

Maxine Hong Kingston's Evolution From Autobiographical Prose to Poetry

By

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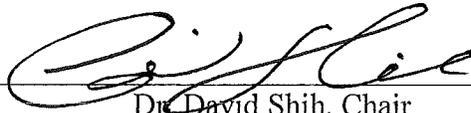
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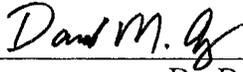
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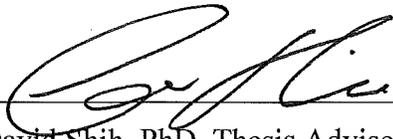
Maxine Hong Kingston's Evolution From Autobiographical Prose to Poetry

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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2015  
Under the Supervision of Dr. David Shih, PhD

My first chapter is an overview of Transactional Reader Response theory. Critics of Transactional Reader Response theory claim that there is a relationship between text and the reader. I discuss how Transactional Reader Response theory can be applied to Maxine Hong Kingston's works. Transactional Reader Response theory allows the reader to create a personal connection with a text. In reading *I Love a Broad Margin To My Life* a reader will have to create meaning with the poetic text. Chapter Two is about how Kingston has written her first narrative of the Fa Mulan story in *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Critics of *The Woman Warrior* only wrote about how the story wasn't Chinese anymore rather than how meaning is created. In *I Love a Broad Margin To My Life*, Kingston changed the story of Fa Mu Lan, and now it represents a more believable narrative that is related to American war stories today. The final chapter discusses Kingston's poetry and how it creates for the reader an opportunity to relate to the text in a personal way and create a response. This chapter also discusses how Kingston has transformed from a prose writer to a poet and how the transformation has freed her to create stories. This book of poetry has inspired me to respond to the narrative to try to understand and interpret the way I felt about the story of Fa Mu Lan. I understand mother and child relationships in a unique way because I was adopted as a young child. Kingston carried over the Fa Mu Lan story into a new generation in a simple way for her readers to make connections to the text through their own experiences.



Dr. David Shih, PhD, Thesis Advisor

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Date

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To my Father, who encouraged me, and Amber R. and Jess E., my loyal friends.

I Rise.

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## Chapter 1

### A Response to Reader Response Theory and Multicultural Literature

In English Literary studies there is a theory called Reader Response Theory. This theory allows critics to put into context a method to understand readers' response to a text. Reader Response Theory differs from other theories in English literary studies because it does not focus on the content, form, or, author's meaning of the work being studied. Reader Response Theory explores the readers' interpretations of a text and how personal connections create that response to the content a text. The type of Reader Response Theory that pertains to this paper is entitled Transactional Reader Response Theory. This type of Reader Response Theory is the best way to interpret multicultural works of literature. This theory of transaction allows an analysis of how the reader will connect to a text through personal connections and create meaning related to their lives within their response.

Maxine Hong Kingston is a Chinese American writer. She began her literary career in 1975 with an autobiography called *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts*. This book combined her personal narrative of growing up in a multicultural world and her interpretation and response to Chinese stories told as a child. One cultural story that Kingston provided in the chapter "White Tigers" was the Chinese folk-tale of Fa Mu Lan. Through a surrealist genre of storytelling Kingston has written her story of self within the story of Fa Mu Lan. The story of Fa Mu Lan that Kingston created centers on a woman who dresses as a man, goes to battle in place of her father and returns home a veteran. Lastly, Fa Mu Lan takes her place back in her community in the role as a

Chinese wife and mother. Kingston has annotated and appropriated the story to become an expressive act of self.

In 2011, Kingston published a book of poetry called *I Love A Broad Margin To My Life*. In three poems she rewrote her story of Fa Mu Lan changing the ending of the story to suicide. Kingston reasoned why Fa Mu Lan, would kill herself: (1) the first was that she got orders from an unnamed emperor to marry him against her own will. (2) The second was that her son didn't recognize her when she came home. (3) In the last poem, it was because her experience with the war had given her Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The new perspectives on Fa Mu Lan within Kingston's poetic memoir has offered me a way to relate my experiences and to understand how a mother could leave her child.

The book *I Love a Broad Margin* created an opportunity to for me to write and respond openly about my experiences as a product of a non-traditional mother child environment. I have my birthmother as well as my adopted mother, and they have affected my life by being very unique role models for motherhood. My birth mother gave me up for adoption, and my adopted mother left me when I was a teenager. I was adopted at a very young age from Honduras and raised in a multicultural home in rural Wisconsin. This background has allowed me to respond uniquely to Kingston's Fa Mu Lan poems. I thought that this topic was important because it allowed me to respond from my life experiences through Transactional Reader Response Theory. Kingston's 2011 plot change of the Fa Mu Lan story uniquely altered the landscape of her story with all three poems ending in the suicide of Fa Mu Lan. The poems in *I Love A Broad Margin* felt more real and believable because war is tragic and it produces heartache. I related to the story that Fa Mu Lan would take her life to spare her child from living with the damages

of her broken self. I have related my parental relationships to Kingston's story and have learned that mothers can't always play a traditional role in their child's life because both experience trauma.

The poetry in *I Love A Broad Margin* allows the reader to make meaning with the text. I felt that I was a part of the story making and that it was important for me to further understand the meaning I created in my response. This story has made me more observant to how my relationships with my birthmother and adopted mother have created my point of view on the sacrifices made within mother-daughter relationships and the trauma that I experienced as a child. The suicide of Fa Mu Lan allows me to be connected to the story because I believe that in mother-child relationships are hinged on community and self. Circumstances that dictate the bond of mother and child include race and class.

TI was born in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. I was three months old when I was adopted, and I have no remembrance of this place, community or my mother. I look at this point in life as a space filled with tragedy because a mother had to give up a child. There is an unknown love, because she sacrificed a relationship with her daughter so that I could have a life that she could not provide. I imagine that this time was a time of loss and hope within a family. I reason that my parents hoped that their daughter could grow up in a place with more opportunity than what they could provide. I don't know my birth mother or anyone that is a blood relative to me. The impact on my life was huge because it left me wondering what my family was like and who they were. They gave me an opportunity to be someone else's daughter and a member of a new community. Looking back at this time in my life, I am grateful that I was given and still have the opportunity to grow as a privileged middle-class American citizen. I now am an American daughter with

multicultural experiences and belong to people that I love dearly and call my own family. I wish I could thank my birth mother and tell her that her sacrifice was not made in vain, that I am working, I am thriving, and I have the ability to love after loss. The point of view that I have concerning mother-daughter relationships is different than my contemporaries' because I understand that mothers can't always be with their children. I have lived with the consequence that sometimes people have to give their child up. I experienced two mother-daughter relationships within my lifetime. It is a unique experience full of opportunity and self-reliance.

When I was adopted, I grew up in a multicultural home with white parents, and in a community that was based around family and working on the family farm. The relationship between my adopted mother and me hit a rough spot when she decided to divorce my father when I was thirteen. We argued, and I felt abandoned at the time that I needed the support of a mother. Later I would find out that this wasn't true, that I could be resourceful, smart, and in control of my own life at a very young age. With adulthood has come the wisdom that the relationship with my adopted mother is half my responsibility and that we take care of each other as members of the same community. So, I believe that the experiences that I have with my adopted mother and my birth mother have given me a unique perspective on what a mother does for a child and how the ties of family can create a strong or non-existent bond between mother and child.

Kingston has opened up space to create a dialogue for me because I have related the Fa Mu Lan stories to the difficulty of mother-child relationships and how they cannot always be traditional or simple. I have experienced the love's of two mothers and want to create meaning with the new story of Fa Mu Lan in Kingston new text. I have thought

about family and the impact of community and war. The plot twist of suicide has made me want create a community that has an open dialogue about the complex relationships of family. I want to share my story of self and respond to the text through my life experiences.

Kingston's texts shows how communities are affected by war and how trauma changes the members. Kingston's first story about Fa Mu Lan in *The Woman Warrior* showed that there was a strong feminist viewpoint that focuses on the positive strong acts of a woman. Furthermore, the story reads as a heroic fairytale of female power that abounds within Fa Mu Lan's community when she was welcomed back as a hero with full support. Fa Mu Lan in this story also has the ability to move on from what happened in the war and live with her child in peace and with support from her loved ones.

