiji. Analogue photography involves a wet and dry process. There are immersions, emersions, water washes and drying of film negatives and prints. It is in this ritualistic scenario where there is an aqueous connection, where the ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ nature of photography intersects with the Mamasa ceremony. Being welcomed to the land by relatives through the Mamasa ceremony and using photography to record the event, allowed several analogies to present themselves. Mamasa literally means ‘to be dry’ and the term is used to describe the drying of a person who is wet from oceanic expedition. The traditional purpose of the Mamasa ceremony was to welcome home seafarers from their journeys of deep-sea fishing, sea exploration or short excursions to gather food. The salt water that accumulated during the time spent on the ocean would be ceremonially washed off on their arrival back to the land.\(^{12}\) The wet clothing would be removed respectfully and replaced with dry clothing. Next a ‘tefui’ (garland) would be tied around the neck of the person. It was usually made of fragrant flowers and fruit. After that the welcomers took pure Rotuman oil—a precisely mixed solution of ratios, parts and dilutions; the careful infusion of kernel oil, pipi nut and the moskoi flower (an essential oil from the cananga tree) producing the much prized liquid— would then be poured on to the person’s head and gently rubbed in.

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\(^{12}\) In general the boats would have been berthed out to sea because of the inadequate facilities for mooring. Wading back to the shore meant an inevitable saturation of clothing, hence the need to change into dry clothing. (Fatiaki)
“This highly symbolic act signifies the cleansing of the body of any salt particles which were collected while wading ashore.” (Fatiaki 80) The removal of saltwater also features as an important historical development in photography’s wet processes. French artist and photographer Louis Daguerre, inventor of the early photographic process called the ‘Daguerreotype, originally used “a heated solution of salt water as the fixing agent.” (Watson and Rappaport 122) However, later a more effective solution of sodium thiosulphate was used. Any photographic fix used in the darkroom process needs to undergo a thorough wash and rinse to avoid fix staining, which occurs as a result of unremoved fix particles remaining on the print. In the same manner as photographic fix freezes an image, the journey to know more about my father was like trying to fix my own image of him. It was comparable to the agitating of photographic paper in a darkroom fixative tray. Sloshing back and forth the chemical liquid mimicked the oscillation between my own idealization of whom my father was, and the factual information that presented itself. There was no control over when a new perspective about my father would surface or when a familiar story about him would finally consolidate itself. The more I asked the family about him, the more the father image morphed. In relation to understanding photography Silverman speaks about the inability to control when the image begins and when it ends:

Not only is the photographic image an analogy, rather than a representation or an index, but analogy is also the fluid in which it develops. This process does not begin when we decide that it should, or end when we command it to. Photography develops, rather, with us, and in response to us. (12)

In the Mamasa ceremony, the washing off of saltwater also “seems to signify not a washing away of salt particles but rather of foreign influence, customs and habits which the recipient may have adopted during his absence from the country.” (Fatiaki 85) In analogue photography the washing off of fixative chemicals is to ensure the silver halides retain their formation, clearly preserving the ‘influence’ of light, which has inscribed “indisputable evidence that [a] trip was made.” (Sontag 9) While the light proof camera or film canister encases the exposed film, the ‘foreign’ composition captured on the negative remains latent for the duration of the return journey home until they can receive a ‘baptism’ in developer, stop and fix in the darkroom. The latent image becomes visible, the foreign location now appearing locally, then immersed in a final wash whereby it becomes a permanent image. While the water in the Mamasa ceremony washes away foreign influences, in the photographic analogue process, water is the final wash, which ensures the longevity of the ‘foreign’ photographic memory. The Mamasa ceremony also disrobes the person so that the traditional Fijian dress, the sulu can be worn. The use of pure Rotuman oil and wearing of the sulu can “be regarded as a form of re-socialization since it is again acquainting the recipient with his history and reminding him of his identity.” (Fatiaki 85) Therefore the changing of dress, pouring of oil and drying off of salt water possess fixative qualities by means of reacquainting and reminding a person of their family identity. With photography, soaking the negatives in

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13 Today this chemical is used to de-chlorinate tap water.
chemical liquids and thoroughly washing away their reactive properties with water fixes the memory of ‘homecoming’ and belonging.

