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American Self, Asian Other: Strategies of De-othering and Transnational Peacemaking in Allen Ginsberg's 1960s Long Poems and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*

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Abstract

This article explores and compares the transnational ontologies, rhetorical strategies, and literary forms of political activism in the work of Allen Ginsberg and Maxine Hong Kingston, focusing on Ginsberg's poems "Wichita Vortex Sutra" and "Iron Horse" and Kingston's 2003 novel, *The Fifth Book of Peace*. It traces their critiques of Cold War/Vietnam War US foreign policies and their attempts at fostering transnational communities and solidarity, relating these to their respective understandings of Buddhist philosophy and its practical applications; more specifically, the concept of dependent origination or "interbeing." Ginsberg's poems follow a "top-down" strategy, moving from abstract ontophilosophical considerations of human interconnect-edness and (mis)representations of difference in language to concrete applications in political discourse, using methods of textual de- and reconstruction. Meanwhile, Kingston favors a "bottom-up" approach by generalizing from the narration and interrelation of individual perspectives of war, otherness, and suffering beyond borders to a more generalized theory of interpersonal connections and the universality of human experience. After situating both authors' works within the framework of transnational relations during the Cold War period, I analyze their respective approaches to undoing difference across borders, political alliances, and cultural groups and demonstrate how their interpretations of Buddhist ethics translate into forms of discourse and activism.

This article explores the transnational visions for America created by two prominent writers and countercultural activists, Allen Ginsberg and Maxine Hong Kingston. Both authors lived and wrote during the Cold War period, a time when the world, at least in

a significant part of American political discourse and cultural products, appeared broadly divided into the essentialist binary categories of the democratic, individualistic West (i.e., America and its allies) on the one hand and the communist East (Russia and its allies) on the other. Thus, despite the importance of transnational alliances and subnational tensions, the nation-state appeared as a fixed, unalterable entity inseparably entangled with distinct ideological viewpoints. The Vietnam War, then, was perceived by many Americans as a concrete manifestation of a threat by an unknown outside other. Ginsberg and Kingston questioned then-predominant notions of the United States' national identity and instead outlined visions of the universality and interconnectedness of human experiences, all with the intention of changing the country's social structures and foreign policies. While the two authors' political protests—especially that of Ginsberg—have been analyzed in numerous scholarly publications, this article relates their transnational frameworks for America and critiques of the country's foreign policies to their practical applications of Buddhist ethics and the ontological presuppositions for these applications. It thereby situates their activism in a religio-philosophical framework, offering a new perspective on the very foundations of their political convictions. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of Buddhist ontology for the wider discipline of transnational American studies and highlight the already existing contributions of these two Buddhist practitioners to international community-building. Moreover, by reading their works dialogically with an emphasis on their contrasting approaches to political activism (as well as to writing), I explore a fuller range of strategic possibilities, both theoretical and practical, for the undoing of cultural differences. While both authors made strong contributions to the undoing of difference, I will focus more strongly on Kingston's novel for three reasons. First, she explores a broader and perhaps more complex range of strategies. Second, her work is longer and thus provides more material for analysis. Third, Ginsberg's work—particularly "Wichita Vortex Sutra"—has been analyzed more extensively, with a significant number of contributions exploring his use of Buddhist philosophy, though it still warrants a transnational perspective.

Ginsberg's most prominent long poems of the 1960s, "Wichita Vortex Sutra" and "Iron Horse" (1966), as well as Kingston's 2003 novel *The Fifth Book of Peace*, exert powerful critiques of America's aggressive foreign policies during the Vietnam War era, tracing these policies to sociocultural understandings of America as a bounded national self. At the heart of their respective contributions to a transnational perspective, I argue, lies the Buddhist concept of selfhood as fundamentally unstable and always already in interdependence with other equally unstable and interdependent entities. It is from this framework that Ginsberg and Kingston draw a comprehensive ethical and political program whose utopian (and arguably naïve) outlook envisions nothing less than the transformation of America (and the world) into a more humane community. This article seeks to answer the question of how Buddhist ontology can be and has been used by these two American authors to critique, question, and ultimately undo the artificial separations presupposed by categories like nationhood

or race using nonessentialist concepts of the self and a set of practices I call “de-othering.” De-othering can be defined as a set of rhetorical mechanisms and embodied social strategies aiming to undo perceived differences between the self and the other. While de-othering is not explicitly tied to Buddhist argumentative strategies (or limited to them), both Ginsberg’s and Kingston’s approaches to undoing difference draw, whether implicitly or explicitly, from Buddhist ontologies, highlighting the applicability of said ontologies in concrete instances of literary writing practices and political protest.

Undoing Difference—The Implications of Buddhist Ontology Within a Transnational (American) Framework

Both Kingston and Ginsberg saw themselves confronted with a perception of Asia—particularly Vietnam, China, and Russia—as a threatening, geographically and ideologically distant, and fundamentally incomprehensible other against which the American people had to defend themselves. This conception has underlain American perceptions of Asian peoples and cultures since the inception of Asian-American contact. Jonathan Z. Smith explains that “‘difference’ is an active term—ultimately a verbal form, *differre*, ‘to carry apart’—suggesting the separating out of what, from another vantage point, might be seen as the ‘same.’”¹ Drawing on Smith’s explanation, Michael J. Altman argues in *Hinduism in America* that “[D]ifference is not inherent but has to be marked and labelled different.”² Altman interprets categorical delineations along national, racial, and social criteria as deliberate and arbitrary constructs which actively exclude, separate, and create equally artificial hierarchies. Altman describes the rhetorical strategy by which such distinctions occur as “othering,” listing Smith’s three models for this. In the first, the “metonymic model,” the feature of distinction is cultural, “expressed as the lack of some familiar cultural trait, the use of some unfamiliar cultural object [...], the presence of some marked physical feature [...], or the characterization of [...] the other as [...] nonhuman.”³ The second model—of “center and periphery”—is distinguished by spatial distance, and the amount of distance directly correlates with the degree of perceived difference.⁴ Here, the presupposition of America as “central” and Asia as the “peripheral” already suggests a hierarchy. Finally, the third model is based on intelligibility and suggests that the “‘other’ is unintelligible and will remain so” in both a linguistic and cultural sense.⁵ Naturally, the three models are not neatly separable, and all played a role in American depictions of their enemy during the Vietnam War. Othering in the context of the Cold War is poignantly exemplified by the “three worlds” model, according to which the world can be separated into a “first world” consisting of America and its allies, a “second world” consisting of Soviet Russia and its allies, and a “third world” that includes all countries not allied with either side. According to Smith’s model, Vietnam falls firmly on the side of America’s enemy, belonging to the “second world,” the metonymic other.

