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Life, Writing, and Peace: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*

TE-HSING SHAN

I. A Weird and Intriguing Text

"If a woman is going to write a Book of Peace, it is given her to know devastation"—thus begins Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003).[1] Unlike her former award-winning and critically acclaimed works—*The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989)—the reception of her latest book has been cool, to say the least. As of November 2008, there were only three entries on *The Fifth Book of Peace* in the *MLA International Bibliography*, in sharp contrast to the numbers on *The Woman Warrior* (273 entries), *China Men* (90 entries), and *Tripmaster Monkey* (63 entries). These three entries include an eight-page book essay published in China, a twelve-page journal article on Kingston's three works published in Turkey, and a U.S. dissertation on three Asian American female writers. In addition, there are very few reviews in newspapers and journals. This is indeed a phenomenon unthinkable for a writer who has been hailed as one of the most frequently taught writers living in the U.S. Why?

One of the main reasons is that critics and reviewers do not know how to cope with this complicated, heterogeneous, and "weird" text, which defies easy categorization. Nor do they know how to respond to the author's urging of her readers to face squarely collective American traumas and symptoms (especially the Vietnam War) through writing in order to explore possible solutions. Polly Shulman's essay in the *New York Times Book Review* is a case in point. To her, *The Fifth Book of Peace* is "a strange, scarred thing, pieced together from fragments, smelling of smoke and anguish"; the characters are unreal and disappointing; the stories are too moralistic; and the "utopianism" is "unreal," "excessive," and "forced." She concludes, "To me, this need for happy endings seems anything but peaceful. It's as if

Kingston was hit so hard—by the fire? the war? the loss of her parents . . . ?—that she can't face any more pain. I hope this book has done its work of moving her past the need to sanitize and happify. Then perhaps she will return to the sadder, fiercer, deeper stories she used to tell so bravely."[2] Shulman suggests that Kingston's inability to confront personal, familial, and national losses results in the failure of the book. This judgment is refuted by E. San Juan, Jr. To him, Shulman stands for a group of reviewers who are unable to appreciate the "novelty" and "the architectonic shape" of the book. He retorts, "Can we expect more from reviewers who are creatures of habit?"[3]

Indeed, Kingston's former works are not without novelty, weirdness, and heterogeneity. For instance, publishers and readers had difficulty categorizing *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. Reviewers and critics found that the word "postmodern" offered a convenient characterization of and solution to *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*. Instead of creating barriers to readers, the novelty and strangeness of these texts in fact account for their warm receptions. In comparison with the author's previous works, structurally, the four-chapter *Fifth Book of Peace* with a short epilogue is not so fragmented as *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*; strategically, the author chose to chronicle the ups and downs of her life after the publication of *Tripmaster Monkey* and to share her feelings and insights; and thematically, the book focuses on peace (which is the author's long-term concern) and the ways to obtain it personally and collectively in the face of natural disaster as well as dominant American ideology and the rhetoric of patriotism.[4]

Therefore, with the exception of the third chapter, "Water," which is a re-creation of the novel destroyed in the 1991 Berkeley-Oakland fire, the other chapters are true records of the author's life. Facing the consequences of the natural catastrophe, Kingston confesses, "After the fire, I could not re-enter fiction."[5] Although forced upon her, the realization that "things that fiction can't solve must be worked out in life" (241) offers a new and unexpected freedom—the freedom "to write diarylike, okay to be formless, no art, no good English."[6] No longer confined by formal, artistic, and linguistic requirements, nor concerned with meticulous fictional techniques, Kingston turns to observe and write about her life directly, trying to fathom the depth and profundity within and, with that intense feeling and intimate knowledge, to reach out to the fellow sufferers of the world, especially Vietnam War veterans. In addition, she also re-creates her novel lost in the fire and places it alongside three memoir-like chapters. As a result, *The Fifth Book of Peace* becomes Kingston's most complicated, autobiographical, and self-reflexive work, for "the life writer not only supplements ostensibly historical narratives with metacommentary and fiction but also leaves a text that posits neither the fantasy of an authoritative master narrative nor the *jouissance* of having abandoned the same."[7]

In addition to Kingston's transgressive acts as an author, the intricate representation of transnational elements in *The Fifth Book of Peace* also contributes to the text's complexity and might thus partly account for its unpopularity among

critics. Notwithstanding such reception, it must be pointed out that, besides engaging universal issues such as war and peace, trauma and therapy, this book also contains various transnational elements, some manifest, others latent. For instance, the second chapter, "Paper," records Kingston's several trips to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in a quest for the lost Books of Peace.[8] The fourth chapter, "Earth," describes Kingston's close connection with Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned Vietnamese monk in exile in France, and her application of the Buddhist mindfulness practice to help the members of her Veterans Writing Workshop. Even the expression "Asian American" or "Asian/American" contains within it a lot of transnational and transpacific significance.[9] In short, this book may encourage us to recognize that these global themes and transnational factors have been central to Kingston's body of work from the start. Indeed, *The Fifth Book of Peace* provides us with an opportunity to reevaluate the global, transnational elements that have been important to Kingston's career all along.[10]

Kingston once described this new work as "a nonfiction fiction nonfiction sandwich"[11] and admitted to being curious to see "what the critics can come up with, the idea of what the border is, because in this book there is fiction and there is non-fiction and there is poetry. And it is not a mixture. It is not a synthesis."[12] In my opinion, the challenge posed by *The Fifth Book of Peace* is not only the ambiguity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of the form,[13] but also, *pace* Shulman, "the sadder, fiercer, deeper stories" more "bravely" told than in her previous works. This paper explores this challenging and unduly neglected work from the perspective of life writing.