Artist Jeff Wall writes in his essay “Liquid Intelligence” about fixing a photographic image. Wall describes the analogue photographic manner in which water must be controlled precisely, and that it “cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the process, or the picture is ruined.” (Wall 1) In order to preserve and interrupt the intersection of light, photographed object and chemical reaction, water and chemicals are precisely measured and restrained resulting in a successfully ‘fixed’ picture. This human intervention and control resembles the way we might fix and defend an image we have of our father. We often do not permit it to spill over the limited, interpreted understanding we received as children. If these experiences could spill over into the explained, understood and unpressed knowledge of that early filial-father history, our father images might risk being ‘ruined’ but it would perhaps also provide an alternative, clearer image. The late Swiss psychologist and psychoanalyst Alice Miller describes the possibilities:

To encounter one’s own history not only puts an end to the blindness hitherto displayed toward the child within oneself but also reduces the blockage of thoughts and feelings. (Banished Knowledge 36)

In making the pilgrimage to Fiji and hearing stories about my father a further exposure is made through the light of their words and shared memories. Not only an alteration takes place but also the father image remains in a state of transition, immersed in a constant state of development, as opposed to the permanent father image held before I embarked on the journey. The childhood experiences and memories of paternal exposure had entered in and formed a latent father image. As the journey progressed and I heard about my father’s first marriage through the interviews with older half brothers and sisters, new information surfaced. The disclosure acted the same way as chemical developer acts on silver halide crystals that have been exposed to light through the camera’s shutter function. In one particular instance a seemingly minute detail reminded me of the continuing developing fluid my father image lay submerged in. In 2015, I learnt that my grandfather was never registered in the Fijian Vola Nikawa Bula (Birth Registry). The absence of my grandfather’s birth registration felt like the light area on a film negative. On a negative the light areas indicate the faint non-registering light photons that have entered the camera’s lens. The greater the absence of light in a scene means the less the film emulsion is affected and consequently appears as a bright area on the negative. My grandfather’s non-registering felt like a kind of disconnection, an absence of belonging and an absence of celebration in the event of his birth. Secondly, discovering this fact in 2015 mimicked the slow reduction potential of worn out developer. The longer the image is immersed in the developer the more opportunity afforded for the billions of silver atoms to form into specks of silver grain and increase detail adding to the overall image. In like manner, my knowledge regarding familial history began to evolve, as the search remained immersed in the developing remnants of family oral accounts.
With the natural human tendency to idealise our father images we often bury many disturbing realities. Alice Miller expands the meanings of repressing negative childhood memories, refusing to front up to the shortcomings of our imperfect fathers and numbing emotions such as anger and unmerited guilt. Miller proposes:

Once this fear has been experienced with all its attendant circumstances, and its ramifications have been understood, we are no longer compelled to feel guilty about something done by others. This liberation reduces the anger. (Banished Knowledge 27)

The trauma or disappointing aspects of fathering experiences during childhood usually remain veiled. When a person might decide to embark on addressing the past in therapeutical manners, often what is discovered can appear in opaque revelations or a partial unveiling. In the journey to Fiji, veils presented themselves in literal and figurative varieties of time, physicality, camera optics and memory. In Susan Sontag’s On Photography, she describes the characteristics of photo optics:

The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. (23)

The camera’s cognizant and mechanical properties are a veil of types; digital manipulation, imprecise darkroom processes, and colour gamut limitations all contribute to veiling some part of reality. It is the trajectory of light that penetrates, reveals, hits, passes through, and around objects unveiled. Light is unfeigned in its deliverance to the lens of the camera, but it is the mechanical optics seated in front of the eye that assemble a veiling. Moreover, technological terming and scientific developments manifest a veil of sorts. ‘Underexposure’, ‘overexposure’ and what we have boldly termed a ‘correct exposure’- a way of saying we have correctly read the colour spectrum of nature reflecting itself upon analogue sensitive halides or digital semi-conductors. In our attempts to know and represent a reality, we can’t but think the veil never completely removes itself. Just as my attempts to connect with my Fijian heritage births from a desire to know and understand my father, there inevitably remain numerous veils, some partly drawn back, some translucent and others completely drawn across. The veil begins closing once we lift the camera to our face. Immediately, we have placed a viewfinder before our eyes. We have placed an inorganic device in front of the natural wonder of the eye. The veil is further pulled across as light enters the focal length of the lens. A photographer pulls and extends a zoom lens, twists clockwise or anticlockwise to widen or shorten a view. A wide angled lens creates distortion causing warping to the image edges. A zoom lens sandwiches the foreground and background, and lenses also have to deal with chromatic aberrations, which contribute to inaccurate focussing.

