



Relative Histories

MEDIATING HISTORY IN
ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILY
MEMOIRS

PASSPORT



ROCÍO G. DAVIS

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*To Sanne and Guy and the cousins,
because of the increasingly transnational character
of our family and the family stories (or versions thereof)
that we love telling each other and the next generation.*

“History is relatives.”
—Ann Marie Fleming

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Relatives and Histories

Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine.

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Years away our grandchildren will come here saying,
This room is where I began. And returning to Boston,
Paris or Portland, they won't know how bewildered I was,
how alone. They'll think I felt American. I was always at
home.

—David Mura, “Nantucket Honeymoon,” *After We Lost Our Way*

Family memoirs, also called “multigenerational” or “intergenerational autobiographies”, have become ubiquitous in ethnic writing in the United States. Since Alex Haley’s dramatic (albeit controversial) *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), ethnic writers have increasingly used family stories to engage the history of immigration, adaptation, and presence in American society. Carole Ione’s *Pride of Family: Four Generations of American Women of Color* (2004), Andrea Simon’s *Bashert: A Granddaughter’s Holocaust Quest* (2002), Louise DeSalvo’s *Crazy in the Kitchen: Foods, Feuds, and Forgiveness in an Italian American Family* (2004), Lalita Tademy’s mirroring *Cane River* (2001) and *Red River* (2007), and Victor Villaseñor’s *Rain of Gold* (1992) and *Thirteen Senses* (2002) are only a few among numerous texts that illustrate a particular relevance or interest in this form of life writing. The 1991 publication of Jung Chang’s bestselling *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* established a paradigm for the family memoir of the Asian diaspora, as her engagement with three generations of women in her family reenacted the history of China in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries for millions of readers. Since then, many Asian immigrant writers have also turned to family stories as a source of personal, historical, and community understanding. In the United States, Canada, and Britain, for example, narratives such as Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* (1994), Lisa See’s *On Gold Mountain* (1995), Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* (1996), Bruce Edward Hall’s *Tea that Burns* (1998), May-lee

and Winberg Chai's *The Girl from Purple Mountain* (2001), Helen Tse's *Sweet Mandarin* (2007), or films such as Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury's *Halving the Bones* (1995), Linda Ohama's *Obaachan's Garden* (2001), and Ann Marie Fleming's *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam* (2003) have expanded the ways family memories may be harnessed as historical narrative that promotes collective memory and builds community.¹ Interestingly, though most of these family memoirs are written in prose, David Mura's excellent *After We Lost Our Way* (1989) demonstrates the validity of poetry for this kind of life writing.

The term "family memoir" has been used to describe a specific articulation of what scholars call the "relational model" of life writing. Paul John Eakin, in *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999), defines the most common form of what he calls the "relational life" as those autobiographies "that feature the decisive impact on the autobiographer of either (1) an entire social environment (a particular kind of family, or a community and its social institutions—schools, churches, and so forth) or (2) key other individuals, usually family members, especially parents" (69). The history of Asian American life writing, because of the imperative to explain or understand immigrant cultures (for oneself and mainstream America), very often privileges the intersection of generational and cultural issues, focusing very specifically on family stories. Though all life writing is arguably relational, many Asian American autobiographies focus explicitly on individual processes of understanding identity. In these cases, though the authors also engage family stories, the narrative centers on an introspective psychological journey—often accompanied by a physical journey to the forebears' homeland, as in, for example, David Mura's *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991), Lydia Minatoya's *Talking to High Monks in the Snow: An Asian American Odyssey* (1992), and Andrew Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* (1999).

