

‘FEAR-OF-WOMEN:’ ELIDING AND MYTHOLOGIZING WOMEN IN MAXINE HONG

KINGSTON’S *The Fifth Book of Peace*

by

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(Under the direction of Aidan Wasley)

ABSTRACT

In this paper I will explore the complex and troubled relationship between Kingston and the female characters she depicts. While Kingston is a popular literary figure whose work has often been analyzed with special attention to treatment of gender roles, the topic is largely unexplored in relation to *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Literary critics may have avoided this text, largely because of its unstable categorization as Memoir/Social History (made yet more difficult because it also contains a novella). However, I believe that the book is that much more deserving of critical attention, as it illustrates Kingston’s real, working relationships in the world rather than simply showcasing her interpretation of a more fluid, imagined environment. Therefore, the relationship between Kingston and her female characters is particularly intriguing because she is not simply creating characters from scratch in this text; rather, she is recording deliberate interpretations of actual people, people who are already a part of the narrative, regardless of her consent. However, she maintains the power to include certain descriptions, details, and dialogue, while, ostensibly for the sake of creating a comprehensive narrative, also excluding other information. Thus, the content of *The Fifth Book of Peace* can be examined and interpreted to reveal more information about the ways that Kingston approaches women in her writing, both in the 1970s and in recent years.

I argue that *The Fifth Book of Peace* relegates many women to simplistic categories that safely contain, interpret, and weave those women back into the story in new ways. It will be important to read these interactions through Kingston's relationship with her own Woman Warrior character. Using this relationship as a starting point, I identify two ways in which the text manipulates the depiction of female characters. On the one hand, it elides the presence of women, such as in the decision to use Woman Vet as the single representative of the Doughnut Dollies (and possibly of other women as well). This move erases any evidence of varied individual experiences and beliefs. Alternately, the text mythologizes female characters, as when Gail De La Fuente becomes "the Angel" (Kingston 2003, 313). In this case, such dubiously generous treatment serves the double purpose of elevating the idea of women while simultaneously containing them by reinforcing traditional gender roles. I explore these categorizations in order to bring the treatment of women in Kingston's work into conversation with her greater struggle to discover peace. This study will reveal the extent to which the text has embraced essentialism, discussing both the treatment of real women and the reinvention of the character of Fa Mook Lan, the Woman Warrior. Ultimately, I will explore the ways in which the shift in attitude toward the Woman Warrior has affected Kingston's struggle to represent men and women equally, as well as the way it has affected her new search for peace.

INDEX WORDS: Maxine Hong Kingston; Feminism; The Woman Warrior; The Fifth Book of Peace; To Be the Poet; Mythologization; Chinese-American Literature; multiculturalism; Fa Mu Lan, Fa Mook Lan; life writing

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## DEDICATION

For the family of strong women whose stories I grew up on.

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## CHAPTER 1

### FEAR-OF-WOMEN

Most accounts of Maxine Hong Kingston's work, in popular as well as scholarly articles, consider both the author and her writing to be staunchly feminist. This position, established with the publication of *The Woman Warrior* in 1976, is so prevalent that more recent criticism does not even have to establish the fact; for instance, in Piro Ahokas's article, "Ethnic Life Writing in an Era of Postethnicity: 'Maxine Hong Kingston' and 'Alice Walker' at the Millennium," published in 2007, the author begins by introducing Kingston as a "feminist/womanist social activist," and goes on to say that her writing has "usefully challenged sexism and racism" (241). This attitude, which assumes that Kingston's position as a feminist is already established, has been taken for granted in the last thirty years, particularly in response to her second book, *China Men*, published in 1980. In fact, many critics complained that *The Woman Warrior*, and, more explicitly, *China Men*, carried feminist ideology so far that the books became examples of female chauvinism. As King-Kok Cheung explains in her essay, "*The Woman Warrior* versus *The Chinaman Pacific*: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?," "Kingston is accused of falsifying culture and of reinforcing stereotype in the name of feminism" (112). These criticisms demonstrate the overall attitude toward Kingston's work, which has elided another, more complicated element in her writing, one that emerges clearly in her most recent text, *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

*The Fifth Book of Peace* is generically fascinating because, like much of Kingston's work, it blends autobiographical and fictional material to create a unique hybrid. The text was actually born out of a fire in Berkeley in 1991 that destroyed Kingston's home as well as

her latest manuscript, entitled *The Fourth Book of Peace*. After losing that manuscript, Kingston decided to take a break from writing fiction, and she returned to autobiographical self-expression instead. Since she considered *The Fourth Book of Peace* to be irrevocably lost, she began work on *The Fifth Book of Peace* instead. The book is divided into four sections, 'Fire,' 'Paper,' 'Water,' and 'Earth.' 'Water' returns to the subject matter from *The Fourth Book of Peace*, which was intended to be a sequel to Kingston's novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*. As a part of the larger project, it becomes a self-contained novella. The other three sections, however, are autobiographical: 'Fire' records Kingston's experience when her house burned down; 'Paper' tells about her search, in both the United States and China, for the first three books of peace; and 'Earth,' the most dense section, chronicles the development of writing workshops for veterans, Kingston's uneasy relationship with her mother, and her BBC-funded trip to France to meditate with Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Experimenting with form once again, Kingston devotes a large portion of 'Earth' to the work produced by veterans in the workshops. The focus of my work is the representation of women in the autobiographical sections of the text, as opposed to the novella in the middle of the book.

While her re-visioning of Chinese myths and her focus on exposing the unfair treatment of women in Chinese cultural practices are clearly empowering and resist such unfair treatment, these elements should not conceal Kingston's self-acknowledged "fear-of-women" (Kingston 2003, 317). One of the more frequent struggles in the feminist movement has been against the sexist treatment of women, by women. In some ways, this problem emerges as a by-product of patriarchal societies, where women have grown up in a culture that denigrates them; thus, despite knowing that these derogatory attitudes are unfair in their own individual cases, many women may still internalize that attitude toward others. For Kingston, who grew up in an environment that, according to her own accounts, was almost completely dismissive of women, it seems plausible, and even likely, that this attitude would have taken hold.

In addition, Kingston clearly struggles with her relationship with her own mother, who is a recurring character in her work. In fact, according to Helena Grice's summary, "the fourth

section, [of *The Fifth Book of Peace*] ‘Earth,’ takes us back to Berkeley in the present day, and to Kingston’s relationship with her mother” (121). This summary, found in one of the few existing critical articles on the text, completely elides a major portion of the plot of ‘Earth,’ which more prominently tells the story of the Viet Nam vets’ writers’ workshops, and of Kingston’s eventual trip to France to meditate with Thich Nhat Hanh. In choosing to summarize the text in this way, Grice suggests that Kingston is still struggling primarily with the issues of *The Woman Warrior*: that her mother continues to loom over her life, somehow eclipsing all other concerns, even ones as powerful as the question of achieving peace. The implications of such a viewpoint are twofold: first, it appears that, twenty-five years after the publication of her first book, critics still see Kingston as obsessed with defining herself as an independent woman in opposition to her mother; and, second, that the relationship with her mother is the most important focus of her work. This second point is particularly emphasized later in Grice’s summary, as she explains that, “it is Brave Orchid [Kingston’s mother] who shakes her daughter out of her post-fire stasis, and spurs her on to her next project” (Grice 2006, 121). While this is true, in a three-and-a-half page summary of ‘Earth,’ itself 160 pages long, it seems strange to insist on reading Kingston’s work so completely through her relationship with her mother. In fact, Grice’s decision to refer to Kingston’s mother as ‘Brave Orchid’ is especially telling: in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston includes a short story told in the first person about a girl whose mother is named Brave Orchid. This narrator is obviously close to Kingston, but she is not necessarily synonymous with the author. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, on the other hand, Kingston refers to her mother as ‘MaMa,’ not ‘Brave Orchid’: Grice has collapsed the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* with the one from *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Doing so suggests that Kingston’s work is all part of a larger project and that the focus of that project is a mother-daughter relationship. Thus, Grice’s article illustrates the ways in which reading Kingston’s work in terms of a feminist project has become the default critical position, even when that feminism is far from the focus of the text.

Given this example, it may be easier to understand how the actual treatment of women in *The Fifth Book of Peace* has thus far been ignored in critical work. ‘Earth,’ the final section of the text, deals primarily with Kingston’s narrative about creating and running writing workshops for Viet Nam veterans. As a result, much of the text is interested in the many male veterans who participate, but it is the treatment of the few women who attend the writing workshops that is troubling. Kingston mentions apparently healthy interactions with both her sisters and other female friends, but her description of the women who are closer to the text is perplexing and difficult to categorize. The text is certainly not downright antagonistic toward these women, but Kingston clearly points to the fact that she is uncomfortable in their presence, as she acknowledges when she admits that she has “fear-of-women” (Kingston 2003, 317). As a result, the text relegates these women to marginalized positions, deeming them either inconsequential or miraculous, a move that safely contains, interprets, and dismisses them from the story.