Veiling also has a presence in the physical landscape and environment of the Fijian ‘homecoming’ (see fig.1) There are flailing vines concealing the mountains and city architecture of Suva, sea breezes animating house curtains, one moment veiling views, the next moment revealing the rich verdure in Fijian backyards. Connecting with the
land and the extended family gifted moments of clarity and expanded the knowledge of my father’s story. The latent father image that was transmitted from my father to myself seemed to become more pronounced in Fiji than in New Zealand. It was as if the chemical magnifying developer had been poured into the lightproof film canister eliciting the hidden father image. To certain degrees, there was a sharpening and stabilizing. With it came a sense of familial belonging through the Mamasa ceremony, along with all the persistent opacities and unresolved veils of not ever being able to completely know, not ever being able to attain a completely correct exposure.

In *Father Who Art On Earth*, Portuguese Priest and poet, Jose Tolentino Mendoca devotes one chapter titled ‘A Father Who Becomes Our Father’ to the French writings of Marcel Proust. Proust wrote, “Many times, we do things without knowing quite why we do them—it is because of the father image that we carry within us and with which we converse” (Mendoca 35,36) The instinctive mimetic life of children is naturally the response of the deep longing to be fathered.

An artist, through cognitive, emotional, creative and even spiritual workings, comes into regular contact with this father image. It is sure, embedded and somewhat latent like an undeveloped photographic exposure. There is a primary paternal source of light. Figure. 1. Marc McFadyen. *Veils*. 2016. Digital Print, 68.25 x 95.5 cm.
For some it might have been a poor luminescence with no intensity, for others it was an overpowering overexposure, and for some a complete absence of light. No matter what degree of light was projected, some manner of father image lies latent on the interior of every son and daughter. Even the residue of negative emotional cut-offs still bears some kind of expression of fatherly reciprocity even if it is a wound.

It could be said that ‘receiving’ is photography’s bedrock. From the early beginnings of camera obscura to today’s digital photo technology, the image is completely dependent on the substratum of receiving light. The family of terms that historically define photography include phrases such as ‘light falling on a subject’, ‘light being absorbed’, or ‘catching the light’. In many ways photography is an exemplification of the process where a child bears the image of both the mother and the father. The light of parental love and interaction ‘falls’ is received by the child and then translated, converting and internalising the ‘light’ into a latent father-mother image.

In receiving my father’s projected image I was essentially receiving an intrinsically ‘Fijian’ image, not just because his mother was full-blooded Fijian, but also because he grew up in Suva surrounded by Fijian culture. My Father Thomas Henry McFadyen, was born in Toorak, Fiji in 1934. His Mother was Fijian and his Father was of Scottish descent. Physically, I, myself look European but inwardly the latent Fijian-father image seemed to greatly affect my identity and personality. At times it was frustrating to have this quarter-gene surface so dominantly. The phrase, ‘Your just like your father’ was a constant expression that I repeatedly heard. In photographic development processes an interesting phenomenon is responsible for configuring the ‘personality’ of the image. Japanese professor Tadaaki Tani’s meticulous scientific explanations in his book ‘Photographic Sensitivity’, explains it is actually the interstitial silver ions in silver halide film that is indispensable in forming the latent image, rather than the majority of silver ions. This somewhat whimsical description summarised and mirrored the properties of my ‘interstitial Fijian gene’. The space invading ions can’t help but migrate and react,

With the captured electron to form a silver atom. This is called the ‘ionic process’. The repetition of the electronic and ionic processes one after another at the same site leads to the formation of a latent image center composed of a cluster of silver atoms (89)

The formation of the latent image relies on the interstitial silver ions that are actually out of place and in the spaces of the main configuration. It made me ask the question Why does something interstitial have to be so crucial to image configuring? And why did my father’s Fijian gene have to exert such a strong latent image when my outward physical image was the opposite?
Part Two

Father Relatedness

When it comes to thinking about fathers we rarely think about the issues of fathering in relation to art or artists. In stepping back and thinking about childhood and paternal experiences there are certain impacts, which can leave an indelible mark well into latter stages of adult life. Coming to prominence is now both a deeper understanding of the important roles a father can play in childhood cognitive and emotional development, and also the detrimental effects of children who experience absent, passive or abusive fathers.

Societal values and traditions are also undergoing shifts, which affect the nuclear family and especially the issue of fathers and fathering. Historically, modern and post-modern artists have often been concerned with the social and political issues of their day; including identity politics, feminism, and capitalist consumerism, to today’s urgent environmental issues. Art is always the mirror in which society is reflected. One such social issue of our time that has seemingly gone under the radar, but is now gaining more attention is the social issue of fatherlessness. In 2011, the United Nations released a report addressing the issues of men in families, and raised concern over the issue of father absence. Recent scientific evidence increasingly suggests that negative social statistics about crime, incarceration and mental health disorders point to fatherlessness as a substantial contributing factor. Global social trends show a rise in the numbers of children experiencing fatherlessness. At the same time, societal perspectives on the roles of father and mother in childcare are evolving. Statistics show if the father is present in the family there tends to be greater father involvement in children’s live than the previous century of detached fathering. Unfortunately, at the same time, there is also a perceptible increase in absent fathers from the family unit.
Sense of Self