A critical analysis of this model unveils particular structures in the autobiographical exercise, which I will describe briefly in order to distinguish the form I focus on in this study. I use the term "auto/biography" as Susanna Egan and Gabriele Helms do in their introduction to the special issue of *Canadian Literature* (2002) on Canadian autobiographical writing to acknowledge the complexity of current work. They note that the slash in the term insists on "the broad continuum of life writing discourses that range from writing about the self (auto) to writing about another (biography). That slash also acknowledges that today contemporary auto/biographers increasingly practice, and theorists are recognizing, original and creative approaches to these genres, a combining or blending of genres to produce, for example, the collabora-

tive work or the family memoir, the art installation, the film, or the web site that combine performance of identity with sophisticated levels of irony and full consciousness of theoretical implications” (“Editorial: Auto/biography?” 6–7). Apart from the most common general relational model, which sets the narrator’s story firmly in the context of family relationships, such as Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), Ben Fong-Torres’ *The Rice Room* (1995), Evangeline Canonizado Buell’s *Twenty-Five Chickens and a Pig for a Bride* (2006), and Kirin Narayan’s *My Family and Other Saints* (2007), among many others, there are particular configurations of the family memoir that invite us to examine the ways auto/biographers engage the lives of family members.²

In general, I distinguish between four models of the kind of text generally (in publishing and reviews) classified as “family memoirs”. As with all forms of literature, there are no definitive barriers between the forms I classify as distinct. Part of my interest in contemporary auto/biographical writing lies in how writers continually open up possibilities for self-representation through formal experimentation. Thus, the categories I propose are meant to help the reader understand particular auto/biographical projects rather than to establish prescriptive groupings.³ First, the focus of this study, what I call the “family memoir”, may be defined most clearly as *narratives or films that inscribe the story of at least three generations of the same family*.⁴ This form of auto/biography, which focuses as much on other members of one’s family as on oneself, generally collapses the boundaries we establish between biography and autobiography and, in many cases, as I argue for those of the Asian American writing, crosses the frontier into history and promotes collective memory. These texts promote a poetics of generational *progression*, making the writers produce the biographies of their forebears (or their children) and engaging the specificities of history and location for the author’s relatives. There is, thus, a significant degree of intersection between the personal and the public, generally enacted by the incorporation of substantial historical *information*—dates, places, names of politicians, descriptions of battles, discussion of ideological commitments, and so on—to supplement the relatives’ stories. The relatives are historical actors, and the author carefully situates her forebears in their social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. The narratives thus articulate, most often chronologically, the stories of successive generations, highlighting the passage of time. In these memoirs, the stories of the author’s relatives occupy as much narrative space and importance as those of the auto/biographer. Indeed, the family stories are usually presented as independent of

the author's life; the relatives are protagonists of their own stories rather than merely characters in the writer's life.

A second type of auto/biography includes those intergenerational texts that privilege a poetics of generational *simultaneity*, where the author learns about or acknowledges the value of family relationships, incorporating the forebears' influence, lessons, or legacy into her own life. Here, the writer is the text's central character and her autobiographical process involves learning about the life, appreciating the legacy, or fulfilling a forebear's dream, rather than actually recounting or contextualizing the relative's life. Texts such as Garrett Hongo's *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai'i* (1995), Evelina Chao's *Yeh Yeh's House: A Memoir* (2004), Pati N. Poblete's *The Oracles: My Filipino Grandparents in America* (2006), or Kalia Kao Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (2008) exemplify this form of intergenerational writing. A third form is composed of texts that focus on the author's relationship with one or both parents, which G. Thomas Couser calls "the narrative of filiation", and are marked by issues of paternal or maternal connection, inheritance, or loss ("Genre Matters" 123).⁵ Notable Asian American filial autobiographies include Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), Milton Murayama's *Five Years on a Rock* (1994), Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1987) and *Boys Will Be Boys* (2003, published under the name Sara Suleri Goodyear), Gus Lee's *Chasing Hepburn: A Memoir of Shanghai, Hollywood, and a Chinese Family's Fight for Freedom* (2002), and Katy Robinson's *A Single Square Picture: A Korean Adoptee's Search for Her Roots* (2002). A fourth category may be called "fraternal narratives", which focus on one's relationship with one's siblings, such as Adam Fifield's *A Blessing over Ashes* (2001) and Luong Ung's *Lucky Child* (2005).⁶

