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## All is Connected to All (Beyond Normative Perception): Maxine Hong Kingston and the Psychedelic Politics of the Counterculture

Few moments in history are so intensely associated with widespread drug use as the 1960s in the United States. The American counterculture scene is unimaginable without its defining attitudes towards and sustained practice of smoking marijuana and “dropping acid,” i.e. taking LSD (other drugs were used but none became as foundational to the counterculture lifestyle and ethos as these two). Yet, regrettably, these psychedelic experiences produced relatively little memorable literature as much of the creative energy of the drug movement went into the visual arts, music, guerrilla theater and experimental performance art.<sup>1</sup> Although the Beats (Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs) engaged with drug use in their literary work of the 1950s, they referred mainly to heroin, marijuana and amphetamines. In the 1960s, the best known authors of what we could call a literature of psychedelic experience are Hunter S. Thompson, Ken Kesey, Tom Woolf (writing *about* Ken Kesey), and the anthropologist (and possibly hoaxer) Carlos Castaneda (writing of peyote).

Yet there is another writer who has produced a rich and sustained literary archive of West Coast counterculture and its fascination with psychedelia, one who has been largely overlooked. Maxine Hong Kingston has been read and studied since the mid-1970s as a foundational figure of Chinese American literature, and a key author of American women’s literary autobiography, but she has never been read as a literary

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent scholarly discussion of the history of literature and psychedelics, see Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002, 218-275.

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hippie or major voice of the 1960s counterculture. This essay aims to challenge that oversight.

Maxine Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California, in 1940 to first generation Chinese immigrants. Her most famous book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, was published in 1975 and awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award. Not only did this semi-autobiographical novel become a cornerstone of a new discipline, Asian American studies, it has since become among the most widely taught American books of the past 40 years. It is assigned in high schools and universities, in American literature classes, Ethnic American literature classes, Asian American classes, Women's Studies courses, courses on autobiography, and American cultural studies programs. It is probably indirectly responsible for the making of the Disney film *Mulan* (1998), which is based on the same legend as the "woman warrior" of the title. Consisting of five independent chapters based on her childhood, her family's stories, and on Chinese folklore, freely adapted, the book is sometimes taught as fiction and sometimes as autobiography. Wikipedia calls it "creative non-fiction." I will argue that we could read significant parts of it as psychedelic writing.

*China Men*, published two years later, focused on the men of her family in order to counter-balance the female focus of the first book. It also borrows heavily from Chinese folklore, legend and her family history. Her third book, *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), is a novel set in Berkeley in the early 1960s, describing the experiences of a race-conscious Chinese hipster, Wittman Ah-Sing (punning on Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, i.e. "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" and "I sing the body electric"). The novel was well received and confirmed her importance to Asian American scholarship but aroused little interest about its counterculture setting. In literary criticism, as in life, timing is everything, and 1989, falling in the heart of the Reagan-Bush years, was not a good year for a re-examination of the 1960s.

Kingston's next work, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), consists of a set of sketches and essays, in Joan Didion style, as well as a narrative chapter about Wittman Ah Sing's life in Hawaii with his wife Taña and their son, transparent avatars for Kingston and her own family. Her latest book, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011), can be considered as a further elaboration of the writing style developed in *Fifth Book of Peace*, except that the book is written as a prose poem. Although *I Love a Broad*

*Margin to My Life* is about the author's trip to China, returning to events narrated in her first book, *The Woman Warrior*, it reveals actually how far away Kingston has moved as a writer from the Chinese-American material that defined her early work. Instead of cultural identity, the focus is on her life-long pacifism and the countercultural experiences from which it was forged.

Although Kingston's counterculture background has occasionally been acknowledged, it has never been seriously explored.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the counterculture of the 1960s, by which I refer to both the political and the lifestyle movements, is indispensable to understanding Kingston's increasing preoccupation with pacifism as well as her signature aesthetic choices, such as generic hybridity, informal tone, rhetorical playfulness and structural non-linearity. The counterculture also left Kingston with a lifelong fascination with consciousness-expansion, consciousness-raising and the power of the mind and imagination to influence reality. Finally, it provided her with a model of community that goes beyond kinship-based family, village or national units to affinity-based "sanghas" created with friends and like-minded strangers and a model of the entire world as an interconnected human family. For all these reasons, I maintain that no discussion of Kingston's work and influences can make sense without taking into account the world of bohemian Berkeley in the early 1960s.