Watching families commuting on mopeds around the clogged arterial side roads of Shanghai,\(^{14}\) prompted me to think of the ways trust often dissipates incrementally, and gives way to increasing cautiousness. The sight of multiple passengers clustered on pillions and other parts of the unstable moped frames was a familiar one. A helmeted father or mother would strategically place a child or two on the bike usually without any safety headwear. This arrangement became a striking pattern of differentiated levels of filial trust. The tiny infants sat oblivious, carefree and hands unconcerned about grasping the parent. Four and five year olds sat slightly more affixed with a posture of wrapped legs and leaning with a sense of balance. Now and then there were those that were engrossed in holding a book or toy while the Shanghai traffic deluge carried them forward. However, when it came to the older children they would elasticise themselves, clinging and pressing against mother or father, aware of the limited interstitial vehicle space.

‘Trust’, seems to be the most fragile of words, especially in the context of a reliable ‘father figure’. One encounter with broken trust or unreliable experience is enough to nudge us into that clinging childhood posture for fear of being let down again. The adaptive self-defence mechanisms evolve and become complex. We lean more toward hesitancy and expectation of disappointment. In relation to creative expression trust also needs to be nurtured in order to allow an environment where people feel free to express themselves. Trust is something that is essential in relationships, and without a good history of experienced trust, our creative expression finds a hesitant bringing forth of creativity. In childhood, trust is developed to the degree of displayed affirmation. The child is affirmed by mother and father and feels validated and in turn develops a healthy self-esteem. In *The Power of Validation*, Child psychologists Karyn Hall and Melissa Cook describe healthy self-esteem as reflecting a right perspective of the intrinsic value a person has for who she is, as opposed to comparing certain abilities with others. What is also important is “her integrity as a person who fulfils her potential with regard to her unique talents and abilities.” (Hall and Cook 37)

In the case of Zhang Xiaogang, his earnest desire to become an artist was completely devoid of any fatherly validation. However, Zhang managed to find affirmation in his mentoring teacher Lin Ling. For Zhang, Lin Ling was a father figure who nurtured, validated and invested time in the relationship. It is these father substitutes, which can greatly alleviate the effects of father absence or abuse. Undoubtedly, fatherlessness in whatever expression, brings some type of baggage even if a better father figure becomes involved. Generally, rejection from a father creates anxiety, insecurity, and can produce volatile emotions and aggressive behaviour. Zhang was still plagued by psychological matters well into his adult life. In 1985 Zhang wrote:

\(^{14}\) I resided in Shanghai China for 8 years from the period 2002-2010.
I’d felt that I’d completely sunk into a bottomless ‘individualist’ abyss/I felt exasperated with the meaning and value of the human being and with emotional relations between individuals. My life was highly unstable: I spent years drifting and wandering, trying to search for the true meaning of life. At that juncture, I began to doubt and even despise what I’d repeatedly emphasized as ‘selfhood’. (Fineberg and Xu 39)

In Alice Miller’s *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness*, Miller writes about Adolf Hitler and Russian-Jewish artist Chaim Soutine. The title of the chapter concerned with these two historical figures is titled, *Despot or Artist?* Delving into their childhoods Miller examines the familial conditions influencing their trajectories, which resulted in one becoming a despot and the other becoming an artist. In Soutine’s early childhood both parents and brothers beat him regularly. Miller mentions her psychological readings concerning Soutine’s paintings of twisted landscapes and tottering buildings, which were made on viewing his work at an exhibition well before reading any of his childhood biography. For her it was a further confirmation that Soutine’s paintings were explicitly linked to his early childhood traumas. Miller contemplates “what it must be like for a little child who is beaten, lying across someone’s knee, head down so that the world looks upside down.” (48) Many of Soutine’s works like *The Old Mill, Landscape with Red Roofs* and *Les Maisons* appear as though some terrible external force has pounded the scenery relentlessly. Shockwaves throw houses into convulsions and trees into wild shakings. Scenes blur as if viewed through a warping film of tears. Miller’s diagnosis suggests, “That visions of the future have to do with one’s earliest experiences and that the repressed suffering of childhood can lend intensity and expressiveness to an artist’s work without his even realizing what he is portraying.” (48)

