Negotiating War and Peace in Chân Không's Learning True Love and Kingston's The Fifth Book of Peace

Christopher Kocela
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the American Studies Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.
The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 458 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the CC BY-NC-ND license.
Christopher Kocela, "Negotiating War and Peace in Chân Không's Learning True Love and Kingston's The Fifth Book of Peace"

Abstract: In his article "Negotiating War and Peace in Chân Không's Learning True Love and Kingston's The Fifth Book of Peace," Christopher Kocela analyzes Sister Chân Không's autobiography and Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir as examples of women's transBuddhist life writing about cultural differences and transnational communities in the wake of war. Kocela argues that Chân Không's autobiography advocates a form of community building based on a nondiscriminatory practice of empathy that supersedes the need for forgiveness or vindication among participants in the Vietnam War. Kingston's memoir, by contrast, advocates Chân Không's teaching while raising questions about the political implications of empathy in an age of pluralism. Kocela argues that a comparison of these texts reveals important differences in the way that Asian and Asian American women employ Buddhist principles of nondiscrimination and interbeing in negotiating issues of reconciliation and return in life writing.
Christopher KOCELA

Negotiating War and Peace in Chân Không’s Learning True Love and Kingston’s The Fifth Book of Peace

In their Introduction to TransBuddhism, Nalini Bhushan and Abraham Zablotski call attention to the important role women's life writing plays in encouraging contact and communication between Buddhist traditions across national divides (2). At root of this process is not only the global spread of feminist perspectives, but also a concerted effort on the part of Buddhist women to understand and overcome linguistic and cultural differences that have historically prevented their collaboration on issues such as war and poverty (Tsomo 152). In this study I read Sister Chân Không's autobiography Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War and Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir The Fifth Book of Peace as examples of women's transBuddhist life writing about cultural differences and transnational communities in the wake of the Vietnam War. By comparing these particular texts and authors, my aim is to analyze and develop the implicit dialogue that exists between them. Chân Không, a Vietnamese nun and long-time associate of Zen (or Thien) monk Thich Nhat Hahn, is well known internationally for her humanitarian activism during and after the Vietnam War. Her autobiography, written in English and originally published in 1993, was expanded and reissued in 2007 with an introduction by Kingston, who credits the text with shaping her understanding of pacifism and for teaching readers how to “reconcile ourselves with the Vietnamese people and our own history, and put that war to rest” (xii). Chân Không’s influence is clearly evident in The Fifth Book of Peace, Kingston's most explicitly Buddhist life writing to date and her first memoir since the publication of her The Woman Warrior in 1976 and China Men in 1981. Over a third of Fifth Book is devoted to describing the Veterans Writing Group Kingston organized in the 1990s, which included meetings with Chân Không and Thich Nhat Hahn in the United States and at their monastic practice center in Plum Village (France). These meetings also reveal the extent to which Chân Không’s own teaching has developed in dialogue with veterans. Yet despite their shared investment in Buddhist practices of mindfulness, empathy, and nondiscrimination, a comparison of The Fifth Book of Peace and Learning True Love reveals significant differences in the role each writer attributes to those practices in the context of community-building during and in the wake of war. I argue that these differences reflect the strategies through which Chân Không and Kingston negotiate both war and peace through the writing process.