Both Ginsberg and Kingston were heavily invested in countering such essentializing views of America as a distinct national entity in fierce competition with a threatening other and thereby in opening new avenues for transnational dialogue and community-building. Parts of “Wichita Vortex Sutra” can be read as an indication that Ginsberg was abandoning a national poetic framework in favor of an international one in the mid-1960s and that he was envisioning a future in explicit opposition to America as a global leader.⁶ The primary point of relation for Ginsberg’s transnational framework was clearly Asia, both in religious and cultural dimensions. As for Kingston, Klara Szmańko argues that in “*The Fifth Book of Peace*, [she] assumes a much more transnational perspective,”⁷ and Kingston herself might call it her “global novel.”⁸ One reason why both authors fought essentializing narratives of America as a nationally bounded, culturally homogenous entity lies in the fact that they would both be excluded at least in part from such conceptions. They belonged to minorities in the US who were subject to processes of othering in all three variants: Ginsberg was of Russian descent, Kingston of Chinese, which fell into the category of the “periphery” according to Altman and Smith (spatial model). Moreover, both were Buddhists, engaging in cultural practices and using languages many Americans did not understand (model of intelligibility), were heavily involved in countercultural activities, and expressed sympathies for Vietnam (metonymic model).⁹ They thus fall between the cracks of such simple binary oppositions as “Asian” and “American,” “communist” and “capitalist.”

Both Ginsberg and Kingston became interested in Buddhism in their young adulthood—Ginsberg through eclectic readings of Buddhist sources (such as Dwight Goddard’s seminal *A Buddhist Bible*), Gary Snyder’s and Jack Kerouac’s influence, and travels through India and Japan; and Kingston through a fascination and encounters with the Beat Generation.¹⁰ While they did eventually come to follow particular lineages (Ginsberg was a scholar of Tibetan Buddhist Chogyam Trungpa, while Kingston followed Thích Nhất Hạnh’s “Plum Village” Zen tradition), both authors’ understandings of Buddhist philosophy remain too eclectic and syncretistic to be categorized in such terms as lineage. Their uses of Buddhist ontology were intricately connected to their efforts at transnational community-building. It comes as no surprise, then, that we find in their works mechanisms of identity construction which imagine “self” as being always already in interdependence with and therefore not inherently opposed to “other.” In *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, Jin Y. Park explains the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* (“dependent co-arising”) by arguing that a “being in Buddhism is always already a result of co-arising (simultaneous happening) of different elements that together construct what we call a ‘self.’”¹¹ Unlike a Western (Aristotelian) framework of logic, which conceives of the self as an absolute, unchanging essence, Buddhist ontology posits that the self cannot be defined except through its relation to the other. The two authors’ Buddhist lineages and influences as well as scattered references throughout their works suggest that the main theoretical basis for their understandings of *pratītyasamutpāda* lies in the Heart and Diamond

Sutras (and, in Kingston's case, the *Avatamsaka* or Hua-Yen Sutra). The Heart, Diamond, and Hua-Yen Sutras and their nonessentialist logic and deconstructive rhetorical strategies crucially inform the two authors' understandings of the human self, American cultural identity, and the political conflicts arising from it. Yet the practical implementations of these strategies in their works differ vastly as a result of their respective style, social habitus, and positionality in the literary field. My reading of their respective works suggests that Ginsberg's starting point is a more "top-down," approach, moving from an intellectualizing, highly technical, and comprehensive critique of language comparable to that of the poststructuralists to its practical ethical applicability.¹² Meanwhile, as I will show, Kingston assumes a bottom-up perspective based on subjective and highly emotional understandings of selfhood, otherness, and their very tangible political consequences, moving from concrete situations to more generalizing deductions about human conduct.

Ginsberg, the Vietnam War, and the Vortex of Deconstruction

Composed during his 1966 trip across America, "Wichita Vortex Sutra" is both closer to the Vietnam War than Kingston's *Fifth Book of Peace*, having been written during the war, and more distant, excluding any firsthand experience of the Vietnam War. In a fragmented, nonlinear manner, "Wichita Vortex Sutra" narrates Ginsberg's bus ride to Wichita, Kansas, interspersed with radio broadcasts, newspaper headlines, and Ginsberg's own musings and comments about the war. The poem, composed at the height of Ginsberg's career, presented a milestone,¹³ but it remains overshadowed by his most critically acclaimed works, "Howl" and "Kaddish." Although "Wichita Vortex Sutra" is best remembered for its bold, naïve proclamation, "I here declare the end of the War,"¹⁴ most of the poem is spent deconstructing the deliberately obscuring language of the American government. The government's rhetorical strategies were by no means new in principle, but certainly new in character. According to Theodore Roszak, "linguistic camouflage" used to "obscure realities" was a common way of justifying war, yet the media had only recently started relying upon "what purport[ed] to be a clinically objective vocabulary of technologisms." At the same time, he claims, more emotionally charged language often betrayed "propagandistic fictions or pure distraction."¹⁵ In "Wichita Vortex Sutra," Ginsberg battles both rhetorical strategies. His own countermeasurements are crucially informed by the Diamond Sutra's insistence upon the emptiness (*sunyata*) of all phenomena, as he implies towards the poem's beginning when he imagines himself reading the "Prajnaparamita Sutra over coffee" and finds his immediate and imagined surroundings "illuminated by Bright / EMPTINESS."¹⁶

Ginsberg initiates part II of the poem by criticizing the government's deliberate dehumanization of the enemy: "over 250,000 / South Vietnamese armed men / our Enemy— / Not Hanoi our enemy / Not China our enemy / The Viet Cong! / [...] The General guessed they'd stop infiltrating the South / if they bombed the North— / So I

guess they bombed! / Pale Indochinese boys came thronging thru the jungle / in increased numbers / to the scene of TERROR! / [...] Put it this way in television language / Use the words / language, language: / 'A bad guess[.]'"¹⁷ The passage addresses the misrepresentation of the supposed other, highlighting mechanisms of emotional regulation and emotionally charged language. "Our Enemy" is depicted as both spatially distant (i.e., othered) and culturally different (i.e., othered metonymically and in terms of unintelligibility), which coincides with a blatant ignorance of American politicians and people (conditioned by media representation) as to who said enemy is in the first place—"Hanoi," "China," or "the Viet Cong." At the same time, Ginsberg begins to assume the enemy's perspective by re-imagining them as "pale Indochinese boys," leveraging the age of the imagined soldiers as a symbol of their innocence and their pallor as a sign of vulnerability to emphasize their humanity. At the same time, he criticizes the government's systematic downplaying of its atrocities as a "bad guess." In a more explicit dissection of the government's rhetorical strategies of (metonymic) othering in a 1967 interview, Ginsberg showed acute awareness of both the theoretical model of othering and its tangible effects: "you can get the American people [...] to fight gentle Indochinese by labeling them [...] 'reds.' [...] It depersonalizes them."¹⁸ The poet's statement follows two strategies of de-othering at once: firstly, to stress the nonviolent behavior and common humanity of the "gentle Indochinese," and secondly to expose the government's strategy of metonymic othering as a deliberate, vicious misrepresentation. However, his description stops short of a complete de-othering by maintaining the different-ness of the "gentle Indochinese." Ginsberg remains rooted in his own perspective, and occasionally (and perhaps unwittingly) reinforces the very categories of difference he set out to overcome.