Today, Kingston has revisited the story of Fa Mu Lan and has changed the story line. Now the story shows what happens to the community after the war. Also the story shows what happens to Fa Mu Lan in her personal life and how she has experienced violence and restricted choices in her life. Fa Mulan wasn't able to be with her son and doesn't have the support of her community to deal with the trauma that has happened in her life at war. The story is a violent ending to a woman who worked hard for her community to stay together, and who at wasn't given the support that she needed. The most crucial part in the story was that violence tore her life apart. Kingston's new poetry has changed this story and brings attention the trauma that is happening in America and the world today.

What had me connecting emotionally the stories that Kingston has created are the narrative threads of war and violence. She has re-written her story of heroism into a

tragedy of a woman who fought for her country and came back home, only to lose the support of her communities and the relationship with her son and family. I think that it speaks volumes to what Kingston has experienced as a second-generation American writer as well as a reporter on what she has seen happen to the warriors who have come home with P.T.S.D. Through her story of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston has written narratives of communities, people of power and of a woman who lived fearlessly. But more importantly, it is the tragic story of women forced out of communities and away from their children.

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Transactional Reader Response Theory examines the relationship between the reader and text and presents the philosophy that the meaning is located in the response of the reader. The meaning in the response is now more significant to study than the “text” and what the author intended. Critics have begun to understand that multicultural texts and readers operate on many platforms of culture and language. Meaning is now an important variable between reader and text. Within Transactional Reader Response Theory many critics focus on this now complex idea of how a reader will respond. Transactional Reader Response Theory allows critics to create a platform for understanding how and what a readers’ response will be to a text. Critics can now comprehend that a response from a reader will vary given their cultural understanding.

One of the founders of Transactional Reader Response Theory is Louise M. Rosenblatt. Her work with the theory argues that there is a relationship between text and reader. Wolfgang Iser and Nicolas J. Karolides agreed that readers are influenced in their response by their life experiences and previous readings. As Transactional Reader

Response Theory progressed, theorists Mingshui Cai and Cynthia Lewis claim that the relationship between text and reader is influenced and affected by multiculturalism. Furthermore, there is a transaction between reader and text in which the reader makes multiple meanings within the response to the text. The issue within Reader Response Theory that this paper will center on will be the Transactional Theory, which hypothesizes that a text takes on individualized meaning for each reader. Through Transactional Reader Response there is a space for readers and critics to learn about themselves through understanding the meaning of their response to a text. This aspect of Transactional Reader Response Theory allows a critical space for interpretation of meaning through the reader's response not offered by other forms of criticism. Critics can now explore modes of interpretation and conclude that everyone reacts to a text in a different way, based on their cultures and societies.

Transactional Reader Response Theory is an excellent way to discuss Maxine Hong Kingston's multicultural literature so that I can fully understand the meaning I have created in my response. The text has allowed me to create meaning for me in conjunction to how I view mother and child relationships. It is through my experiences within my families that I can relate in a new and different way to Kingston's new poems about Fa Mu Lan. The cultural diversity within this text that Kingston has created allows me time and space to create and apply meaning in my response related to my life.

Louise Rosenblatt's book *Literature as Exploration* created the argument that each reader has an individualized understanding of a piece of literature. This component of Transactional Reader Response Theory is important because it addresses the role of

the individual reader and the relationship that a reader has with the text. Rosenblatt wrote:

The reading of a particular work at a particular moment by a particular reader will be a highly complex process. Personal factors will inevitably affect the equation represented by book plus reader. His past experiences and present preoccupations may actively condition his primary spontaneous response. In some cases, these things will conduce to a full and balanced reaction to the work. In other cases, they will limit or distort. (*Literature as Exploration* 75)

Rosenblatt suggests that each reader given a certain time in their lives would not always have the same reaction to a text as they would under other extraneous circumstances. It is important for critics and readers to be aware of socially-installed perceptions of broad social subjects that might come through in a response. According to Rosenblatt's vision of Transactional Reader Response, a text no longer exists outside of the reader as an object to be studied, but there is meaning is created by the reader, and in turn the reader may be influenced by the text and change their outlook and opinion on a topic.

Rosenblatt argues that certain words or phrases that are culturally related might affect the reader in a positive or negative way within a text given their cultural understanding. Taking this issue into account allows for the social and economic influences of the reader to be acknowledged during a response to a text. Rosenblatt's perspective of reader and text is important because it is a more inclusive way for the reader to relate to the text and create a shared experience:

The reader's fund of relevant memories makes possible any reading at all.

Without linkage with the past experiences and present interests of the reader, the

work will not come alive for him, or, rather, he will not be prepared to bring it to life. Past literary experiences make up an important part of this equipment that the reader brings to literature, but they have usually been emphasized to the exclusion of other elements derived from general life experiences. (*Literature as Exploration* 77)

Literature is an active way different societies communicate with each other and create understanding. Transactional Reader Response Theory creates a literary space for readers to be forward thinkers and create an inclusive community by understanding racial and socioeconomic differences.

The theory of Transactional Reader Response allows the individual reader to respond not purely to the text but to the emotional feelings to the passages in which there was a connection between the written word and the cultural, emotional, and mindful awareness of the individual reader. Rosenblatt's book *The Reader The Text The Poem: The Transactional Theory Of The Literary Work*, explained this relationship in relevance to poetry:

The poet fashions a text in which any one word is dependent on its interrelationship with the other words. . . . The reader, assuming the aesthetic stance, selects out and synthesizes interanimate- his responses to the author's pattern of words. This requires the reader to carry on a continuing, constructive "shaping" activity. (*The Reader The Text The Poem* 53)

It is within this "shaping activity" that the reader makes personal connections to a text. Readers who respond to Kingston's work will create meaning through social or emotional

connections. Through the power of poetry there can be a growing of awareness of the reader's own cultural groups and life experiences.

How the reader experiences poetry is a smaller study of literature within

Transactional Reader Response Theory:

In focusing our attention on the poem or play or novel, we are saved from confusion with that kind of external 'objective' reality by our awareness that although the images and characters of, say, a story are the focus of our attention, their existential contours are delimited for us by our transaction with the text. This evocation, then, becomes the 'object' of the concurrent stream of responses that, is usually ignored, often contributes greatly to the texture and the impact of the literary transaction. (*The Reader The Text The Poem* 66)

By focusing on this stream of the reader consciousness, critics of Transactional Reader Response are able to look at poetry as a living thing brought out from the object of study into a place where the reader has to create meaning and become part of the "stream of response: to a text. It is within this transaction that meaning is created for the reader.

Wolfgang Iser's essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" argues that there is an exchange between the reader and the text in Transactional Reader Response Theory. In this exchange the reader will make personal connections to the text that will come through in their response. Iser argues that,

[T]here is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, which on a second reading may turn into a kind of advance retrospection. The impressions that arise as a result of this process will vary from individual to individual, but

only within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text.

(57)

Iser explains that each reader would find an individual understanding in a text and create meaning based on past experiences, texts and social placement.

Iser's essay states that Transactional Reader Response Theory is looking at the reader's imagination. It is within this imagination that creativity abounds and connections and meaning are created. This process is declared as a "living event" and within this event is a response from the reader:

[There are three] important aspects that form the basis of the relationship between reader and text: the process of anticipation and retrospection, the consequent unfolding of the text as a living event and the resultant impression of lifelikeness. Any 'living event' must, to a greater or lesser degree, remain open. In reading, this obliges the reader to seek continually for consistency because only then can he close up situations and comprehend the unfamiliar. (64-65)

It is in the process of transaction that the reader responds to the text and creates meaning. Iser believed that through the theory of Transactional Reader Response that readers must create a way of understanding a text. In this creation of thought within their response they link their personal experiences to the text that they are reading.