Kingston graduated from UC Berkeley in 1962 after having majored in English literature, and continued to live in or near San Francisco until

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<sup>2</sup> In a 1990 interview, Kingston explains that *Tripmaster Monkey* is set in the early 60s because the "Monkey King" (an iconoclastic character from a Chinese epic novel, *Journey to the West*) was "here, in the Sixties. Abby Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, you know? They were monkey spirits, trying to change the world with costumes and street theater." Marilyn Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, "A MELUS Interview: Maxine Hong Kingston," *MELUS* 16.4, "Toward the Multiculture," Winter 1989-1990, 57-74. Also, during an interview in 1993, Neila C. Seshachari tells Kingston that she considers *Tripmaster Monkey* "a quintessential novel of the 1960s," and Kingston explains that she set the novel during this time because of her admiration for the many new words that it spawned, such as "Be-In," "love-in," "flower power" and "tripmaster" itself. Neila C. Seshachari, "Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston," *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, eds. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin, Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 1998, 203. No other **significant** scholarly exploration of Kingston's counterculture background has been done.

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1967. In all respects, the period 1958 to 1967, the years that she lived in Berkeley, were the most important to the Bay area counterculture. On the political side, student activism began on the UC Berkeley campus the year she enrolled, in 1958, with the organization SLATE, a precursor to the Free Speech movement. In 1960 a protest against HUAC activities led to student activists being forced down the steps of the San Francisco City Hall with fire hoses, an event that was televised and led to the politicization of many people on the New Left. The highly visible Berkeley Free Speech movement – led informally by Mario Savio, among others – began in 1964 with several dramatic acts of civil disobedience, including a famous incident of blocking the arrest of a CORE activist when students surrounded the police car that held him for 32 hours and used it as a platform for speeches.

At the same time, the Haight-Ashbury scene was beginning to coalesce, marijuana was abundant and LSD was legal until October of 1966. The following year, 1967, the year of the so-called “Summer of Love,” was a key turning point in the history of the counterculture as well as in Kingston’s own life. The year began with an event organized initially as a protest against the recent criminalization of LSD: the Human Be-In at the Golden Gate Park, also advertised as a Gathering of the Tribes. One of the many things this extraordinary event revealed was that there was indeed a huge alternative community of “tribes” and people in San Francisco at this time. Sources differ, but somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 people came to the park that January day, including Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg and Stanley Owsley (who distributed free samples of his famous homemade “Owsley acid”).

Ironically, this celebration of the San Francisco bohemia was also the beginning of its end, largely due to the media obsession with the “hippies” that it sparked and which resulted in tens of thousands of young people, including many teenagers who had run away from home, descending on the city for the “Summer of Love” and overwhelming its infrastructure and public services. The Diggers, a group of radical community activists, who had staged happenings such as the “Death of Money” parade in the spring, organized a mock funeral happening called “Death of Hippie” at the end of the summer to announce that the “Summer of Love” was over and that visitors should go home and take what they learned to their own

communities.<sup>3</sup> Many local residents who had enjoyed the era of social and personal experimentation up until then also decided to leave. Some went to found communities in other parts of the country. Kingston, like Wittman Ah Sing, left for Hawai'i with spouse and child. Yet, for many parts of the country, the Berkeley counterculture was just arriving, via the media and its recently scattered veterans, and its values and influence would continue to be felt for years.

Since "counterculture" is a broad term, and "counterculture values" may seem somewhat impressionistic, I would like to define this term through five issues that Timothy Miller, in his book *The Hippies and American Values* (1991), identifies as key sites of the counterculture's ethics. These are, as he puts it: dope, sex, rock music, community, and cultural opposition. Although all five are important in Kingston's work, I am going to focus only on the first, "dope." The last issue, cultural opposition, is also relevant to Kingston's work, however. In fact, the notion that that counterculture was politically oppositional is a conflation of the two branches of the cultural left in the 1960s, the political activists and the hippies. Theodor Roszak, in his influential *The Making of a Counterculture* (1969), was among the first to argue that these two groups were two faces of the same phenomenon, though they often seemed quite distinct, especially to each other, at the time (264-265). These two groups may have had roughly the same goals but often disagreed sharply about how to achieve them. Activists believed in organized protest and putting pressure on lawmakers and institutions, while hippies tended to prefer putting their energies into creating an alternative society by living it themselves. They often saw political protest as a way of feeding into "the system" by being locked in a dialectical struggle with it but without a clear way to advance beyond the terms of the agon. Activists in turn often saw hippies as spoiled children who were too self-involved to engage in meaningful political struggle. One group that successfully combined hippie values and political activism was ~~was the street theater~~