Kingston does make mention of many women throughout the text, but they are described, both by Kingston and in their own identifications, primarily as caregivers— as translators of men’s lived experience (264), as “mother hens” (268), as triage nurses and readjustment counselors (263), as letter writers (291), as “white wifely thighs welcome-home spread” (297), as Viet Nam widows (Kingston 2003, 314). In each instance, these women seem to feel pain primarily for the men’s sake. Nurses and counselors are hurt by the pain they witness, and even widows become outraged on their husbands’ behalf, as in the case of Pauline Laurent, who demands that the army recognize her husband as “Dead?!” not “fatally wounded” (Kingston 2003, 314). In fact, the text engages in this terminology to describe the women present at the writing workshops, not just when discussing the role of women in the Viet Nam War. That is, not only are women classified as caregivers during the 1970s; contemporary women are also represented primarily as healers of men.

The question, then, is whether Kingston is recording these women’s own interpretations of their roles or forcibly ascribing those roles. There is obviously no way to discern just how

much Kingston's point of view has influenced her record of these workshops, but ultimately, she is responsible for the ways in which women are represented in her text. Beverly Skeggs says that, "Storytelling is not a neutral activity" (Tokarczyk 2008, 46). In other words, Kingston must choose what to include and exclude, must speak from her own biased point of view. In addition, Tokarczyk tells us that, "Kingston strives to depict the accuracy of the experience, not necessarily the accuracy of the details" (56). If Skeggs and Tokarczyk are right, then Kingston could leave out the voices of many actual participants, since she is simply reflecting her own experiences rather than creating an accurate record of the events. In other words, if Kingston's impression was that a predominant number of veterans were men, then the text might focus solely on those men.

But this explanation is insufficient for Kingston's work, which has often explored silences and absences. When faced with traditional behaviors and unfavorable situations in the past, Kingston has been well known for questioning those roles; for proof, we can turn again to *The Woman Warrior*, where, in "No Name Woman," Kingston imagines a multitude of justifications for the behavior of her mysterious, adulterous aunt. Here, she is faced with nothing but her mother's unpleasant recitation of the aunt's sins, but Kingston is able to heroize the woman nonetheless. If nothing else, we can ask that she do the same for the women in this book: she can trouble the repeated stories of healing men, she can raise questions about why only a fraction of women consider themselves veterans. Kingston is responsible both for failing to point out and question the gender normative roles that pervade these narratives and, ultimately, for idealizing such roles throughout *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Since the final text elides the presence of real women while celebrating traditional feminine roles, we can ask why Kingston has chosen to construct her narrative in this way and what such a distorted emphasis might mean. This elision also points back to Kingston's 'fear-of-women,' to the ways in which Kingston as narrator displays clear discomfort when female veterans enter the workshop space. The fact that this book does not approach women in the same ways as Kingston's previous work suggests a significant change in her writing and in what she hopes

to achieve through it, a change that we can trace by examining the treatment of women in both *The Fifth Book of Peace* and Kingston's other recent text, *To Be the Poet*.

## CHAPTER 2

### EMPOWERING WOMEN'S VOICES

Before launching into criticism of Maxine Hong Kingston's 'fear-of-women,' it is important to take a closer look at how much we can and should hold the text responsible for the details and attitudes it reflects. It is imperative that we acknowledge the difficulties of the situation that Kingston is dealing with in this book. She tackles not only the Viet Nam War and the multitude of ideas and emotions attached to that war; she also confronts a time when women's power was severely limited. In this project, I explore the troubled relationship between Kingston and the other women in the text, but this relationship must be studied within two frames: first, in the 1970s, when many Americans felt helpless in the face of an unending war, when women, in particular, struggled to make a difference; and second, as a record of the twelve years that Kingston spent writing this book, from 1991 to 2003 (Tokarczyk 2008, 199). These dual frames are important because they can help us differentiate between the areas where the text portrays women as caretakers because it is exploring a time period in which women were limited to such roles, and the places where the text essentializes women by suggesting that their contemporary value is still located primarily in that ability.

In addition to the distinction between time periods, it is helpful to pay attention to the way that Kingston includes herself as a character within *The Fifth Book of Peace*. It is impossible to pin down the precise differences between Kingston the narrator and Kingston the author, or, more precisely, to discover how self-aware Kingston is of her behavior in the text. One of the most helpful resources when dealing with this question is Kingston's own explanation of her beliefs: she has given numerous interviews, quite a few of them while

working on *The Fifth Book of Peace* or shortly after its publication. In addition to the interviews, the text of *To Be the Poet*, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, provides insight into Kingston's process. Because all three sources (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, the records of the interviews, and *To Be the Poet*) are written in an autobiographical voice, because each of the texts deals with details that are Kingston's true life experiences, it becomes possible to understand all three as part of a larger, interconnected text. At the same time, though, these three sources should be understood as Kingston's public narrative, not as a private record of her life. In other words, Kingston the author and Kingston the narrator should be considered as separate entities: Kingston the author may have experienced the emotions that are recorded in this book, but she has some control over what to emphasize, and when, and how. While exploring Kingston's writing, then, in both books and interviews, we can assume that she has made deliberate choices about what parts of her life to include and exclude. And so, finally, the characters in the book, the thoughts that Kingston records, and the ways in which she excerpts quotes and writings from the veterans should all be carefully examined in order to understand the messages and goals of the text itself.

In order to understand why Kingston chooses to devote so much of *The Fifth Book of Peace* to the Viet Nam War and its veterans, it is helpful to look at the introduction to 'Earth,' in which she writes about her personal connections to the War. This introduction also sets up the interlocking themes of caretaking and regret that run throughout the book. In this section, Kingston tells about her own experience with her husband, Earll, and two of her brothers, all of whom participated in Viet Nam, and about her inability to keep them out of the War or to heal her brothers when they returned from the War. Kingston says, "I should have written more letters to my brothers Joe and Norman in Da Nang and Korea...I should have better counseled my sister Carmen, who married a soldier...I should have demanded that Earll not ship out with the Merchant Marine for Viet Nam" (241). Each of these regrets, which are presented in rapid succession and closely tied to one another, implies that Kingston believes that she had the potential to affect the War in Viet Nam and those who participated,

but that she foolishly passed those opportunities by. While she does not expound on why she should have written more letters to her brothers or offered “better counsel” to her sister, she seems to suggest that she could have better cared for her siblings during this time. This is especially true in the case of her brother Joe, who, Kingston later reveals, “turned his back on everything’..for a year, on our parents’ sofa” (Kingston 2003, 348). The implication, then, is that, if she had written more letters to Joe, perhaps he would not have spent a year on the sofa when he returned from Viet Nam. She also seems to believe that she could have helped Norman and Carmen in similar ways.

In the case of her husband, Earll, the situation is more complicated. By demanding that he not go with the Merchant Marines, Kingston suggests that she could have preserved his mental and emotional health, as she hoped to do for her siblings, but she also hopes to have prevented actual aggression. Kingston admits that, “I went aboard the ship..and saw the torpedoes and rockets roped to the deck”(Kingston 2003, 241). The text implies that, if she had kept Earll off the ship, if other women had kept *their* husbands off the ships, then there would have been no crew to launch torpedoes and rockets. In some ways, this is akin to her decision, as an act of peaceful protest, to refuse to use her brothers’ ranks and APOs when addressing letters to them because “I was refusing to go along with any military system” (Kingston 2003, 241). Such an explanation suggests that Kingston sees writing, or, in this case, not writing, as an action with the potential to create change. This belief is reiterated in her desire to write letters to her brothers, implying that letter writing could have made a significant difference in their lives, just as she implies that providing spoken counsel to her sister could have produced real change. The importance of language is likewise evident in her regrets about Earll’s position during the War: she would have relied upon speech when demanding that he stay off the Merchant Marine ship, as well.

Of course, the underlying issue is Kingston’s belief that she could have relied upon language, both written and spoken, to make a difference in the War. If, as a woman, Kingston could not be drafted herself, she could at least have convinced a man to stand against the

draft. If she could not refuse to fire rockets, at least she could persuade men to hold their fire. And, beyond that, if she could not stop men from going to war, she could be more supportive, could write letters to her brothers and give counsel to her sister so that they would not be so emotionally damaged, thus decreasing the harmful side effects of Viet Nam if not ending the War itself. This belief seems to be a driving force behind Kingston's decision to hold writing workshops, as well as her decision to devote so much of *The Fifth Book of Peace* to an exploration of the veterans' concerns and perceptions of war. She imagines ways in which she could have used language to stop war in the past; since she failed to make use of these methods during the Viet Nam War, she is now making a conscious effort to use language against war and toward peace, both in the text and in her own life<sup>1</sup>.

This attitude toward the War may also explain some of Kingston's 'fear-of-women.' She devotes a good deal of this narrative to a record of her regrets, the ways in which she was powerless but might not have been. As a result, when she encounters women with strong voices, women who acted in practical, obviously useful ways during the War, there is a clear struggle to find a way of incorporating them into the text. Kingston is a pacifist, as we can see in her desire to put a stop to war or, at least, to heal the after-effects of war. It could potentially be very difficult for a pacifist to interact with a veteran and vice versa, but Kingston is working primarily with men who were drafted into a war, or who, at the very least, entered the armed services out of economic necessity. Because many of these men had no choice, then, it is easy enough for this text to represent the male veterans as victims, as people who did not wish to take part in the violent acts that constitute war.