Iser's argument is that the reader has more than one sense of understanding at work as a text is read, and it is through the thoughts of the reader that meaning is reached within a response. Iser theorizes that there is the self that reads the text and the created self that empathizes and identifies with the text. It is in this exchange of identifying with a text that meaning is created:

As we read, there occurs an artificial division of our personality, because we take as a theme for ourselves something that we are not. Consequently when reading we operate on different levels. For although we may be thinking the thoughts of someone else, what we are will not disappear completely-- it will merely remain a more or less powerful virtual force. . . . Every text we read draws on a different boundary within our personality. (67)

By using this hypothesis, Transactional Reader Response Theory takes into account the importance of the history and culture of the reader. A multicultural text will offer the reader new insight into themselves and may dissolve a stereotype once believed in by the reader. As the reader responds and creates meaning in their response, the reader can create new understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Nicholas J. Karolides, author of the essay “The Transactional Theory of Literature,” argues that readers are influenced by their past experiences and that readers of a text could be similar in background and still interpret and respond to a text with completely opposite understanding. Karolides states that there are three points of interest in reader response:

Readers influenced by past experiences and current circumstances, regional origins and upbringing gender, age, past and present readings, will vary in their responses from those of others. Even readers of the same age, similar background and circle of relationships will express differences in general impressions and nuances of feelings. (23)

He goes on to present that the reading event is unique onto each reader and even goes as far as to say, like Iser, that each time a text is read a different response can happen. He

reasons that readers themselves are never in the same frame of mind because societal and cultural influence change.

Mingshui Cai, author of the article “Transactional Theory and the Study of Multicultural Literature,” questions the scope of the application of Reader Response in relation to multicultural literature. This is a crucial point to make because in his teaching of minority literature he has noticed that many of his students of “mainstream culture” read through an “egocentric” lens. This sense of egocentrism can be problematic for multicultural literature. The framing of the theory of Reader Response is hinged on the reader responding and making meaning with the text. If a reader does not relate to a text, often times the information is forgotten, and there will be no meaning created in the response. When the author of a text pulls information from many cultures and the reader belongs to a singular culture with little outside influence, the meaning created in the response of a text can be misguided or ignored by the reader. Cai states, “When the transact-to-transform approach bumps into snags, teachers are likely to find transactional theory alone inadequate as a theoretical guide for using multicultural literature to achieve the goal of multicultural education” (213). He argues that Rosenblatt’s theory does not include a multicultural critical perspective but is still valid. He states that her contribution to the theory is a starting point for understanding our selves and the relationship to the human experience. This is an important point for Cai to make: “For Rosenblatt, critical literacy is a personal as well as a political matter because it entails examining one’s own aesthetic experience” (214). Cai concludes the essay with this point of view on how teaching multicultural literature is important to teach a critical transactional perspective:

[I]n the study of multicultural literature, it is imperative for us to teach students a critical perspective that encourages self-change and social transformation. . . .

Transactional theory is still a viable and valid theoretical guide for the study of multicultural literature if we interpret it correctly and apply it properly. (219)

In this critical theory of Transactional Reader Response, Cai believes that a teacher should help their students understand multicultural literature and create a “critical perspective” so that meaning can take hold within the reader. Cai concludes his essay by arguing that if Transactional Theory of Reader Response is used correctly, the student of a multicultural text will create “frames of reference” that will be aware of other cultures.

Cynthia Lewis argues in “Critical Issues: Limits of Identification: The Personal, Pleasurable, and the Critical in Reader Response” that critics should be more aware of the reader’s response in relation to political points of view. She believes that social and political points of view greatly influence a reader’s response. Lewis then argues that the classroom setting also has an influence in how a reader will respond. Variables such as social setting rather than a private learning time also influence a reader’s response. Lewis declares:

[We should] broaden our view of reader response to acknowledge the social and political dimensions of response in particular context. Through such examination, status and power negotiations become clearly visible, underscoring the critical role of the peer dynamic and posing a challenge to the concept of the classroom as a unified learning community so often idealized in educational literature. (258)

Lewis argues that Transactional Reader Response Theory should view the response of the reader in light of “social and political” beliefs of the individual reader. Multicultural

literature has a political message that may be missed by dominate culture readers because it is oppositional to generally accepted cultural myths:

literature can help readers to understand what it means to be human, readers must also take responsibility for interpreting the political messages of text. . . . In addition White readers sometimes resist the political messages in multicultural text that seem to threaten their values and identities. . . . Literature discussions should invite readers to question the discourses that shape their experiences as well as to resist textual ideology that promotes dominate cultural assumption.

(260-261)

Lewis reasons it is important to “resist textual ideology and cultural assumption” in a response. This point is important to the development of Transactional Reader Response Theory because when the reader responds to multicultural or minority literature without recognizing their own ideology of their cultural and society, their response may be from a misconceived point of view. When this misread, information occurs the text is pushed back into the margins of that reader’s mind, preventing a meaningful and critical response.

Lewis makes the point that there is a distinction between a reader who has experienced what a text is conveying versus a reader who hasn’t had these experiences. She believes that an outside reader will try to create meaning in conjunction to who they are:

For readers who are insiders to these experiences of racism, an aesthetic reading of this text [*The Watsons Go To Birmingham*] may well include identification with character and plot. For readers who are outsiders to these experiences of

racism, an aesthetic reading is not about identification, but about understanding how the text works to position particular readers as outsiders. This position deepens the understanding of the characters lives as separate from the reader's own in important ways. In disrupting the reader's inclination to identify, the text heightens the reader's self consciousness and the text consciousness in a way that should not be viewed as less aesthetic than a more direct or immediate relationship between reader and text. (263)

Like Rosenblatt, Lewis wants to stress the point that reading is an active circuit between the text and the reader. But she modifies her argument by adding that in a response there is a limitation of identifying with a text, and if there is no connection between reader and text then there is no useful meaning created.

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In reading *I Love a Broad Margin* by Maxine Hong Kingston, a reader will have to create meaning with the poetic text. This poetry is a way for the reader to create a new community that shares stories of war, survival, and resiliency. In a response a reader will create meaning and a space to explore cultural and personal stories. I will analyze my response through the Transactional Theory of Reader Response and share what meaning I created with the text. The responses that I will offer will be based on my experiences so that I can create meaning based on my stance as a multicultural woman, a woman of color, and as an adopted daughter.

Kingston's story of Fa Mu Lan in poetry is important to me because the story has changed from the first time she wrote it in her first memoir, *The Woman Warrior*. In this book the story of Fa Mu Lan is different; Fa Mu Lan is depicted as a hero and a role

model. Fa Mu Lan goes home to her family and community and is welcomed back into her culture and community. I found this story to be inspiring in the fact that we have a war hero that does it all: fights battles, returns home, and ends as being a wife and mother. The ideal of “having it all” was an acceptable ending for me. In Kingston’s prose writing I believe that it was easier to dismiss the story of Fa Mu Lan because it is an expected warrior story of faith and perseverance that a warrior can return home. This version of the story supports my hopeful ideals that there is a victory in war.

However, when Kingston re-wrote this story in, *I Love a Broad Margin*, there is a drastic change within the story. Fa Mu Lan in this story goes back home and commits suicide. The way that the information is given and how I gathered information from the poetic text allowed me to connect with this story in a different way. I felt a personal and reflective message was being created in my response that war is hard on families and women. The meaning that I derived from the suicide of Fa Mu Lan in the text was that women are deeply impacted by society, war, and family. More importantly I feel that many women have to adapt to preexisting social roles that come from cultural expectations. My intent is to investigate why I feel the way I do through my social identity as a minority woman and my roles of daughter and adopted daughter. This story is relatable because it isn’t surprising for me that a woman who is a wife and mother would be more influenced by community than her own child and would chose to sacrifice a life with that child because the community that was available wasn’t supportive of the relationship.

I immediately thought of how the story of Fa Mulan has changed for the better in *I Love A Broad Margin*. This story is more meaningful that now Fa Mulan has committed

suicide. I felt that she didn't have a community to foster a relationship with her son. The poems grab at my heartstrings and my emotions about families caught in the crossfire of home, war and rebuilding a life without the resources or community to carry on. I believe that Kingston has written a narrative that shows how hope can be lost after war and that women have to struggle to live after war and have the resources to survive. I have experienced the actions of living in a home with an absent mother. Kingston has created a work that shows the importance of how a community should be peaceful and inclusive so the tragedy of broken families does not happen after war.