Feminist and postcolonial criticism has emphasized the ways in which Asian American life writing subverts Western autobiographical conventions. Rocío G. Davis argues that texts such as Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family emphasize community over the individuality of the author, creating a relational form of life writing that “challenges the fundamental paradigm of the independent self of traditional autobiography” (45). Similarly, Katherine Hyunmi Lee observes that, in contrast to the celebration of "metaphysical selfhood" (184) in biographies of Cauca- sian men, life writing by Asian American women constructs a socially mediated form of self which “cannot (and does not necessarily desire to) achieve transcendence” (185). Buddhist life writing tends to sharpen this focus on community and social relations at the expense of selfhood, reflecting the fact that Buddhism regards "no self" (in Sanskrit, anatman) as one of three marks or seals of existence, alongside impermanence (anitya) and suffering (dukkha). In the Anatatalakkhana Sutta or “Discourse on the Not-Self Characteristic,” the Buddha attributes the universality of human suffering to the belief that emotions, perceptions, and consciousness comprise a permanent self; accordingly, Buddhists regard spiritual practice as an effort to achieve liberation from attachment to selfhood. The result is life writing that frequently subverts the conventional autobiographical relationship between experience and subjectivity. According to Gail Watson, a fundamental teaching of autobiogra- phy is that the subject does not predate experience but is constituted by it: "experience, then, is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm" (31). In Buddhist life writing such as Le Ly Hayslip’s Child of War, Woman of Peace or Ayya Khema’s I Give You My Life, however, autobiographical subjects place a spiritual and political premium on relinquishing the tendency to own identities based on accumulated experience. While not denying the emotions and conflicts to which experience gives rise, Buddhist life writers tend to emphasize their impermanence and interdependence on a variety of social and environmental factors.

In their address to wartime experience in particular, both Chân Không and Kingston endorse an understanding of subjectivity that reflects what Thich Nhat Hahn calls "interbeing." Derived from the traditional Buddhist concept of “dependent origination” (pratityasamutpada), interbeing emphasizes the radical intertwining of the self with all other selves, giving rise to an understanding of social reality in which everyone shares responsibility for violence and injustice. In Being Peace Nhat Hahn illustrates the radical ethical implications of interbeing by describing his reaction to the suicide of a twelve year- old Vietnamese "boat girl" who had been raped by a Thai pirate: "If you take the side of the little girl, then it is easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate. But we can’t do that. In my medita- tion, I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, I would now be the pirate... If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, you shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs” (65–66). Awareness of interbeing provides the basis for a form of engaged Buddhism that seeks social remedies for common sources of human weakness and misunderstanding across cultural differences. Originally associated with Nhat Hahn’s founding of the Society of Youth for Social Services during the Vietnam War, engaged Bud- dhism has since come to denote a wide variety of Buddhist responses to social and political problems including Sulak Sivaraksa’s humanitarian and environmentalist efforts in Thailand and the Dalai
Lama’s Middle Way approach to Tibetan self-determination. For both Kingston and Chân Không, however, interbeing and its transformative potential is bound up not only with meditation and mindful practice, but in the writing of autobiography. As the spiritual progressions through which Cao Ngoc Phuong (Chân Không’s birth name) becomes the nun Chân Không, whose dharma name means True Emptiness or “empty of a separate self … It is a celebration of interconnectedness, of interbeing” (239). In order to demonstrate her spiritual worthiness of this name, Chân Không must relinquish her claim on any sort of fixed identity including the identity that accrues to her as a victim of, and witness to, the violence of the war in Vietnam. I argue that Learning True Love departs this section of action into the lives of others as a process of writing itself: as a result, the political power of engaged Buddhism in the text becomes tied — systematically at times — to the reader’s own ability and/or willingness to empathize. Similarly, Kingston’s The Fifth Book of Peace also links awareness of interbeing to renunciation and the writing process; but for Kingston, what must be renounced is the temptation to emancipate a solitary writing life in which imaginative projection and empathy threaten to substitute for social engagement. This important difference between Kingston and Chân Không on the subject of empathy complicates what Shan (10-11) and Shounan (106) portray as Kingston’s straightforward adoption of Nhat Hahn’s teachings. For Kingston, as a Chinese American without any firsthand experience of war, the danger of empathy lies in what Dominick LaCapra describes as its tendency to become a “self-sufficient psychological response that obviates or obscures the need for sociopolitical understanding” (134). Consequently, The Fifth Book of Peace documents at the level of both form and content Kingston’s efforts to develop a communal form of life writing that transcends the erasure of cultural and historical difference of which, in Chân Không’s autobiography, it sometimes appears to be the case.