In recent decades, auto/biography has gained important scientific and academic ground as a valid source for negotiating with the past. Understanding this development, I nonetheless argue that life writing can be not only a potentially productive source for a nuanced reconstruction of the past, but also a valuable document for discerning processes of identity. I do not conceive auto/biographies as a "dangerous double agent", moving between literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object (Marcus 7), but rather as a privileged way to access personal and collective forms of subjectivity in changing contexts. Specifically, I will discuss how family memoirs expand the boundaries and function of life writing as they reexamine history and build community for oneself and one's ethnic group. Taking my lead from Kingston's affirmation cited above, I argue that identity is not only shaped by the stories we have

been told, but also, and more importantly, by the stories we tell. The act of writing one's story affirms as it performs identity. This intersection between the discourse, practice, and social function of life writing, history, and ethnic identity lies at the heart of my project. My approach links genre studies and historiography, using the strategies of each in order to think about the writing of not only the history of immigration and adaptation to the United States by subjects of the Asian diaspora, but also as a way of illuminating non-official histories of Asia and America themselves. I argue that this strategy is multiply enhancing as a discursive tool because auto/biographical stories may be analyzed not merely as a way to negotiate a historical context in order to inform the reader, but also to illuminate the writer's literary activity. The processes of literary creativity and historical inscription blend in these family memoirs to produce texts that require a nuanced reading on many levels.

These purposes overlap significantly and lead us to understand the need to continually address the cultural work enacted by these *literary* texts, as well as their specific aesthetic projects as mutually enhancing purposes. This book, thus, draws upon and expands some of the issues I raised in my 2007 book, *Begin Here: Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood*, particularly my interest in examining the ways that *forms* of life writing may promote diverse historical, cultural, political, or social purposes. In a sense, I want to explore the ways in which and the reasons why Asian American writers select or develop particular auto/biographical forms to address specific concerns. For instance, and at the risk of promoting essentialist generalizations, I have observed interesting similarities among writers who have chosen the specific genres of autobiography I have studied in detail: the *Childhoods* and family memoirs. On the one hand, writers of the *Childhood*, arguably the most poetic form of autobiography, tend to be writers themselves. As Richard Coe states in his germinal study of the genre, the text exists as evidence of artistic self-awareness: the narratives conclude not necessarily at the point of the author's final and positive integration as a member of society, but at a point of total awareness of self as a writer who will produce, as evidence of an artistic identity, *this* text (9). The majority of the authors I discussed in *Begin Here* were either published (even award-winning) poets, novelists, or dramatists before writing their autobiographies of childhood—Lynda Barry, Wayson Choy, Richard Kim, Michael David Kwan, Hilary Tham, Laurence Yep, and Yoshiko Uchida, among others—or later went on to write fiction or poetry—Heinz Insu Fenkl, Evelyn Lau, Aimee Liu, and Kien Nguyen. On the other hand, a significant number of family memoirists are journalists, political

scientists, activists, or historians: Duong Van Mai Elliott, K. Connie Kang, Lisa See, Winberg Chai, Mira Kamdar, and Jael Silliman. The writer with the most “unusual” profession was the late Bruce Edward Hall (1954–2003), who, apart from being a freelance writer, worked during 1983–1990 as a puppeteer, performing with the Henson Muppets.

In particular, I will examine possible explanations for what might be considered a boom in family memoirs in the last three decades. All the Asian American family memoirs I have identified were written between 1980 (Kingston’s *China Men*) and 2001, indicating a surge of interest in this kind of text. Tellingly, most of the narratives were written in the 1990s, when tensions about the new millennium inspired an onslaught of historical writing (in fiction and nonfiction) and increasing critical attention to the relations between life writing and history. Asian American writers, for these reasons or others that I will discuss, responded to the impetus or need to engage the past. Clearly, the general concerns in these family memoirs center on events of Asian history that led to their families’ immigration, processes of adaptation or assimilation to American society, and strategies of representation by ethnic subjects within the frame of American culture. I will explore three aspects in particular.