At first I was astounded that Kingston would share this tragedy in her story, because in some of the literature that I have read it is not "normal" for a female legend to be overpowered by suicide. I believe that Fa Mu Lan may not have had the support of her community that she worked so hard to preserve and return to. However, because of the knowledge and multiculturalism that I brought to the text, I felt as if I understand why the story of Fa Mu Lan ended with suicide. Kingston's text presents that Fa Mu Lan's child did not know her:

The woman soldier comes home from battle;  
 her child does not recognize his mother.  
 He cries at sight of her; he runs away from her.  
 Why not give up on life?" (217)

As I read, I felt the emotional tie to the story since life pulled my birthmother from me. Oppression from violence many have been part of the reason that Fa Mulan could not be with her child again. She could have been without the support of mothers in her community or ostracized as a single mother. For me there is a wall of cultural exclusion

and language barriers between my mother and me. There is trauma there that I haven't even begun to consider. She like Fa Mu Lan could have passed on. The unanswerable questions stretch on and on. What I do know is that trauma has existed in both our lives, communities did not support our relationship, and choices were made that I couldn't control or change. Through this story I see clearly that violence happened, oppression happened, and more importantly, lives were changed by a country recovering from military rule and perhaps war. I felt empathy for Fa Mu Lan as well as her son as I read this passage, because suicide was her exit strategy for the life that she couldn't lead as a mother because of country and community. The bond of mother and child was broken by personal and cultural exclusion and war.

I thought of the sacrifices that Fa Mu Lan made for her family's freedom, leaving them behind to go into battle, only to reach home again a changed woman and suffering from P.T.S.D. Women in war was a new issue in Fa Mu Lan's community, and I'm sure that she felt an estrangement because she was the only woman has ever gone to war as a man, and lived to tell her story and go home to her family. This experience with the text has allowed me feel connected to the story because I am certain that my birth mother had strong feelings of loss as she left me in an orphanage, breaking her bond with me. And I imagine how different my life would be if that bond were still intact. Perhaps my birth mother didn't have the support of her community to provide care for her and her small child. She could have been a single mother suffering from the fallout of war in her country or community. Furthermore, this story touched my life and stuck with me as I am in the process of rebuilding my relationship with my adopted mother. The dynamics of multicultural influences has made me become more empathetic to the choices within

motherhood and adulthood. I believe that community has a lot to do with how women are supported and how mother child relationships are fostered or destroyed. Kingston is bringing awareness to women being oppressed and that the perpetrators are the government, community members and society; it is harder being a woman than a man, and with the violence that is happening today it is even harder to be a wife, mother, and keep a fulltime job to make a life.

My response to Kingston's story of Fa Mu Lan is, and would be, different than someone else who has experienced being a child, a woman, and an adopted daughter. It is through responding to this story and making personal meaning that I am making a difference within the world I live in. The bond of literature and reader can be deep and meaningful with poetry and multicultural literature because the reader has to allow that circuit of self, text, and response to be wide open to create meaning. Separating self-experiences and social influences while reading is impossible for me and any other reader. I have a wider scope of understanding because of my multicultural background. Readers need to relate and create meaning to what they are reading and identify with some aspect to engage mentally, create inclusivity, and respond to social change. It is the response of these readers that makes a difference in the world and creates the awareness of oppression today. It is within the theory of Reader Response that this space to create meaning is encouraged for the reader. Finding the commonalities within the text to the modern reader, who is open to Kingston's text being an experience, allows the book to become living literature, responding to the reader's needs and experiences.

This story of Fa Mu Lan in *I Love A Broad Margin* has influenced my point of view on mother child relationships, and I want to answer why I felt the way I did when I

read the text. The meaning that I have gained from the text is that family relationships can be influenced through culture and circumstances. The created text is has motivated me to create a more inclusive community in my world by understanding and accepting how my mothers have influenced and changed my life. By using personal experiences to relate to this text and how I was given my citizenship of the United States. I have connected with one of the messages that I have received, which is that mothers across the world sacrifice in different ways for their children and themselves. But also that women in general have to live in a world that may or may not support the relationships between the mother and the child. Working toward peace is one way that will take away the tragic trauma of war, creating communities that foster mother-child relationships is another so that history won't repeat itself.

**Chapter 2**  
***The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood***  
***Among Ghosts: A Focused Critical Study on Maxine Hong Kingston's***  
**Fa Mu Lan.**

Maxine Hong Kingston's first book, *The Woman Warrior*, (1975) is a wonderful prose memoir that incorporates her experience as a multicultural second generation Chinese American woman. The genre of *The Woman Warrior* was labeled as autobiography, when in fact it is a mixture of autobiographical experiences and stories that influenced Kingston as she developed from child to woman. This book created a new type of literature because no one had written about themselves or their cultures like this before. Many critics misread Kingston's text, believing that it was purely autobiographical. What Kingston actually created was a literary work of its own unique genre of self-exploratory writing.

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Many critics were perplexed by Kingston's story of Fa Mu Lan in *The Woman Warrior* and believed her version of the story was misleading and went as far as to argue that Kingston had misrepresented Chinese literature. Critics' responses to Kingston's memoir are important because when they interpreted Kingston's text, they related it to the traditional story of Fa Mu Lan rather than creating meaning with the text for themselves. Critics also have had different levels of appreciation of Kingston's text and have contrasted Kingston's contemporary American story and narration with their own culturally-influenced versions. However, what they have failed to do is appreciate the role that the reader plays in creating the meaning of the text and the valuable way that Transactional Reader Response Theory can be applied to Kingston's work. Kingston has

created a work that creates an activism that through peace and understanding.

Communities can help create a discussion about the traumatic experiences of warriors.

The chapter "White Tigers" manipulated the saga of Fa Mu Lan to represent Kingston's story of self. Kingston did not narrate the story like previous storytellers and writers. Kingston wrote her own version of what she remembers being told as a child from her mother. The chapter is written in prose form and depicts how Fa Mu Lan went on the journey to save her family and her village from an evil emperor. The chapter ends with Kingston comparing her life to the heroic story of Fa Mu Lan. Kingston's first version of the folk story is important because she wrote to retell the story that her mother told her as she figured out her place as a second generation Asian American woman. Kingston wrote from the perspective of Fa Mu Lan, offering her reader a more intimate point of view of the narrative and a response to her own experience with the story. Kingston has taken her life as a second generation American and has given us a roadmap to a minority woman's life. I believed in her story. I feel that this story is presented as a hopeful story, one where Fa Mulan can go home and return to a life with her family and be a wife and mother without question and without social or personal alteration. This is a story of hope, and my response was that while the story created a woman of power it also ended in a typical fashion where life resumes as normal as possible for this woman warrior. The story ended with Fa Mu Lan returning home and taking her place back in her community with a traditional role of wife, mother, and civilian. I believe that I felt that way because it didn't make me question the story or search for more narratives. The story was complete. It is important for me to understand why I reacted to the story in a different way now that it has ended in a suicide.

The critic most opposed to Kingston's work with the story of Fa Mu Lan was Frank Chin, author of the article "Come all Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." He believed that Kingston presented a story of Fa Mu Lan that wasn't Chinese. Chin's argument was that Kingston's version of Fa Mu Lan is "not consistent with Chinese fairy tales and childhood literature" (8). He also made the case that Kingston was influenced by American, Christian, and White culture. Chin is upset with her and other Asian American authors who have written the story of Fa Mu Lan in what he believes was a false manner:

The American-born generations and the colonial middle class immigrants-- likewise indoctrinated in white supremacy, in Singapore, Hong Kong and Christian Taiwan-- talk of their art as being above the history and the people it portrays. . . . We expect Asian American writers, portraying Asia and Asians, to have knowledge of the difference between the real and the fake. This is a knowledge that they have admitted they not only do not possess but also have no interest in ever possessing. They are, thus, reflective creatures of the stereotype. They talk about the agony of the stereotype but, when pressed, have no idea how to describe it. (9)

Frank Chin is clear in his argument that the rendition of Fa Mulan from Kingston does not coincide with his own culturally-based story. In his essay he includes a Chinese language version of "The Ballad of Fa Mulan" as well as translation in English. Chin then argues that Kingston is basing her autobiography on her imagination and Christian influences:

Kingston asserts her technique and her biased Christian autobiographer's

intelligence is informed only by autobiography, dreaming up the imaginings and visions of the immigrants, and duplicating immigrants' mental process. She speaks the language of the Chinese subconscious: no. (33)

Chin asserts that Kingston does not know her own Chinese cultural story and has destroyed the authenticity of the fairy tale of Fa Mu Lan. Chin accuses Kingston of not knowing her own culture and wonders how and why she would devalue her cultural origins like this in her autobiography.