Despite its advocacy of no-self and interbeing, Chân Không’s Learning True Love reads as a straightforward autobiography. Beginning with her childhood in Ben Tre City during French colonialism, the narrative details her first meeting with Thích Nhất Hạnh in 1959, her work as part of his Order of Interbeing in Saigon during the escalation of the Vietnam War, and, after her exile from the country in 1966, her humanitarian activism and teaching tours of Europe and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. The first edition of the autobiography was published in 1993 and concluded with her publicized teaching tour in 2005 — her first return to her home country in thirty-seven years.

Chân Không’s autobiography is organized in keeping with what David J. Leigh calls a “directional image” (14). Childhood experiences that in many spiritual autobiographies provide the subject with a touchstone for measuring spiritual and ethical development. In Learning True Love that image emerges out of the egalitarian discipline instilled in Cao Ngoc Phuong by her parents. Growing up in a home shared by eight siblings and twelve cousins, Phuong was taught not to expect any favoritism from her parents in the apportioning of food or chores. As she writes: “Mother and Father cared for all of us equally, without discrimination. At mealtimes, no one was allowed to say, ‘I am your daughter, so I deserve more food than my cousins’” (3). This model of caring nondiscrimination is presented as explanation for Phuong’s attraction, as a university student, to Nhat Hahn’s spiritual teaching, which cut through the discriminatory views of traditional Buddhist monks by affirming the importance of social work and the possibility of enlightenment for women (14-16).

Learning True Love portrays Phuong’s evolving commitment to nondiscrimination through a recurring narrative pattern. Repeatedly tested by situations that tempt her to take a self-interested or one-sided view, she responds by invoking or—as her practice develops—directly experiencing the truth of interbeing. For example, when the course of the book outlines her spiritual progressions through Buddhist terms by portraying it as the result of practice rather than faith or uncommon ability. Initially Phuong tends to respond to challenges by invoking an abstract idea of interbeing. When two of her friends are killed by grenades she works through her anger and frustration by meditating and calling on the power of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva (“enlightened being”) of compassion, which enables her to see, as she puts it, that “men are not our enemies. Our only enemies are the misunderstanding, hatred, jealousy, and ignorance that lead to such acts of violence” (89). Later Phuong develops the capacity to experience nondiscrimination directly through empathy for others. She recounts an experience in which, coming upon soldiers about to shoot innocent villagers, she is able, despite her “limited English” (153), to stop them by communicating their shared sense of fear: “Looking deeply into the soldiers’ faces, I could see that they were good people … But the situation of war had made them act like barbarous killers” (153). For Phuong, this practice of getting “in the skin” (160, 203) of another person becomes key to dissolving political oppositions and working for peace and reconciliation after the war. When frustrated in her efforts to bring humanitarian aid to Vietnamese children by the communist government, she works by seeing through the eyes of her opponent: “Filled with fear, suspicion, and also arrogance from having won the war and being one of the rulers of Vietnam now, I could see myself behaving in the same way as those who were raised in that atmosphere” (197).

After she leaves Vietnam in 1968 she dedicates herself to learning English so as to better convey the suffering of the Vietnamese people to the Western media (144) and to aid in Nhat Hahn’s teaching of compassion and empathy during his tours of the United States. At the end of the book, Chân Không portrays her ability to write in English and to communicate with Westerners as key to her success as a proponent of interbeing: “As you read these lines and know that, in a remote area of Vietnam, children who are severely malnourished are receiving some funds from Plum Village, you can see that act of love as the collective work of thousands of hands and hearts. All of us, indeed, inter-are” (294)