But in the case of the women who participated, Kingston runs into veterans who take pride in their work. In the case of the "Second Generation Doughnut Dolly," for instance, the position has been passed from mother to daughter, suggesting that the role was so highly valued that it was worth keeping in the family (Kingston 2003, 320). They are proud of the work that they have done, that they have been allowed to do, perhaps because they

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<sup>1</sup>We see an example of this when Kingston was arrested while reading a poem outside the White House on International Women's Day (Tokarczyk 2008, 199, 202)

have had status conferred upon them, have gained power from a traditionally patriarchal system that previously limited their abilities. And after all, the work they have done has been rewarding and humanitarian, almost the exact opposite of what the male soldiers were doing in Viet Nam: rather than destroying and killing, these women have risked their lives for the clear purpose of caring for injured soldiers. Whether serving as Doughnut Dollies or triage nurses, these women have been able to make a positive impact, and they have been rewarded for their work. When Kingston's pacifist beliefs collide with these women, who are understandably proud of their participation in the War, strange things begin to happen. Kingston has demonstrated that she is uncertain about her own participation in the War, about what she could have done and how well it would have worked. It seems probable, then, that she would have trouble accepting women who participated wholeheartedly in that War. The earlier reference to ignoring the rank and APO on her brothers' letters becomes a microcosm of the bigger picture: she hoped to make a practical difference through the manipulation of language, but in the end, she failed to manipulate language successfully, and so she neglected her brothers' immediate needs instead. On the other hand, the female veterans chose to participate in the war rather than abstain from action, and, as a result, they were capable of performing clearly practical and helpful acts for the soldiers. In the aftermath of the War, the narrator is left questioning the usefulness of her abstention, but she is simultaneously confronted with examples of participation that were, without a doubt, positive and useful.

However, Kingston's belief that she could ever have used language to make a practical difference in the lives of her husband and brothers is problematic given the textual evidence of her relationships with these men in the aftermath of the War. For instance, Earll was across the country when fire attacked their San Francisco home in 1991, and, as Kingston says during that crisis, "I am not taken care of. It is I who have to take care of everybody else. Earll, as Sorin, will stay in Virginia for the run of *The Seagull*...I'll hold a grudge against him for neglecting me, nonetheless" (Kingston 2003, 29). This is a tricky statement,

since Kingston the narrator is telling us about what has already happened to Kingston the author, but, within the confines of the book, the narrators seems to reach this conclusion before she has had the chance to speak to her husband, to find out what he will want to do when he hears the news.<sup>2</sup> Chronologically speaking, Kingston the narrator is on the phone with her mother when she says that Earll will stay in Virginia, and she has called her mother in the first place because “I couldn’t call my husband; I didn’t have Earll’s current number memorized” (Kingston 2003, 22-23). And so the comment about being neglected by her husband becomes immensely complicated: we have no way of knowing if she is lamenting the fact that Earll will refuse to come home or if she is upset because she will tell Earll that it is not necessary for him to come home. We do not know if the narrator will let her husband know that she wants him to come home, or if Earll will realize that she is holding a grudge. According to one reading, then, Earll looks like a terrible husband— what kind of man refuses to come back when his home burns to the ground, when his wife feels “neglected?” And yet, according to the other reading, Kingston may not even have told Earll that she feels neglected. Will she encourage him to go about his work while she deals with the aftermath of the fire? According to this reading, Kingston will sacrifice her own desires, but she will do so without giving Earll a chance to take care of her. Without any further information, it is impossible for the reader to know how to interpret this scene. What is clear, however, is that she wants Earll to come home, and, for one reason or another, Earll will not do so. If we draw a comparison between this situation and the one in which Earll boarded a Merchant Marine ship, we can see how unlikely it would be for Kingston to convince Earll to stay on land. Given the circumstances during the fire, it seems that either Earll would have refused her request, or she would have been unable to ask him to come home at all. In either situation, Earll will end up on a boat, participating in the War, not paying attention to his wife’s demand that he stay at home.

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<sup>2</sup>Curiously, in an interview, Kingston says that, after she has read through the page proofs of her manuscript, Earll also reads through it and “writes little notes on it” (Tokarczyk 2008, 210). This suggests that Kingston is far enough removed from the narrative of the text that Earll can read about Kingston’s reactions to him without taking offense.

Similarly, Kingston invited both Norman and Joe to the writers' workshops, but neither of them attended. In fact, she admits to the rest of the workshop group that "neither one of them answered" her invitation at all (Kingston 2003, 292). This is particularly important because Kingston acknowledges that, "one motive for starting these workshops is, I want to give my brothers some ways to get over Viet Nam" (Kingston 2003, 292). In fact, in an interview, she clarifies this statement, saying that "Art, writing, community, and spiritual practice help keep them [the veterans] alive" (Tokarczyk 2008, 209). Kingston includes each of these activities in her workshops, thereby, according to her own definition, keeping the veterans alive. This reiterates Kingston's belief that language is powerful enough to change the world, even powerful enough to save lives. It also points to her desire to save her own brothers, not simply to involve them in her latest project. In the context of the book, then, their silence is its own kind of action. Perhaps it is no surprise that, at the first workshop, she says to the veterans, "Thank you for being my brothers" (Kingston 2003, 292). Kingston began the tremendous task of these workshops, at least in part, as a way to care for her brothers, and, since neither of them has acknowledged her effort, she has chosen to transfer that caring to the veterans in the workshop group, who she intends to treat as her brothers.

Given such evidence of her relationships with Earll, Norman, and Joe, it seems difficult to imagine that Kingston would have had the power to talk these men into dodging or refusing the draft. Discussing Earll, she acknowledges that, "I want the unreasonable, that he'd been there with the veterans, that he'd been there at the fire" (Kingston 2003, 282). Asking Earll to stay off the boat, to stay with her, seems like one more unreasonable request, just as her request for her brothers to attend the writing workshop was also treated as unreasonable, based on the silence that met it. Given their explicit resistance to her healing attempts even twenty years later, when they are far removed from the war, it seems naive, at best, to suggest that Kingston could have healed these men simply by sending them more letters.

These experiences, including Kingston's failures and regrets, suggest the ways in which she, too, has become a victim of war. It is important to recognize that she is not simply

conducting writing workshops as an altruistic exercise: she, too, wants to be healed of the trauma that she experienced when she became helpless and voiceless during the Viet Nam War. Angela K. Smith says that “To participate in war on many levels, [women] need to break traditional codes of femininity. Even as victims and casualties they trespass into a male arena” (4). The fact that Kingston writes with the veterans and participates in their sharing and meditation, then, can be seen as a way of “trespass[ing] into a male arena.” She is simultaneously inviting these men to make themselves heard and giving herself permission to speak with them, to be a voice that is equal to theirs. After the silencing that Kingston experienced during the 1970s, this must be a great relief. Helen M. Buss, quoted in Tokarczyk’s *Class Definitions*, suggests that, “Women take up memoir to rewrite themselves into history” (56). By intertwining her narrative with that of the veterans, Kingston is able to recover her own voice, making it a part of the narrative that once excluded her. With this voice, she is finally able to have an effect on the War and its veterans, over whom she was once unable to exert any influence.<sup>3</sup> But Kingston’s voicelessness in the 1970s was not just the voicelessness of an American woman in the face of Viet Nam: it was also the very particular voicelessness of a Chinese-American woman. We can find evidence of this other voicelessness by turning to Kingston’s first book, *The Woman Warrior*. As many critics have noted, Kingston dealt with the enforced silence of both Chinese immigrants and women in *The Woman Warrior*, most notably in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” in which Maxine aggressively confronts a Chinese girl in her class who refuses to speak. A current example of this line of criticism is evident in an interview for the 2004 text *Writing Across Worlds*, where

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<sup>3</sup>Helena Grice offers an alternative way of reading Kingston’s choice to quote the veterans directly, suggesting that, “it is as if the author cannot herself speak these horrors, but must allow them to be told by others...Kingston seems to be almost *silenced* by the stories (Grice 2006, 121, emphasis mine). Grice’s decision to interpret the veterans’ stories as a silencing overlooks the basic, obvious purpose of direct quotes; as a scholar herself, Grice frequently allows other people to voice their own ideas, which is what Kingston does here. Moreover, this is indicative of the problematic ways in which Kingston is criticized no matter how she approaches other voices: when she tells the stories of her male ancestors in *China Men*, she is accused of looking “for the experience of active appropriation” (Juhasz 1985, 184), but when she allows the men to tell their own stories, it is interpreted as a silencing of her voice instead.

Maggie Ann Bowers says to Kingston, “You spent part of your early life silent in English and in *The Woman Warrior* you refer to the pain of speaking” (174). Observations like this one indicate Kingston’s long-term interest in issues of voice, both literal and metaphorical.

In fact, Kingston’s desire to create a space of healing seems to have been triggered by a second traumatic episode in which she again lost a part of her voice: the fire that burned her home and her *Fourth Book of Peace*. In an interview with Michelle M. Tokarczyk, Kingston says, “Then came the fire and I lost that story [*The Fourth Book of Peace*, intended to be a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*]. And I lost my imagination..I didn’t care about fictional characters” (200). Since Kingston is a writer whose work is obsessed with voice, especially with a blending of factual and fictional elements, the sudden inability to write fiction, to use the imagination, must have been a severe loss. Kingston goes on to explain that, “I didn’t want to write fiction; I wanted to use writing as I did when I was a child, for self-expression” (Tokarczyk 2008, 200). This explanation suggests that Kingston was suffering from a loss of not just her fiction-writing abilities, but of her own identity— her reaction to the fire was to begin the process of self-identity and self-creation through writing, to reestablish her own narrative. In fact, in the interview with Bowers, Kingston says “a mature...human being first understands oneself and then considers the other” (Bowers 2004, 180). So, in order for Kingston to recover from the trauma that was her double loss of voice— first during Viet Nam, and again in the aftermath of the fire— she sets out to replace *The Fourth Book of Peace*, a novel about others, with *The Fifth Book of Peace*, a narrative of the self.