Ginsberg identifies language and the understanding of Vietnam (and, more broadly, communism) as an outside threat as a key factor in the proliferation of the war: "The war is language, / language abused / [...] like magic for power on the planet: / Black Magic language, / formulas for reality— / Communism is a 9 letter word / used by inferior magicians [...] / —funky warlocks operating on guesswork[.]'"¹⁹ Ginsberg's analytical, top-down exploration of the war as a product of abused language views that very language as a misrepresentation, "guesswork" by "warlocks" whose demonization of "communism" is "inferior" because it constitutes an arbitrary separation of humans into ally and enemy.²⁰ Ginsberg saw this as an illegitimate ploy for political power, a strategy of othering employed to maintain political and cultural hegemonies and to harden national frontlines. However, Ginsberg's rhetorical strategy is not exclusively deconstructive, and he aims to reconstruct from the ruins of war and the ubiquity of human suffering (one of Ginsberg's main themes) a sense of common humanity: "prophecy of the secret / heart the same / in Waterville as Saigon one human form: / When a woman's heart bursts in Waterville / a woman screams equal in Hanoi."²¹ While the "gentle Indochinese" in his earlier perspective on the war still retain a residue of their otherness, Ginsberg now fully unifies the "secret heart" of Waterville and Saigon (and Hanoi) by virtue of their common suffering. The poet uses the notion

of dependent co-arising to suggest, in this instance, that the sufferings (*dukkha*) and fates of American and Vietnamese people are entangled in complicated and unforeseeable ways. He then introduces a transnational perspective by de-othering the American and Vietnamese people into “one human form.” He goes on to explore the fundamental condition of humankind—a two-sided coin of loneliness on the one hand (caused by self-isolating ontological distinctions), longing for companionship on the other: “I’m [...] a lonesome man in Kansas / but not afraid / to speak my lonesomeness [...] / it’s Ours, all over America, / [...] & spoken lonesomeness is Prophecy / in the moon 100 years ago or in / the middle of Kansas now. / [...] O but how many in their solitude weep aloud like me— / [...] in tears to know / how to speak the right language— / [...] I search for the language / that is also yours[.]”²² Concluding by projecting his subjective experience onto the experience of all Americans—and, by implication, all people—Ginsberg at once identifies the effects of othering again as instrumental to human suffering (here, of “lonesomeness”) and announces his search for “the right language,” a common language that counters this ubiquitous isolation, a language of de-othering. His pursuit of a revelation of “one human form” and his comprehensive efforts of bringing together America and Asia are continued almost immediately thereafter in “Iron Horse,” though perhaps less optimistically.

“Iron Horse” can, in many ways, be read as a counterpart to “Wichita Vortex Sutra.” Written after Ginsberg’s declaration of the end of the war in the earlier poem had evidently failed, “Iron Horse” features a similar narrative frame—this time, Ginsberg narrates a long train ride through the US, interspersed with snippets of news on the war, overheard conversations between soldiers, and Ginsberg’s own comments. At the same time, however, the optimism of “Wichita Vortex Sutra” has given way to a pessimistic mixture of engaged desperation and quietist resignation. Yet its rhetorical strategy is markedly similar to that of the previous poem—this time, Ginsberg’s criticism includes those previously excluded from the discourse on the war, namely the American soldiers dispatched to Vietnam. While on a train with several soldiers, the speaker portrays them as victims of the propaganda machine addressed in “Wichita Vortex Sutra”:

ninety-nine soldiers piled up on the train at Amarillo— / [...] all so friendly / [...] —Been taking courses in Propaganda, / How not to believe what they were told / by the enemy, / Young fellas that some of them had long hair / [...] Volunteered / assignments behind the line of Great Machines / that drop Napalm, / milking / the Calf of Gold. / Three months from now / Vietnam, they said.²³

Instead of viewing them as purveyors of terror and destruction, Ginsberg humanizes them and identifies them, at least by their physical features (“young fellas” with “long hair”) and “friendly” demeanor, with the pacifistic and decidedly nonviolent cause of the counterculture. By insisting upon the soldiers’ initial innocence, Ginsberg resists

the temptation of othering to which the New Left was often as equally susceptible as the pro-war camp. Ginsberg's consistent insistence upon nonviolent forms of political activism alienated him from the New Left's more radical and openly violent branches.²⁴ Moreover, the speaker once more redraws the frontlines of the war by portraying the soldiers as innocent yet naïve victims of a vicious governmental misinformation campaign, as illuminated by the comparison to the Israelites, whose veneration of the golden calf here appears as ignorant complacency with authoritative decisions rather than an act of willful evil. The poet thereby relativizes the categories of "victim" and "aggressor"—the soldiers are ignorant of what they are assigned to do, and their participation in the war is contextualized by the government's lies: "A consensus around card table beer— / 'It's my country, / better fight 'em over there than here,' / afraid to say 'No it's crazy / everybody's insane— / This country's Wrong, / the Universe, Illusion.' // Soldiers gathered round / saying—'[...] / if we lose, / there's no stopping the Chinese communists, / We're fightin the communists, aren't we? / Isn't that what it's about?'"²⁵ Here, the soldiers are shown repeating (most likely verbatim) the propagandistic platitudes they have been fed, and Ginsberg explicitly comments that they are "afraid to say" what he considers the truth—that the war mentality stems from a profoundly broken society. The mechanisms of othering are once again made abundantly clear—in this case, both metonymic and spatial—and the soldiers' blatant ignorance of the actual political situation and the obvious, clichéd stereotyping of their assumed enemy shows the disorienting effects of governmental "Black magic language."

But the soldiers' innocence does not last, and later in the poem, Ginsberg once more assumes the kind of top-down, intellectualizing, and large-scale perspective that characterizes his nonessential deconstruction of language: "Who's the enemy, year after year? / [...] What's the news, defeat after defeat? / [...] What's the picture, decade after decade? / Television shows blood, / [...] Cut Sound out of television you won't tell who's Victim / Cut Language off the Visual you'll never know / Who's Aggressor— / cut commentary from Newscast / you'll see a mass of madmen at murder."²⁶ The initial set of rhetorical questions aims to demonstrate the arbitrariness of categories specifying a war and its causes—ally and enemy, victory and defeat (although the poem seems to imply that in war, there can only be defeat), victim and aggressor. Ginsberg then proceeds to demonstrate the war's fundamental inhumaneness, defamiliarizing television's coverage of the war through the cutting out of sound and thereby disrupting a supposedly reliable representation of reality.²⁷ Tony Trigilio concludes that "[t]his is a gesture of shunyata, one that loosens language, sound, and imagery from the moorings that would separate subject from object and [...] distinguish between citizens and their enemies."²⁸ This strategy is emblematic of Ginsberg's understanding of Buddhist ontology as it suggests that categories such as self and other, friend and enemy, do not exist as absolutes but arise in dependence of each other. It presents an idiosyncratic and distinctly literary application of de-othering and, as is typical of Ginsberg's understanding of Buddhism, situates ontological conceptions

within concrete political contexts and vice versa. For the author, religion (or spirituality), ontology (or the realization of the nature of reality), and politics are never neatly separable, and America's wars are as harmful to America itself as they are to other countries. Comparable techniques of de-othering can be found in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*, but instead of theorizing de-othering from an ontological standpoint, she searches for practical ethical applications in individual interpersonal contexts.