Miller asks the question, why all abused children do not turn into tyrants like Hitler? The answer is found in what she terms an *Enlightened Witness*. This *Enlightened Witness* refers to a person who is able to help a child alleviate some of the suffering through acts of sympathizing, showing love and helping the child to understand that they have been wronged. Miller believes that in the case of Hitler, such a witness was virtually non-existent and she goes as far as to compare Adolf Hitler’s familial environment, “to a totalitarian regime” (51) Hitler’s violent, distant and repressive father Alois Hitler, subjugated him to beatings, humiliations and constant corrections. Alois ruled the house with the authority of an autocratic dictator. This example produced the inner template, which shaped Adolf. Miller further states that,

Hitler’s father’s arbitrary exercise of power was the highest authority, from which there was no escape. In the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler demonstrated the extent to which he had internalized this system. Not a single feeling or humane consideration existed that might have set limits to his cruelty once he achieved sole power. His use of power paralleled exactly the way he had been brought up. (51)

Adolf’s internalization of the negative paternal experiences became the eventual extension of his externalized adult expression. It is not hard to then comprehend how Miller could extrapolate the childhood experiences of artists and see those experiences
materializing in their artwork. In considering Soutine and Hitler, Miller makes the comparison that both were beaten and punished for their desires to embark on an artistic career by their fathers. However, there were markedly different factors in the culture of their upbringing. Miller discusses the stern, unemotional German father in contrast to the Jewish culture of fathers in “Eastern Europe [who] were not trained to be harsh and brutal.” (54) There was not the same level of repressing the gentle, impotent traits of youth compared with Miller’s view of the tendency for German fathers to lean more towards draconian childrearing methodologies. Miller identifies a channelling of childhood pain in Soutine’s paintings and also identifies his mother as a sympathetic witness who helped him with the financial means, which enabled him to enrol in art school. Miller concludes:

It is inconceivable that a person like Adolf Hitler could have grown up in the family of a poor Jewish tailor in Lithuania. It is just as inconceivable that Soutine the painter could have developed his subtle sense of color and his ability to express suffering as the son of Alois Hitler in Braunau. (53)

Another example of filial-father suffering expressed in an artist’s oeuvre might be found in the life of Jean-Michel Basquiat. (1960-1988) Basquiat’s parents separated when he was just seven years of age. Basquiat and his sisters went and lived with their father who regularly beat him as a child. Basquiat also experienced the trauma of having his mother committed to a mental asylum and his father ultimately banishing him from the family home. In a 1983 interview Henry Geldzahler asks Basquiat: “Is there anger in your work now? JMB: It’s about 80% anger.” (Stiles and Selz 285) The ‘80% anger’ in his creative expression and artistic temperament seems directly connected to those early volatile family experiences. The anger almost feels tangible in works such as Boxer, Black King Hands Up, Tar Tar Lead Lead and Offensive Orange. The erratic childlike qualities of Basquiat’s paintings seem eerily frozen in the memory of childhood trauma as if his body has somatically translated his father’s abuse and rejection in to some of his later life expressions. Though it is not difficult to see why art commentators write about Basquiat’s referencing of heroic boxers such as Cassius Clay and Sugar Ray Robinson in paintings like Black King Hands Up, it also does not appear too far a stretch to discern traumatic traces of his childhood in this particular work. The Black King with his hands up more or less resembles a disfigured person with hands protesting in the air, rather than a victorious boxer who might be standing over his opponent. It is as if Basquiat’s “repressed traumatic experiences in childhood are stored up in the body, and although remaining unconscious, exert their influence even in adulthood.” (Miller Untouched Key 169)

Miller’s publications Banished Knowledge and The Untouched Key were written in the 90’s, and she regularly commented on the new knowledge coming to light in regards to child trauma and parental violence. In parts of the world there is a growing interest in addressing the particular type of identity crises caused by both abuse and fatherlessness. In New Zealand an initiative to engage and support men’s issues called Essentially Men is an organisation directed by Rex McCann. He is also the author of
Fatherless Sons: The Experience of New Zealand Men. In the case of New Zealand males, McCann sees a distressing trend of fatherlessness needing to be addressed. In McCann’s view having a healthy fathering experience is important because “There is no other person who will shape the son’s sense of self as his father will; the father is the pattern of manhood the boy is cut from.” (McCann 43) When this sense of self is not projected it sets a child on the search for selfhood and a hungering for an affirming role model. McCann’s workshops also teach healthy masculinity in relation to fostering a deep respect for women. The skewed stereotypes of macho, controlling masculinity are replaced with teaching emotionally available, and caring characteristics. A healthy sense of masculinity passed on from a father to son is invaluable and not an immediate transaction. McCann states, “The father’s masculinity is a starting place for a boy’s own masculine identity and for this to become stable, it needs to be constantly reinforced.” (McCann 52)