II. Contextualizing and Re-visioning a Pacifist Warrior/Writer

In order to have a fuller understanding of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, it is advisable to place it in the context of Kingston's writing career and life trajectory. It goes without saying that any literary production represents a phase in the author's life and has its unique significance, even more so for a minority writer like Kingston. Her debut work, *The Woman Warrior*, fights against the racism of mainstream American society and the sexism of both American and Chinese patriarchy from the speaking position of a Chinese American female. *China Men* endeavors to establish a heroic image of Chinese American males and to reclaim American history on their behalf. Her first novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*, describes how an angry young Chinese American male writer, Wittman Ah Sing, in northern California in the 1960s, strives for ethnic belonging and cultural identity through theatrical performance.[14] After the publication of *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston devoted herself to writing a sequel with the title "The Fourth Book of Peace." However, the fire burned up her house along with all her property and turned these "156 good, rewritten pages" into "purely white" ashes.[15]

The Fifth Book of Peace begins with the chapter "Fire," which vividly describes

her hasty drive home after hearing of the breakout of the fire on the radio, her desperate attempts to get close to her house, and the aftermath of this devastating incident, which killed twenty-five people and left thousands of people homeless. This is followed by "Paper," which depicts her quests for the alleged three lost Books of Peace in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The chapter "Water" is a re-creation of her burned fiction about Wittman Ah Sing and his family in Hawai'i and, in this sense, is the sequel to the sequel of *Tripmaster Monkey*. And the final chapter "Earth" records her efforts to reestablish herself by calling upon "war veterans to help write a literature of peace" ("Contents") and by devoting herself to setting up and leading the Veterans Writing Workshop. The four-page epilogue depicts the situation after 9/11. The chapter titles might remind us of the four elements in Buddhist cosmology (earth, water, fire, and wind) and the five elements in Chinese cosmology (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth).[16] Technically speaking, each chapter is loosely connected with the others. However, whether we judge this book alone or in the context of Kingston's creative career and real life, a common thread emerges without fail: peace.

This statement can be self-evidently applied to *The Fifth Book of Peace*, published in the new millennium, since the book title contains the word "peace" and some editions even have the Chinese characters for "peace" (*he-ping*) on the front cover. Nevertheless, a closer look at Kingston's life and oeuvre shows that peace has always been one of her major concerns. In "War," one of the essays collected in *Hawai'i One Summer*, she writes, "In 1967, Earll and I, with our son, left Berkeley in despair over the war." And they "did not look for new jobs in Hawai'i. It was the duty of the *pacifist* in a war economy not to work."[17] Instead of escaping from the war, they "had put [themselves] in the very midst of it, as close as you could get and remain in the United States" (16). To them, "there was nothing to do but continue the protest, help the AWOL soldiers and sailors when they took sanctuary at the Church of the Crossroads and formed the Servicemen's Union" (18). In other words, as pacifists, Kingston and her husband practiced civil disobedience in the face of state tyranny and brutality.

It was also in Hawai'i that Kingston wrote *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, which not only established her as one of the most famous contemporary American authors but also changed the course of her life completely. Rather than suggesting violence and atrocity, the word "warrior" stresses the heroism of a female fighter/writer against all kinds of injustice, especially racism and sexism.[18] As a pacifist project, writing for Kingston is a way of expressing, combating, and exorcising the injustices heaped on Chinese Americans on both personal and collective levels. For without getting rid of negative feelings about injustices, no internal peace is attainable, which is the first step toward universal peace. Kingston turns racial and sexual injustices into raw materials and motivating forces for her writing projects with huge success. In other words, her previous works, which won so much praise and popularity inside and outside of academic circles, demonstrate her endeavor to

write/right past wrongs in order to pave the way for a more peaceful future.

Since the manuscript of "The Fourth Book of Peace" was burned up, we have no idea what it looked like. But judging from the title of the book, its nature as a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*, and the re-created "Water" in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, it is beyond doubt that peace was once again the central theme of the lost novel. And the appearance of *The Fifth Book of Peace* further confirms Grice's judgment that "each of her books has taken pacifism as its theme, to a greater or lesser degree" and that her "possibly greatest legacy as a writer . . . is her consistently politicised worldview and commitment to pacifism in all its forms, which constitutes a personal and writerly credo" (14). Grice is not the only critic who makes such an observation. In fact, in an essay published more than fifteen years ago, King-Kok Cheung argues, "Kingston's commitment to pacifism—through re-visioning and re-contextualizing ancient 'heroic' material—is even more evident in her most recent book, *Tripmaster Monkey*."[19] Similarly, reading Kingston's six works intertextually, Sato describes "Kingston's oeuvre as performing a narrative reenactment of Asian/American wars from her perspective as an Asian American." And she further argues that "viewing Kingston's oeuvre as such foregrounds its pacifist trajectory, that pacifism is a form of intertextuality in Kingston's writings."[20]

The views expressed by these critics are further supported by the author's own words. Jennie Wang confirms that the title Kingston gave her lecture in China in 2004 was none other than "Five Books of Peace," excluding *Hawai'i One Summer*.[21] And in her conversation with Simmons, Kingston not only talked about *The Fifth Book of Peace* she was writing but also connected it to a larger vision of the world and to her sense of mission as a writer:

> I think that the only way I can integrate East and West is thinking about global politics or a global peace-making mission, and so what I'm working on now has to do with: How do you make peace in the world? How do you stop war? How do you write a book of peace? . . . does conflict have to be violent? Does conflict have to be war? I see myself writing counterpoint to *The Odyssey*, which is about a human consciousness that finds its heroism in war. So how do I write about woman warriors, peace warriors?[22]

All these not only prove that peace has been one of Kingston's recurring themes but also vividly demonstrate what Lim describes as Kingston's "authorial totality" in her recent retrospective interview.[23] In short, they indicate the author's intention "to make the world a more peaceful place" and "to change the world through artistic pacifist means."[24]

III. Fire Baptism and Sea Change

It is terribly traumatic for an author to have her manuscripts burned. The fact that the re-created novel becomes a chapter of the book suggests that to Kingston this fictional re-creation and the three memoir-like chapters complement each other and represent the author in both fictional and nonfictional ways.