First, I begin my analysis with a discussion of the family memoir as a subgenre of auto/biography and locate its practice in current creative and critical debates. The texts I analyze are creative engagements with a family’s history that also oblige me to attend to the literary strategies that the authors employ. The dominant metaphors that structure the narration, for example, as well as the text’s chronotopic disposition, serve to manipulate sources of meaning. These strategies heighten their effectiveness as texts that dialogue with history and personal life. Second, I want to analyze these texts as a form of historical mediation for Asian Americans. As texts that present family stories about an Asian past and contemporary America, they most often introduce Asian history and the history of immigration to mainstream and ethnic Americans. Importantly for our purposes, these stories promote that history and prevent its erasure by means of the physical existence of the text that embodies it. While I do not suggest that Asian American memoir writers necessarily privilege the documentary nature of their texts over their creative or interpretative character, we cannot ignore the historical work being enacted in these texts. As Shirley Neuman states, “An adequate poetics of autobiography, I would suggest, would acknowledge that subjects are constructed by discourse but it would *also* acknowledge that subjects construct discourse” (223). Third, I

explore the development of collective memory through these family memoirs. In the context of auto/biographical writing or filmmaking that explores experiences of diaspora, assimilation, and integration, we have to consider the way these texts re-imagine a past by creating a work that exists *in* history and *as* a historical document, making the creative process a form of re-enactment of the past itself. Indeed, as Mieke Bal explains, “Cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually *perform*, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully [*sic*] contrived” (vii). Clearly, the portrayal of the historical context of a specific family is necessarily subjective, but supports the process of collective memory. By thinking of family memoirs in the context of collective memory, we consider the notion of a shared identity that unites a social group, be it family or nation. Auto/biographical writing can thus be viewed as a cultural discourse because its discursive frame produces a subject (or subjects, when we speak of multigenerational memoirs) that participates in a specific cultural, social, and political context, at the same time that the text itself *reproduces* this context.

The chapters of this book center on specific thematic issues in diverse family memoirs. After an introductory chapter that outlines the critical paradigms of the discussion, I focus, in chapter 3, on the narrative of Asian wars and revolutions in the twentieth century, which led to massive immigration to the United States, and which is the subtext of a significant number of Asian American family memoirs. Events of the mid-twentieth century that have become part of our general knowledge of world history—the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Korean and Vietnamese wars, in particular—are at the heart of the four texts I examine in chapter 3: Pang-Mei Natasha Chang’s *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1996), May-lee and Winberg Chai’s *The Girl from Purple Mountain* (2001), K. Connie Kang’s *Home Was the Land of Morning Calm* (1995), and Duong Van Mai Elliott’s *The Sacred Willow* (1999). The family memoirs analyzed in chapter 4 illustrate an important facet of Asian history, namely the experience of travel and displacement within Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the memoirs I examine here, the authors depict their forebears’ travel to and existence within spaces where they were classified as “other” within Asia, illustrating a history of multiple diasporas that was often elided after the family’s immigration to the United States. Jael Silliman’s *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* (2001) recounts the history of the Baghdadi Jews’ settlement and progressive acculturation to India through the story of four generations of women in her family; Mira Kamdar,

in *Motiba's Tattoos* (2001), describes her Indian family's settlement in Burma as part of the possibilities of mobility within the British empire; Helie Lee paints a portrait of her Korean grandmother's life as a refugee in China in *Still Life With Rice* (1996). In chapter 5 I focus on three memoirs that center on generational stories of the Chinese in America. Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980), Lisa See's *On Gold Mountain* (1995), and Bruce Edward Hall's *Tea That Burns* (1998) are family portraits that serve as creative complements to academic histories on Chinese immigration. Chapter 6 analyzes the discursive possibilities of the filmed family memoir, called "family portrait documentary", and examines Lise Yasui's *The Family Gathering* (1989), Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury's *Halving the Bones* (1995), and Ann Marie Fleming's *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam* (2003). The first two films narrate the Japanese American experience and use innovative techniques (the blending of different forms of film—from home movies to documentaries and films) to reenact the family story of internment; Fleming's documentary also deploys numerous audiovisual techniques to perform the life of her great-grandfather, a vaudeville star, and their transnational family.