The efficacy of this process becomes evident when Kingston goes on to note that, “After about two years of that kind of writing [the self-expression mentioned above], Wittman [the protagonist of both Kingston’s novel *Tripmaster Monkey* and the novella within *The Fifth Book of Peace*, “Water”] came back” (Tokarczyk 2008, 200). So, only by first reestablishing her own identity was Kingston able to return to the role of storyteller. In fact, this seems to mirror an early phase in Kingston’s life as a writer: before writing her first novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston wrote two texts that established her identity and that of her family, *The*

*Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, both of which were published shortly after the end of the Viet Nam War (1976 and 1980, respectively). Now, again, before she is able to return to Wittman, Kingston must focus on her own story, which is the focus of three of the four sections of *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

While re-visioning her own narrative voice, Kingston chooses simultaneously to explore the possibilities of creating peace. Toward this end, she rewrites her Woman Warrior story in both *To Be the Poet* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*. As she explains in an interview, she originally wrote the story “as prose with an emphasis on women’s liberation. But now I have rewritten it, and it appears again in *The Fifth Book of Peace*. It’s now a homecoming poem” (Tokarczyk 2008, 202). It is this choice to revise the original myth that points to the more troublesome elements of *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Instead of simply finding her own voice, by rewriting the story of the Woman Warrior, Kingston seems to be changing her idea of what, exactly, a woman should be, at least within the confines of her texts. She enacts her new ideas in the ways that she chooses to narrate the veterans and their language, including the way the text treats women. Finally, it is her decision to reinvent all women, not simply one woman, that is problematic. In the process of recovering her own voice, of crafting that voice into one that will embrace homecoming, Kingston creates a text that includes women primarily as caregivers. When she admits that the focus of the story is no longer women’s liberation, she indicates that *The Fifth Book of Peace* has prioritized peace above women’s liberation, that it is willing to return women to more traditional roles in order to achieve that peace. However, a peace that is achieved at the expense of women’s liberation is a dangerous thing. While Kingston’s personal decision to commit herself to leading men home from war is certainly noble, the way that the text also presents other women as healers is immensely problematic.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ELISION OF WOMEN

One of the first incidents that stands out as an example of the relegation of women is the workshop scene in which a large group of female veterans participates for the first time. Though Kingston says that “a large group of women” attend a writing workshop, she only records one female voice, that of the leader of this group, a woman who is referred to only as “Woman Vet”(Kingston 2003, 317).<sup>1</sup> Woman Vet argues loudly for the recognition of female veterans, whom she associates closely with Doughnut Dollies. While it is clear through Woman Vet’s speech that not all the women in this group were Doughnut Dollies (Kingston 2003, 317), that some of them might have been nurses or had other roles, the text fails to offer any narration that might help to qualify the term “Doughnut Dolly,” or even to give clear examples of what the women did during the war.<sup>1</sup> Kingston has been diligent in explaining terminology thus far, or at least in quoting explanations given by members of the group, so this silence is especially suspect. Moreover, the lack of information points to an interesting tension, since the text acknowledges that even the male vets at the writing workshop ask, “What did she do in Viet Nam?” (Kingston 2003, 317). Here, in addition to the fact that the reader may be confused and curious about Doughnut Dollies, we see the question echoed by the workshop members themselves, thus indicating that Kingston is aware of the mystery surrounding these women. Therefore we can conclude that she realizes that the reader, along with the male veterans, will be asking this question, but that she has deliberately chosen to leave it unanswered.

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<sup>1</sup>Actually, “Doughnut Dolly” is a term that refers to civilian women, usually single and in their early twenties, who were recruited by the U.S. Government to move to Viet Nam, where they became “Recreation workers.” This entailed visiting with soldiers in hospitals, keeping up morale, and providing “a touch of home” (Cummings 2007).

On the one hand, we could argue that, because Woman Vet herself seems so set on masking her individual identity<sup>2</sup>, the text is not responsible for clarifying her position. On the other hand, a simple explanation or discussion of the term “Doughnut Dollies” might have offered the reader some clarification without specifying the role of Woman Vet in particular. Similarly, Kingston could have included quotes from one of the other female veterans, who are mentioned briefly, and who are clearly proud of their role as Doughnut Dollies. Kingston tells us that Kate Beckwith, “a second-generation Doughnut Dolly,” shares their motto: “We are NOT entertainers! We are RECREATORS!” (Kingston 2003, 320). This motto, unto itself, is not very informative. Since Kate Beckwith was present at the workshops, and since she clearly spoke, it would have been helpful to see more of her words recorded on the page. Perhaps she did not have anything else to say, but this seems an unlikely alternative, given the nature of the workshops. In fact, the text has conscientiously recorded instances in which the men choose to remain silent, so it would have been possible to include a similar observation in the case of these women if they had been reticent to share their thoughts. Rather, the book seems to have specifically resisted giving an explanation of the Doughnut Dollies, despite opportunities to delve into further detail by focusing more attention on their presence.

Instead, the closest the text gets to an explanation is a brief description of a photograph, taken twenty years earlier in Viet Nam, that shows Woman Vet holding two small children. Kingston says that, “She [Woman Vet] had done all she could to lift and fly the babies out of Viet Nam” (Kingston 2003, 318). This is still a vague description, and one that does little to draw visibility to the presence of women in Viet Nam, since it obscures their actual participation. We are left asking some important questions: What was she able to do to save those children? What power was in her hands? How many children were there? Did she succeed in getting them out of Viet Nam? Their fathers may have been fighting or dead, but

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<sup>2</sup>When she is first introduced, Kingston tells us that Woman Vet “tells us what not to call her. Tells us who she is not.” (Kingston 2003, 317) Woman Vet shares what she wants to with the group, but she evidently refutes attempts to identify her as a single person rather than as a representative of the group.

where are their mothers? Because this photo simply shows Woman Vet and the children, she is presented as the mother figure— despite the fact that these children may have had biological mothers, mothers who cared for them, and who also wanted to leave Viet Nam. Moreover, because the snapshot shows Woman Vet and the children on the ground, rather than about to board a plane, we don't even know if she achieved her goal of removing those children from a war zone. Nor do we know if their mothers would have been allowed to leave, or what might have happened to the children who did fly out of Viet Nam. Their histories are probably complicated and difficult, but those facts are elided in this description, which suggests that simply getting the children onto a plane is a sufficient and effective solution. This omission of vital information about Woman Vet's role in Viet Nam, as compared to the ongoing stories of the male veterans, illustrates the fact that women are not a top priority in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, that the text is not recording their stories as completely or diligently as the men's.

Woman Vet paves the way for other women vets to enter the text, but she also sets the tone in which those women will be regarded. Before Woman Vet's entrance, Kingston describes the occasional female in mythological terms, as discussed in detail in Chapter Four. But along with Woman Vet comes Kingston's admission that she is afraid of women. Indeed, she goes on to say that, "There is an immensity about them, individually and en masse. A vastness. Heat. They are not angelic" (Kingston 2003, 317). This description contains the women by lumping them into a single entity, a pattern that Kingston continues at the next workshop when she says that the women have returned, and then simply provides a list of their names and positions (Kingston 2003, 320). Her attitude toward these women emerges when, at the end of the list, Kingston adds that, "Dan Fahey brought a girlfriend, who sits lotus-position on the floor" (Kingston 2003, 320). This addition to the list seems inappropriate on a number of levels: first of all, there is no suggestion that the girlfriend is a veteran, but she is worthy of being included in this list by virtue of being a woman. Moreover, Kingston does not seem to value the girlfriend overmuch, since she does not even give the woman's

name. And, finally, the description of her sitting lotus-position contains a hint of bitterness: it implies, perhaps, that the girlfriend thinks she is attending a yoga class rather than a workshop for spiritual healing, or maybe it simply suggests that she is isolated from the rest of the group. Whatever the case, it is strange that Kingston so clearly devalues this woman, given that the workshops are ostensibly intended for the families of veterans as well as the veterans themselves. While the workshop is presumably open, Kingston's attitude toward the women in attendance seems surprisingly dismissive.

In addition, this description of the women suggests that they are dangerous, as Kingston reiterates when she says that "The women have come, and I have to heed them" (Kingston 2003, 317). Clearly she is now paying attention to the women veterans, but her attitude toward them here is reluctant, even defensive, an attitude that is at least partially a response to Woman Vet's aggressive demands. In addition to putting Kingston on edge, however, Woman Vet speaks for the entire group when she says that "We went to Viet Nam because our brothers were there in need of support and comfort" (Kingston 2003, 318). By giving this explanation and using the word 'we,' she sets up the way in which Kingston continues to recognize the women vets— as caretakers and supporters of the men who participated in the "real" conflict.