Buddhism and Transnational Community-Building in *The Fifth Book of Peace*

Written over two decades after the end of the war, Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* narrates, in four loosely connected chapters (titled "Fire," "Paper," "Water," "Earth"), Kingston's loss of her draft of a fictional fourth book of peace in the 1991 Oakland hills fire, her search for (mainly Chinese) definitions of peace, her and her husband's (lightly fictionalized) stay and countercultural activities in Hawai'i, and her organization of a variety of mindfulness and writing workshops for veterans (and participants in a broader sense) of wars, most importantly the Vietnam War. The novel assumes a perspective both more distant (in terms of its time of composition) and more intimate with it as she heavily relies on first-hand accounts of the people directly and indirectly involved—veterans from both sides, peace protestors, deserters, etc. Notwithstanding its initial lack of critical success, the book offers valuable transnational perspectives on America and Asia.

Similar to Ginsberg's poetic conceptions of self and other, Kingston's narrative is informed by the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*—or, more precisely, by "interbeing," its conceptual equivalent in Vietnamese Zen monk Thích Nhất Hạnh's Plum Village tradition.²⁹ Interbeing can be defined as "the interconnectedness between all people and all phenomena,"³⁰ but unlike the relatively abstract, ontological *pratītyasamutpāda*, it is already embedded into a comprehensive ethical code.³¹ Nhất Hạnh claims that we humans "cannot just be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing."³² Interbeing thus provides the foundation of Nhất Hạnh's "Engaged [Zen] Buddhism,"³³ which "uses the Buddha's teachings to work for the collective social good" and applies Buddhist ethics to all aspects of social life.³⁴

Nhất Hạnh's ideas of interbeing and interbeing's ethical ramifications inform the narrative of Kingston's book first and foremost in her choice of the veterans' stories and experiences. She establishes the concept as central in the chapter "Paper," where she muses on different conceptions of peace and other related concepts, connecting them to Buddhist meditation practice and philosophy: "In the book of the I Ching, the image for the interconnectedness of all beings and things is ribbon grass [...] 'because the stalks are connected by their roots.'"³⁵ The ethical consequences she draws from this image are tangible throughout the book—not only are all things human or nonhuman connected "by their roots," their very foundations, but these connections are often as invisible and intangible as they are impactful. Thus, the peace

Kingston seeks to cultivate can only be achieved through a thorough understanding of interbeing and an uncompromising restructuring (or de-structuring) of social hierarchies based on this understanding: “*Ping. P’ing. Peng. [...]. We said ‘peace’ [...]* in various ways. [...] In my Say Yup dialect, *peng* means ‘level,’ ‘even,’ [...] Yes, same in Mandarin, ‘equal,’ ‘ordinary.’”³⁶ “‘Great equality is the means to highest peace.’ ‘King and ordinary people hunt deer on the same level land.’”³⁷ The kind of “great equality” Kingston proposes here is, first and foremost, an ontological condition of sameness that precludes conceptions of the “other” to some degree. This ontological condition is then realized in the form of a radically egalitarian ethical code quite literally locating both king and “ordinary people” on the same “level,” “even” plane. In full consequence, this code would mean the end of gender, class, and racial or national divides—in short, a comprehensive de-othering—and, to the degree that she and any other human being is capable of this, Kingston attempts to realize this conception of peace throughout the book.

This realization fundamentally depends upon the (Zen) Buddhist practices taught by Thích Nhất Hạnh. Nhất Hạnh proposes a conceptual quadrangulation of interbeing (the ontological state of reality), meditation (the practice), mindfulness (the mental state desirable for the practice) and peace (the goal): “According to Nhat Hanh, meditators practice mindfulness, that is, concentration on what they are doing. This way, they realize interbeing. One understands interbeing when one touches one thing with deep awareness.”³⁸ This conceptual cluster becomes instrumental for Kingston’s efforts at de-othering Asian and American people(s) and fostering a transnational community. To it, she adds writing: “Reading and writing should expand and transform the self,” which, in turn, only becomes possible when one goes beyond “family, tribe, Chinatown, gang, nation—into a larger selflessness or agape.”³⁹ The book’s last chapter, “Earth,” narrates the organization of a series of workshops and retreats for veterans in which they write about their experiences in the war (or bring existent pieces) and discuss their writing with each other—based on Nhất Hạnh’s teachings. Kingston’s elaboration of a combination of meditation and writing at the beginning of “Earth” already brings to the fore the situation’s inherent potential for transnational, intercultural community-building.⁴⁰ By teaching practices derived from Vietnamese Zen culture to a largely American audience, she is effectively taking the first step of bridging the perceived gap of otherness between the two. This particularly applies to one specific workshop with a particularly homogenous group of participants: “At summer’s end, Earl and I go to the East Coast. I’m giving the writing workshop for veterans [...]. They identify themselves as ‘combat vet’ and ‘one hundred percent Viet Nam vet.’ None of them are Black. No Asian Americans. All Whites. No women. [...] They must feel safe being among Buddhists, and so are able to express themselves. They readily admit to killing, and they are in horrendous pain. The more killings done, [...] the more PTSD.”⁴¹ The emphasis on the veterans’ homogenous white identities builds an expectation of tension between the workshop’s participants and leaders, who come from different religious and national

backgrounds. The subversion of this expectation proves to be a much more powerful demonstration of the real-life possibilities of de-othering than any explicit comment on the irony of the situation could have been. In participating in the workshop, these veterans have already taken a twofold step towards the other, since Buddhism was not only the predominant religion in Vietnam during the war,⁴² but also enjoyed increasing popularity in the pacifist countercultural circle of the New Left—who are referred to at one point as America’s “other enemy” by the narrator.⁴³ At the same time, the veterans are decidedly not portrayed as aggressors in this passage: “While American soldiers may be seen as a tool of imperialism and colonialism in Vietnam, they were also the victims of imperialist and colonial policies.”⁴⁴ According to Szmańko, by including white veterans in her workshops, Kingston “striv[es] for the transformation of whiteness” away from the symbol of imperialist aggression, ultimately “bringing together in the spirit of transformational identity politics people of various races and ethnicities with diverse histories of oppression.”⁴⁵ In doing so, she is effectively redrawing, if not erasing, the frontlines of the war.

Kingston’s redrawing of the frontlines begins with the definition of peace itself, which, she insists, remains fluid and therefore requires constant renegotiation: “By claiming that the idea of peace is constantly changing, [Kingston] foregrounds [...] the need for a shared contemporary idea of peace.”⁴⁶ In the chapter “Paper,” Kingston exemplifies how notions of peace can be co-opted in the name of war using Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*:

It’s used in military academies [...]. Scholars argue that *The Art of War* is about preventing war [...]. Sun Tzu’s highest value was peace; he advised going to war only when all other ploys failed. [...] My own *Woman Warrior* is being used as a text at the United States Air Force Academy [...]. ‘It gives a mythos to the women military students,’ says their instructor [...]. I have to make up for that. The roots of “warrior” are in “quarrel,” “error,” “worse.” I’ve been pretending [...] that it means “one who wars against confusion.”⁴⁷

Kingston’s examples here suggest that peace and war cannot exist in and of themselves but are defined through the existence of their respective opposite—not just in theory but in practice, and in a way that affects our everyday lives. This, of course, is an example of dependent co-arising. Consequently, the use of both *The Art of War* and *The Woman Warrior* demonstrates that the “belief in an absolute truth is harmful to peace.”⁴⁸ But in the same way in which actions dedicated to creating and maintaining peace may result in war (such as writing a book supposedly encouraging peace being abused as propaganda for war),⁴⁹ wars can also result in what Kingston occasionally calls “islands of peace.”⁵⁰ In this way, conventional delineations of war against peace are undermined as the two are shown to exist only in interdependence with each other.