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to imply that the counterculture scene itself was over, but that summer tourists were invited to take what they had learned back to their communities around the country. The long-term goal of the counterculture was to spread and gradually take transform American society from a competitive one to a cooperative network of "free families in free cities," The Diggers, "The Digger Papers," *The Counterculture Reader*, ed. E.A. Swingrover, New York: Longman, 2004, 32.

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organization called the Diggers, who became the counterculture's most visible and active local hippies also devoted to cultural opposition. Constituted by a break-away cadre of around twenty former members of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, they founded the Free Store and the Free clinic, put on free parties and gave away free food<sup>4</sup> (Doyle, "Staging the Revolution" 78-79).

In practice, for many city residents, as for the Diggers, the line separating hippies and activists was entirely permeable, and many people found themselves charting a middle ground that included political demonstrations with various degrees of involvement with alternative communities and practices. Kingston is a perfect example of this in many ways, a devoted participant of anti-war demonstrations though wary of politics and ideological commitments as such: in *The Fifth Book of Peace* she writes that "ideology is what got us into trouble [in the Vietnam War] in the first place ... We don't want ideology" (331). Similarly, in the most recent book, she says that she wants to "change the world" (209), but her methods are mainly the "do-it-yourself" strategies of the lifestyle counterculture: art-creation and community-formation. In the Veteran Writers Workshop, for example, the writing workshop she has run for veterans since 1991, she does both: war veterans meet regularly to share the poems and prose they have written.

Although stereotypes about the 1960s tend to view the highly visible drug use of the time as a symptom of hedonism, the role of mind-altering substances was actually far more complex.<sup>5</sup> The point of taking hallucinogens or of smoking pot, for the counterculture community, was often understood as a means to become more aware of the worlds both inside and outside, and not as an escape from lucidity or from reality. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle call it a means of "deconditioning" that people used to help them perceive and critically distance themselves from learned forms of aggression, racism, sexism and

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<sup>4</sup> Michael William Doyle, "Staging the Revolution: Guerilla Theater as a Countercultural Practice, 1965-1986," *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*, New York: Routledge, 2002, 71-97.

<sup>5</sup> For a scholarly article on the meaning and use of marijuana and LSD in the 1960s, see David Farber, "The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation: Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture," *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, New York: Routledge, 2002.

intolerance.<sup>6</sup> Drugs were thus regarded as both fun and mind-expanding, bringing insights to users about the interconnectedness between people and between the material and spiritual world. Admittedly, for some, smoking marijuana or dropping acid was mainly a harmless good time, a way to share a moment of complicity and pleasure with other people. However, for many others, it was a life-altering experience, even a holy one, an experience that could lead to significant changes in the world if enough people shared it. In the PBS documentary *Summer of Love*, Mary Kaspar, who lived in the Haight-Ashbury area in the early 60s, explains that she and her friends believed that LSD could change the world because they had been changed so profoundly by it themselves. While high on acid, she had experienced “cosmic oneness, where I truly felt I was no different than you, I was no different from my black friends; I was no different than anyone who lived in any other part of the world.”<sup>7</sup> She concludes that “God lived inside all of us.” This example illustrates well how the line between consciousness-altering and consciousness-raising was often crossed, and how the knowledge acquired during psychedelic experiences could have an impact on the politicization of individuals and entire communities. As historian David Farber puts it, LSD enabled some people “to hunt out, recombine, and produce social schemata that changed their trajectory on the social map of space and time.”<sup>8</sup> The important point here is that LSD was considered an important tool of consciousness raising, spiritual insight and politicization, these three being regarded as intertwined and inseparable. The conceptual link between them was the dissolution of boundaries between people and social identities, and the sense that one could see social reality stripped of automated, prejudiced, and culturally limited meanings. In other words, LSD was viewed as a means to achieve a politically and spiritually enlightened state where the tripper saw the true interconnectedness between people, and for that matter, between the human and the non-human.