To Kingston, this incident is like a fire sacrifice. Although she knows that "storms of wildfire are as normal as timely rain" and that "the reason for this fire is five years of drought,"[25] this rational, scientific explanation cannot fully satisfy one who had just suffered the loss of her father one month ago and the sudden loss of all her belongings. Another explanation is that the recently deceased father is angry with the insufficiency of the "gifts and provisions" burned by his family and "wants more—my book, all my books, my house, and neighborhood—and is taking more—my cities, Berkeley, where I teach, Oakland, where I live."[26] It seems that the deceased is an insatiable and angry father. Her mother, Brave Orchid, instead, provides a positive image of the father as a benevolent protector, for she knows that her daughter would not have noticed the breakout of fire once she got in "a cloud of reading or a cloud of writing." So BaBa had kept his daughter "busy and safe" at her birthplace, Stockton, and had saved her from the fire that claimed twenty-five lives (24). Therefore, once again Brave Orchid teaches her daughter a typical Chinese lesson about the interdependence of fortune and misfortune. Finally, the author comes to realize, "Now, that's the right way of seeing my father, not the father-god of the Americas who hunts his children and burns things with his anger, but BaBa, who used his funeral to save my life" (24).

More significantly, this fire facilitates Kingston's transformation both as a writer and as a human being. Indeed, the rewriting of the burned novel and other chapters takes more than ten years and the result is not the same as that she originally had intended. However, this crisis (*wei-ji*), which in Chinese means both "danger" and "opportunity," allows the author to begin a new chapter in her life, just as the book's opening sentence asserts: "If a woman is going to write a Book of Peace, it is given her to know devastation."[27] In other words, without an intimate knowledge of devastation, no one is able to produce a book of peace. Moreover, this knowledge of devastation generates empathy, which enables the devastated person to sympathize with the wretched of the world. As Kingston stood at the fire scene, ideas kept "pour[ing] into me." It suddenly dawns on her that "I know why this fire. God is showing us Iraq. It is wrong to kill, and refuse to look at what we've done."[28] She further points out, "For refusing to be conscious of the suffering we caused . . . we are given this sight of our city in ashes. God is teaching us, showing us this scene that is like war" (14). Therefore, the fire burned up all her things and compelled her to begin anew. On the other hand, it also gave her the knowledge and empathy that connect her to fellow sufferers of the world, especially those suffering from war.

Consequently, she writes of a turn from the personal to the communal, for

"the fire's aftermath also gave me the method of how to write it—with others, in community" (40). The Buddhist term *sangha* appears many times in the book and is used in its secular sense, "community." In fact, the expression "workshop/community/*sangha*" is used in her introduction to the anthology she edits for the Veterans Writing Workshop.[29] No longer writing as a solitary writer, she comes to realize the importance of community. As she says in her interview with Neila C. Seshachari, "Much of my writing is in solitude, but I feel that it's vital that periodically there be this gathering of communal energy. . . . I want to tell everybody, and young people too, that there are many things that we must do in community. I wish I had started sooner."[30] In her interview with Maggie Ann Bowers, Kingston connects community with peace by saying, "I am thinking we can make a peaceful world—how can we change the world? First there has to be the idea of peace and community and love."[31] She also says, "My idea was that we can turn weapons into musical instruments. It's sort of like plowshares from swords, and, again, I'm saying that the first step is to have that kind of consciousness that can create the world and save it. We have to change human consciousness and that's a step towards changing the material world."[32]

In this specific case, Kingston combines her writing expertise with the Buddhist mindfulness expounded by Thich Nhat Hanh in order to establish and lead her *sangha*—the Veterans Writing Workshop—and, together, they face and narrate their life stories with their traumas. Walking out of their past shadows, these veterans and victims transform themselves into peace writers and creators. This sea change is evidenced by the title of the anthology Kingston edits for this writing group: *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*. If we compare Kingston to a phoenix bathed in and reborn from fire, then this phoenix emerging from her baptism of fire transforms the war veterans she leads into more phoenixes carrying the hard-won message of peace. As Thich Nhat Hanh points out in *Creating True Peace*, "Peace is not simply the absence of violence; it is the cultivation of understanding, insight, and compassion, combined with action. Peace is the practice of mindfulness, the practice of being aware of our thoughts, our actions, and the consequences of our actions."[33] In short, these victims and veterans bear witness to their traumatic experiences and turn them into heart-wringing life stories bearing messages of peace. And all these come in the aftermath of the baptism of fire that Kingston undergoes.