As suggested by these concluding lines, the power of engaged Buddhism in Learning True Love depends, finally, on persuading the reader to participate in Chân Không’s practice of empathy and...
compassion, becoming, in effect, a part of her spiritual sangha ("community"). To the extent that the book succeeds in this endeavor it does so, I suggest, by working through several of the ideological deficits associated with mainstream representations of Vietnam and the American literature about it. On one level, through its depiction of Chân Không's wartime experiences, exile in the West, and her eventual return to Vietnam as a spiritual teacher, Learning True Love exhibits all the key characteristics of Vietnamese American narratives of witness. But in contrast to these narratives which attempt to bring about a "perspectival shift" (Janette xviii) on mainstream representations of Vietnam in the United States, Chân Không's position as a member of the Vietnamese diaspora outside the U.S. enables her to suggest the limits of US-American imperialization of Vietnam and its consequences for the Vietnamese. This scholarship has portrayed the quest for reconciliation and forgiveness in Vietnamese American life writing as testament to the ongoing influence of postwar US-American imperialism. Mimi Thi Nguyen, employing Derrida's theory of symbolic gift-giving, argues that US-American imperialism operates by bestowing a humanitarian "gift of freedom" on other nations for which it demands recompense in the form of forgiveness and exoneration from its victims. This imperialistic logic is registered in Denise Chong's biography of Phan Te Kim Phúc, The Girl in the Picture, which portrays the symbolic conclusion of Kim Phúc's journey from Vietnam to North America as dependent on her forgiveness of the American bombers who dropped napalm on her as a child (Nguyen 114-17). In a similar vein, Chihwing Wang argues that the longed-for reconciliatory return to Vietnam in memoirs such as Andrew Pham's Catfish and Mandala and Andrew Lam's Perfume Dreams produces, in the Vietnamese American subject a troubling awareness of his "diasporic aura as a sign of power conferred by the history of US-American military involvement" (183). In contrast to the approach taken by Nguyen in Learning True Love, Wang advances an understanding of reconciliation that explicitly rejects the common neoliberal equation of humanitarianism with the conferment of "rights" or "freedom" (for more on the connections between human rights initiatives and neoliberalism, see Dahbour; Schwenkel). In her autobiography Chân Không points out repeatedly how her approach to peace and social aid evolved out of her renunciation of the right to forgive or condemn for political purposes. When four members of the School of Youth for Social Service are arrested by unknown assailants in 1967, she is pressured by representatives of each party to deny that she is involved in the act: but she responds instead by publicizing the fact that the murderers had been heard apologizing to their victims before shooting them: "It was obvious that these men had been forced to kill our friends, for if they refused, they themselves could have been killed. In the speech I wrote...I thanked the murderers for saying that they were forced to kill" (106). Chân Không's actions here call to mind Charles Taylor's notion of "transitional justice" (705) as a response to violence in which one "renounces the right conferred by suffering, the right of the innocent to punish the guilty, as an act of mercy"; but she responds instead by publicizing the fact that the murderers had been heard apologizing to their victims before shooting them: "It was obvious that these men had been forced to kill our friends, for if they refused, they themselves could have been killed. In the speech I wrote...I thanked the murderers for saying that they were forced to kill" (106). Chân Không's actions here call to mind Charles Taylor's notion of "transitional justice" (705) as a response to violence in which one "renounces the right conferred by suffering, the right of the innocent to punish the guilty, as an act of mercy"; but she responds instead by publicizing the fact that the murderers had been heard apologizing to their victims before shooting them: "It was obvious that these men had been forced to kill our friends, for if they refused, they themselves could have been killed. In the speech I wrote...I thanked the murderers for saying that they were forced to kill" (106). Chân Không's actions here call to mind Charles Taylor's notion of "transitional justice" (705) as a response to violence in which one "renounces the right conferred by suffering, the right of the innocent to punish the guilty, as an act of mercy"; but she responds instead by publicizing the fact that the murderers had been heard apologizing to their victims before shooting them: "It was obvious that these men had been forced to kill our friends, for if they refused, they themselves could have been killed. In the speech I wrote...I thanked the murderers for saying that they were forced to kill" (106).
agnostic in her rendering of the trajectory. At the center of this memoir, presents the recollection of the day of her father’s funeral. Devastated by these combined losses, she interprets the burning of her home as both an act of revenge by her father, and as karmic retribution for the current war in Iraq: “For refusing to be conscious of the suffering we caused .... we are given this sight of our city in ashes. God is teaching us, showing us this scene that is like war” (14).

