

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

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Christopher Kocela,
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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 Zablocki 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 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 Caucasian 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 *Anattalakkhana 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 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, a fundamental teaching of autobiography 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 meditation, 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 Buddhism 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 mindfulness, but with the writing process itself. At the heart of *Learning True Love* is the spiritual progression 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* depicts this renunciation as a form of imaginative projection into the lives of others analogous to the process of writing itself: as a result, the political power of engaged Buddhism in the text becomes tied — problematically 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 embrace 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 psycho-logical 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 enables compassion without 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 Thich Nhat Hahn 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 1968, her humanitarian activism and teaching tours of Europe and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. The first edition of the autobiography, published in 1993, concludes with her ordination as a nun in 1988 and the 2007 edition updates her life story by describing her role in the establishment of Deer Park monastery in California, the first US-American branch of the Order of Interbeing. This version concludes with an emotional account of her return to Vietnam for Nhat Hahn's much-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" (2), an emotional childhood experience that in many spiritual autobiographies provides 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. Over the course of the book, this pattern serves to authenticate her spiritual progress in 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 difficulties associated with postwar return and reconciliation in Vietnamese American literature. 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 target aspects of US-American imperialism not recognized in Vietnamese American texts. Recent 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 exonerated 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, Chih-ming 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 imperialism" (183). In contrast to the texts examined by Nguyen and Wang, *Learning True Love* advances an understanding of reconciliation that explicitly rejects the common neoliberal equation of humanitarianism with the conferral 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 murdered by unknown assailants in 1967, she is pressured by representatives of each warring party to denounce the other as responsible for 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, of the victim to purge the victimizer. The move is the very opposite of the instinctive defense of our righteousness. It is a move which can be called forgiveness, but at a deeper level, it is based on a recognition of common, flawed humanity" (709). In Taylor's view, both Nelson Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the Dalai Lama's Middle Way solution to Tibetan independence exemplify this strategy, but such tactics frequently placed Chân Không at odds with U.S. anti-war protestors and peace organizers. As early as 1968 U.S. peace activists believed peace could be reached in Vietnam only through the defeat of the South Vietnamese and the complete withdrawal of military forces, a strategy that in Chân Không's view elevated long-term political objectives over the immediate suffering of the Vietnamese (135). Similarly, she makes clear that despite the esteem in which she is held by human rights organizations around the world she refuses affiliation with these organizations and "never claims to work for human rights" (211). For Chân Không, humanitarian efforts should be conducted without "any distinction between the person who gives the help and the one who receives it, just as the right hand helps the left hand without looking down upon it or expecting any special thanks" (280). Accordingly, she avoids the language of vindication or forgiveness in describing her return visit to Vietnam after nearly forty years in exile.

Yet while the depiction of renunciation works effectively to legitimate Chân Không's strategy of nondiscrimination, other aspects of the narrative in *Learning True Love* detract from the reader's ability to empathize with this approach. Perhaps the most conspicuous rhetorical feature of the work is its incantatory repetition of the statement that Chân Không was "never tired" (76, 149, 154, 278) in pursuing her humanitarian goals: "Vietnamese and others around the world were also shouldering great responsibilities to try to help alleviate the suffering in Vietnam, but many of them became exhausted — today we call it 'burnout.' I never felt that way" (76). As this address to "burnout" suggests, Chân Không is cognizant of the fact that Western readers are likely to question the pre-eminence of empathy in her spiritual and political practice. One of the persistent risks run by witness narratives focused on war is their potential to demand too much of their readers, producing disengagement or compassion fatigue as a result of overexposure to trauma or violence (Smith and Watson 137). But *Learning True Love* addresses doubts about empathy solely in terms of how to overcome its weakening or absence and never by addressing the possibility that one might choose, for moral or political reasons, not to empathize. Initially, Chân Không is herself uncertain about why she is able to work beyond the endurance of others (77); but by the time she returns to Vietnam, she has come to realize that the solution to concerns about compassion fatigue is empathy itself: "In this moment I realized the significance of this return of Thay and his Sangha to Vietnam. Suddenly, I felt connected to everything without discrimination — it was all equally good. I felt the same empathy for all, and decided to accept them as they were ... From that day on I started working from early morning until late at night. I was never tired" (278). Absent in this epiphany is any awareness of the fact that, for some readers, "empathy has become an ideologically suspect myth of benevolence designed by the powerful to justify their practice of selectively appropriating the cultures of the powerless" (Huang 147-48). While Chân Không's status as a Vietnamese exile would seem to deflect accusations that she acts out of imperial-

istic motives, her reliance on empathy could nonetheless appear problematic for Western, and particularly US-American, readers attempting to embrace her practice of socially engaged Buddhism.

Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* dramatizes some of the difficulty of translating Chân Không's practice of empathy into an American cultural context. Through its direct engagement with Chân Không's teaching as delivered to war veterans in the United States, Kingston's memoir registers a response perhaps prevalent among Western readers of *Learning True Love*, which is that, despite the inspirational appeal of Chân Không's depiction of interbeing, it is necessary to question the political implications of empathy in an age of pluralism. In *The Fifth Book* this questioning emerges not only in the immediate reactions of some veterans, but also in Kingston's representation of the relationship between life writing and interbeing. The formal complexity of Kingston's memoir reflects an attempt to preserve Chân Không's approach to transBuddhist community-building while remaining more attentive to the possible dangers of empathy as a practice capable of simply denying, rather than attempting to work across, cultural difference and otherness. In contrast to Chân Không's *Learning True Love*, Kingston's *The Fifth Book* poses a challenge to the conventions of memoir by bringing together extended passages of fiction and life writing. *The Fifth Book* covers nearly ten-and-a-half years of Kingston's life beginning in October 1991 with the firestorm that destroyed numerous homes and neighborhoods in the Oakland-Berkeley area including Kingston's own, and ending on International Women's Day 2002. The four sections of the book are named for four traditional natural elements because, as Nicole McDaniel notes, "the qualities of each element — the creativity of wood [in the form of paper], the energy of fire, the endurance of earth, and communication of water — influence how Kingston organizes each chapter" (4). The first section, "Fire," depicts Kingston's failed effort to rescue the manuscript of her novel-in-progress from her burning home in Berkeley, which was destroyed on 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 previous trips to China, to locate three 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 recreated 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 Ah Sing, his wife Taña, 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.

While writing *The Fifth Book*, Kingston spoke of it as an effort to give expression to the new, 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 of the United States during which both he and Chân Không provide spiritual instruction to Kingston and the veterans. Teachings on interbeing loom large in Kingston's representation of these meetings, and Chân Không'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 Không'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. Where does she get the notion that these people have less suffering? ... She's too impressed by drama. She's a Buddhist, she's Sister True Emptiness, yet doesn't feel the drama 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 Không and her generalities. I don't like her politics" (377). Although Kingston 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.

In an interview conducted 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 Không'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 not be read as lack of commitment to her Buddhist 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.sonshi.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. As one of the two most important bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism (alongside Kuan Yin) Manjusri is renowned for his powers of discernment and interpretation. In the introduction to the Lotus Sutra it is Manjusri who, alone among the legions of bodhisattvas and divine beings in attendance, is able to read the signs that the Buddha is about to deliver the great lotus sutra teachings. I suggest that Kingston's reference to Manjusri here should be read as an effort not to deny the importance of compassion or empathy, but to work toward a more critically aware version of empathy than that which characterizes Chân Không's teaching. Although LaCapra indicates the potential for empathy to degrade into mere "projective identification" (134), he also describes a concept of empathy that remains capable of respecting otherness and difference: "Neither should empathy be conflated with an incorporation of the other into one's own (narcissistic) self or understood instrumentally as a means of discovering one's own 'authentic' identity. On the contrary, it induces one to recognize one's internal alterity or difference from oneself ... Empathy in this sense is enabled by internal alterity (or the unconscious) and based on one's being open to the other, who is constitutive of the formation of oneself" (76-77). I suggest that it is a form of critically aware empathy — a union of Kuan Yin's compassion and Manjusri's critical wisdom — that Kingston attempts to develop in *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

The need for a critically aware form of empathy is established in Kingston's interpretation of the Oakland-Berkeley fire at the start of the book. Her belief that the fire is a form of karmic retribution for her unwillingness to take responsibility for her country's wars serves a function similar to what Wang reads, in Vietnamese American narratives of homecoming, as a traumatic return on the Asian American subject of the privileges of U.S. imperialism (183). As Wang observes, this traumatic return forces the subject to realize that she "cannot just doggedly cling to the resistant minoritarian stance" (183); instead, it becomes necessary to balance this stance against awareness of one's positioning, in the eyes of others in the world, as a privileged subject. For Kingston, it is no longer enough for her to maintain awareness of her status as a Chinese American subject in the United States, particularly when that minority positioning allows her not to consider her culpability for the actions of those in power. If, as I argue previously, the narrative structure of *Learning True Love* is organized to show how Chân Không'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 writing in communal terms — a fact that becomes evident when Kingston contemplates, in her imagination, the garret where she used to write: "Fiction cares for others; it is compassion, 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 Wittman'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 each, and all 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 pedagogy. 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 other writers. In contrast with Chân Không's ability to get "in the skin" of her interlocutors, Kingston portrays empathy as, in part, an ability to identify and bring together those most able to establish dialogue on potentially divisive issues. Citing one of the many guest speakers she invites to the workshops, Kingston writes: "'We were a bunch of dumb kids. The Vietnamese too, a bunch of dumb kids...' Larry, a veteran of Viet Nam, can say such things, which I want to say but do not have the authority to say" (*Fifth Book* 291).

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.

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