Kingston talked about the natural catastrophe she encountered in her subsequent lectures and asked her "audience of Dreamers to help me write. Please send me anything you find about lost Books of Peace, cities of refuge, tactics for stopping war," and "everybody promised to mail me dreams for the book-to-be."[34] This invitation turned her life in an unexpected direction. Among the correspondents, one particular group was that of war veterans. As Kingston tells us at the beginning of the fourth chapter, "Because I asked everywhere for Books of Peace, and I told everyone that I had lost the one I was writing, veterans of war began sending me their stories" (242). Since the pacifist Kingston left the continental U.S. in the 1960s

to avoid further involvement in the Vietnam War, and as a follower of the Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, she had a special feeling toward Vietnam War veterans. In her interview with Eric J. Schroeder in 1996, Kingston talks about the inception of the Veterans Writing Workshop:

> I first started thinking about doing the veterans' workshop about six or eight years ago when I attended one of the retreats that Thich Nhat Hanh had for veterans of war. He called these workshops "Healing the Wounds of War." Most of the people who attended were Vietnam veterans from America and from Vietnam. They'd get together for meditation and discussions. At the time I thought, "They need one more component; they need an art. And specifically writing." So I asked to give a writing workshop during one of these Thich Nhat Hanh retreats. I incorporated writing into a Buddhist day of meditation. A few years later, the Lila Wallace Fund gave me a fellowship and asked if I would pick a community project to work on. I decided that what I wanted to do was to give more of those writing workshops—to do them on a regular basis and include veterans of all wars.[35]

According to Kingston, the function of the specific workshop was to "get together and figure out how to express ourselves in art. Let's make an art out of this war that we were all in" (226). In addition to the Veterans Writing Workshop, there were other names as well: the Veteran Writers Group, the Veteran Writers' Workshop, and the Veterans Writing *Sangha*.[36] Whatever the name might have been, it can be clearly seen that the emphasis was placed on veterans, writing, and community/*sangha*/group. Therefore, starting in 1993, Kingston has made use of her writing expertise and spiritual practice to lead those who once had been "at hell's gate"[37] to face their past doings and traumas bravely, to fight against amnesia, and "to learn how to exorcise the demons of war in poems and prose."[38] Through these efforts, they try to transform themselves and reengage with society by becoming veterans of peace and sharing their precious lessons from war. It reminds us of Homi K. Bhabha's idea of "remembering" and "re-membering," namely, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present."[39] Furthermore, these veterans not only face their "dismembered past" and present trauma but also make an effort to bring about future peace. In her "Introduction: Tell the Truth, and So Make Peace" to *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, Kingston has this to say: "Listening to people who had lived to tell the tale, I believed that it was the telling that kept them alive. They had survived hell and come back to warn us at home."[40] In other words, to Kingston, "talk-story" serves many functions: on the one hand, to keep alert, to fight against silencing, and to resist

amnesia;[41] on the other, to express oneself, to represent others, to communicate experiences, and to "tell the truth, and so make peace."

IV. Mindfulness, Writing, and Peace

Although *The Fifth Book of Peace* does not contain expressions of strong sentiments, the author's objective description reveals how deeply traumatized the author must have been (she chooses a rather neutral expression, "post-fire symptoms"[42]) and how hard she strove to reestablish herself. In fact, Kingston's quest for peace had begun long ago and become all the more urgent following the fire. Her search for the three lost Books of Peace in her seven trips to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan proved to be futile. It was Wang Meng, a famous writer in mainland China, who urged Kingston to write her own book of peace: "You yourself imagined Books of Peace. And since you made them up, you are free to write whatever you like. You write them yourself" (52). So Kingston felt that she had been "mandated by the ex-cultural minister of China to write Books of Peace" (52) and that "it is my responsibility to pull the Book of Peace out of nothing" (53). The writing of "The Fourth Book of Peace" came as a result of her failure to find the legendary Books of Peace. I would like to point out that what is important is not the existence of these books, but Kingston's determination and persistence shown in the process of her quest as well as the result of her efforts in black and white. Therefore, her "making up" here indicates two things at the same time: her endeavor to construct something fictional and to fill in the vacuum. Whereas the fire destroyed the manuscript of "The Fourth Book of Peace," a nightmare for any writer, it provided the author with an opportunity to embark on an alternative means of writing. No longer writing by herself, she sought to connect with victims of wars and to talk their stories collaboratively. In short, although the fire resulted in a degree of post-traumatic stress on her part, it also gave her an intimate knowledge of devastation and a keen sense of empathy, which enabled her to go beyond her solitary writing habits and to conduct writing therapy/therapy writing for other devastated souls. By engaging with veterans of wars, she was able to transform her trauma into a resource to help others.

Two characteristics of trauma are often mentioned in trauma discourse: belatedness and incomprehensibility. For instance, in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth points out, "The repetitions of the traumatic event . . . suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing."[43] Moreover, in his *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra asserts, "Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered,"[44] and "trauma indicates a shattering break or cesura in experience which has belated effects" (186). However, belatedness will not only fail

to solve problems or end trauma but might generate new problems. Therefore, LaCapra offers his idea of "writing trauma" and argues that "writing trauma would be one of those telling aftereffects in what I termed traumatic and post-traumatic writing (or signifying practice in general)" (186). And he has this to say with regard to this signifying practice and its significance: "It involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and 'giving voice' to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic 'experiences,' limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms" (186). Viewed from this perspective, the establishment of the Veterans Writing Workshop helps those victims to refuse elusion and procrastination by facing their trauma squarely. By trying to comprehend the incomprehensible and to express the inexpressible in a collective effort, the participants endeavor to release past suppression, to transform pressure into impetus, and to transform disorder into order or even a higher order.