One of the concerning trends of fatherless males or misrepresented masculinity is the propensity to violence, domination or sexual violence against females. Tied in with this, is the detrimental explosion of available pornography in society. The degradation and abuse of women is unfortunately documented as being on the increase and not the other way round. Family author and researcher David Popenoe believes that in family environments where women are respected, young male adolescents “do not have the same need to reject and dominate women.” (Popenoe 162) Again, it is not such a stretch to see the negative impacts and scars vivified through the art world. The work of feminist artists and other direct works centred on masculine abuse such as Nan Goldin’s photograph titled, ‘Nan One Month After Being Battered’ is an example widely known from her photographic series- The Ballard of Sexual Dependency. In Popenoe’s publication Families without Fathers, he reveals the startling American figures of fatherless males incarcerated in prisons as being as high as 70%. Popenoe confirms through statistics and empirical evidence that, “Fathers make important contributions to their children’s intellectual competence, prosocial and compassionate behaviour, and psychological well-being.” (Popenoe 163)

Absence, Cognition and Creativity

The absence or presence of a father has consequences on early childhood experiences, setting a definitive course, which contributes significantly to adult outcomes. Father absence is primarily understood as the missing physical presence of a father. However, there is the situation where a father can be present but fails to effectively or positively engage with their children. Passive fathering also has negative effects, which are coming more into focus as research begins to build its findings on fatherlessness. However, science journalist and author of Do Fathers Matter? Paul Raeburn believes the evidence
“does not show that the children in families without fathers in the home are doomed to failure or anything close”. (Raeburn 15) There are lots of supported familial structures, which can cushion the effects of not having a father in the home. However, when none of those supporting elements are there for a child, the disadvantages begin to stack up.

In 2005, Professor of Developmental Psychology, Eirini Flouri published *Fathering and Child Outcomes*. The book’s detailed research is based on the United Kingdom’s National Child Development Study. A study which research partner Ann Buchanan describes as covering “all children born in one week in 1958 (some 17 000 children), [and] has recorded events in children’s lives for over 40 years.” (Flouri foreword) The study reveals the link between absent fathers with subjects such as low self-esteem, socio-economic disadvantage, aggressive behaviour, low academic motivation, low career maturity in adolescence, and mental health, to name but a few. Where there is an absence of a father, there tends to be evidence of unfavourable consequences.

Unfavourable consequences in childhood experiences can also negatively impact cognitive functioning. American Psychologist Henry B. Biller has spent many years researching the dynamics of paternal involvement in child health development. Biller states that, “paternal nurturance was positively correlated with intellectual functioning, whereas father deprivation tended to lessen cognitive competence.” (Biller 99) Cognitive functioning includes intuition and perception, which is often the hallmark of artistic creativity. In creative practice an artist relies heavily on cognitive adeptness. To have the ability to communicate allusively and retain some sense of tension and mystery requires the intuition to sustain that threshold. A childhood with an involved fathering experience helps grow the sensation of awareness through interaction and calling forth the child’s ability to express identity. Biller reinforces again the possible stunting of this interaction. “The major disadvantage related to father-absence is lessened parental attention including fewer opportunities to model mature decision-making and problem solving. (Biller 100) Decision-making and problem solving are the invaluable hands that carry out the inward processes of perception and intuition. Father absence directly diminishes these experiences affecting not only cognitive functions but also the emotional stabilizing traits of confidence and self-esteem. The obvious hindrance to a healthy cognitive development due to father absence would be the loss of opportunity for a child to be able to ask questions, enquire, test boundaries, have feedback or be encouraged.

In the area of creativity, disadvantages in developing creative processes appear to those children who grow up fatherless or without father figures. If there is a prolonged experience of father absence, some degree of impairment is highly likely. Biller describes, “The creative process involves the imaginative joining or associating of ideas, materials or objects never before connected in a similar fashion.” (107) Though creative skills and intuition may be recoverable either through extended family experiences or when the child enters school, it can also be hindered by a continued sense of loss of the
birth father. The way in which a father will interact with a child includes exposing “the child to a different style of verbal and problem solving behaviour than the mother or other females.” (Biller 111) As the behavioural and cognitive patterns become reinforced and mature, a well-rounded confident child grows.

Biological Inputs

Since the mid 1980’s different fields of biology such as physiology, genetics, neurology and socio-biology, have been uncovering voluminous amounts of information through extensive surveying and social scientific studies revealing the biological impacts of fathers. Social constructionists weigh in heavily on the evidence of nurture but tend to play down the biological evidence that fathering suggests. However, the negative effects of fatherlessness highlighted in social disorder statistics is unheeding to the nature verses nurture argument. In Western societies there has been a recent positive shift in regards to encouraging fathers to be more involved in the lives of their children. Neurologists, geneticists and psychologists are now unearthing evidence that link a father’s influence to subjects in child development such as a child’s language acquisition, mental wellbeing and overall brain development.