This study thus proposes to read the ways a particular form of autobiography might develop meaning as a personal search for family and as a way of promoting the collective memory so vital to community survival. In the plural context of American society, these texts, which privilege the progression in time of relational life stories, connect accounts of life in Asia with narratives of immigration and adaptation, explaining communities to themselves by highlighting their origins. The authors' metaliterary commitment—a blend of searching for a personal story and a link with a community—involves mediating history through family, the public through the private. This creative engagement with the past in order to manage the present requires us to unravel the multilayered structure of these family memoirs as part of the dynamic of Asian American cultural production.

Family Memoirs in the Context of Auto/biographical Writing

Mediating History, Promoting Collective Memory

“So, why are you calling this a *me-moir*?” Ken asks when I sit him down to read pages, still warm from the printer, in which my versions of events often mixes with the voices of others in my family: “It’s a *we-moir*.”

—Kirin Narayan, *My Family and Other Saints*

In his book, *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur explains that identity is partly bound up in identification with significant others, which is the reason why, especially in autobiographies, writing the self implies writing the other. This idea resounds with one of the key insights in autobiography theory in the 1990s, namely that identity—for both men and women—is essentially relational, formed and defined in relation to others. As Laura Marcus points out, “Recounting one’s own life almost inevitably entails writing the life of an other or others; writing the life of another must surely entail the biographer’s identifications with his or her subject, whether these are made explicit or not” (274). Relational approaches to life writing complicate notions of self-representation by privileging the intersubjective rather than the merely individual. This perspective challenges the uncritical notion of the autonomous self—the idea that one alone defines and creates him/herself—traditional to Western theories of life writing. And indeed, the proliferation of family memoirs only proves this point. The Asian American challenge to the pervasive Western notion of the individual as the prime subject of autobiography began with Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), which illustrates how the first person in autobiography is, as Eakin argues, “truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation,” as it addresses “the extent to which the self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others” (*How Our Lives* 43).

Several recent critical studies on autobiography have emphasized this new discernment in inscribing the self-in-relation, noting how the relational configuration of autobiography also controls the shape of the text, leading to

originative formal choices. The writing subject therefore views and inscribes his or her story from the prism of intersecting lives. Susanna Egan, defining her eponymous operative term, “mirror talk”, argues that this process begins “as the encounter of two lives in which the biographer is also an autobiographer. Very commonly, the (auto)biographer is the child or partner of the biographical subject, a relationship in which (auto)biographical identity is significantly shaped by the processes of exploratory mirroring” (7). These perspectives require us to revise our perceptions about identity and strategies of self-representation on diverse levels, as well as the possibilities of signifying for the writer of the autobiography, specifically the formal remembering and re-imagining of intersecting lives.¹

Eakin considers the most common form of the relational life as “the self’s story viewed through the lens of its relation with some key other person, sometimes a sibling, friend, or lover; but most often a parent—we might call such an individual the *proximate other* to signify the intimate tie to the relational autobiographer” (*How Our Lives* 86). In some cases, the writer presents the biography of the other as part of his or her own life-writing exercise, occasionally to the point of writing the “autobiography” of that other. When this happens, the narrator’s authority must be established for rhetorical reasons, based primarily on the validity of the autobiographical pact. We also need to consider the role of the writer in relation to that of the subject. In the relational lives I consider here, “the story of the self is not ancillary to the story of the other, although its primacy may be partly concealed by the fact that it is constructed through the story told *of* and *by* someone else. Because identity is conceived as relational in these cases, these narratives defy the boundaries we try to establish between genres, for they are autobiographies that offer not only the autobiography of the self but the biography *and* the autobiography of the other” (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 58).

Relational life writing challenges the fundamental paradigm of the unified self of traditional autobiography, as well as the concept of monologic representation. Philippe Lejeune suggests that “a *lifé* (that is, a written and published story of a life) is always the product of a transaction between different postures” (197). In a sense, this form of autobiographical inscription corresponds to a logical reality, as Michael Jackson explains, “Life stories emerge in the course of *intersubjective* life, and intersubjectivity is a site of conflicting wills and intentions. Accordingly, the life stories that individuals bring to a relationship are metamorphosed in the course of that relationship. They are thus, in a very real sense, authored not by autonomous subjects but by the

dynamics of intersubjectivity” (23). Indeed, the innovations these auto/biographical texts offer stem precisely from the unique tension created by the performance of intersubjectivity. One of the constitutive thematic/textual markers of this life-writing exercise involves an emphasis on the connection between biography and autobiography, locating the narrating subject most often in the context of a community—family or ethnic group. This concern operates on a formal level as well, proposing a renewed aesthetic that revises the notion of the voice of the narrator, who writes with an individual voice that connects to a collective voice.