The second section of the memoir, “Paper,” describes her unsuccessful attempts, both in the United States and on her previous trip to China, to locate the lost Books of Peace — centuries-old collections of Chinese wisdom which may or may not exist. This brief section concludes with Kingston’s decision to recreate the contents of her burned manuscript, a “Fourth Book of Peace” that aims to provide a “happy ending to the Viet Nam War” (61). “Water,” the third section of the memoir, presents the reconstructed manuscript and serves as a sequel to Kingston’s 1988 novel, Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book. Like Tripmaster Monkey, “Water” is narrated by the bodhisattva of compassion, Kuan Yin, who follows Wittman’s Ah Sin, her son Min Wang, and their son Mario from California to Hawaii during the war. Based loosely on Kingston’s own experiences moving to Hawaii in 1967, Wittman’s story focuses on the creation of a temporary Sanctuary where soldiers write statements of conscience against the war. Finally, the last and longest part of the memoir, “Earth,” is devoted to the Veterans Writing Group which Kingston organized in June 1993. Part creative writing class, part therapy group, and part sangha, the Veterans Writing Group provides its members with an opportunity to discuss their wartime experiences and traumas and to capture them in fiction and life writing. “Earth” depicts those discussions and writings in detail, even incorporating into the text whole stories and poems produced by the veterans for the workshops. While several of these texts have subsequently been published as a separate collection edited by Kingston entitled Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace, their combined effect in The Fifth Book is to establish a sharp contrast between the narrative form of “Earth” and the previous, more univocal portions of the text. As I suggest, this chaotic communal narrative represents a deliberate effort on Kingston’s part to remedy the losses and traumas registered earlier in the memoir. Drawing on The Fifth Book, Kingston’s attempt to give expression to the communal vision of self which she discovered in the wake of the Oakland-Berkeley fire. Although she had always felt a sense of duality as a Chinese American torn between cultural traditions in the East and the West, the fire, by destroying her home and rendering her completely dependent on others, made her realize more powerfully than ever that “the self is always in context with society and community” (Kingston qtd. in Simmons 164). Accordingly, she began to see that the only hope of working through her own trauma was to look for a solution to suffering and war on a global scale: “the only way I can integrate East and West is by thinking about global politics or a global peace-making mission” (Kingston qtd. in Simmons 164). In The Fifth Book, engaged Buddhism clearly provides the model and the practice for carrying out this transnational peace-making project. Although Kingston’s China Men makes subtle use of Buddhist tales to blur boundaries between fiction and autobiography (Lim 303 and although Tripmaster Monkey is narrated by the bodhisattva Kuan Yin, The Fifth Book of Peace showcases the importance of Buddhist retreat and meditation to Kingston’s writing and teaching. At the first meeting of the Veterans Writing Group she instructs participants to think of writing as a form of meditation: “Writing is like meditation: you sit breathing in silence, only you add one thing — the writing. Instead of letting thoughts and pictures and feelings go by, you hold on to them. You slow them down. You find the words for them ... Writing, you change. And you change the world, even the past” (The Fifth Book 266). Several meetings of the group take place as part of Thich Nhat Hahn’s teaching tours in the United States during which both he and Chân Khỏng provide spiritual instruction to King- ston and the veterans. Teachings on interbeing loom large in Kingston’s representation of these meetings, and Chân Khỏng’s discussions with the veterans refer to several of the events depicted in her autobiography, establishing an intertextual relationship between The Fifth Book and Learning True Love. Yet despite her reverence for these Buddhist teachers, Kingston is not uncritical in her rendering of them. At various points she remarks on the detachment and abstraction of Nhat Hahn’s teaching, concluding that “it’s up to me to teach the veterans practically” (308). She also reflects critically on Chân Khỏng’s practice of getting “in the skin” of her interlocutors: “Sister Phuong says, ‘This group of
veterans, you suffer less than other veterans.' She says such a thing with Jeff Barber's artificial leg sticking out before her. Why does she do that? Does she have a point? ... She's too impressed by drama. She's a Buddhist, she's Sister True Emptiness, you don't feel the shame in our silence" (307). Later, when the group travels to Plum Village for the filming of a BBC documentary, Kingston's reservations are echoed in the comments of a veteran who confesses to her, "I have problems with Sister Chân Hoàng and her generalizations. I don't like her politics" (377). Although King-
ston turns to engaged Buddhism as a practice for bringing together East and West, she is not entirely satisfied with the model of community it provides.