There are all kinds of writing workshops in the U.S., but people seldom see one like Kingston's, which combines writing and spiritual practice and targets veterans. In essence, she adopts Thich Nhat Hanh's idea and practice of Buddhist mindfulness to help the participants face and write about their own traumas and lives in order to acquire inner peace and advance world peace.[45] Mindfulness places emphasis on living fully in the present moment. Although it recommends sitting meditation, it also develops many practical skills, such as walking meditation, eating meditation, and mindful listening, so that people can combine spiritual practice with their daily lives, one of which, "writing meditation," is Kingston's innovative addition.[46] Based on the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (*Hua-yen Sutra*), Thich Nhat Hanh also highlights the idea of "interbeing," namely, the interconnectedness between all people and all phenomena. These ideas appear in his writings over and over again. Moreover, as an exile from war-torn Vietnam, he cherishes peace and urges people to eradicate the roots of evil and violence, to cultivate the seeds of inner peace, and to promote global peace. As an exponent of Engaged Buddhism, he established an independent Buddhist organization and provided social services during the Vietnam War period. The cover of his early work *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (1967) clearly indicated that this was "a Buddhist proposal for peace."[47] With this background, he has a very special concern for American veterans and has held many Zen retreats specifically for them. With his persuasive ideas and effective methods, he has attracted thousands of followers in Europe and the U.S. (only next to the Dalai Lama), one of whom is Kingston.[48] Grice has this to say about Kingston's religious interests: "Kingston's interest in Buddhism is central to *The Fifth Book of Peace*, although it can actually be traced back to her early writing years."[49]

With the assistance of the Community of Mindful Living, the first meeting of the Veterans Writing Workshop was held at the University of California at Berkeley on June 16, 1993, with the theme "Reflective Writing, Mindfulness, and the War: A Day for Veterans and Their Families."[50] In addition to veterans of the Vietnam War, there

were veterans of the Korean War, and even one veteran of the Second World War (259). Kingston welcomed these war veterans with the following remarks, which fully explain the purpose of this workshop: "You have lived, witnessed, and suffered terrible events, wars" (259). Kingston compared these veterans to Odysseus, tried to bring about their homecoming, and attempted to help them transform themselves and others:

> I am trying to gather us in time, to bring us from out of the past into the now. 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. "Twenty years after Viet Nam, right now, you are returned to America, and picturing, remembering, thinking about what happened. Twenty years ago, explosions blew up and entered and resounded inside of us; we carried the effects and consequences in our very bodies. . . . That journey from the traumatic thing to the transforming words takes twenty years. The conscious mind is waking up! You are now ready to gather the smithereens, and narrate them into story. We'll put that war into words, and through language make sense, meaning, art of it, make something beautiful, something good."[51]

The chapter on "Earth," which occupies about two-fifths of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, meticulously chronicles how Kingston established and led this writing workshop, witnessing the growth of the author as well as that of her fellow sufferers of devastation on their way from "the traumatic thing to the transforming words" and to becoming creators of "something beautiful, something good." With the leading of Kingston, the dialogues, listening, and feedback of the members, as well as the help of Buddhist teaching and skills, they are able to look at their trauma face to face, to delve deep into the roots of their symptoms, and gradually to reconcile with themselves and others. Although they encounter some difficulties and once even consider bringing the workshop to an end, they are able to continue, and the Veterans Writing Workshop is now entering its fifteenth year.

In short, through writing, mindfulness practice, and mutual support, members of the writing workshop gradually walk on the path of healing and further devote themselves to the peace movement. The whole phenomenon can be described as a "lotus in a sea of fire," to borrow Thich Nhat Hanh's book title. To Kingston herself, this Book of Peace is no longer a private, solitary creation but a collaborative work coming from self-help and helping others—a collective work of writing life, peace, and hope. The workshop has continued to blossom over the years. For instance, Claude Anshin Thomas mentions that "writer and activist Maxine Hong Kingston" introduced him to "mindfulness meditation retreats in which writing has a key

role."[52] Moreover, John Mulligan's *Shopping Cart Soldiers* (1997), James Janko's *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo* (2006), and *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (2006) are the most illustrious accomplishments of the Veterans Writing Workshop. In her debut work, Kingston plays upon the Chinese word *bao* as both "report" ("to report a crime") and "revenge": "The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words."[53] In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston takes this one step further not only by encouraging homecoming veterans to report the crimes of wars to those at home, but also by adding positive meanings to *bao* as "repay" and "reciprocate" with the aim of achieving reconciliation, harmony, goodness, and peace through individual and collective efforts. In comparison with Kingston's previous works, *The Fifth Book of Peace* is an individual and collective book of life, characterizing the author's movement from self to community, her combination of words and action, and her matching of writing expertise with spiritual practice. In contrast to Shulman's judgment, *The Fifth Book of Peace* is not only the saddest, fiercest, deepest story that Kingston has bravely told but also her most positive, powerful, transformative, and sublimating life writing.

V. Talk-Story and New Life: Life, Writing, and Peace

At the end of his *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger*, the medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman asserts, "Narratives can haunt. What haunts our memories is more than images and words, but the actual world of experience that stands behind them."[54] In Chapter 2, Kleinman tells a story about a World War II veteran, Winthrop Cohen, who was unable to recover from his haunting memory of having killed an armless Japanese military doctor. For all his life, neither official statements nor traditional value systems (such as patriotism) were able to rid the veteran of his sense of guilt, and his family suffered along with him. Many of Kingston's workshop members also faced a similar situation. Fortunately, with Kingston's help, they have been able to transform themselves from "veterans of war" into "veterans of peace" by talking about their life stories and sharing their hard-won lessons. In his conclusion to the chapter on Cohen, Kleinman says that what his patient was "suffering was not disease but tragedy. He could not come to terms with the morality or normality of his actions during the war. . . . He had been remade in a terrifying and devastating way, and yet those very qualities later in life spurred him toward critical self-reflection" (44). Kleinman continues to argue that "it doesn't necessarily respond to treatment. In place of healing it gives voice to pain and suffering about the sometimes defeating reality of our lives: a seemingly despairing reality that, when we confront it, can only be lived through, we imagine, enduring the unmasterable. *It is exactly here where religion, ethics, and aesthetics remake meaning, creating hope*" (44–45, emphasis added). In the conclusion to his book *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist in the Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston,

also indicates the close relationship between expression, groups, art, and healing: "Healing requires voice. The circle of communalization of trauma, which is essential to the healing of trauma, is much aided by the arts."[55] He further points out, "Prevention of trauma lies squarely in the realm of justice, ethics, and recognition of one another's humanness, recognition that we are in this together and part of one another's future" (243).