The women remain the focus of the text for a few more pages, but their own voices are quickly replaced by male voices: instead of hearing from more women, the text goes on to record Ted Sexauer's speech *for* women vets. In this speech, he reinforces their roles as caretakers, claiming that, "we know that, at the heart of it, you were there because you cared about us. And that is why we care so much about you..." (Kingston 2003, 321). This speech is immensely problematic for two reasons; first, because privileging men's voices, even if they are lauding women, does not result in the equality that comes from actually letting women speak; and second, because of Ted's statement about why the men care about the women. He creates a nice turn of phrase, but there is something seriously wrong with the idea that the women have to act as the initial caretakers in order to earn the men's love.

Even worse, then, is Kingston's follow-up to this statement, which tells us that, "the women love the speech" (Kingston 2003, 321). Even if the women love the speech, Kingston, as the narrator in control of this text, could raise some questions about *why* they love it, what such a love might suggest. Kingston has proven herself to be a perceptive narrator capable of recognizing issues like the power struggle that might be taking place here, but instead, she simply takes the scene at face value, implicitly condoning Ted's speech and the women's reaction to it.

Such an omission is not necessarily indicative of intentional sexism, but it is problematic. It seems plausible that Kingston ignores this mistreatment of women simply because she has chosen to focus primarily on men in this text. Because only men could be drafted in Viet Nam, and because only men were sent into active combat, the average male soldier necessarily had a different kind of experience than the women who participated in Viet Nam. This inclusion of the male voice is especially significant because of earlier criticisms against Kingston, which suggested that she only depicted men as negative stereotypes, or that she appropriated their stories to fit her own.<sup>3</sup> By allowing the men she is writing about to tell their own stories within the text, Kingston is giving them as much of their own voice as possible. If the object of "Earth" is to explore the experience of the average American soldier during the Viet Nam War, then women's stories will necessarily be left outside the lens of the text. In fact, if the text aims to capture the soldier's perspective, then women should only be marginally visible, and then only in the role of nurse or Doughnut Dolly, as are the women in this text. Perhaps the women's individual stories and suffering are irrelevant because the men were ignorant of those stories, and the narrator is attempting to portray their voices accurately.

This rationale makes sense, but only up to a certain point. If we assume that Kingston wanted to offer herself as a conduit of expression for the male veterans of the Viet Nam War, it becomes increasingly difficult to explain why she includes her own voice and perspective so

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<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, Suzanne Juhasz, who suggests that, in *China Men*, "the narrator looks as well for the experience of active appropriation" (Juhasz 1985, 185).

insistently. While she does devote a great deal of space to transcribing the men's writing and speech, she also invites the reader to follow along with her own interpretation of these men, her own experiences in the writing workshop. And if, instead, she is focusing the narrative through her own experiences of the Viet Nam War, then we expect her to give attention to the women, too. After all, they present themselves to Kingston as veterans, and the name of the original workshop is "Reflective Writing, Mindfulness, and the War: A Day for Veterans and Their Families" (Kingston 2003, 248).

What seems more likely is that Kingston does not initially consider women as possible veterans. Her inspiration for holding writing workshops seems to consist of two parts: first, a desire to help her brothers recover from Viet Nam, and second, the multitude of letters that she receives from veterans, all of whom she identifies as male. In fact, in the early parts of "Earth," when she is building up to the creation of the workshop, she mentions women only in three specific instances: in her own case, when she says that she should have kept her husband from going to war (241), in reference to her sister, "who married a soldier," (241), and in a letter from an Anonymous Veteran, who suggests that "veterans need to report to women" because "women are sanctuary" (Kingston 2003, 247). This last instance seems to be the most telling: it illustrates the dichotomy between men and women in a war; it jumps to the immediate assumption that veterans and women belong in two distinct categories, meaning that veterans cannot be women and women cannot be veterans. In the narrator's own experience and that of her family, this distinction has been true, and here it is again, being reiterated this time by an anonymous veteran. Given the scenario, she may have made the understandable assumption that this dichotomy is always true. Thus, perhaps her reason for excluding women veterans from most of the text is simply that they were not a part of her initial idea. If this is the case, Kingston does not choose to exclude women in order to reproduce the masculinist viewpoint; neither does she ignore them because of her own conscious uneasiness around women. Instead, they simply did not fit into her framework, and so she has trouble recognizing them, even when they are right in

front of her. Perhaps ironically, her ignorance of female veterans could be compared to the ignorance of the soldiers in Kingston's own *The Woman Warrior* who, because they could not imagine a female general, missed the fact that their own beloved leader, Fa Mook Lan, became pregnant and gave birth while leading them through battle.

Whether or not the text's exclusion of women can be chalked up to Kingston's original expectations, the fact that she offers so few, and so biased, depictions of female veterans is immensely problematic. Because the text focuses so heavily on Woman Vet, that character automatically becomes the representation of all women vets—nurses, Doughnut Dollies, and others. This substitution is driven home by the very moniker "Woman Vet," which is the only name by which Kingston refers to this character. While this woman did not want her real name used, Kingston could have provided a pseudonym, or simply a name that was less encompassing.<sup>4</sup> Writing about *The Woman Warrior*, Helena Grice notes that, "Names are in fact crucial in the text," and then goes on to suggest that "namelessness obliterate[s] identity" and "the naming system in the text reflects the characters' functions in the narrator's life" (Grice 2001, 172). While I do not want to suggest that *The Woman Warrior* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* are interchangeable, there are enough other similarities between the texts, and throughout Kingston's work as a whole, that it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that naming is an important factor in both texts. If we apply Grice's observation to Woman Vet, we get a glimpse of the way in which she is not so much a personality as an icon to the narrator, a character who serves a single function within the text: she is representative of any female veteran. Therefore, the fact that this rare representation shows a woman holding two children serves largely to reinforce the idea that women veterans were simply performing "women's work," much less trying and gruesome than that of their male coun-

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<sup>4</sup>Of course, we shouldn't overlook the similarity between the titles of *Woman Warrior* and *Woman Vet*. Kingston's reasons for choosing such a familiar name, however, are unclear: she could intend to pay homage to *Woman Vet* by connecting her to Kingston's own *Woman Warrior*, but she might also intend to point out the negative aggression that comes along with identifying as a warrior; *Woman Vet* is angry and defiant in a way that seems to confound attempts to make peaceful connections at the writing workshops.

terparts. After all, caring for children, even the unhappy children of war, is still preferable to withstanding guerrilla attacks or killing men at close range.

Further reinforcing the idea that work is split along gender lines, and that women's work is easier or more pleasurable, Kingston notes that, in the photo, "Woman Vet was looking at the boy, and cooing at him, or about to kiss him" (Kingston 2003, 318). This pose, and this description of it, suggests any number of interpretations. First, we see that the woman's attention belongs to the boy, just as the American women in Viet Nam were expected to direct their attention to the men. In addition, she is in the midst of a happy, intimate, and affectionate gesture toward this boy. She does not appear to be upset or afraid, which suggests that she is in a relatively safe place. This depiction erases the reality of moments in which Woman Vet *was* afraid or in danger, a fact that is omitted in the description of this photo.<sup>5</sup> We also see that she has the energy required to give affection, something that many of the male vets have clearly struggled with even after the War, as evidenced by the high divorce rate among returning soldiers. This illustration is ultimately insulting to Woman Vet, and to all women vets, as it reinforces the idea that, whether incapable or unwilling, women did not suffer as seriously as men did during the Viet Nam War.

Moreover, Kingston tells us that Woman Vet is "a beautiful madonna with enormous dark eyes and thick black hair" (Kingston 2003, 318). We expect the image of a soldier fighting a gruesome war to be disheveled, hungry, dirty, and unhappy. We at least expect her hair to be tangled. The omission of any such language surrounding Woman Vet in the narrative tells the reader that she is none of the above, and, therefore, that she has not suffered in ways that are analogous to the other soldiers' experiences. On the surface, the description of a woman as a "beautiful Madonna" sounds like a compliment: such positive descriptors elevate Woman Vet's status, turning her into an admired figure. However, such a description

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<sup>5</sup>For instance, in the excerpt that Woman Vet reads aloud at the workshop, she complains that "our sacrifices as civilian women don't count" (Kingston 2003, 317). Speaking in a sarcastic tone, she goes on to say, "After all, we didn't have real jobs, and were never under stress or in mortal danger" (Kingston 2003, 317). The bitter tone of this complaint suggests that she was, in fact, making sacrifices and in danger.

also implies that Woman Vet can walk through the war calm and collected, looking like a holy image. It suggests that she is unruffled by the death and destruction that surrounds her. Any real, human suffering that Woman Vet felt is masked by the narrative's beautiful, if not sympathetic, image. In addition, by referencing the Madonna, Kingston invokes an explicit comparison between Woman Vet and ideal womanhood. Such a comparison reiterates the traditional, gender-normative place of women in wartime. Rather than raising questions about why Woman Vet's responsibilities in Viet Nam are represented by a photograph of her holding children, this description celebrates the fact that Woman Vet is performing traditional "woman's work," peacefully tending children rather than involved in aggressive physical battle.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MYTHOLOGIZATION OF WOMEN

This reference to the Madonna, however, points to another discrepancy in the text's attitude toward women. When it does not erase their very presence, it mythologizes them instead. This treatment occurs most frequently when Kingston is dealing with women who already inhabit traditional female roles. She is already leaning toward this treatment when she compares Woman Vet to the Madonna, a comparison that immediately sets up unrealistic expectations. No matter what real work Woman Vet did, this allusion threatens to erase that work. It suggests that Woman Vet is comparable to an iconic figure, and thus that she is capable of actions beyond the normal human scope. If this is the case, her suffering becomes less real because she is more mythological, and thus less human and less vulnerable. In this case, she is less likely to experience human pain and suffering, despite living in a war zone. Such an assumption also means that her very human work will be taken for granted and any evidence of her very real struggle erased.