The relational model of auto/biographical identity, I argue, functions on two levels in family memoirs: first, within the text itself, as the author draws upon the stories of family members to complete her own, and, second, because these texts very consciously interpellate an audience. Asian American family memoirs manifestly present the individual author’s self as discursively constituted, as issues of literary traditions, immigrant history, identity politics, and cultural contingencies participate in the construction of the text. With this proposal, I consciously challenge Georges Gusdorf’s claim that a collective or community-oriented subject, with an “unconsciousness of personality, characteristic of primitive societies” cannot produce “autobiography” (30). Indeed, Gusdorf’s model of autobiography privileges a noncontextual, nonrelational paradigm of individualism that posits a problematic binary between relationality and autonomy. The form of the family memoir hinges on the interrelation of the individual and the family stories that surround the writer, the dynamic between connectedness and autonomy serving as a crucial point in the development of textual identity. Generally written by one person, the stories that make up the text are linked to each other, evidencing both an *inter-* and *intragenerational* collective voice that connects with readers in important ways.

Family memoirs, as relational texts, foreground the collective nature of memory. In Asian American texts, where a negotiation with structures of power often guides the representational impulse, the engagement with the stories of past lives allows us to view changing perspectives on issues that govern identity politics. The voices elicited in these texts are often posited as mirroring, highlighting the intersubjective, and postulating the advantages of multiple-voicing. When the life writer goes a step further and appropriates not only the *story* but the *voice* of proximate others, the implications for life writing multiply. For example, in *Still Life with Rice* Helie Lee speaks in her grandmother’s voice to claim a past she had previously refused

to acknowledge. Lee's family memoir centers particularly on a process of inter-subjective identification, where mutual recognition becomes necessary; Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury, in *Halving the Bones*, also speaks in her grandmother's voice as she struggles to connect with the relatives she had never really known; Natasha Chang retells her great-aunt's story in the form of a dialogue with herself. As Jessica Benjamin explains, "The idea of mutual recognition . . . implies that we actually have a need to recognize the other as a separate person who is like us yet distinct" (quoted in Egan 8). The notion of dialogue between generations lies at the heart of Lee's project in *Still Life with Rice* as she manipulates the traditional first-person voice of autobiography to address precisely that gap in knowledge. As Jennifer George-Palilonis notes, Lee "stretches the boundaries of the concept of interiority by exploring her own sense of self through the telling of the story of her grandmother's life" (206). Moreover, this is the only family memoir I have found that is narrated by a character of the first generation who narrates "forward" to her descendants, rather than the traditional auto/biography, which features a character looking back at her forebears. This experimental configuration—a "renegotiation of retrospectivity" (George-Palilonis 207)—invites us to rethink the notion of implied readership within the paradigms of intergenerational subjectivity that Lee sets out to explore.²

Here issues of connectedness and autonomy arise: Asian American family memoirs generally privilege interconnectedness as forms of developing autonomous selfhood, and the figures of the parents and grandparents of the writer are most often presented as crucial to the formation of the narrating self. We can establish an interesting connection between the form of the text—in this case, the family memoir, which differs from the individualistic manner of traditional autobiography—and the relational configuration of the identity unveiled. David Parker refers to this process as a "dialogic or interlocutive ethics of recognition" as opposed to an "individualistic ethics of authenticity" typified by traditional Western forms of autobiography. As he explains, "In the relational narrative there is often an implication that the forebears embody specific values that have been unrecognized or misrecognized by the dominant narratives of the culture. These forebears have tended to slip through the interstices of the available conventional languages, and sometimes the writer's work, even life's work, can be seen as an attempt to find an adequate language with which to articulate what distinctively makes them, and part of the writers themselves, worthy for recognition" ("Narratives of Autonomy" 142).