The idea that we can recover, relearn or cognitively improve because of the brain’s neural plasticity is a field of knowledge that is finding coverage in both the general reading populace and scientific communities. The field of neural science also links positive fathering experiences with a child’s healthy wiring of brain circuitry. Former editor in chief of Nature Neuroscience scientific journal Sandra Aamodt, and professor of neuroscience Sam Wang, in their publication Welcome to Your Child’s Brain, discuss some of the limits of brain plasticity. The strengthening of synaptic connections in a child’s brain have sensitive periods where the “child’s brain has definite preferences about what it should learn at various stages of development.” (Aamodt and Wang 41) These brain synapses expand and link through stimulating experiences. The experiences are received through the five senses as simple interactions like a father talking to his child or a mother having skin-to-skin contact with an infant in early life. Brain development builds a foundation of simple architecture, pruning synapses and layering more complex highways of neurotransmitters. “Once these plastic changes have occurred, the brain architecture often becomes more difficult to modify in the future.” (Aamodt and Wang 42) If there is an absent father in the early years of a child’s cognitive brain development, it may be possible to substitute these necessitated experiences with extended family or other types of care giving. In the case of single mothers raising their child(ren) alone the father absence creates a significant disadvantage. The brain’s plasticity is amazingly forgiving in its rehabilitative potential, but as we age the maturation peaks and then the journey of stagnancy or decline
commences. “Retraining the brain in adulthood is possible in some cases, but it is slow and difficult.” (Aamodt and Wang 46)

It is hard to surmise the full future potential of a child, but perhaps one consistent rule that seems to be a law of nature is that building a good foundation first is easier done at the outset than later on:

If the experience required to complete an early developmental process is not available, the sensitive period is normally extended for a while, resulting in delayed maturation of that brain circuit and all the others that depend on it. Eventually, though, the window of opportunity closes, and any resulting damage may become permanent. (Aamodt and Wang 47)

The advantages of having a good start often play into predetermining positive outcomes later in life. This seems explicit in early childhood experiences, especially in association with brain development despite there being a fair measure of flexibility in the processes. To encourage involved fathering carries with it long lasting benefits for a child’s overall development. The challenges will be preventing social trends that contribute to the disintegration of filial-father relationships.

Yeames’ *When Did You Last See Your Father?*

William Frederick Yeames’ *When Did You Last See Your Father?* (See Appendix E) is a painting depicting a scene from the English Civil War (1642-1651). Parliamentarians, also known as Roundheads occupy a house while a young son of a royalist father stands before his questioners. The Parliamentarians held considerable sway in English cities while King Charles’ support was predominantly in rural areas. For a time a large portion of the population remained neutral. Eventually, the war spread to all levels of society. When the war began to swing in favour of the Parliamentarians, many Royalists took to fleeing and hiding. To be captured meant almost certain death. In Yeames’ painting, the weightiness of responsibility and burden to keep his father’s whereabouts unknown is subsumed in the child’s upright posture. The questioning Parliamentarian Roundheads are depicted with a touch of humane comprehension offsetting and denying the seriousness of the moment.

There is something alarming about the absence of the father and the interrogated child standing in his place. It suggests the dilemma of being thrust into distressing circumstances that a child should never have to prematurely deal with, and the extreme confrontations of strength pitted against vulnerability. Yeames’ setting is one of 17th century civil war, but the quandary still echoes down into society’s contemporary
expectations and is aptly pertinent to today’s 21st Century growing father absence. Like Yeames’ son in blue, many involuntarily find themselves in the position where the fathers should be. To a degree he is politically and socially side-lined and also increasingly absent. Like the boy in blue many of the fatherless rise to the challenge, putting on a brave face, hiding fears and tears and becoming substitutes for their own removed paternal figures. The under-fathered remain like the child Louise Bourgeois never ceased to pull out of her inner psyche. The title of Yeames’ painting continues to reverberate through the centuries— “When Did You Last See Your Father?” There is a decline of paternal protection, guiding figure and identity shaping presence. To compound this sense of loneliness is the unrelenting social climate of immense pressure women, men and children face in this high-speed world of achieving success. There are those who can cope and flourish. The late author and priest, Brennan Manning describes them: “the perfectionist interprets weakness as mediocrity and inconsistency as a loss of nerve.” (Manning 12) And then there are those who stand like the young boy standing in front of judges and accusers, vulnerable and forced to give an account for forces out of their control.