Throughout the novel, the supposed frontlines of the Vietnam War are redrawn multiple times through the use of multiperspectivity. As Amy Tang demonstrates, this multiperspectivity functions within a wider program of de-othering spanning Kingston's entire oeuvre, which Amy C. Tang describes as a progressive movement from what Kingston calls "the selfish first person" in *The Fifth Book of Peace* toward, in Tang's words, "understanding and inhabiting the viewpoint of others."⁵¹ Unlike Ginsberg, who remains fixed in his own perspective, Kingston attempts to overcome her own positionality through multiperspectivity. This effort, then, can be understood as the narrative realization and perfection of interbeing. With each narrative, the very definition of the war changes as the categories of "ally" and "enemy" become increasingly fluid. This results in a questioning of the categories themselves, and the narrator evidently mistrusts their capacity to represent a supposedly exterior reality. Place as both a literal and metaphorical dimension enables the narrator's (or rather narrators') multiperspectival reimagination of the war as both an internal and collective conflict of the self: "Joe Lamb [...] reads to us about ourselves right here and now. 'This weekend, here where Turtle Island opens to the Pacific, [...] with twenty-five veterans, with twenty-five souls from twenty-five wars, with one soul from one war, we gather [...]. Does the species itself wage war with itself? Where are wars fought? On the earth? In the mind? [...] In the collective soul?'"⁵² The passage attempts to undo the effects of othering in the spatial sense proposed by Smith. The opening of "Turtle Island" to "the Pacific" signals a transnational or transpacific perspective—"open"-ness or possible unity that is explored in Lamb's series of rhetorical questions, all of which suggest that categorical distinctions between self and other are not only thoroughly misguided but harmful. Through her choice of stories, Kingston promotes Nhất Hạnh's notion of interbeing, which holds that "two sides in a conflict are not really opposing, but two aspects of the same reality."⁵³ Ultimately, then, what was previously conceived of as a conflict with a supposedly threatening external other is reconceptualized as a pointless act of self-destruction. But the gap between America and Asia is not so easily bridged, and Kingston's centering of de-othering as a strategy of transnational peacemaking begins with those who arguably have the most immediate cultural ties to both continents—Asian Americans.

Gayle Sato views Kingston's work as a reprocessing of various Asian/American wars (mainly referring to the Vietnam and, to some extent, the Korean and Second World War) "from her perspective as an Asian American."⁵⁴ Kingston repeatedly experiences symptoms of the supposed in-between-ness of her identity as an Asian American—for example, she asks for the "Three Lost Books of Peace" whilst traveling through Taiwan, and is viewed as an "unread person of the West" on the one hand, as "connected by karma to China" and "infinite kin of the Chinese" on the other.⁵⁵ Kingston and other Asian Americans prove particularly important as ambassadors of transnational community-building in the novel as they are identified as members of both groups. Kingston's status creates ambiguous reactions oscillating between acceptance and rejection from both Asians and Americans,⁵⁶ which thwart any attempt

at an essentialist self-conception, thus necessitating a nonessentialist self-image in accordance with the notion of interbeing. For Asian Americans directly involved in the war, the effects of their in-between-ness prove transformative. Kingston exemplifies this with a poem by Paul Fujinaga, a Japanese American veteran of Vietnam, entitled “Fucking Gooks”: “John Wayne I was, in fatigues and boots, / here to kill those fucking gooks / ... They’d touch my hair and say, same-same Vietnamese.”⁵⁷ In the first half, Fujinaga invokes John Wayne, a stereotypical icon of American masculinity who here serves as an example of white jingoism and racism (as suggested by the pejorative “gooks”). The second part undercuts his all-American self-depiction with the friendly reactions of his supposed enemies, revealing him to belong to both groups and, at the same time, neither. Kingston’s narrative demonstrates that, as she puts it, “‘Asian Americans have special pain over Viet Nam, Asians against Asians.’ The playwright Reuben Tam said it better: ‘Gooks killing gooks. I was a gook killing gooks.’”⁵⁸ Their “special pain” arises from the fact that they are acting against their own interests by killing a supposed enemy who would often accept them in the name of a homeland which discriminates against them (as exemplified by Tam’s self-description as “gook”). On the other hand, they bear a strong potential for de-othering and peacemaking due to their partial ability to traverse national boundaries, at least to the degree to which they accept the respective nation’s conditions (which, in America, always includes racist discrimination).

Ultimately, however, Asian Americans must be viewed as the tip of the iceberg of interbeing—a prominent example of a condition that applies to all people and things equally. And while their attempts to form transnational bonds serve as an example of community-building beyond race and nation, the main initiative to do so must be carried by everyone and cannot function without a wider cultural understanding of Asians and Americans as “infinite kin.” This is what Kingston ultimately seeks to teach with her selection of stories: “Renny Christopher [...] writes from the point of view of the woman who listens to the men who went to Viet Nam: [...] On my map / the two coastlines— / California’s / Viet Nam’s— / look like they should fit as jigsaw pieces if only I / could bring them together at just the right angle.”⁵⁹ The picture painted here allegorizes interbeing as a function of geographical borders which can be pieced together and thereby transcended, but on a deeper level, it imagines a transpacific community based on a conception of humanity as an organic whole. In order to realize this community, the two sides must meet, and what begins here as an allegory becomes manifest in the chapter “Earth,” where American soldiers and veterans encounter the “other” and attempt to overcome their perceived differences.

The main underlying narrative of “Earth” centers around the de-othering of two supposedly irreconcilable factions, divided not only by the Pacific Ocean but also by ideological, religious, and, most importantly, political differences. Kingston’s attempts at reconciling American and Vietnamese participants in the war are informed by Thích Nhất Hạnh’s tenet that “one’s greatest adversary can become a friend, and befriending

is the first step towards peace.”⁶⁰ The first prerequisite to this development is encoded in the very process of othering—namely the American veterans’ admittance that they do not know or understand their enemy. As one veteran recalls their patrol on a “ship [...] rocking in the river current,” he asks himself: “‘We were shooting at what? We didn’t know. The enemy, of course. The Viet Cong, whoever that was.’”⁶¹ The superficial clarity of the divide between himself and “the enemy” is undercut by his lasting obscurity: not only is he invisible, hidden away in the mysterious, impenetrable jungle, but the speaker also admits to not understanding what “enemy” means in this case, and hence, sows the first doubt regarding the righteousness of his assignment. This admittance of ignorance later enables the first attempts at empathizing with the Vietnamese, as in this dialogue between two American veterans: “‘I wonder what our counterparts, the writer veterans in Viet Nam, are thinking?’ [...] ‘What do you *think* they think? Invaders out of nowhere bombing them, [...] killing their family and friends and neighbors. [...] Strangers invading your country and your village, and [...] wrecking your life. [...] How would you feel?’”⁶² Although no actual encounter between the two sides has occurred yet, a veteran’s willingness to imagine oneself in the other’s situation demonstrates the universality of human suffering in wars, and the series of rhetorical questions can be read as a first step towards a comprehensive de-othering.