At first glance, Kingston’s work does not seem overtly concerned with drugs, except for the novel *Tripmaster Monkey*, which signals its

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, “Section One: Deconditioning,” *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, New York: Routledge, 2002, 15.

<sup>7</sup> A complete transcript of this film is available online at the PBS website: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/love/>

<sup>8</sup> See David Farber, op. cit. 19.

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counterculture insider pose in its very title (a “tripmaster” being, in counterculture parlance, someone who guides the LSD experience of others, often persons who are taking it for the first time). I intend to demonstrate in what follows that psychedelic experiences are actually the secret core of all of Kingston’s work, the cosmic laugh at the heart of her literary world. This is not to make any concrete claims about Kingston’s personal experiences with marijuana or hallucinogens. Instead, my argument is about her writing and her use of psychedelic experiences as tropes for the acquisition of a specific kind of knowledge. To put it simply, the passages that focus on drug-induced experiences are the points of articulation of many of Kingston’s most vital ethical and political values.

I would like to begin with the story that gives Kingston’s first book its name and which has been one of the most taught and most discussed sections of her writing, “White Tigers,” which is a version of the Mulan, or Chinese woman warrior, legend. This chapter consists of an extensively elaborated retelling of the sixth century Chinese ballad about a young woman who disguises herself as a man to replace her father when he is conscripted into the emperor’s army. The original ballad and its many Chinese retellings all begin with Mulan’s distraught brooding about her old father’s conscription as she weaves. The most common version begins with the lines: “You can’t tell the sound of the loom/ From the sighs of the girl”<sup>9</sup> (Ting 77). None of these versions includes any account of her preparation for her career as warrior. The long section of “White Tigers” which describes the narrator’s imagined childhood apprenticeship to the mysterious couple who teaches her martial arts and puts her through a series of tests is thus entirely a product of Kingston’s own imagination, weaving together elements of Berkeley psychedelia with Chinese folklore, allusions to Native American initiation rites (very much in vogue in the 1960s) and the writings of Carlos Castaneda.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> PP Ting, “The Ballad of Mulan,” trans. William H. Nienhauser, *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*, eds. Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong attributes elements such as the prolonged training and the hermit’s retreat on misty mountains to Chinese folk traditions, but the hallucinatory transformations of objects and the intense and colorful distortions perceived by the narrator are entirely of Kingston’s own elaboration and are clearly inspired by Castaneda’s descriptions of turning into a crow and other

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It begins with a bird leading the narrator as a little girl away to the mountain, in a manner that recalls Alice following the rabbit down the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The drug allusions begin with her getting lost in a cloud she calls "dragon's breath" (possibly evoking "Puff the Magic Dragon," the 1960s hymn to marijuana smoking sung by the group Peter, Paul and Mary<sup>11</sup>), and include distortions in temporal perception ("I would not know how many hours or days passed") and a heightened sensitivity to color: she emerges from the cloud into a "yellow" world where she meets an old couple with seemingly bottomless pots and a floor that stirs up "new blends of earth colors" when she walks on it.<sup>12</sup> After some time, she is taken to the mountains of the white tigers and left alone, as in a Native American rite of passage. Following deer tracks, she is led to the "fungus of immortality," possibly an allusion to hallucinogenic mushrooms, which she eats.<sup>13</sup> Soon after, she sees a white rabbit that jumps into her campfire to feed her and then watches a man and woman made of gold dancing the earth's dances, melting from Chinese lion dances to African, Hindu and American Indian dances, the lion's manes growing into shiny feathers and the couple growing bigger and bigger, becoming tall angels.

Although there are rabbits (a hare, actually) at the end of the original Mulan ballad, and Kingston's version also alludes to the story of Buddha, for whom a rabbit sacrifices itself by jumping into a fire, I would like to

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experiences produced by his ingestion of peyote under the alleged tutelage of a Yaqui shaman. See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese American Autobiography Controversy," *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 48, note 7, and Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> In suggesting a local drug-linked resonance to the image of "dragon's breath," I do not mean to deny or diminish the great symbolic weight of the dragon in Chinese culture, which Kingston is also certainly evoking in this passage.