Whereas Kleinman uses Cohen to illustrate the crises and uncertainties that human beings face and to emphasize the importance of life narratives, Shay combines many actual case studies with his reading of Homer's *Odyssey* to describe the sufferings and trials Vietnam War veterans underwent before their real homecoming and settlement. Both authors place special emphasis on the importance of art in helping veterans face their past trauma. Shay demonstrates how support groups are able to form a sense of solidarity among veterans and how art can help hidden trauma to find an outlet—both are indispensable for healing. He further suggests that the fundamental way to eradicate trauma is to find the commonality among human beings. Similarly, members of Kingston's Veterans Writing Workshop are common people who have suffered from their life experiences as war veterans. With Kingston's help, they are able to face and heal their past trauma with writing and spiritual practice and to transform themselves into instruments for future peace.

This transformation is embodied in Kingston's rewriting of Fa Mu Lan's story, with special stress on the homecoming motif. In her conversation with Simmons, Kingston revealed how she would deal with this motif in *The Fifth Book of Peace* she was writing: "How to come home from war? How to come home from Vietnam?"[56] Traditional interpretations of the Chinese "Mu Lan Ballad" mainly focus on the Confucian concepts of loyalty and filial piety. In fact, the motifs of return and homecoming also appear several times in the original poem, with the last one-fourth devoted to the description of Mu Lan's family welcoming the triumphant daughter and the scenes after her return. In *The Woman Warrior*, written over three decades ago, Kingston rewrites the Fa Mu Lan story in prose from the perspective of feminism and an ethnic minority. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston once again returns to the Fa Mook [*sic*] Lan story, this time in poetic form and with the following "deviations" from the original ballad: Mook Lan's parents grow old and pass away during her years of combat; she is wounded in battles and "blood drips red / from the openings of her armor"; and she passes her home village six times without being able to "place offerings" on her parents' graves. However, the greatest difference appears at the end of her poetic rewriting:

> Presenting herself to the army, she says,
> I was the general who led you.
> Now, go home. By her voice,
> the men recognize their general—
> a beautiful woman.

You were our general?! A woman.
Our general was a woman. A beautiful woman.
A woman led us through the war.
A woman has led us home.
Fa Mook Lan disbands the army.
Return home. Farewell.
Beholding—and becoming—Yin, the Feminine,
come home from war.
Jik jik jik. Jik jik jik.[57]

Brief as this rewriting is, it represents the author's mindset in another phase of life. In *The Woman Warrior*, Fa Mu Lan returns home, angrily beheads the male chauvinist in her home village, and liberates the suppressed women.[58] In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Fa Mook Lan is an embodiment of "Yin, the Feminine," which not only leads her male comrades into various battles but, more importantly, leads them safely back home. In other words, Kingston transforms her former "war story" and "women's liberation story" into a "homecoming story" and provides "a vision of the Feminine. It is possible for a soldier to become feminine. Veterans can return to civil society; they do not have to be homeless."[59] And "Jik jik jik. Jik jik jik" returns to the beginning of the poem and forms a circle. In addition, she also offers new interpretations of this onomatopoeia: "'Jik' means 'to weave,' 'to knit,' 'to heal'" (390), suggesting the need to weave the torn body and mind and the wounded world and to return them to peace and harmony. For Kingston, although she chose to leave the U.S. continent during the Vietnam War, she has always regarded herself as part of this war and has even called it "my war."[60] By leading the Veterans Writing Workshop, Kingston, like Fa Mook Lan, makes good use of her power of "Yin, the Feminine" and leads those veterans home so as to engage in another struggle for peace.[61] Therefore, Kingston's rewriting of the Fa Mook Lan story demonstrates how a writer adds new meanings to an old story and, by so doing, reveals her own growth.

This paper attempts to illustrate the significance of life writing and writing life by reading Kingston's unduly neglected *Fifth Book of Peace*. Starting from her *Woman Warrior*, she has been emphasizing the importance of "talk-story." In her introduction to *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, she reiterates, "We tell stories and we listen to stories in order to live. To stay conscious. To connect one with another. To understand consequences. To keep history. To rebuild civilization."[62] In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, "talk-story" can be fiction or "re-fiction" (as in the case of "Water"); it can also be real narratives of traumatic experiences, mental rehabilitation, and spiritual development (as in the other chapters). The result is a new life that has many implications. As Kingston the person, she stands up after the devastating fire and faces her life anew; as Kingston the writer, she brushes aside the ashes of her former manuscript and produces a new text with a new way of writing; and as Kingston the spiritual seeker and American citizen, the fire gives her the intimate

knowledge of devastation and impermanence and, through a keen understanding of empathy and interbeing, leads her to assist American veterans with writing and mindfulness practices. Consequently, she not only finds a higher and broader meaning for her own life but also helps victims of wars find inner peace and strive for a more harmonious world. In other words, *The Fifth Book of Peace* embodies this personal and collective transformation and bears witness to the fact that "religion, ethics, and aesthetics" can "remake meaning, creating hope."[63] It provides a vivid chronicle of both self-reliance and group reliance, self-expression and group expression, as well as self-healing and group healing. The personal becomes not only the collective and the political, but also the religious, the ethical, and the aesthetic.