However, this process can only be fulfilled in a genuine encounter. American veteran Robert Landman recounts a dialogue with a Vietcong prisoner of war, who had been subjected to a brutal interrogation—but according to Landman, the interrogator had failed to ask the most important questions, questions concerning the prisoner of war as a person:

I asked [the NVA soldier] his name. I told him mine. I asked him how he came to be here. He was drafted out of school into the army. I said, “Me too” and “How old are you?” “Nineteen.” “I’m nineteen also.” [...]

In that moment, everyone and everything became silent [...]. There are many different kinds of silences This was a peaceful silence ... beyond all understanding [...]. [W]e looked at each other and I wished him well. [...] Within a few minutes, he was gone, but something remained, something unexplainable and transformational

I realized that he was not the enemy. [...] From that moment on, I did not want to be in a position to bring harm to anyone.⁶³

While the interrogator had viewed the soldier in a profoundly dehumanizing manner, Landman’s interest lies in their common humanity, and he reframes their common experience of the war as something that connects rather than divides them. The superficial similarities of their situations betray a deeper universality of human experience, and it is this universality which allows for a “moment of peace,” a silence

“beyond all understanding” in which their interbeing is realized.⁶⁴ Landman realizes in what can only be called an epiphany that the prisoner “was not the enemy” and that he no longer wanted to “bring harm to anyone.” The realization of interbeing as a profound ontological condition then immediately results in a radical revision of an ethical code transforming Landman’s very identity, thus demonstrating Kingston’s bottom-up approach from concrete situations to a more universal applicability.

In a similar instance of epiphanic insight, Sister Phuong, a Vietnamese Buddhist nun, expresses the idea of interbeing in a more comprehensive and universally applicable way, connecting the philosophical concept to its real-life consequences. Phuong recalls standing before a cathedral in Florence, looking at a merchant, and seeing that “the merchant [...] in front of the cathedral is like me. I, I feel that [...] I am one part of her, [...] that I am in touch with the reality as it is in that moment.” As she enters the cathedral, the feeling recurs with artworks and statues of other saints, including Jesus, and she feels “that I enter in my own home.”⁶⁵ Finally, she sees an angel smile at her from a picture, and “I feel that there is no pain at all. And I feel very happy at that moment. And then I know that when we practice correctly we drop all the concept, I see the realities are as one togetherness. But because we try to make a concept, we are separated: He is Christian, he is Buddhist, he is Islam, he is Western, he is non-Western, Vietnamese.”⁶⁶ What Landman expresses in very particular terms—recognizing a supposed enemy as a friend—Phuong expresses in a more abstract way as a complete abandonment of conceptual separations between religions, races, and even separate selves, until a person can “see the realities [...] as one togetherness.” Recalling Smith’s explanation of difference, one notices how Phuong understands separation as an active (albeit not necessarily conscious) decision to “try to make a concept.” Similarly, de-othering must occur as an active decision, which, the nun concludes, is rooted in practicing correctly, which she understands as meditation practice and a cultivation of mindfulness. However, the epiphany crucially takes place at a Christian site of worship, indicating that her realization is universally possible and not restricted to a Buddhist context. In fact, the very separation of Buddhism from other religions would be an equal impediment upon Kingston’s endeavor of transnational community-building as any other mechanism of othering. Only by thoroughly “going beyond representation”⁶⁷—Kingston’s (and Nhất Hạnh’s) argument—can humans foster a common humanity beyond language-enforced categorical boundaries.

The kind of epiphany expressed by Landman and Sister Phuong remains crucial for putting the abstract theory of de-othering into concrete practice. In Kingston’s book, Plum Village serves as a prime example of a transnational spiritual community, or *sangha*.⁶⁸ For Nhất Hạnh, “Sanghas provide places where interbeing can be grasped,”⁶⁹ and throughout the novel and the chapter “Earth” in particular, the solidarity and mutual empathy fostered within the community establishes it as a crucial mechanism of de-othering and forging transnational connections. Kingston recalls an interview with the BBC in which she explains the centrality of Plum Village (responding

to an “abstract question about ‘nation’”) as follows: “I said that Plum Village was a successful experiment in international community. Crossing, erasing, broadening boundaries, people had come here from all over the world [...]. And they were of various religious traditions [...]. We were living in community, living in peace.”⁷⁰ Szmańko relates Kingston’s goal of “crossing, erasing, broadening boundaries” to “Alejandro Portes’s definition of transnationalism as ‘goal-oriented initiatives that require coordination across national borders by members of civil society.’”⁷¹ In doing so, Szmańko emphasizes the non-corporate character of Plum Village, which was established in explicit opposition to the political and religious entities enforcing artificial national, religious, and ideological boundaries and waging war based on them. The community of Plum Village almost assumes a character of countercultural protest.⁷² Szmańko further argues that according to Kingston and the Vietnamese Buddhist monks of Plum Village, inner peace and global peace are dependent upon each other, being subject to dependent co-arising.⁷³ As Kingston puts it, “Every time we go to war, we’re in schizophrenic agony. Whoever the enemy is, they’re related to us.”⁷⁴ Rather than meaning “related to” in the narrow sense of family trees or even racial genealogies, the all-inclusive “whoever” recasts the “enemy,” the other, as an ontologically inseparable “us,” the self in the nonessential sense proposed by *pratītyasamutpāda*.

Towards the end of the chapter, the American veterans meet their Vietnamese counterparts and former enemies, thereby fulfilling the long-intimated potential for a practical application of the implications of interbeing:

Wayne Karlin said that he was up in the air bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail [...] when Khue was on the ground. “If we had met two decades ago, we would have tried to kill each other.

[...] I was a helicopter gunner, and she was clearing bombs on the Ho Chi Minh Trail [...]. I flew above the jungle canopy, transfixed with hate and fear and searching for her in order to shoot her, while she looked up, in hatred and fear also, searching for me. [...] [Today] I see her face [...]. She looks at me and sees the same. Mutual seeing of the humanness we hold in common.”⁷⁵

Kingston’s use of the concept of interbeing here strongly relies on the very factor of division which, at first, appears to define this moment of irreconcilable enmity. It is precisely in the ubiquity and thus universality of othering, of constructing borders, political sides, and agendas based on distinctions between self and other, and on the very real conflicts that arise out of these constructs, that her narrative finds an opportunity to reveal a common humanity. For when Khue and Karlin look at each other “transfixed with hate,” their emotions and activities stand as mirror images, and they are divided merely by ignorance of each other’s true face: Karlin “had not seen the enemy; the VC had been invisible, hidden in the dark, in the jungle. She had been

the enemy—this lovely, lovely woman.”⁷⁶ Similarly, the current empathy between Khue and Karlin, characterized by “mutual seeing of the humanness we hold in common,” stands as a positive mirror image of their former mutual ignorant antagonism. What ultimately turns hate into love, ignorance into seeing, is not the end of the war or the factual erasure of political entities, but an imaginative act of de-othering, an active confrontation with one’s own prejudices and with the individual existing in interdependence with oneself—“she looks at me and sees the same.” The act of hugging—or, in the practice of Thích Nhất Hạnh, hugging meditation—then presents an iterative (i.e., non-final) consolidation of this process, in which the participants (and members of formerly opposed groups) hug each other and “became a mass of loving humanity.”⁷⁷ The unity that is initially imagined as an ontological condition finds its physical and tangible equivalent, and in becoming “a mass of loving humanity,” the group temporarily undoes, at least in the narrator’s imagination, all forms of othering.