Many of these family memoirs appear to be driven by a series of overlapping motivations based primarily on what Parker calls "a complex sense of

moral obligation” to tell the stories that will challenge uncritical views on ethnic persons and communities and which include: (1) the consciousness that the stories of one’s relatives are constitutive of one’s own story, that “the memories of these forebears in a sense are me, their languages partly constitute my speaking position” (“Narratives of Autonomy” 150). These memoirs generally highlight the acknowledgment of a cultural debt to family as they explore the meanings that the family history might have for the writer’s present family or community. As the auto/biographer examines his or her own memory in relation to that of others, identity is reconfigured. This process activates a chain of associations that enables the writer (and, I would argue, the reader) to engage the present in renewed ways; (2) a recognition of the power of personal narratives inserted in the public forum to engage historical and cultural issues, in order to challenge dominant mainstream versions that have often hidden, misrepresented, or invalidated these stories. It also stresses how, to an important extent, individual identity is constituted in relation to family and national history. Further, we can suggest that these texts offer “new models not only for writing history but also for thinking about the listening strategies we use to process stories from the past” (Heble 27); (3) a commitment to preserve these stories from disappearing and provide ethnic communities with potentially empowering narratives. In a sense, these motivations function simultaneously on the personal and collective level. So, though the auto/biographical act is primarily personal, many forms of auto/biographical writing—the family memoir among them—“[exist] for [their] public interpretive uses, as part of a general and perpetual conversation about life possibilities. . . . In any case, the ‘publicness’ of autobiography constitutes something like an opportunity for an ever-renewable ‘conversation’ about conceivable lives” (Bruner 41).

Many Asian American writers make untold family or community stories the crux of their auto/biographical projects. Narratives about the Japanese American internment, for example, highlight not only the fact of the internment and the family’s particular experience of it, but, crucially, also engage how this memory was remembered (or concealed) and passed on (or silenced), as Lise Yasui illustrates in *A Family Gathering*. There is often a tension between the family’s obsession with hiding stories about the past, for example, to preserve the family’s immigration status (as in stories about the Chinese in America, such as Kingston’s *China Men* or Hall’s *Tea That Burns*) or idealize one’s forebears (well illustrated by the dialogue between May-lee and Winberg Chai in *The Girl from Purple Mountain*) and the contemporary writer’s need to

know the truth and set the record straight. Much of the interest in these texts lies precisely in the opposition between the natural prudence that seeks to preserve family members' honor and the desire to engage one's history honestly and in depth.

At this point, we should consider the process of the construction of the family memoir, agendas for which are determined by the ideas about identity, family traditions, and history that shape one's cultural perspective, as well as community positions in society. Manuela Costantino and Susanna Egan's work on family stories gives us a clear description of this process.

The auto/biographer who situates herself as storyteller in the midst of past and future generations is both embedding herself in her extended family and asking questions about her own sense of identity. Her auto/biographical toolkit consists of inherited stories, her own memories, an older generation that can answer questions, and family documents and photographs. She assembles these different elements into a family memoir that shapes her life and identity in connection to the lives and identities of her relatives. Her methodology is unusual in that she has a vested interest in certain kinds of truths, in particular the discoveries or explanations that validate her childhood understanding of her parents and grandparents and that give her children some engagement with and pride in their old-world inheritance. Her approach to this combination of stories and documentary information is therefore both curious and well-informed, syncretic and predetermined. (97)

A particularly interesting point in our examination of the manner in which this form of memoir is constructed centers on the relationship between the role of memory and the use of historical research. Though the romantic notion insists that life writing begins with remembering and that the individual writer contains within him or herself the memories necessary to create autobiography, in the case of family memoirs, one's personal memories are patently insufficient. More importantly, even though many writers begin their auto/biography based on remembered stories from grandparents or other relatives, individual memory soon proves inadequate for the project. Indeed, in most cases, the writing of family memoirs requires more investigative research than recollections in solitude. Official documents, letters, photographs, newspapers, archival film footage, mementoes, and interviews with surviving relatives help complete and validate (or challenge) personal memory. This leads to interesting questions regarding narrative truth for, as we know, "official"