<sup>12</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, New York: Vintage, 1975, 20.

<sup>13</sup> This passage seems to allude not only to hallucinogenic mushrooms, but possibly even to the McKenna brothers' theory, published a year earlier, that human consciousness was the result of an evolutionary leap triggered by the ingestion of psilocybin-containing mushrooms growing near the droppings of ungulate herds, see Terence and Dennis McKenna, *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching*, San Francisco: Harper, 1975.

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suggest yet another source for this fantastic fictional voyage: the white rabbit presiding over San Francisco culture in the late 1960s, namely the white rabbit of the Jefferson Airplane album of that name released in 1967. Like Kingston's retelling of the Chinese legend, this song is based on another literary text, Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). Carroll's version and Grace Slick's both mention substances that upon being eaten make people smaller or bigger and provoke seemingly magical transformations of consciousness.

Kingston's description of her narrator's training and experiences in this long embedded section of the chapter has been called magical realism, but I would argue that these passages could also be understood as "psychedelic writing."<sup>14</sup> The ever-shifting fantasy of becoming a woman warrior is like a drug-enhanced daydream, which she contrasts ironically to the reality of her life as a young woman in California, where she does not like armies and thinks martial arts are "for unsure little boys kicking away under fluorescent lights."<sup>15</sup> The woman warrior fantasy stands outside of the narrator's ordinary existence, something like a reverie but with elaborate and hallucinatory details, where the tripper's imagination takes priority over the original ballad that serves as point of departure. A comparison could also be made to Hunter S. Thompson's work *-Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas-*, which often mixed journalism, autobiographical sketch and complete fantasy (much of it drug-inspired).

Her second book, *China Men*, has even more explicit drug experiences. There is Uncle I Fu, who is drugged into giving away all his money to thieves. Feeling "a surge of chemicals or light rushing through him," he goes to the bank to withdraw his life savings. Anyone familiar with drug literature would recognize the following description of his experience: "The walk he took was magical: inanimate objects glowed, but oh, the animate – the trees and the flowers and bugs and dogs were spraying colors. Human beings flared haloes around their heads and the rest of their bodies. Bands of light connected couples."<sup>16</sup> Compare this to Timothy Leary's transcription of people's "first reactions to the psychedelic experience": "Why, colors are so bright! The world seems

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<sup>14</sup> For the term "psychedelic writing," see Scott McCulloch's online article at the Literary Culture website: <http://www.suite101.com/content/psychedelia-in-writing-a14044>

<sup>15</sup> *The Woman Warrior*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*, New York: Vintage, 1977, 212.

alive! I'm seeing for the first time! It's alive! It's alive!"<sup>17</sup> Besides enhanced visual perception, Uncle I Fu experiences a sense of connection to the ontological essence of material objects and physical properties: "He later explained how he understood the stopping quality of red light and the go of green."<sup>18</sup> Yet Kingston is also making fun of the altered state of Uncle I Fu in this passage. While he may feel that "Time and fate were his invention and under the control of his will," in fact he has been duped into giving away his money to con-men. Kingston's account of this scam is decidedly tongue in cheek, poking gentle fun at the anti-capitalist mantra of the counterculture, as she has the robbed Uncle rejoice to find himself "free of money ... free of burden" until his wife and employees make him "crash" down to the reality of his situation.<sup>19</sup>

A far more positive encounter with drugs occurs to Great Grandfather, Bak Goong, who smokes opium on the ship to America and has an intense religious experience:

the meaning of life and time and what he was doing on this ship became clear to him... His thoughts branched and flowed and branched again and connected like rivers, veins, roads, ships' lanes. New ideas sparked and he caught his breath when he saw their connection to old ideas.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to bringing him existential insight, Bak Goong's opium trip introduces two of Kingston's own key preoccupations, i.e. pacifism and the interconnection of people. In the same passage, Bak Goong thinks: "Wars were laughable; how could a human being remember which side he was on? ... He loved the strangers around him as much as he loved his family" [95]. Compare this passage to another Kingston writes in her own voice in *The Fifth Book of Peace*: "Every time we go to war, we're in schizophrenic agony. Whoever the enemy is, they're related to us."<sup>21</sup> The drug experience also permits Bak Goong to escape the limited logic of ordinary consciousness and to think in terms of paradox, a theme that is important to American philosophy, especially the tradition of Emerson

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<sup>17</sup> Timothy Leary, "The Molecular Revolution," *Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out*, Oakland: Ronin Publishing, 1965, 112-141, 128.