To sum up, although many readers and critics find *The Fifth Book of Peace* disturbing or ungraspable, we may read it from the perspective of life writing and discover Kingston's concern with peace over the decades. Furthermore, the book demonstrates the author's resilience in the face of catastrophe and her ability to produce a new and higher order by joining forces with fellow sufferers of the world through writing and spiritual practice.

Notes

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[1] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 3.

[2] Polly Shulman, "Out of the Ashes: Maxine Hong Kingston's Memoir of Loss Incorporates Part of a Vanished Novel; Review of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, by Maxine Hong Kingston," *New York Times Book Review*, September 28, 2003, A8.

[3] E. San Juan, Jr., "The Fifth Book of Peace," *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 3 (2005): 199.

[4] According to Gayle K. Sato, "Kingston's six books are notable for their destabilization of traditionally defined boundaries between fiction and autobiography, and for their counter-memories of Chinese American history which present a multi-cultural and feminist critique of dominant US narratives of national identity." Gayle K. Sato, "Reconfiguring the 'American Pacific': Narrative Reenactments of Viet Nam in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*," *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 16 (2005): 115. Whereas this observation is valid

in general, the critics' neglect of *The Fifth Book of Peace* seems to reveal their inability to appreciate Kingston's destabilization and critique. Regrettably, Sato's article is not included in the *MLA International Bibliography*.

[5] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 61.

[6] Ibid., 62. In her conversation with Diane Simmons in 1997, Kingston also mentioned, "after the fire I wanted to use writing for my personal self. I wanted to write directly what I was thinking and feeling. I didn't want to imagine fictional other people. I wanted to write myself. I wanted to write the way I wrote when I was a child, which is to say my deepest feelings and thoughts [that would] come out in a personal way and not for public consumption. It's not even for other people to read but for myself, to express myself." Diane Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston* (New York: Twayne, 1999), 163. This attempt at innermost self-expression may partly explain the book's relative unpopularity.

[7] David B. Eubanks, "Purely Coincidental Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Worry and Fiction in Contemporary American Life Writing" (PhD diss., University of Maryland at College Park, 2005), 6.

[8] Shameem Black regards this quest account as Kingston's "strategies of transnational representation" and names them as "cosmopolitan writing, or cosmopoetics," which, together with the authorization of the Chinese intellectual elite, attempt to "elude the prison of Orientalist representation." Shameem Black, "In Search of Global Books: Unwriting Orientalism in *The Fifth Book of Peace*," in *Querying the Genealogy: Comparative and Transnational Studies in Chinese American Literature*, ed. Jennie Wang (Shanghai: Shanghai yi wen chu ban she, 2006), 278.

[9] Adopting a transpacific approach to Asian American studies, Chih-ming Wang argues, "If Asian American studies in the United States considers ethnicity as its primary problematic, Asian/American studies in Taiwan—and in Asia at large—has to look at the intersections of ethnicity, language, and Americanity in transnational contexts, so as to attend to local differences and historical specificities in relation to the global system—be it capitalism, imperialism, or modernity." Chih-ming Wang, "Thinking and Feeling Asian America in Taiwan," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2007): 152. In his conclusion, he urges people "to imagine and initiate a critical alliance across Asia, the inner Pacific, and America to untie the ideological complications of the American dream discourse that Asian America is a part of" (152). In other words, a transnational reconceptualization of Asian American studies will allow both Asian and American scholars to explore some hitherto neglected issues. If Edward W. Said could develop a critical paradigm of "culture and imperialism" out of his colonial experiences (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* [New York: Knopf, 1993]), a critical paradigm of "culture and transnationalism" might also be developed in connection with American studies, given the predominant presence of the U.S. around the world.

[10] I would like to thank one anonymous *JTAS* editor for his or her comment in regard to transnationalism.

[11] Eric J. Schroeder, "As Truthful as Possible: An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson:

University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 223.

[12] Maxine Hong Kingston, "What Is Common in Chinese World Literature?—Speech on International Women's Day at Fudan University," in *The Iron Curtain of Language: Maxine Hong Kingston and American Orientalism*, ed. Jennie Wang (Shanghai: Fu dan da xue chu ban she, 2007), 377. Unlike Kingston's other works, abstracts are provided under the four chapter titles in the table of contents. And they describe the nature of the respective chapters as "a true story," "the history," "a fiction," and "a nonfiction."

[13] San Juan describes it as "this hybrid, collage-like artifice" (San Juan, "Fifth Book of Peace," 197), and Shirley Geok-lin Lim regards it as a "mélange" of "memoir, diary, journal, and fiction," which is characterized by "the genre-hybridization." Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Sino/Anglophone Literature, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Peace Writing" (paper presented at the "Globalizing Modern Chinese Literature: Sinophone and Diasporic Writings" conference, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, December 6–8, 2007), 4, 7. In her recent "retrospective interview" with Kingston, Lim also describes this text as "a mixed genre work or creative nonfiction." Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Reading Back, Looking Forward: A Retrospective Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," *MELUS* 33, no. 1 (2008): 160.

[14] Two of Kingston's lesser-known works are *Hawai'i One Summer* (1987), a collection of short essays on her life in Hawai'i, and *To Be the Poet* (2002), her series of lectures at Harvard University on her idea(l)s of poetry and of being a poet.

[15] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 61, 34.

[16] In my interview with her, Kingston replies, "Yes, I was thinking of these elements. Also the children's game: scissors, rock, paper." Te-hsing Shan, "A Veteran of Words and Peace: An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," *Amerasia Journal* 34, no. 1 (2008): 55.