Shortly after the publication of The Fifth Book, Kingston provides some insight into the source of her dissatisfaction. When asked whether she regards The Fifth Book as an effort to come out as a Buddhist, she speaks about the importance of meditation in her life but opts for a more inclusive account of her identity: "You know the linguistic concept of 'et cetera'? I am Buddhist, et cetera. I am Chinese-American, et cetera. I'm an American, et cetera. I'm a writer, et cetera" (Kingston qtd. in Whalen-Bridge 181). Kingston then goes on to say that awareness of interconnectedness, in her view, does not entail the complete elimination of the ego, since "it seems to me we always have one, and I don't think I understand that, about letting go of ego" (182). In contrast with Chân Hoàng's unhesitating endorsement of empathy and nondiscrimination, Kingston's comments suggest her unwillingness to privilege Buddhist insight or practice above other forms of cultural or ethnic identity. Tsomo argues that this difference often separates Asian American Buddhist from Asian Buddhist women (152), but Kingston's desire to strike a balance between various kinds of affiliation should be read as less of a commitment to resist values. On the contrary, in a subsequent interview she does not hesitate to claim a specifically Buddhist objective for The Fifth Book and Veterans of War. In response to an interview question about how her most recent books reflect her idea of the "woman warrior" she writes that "I am working on a Buddhist definition. With his/her sword, Manjusri cuts through ignorance and wrong views and delusion" ("Maxine Hong Kingston"<https://www.sonsni.com/maxine-hong-kingston-interview.html>). In light of Kingston's reservations about empathy and nondiscrimination, her invocation of Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, is significant.

Kingston views the Buddha as "the great Buddhist, but at the same time, a woman warrior" (152) who is constitutive of the practice of compassion. If, as I argue previously, the narrative structure of Learning True Love is organized to show how Chân Hoàng's wartime experiences shape her renunciation of self and her practice of empathy, the structure of The Fifth Book of Peace testifies to Kingston's efforts, in the wake of her symbolic experience of war, to develop a new writing practice capable of registering a critical, transnational form of empathy.