<sup>18</sup> *China Men*, 212.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, New York: Vintage, 2003, 361.

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and Whitman that Kingston claims for herself. As Whitman famously says in “Song of Myself,” “Do I contradict myself/Very well then I contradict myself/(I am large, I contain multitudes)” and Emerson claimed that “consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” so Bak Goong sees how “Everything was true ... He was Lao Tse’s great thinker, who can embrace opposing thoughts at the same moment.”<sup>22</sup> Although opium is not actually a hallucinogen, Kingston attributes the characteristics of an LSD, peyote or ayahuasca trip to Great Grand-father, these all being substances that fascinated the counterculture for their consciousness-expanding qualities. In this instance, the drug allows Bak Goong to see the many connections between people and things that normally are invisible, an idea that becomes the centerpiece of Kingston’s later work.

Kingston’s next novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*, is an explicit treatment of the countercultural scene and its drug values. Nevertheless, it is far from being a simple homage. For one thing, Wittman Ah Sing is not exactly a hippie. His affinities are to the earlier Beats, urban and nocturnal and literary, and furthermore he is well aware that he has arrived on the scene a bit late and that his Chinese background would complicate his ability to belong to that milieu just as it complicates his sense of belonging to any American institution or group.<sup>23</sup> During the course of the novel, which follows Wittman around for a period of around two months in 1963, much of the narrative is concentrated on two key events: a party where he meets his future wife and the play that he puts on with the help of people he’s met. Both are sprawling affairs that offer Kingston the opportunity to riff on the complex joys of the social events that defined the bohemian branch of the counterculture: parties and performance art. At the party Wittman encounters a group of stoned people who are calmly watching a fire, “swimming in hallucinogen, ripped but appearing as ordinary as pie.”<sup>24</sup> Wittman is fascinated to see “how the psychedelic state looks from the outside, that is, through the vantage eyes of a head straight from ear to ear at the moment” [87-89]. Although not high himself, Wittman infers from their calm “breathing in unison” what kind of experience they are having, one that sounds very much like Bak Goong’s: “that trip where the margins

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<sup>22</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Wittman is resentfully aware that Kerouac was often racist and might well have seen Wittman merely as a “Twinkling little Chinese,” *Tripmaster Monkey*, New York: Vintage, 1987, 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

between human beings, and between human beings and other creatures, disappear, so that if one gets hurt, we all hurt, so that to stop war, all we have to do is drop lysergic acid into the water supply” [88]. In this again slightly tongue-in-cheek manner, Kingston evokes the counterculture fantasy of the revolutionary potential of exposing large numbers of people to LSD. Like Mary Kaspar from the PBS documentary, Wittman attributes to LSD the ability to make users perceive their radical interconnectedness.

What is interesting here is that this radical interconnectedness is perceived to be an insight *facilitated* by LSD, *not* an illusion caused by it. Just as for Mary Kaspar acid was a springboard to a political consciousness based on the assumption that the connections she had perceived during her trips were real and not imagined, so Wittman corrects himself after raising the idea of LSD in the water supply by saying “but we don’t even need to do that—because human beings of all time are in connection—the margins don’t disappear—there aren’t any margins—psychedelics only make you know about things, and do not cause a thing to be—it is—it already is ... the pleasure of acid was in knowing ideas as real as one’s body and the physical universe” [88]. In other words, psychedelics could be considered as a short-cut to certain kinds of knowledge, but they are not necessary once the knowledge had been acquired. *Tripmaster Monkey* is thus the story of a “head” (drug user) now “straight from ear to ear” (no longer using LSD) bringing psychedelic insights to uninitiated readers.

In short, even if *Tripmaster Monkey* presents LSD as a means of gaining insights about community and the place of the self in the larger scheme of things, the book is also a kind of guide to acquiring those insights without needing to take any drugs at all. Instead, the novel seems to suggest, art itself is a kind of trip that can take you outside of yourself and show you a more complex portrait of reality. This is the first figurative leap staged by the novel around the trope of “tripmaster,” which figures Wittman as a kind of tripmaster for the experience he offers to spectators and players through his play. The play is so effective a trip that it changes *even him*, transforming him into a pacifist after having seen that the three brothers and warriors in the story all end up losing the war [340]. The play’s effectiveness is certainly a tribute to the profound impact of the Bay Area’s famous guerilla theater group, the San Francisco Mime Troupe (also the seed group for the Diggers).