This tendency to mythologize becomes far more evident in the case of Gail De La Fuente, a woman veteran who appears only once in the text. Kingston sets up Gail's arrival by recording her own response to the announcement that another veteran is coming to the workshop: "Of course, invite him to join us" (Kingston 2003, 312). This introduction acknowledges her expectation that veterans are male and also illustrates the ease with which she is able to welcome those male veterans. When, instead of that expected male, Gail enters, Kingston describes her, "like a blonde doe, stepping carefully, large eyes looking at each and all of us" (Kingston 2003, 312). This description is completely out of line: because of her gender, Kingston immediately presents Gail as gentle, passive, and frail. Despite the fact that she

has been introduced as a veteran, as a person who has lived through the same harrowing experiences as the rest of the workshop members, this language transforms her into a traditional female and erases any concept of her very real work. Just as Woman Vet's work and suffering are overlooked in favor of an image of Woman Vet as Madonna, so Gail De La Fuente's work is erased in this image of her as a doe.

Kingston proceeds to mythologize Gail even more explicitly, next noticing that Gail "must have seemed like a golden angel in Viet Nam" (Kingston 2003, 312). After making this observation, she brings that metaphor into the present and makes it clear that Gail is angelic not only to injured men in Viet Nam, but even here and now, to someone such as herself. She notes that Gail's "blonde bob shimmered like a halo," and imagines that she "must have looked exactly as she does now, not aged at all" (Kingston 2003, 312), a description that reiterates Gail's ongoing heavenliness. While the male veterans are here to let go of the experiences of Viet Nam, Gail is unchanged since that time— and, surprisingly, this immobility is viewed positively. In fact, the implication is that Gail has no need of change, which means that there is nothing wrong with her, nothing that requires fixing. In this scenario, we can understand her lack of problems as evidence that she has not suffered as the male veterans have. If she had experienced pain similar to theirs, she would need to heal, just as they do. Instead, she does not have any desire to change, nor does she exhibit any need of the workshop— she only attends a single session, at which she does not express her thoughts in writing as the other veterans have done. The implication throughout is that Gail is a healing force, not someone in need of healing.

In this scene, the text erases evidence of Gail's wartime experiences. Kingston records a conversation with Gail, wherein she "speaks the names of places in Viet Nam where she served" (Kingston 2003, 312), but none of those names are recorded. The names might have been familiar to readers; the history of those places might have been known, and thus Gail's work might have become more explicit. Instead of allowing us to make that connection, however, Kingston moves on to tell about Gail's plan to visit the memorial to women veterans

in Washington, D.C. In addition to this discussion, we are told (though no direct dialogue is relayed), that Gail and Ted, who was a medic, talk about the routes along which soldiers were transported. Gail is able to confirm that, when Ted sent away the wounded, they fell into her hands. This provides a reassuring moment for Ted, who now has confirmation that the men he worked on were sent to safety, to an “angel,” in fact.

Gail is present for less than two pages of the text, and one of those pages is devoted to a poem, spoken in meditation, and begun by her. The poem, perhaps ironically, is entitled “Keeping Quiet.” It is by Pablo Neruda, and it is primarily a poem of peace, a poem that reiterates Gail’s healing presence rather than tackling the realities of her lived experience. Like many of the women in this text, Gail’s sadness is inspired by the pain of the male veterans: at the Memorial in Washington D.C., she cannot honor the men she treated because she does not know their names. Her happiness, then, depends upon her ability to care for and please others. While Gail’s concern is perfectly reasonable, it is interesting to note that the text only quotes her directly here, rather than when discussing the places where she was stationed and the paths by which the patients traveled. The direct quotation, and the decision to devote so much valuable space to the Pablo Neruda poem (which, surely, interested readers could have looked up on their own) indicates a narrative bias that presents Gail in a particular light, as an angelic martyr rather than as a veteran who shares common ground with other veterans.

One possible explanation for this treatment can be found in the same section of the text: Kingston notes that Gail is wearing “a lightweight suit and high heels,” and then follows up with the simple sentence, “I’ve been wearing the same clothes all week” (Kingston 2003, 312). There is no other comparison between the two women, no other suggestion that Kingston is unhappy with her own appearance. Her description of Gail does not exhibit any resentment; in fact, she becomes increasingly enthusiastic, eventually leading to her comparison of Gail to “a miracle” (Kingston 2003, 313). Nonetheless, that single observation of the narrator’s clothes as opposed to Gail’s invites us to draw out the comparison. As a woman, Gail, like

Kingston, is in the minority in this group. In addition, both women are positioned as healers of men: Gail as a triage nurse and Kingston as the leader of the workshop. She has led the men in repeated sessions, with more and more members attending. She has spent a great deal of time and energy in these workshops, and she has become attached to their members. She has had some success, but also some failure in rehabilitating the veterans. But Gail, through a claim of prior experience, is able to walk into the room and facilitate healing in a matter of minutes. Because she has suffered with these men in different ways, Gail has greater power and makes a bigger impact. According to Kingston's description, when Gail "shows up...suddenly everything makes sense, and is redeemed" (Kingston 2003, 313). Such immediate and complete redemption is clearly an unrealistic expectation, and it is no surprise that Kingston has not been able to evoke this kind of response. However, whether or not Gail actually has this miraculous effect on the veterans, Kingston's uneasiness in the situation echoes her relationship to Woman Vet, who also participated in the War itself, and who also necessarily has a strong connection to the male veterans. In each situation, Kingston's authority, and her exclusive ability to heal these men and lead them home, is at stake.

Approaching the situation from a slightly different angle, Kingston suggests that the presence of Asian women among the veterans should be understood as a reference to a goddess. One Asian-American woman, Jeannie, says that white people often approached her to "speak in anger and confusion about Japan and relocation camps" (Kingston 2003, 324). When this happened, Jeannie would simply forgive the person. She tells Kingston that this "was what they need to hear" (Kingston 2003, 325). Building off this anecdote, Kingston suggests that the Asian women "look like the goddess Kuan Yin, and provide images of her. Veterans who've been to Asia recognize her" (Kingston 2003, 325). This is a strange conclusion for Kingston to come to: the idea that all Asian women should be understood as representatives of a particular Asian goddess is offensive on a number of levels. Most obviously, it is problematic to suggest that all Asian women look the same. But, more

practically in this situation, the decision to represent these women as mythological figures sets them apart from the rest of the workshop, suggests that they are not present as humans whose goal is to recover from the traumas of war. All the women who Kingston puts into this category are automatically positioned as healers rather than group members, a point that is emphasized when Kingston says that Kuan Yin “is everywhere, and all will be well” (Kingston 2003, 325). Just as the image of Gail as an angel hides her human participation and pain, so does this image erase Asian women’s suffering. Even worse, though, is the implication that the women are present specifically to serve the veterans, to “provide images of” Kuan Yin (Kingston 2003, 325). Such a move might seem complimentary to Asian women as it elevates them to the status of goddess, but it simultaneously places them in a lowered position by emphasizing their responsibility to act merely as images for the veterans.<sup>1</sup>

The text does not include any obvious desire to eradicate these women from the text or any ill will toward them. However, it clearly relocates women like Woman Vet and Gail De La Fuente to Othered positions. It doesn’t seem to matter whether they are relegated to minor roles or elevated to mythological status, so long as they no longer exist as actual, earth-bound women. Kingston explains their presence as either unimportant, or as an unforeseen miracle, as a mythological figure who descends to offer her assistance. Tacit in this description, however, is the implication that such figures will not be consistently present, that, like Gail De La Fuente, they will appear only for brief periods. Therefore, while Gail is undeniably capable of healing the veterans, she is less important than Kingston, who will be consistently, humanly present. As she notes, “it’s up to me to teach the veterans practically” (Kingston 2003, 308). The choice to use the word “practically” suggests that whatever the others have to offer is impractical and thus useless. A certain amount of disdain is present in such a description primarily because it acknowledges that there are other teachers, but that only

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<sup>1</sup>Later, we see Lucki, one of the newer women in the group, relegated in a similar way when Kingston describes her as “the Cassandra of the Tet Offensive,” referencing the famous Greek oracle and, again, emphasizing a woman’s responsibility to the soldiers (Kingston 2003, 341).

she will be capable of this “practicality.” In addition, practicality suggests necessity, which immediately privileges Kingston’s teachings over others.

This emphasis on Kingston’s practical and human presence is also evident as a result of the extended narration of *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Because she tells the story, because she has already told the story of the fire that burned down her home, we are aware that she is holding these workshops while also dealing with personal crises, despite the fact that she makes a concerted effort to control discussion of her personal life in the workshop environment. This is evident when, in the workshop, she says that, “I admit that one motive for starting these workshops is I want to give my brothers some ways to get over Viet Nam” (Kingston 2003, 292). Her use of the word “admit” suggests that she is initially hesitant to share this detail, that her motivation is in some way private or inappropriate. Certainly this detail might be private, but, in a room of veterans who are clearly seeking some kind of healing, Kingston’s choice to admit that she wants her brothers to heal seems less private, more normative. The second interpretation, then, is that there is something inappropriate about this admission. It seems plausible that Kingston feels that the workshop belongs to the veterans, not to her, that, much like a teacher who should not share too much personal information, it is not her job to make personal admissions.