Conclusion: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Ginsberg’s and Kingston’s Models of De-Othering

My analysis has shown, among other things, both Ginsberg and Kingston’s literary practices are committed to questioning, re-imagining, and undoing the Cold War period’s nationalistic ontologies through observations of human empathy and the universality and transnational entanglements of human experiences. At the same time, in observing Ginsberg and Kingston’s rhetorical and practical approaches to de-othering, transnational community building, and peace activism by theorizing and realizing interbeing, a few crucial differences emerge. Ginsberg’s top-down view on *pratītyasamutpāda* as an ontological condition with ethical implications remains on a largely theoretical level, urging the reader (and the larger American public as well as politicians) to draw their own conclusions from his deconstructive, abstract form of de-othering. Where Ginsberg uses individual people as examples—for instance, the soldiers on the train or the woman screaming in Hanoi—they remain anonymous, somewhat transparent characters introduced to convey a point about our common humanity. The practical ethical consequences remain relatively abstract (with the partial exception of the poet’s “search for the language / that is also yours”), and the poet’s locating the core issue on the level of language allows him to frame a de-othering within human thought structures as the ultimate end. At the other end of the spectrum, Kingston’s bottom-up approach prioritizes the realization of interbeing within challenging concrete everyday situations, such as the encounters between (former) enemies and people of supposedly opposing or distinct groups. Tang calls attention to Kingston’s insistence upon “practice” as a more effective means of peacemaking than such imaginative acts as Ginsberg’s declaration of the end of the war—such acts, Kingston seems to imply, are naïve and therefore simply insufficient.⁷⁸ Consequently, the examples she provides do not function only as a means to an end

but, to some extent, can be read as self-serving. Moreover, her deep immersion into multiperspectivity—Tang argues that “Kingston’s voice is remarkably absent” throughout the “Earth” chapter⁷⁹—demonstrates a deep commitment to the implementation of interbeing into her novel on a formal level. Her model can be called praxeological insofar as she focuses on the individual body and its raw physicality as a prime means of navigating social situations and understanding trauma, mindfulness, healing, and their social potential within communities as primarily bodily functions. This material viewpoint already manifests in her application of meditation, specifically breathwork and hugging meditation, to realizing human interconnectedness. These differences to Ginsberg’s form of de-othering may derive from their respective involvement in Buddhism at the time the respective works were composed—for Ginsberg in the mid-1960s, it was largely theoretical, his practice inconsistent and yet to be formalized. Kingston could look back on more practical and formalized experiences.

The nonessentialist reading framework for the two authors’ writing has proven highly fruitful and can be used more expansively within the scope of transnational American studies’ exploration of complex transnational processes, partly because it abolishes the restrictive temporal unidirectionality of conventional causality—dependent co-arising suggests simultaneity and multicausality, thus circumventing the often oversimplifying “chicken-and-egg” debate. What remains to be explored is whether the processes which the two authors enabled within a nonbinary, nonessentialist logical framework may also function according to the still-dominant Western, binary, essentializing models, and to what degree the results yielded by such approaches are comparable.

Notes

- ¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 241–242.
- ² Michael J. Altman, *Hinduism in America: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2022), 12.
- ³ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 232.
- ⁴ Altman, *Hinduism in America*, 13. See also Smith, *Relating Religion*, 234–237.
- ⁵ Altman, *Hinduism in America*, 13. See also Smith, *Relating Religion*, 237–241.
- ⁶ Sascha Pöhlmann, *Future-Founding Poetry: Topographies of Beginnings from Whitman to the Twenty-First Century* (Camden House, 2015), 280–281.
- ⁷ Klara Szmańko, “Towards the Transformation of Whiteness, the White-Centered National Narrative, Racial Categories and the Self in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The*

Fifth Book of Peace,” *European Journal of American Studies* 19, no. 2 (2024): 1,
<https://doi.org/10.4000/11xax>

- ⁸ For Kingston’s thoughts on a “global novel,” see Maxine Hong Kingston, “The Novel’s Next Step,” *Mother Jones*, December 1989. Amy C. Tang comments on Kingston’s unexpected interpretation of the word “global” thusly: “As a whole, *The Fifth Book* is noticeably much less interested in the kinds of migratory nomadism we might expect of the ‘global novel’ it purports to be, than it is in establishing and building communities” (Amy C. Tang, *Repetition and Race: Asian American Literature After Multiculturalism* [Oxford University Press, 2016], 165).
- ⁹ Additionally, Ginsberg had at some stage in his life expressed sympathies with communism, as his mother had been an ardent defender of communism and part of a communist cell, some of whose activities are described in his poem “America” (1956). The poem explores Ginsberg’s profound alienation from America’s dominant ethical-political ideology at the time (see Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems, 1947–1997* (Harper Perennial, 2009), 154–156).
- ¹⁰ Kingston cites the Beat writers as her first point of contact with Buddhism in two respects. First, she learned about Buddhism by reading their work; second, she recalls that her first direct encounter with Buddhist practice occurred on a trip to China with Ginsberg and Snyder (see Maxine Hong Kingston, “Buddhism, the Chinese Religion, and the Ceremony of Writing: An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston,” interview by John Whalen-Bridge, in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff [SUNY Press, 2009], 178).
- ¹¹ Park relates *pratityasamutpada* to two other central concepts, *sunyata* (commonly translated as “emptiness,” meaning nonexistence of an absolute, unchanged essence or self) and *anatta* (commonly translated as “no-self”) (see Jin Y. Park, “General Introduction,” in *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. Jin Y. Park [Rowman and Littlefield, 2006], xii–xiii).
- ¹² For more on poststructuralism and Ginsberg’s Buddhist influences, see Tony Trigilio, *Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 94.
- ¹³ Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg*, expanded ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 477.
- ¹⁴ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 415.
- ¹⁵ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Anchor Books, 1969), 144.
- ¹⁶ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 403.
- ¹⁷ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 406–407.