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Another level of meaning for the tripmaster trope is the way the novel's omniscient but not entirely neutral narrator guides Wittman on his journey through the novel, making sure that he stays out of harm's way. Finally, we can conceive behind these different layers of tripmasters the author herself, shaping and creating the reader's trip into her fictional universe. In an interview with Neila Seshachari in 1993, Kingston affirmed that she was "very good" at being a tripmaster back in the 1960s, making sure that people went to "beautiful places" rather than "dangerous" ones.<sup>25</sup> It is clear that Kingston's understanding of her work as a writer is connected to this guiding function.

The next book that Kingston published, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), is a generic hybrid: part memoir, part fiction. The strong connection between fiction and autobiography in Kingston's work is especially visible in the chapter titled "Water," which is written as an extension of *Tripmaster Monkey*, with Wittman and his wife Taña moving to Hawai'i, but also as a kind of fictionalized memoir of the Kingstons' own move to Hawai'i in 1967. Near the beginning of the "Water" chapter, Kingston describes the Ah Sings' first night in their new home. Wittman and Taña celebrate their new life by smoking some marijuana given to them by friends as a going-away present. Wittman is initially reluctant because he has given up drugs in general as a "political action," explained in *Tripmaster Monkey* as a gesture of commemoration of the way the British American Tobacco Company forced many Chinese into opium addiction in the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, putting politics aside momentarily, Wittman smokes a joint with his wife and has a trip every bit as enlightening and grandiose as Bak Goong's opium dream. Wittman feels himself floating out of his house and across the ocean and around the world and back in time. He sees a rainbow across the North Pole and fires burning in Vietnam and he sees himself in previous lives with his wife. Fully alert on this journey, Wittman has "a sense of knowing the truth, aware of everything, even his doubts and having smoked dope ... He was not making this up, and not controlling the story."<sup>26</sup> Just like Bak Goong, Wittman realizes that "All is

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<sup>25</sup> Neila C. Seshachari, "Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston," *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, eds. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin, Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 1998, 205.

<sup>26</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, New York: Vintage, 2003, 92.

connected to all, and I am conscious of that, and I am conscious that I am conscious” [92].

Here again we have the essence of the value that the counterculture attributed to marijuana and psychedelics, that is, the ability to induce perception of the connections that are normally obscured by our social schemas and hierarchies. Also like Bak Goong, Wittman’s drug experience is one of intense self-awareness, including the awareness that he has taken drugs. This state of heightened lucidity can be compared to the “mindfulness” that Kingston advocates through this book and her last one, a mindfulness that she associates with meditation but which clearly has some origins in the chemical experiences that preceded meditation for many people who passed through the 60s counterculture.

Not only is *The Fifth Book of Peace* a clear display of counterculture affiliations, it is also full of nostalgia for the passing of those halcyon days. There are numerous references to the “good high days” of “free grass and legal LSD” when “a stranger walking by on Telegraph Avenue or in the Haight would have handed you a tab or a cookie for free” [90]. While visiting another house nearby, where “hippie haoles [non-Hawaiian hippies]” party all night long, looking like “zombies and vampires,” the Ah Sings can only regret that “the times and places of good trips are over” [165]. Their standard of reference are the parties “back home in California” where “trippers had been such good talkers that they tape recorded themselves. Stoned, they rapped [talked] all night. Playing back the tape, they were still brilliant. Times have changed, drugs have changed” [165]. The Ah Sings left Berkeley when the Summer of Love had turned dark, when overcrowding, under-aged runaways [teenagers who had run away from home] and hard drugs like amphetamines and heroin had changed the nature of the Haight-Ashbury scene into something much darker and less joyful. The specificity of this transformation and disappointment is visible in the passage above, where the silent stoned hippies next door fill the Ah Sings with regret for the sparkling psychedelic parties of their past.