Chin's essay makes his reader think about the origin of the Fa Mu Lan story and tries to compare the value of Kingston's story to the "Ballad of Fa Mulan" created in China. Chin claims that Kingston has combined two fairy tales and has misused her ethnicity within her autobiography:

[T]he autobiography completely escaped the real China and Chinese America into pure white fantasy where nothing is Chinese, nothing is real everything is born of pure imagination. . . . [Kingston] violates the heroes of two Chinese myths when she puts the tattoos of Yue Fei on Fa Mulan's back. (49)

Chin believes that Kingston has created a story that isn't part of Chinese culture and is filled with American betrayal and Chinese cultural misrepresentation. He doesn't look for how the reader can connect with the text and create meaning, but rather he wanted the story of Fa Mu Lan to be his version for historic accuracy.

Kingston responded to Frank Chin's blatant disregard for the cultural value of *The Woman Warrior* in her article "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers." She states that her autobiography is American as is her story of Fa Mu Lan:

Readers tell me it [Fa Mulan] ought to have been the climax. But I put it at the beginning to show that the childish myth is past, not the climax that we reach for. Also, “The White Tigers” is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody. Another bothersome characteristic of the reviews is the ignorance of the fact that I am an American. I am an American writer, who like other American writers wants to write the great American novel. *The Woman Warrior* is an American book. Yet many reviewers do not see the American-ness of it, nor the fact of my own American-ness. (57-58)

It is with this theory of “American-ness” that Kingston carved out her own reading guide in this article for her autobiography. Kingston argued that *The Woman Warrior* is a presentation of her sharing her individualized multicultural world. I agree that the story of Fa Mu Lan is a fragment of Kingston’s multiculturalism and should be able to stand as American literature with rich diversity of thought and composition.

Zhang Ya-jie, a critic of Kingston’s work, wrote the article “A Chinese Woman’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*.” Zhang believes that Kingston has misinterpreted the story of Fa Mu Lan because it wasn’t like the story that Zhang heard as a child. Zhang also wrote that at the time of reading *The Woman Warrior*, she was a visiting professor to America from the People’s Republic of China. She argues that Kingston has combined two stories: “In the chapter, ‘The White Tigers,’ Kingston has actually interwoven two ancient Chinese stories: the story of Yue Fei, a very famous hero and general in the Song Dynasty, and Hua Mu Lan. These two stories are well known to every Chinese, man and woman, old and young” (103). Like Chin, Zhang

argued that the story that Kingston has created is not of Chinese origin and that Kingston has only used her imagination to create her narrative.

Zhang also states that after understanding Kingston's book through listening to American students responding to Kingston's story of Fa Mu Lan, she was able to see the value of Kingston's genre of autobiography. Zhang wrote, "Thanks to the Chinese-American professor and the American students, I could see the book in a different light. It is, after all, an American story, not a Chinese one. Some of my assumptions were wrong from the very beginning because I am Chinese." (104). Her relationship to the Fa Mu Lan story was closer to the source of the folk tale. Zhang argues that Chinese Americans have been put through cultural assimilation and difficulties.

Once people emigrate, they become a new people influenced by their new country; and it then becomes difficult for those from the "Old Country" to share the emotions and thoughts of the immigrants. . . . In mixing ancient Chinese stories with her own imagination, Kingston has created a new woman warrior who actually challenges old and new. (104)

It is within the surrealist narration of Kingston's work that many critics like Zhang found it difficult to understand how the story was operating on a different level of meaning. The interpretation that many critics had of Kingston's Fa Mu Lan was that it simply did not follow her traditional Chinese texts and folk tales.

Lan Dong's article "Writing Chinese American into Words and Images: Storytelling and Retelling of the Song of Mu Lan" argues that the story of Fa Mu Lan through Kingston is transnational, "as translations and adaptations of her [Kingston's] story have facilitated this female protagonist's crossing of the geopolitical and cultural

boundaries and being embraced by a wide international audience”(220). Dong realizes that Kingston is a multicultural writer in contrast to Chin who has claimed Kingston is a “fake” imposter within the Chinese American community.

Dong approaches Kingston’s story of Fa Mu Lan with his own impression and responds that he believes the text is multicultural. Dong argues that Kingston’s story is an American story: “[Fa Mu Lan is a] ‘combination’ of her Chinese cultural heritage and her present American life into her Chinese American identity as a woman enabled to write her own history and invent her own representation” (222). Dong didn’t fixate on the genre or the meaning that Kingston was creating with the text but rather recognizes that *The Woman Warrior* as a whole is a multicultural text with multiple meanings:

[S]torytelling is a hybrid representation of the cultural past and present of the Chinese diaspora. As such, Kingston. . . appropriated and revitalized Mulan by transplanting the heroine into a new multicultural context, expanding the milieu of the original version and heightening discursive meaning. Their translocations of Chinese mythology exhibit the processes of cultural repositioning and transnational writing that help them configure an empowered female identity for displaced women of the diaspora. Their retelling crosses national, cultural, and geopolitical frontiers. It “translates” and recreates effectively. (224)

Dong recognizes that Kingston is not trying to replicate a story; rather she is combining her multiculturalism with her life story in writing. By understanding that Kingston is “transplanting” the story of Fa Mu Lan and incorporating the diaspora and displacement of Chinese stories and people, Dong argues that Kingston’s story of Fa Mu Lan is multicultural and her own creation of self.

Feng Lan's article "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior" argues that readers should view Kingston's Fa Mu Lan as a rehistoricized tale of female empowerment:

Indeed we must rehistoricize Kingston's revision of Mulan in order to locate its appropriate position in relation to the Mulan matrix.... Kingston's English rendition is a "reconstruction" of Chinese history by which she explores the nature of Chinese womanhood in terms of its potentials as well as its limitations: (230)

Moreover, the story is now operating as a catalyst for issues concerning Kingston's own Chinese heritage and American life. Lan, however, argues "Her source for legend was her mother's Cantonese "chants". . . . In other words, the legend was part of the ethnic upbringing that impacted young Kingston's intellectual growth and fostered an unconscious attachment to the ancestral land" (236). It was in this childhood that Kingston was taught the stories of China. Lan believes that Kingston has created two narratives within the story of Fa Mu Lan, in which she is finding herself and sharing her experience as American Chinese woman.

Lan then made a unique argument for surrealism to be applied to Kingston's work. Lan believes that the reader must create meaning with the text and look objectively for interpretation. Kingston finds her identity as a multicultural woman and explores her "imaginative power" and sets a surrealist tone in her text:

The depiction of Mulan's experience in the wilderness, which forms one of the most poetic portions of the book, is highly original, full of enchanting images that testify to Kingston's unusual imaginative power. Indeed, it establishes the

surrealistic tone that characterizes the overall style of *The Woman Warrior*, a style constructed largely from fragments of traditional Chinatown literature. . . . In Kingston's hands these narrative sub-genres, which are often marginalized in the Chinese literary tradition becoming illumination strategies to sustain that generates meaning allegorically. (237)

Lan believes that the text is operating on many levels of culture and personal experiences for Kingston. Therefore, the text's meaning should be left to interpretation by the reader to create meaning with "White Tigers." He believes that Kingston's story of Fa Mu Lan should exist on its own as literary interpretation of the Fa Mu Lan story, not a rendition of a traditional Chinese folk tale.

Lan concludes his article by stating the text is operating as a characterization of both old and new cultures. In addition he argues that Kingston has to negotiate her narrative by understanding her multiculturalism:

I do not mean to conclude that Kingston's Mulan is a failed representation of the Chinese female, but rather seek to highlight Kingston's dialectical characterization of her, a characterization which rests on Kingston's awareness of the contradictions inherent in the historical conditions within which Mulan exists. Kingston's recreation should be evaluated from two perspectives. First it is a marvelous addition to the Mulan gallery unique among modern versions of the narrative because of its coherence, intellectual depth and moral sincerity. Second, her recreation offers a keen insight into Chinese culture--especially in regard to women, family, tradition, and nation building. (242-244)

It is within this principle of dichotomy that Lan interpreted Kingston's Fa Mu Lan within

*The Woman Warrior*. He is able to look past traditional Fa Mu Lan stories, poems, and songs, and offer his readers a way to personally respond to Kingston text. Appreciating how Kingston has transformed the story has allowed Dong to accept its modernistic surrealist style and enjoy Kingston's experiences that she has shared with her reader of her Chinese American life.