This interpretation is backed up when, “John Swensson stops the readings, courteously asking after my burned book and house” (Kingston 2003, 277). Kingston’s decision to describe Swensson’s request as “courteous” suggests that she does not believe in the sincerity of his request; rather, she thinks that he is only being polite, that he has no real interest. Her first thought is, “This is their [the veterans] time; I’ve got to let everybody read. I don’t want to digress” (Kingston 2003, 277). Such a reaction again demonstrates her hesitancy to discuss her personal life, her desire to squelch her presence as a human who is also in need of healing. Once again, she tries to sacrifice her own needs to those of the veterans, despite the fact that they are requesting her participation. In fact, Kingston’s next reaction is fascinating because of the way she, once again, seems to put the veterans’ needs first. She goes on to say

that, “John thinks I need my losses listened to. I ought not be above it all. I should be as generous as everyone else, reveal my life too” (Kingston 2003, 277). This second perspective on the situation shows that she is only willing to share her own experiences if she does it through the lens of helping the veterans, of contributing to their project. Her first reaction shows Kingston suppressing her own story for their sake, not out of any personal desire to keep this information to herself. But her second reaction shows that she is willing to share for the same reason: only if it will help the veterans. In both situations, she posits her own behavior as selfish, either hogging someone else’s time or hogging her own memories. This is another instance of her struggle to incorporate her own voice into the whole, clearly unsure what constitutes too much or too little. At the same time, this moment emphasizes her own humanity and vulnerability. She is uncertain how to act, which is a peculiarly human condition. She is also vulnerable in the sense that she is dealing with her own traumas, her own hardships. Where women like Woman Vet and Gail de la Fuente seem beyond suffering, Kingston has human struggles that she is unable to mask. That vulnerability, that humanity, is what is important in the end; it is what sets her apart. It reiterates the sacrifices that she has made for the veterans, and it also emphasizes the ways in which she can empathize with them. Finally, it is that difference that allows both the readers and the veterans to rely on Kingston as a leader.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE EVOLUTION OF THE WOMAN WARRIOR

And yet, Kingston is interested in something much more complicated than eliminating the competition in order to become the only leader. Rather, she is questioning the very nature of how a leader should act and what her goals ought to be. She returns to her original concept of a female leader, her Woman Warrior, to experiment with this question. Grice tells us that, “Kingston has often expressed regret at figuring female resilience through war imagery in *The Woman Warrior*; here, then, [in *The Fifth Book of Peace*] she is able to correct this” (Grice 2006, 124). Now, instead of the woman who leads her army into battle, Fa Mook Lan becomes the hero who leads them home from battle. Indeed, Grice goes on to suggest that, “Kingston reclaims the power of her woman warrior: no longer does this rest upon her combative abilities, rather Fa Mook Lan’s strength is now seen to lie in her creativity” (Grice 2006, 124). This creativity is emphasized in Fa Mook Lan’s interest in weaving in Kingston’s revised tale. And, of course, we cannot overlook the metaphorical weaving of stories that Kingston has taken part in for so long. Such a metaphor becomes literal in this case, where Kingston has actually picked up the threads of the veterans’ own stories and woven them into her narrative. And so, with the apparent goal of writing a peaceful warrior, Kingston creates a woman leader who embraces traditionally feminine practices and disassociates herself from the fierce character found in *The Woman Warrior*.

While she was writing *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston also wrote a short book called *To Be the Poet*. This book is ostensibly a book of poetry, though it is a book that begins with a prose explanation of her desire to write poetry. In fact, in typical Kingstonian fashion, the book is a hybrid: though there are three chapters, they can never quite be categorized

as prose or poetry. Many of the poems look like journal entries, and they are sprinkled throughout ongoing prose narrative, often explanations of the poetry. In fact, the book was published in a small, pocket-sized version more reminiscent of a journal than a scholarly work, in a markedly different format from Kingston's other works. Throughout the text, she refers to *The Fifth Book of Peace* as her "longbook," pointing out that she wrote "over one thousand pages" (Kingston 2002, 3). She explains her desire to write poetry as a desire to write in quick bursts of inspiration, rather than laboring like "a workhorse" (Kingston 2002, 3) over her prose. *To Be the Poet* is valuable, then, not only for aesthetic reasons, but also because it provides firsthand documentation of the creation of *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

For our purposes, the most important part of this text is the final poem, which is untitled, though it is introduced with this note: "At the end of Spring/the ending of the longbook" (Kingston 2002, 108). This final poem is, according to Kingston's description in interviews, a retelling of the Fa Mook Lan/Woman Warrior legend.<sup>1</sup> After the poem, Kingston includes a brief explanation: "I am ending the longbook with a poem. All that prose added up to this one poem. If I hadn't put myself into a poetic state, I wouldn't have thought to end this way. I went through a poetry door and came out of the war story" (Kingston 2002, 110-111). What is fascinating about this explanation is the claim that she is ending the longbook with a poem. *The Fifth Book of Peace* does not actually end in a poem, not in the text or in the Epilogue that follows. The only poem, then, is this untitled one in *To Be the Poet*. In other words, she considers this book to be the ending to the other book. *To Be the Poet* was published in 2002, while *The Fifth Book of Peace* did not appear until 2006. Certainly some of this can be marked up to the fact that the editorial process for *The Fifth Book of Peace* would have been much more time-consuming. Nonetheless, these two texts are the first that Kingston has published since *Tripmaster Monkey* in 1989. So, while Kingston specifically sets out to write *To Be the Poet* to escape the rigors of *The Fifth Book of Peace*,

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<sup>1</sup>At different times, Kingston refers to the Woman Warrior as either "Fa Mu Lan" or "Fa Mook Lan." I use them interchangeably here.

she ends up bringing the two so close together that one is actually allowed to complete the ending of the other.

It is especially telling that, in 2002, Kingston labels a retelling of the Woman Warrior legend, which she first tackled in published form in 1976, as the end of *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Such a move suggests that the legend of the Woman Warrior has played a significant role in Kingston's life. This was obvious back in 1976, when, in "White Tigers," Kingston reimagined the original myth from a first person perspective, intertwining her own life with that of Fa Mook Lan's until the two were inseparable. And yet, in *To Be the Poet*, which is more clearly about Maxine Hong Kingston's real, lived life than much of her previous work, she writes that: "The last time I was on her Big Island,/Pele struck my head blind./'Take that, Woman Warrior./You call yourself Woman Warrior, do you?'" (100). A line like this, in a poem that reads like a journal entry and begins, "Sunday, Father's Day near Kapa'au" in a chapter filled with mundane details about "FAXing my agent" and "changing car, plane, hotel reservations" (Kingston 2002, 101), seems to refer more blatantly to Maxine Hong Kingston than many early references to the Woman Warrior have done. And so, given that Kingston admits to calling herself the Woman Warrior, the content of this final poem, this ostensible end to her longbook, becomes especially important.

This revisioning of Fa Mook Lan's story begins with the line "Jik jik jik. Jik jik jik," which Kingston describes as the sound of weaving (Kingston 2002, 108). In this version, "Fa Mook Lan is weaving/the shuttle through the loom/when news of the draft comes" (Kingston 2002, 108). According to Tokarczyk, Kingston has said that she "wishes she had made her Fa Mu Lan a weaver, as the legendary one was" (60). Such a large change in Fa Mook Lan's beginnings is important, even if it does reflect the original myth, because, after all, Kingston chose to leave certain details out of the first story for a reason, and we can thus assume that she has a specific reason for choosing to add them now.

This new beginning is an abrupt shift from the story told in "White Tigers," in which Fa Mook Lan spends the years leading up to war being trained as a warrior by an old man

and an old woman. This change causes some practical problems: for instance, how would she have the knowledge or be in the physical condition necessary to fight and win a war without these years of training? If Fa Mook Lan is a traditional daughter before the war begins, then she will be at a distinct disadvantage when she sets out to lead an army. Moreover, when Kingston takes away Fa Mook Lan's years of training, it also takes away her destiny. In the original version, Fa Mook Lan's parents knew that she would be taken away and trained; the old man and woman had clearly sought her out years ahead of time. Now, fighting a war ceases to be a necessity or an inevitability; it also ceases to have the great import of an event ordained by fate. Instead, the nobility of Fa Mook Lan's act is solely in her decision to sacrifice herself in her father's place, just as Kingston seems to encourage the women in the writing workshops to sacrifice for the men. No particulars of battle are recorded, no confrontations against dangerous enemies as seen in *The Woman Warrior*. In fact, Fa Mook Lan is now a more realistic character, and hence, just like Kingston, she may be easier for the reader to relate to than the nearly supernatural women who float in and out of *The Fifth Book of Peace*. However, this new characterization of Fa Mook Lan as a peaceful weaver does not explain how she is able to win so many battles, or even how she comes to be a leader of the army in the first place. Since these details do not make sense from a plot perspective, we must consider other possible reasons for their inclusion.