[17] Maxine Hong Kingston, *Hawai'i One Summer* (1987; repr., Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 15, emphasis added.

[18] In fact, "writing as fighting" is a prevalent theme among minority writers. Helena Grice also emphasizes Kingston's "desire to explore all possible avenues of peaceful activism in relation to a whole range of political themes, of which war, racism, gender inequality and violence are only the most obvious." Helena Grice, *Maxine Hong Kingston* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 14.

[19] King-Kok Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 243.

[20] Sato, "Reconfiguring the 'American Pacific,'" 116.

[21] Wang, *Iron Curtain of Language*, 373.

[22] Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 164.

[23] Lim, "Reading Back," 157.

[24] Donna Perry, "Maxine Hong Kingston," in Skenazy and Martin, *Conversations*, 168. In an unpublished paper, Lim also mentions Kingston's "imaginary of Peace as a rewriting of three earlier Chinese books of peace" and that "the central theme of the entirety of her oeuvre . . . is the project of peace." Lim, "Sino/Anglophone Literature," 4, 6.

[25] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 9. Reflecting upon nature from an ecological, rather than anthropocentric, perspective, Gary Snyder says that "flood and fire are perfectly natural. And earthquakes are too." To him, these natural disasters remind people of the Buddhist idea that "everything is impermanent" and the Chinese idea of "following the Dao." Gary Snyder, *Back on the Fire: Essays* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007), 8.

[26] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 14.

[27] Ibid., 3. This sentence comes from her Quaker friend Phillis Hoge Thompson's phone call, which gives her "the first line to the Fifth Book of Peace" (40). Kingston mentions nonviolent and peace-loving Quakers several times in the book (128, 130, 287), sometimes in connection with Buddhists. To Lim, this opening sense is "a classic oxymoron" with "proverbial power" and encapsulates "the tension in the incongruity of the narrative." Lim, "Sino/Anglophone Literature," 10, 11.

[28] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 13.

[29] Maxine Hong Kingston, "Introduction: Tell the Truth, and So Make Peace," in *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, ed. Kingston (Kihei, HI: Koa Books, 2006), 2.

[30] Neila C. Seshachari, "Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston," in Skenazy and Martin, *Conversations*, 199.

[31] Maggie Ann Bowers, "Maxine Hong Kingston with Maggie Ann Bowers," in *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, ed. Susheila Nasta (London: Routledge, 2004), 175.

[32] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," in Skenazy and Martin, *Conversations*, 160.

[33] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community, and the World* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 5.

[34] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 42.

[35] Schroeder, "As Truthful as Possible," 225.

[36] Kingston, *Veterans of War*, 3.

[37] Here I borrow the title of Claude Anshin Thomas's autobiographical work *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004). Also a Vietnam War veteran, he took part in Kingston's workshop (49), received Thich Nhat Hanh's instruction (40–48), and became a monk under Japanese-style Zen Buddhist Bernie Glassman (49).

[38] Sandra P. Thomas, "From the Editor—Of War and Peace," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 25, no. 7 (2004): 653.

[39] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 63.

[40] Kingston, *Veterans of War*, 1.

[41] Paul Skenazy, "Kingston at the University," in Skenazy and Martin, *Conversations*, 121.

[42] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 21.

[43] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 92.

[44] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 41.

[45] For more on the relationship between Buddhism and peace, see Chanju Mun, ed., *Buddhism and Peace: Theory and Practice* (Honolulu: Blue Pine, 2006). On the relationship between Buddhism and mental health, see Part 4, 331–79.

[46] Kingston, *Veterans of War*, 2.

[47] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

[48] For Thich Nhat Hanh, mindfulness and peace are inseparable and constitute the basis of Engaged Buddhism, for world peace can only be achieved when people are at peace with themselves first. *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987) and *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993) are but two of his more than one hundred books. In fact, almost all discourse on Engaged Buddhism in Europe and the U.S. mentions him without fail. See Christopher S. Queen, ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom, 2000). For more on his background, ideas, and practice, see Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, "All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing," in Queen, *Engaged Buddhism*, 35–66.

[49] Grice, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 114.

[50] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 248.

[51] Ibid., 260. See also Edward Tick's *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005), especially the chapters on "The Soul's Homeward Journey" (189–99) and "The Healing Power of Storytelling" (217–34). For a discussion of the homecoming motif, see section V of this paper.

[52] C. Thomas, *At Hell's Gate*, 49.

[53] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 53.

[54] Arthur Kleinman, *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 217.

[55] Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 243.

[56] Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 165.

[57] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 391–92.

[58] Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 44.

[59] Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, 390.

[60] Bowers, "Maxine Hong Kingston," 179.

[61] In the postscript to her interview with Maggie Ann Bowers, Kingston writes, "I finished *The Fifth Book of Peace*, for which I rewrote the Woman Warrior myth in poetry form. I was able to do that by changing myself into a poet, a process I divulge in *To Be the Poet*. I read the new Woman Warrior come-home-from-war chant at a rally in Washington DC trying to prevent the shock-and-awe of Iraq. I was arrested and went to jail. I have been traveling everywhere saying 'Peace Peace Peace', and continue to believe in the power of words to improve the world" (ibid., 172). Moreover, in her interview with Donna Perry, Kingston expresses her conviction that, by creating a language of peace, she is able to affect politics and stop wars (Perry, "Maxine Hong Kingston," 168–69). All these indicate Kingston's active intervention via writing peace and peace writing.

[62] Kingston, *Veterans of War*, 1.

[63] Kleinman, *What Really Matters*, 44–45.

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