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What is missing from these critics method of interpretation is that they put no emphasis or priority on creating a community through their response. Kingston is trying to create a community of storytellers connecting lives with stories and storytelling to promote understanding and peace. Kingston's text shouldn't stop with the reader's understanding what her intention was, but readers should look at how Kingston is inspiring readers to share her values of peace and become part of her community. In *I Love A Broad Margin*, you as a reader have to participate by creating meaning with the text because of its poetic form and content.

Critics of *The Woman Warrior* have focused on many aspects of Kingston's work. Chin only looked at what was on the page within the text, telling his readers that Kingston's book doesn't follow the traditional text. Zhang interpreted Kingston's text to be false to begin with because she is a Chinese woman raised on the story of Fa Mu Lan. She changed her view on Kingston's work when she heard the responses of American students to "White Tigers." Dong and Lan offered the opinion that Kingston has made the story of Fa Mu Lan surrealist and transnational and a representation of Kingston's life. However, another good way to understand Kingston's work is through Transactional Reader Response Theory. This theory puts emphasis on the relationship of the reader and

the response given to a text is explored. It isn't the content on the page that needs to be scrutinized but the reaction and the thoughts of the reader as they make social connection and meaning with a text. It is through the connection of community that a reader will make meaning with a text in their response. Then readers can share their thoughts and ideas to create an open dialogue on many issues within their communities.

To understand Kingston's reshaping the mode of memoirist prose writing to poetic memoir, it is imperative to study how she has developed her story of self within her earlier texts. In her books she argues for the importance of poetry, how to create it and to take time for this art form to flourish in her reader's lives: *To Be The Poet*, *Hawai'i One Summer*, and *Veterans of War Veterans of Peace*. Lastly, this new book *I Love A Broad Margin* shows that time always changes the interpretations of stories, especially with the Fa Mu Lan story. I will be examining my transactions with these texts in my final chapter.

Through poetry readers need to work to make connections to the new community that Kingston has created for them. Kingston's text is part of the living, breathing story of Chinese, Hawaiian, and Chinese American literature, giving scholars, critics, and readers a text that they can create meaning with by using their own experiences to relate. It is through this art form that a reader-ly community is created that will share in the importance of poetry. Furthermore, it is the reader's responsibility to become a part of that interpretive community, linking life and response with text. Each story is encapsulated within a modern poetic form. Thus, for the critics and readers, this newest poetic memoir *I Love a Broad Margin* creates many new beginnings, questions, stories, as well as endings that infuse Chinese American poetry with a response from readers and

critics alike, carrying the Fa Mu Lan story into the future.

### Chapter 3

#### A Reader's Response to *I Love A Broad Margin To My Life*.

Poetry allows the reader to interpret a text and create meaning that relates to the reader's life. The language of Kingston's poetry is simple, and there is space for the reader to relate to the text in a personal way and offer a response. Kingston's newest book, *I Love A Broad Margin*, creates a community of readers to respond and connect personal meaning to the content of the text. This chapter will show how Kingston progressively removed herself from the realm of prose writing and moved her life's work into poetry form. She claims within her text that she wanted to keep language simple to create a more meaningful connection to her reader. Also there hasn't been as much criticism for *I Love A Broad Margin* as there was for *The Woman Warrior*. However, there are some book reviews that don't look favorably at how Kingston has changed from prose to poetry. Lastly, I hope to prove that Reader Response Theory is the best way to respond to Kingston's new book *I Love A Broad Margin* and the story of Fa Mu Lan.

As I read Kingston's books on her life and her transition to poetry form, I found myself drawn to her cause to create a community that shares stories and takes joy in poetry. *To Be the Poet*, *Hawai'i One Summer* and *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* prove that she wants to be a poet. Kingston offered her war stories, tales of her childhood and how she has remained a storyteller in all her books. In Kingston's first book of autobiographical poetry, *To Be The Poet*, she wrote, "Let's try for poems. Let's meet tomorrow with poems in hand. May poetry come to one and all this night" (26). This text is a way for Kingston to explain her writing processes and share with her reader how to develop as a poet. Kingston encourages her readers to write poetry and share their

experiences. In *To Be The Poet* Kingston includes an example of one of the ways that she creates her poetry:

You gather your close-eyed experiences and your open-eyed experiences as raw words, then arrange them, add to them, exchange them for just-right words and somehow make coherence. You are transmuted from note-taker to Poet. I go outside, sit on the boards of the porch that overlooks valleys and hills, close my eyes, and hear the sounds of the first day of Spring. . . . There is no strict divide between the world and me. Shutting the eyes does not shut out the environment and my surroundings do not replace my emotions. What I feel influences what I see, and of course what I see affects my feelings. . . . The Poet alights in the right-now time, and stays in the special/ordinary moment. If I were to make an hour for poetry everyday, I would change my life. (30-31)

Kingston wanted poetry to create a moment for her readers and herself to enjoy life and to share feelings and stories that have affected them. Kingston proved the American poet must act as an interpreter of the world around them and create a dialogue and record of that space. Kingston ends *To Be The Poet* with this advice:

As mother, I give advice:

Just one thing to do about life-

enjoy it. Enjoy it. . . .

I went through a poetry door and came out of the war story. (108-111)

She tells her readers to love life and take time for the experiences that life has to offer.

Kingston's drive for poetry also affects what and how she teaches students. This influence of poetry has helped her solve her problems and create a classroom where

thoughts, ideas can fit into a new genre where free verse allows for issues of a community to be addressed and solved. Kingston wrote in *Hawai'i One Summer* that poetry is a beautiful way to communicate and solve problems within the writers' world:

I tell the students the form-- the epic, the novel, drama, the various forms of poetry-- is organic to the human body. Petrarch did not invent the sonnet. Human heartbeat and language and voice and breath produce these rhythms. . . . Put a problem into a sonnet and it will help you state the problem, explore it and solve it elegantly in a couplet. (44)

Poetry is an important part to what makes a text meaningful and thought provoking for me. I want to share the power of poetry and show that it is a way to create a community that is inclusive toward its reader.

Within the anthology of autobiographical essays in *Hawai'i One Summer*, Kingston wrote about how she enjoyed writing poetry. She shared how poetry gave her harmony and how she had found her niche by therapeutically writing about her life. Kingston states, "And yet it was in Mrs. Garner's classroom that I discovered that I could write poems. I remember the very moment in the room. . . . and out of the air and into my head and down my arm and out my fingers came ten, twenty verses in an a-b-b-a rhyme. The poem was about flying; I flew"(42). Kingston also shared with her reader that through college, the essay ruled her writings but she was able to practice poetry in her spare time at home. Now as a professor, she allows her students to freely write in the manner that they prefer.

In the introduction to *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, Kingston writes about how important it is to tell stories and to create a peaceful community through writing the

experiences of individuals. This introduction is important because it shows that writing and inspiring others to write is significant to Kingston and that she wants her community to grow and commit to a peaceful activism against war. It is in this activism that Kingston has created living literature and approached the subject of why stories are important to her community: “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” (1). Kingston’s concern for the welfare of veterans continues when she writes about how to protect and make them part of her community through writing and sharing their stories of war to heal the community and prevent P.T.S.D. Kingston supports her argument by proving that this is a worthy cause:

But it is in words that each individual reveals a unique mind. The veterans need to write. They would write the unspeakable. Writing, they keep track of their thinking; they leave a permanent record. Processing chaos through story and poem, the writer shapes and forms experiences and thereby, I believe, changes the past and remakes the existing world. The writer becomes a new person after every story, every poem; and if the art is very good, perhaps the reader is changed, too.

(1-2)

Kingston’s new concern with the stories of veterans comes through in her book *I Love a Broad Margin* through the remaking of her own warrior story of Fa Mu Lan and now takes on new aspects of the devastation of war and the warrior’s life.