The most obvious reason for using the detail of weaving in the new version is that it reaffirms Fa Mook Lan's femininity. We will see this theme repeated throughout the poem, as Kingston also explicitly states that, when Fa Mook Lan returns from war, she is "becoming– Yin– the Feminine" (Kingston 2002, 110). Weaving is a traditionally feminine activity, associated with women at least since the time of *The Odyssey*. Kingston invites this comparison with references to Odysseus's homecoming from war. First, she says that, "If they could hear my voice repeating 'home...home...home,' they might follow it and return home. Home free. Odysseus took twenty years to get to and from the Trojan War" (Kingston 2003, 260). Here she is positioning herself, in the first person, as Penelope, the one who waits

at home. And again, a few pages later, Kingston tells the veterans that, ““To come home, Odysseus, teller of many stories, told his wife of the war and homecoming from war, and he listened to Penelope tell all her life from when they parted”” (Kingston 2003, 266-67). Here she doesn’t just hint at Penelope’s presence; Kingston invites her directly into the story.<sup>2</sup> However, the comparison to Penelope is problematic for Fa Mook Lan. Penelope’s weaving was useful for two reasons: first, it was practically productive and socially acceptable; second, it was a way of keeping the suitors at bay and thus preserving Penelope as “the faithful.” If Fa Mook Lan becomes a weaver, then, at least to a Western audience, she becomes traditionally feminine, productive rather than aggressive, willing to put her own life on hold in order to remain faithful beyond any reasonable expectations. Homer seems to applaud Penelope for this loyalty, both to Odysseus and to the feminine ideal, and Kingston’s use of this model reinforces those values.

However, another reason that Kingston might choose to pick up on the theme of weaving is Penelope’s brilliant use of this art as a method of resistance. While Odysseus is busy attacking just about anything that comes his way, Penelope is able to preserve her home and raise her son safely despite the threatening and aggressive presence of the suitors. She is engaged in a process that is both practical and artistic, and she is also successfully circumventing a physical confrontation. This method has worked for twenty years, but Kingston’s use of it becomes more problematic when we consider that, by the time Odysseus arrives home, Penelope’s method is about to fail. In the end, despite her years of peaceful protest, she is saved only by her husband’s physical prowess.

Beyond the problems inherent in a comparison to Penelope, however, are the problems that are suggested by Kingston’s desire to portray Fa Mook Lan as a traditional woman, no matter what her reasons. This return to tradition suggests an essentialist move on Kingston’s part, a desire to define women by a particular, biologically generated set of characteristics.

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<sup>2</sup>This reference is odd because Kingston goes on to quote a section of *The Odyssey* that describes Odysseus telling Penelope about his adventures, but she does not provide any evidence of Odysseus listening to Penelope’s story. Once again, Kingston sets up the example of a woman healing a man without showing the converse.

In other words, Kingston seems eager to celebrate, both in this poem and, as previously discussed, throughout *The Fifth Book of Peace*, the traditional healing roles of women. In the poem, Fa Mook Lan is a woman who must “disguise herself as a man” (109) in order to enter battle, but who, when the war is ended, “takes off man’s armor./She bathes, dresses herself in pretty silks” (Kingston 2002, 110). In other words, she is only able to enter the battlefield as a man, and, when she is released from her duty, she returns to traditional womanhood. In any other text, the fact that she is able to become a believable male simply by putting on armor might be considered empowering, but this is not the case when it comes to Kingston. In Kingston’s original tale, Fa Mook Lan had a husband, became pregnant, gave birth, and carried her baby through battle. In fact, Kingston tells us that, “We [Fa Mook Lan and her husband] made a sling for the baby inside my big armor, and rode back into the thickest part of the fighting” (Kingston 1976, 40). Such an image suggests a sharp contrast: Kingston’s original Fa Mook Lan was capable of combining the roles of man and woman, able to generate life while simultaneously destroying it. The strict line separating masculine and feminine gender roles was effectively erased in this image of the all-capable woman, a woman who was even aided by her husband, suggesting that he approved of her gender bending actions.

The newfound essentialism that this change in plot implies is emphasized even more heavily in the lines of the poem that describe Fa Mook Lan’s dress and appearance. In *The Woman Warrior*, when Fa Mook Lan first puts on men’s clothing and armor, the people say, “How beautiful you look...How beautiful she looks” (36). But this scene is left out of the new version entirely. In the original tale, Fa Mook Lan also sends the men home while still dressed as a man herself— she explicitly describes being mistaken for a man after releasing her army (Kingston 1976, 42). When she returns home, her husband must explain to their son that this general is also his mother. Kingston tells us that “My son was delighted that the shiny general was his mother too” (Kingston 1976, 45). The son’s simple, happy response to Fa Mook Lan’s double identity is the only one recorded in the original tale.

In the new version, instead of this easy homecoming, Kingston spends about a third of the poem describing Fa Mook Lan's transition (now in the third person, not the first) from warrior to woman. When Fa Mook Lan takes off her armor now, she also "dresses herself in pretty silks,/and reddens her cheeks and lips./She upsweeps her long black hair,/and adorns it with flowers" (Kingston 2002, 110). Such detail clearly establishes Fa Mook Lan as a traditional female, a woman who is particularly interested in her appearance. This description also returns us to the traditional femininity found in the images of weaving at the beginning of the poem. Four lines out of thirty-nine are devoted to this process, providing a clear break in the narrative and signaling the importance of the feminine image. In addition, it is not until after she has returned to this traditional gender role that Fa Mook Lan dismisses her army. She appears before the army and, in a moment that is suspiciously reminiscent of a coming out, announces that she has been the general. What is yet more significant is the extended record of the army's response: another four lines are devoted to direct quotations from the soldiers, all of which echo a general sense of disbelief that "A woman has led us through the war" (Kingston 2002, 110). Whereas in the original tale, Fa Mook Lan's gender seemed inconsequential, a happy bonus to those who realized her double identity, here the reaction is much stronger. The suggestion is that women are incapable of being soldiers, incapable of dealing with war. And Fa Mook Lan does not refute this disbelief: she is now "Becoming..the Feminine" (Kingston 2002, 110), a role that she seems to prefer, based on the attention that she has given to returning to this identity. Moreover, there is a strange suggestion that, in order to return home, the soldiers must also embrace femininity. After Fa Mook Lan has ordered the soldiers to return home, Kingston gives us this sentence: "Beholding- and becoming- Yin- the Feminine,/come home from war" (Kingston 2002, 110). There is no clear subject in this sentence, though it is clearly separated from the rest of the poem by periods. While it seems easiest to interpret it as a reference to Fa Mook Lan, it does come directly after Fa Mook Lan's order to the soldiers, and it is possible to read this as a continuation of those orders: if you want to come home from war, you must embrace

the feminine. It is in this line that Kingston's new belief reaches its culmination: rather than embracing the Woman Warrior who can be both warrior and nurturer, she embraces a traditional, essentialist view of women who will make peace their first priority.

Kingston's concept of essentialism is closely related to the womanism that many critics have noted in her later works, though the two ideas are not by any means interdependent. The term is often associated with Kingston because of her clear decision to tell the stories of the men in her family as well as the women, and, similarly, because of her creation of a sympathetic male narrator in *Tripmaster Monkey*. Under these terms, then, Kingston's interest in the community of veterans begins to make more sense. William Cloonan suggests that warfare is "another form of patriarchal oppression" (76). If warfare is patriarchal oppression, then Kingston's attempts at peace are attempts at living outside of patriarchy, a move that would benefit the entire community, both male and female. Moreover, if warfare is patriarchy, it is no longer acceptable for Fa Mook Lan to be a warrior, to participate in this system of oppression. Perhaps the reason that she now separates her female identity so distinctly from her warrior identity is because she wishes to abolish warfare, and thereby to abolish patriarchy.

By choosing to emphasize Fa Mook Lan's essential feminine identity in *To Be the Poet*, Kingston may hope to create a space that is separate from patriarchy, but she simultaneously reinforces this system. The new version of the Woman Warrior seems to suggest that the best way to avoid warfare, to come home from war, is to put on a recognizable, labeled, "feminine" identity. This identity, from the silks to the makeup, conforms to a prototypical concept of womanhood and reorients a woman who was once able to span two worlds, confining her to a very small area of approval and locking her inside a concept of essential femininity. The dangers of such a move are evident in *The Fifth Book of Peace*. As it invests in traditional femininity, the text continually relocates women into smaller, more sacrificial roles.

When *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1976, this image of a woman who could do it all was especially inspiring, and feminists rallied behind the book. But in *The Fifth Book of*

*Peace*, published thirty years later, Kingston laments the fact that *The Woman Warrior* is being used as inspirational material for young women who join the U.S. Air Force (Kingston 2003, 49). She seems to feel that she has encouraged these women to make war, which is antithetical to her great desire to establish peace. And yet, *The Fifth Book of Peace* goes too far in the opposite direction by creating a woman who can set an example of peacefulness. The text seems ready to invoke the healing roles of women during the Viet Nam War, ready to celebrate those actions and diminish more aggressive ones, despite the consequences. Disturbingly, then, in order to accomplish peace, Kingston's latest works emphasize a return to the traditional gender roles that *The Woman Warrior* encouraged women to fight against.

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