The acuteness and clarity of the book’s recognition that the drug experiences that partially formed the Ah Sings’ vision and values are no longer possible (not for them nor for anyone, since those experiences were linked to a particular social context that was gone) is directly linked to the way *The Fifth Book of Peace* searches for alternatives to those experiences. These alternatives include meditation, “mindful living,”

## All is Connected to All

reading and, above all, writing. All of these practices are tacitly offered as alternative tools for both tripping, taking meaningful mental voyages, and for creating communities or sanghas of mindful trippers and fellow-travelers. The most concrete example of this process is the phenomenally successful Veteran Writers Workshop. Since 1991, Kingston has run a workshop for veterans who want to write, and in 2006, she edited a collection of their stories and poems titled *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*. In the introduction, she wrote that humans “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.”<sup>27</sup> In these six short sentences, one can see the counterculture values that have informed Kingston’s writing throughout her career: self-awareness, connection and community, cultural memory and artistic production. All of these principles were basic to the counterculture, and Timothy Leary would have argued in the 1960s that they were linked to the conscientious use of psychedelics. If, for Kingston, her counterculture values are ultimately linked to a conscientious use of creative writing, they are nevertheless profoundly rooted in a clear understanding of how real psychedelic experiences awaken and transform LSD users.

By way of conclusion, it should be emphasized that the psychedelic moment of the 1960s was unique in the history of modern drug experimentation. LSD users were not mystics seeking transcendence in the classical sense, wishing to escape the material world for an ideal or better one. Nor were they like many nineteenth century drug users, enamored of the night, of decadence and of exotic dreamlands accessible only through narcotic intoxication. Instead, the spirit of LSD experimentation was to enter into a more intense and intimate relationship with the material world around us, to slow down and allow the senses to fully appreciate the richness of the here and now, and to peer beyond unconscious and mechanized social schemas. The LSD molecule allowed users to become aware of perception itself, and to glimpse the pulsing flow of information that is filtered out by ordinary, practical-minded consciousness and organized into culturally informed paradigms. The spirit in which psychedelic experience was sought out was curiosity, self-growth, and wonder. It was also inherently political, motivated by a desire to penetrate social forms and perceive what Benjamin attributed to

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<sup>27</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, Kihei: Koa Books, 2006, 1.

Surrealist art, that is, creating an experience where “things put on their true – Surrealist – face.”<sup>28</sup> Just as Benjamin conceived of Surrealism stripping social reality of its bourgeois mystifications, so the LSD user sought to chemically dissolve the ideological blinkers that kept them in thrall to what Timothy Leary called the “fake-prop TV studio stage set that is called American reality.”<sup>29</sup> The goal was to have a more accurate understanding of reality by dissolving the distortions created by learned perception and the limitations of ego. According to R.A. Durr, one of the most common accounts of the effects of LSD is a “sense of the exposure and transcendence of the habitual self, the proud isolate self.”<sup>30</sup> In Kingston’s work, this psychedelic state of consciousness is transcribed into the recurrent theme of “all is connected to all” and her playful facility in slipping into fictional avatars like Wittman Ah Sing. Although Kingston only began to write in the mid-1970s, the spirit and aesthetic lessons of the counterculture and its specific and sacramental use of hallucinogens permeate her work like no other American writer of this period. Neither a wide-eyed promoter nor an uninformed skeptic, Kingston helps us see the complexity and richness of psychedelic experience in the 1960s counterculture. As the Liddel-Scott-Jones *Greek-English Lexicon* has it, the word *pharmakon* can mean, in addition to “remedy,” “poison,” and “scapegoat,” also “a means of producing something.” In the 1960s, a whole generation undertook to produce something new through a deliberate course of dismantling the assumptions and perceptions they saw as rooted in their social conditioning. In their place, 1960s psychedelic experimenters sought to found a new, more gentle and more just society, one based on the boundary-blurring insights of LSD experience. A major landmark in the cultural history of the *pharmakon*, the counterculture built its philosophical, political and aesthetic practice around the ultimate psychedelic principle that “all is related to all.”

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge-London: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999, 464 [note 3a, 3].

<sup>29</sup> Timothy Leary, “Start Your Own Religion,” *Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out*, Oakland: Ronin Publishing, 1965: 1-16, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Allen Durr, *Poetic Vision and the Psychedelic Experience*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970, 77.

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