In which ways can we make our way back? What obstacles hinder that ‘Homecoming’? Just as departures begin in the inward seat of the emotions, so begins the return journey. Pride is usually a first stumbling block to petitioning for help, to seeking out a healthy father figure. Compounding the issue is the disillusionment with ascertaining a father who measures up to one’s expectations. We see all kinds of faults because of generational gaps in knowledge of technology, communication and culture. Henri Nouwen states, “The men and women of tomorrow see that no father has anything to tell them simply because he has lived longer.” (Nouwen 31) The false fathers society often elevates and surrounds itself with—intellect, independence, material wealth, knowledge and acclaim—are cold paternal stand-ins that have a tendency to evade personal contact, and cause us to father the next generation in the same way. Philosopher Martin Buber said, “All real living is meeting” (Herberg 46). Our vis-à-vis fathers have morphed into Youtube tutorials and social media surrogate apps. There is a gradual relinquishing of mentoring, identity instilling, and skill-teaching fathers. Welsh poet and orator George Herbert said, “One father is more than a hundred schoolmasters.” (Herbert 244) Technologies change but the consistent need for a nurturing, stable, and time-giving father remains a constant. The availability of systems in which one can attain information and knowledge is limitless. Rather what seems to be increasingly inaccessible is the access to healthy father figures. Psychologists Judith Trowell and Alicia Etchegoyen highlight the issue of the,

Social climate in which fathers, as consistent and stable role models, are increasingly unavailable to the next generation. Even unstable fathering role models are in short supply.” (xv)

What of those fathers who desire to be in their children’s lives, separated by society’s departures through laws that estrange? A 2011 United Nations report stated, “Policy makers have been slow to recognise the need for effective public policy that is
supportive of men’s involvement in their families.” (United Nations) To bridge the filial-father rift means to consider not only public policies that support fathering involvement, but also means to think about the very idea of intimately relating to each other.

Often we are nominal in our relationships, linked in name or DNA only. Professor of Philosophy Esther Meek explains the, “tenor of true knowing is love, interpersonal resonance, interpenetration, rather than impersonal description.” (42) Meek’s description seems desperately apt to adult life and not just for the obvious infantile attachment stage. How many of us truly know our fathers, and how many of our fathers truly know us? How many fathers remain connected with daughter and son into the post ‘leaving-home’ seasons of their lives?

The individualistic tendency of the 21st Century seems to gravitate towards drowning out the father’s voice. The outward influence of the father’s voice may appear muted and distant, but the inward father image persists in leaking out and manifests in all our creating, conversations and observations. It is in our making, expression, gestures, spatial perception, and problem solving. An artist produces to some degree of the spectrum, either out of father absence, anger, and insistent rejection or out of a positive, involved fathering experience. The father image manifests in disguised articulations of confidence or low self-esteem, activeness or passivity, worthiness or unworthiness. We ‘converse’ to the world through artistic expression with an inherited paternal inflection. Our childhood experience with paternity does not fade; we bring it with us even if we persistently do our utmost to leave the nascent memories behind. We conceive methodologies as adult practitioners, believing them to be undiluted, but the palette with which we create is determined in early childhood experiences.

Zhang’s colour palette, childhood greys, Cultural Revolution reds and amnesiac yellows, haunting him into the 21st Century, or Bourgeois’ childhood stitching, sewing and weaving bringing her into her later understanding of familial repairing and reconciliation.

It would appear the impetus of Avant-Garde is in its desire for exploration and departure. Perhaps it is actually an inward journey unconsciously touching the childhood traumas and yearning for familial images. However, no matter the physical or emotional distance of an artist, just like Zhang’s gangly bloodlines connecting each family member; we create and make art still connected to the ‘emotional unit’, mother, father, sister, brother, all present there somewhere in the distant attempts of Avant-Garde departures. The fatherlessness epidemic might disclose itself more prominently in the arts. If it does not reveal itself in the conscious pronouncement as in the manner of biographical art, such as Huang, Zhang, Bourgeois or Rembrandt, it will certainly seep through instinctively, by ways of brokenness, identity struggles, anger, abandonment, and trauma. These repercussions can be and will be found in the expressions of paint, sculpture, photography, installation and every sort of soul expressing medium—a silent lament of a generation, searching for a homecoming, searching for a father figure.
Appendices

Appendix A
Artwork by Huang Xiangjian:


Appendix B
Artwork by Zhang Xiaogang:


Appendix C
Artwork by Louise Bourgeois:

Appendix D

Artwork by Rembrandt Van Rijn:


Appendix E

Artwork by William Frederick Yeames:


