

PI: A/P John Whalen-Bridge (English Language & Literature)

Project Title: Maxine Hong Kingston: A Literary Biography

Abstract:

a) Academic Significance/ Novelty of Research

I have been chosen to be American novelist Maxine Hong Kingston's "authorized biographer," which entails intensive research in archives, consideration of all her writings and scholarly writings about her work, and comprehensive interviews with all living friends, family members, and professional contacts. There is no biography of Kingston yet, and there will be great demand for a writer who is commonly referred to in criticism as "American literature's most-taught author." Kingston has given me authorization on the basis of my work on Buddhism and American literature. As she is often (almost always) discussed in terms of ethnicity and her extremely important role within Asian American writing - she basically opened the door to mainstream audiences with her 1977 book *The Woman Warrior* - it will be important to develop the scholarly understanding of Engaged Buddhism and peace activism within her work.

In terms of "novelty," this will be the first full-length biography of Kingston. In terms of academic significance, Kingston is a highly autobiographical writer who has developed highly influential hybrid forms mixing fiction and non-fiction. It is important to approach these matters from the biographical side, and no one has done this in an in-depth way, so I believe the work will be highly significant.

b) Hypothesis/ Research Questions to be Addressed

1. Kingston's struggle to become a successful writer has not been properly understood. She began publishing in the mid-1970s, and her first book is a magnificent achievement in terms of style and form. I have read drafts of books and stories that she wrote before this publication, and it is a mystery how she made the leap from rather mediocre writing to the kind of prose (and sometimes poetry) that has earned her current reputation. She wanted to be a writer from childhood and began writing when she graduated UC Berkeley in 1962, but her first published book came out in 1977. It is very unusual for such a successful writer to take 15 years to publish, and it is astonishing that her first work was such a monumental success.

2. Kingston's work is not correctly understood as a contribution to non-Orientalist philosophical and religious expression because her ethnic difference has received the lion's share of the attention. Her interest in the social philosophy of Engaged Buddhism became explicit in her published work only with the publication of *The Fifth Book of Peace* in 2003, and she began on this particular path 12 years earlier, when her house burned down, and, with the house, the manuscript of her partially-complete novel "The Fourth Book of Peace." This was a traumatic experience (as her 2003 book makes clear), and I will explore the ways in which her turn towards Engaged Buddhism (which emphasizes the social situation as much as the transformation of the individual psyche) affected her development as a writer.

3. Her turn toward poetry has been completely ignored by contemporary academic critics, largely because her faux-naïve rhetoric of the life of a poet has been misunderstood badly. I have tested out my theory that these are unsatisfactory responses by teaching *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* as a single text (last year) and as the culmination of a graduate single-author seminar this year.

4. Kingston's struggles with anxiety and depression have been improperly understood in her work, in part because she is such a masterful public reader. I have read fifty years of journals and have

interviewed the author, who is comfortable with me writing about these intimate aspects of her life, which will surprise many readers when my book is published.

5. Kingston and her husband Earl Kingston almost always appear together and have an unusually strong marriage - interviewees have told me that they are a perfect couple. She has written about the strains of early married life obliquely in various texts, and my interviews and reading of the journals will highlight the difficulties in her personal life in relation to the structures and themes of her texts. I will discuss this matter not just in relation to her personal life, but will relate it to the challenges of the mid-1960s, eg, the so-called "Summer of Love" in 1967 SF. It was in that year that Maxine and Earl decided they had to leave the Bay Area for Hawai'i, which I believe was a crucial decision in terms of her development as a writer.

c) Methodology/ Approach and Feasibility of study

I will use the conventional methods of literary biography, namely a careful and comprehensive review of all published work; archival research in the Bancroft Library of UC Berkeley, where Kingston's papers are stored; interview with family members and friends; and contextual research in Asian American history and literature, life in the 1940s through present in the areas where Kingston has lived. I need support to do the most important parts of this research, which is the archival work at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, as well as the interviews with family, friends, and professional colleagues. I will do some of these by phone, but more searching enquiries are best done in person. The Bancroft Collection includes about 60 boxes of material, which I have not looked at yet. There are also 60 boxes of papers that have not yet been sold to a Special Collections library, and I have made a preliminary review of this material (in June 2017). It was not enough time to get through that material, so I will need to revisit in, perhaps in the third year of my research project, after it has been processed by a research library. I will also need to visit Hawai'i, where Kingston lived for 17 years and about which she has written in *China Men* (1980), *Hawai'i One Summer* (1987, U of Hawai'i edition), and *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

The study is highly feasible. It takes a lot of work to accumulate the chronological details and do the interviews and take the notes, but the writing based on that accumulation will follow the chronological order. I've written four bio-critical essays, so I am familiar with how to balance the life and the art. I have also had multiple discussions with highly successful literary biographers such as J. Michael Lennon (*Norman Mailer: A Double Life*), who continue to advise me about methods of biographical scholarship.