A crucial step in that process is rejection of the solitary life of the writer, which although guided by compassion, can also serve to remove one from the world. When Kingston suggests to her mother that the fire might also have been an act of revenge from her deceased father, she is angrily rebuked: "Your Baba saved you!" she yelled. 'He kept you busy and safe here. If not for him, his funeral, keeping you home in Stockton, you — I know you — you would have been in a cloud of reading or a cloud of writing. The house burns, the city burns, you wouldn't notice' (Fifth Book 24). The idea that solitary writing proves potentially dangerous to herself and others provides the impetus for thinking about what would not be normal today, but then, when the band of monks, in the company of her imagination, the garret where she used to write: "Fiction cares for others; it is compassionate, and gives others voice ... The garret where I wrote, which was just my height, burned. A sign. I do not want the aloneness of the writer's life. No more solitary. I need a community of like minds" (Fifth Book 62). In this passage, Kingston's shift from describing the work of the fiction writer, to reading the sign of her burned garret, signals her decision to combine Kuan Yin's compassion with Manjusri's sword. Although she makes one last attempt at creating a happy ending to Vietnam through fiction, the story of Witt-
man's retreat to Hawaii in "Water" fails precisely because it recreates the avoidance of war which, she
believes, caused her "baptism by fire" (McDaniel 63). Whitman’s motivation for leaving the United States is to avoid contact with the War in Vietnam: "Butting heads against the escalating war, gives it energy. Don’t think about it anymore" (65). But it is precisely the need to look at and think about war that motivates Kingston’s turn to a genuinely communal form of writing, reading, and teaching in the final section of the memoir.

Ultimately, it is Kingston’s supervision of the Veterans Writing Group, consisting of African American, Asian American, and White men and women, that emerges as a form of critical empathy in The Fifth Book of Peace. On one level, this group establishes for Kingston a new understanding of her purpose as writer and teacher. Watching the veterans work together, Kingston thinks: "This communication is what I live for. I am accomplishing the purpose of my life: to get each to communicate with all. I am accomplishing the purpose of my life: to get each to communicate with all. If nothing more happens, today is culmination enough" (Fifth Book 340). In contrast to the work of the solitary fiction writer, as Kingston has defined it, her writing about the veterans workshops resists the tendency to imagine the inner lives of her characters; instead, the veterans’ perspectives on their wartime experiences, and on one another, are represented directly through the writing they produce for each meeting. By describing her own (often conflicted) role in leading these workshops, Kingston concludes The Fifth Book by practicing what Margaretta Jolly calls "critical creative life writing" (878), in which the central focus is reflection on the process and teaching of creative writing itself. In contributing to this genre, Kingston joins other life writers, such as Jane Tompkins and bell hooks, who have employed Buddhist principles in the development of their pedagogies. hooks in particular insists, like Kingston, on empathy and meditation without thereby demanding the relinquishment of identity, and even credits Thich Nhat Hahn with providing a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit” (Teaching 14). For Kingston, critical creative life writing allows her not only to theorize connections between meditation, community, and composition practice, but also to construct a vision of community in which the elaboration of different cultural, ethnic, and ideological perspectives plays an essential part. As Shounan points out, Kingston presents peace as an ongoing work in progress that requires frequent exposure to new cultural viewpoints (120) including those of North Vietnamese veterans, U.S. peace activists, and others.

In conclusion, despite the differences that separate Kingston from Chân Không on the subject of empathy, Kingston’s critical creative life writing, like Chân Không’s spiritual autobiography, still affirms the truth of interbeing. Late in Learning True Love Chân Không provides a hopeful vision of immigration as a path to peace and cultural tolerance: "For the first time I can see that Vietnam is not just the small dragon-shaped country on the South China Sea. It is now the whole world, extending from the Americas to Europe, and all the way down to Australia" (228). It is difficult to imagine Kingston invoking the global spread of US-American culture as a corresponding image of transnational community. Instead, she portrays the Veterans Writing Group and her own writing about it as an effort to "to show the world a multicultural, multiracial America. Every time we go to war, we’re in schizophrenic agony. Whoever the enemy is, they’re related to us" (Fifth Book 361). Where Chân Không offers a vision of interbeing defined by nondiscrimination, Kingston insists on global connections without letting go of racial and cultural difference.

Works Cited


Christopher Kocela teaches contemporary US-American literature, theory, and popular culture at Georgia State University. His interests in scholarship include intersections between Eastern thought (especially Buddhism) and the depiction of racial and gender difference, as well as the development of transnational perspectives, in contemporary North American English fiction and poetry. Kocela published *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction* (2010). E-mail: <ckocela@gsu.edu>