In *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, Kingston explains how important it is to read and respond by writing back or writing the experiences of the self to share with others and help make an inclusive community. Her words are poignant when she

describes how important this new writer community is and how those involved in telling their story have shared and participated. She shares how they as a group re-defined the word veteran:

As the writers became skilled in knowing others' points of view, they enlarged the definition of veteran. A veteran could be a woman; a veteran could be a deserter; a veteran could be a civilian who had served in war; a veteran could have been a member of a street gang; a veteran could be a survivor of domestic violence; a veteran could be a peace activist. All manner of persons identified themselves as veterans and came to join the regulars, who argued for a while, then let every one belong. Wars affect all of our lives. (2)

Kingston and the people of this writing workshop have concerns that war changes everyone. Their willingness to share how they feel about the uneasiness about war and its effects allows them to open up about what has happened in their communities and the trauma of war. They have related to their readers how the consequences of war have changed them. I have felt deep empathy for them and their cause, and their text has made me respond to how war has changed myself as well.

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The story of Fa Mu Lan has changed in *I Love a Broad Margin*, and now Kingston writes a more serious ending of suicide of her woman warrior. Kingston wrote three poems in *I Love a Broad Margin* involving Fa Mu Lan. The first is "Spirit Village," and the second "City" and the third "Home Again." My response to this story is different from how I responded to ok *The Woman Warrior* where war is glorified within a warrior woman tale. These new poems in *I Love A Broad Margin* concerning Fa Mu Lan close

the story with the fact that Fa Mu Lan killed herself. The message that Kingston offers her readers today through the story of Fa Mu Lan addresses the issues of war and family. The poems create urgency for today's reader to take seriously the consequences of war on communities, individuals and families. This change had affected my life because I used to see war as a far away entity of society that doesn't directly affect my life. After reading this poetry and beginning to understand my role as an adult participating in an American multicultural life, I realize that the fantasy of how I saw war was wrong. I realized that war is a part of my communities and that it is important to create peace.

In the first poem "Spirit Village," Kingston writes about how she found Fa Mu Lan's grave and learned of her suicide. Kingston tells the story through the dialogue of the monk and herself:

"She killed herself," says the monk.

"She hung herself." No. No.

Why? I can't believe it. Why?

"The Emperor heard: the mighty general was a woman  
in disguise, a brave and beautiful woman who'd gone  
to war as a man. He sent for her to be a wife.

She refused, and he placed her under house arrest.

She killed herself at home" No. No.

She can't be the Fa Mook Lan who's  
the woman warrior I told about, we all  
tell about. (127)

This story metamorphosed from a classical heroine motif, Now the story is a warning of the consequences of war and a testament of a community remembering loss and tragedy. Kingston has narrated a story that is now more poignant to me because of Fa Mu Lan's choice of suicide. This poem gave me space to create my own meaning with the text and conclude that that the warrior's life can be difficult.

The poem "Spirit Village" has created time for me reflect on my own communities' involvement in war. Kingston shared with her reader her disbelief that Fa Mu Lan would kill herself.

She couldn't have killed herself. She couldn't  
 have found life after war, life  
 as a woman, useless to live. How to go on  
 without her? Wittman has to find a way.  
 And I have to find my own way. (127)

This part of the poem shows that the meaning of war has changed for Kingston, and she has involved her character's reaction to the suicide for perspective to guide the reader. Kingston used her narrator Wittman from her book *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* as a way to understand Fa Mu Lan's suicide. I felt that the poem's ending gave me a new reason to be actively aware of the gravity of war and an activist for peace in my own communities.

The second poem that addresses the Fa Mu Lan story is "City" This poem is different from the previous poem and explains in modern terms that Fa Mu Lan had P.T.S.D, resulting in her suicide. This poem creates an urgency of care for the warriors that come back from war:

Fa Mook Lan would go, She'd join  
The army of whichever side held her family  
hostage. She'd win battles, and receive  
honorable discharge home, though the 1,000  
years war is not done. Now  
I know; She killed herself.  
She had P.T.S.D; her soldier's heart broke,  
And she fell upon her sword. This month,  
May 2009 more American soldiers died by  
their own hand then killed by Iraqis and Al Qaeda. (211)

This poem struck me as meaningful because it ends so tragically, and I realized how Kingston was relating this old folktale to modern day society for the reader. The aftermath of war can be more devastating than the actual battle where the horrors of war take place. Kingston is creating a community through her text where readers and veterans and people who want to create peace can share their stories

There are risks of warriors today having P.T.S.D, and this poem creates an awareness that it is happening to soldiers all over the world and at home for the reader. the risk of suicide of American soldiers is high. Kingston brings this to her reader's attention in hope that she will build a community that will make space for members who suffer from trauma, who experienced war both at home and abroad and are forever changed. Kingston continues her poem with important facts about the soldiers that have committed suicide:

So far this year, 62 suicides,

More than half of them National Guard;

138 in 2008. I have no words of consolation. (211)

This poem offered me the opportunity to connect personally with the story and realize that war has consequences and that communities need to support the warriors that go to war. As a result I want to honor the fact that any war creates suffering families and broken communities. I believe that everyone suffers from this trauma of war, but it is within sharing and storytelling that we can heal our community members and ourselves.

Kingston's last poem "Home Again" describes how Fa Mu Lan's son did not recognize her; she refused the order to marry the emperor and that is the reason why she committed suicide. This poem struck me as socially important because I am coming from a place where I was adopted and an immigrant. Kingston inspires her readers to help warriors and change neighborhoods into inclusive communities for all so that the trauma of war does not continue:

I have broken the news that Fa Mook Lan  
killed herself. Everyone who hears denies  
that it happened. No. How? Why?  
the woman soldier comes home from battle;  
her child does not recognize his mother.  
He cries at sight of her; he runs away from her.  
Why not give up on life?  
I found evidence as scholars know evidence  
of how Fa Mook Lan died. . . .  
I read that Fa Mook Lan killed

herself by hanging; she refused the emperor's  
order that she become one of his wives.

The source cited was the P.R.C's  
National Tourism Administration  
1998. Her hanging

may be revisionist history;  
governments have trouble acknowledging P.T.S.D.

Why not give up on life?

Why continue to live? (217-218)

Kingston wrote that The Peoples Republic of China National Tourism Administration story could be true, or the more likely cause would be P.T.S.D. I believe that the war trauma results that Fa Mu Lan must have experienced matters and that Kingston has written this from a realistic point of view. Now the story is linked to modern day warriors who suffer from the same fate of P.T.S.D. As we know, Kingston wants to create a community for these warriors to share their stories. Kingston continues her story by writing about why she continues to live for herself and her community instead of choosing the alternative:

I make up reasons why to live on:

1. Kill myself, and I set a bad example

To children and everyone who knows me.

2. I will die deliberately as Thoreau lived

deliberately. I live nonviolently. So I shall not  
kill myself by hanging or sword. (218)

Kingston is creating a community of readers who are now more socially aware of the effect of war on communities and themselves. I feel that my place in life is influenced by my social identities that I occupy as a minority, an immigrant, and a woman who has experienced being born and raised by two different mothers. I have a strength like Kingston to go on, "to make up reasons to live" because I don't want to allow my early childhood trauma and P.T.S.D to dictate my life. Instead I want to share my experiences with those around me so that there is space to grow a community where I have a place to explore my role as a multicultural American woman. Through writing poetry Kingston has opened up and created this space and a new community of readers that will help create peace and inclusion.

*I Love a Broad Margin* is a beautiful collection of poetry that builds a community that enables the sharing of stories with a message of peace and understanding for people who have experienced trauma can share their stories. The story of Fa Mu Lan emotionally moved me more than other versions of this story that I have found. I wasn't shocked that Fa Mu Lan took her life; I believe that it was a way out for her and to offer her son a life that she couldn't provide. I saw that Fa Mu Lan was protecting her son by giving him freedom un-challenged by the presence of an absentee or P.T.S.D-affected mother figure. It was told in a simple poetic way, and I was able to understand through my experiences in life why a mother would leave her child. The story of Fa Mu Lan improved because it addresses the issue of mother-child relationships in a more meaningful way to me, because I am adopted and have experienced two mother relationships. I feel because of these relationships I have related to Kingston's text and have further understood that the role of motherhood is hard for many women if a

community does not support that relationship. The Fa Mu Lan in these poems was a strong woman within her community because she sacrificed her relationship with her son so that he could be a part of his community. My birthmother also made a sacrifice to give me up so that I could be an American.