- ¹⁸ Allen Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958–1996*, ed. David Carter (HarperCollins, 2001), 72.
- ¹⁹ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 409.
- ²⁰ At the same time, Ginsberg acknowledged the very real suffering resulting from such misrepresentations.
- ²¹ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 412.
- ²² Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 413–414.
- ²³ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 448–449.
- ²⁴ Allen Ginsberg, “An Interview with Allen Ginsberg,” interview by Robert Head, in *Conversations with Allen Ginsberg*, ed. David Stephen Calonne (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 45–47.
- ²⁵ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 449–450.
- ²⁶ Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 462.
- ²⁷ Philip Löffler discusses Ginsberg’s use of Brechtian defamiliarization in the context of “Wichita Vortex Sutra.” However, his analysis applies here (see Philipp Löffler, “‘Language is the House We Live in:’ Language-Centeredness and the Limits of Political Activism in Post-War American Poetry [1950–1980],” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 57, no. 4 [2009]: 360, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa.2009.57.4.355>).
- ²⁸ Trigilio, *Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics*, 127.
- ²⁹ A dedicated practitioner within Nhất Hạnh’s lineage, Kingston organized the writing workshops with other members of this tradition, and hence both the workshop’s practices and underlying ideas are inspired by Nhất Hạnh’s idiosyncratic brand of Engaged Buddhism.
- ³⁰ Te-Hsing Shan, “Life, Writing, and Peace: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace*,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.5070/T811006948>
- ³¹ The concept, as Nhất Hạnh proposes it, is developed in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which is referenced in both Ginsberg’s and Kingston’s writings (Shan, “Life, Writing, and Peace”).
- ³² Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Bantam Books, 1991), 96. Kingston’s view of the self echoes Nhất Hạnh’s sentiment: “[T]he self is everyone. Separate parts experience interconnection like the circuits in a huge electric grid” (Maxine Hong Kingston, “Embodied Mindfulness: Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston on Buddhism,

Race, and Beauty,” interview by John Whalen-Bridge, in *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff [State University of New York Press, 2011], 156). Kingston’s image reimagines the metaphor of Indra’s net from the *Avatamsaka Sutra* in a similar manner as Ginsberg’s poem “Lysergic Acid”; see Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 239–242. The subtle oscillation between confirmation of “separate parts” and negation of their separateness through their experience of interconnection is typical of Buddhist logic’s “middle path” (Park, “General Introduction,” xii).

- ³³ Sieber’s argument that Nhất Hạnh’s socially engaged lineage categorically opposes “traditional Zen Buddhism” because the latter merely involves “meditating for one’s own enlightenment in a monastery” may appear as an overgeneralization that equates Zen with reclusiveness (more typical of Rinzai than of Soto Zen) while ignoring the role of the Bodhisattva, an archetype emphasizing compassion and mutual aid. Yet the degree to which Nhất Hạnh’s practice included and actively encouraged various forms of political “justice activism” distinguishes it from other traditions and lineages; see Alexander Sieber, “Hanh’s Concept of Being Peace: The Order of Interbeing,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 5, no. 1 (2015): 2, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v05i01/51097>
- ³⁴ Sieber, “Hanh’s Concept of Being Peace,” 3.
- ³⁵ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (Vintage International, 2003), 47.
- ³⁶ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 52.
- ³⁷ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 52.
- ³⁸ Hsu Shounan, “Writing, Event, and Peace: The Art of Peace in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace*,” *College Literature* 37, no. 2 (2010): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.0.0104>
- ³⁹ Maxine Hong Kingston, “Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston,” interview by Neila C. Seshachari, in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 213.
- ⁴⁰ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 265–267.
- ⁴¹ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 300–301.
- ⁴² Don Lattin, “‘The Vietnam Years’: How the Conflict Ripped the Nation’s Religious Fabric,” *Religion News Service*, September 8, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/09/08/the-vietnam-years-how-the-conflict-ripped-the-nations-religious-fabric/>

- ⁴³ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 269.
- ⁴⁴ Szmańko, "Towards the Transformation of Whiteness," 7.
- ⁴⁵ Szmańko, "Towards the Transformation of Whiteness," 7.
- ⁴⁶ Hsu, "Writing, Event, and Peace," 105.
- ⁴⁷ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 48–49.
- ⁴⁸ Hsu, "Writing, Event, and Peace," 119.
- ⁴⁹ Another such instance is the propagandistic controlling of terminology pertaining to the Vietnam War: "Marc uses the word 'pacification' [...]. U.S. policy in Viet Nam wasn't war; it was pacification. It wasn't peace either" (Kingston 277). Such deliberately disorienting rhetoric strategies were already deconstructed by Ginsberg in "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (compare p. 5), and Kingston's repetition of the word "pacification" here follows the same rhetoric pattern as Ginsberg's "language, language."
- ⁵⁰ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 244.
- ⁵¹ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 62; Tang, *Repetition and Race*, 138. See also Maxine Hong Kingston, "Reading Backward, Looking Forward: A Retrospective Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," interview by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *MELUS* 33, no. 1 (2008): 157–170, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.1.157>
- ⁵² Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 295.
- ⁵³ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho (Beacon Press, 1987), 95.
- ⁵⁴ Gayle K. Sato, "Reconfiguring the 'American Pacific': Narrative Reenactments of Viet Nam in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* 16 (2005): 116.
- ⁵⁵ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 48.
- ⁵⁶ However, multiple examples in Kingston's narrative suggest that the problem of rejection occurs primarily on the American side. See Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 272–273.
- ⁵⁷ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 259.
- ⁵⁸ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 280.
- ⁵⁹ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 278–279.
- ⁶⁰ Sieber, "Hanh's Concept of Being Peace," 2.

- ⁶¹ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 242.
- ⁶² Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 279.
- ⁶³ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 309–310.
- ⁶⁴ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 310.
- ⁶⁵ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 375.
- ⁶⁶ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 376. Kingston has made a similar statement in an interview with John Whalen-Bridge, stating why she does not say she is a Buddhist: “To say that one is a Buddhist is like saying, ‘I am a Catholic’ or ‘I am a Protestant’ or ‘I am a Confucian.’ It all seems so narrow, even Buddhism.” The statement in itself constitutes a de-othering of religious and denominational boundaries (Kingston, “Buddhism, the Chinese Religion, and the Ceremony of Writing,” 180).
- ⁶⁷ Hsu, “Writing, Event, and Peace,” 108.
- ⁶⁸ Against Te-Hsing Shan’s claim that Kingston is using the term “in its secular sense” in the book (Shan, “Life, Writing, and Peace,” 384), Kingston herself has argued against the synonymity of “community” and “sangha” by foregrounding the aspect of “spiritual practice,” which crucially distinguishes the latter term from the former; see Kingston, “Buddhism, the Chinese Religion, and the Ceremony of Writing,” 185.
- ⁶⁹ Sieber, “Hanh’s Concept of Being Peace,” 5–6.
- ⁷⁰ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 389–390.
- ⁷¹ Szymańko, “Towards the Transformation of Whiteness,” 6; Alejandro Portes, “Introduction: The Debates and Significance of Immigrant Transnationalism,” *Global Networks* 2, no. 3 (2002): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00012>
- ⁷² Szymańko, “Towards the Transformation of Whiteness,” 6–7.
- ⁷³ Szymańko, “Towards the Transformation of Whiteness,” 6.
- ⁷⁴ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 361.
- ⁷⁵ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 352.
- ⁷⁶ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 358.
- ⁷⁷ Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 396.
- ⁷⁸ Tang, *Repetition and Race*, 156.
- ⁷⁹ Tang, *Repetition and Race*, 144.

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