I recognize that community also dictates family relationships. I come from a place of understanding of why mothers leave their children. I have interpreted the story of Fa Mu Lan through my identities of first generation American minority woman raised in a multicultural home, as well as, a woman who experienced the loss of two mothers; my identity and my place in my family and community was one I had to find for myself. I grew up with the ability to see the world from many perspectives, and to have a deep empathy and understanding of how families change and grow.

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Kingston describes her own life at the end of *I Love a Broad Margin* by writing about how she has changed from a teller of stories to become a reader now responding to what she has read. Kingston has found closure in her narrative of self. Kingston declares that her need for storytelling is ending:

Before I had language,  
Before I had stories, I wanted to write.  
That desire is going away.  
I'll stop, and look at things I called  
distractions. Become a reader of the world,  
no more a writer of it. Surely world  
lives without me having to mind it.

A surprise world! When I complete  
this sentence, I shall begin taking  
my sweet time to love the moment-to moment  
beauty in everything. Everyone. Enow. (221)

Her stories have filled me as a multicultural woman with a new awareness of the issues of war. I think that a true artist writes in a manner that inspires and changes the perspective of the readers. Kingston has done this in her text; she doesn't shy away from the hard topics of war and the suicide rates of American soldiers and the impact on families.

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The relationship that I had with my birth mother was very short. I was only 3 months old when I was adopted from Honduras and relocated to Northern Wisconsin. I believe that she gave me up because she had no choice. However, this may not be fact; she has never reached out to me, nor have I taken my time to go looking for her. I see her as a person who has made a sacrifice, and I'm sure she experienced the trauma of letting go of her child among other life changing experiences. Whatever the circumstances may be, she made a choice for me. In this choice I was powerless to change it or even old enough to protest against it. I have dealt with this trauma and realized I have the strength to live on. Living with her choice is an easy and a hard thing to do; I have empathy for anyone who has experienced the loss of their birth mother, and in this I can relate to Kingston's Fa Mu Lan story. A mother having to separate from her child in order for that child not to be affected by what her mental state had become is horrible ordeal.

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Books reviewers of *I Love A Broad Margin* paint a slightly different point of view

of what they think of Kingston's new genre of poetry. David Orr of *The New York Times* asks the question of why Kingston would switch since she has gotten so much literary exposure from the prose writing that she does. Orr argues that, "Why would someone who's already mastered an art form that is vastly more influential and lucrative than poetry--fiction or songwriting, for example-- want to be a poet?" (1). He also questions Kingston's motive when she already has "Prestige." He writes, "And of course nobody thirsts for prestige so much as people who already have heaps of it"(1 Orr). He then argues that her poetry is problematic because the language of her poetry is "numbing":

That said, plenty of very good poets have struggled with exactly the difficulties Kingston confronts here, and many have handled those difficulties with less grace. It's worth remembering, after all, that Emerson recognized a difference between "the Poet" and, well, poets. The Poet, he says, "is a beholder of ideas, and an utterer of the necessary and casual. For we do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in meter, but of the true poet." Was it really necessary, then, for Kingston to write poetry in order to "be the Poet"?

Perhaps, in her prose, she had been one all along. (1)

He doesn't see the validity of the message that I have found in Kingston's poetry or the community that she is trying to build. He doesn't care for her art form but recognizes how she is trying to be a poet.

In an interview with Koa Beck for *Smith Magazine*, Kingston explains why she has chosen poetry to show her new enthusiasm for poetry, "To me, Broad Margin is a journey though China and I go to all those villages and in each one there is some adventure that takes place. I see my book as going through geographical space as well as

other inner travels.” (1) Kingston also answers questions about how she has stayed a writer all her life and what it means to her to write her story. Kingston talks about her superstitions about how writing has always been her niche in life,

Really early in the book, you write, “I have a superstition that as long as I, any writer, have things to write, I keep living.” Can you please say a little more about that?

“I guess it has to do, somewhat, with this poem about being afraid that there is not enough time to write everything that one is feeling and thinking—and I have thought that my whole writing life. That there is so much more to say and there isn’t enough time and so it helps me to have those superstitions. As long as I have stories to write, surely I won’t die. That’s a superstition that comforts me. But it doesn’t help to know that I do have writer friends who have died without finishing their work so I have doubts about that superstition.” (1)

Kingston’s interview shows that she has enjoyed being a writer, the interview ends abruptly with Beck asking, “what her 6 word memoir would be?”(1), to which Kingston replies “Love a broad margin to life”(1). A response fitting to a book of poetry.

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Through writing Kingston writes that she has sacrificed much of her life for her career in *I Love a Broad Margin*.

I regret always writing, writing, I gave  
my kid the whole plastic bag of marshmallows,  
so I could have 20 minutes to write.

I sat at my mother’s death bed, writing.

I did swab her mouth with water, and feel  
 her pliant tongue enjoy water, then harden  
 and die. (221)

Kingston confesses her need to tell the stories and create her communities are coming to a close. She is ready for her new chapter of life, but I think that it is unique at the end of her writing career she doesn't close the book on Fa Mu Lan but rather she re-writes the story. She changes the ending and makes her readers think about how being a storyteller is a hard thing to do. She recognizes that even in her life she has sacrificed relationships like many of the women that she writes about:

Before I had language,  
 Before I had stories, I wanted to write.  
 That desire is going away  
 I've sad what I have to say,  
 I'll stop and look at the things I called  
 distractions. Become a reader of the world,  
 no more a writer of it. Surely, world  
 lives without me having to mind it. (221)

Now Kingston is going off to experience new things and old "distractions" I believe that she has left a legacy of writing. She has attempted to create new communities, bring awareness to feminist movements, and once again write the story of Fa Mu Lan as a frame for the issues of society that matter to her. Yet at the end of *I Love a Broad Margin* she believes that she has sacrificed a lot of her life to the written word. She has, however, linked together the importance of community, war, and violence, into a

narrative of peace.

Kingston returns to telling her readers about her personal journey of writing and telling stories. Kingston wants her reader to know about this journey of writing as it comes to a close in *I Love a Broad Margin*:

But how be alone unless "I" How  
 Be lonely with you-understood alongside  
 How be American unless "I"? Crossing  
 languages, Crossing the sky of life and death,  
 Daughter will help Father. I am barbarian  
 who sings strange words. (219)

Kingston's poetry holds a lesson of being a writer of the communities that she belongs to. Kingston writes that the 'I' is part of America and part of what makes self and family. She has created a text that will promote a new community of readers that will work toward peace.

I see the value in using cultural stories of the past and integrate them with the present so that the story can reach new audiences. Kingston's poetry is relevant to modern literature because it explores the complexity of family and creates the space for social change. I believe that Kingston's poetry has empowered me to promote a way to create peace in the life that I have chosen. Furthermore, I believe that her story allows an open discussion on how war impacts families, changes women's roles in society and creates violence. Specifically, having the story of Fa Mulan continue in this manner, shows that circumstances and trauma dictate women's relationships in their communities. Through this story is a way for Kingston to reach her audience in a different way than

*The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts*, where critics focused on genre rather than the message that she was attempting to get across. Instead the story creates a way for readers to discuss feminism, trauma, and what happens after communities are changed by war.

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The second great act of motherhood that affected my way of thinking when my adopted mother left me. I believe that sometimes that mothers make choices for themselves that affect their children. However I believe that it is my responsibility to have an open mind and not allow that trauma of childhood abandonment affect me. Women have a hard role to play in all communities, war affects their relationships with their children, communities influence their opinions, and lastly most women have to negotiate through a male dominated world. I feel that a mother's role in a child's life can be untraditional because of social circumstances around them and the communities that foster or destroy those relationships.

I have connected with the poems of *I Love a Broad Margin* because I am multicultural and I belong to many communities, all influencing my internal battle of self-identities and my opinion of war and the consequences of it. Through Kingston's narratives there are stories of how women deal with trauma and war. It is important for Kingston to show in her stories that that she is now a pacifist and through peace there is a welcoming community for all. I have found that within Kingston's text there is a space for readers to share their traumatic experiences, related to their own wars at home and within the human spirit. Kingston's story of Fa Mu Lan has given me the time to reflect upon and understand the relationships that I have had with my mothers. *I Love a Broad*

*Margin* has helped me continue to understand how I see motherhood operating in the communities that I belonged to as I was growing up. Through these stories I was able to think about my mothers and how they have shaped my life.

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