documents may be as unreliable as memory. Yet we may argue that one of the most fascinating dynamics of the juxtaposition between private stories and public records might be their mutually challenging nature: the private version may contradict official stories or unveil hidden histories; the documents might likewise reveal family secrets and complicate remembered versions. Indeed, the historian F. R. Ankersmit argues in his article, “The Reality Effect in the Writing of History” (1989), that since history is accessible only through texts—including photographs, film, and so on—and memory, “the reality of the past is an effect caused by a tension in and between historical texts” (18). Specifically, we note a tension between “notation”—the amalgam of detailed information that constitutes the historical past—and “prediction”—the historiographical construction of meaning from notation (Ankersmit 19). The often contradictory or complementary evidence obliges the author to continually revisit the narrative, revising the private and public records of the past.

Indeed, though we acknowledge that private stories affect the transmission of official records, the fact is that writers of family memoirs are often required to revise received personal stories to, as the case may be, accommodate information that had been withheld by the storyteller or consider alternative versions of a founding event. Several Asian American family memoirists find that they have to choose between remembered versions or truth based on fact. This dilemma is most vividly illustrated in the contrasting perspectives that May-lee and Winberg Chai had on the kind of narrative they were working on. In her memoir *Hapa Girl* (2007), written several years after *The Girl from Purple Mountain* was published, May-lee describes the process in this manner: “He had envisioned it as heroic, triumphant, how Nai-nai had saved the family during World War II in China; but I added conflict, the family fights, the bitterness that lingered long after the war had ended, all the elements that I had been taught in college make literature great, the things that make us human. My father couldn’t fathom what I was trying to do. ‘You’re a negative person,’ he concluded” (158). Kingston’s multiple versions of history, Yasui’s need to believe her memories, and Fleming’s numerous graphic renderings of Long Tack Sam’s childhood are further examples of the ways family auto/biographers negotiate with their material as they articulate the stories.

Though historical documents may have been the result of biases or faulty information, we know that memory is also susceptible to fictionalization. The trope of “countermemory”—interrogating “the gaps that always exist between

what is told and the telling of it” (Holquist xxviii)—functions in multilayered ways here, to resist the prejudices, erasures, limited perspectives, or inventions typical of official versions of the past. A narrator in one of these auto/biographies functions almost as a builder who, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, takes up “bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining and joining them in excessive ways, creates a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space” (“Introduction” 14). Smith and Watson note that this kind of narrator can evaluate as well as interpret the past, creating a “countermemory” that “reframe[s] the present by bringing it into a new alignment of meaning with the past” (“Introduction” 14).³ George Lipsitz defines the term as

a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. (212–213)

This trope obliges us to reframe the narratives of history attending to our communities’ developing self-understanding and engagement with excluded historical memory. By giving us new perspectives about the past, these texts resist the prejudices, erasures, limited perspectives, or inventions typical of official versions of the past. By privileging this trope, the writers create a structural tension between documentary evidence and memory. Nonetheless, though the process of collecting information may appear to give the account more credibility or authenticity because the writers are thus authorized as “responsible recipients and interpreters”, Costantino and Egan assert that “authority comes to rest where autobiography, and not history, places it—in the personal” (100).

Ultimately, these authors seek to represent a truth that lies beyond documentary evidence, although they need the documentary evidence to verify particular experiences. The kind of memory work involved in these family memoirs illustrates what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory”, “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal

connection” (22). Significantly, her term also signals the nature of this kind of memory, constitutive of family memoirs: postmemory becomes “a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (22). Indeed, this form of memory is characteristic of ethnic cultures where issues of heritage operate in the present to develop ethnic communities. We can also discern the process by which various groups use these forms of memory to adapt personal and national origins to changing political and transnational paradigms.

Interestingly, many of these writers, who Roger Porter calls “sleuths of selfhood”, persons who track their past using external sources, function as detectives who gather evidence and sift through clues for the real stories (100–101). Eakin’s notion of “the story of the story” (*How Our Lives* 59), the process of harnessing personal and collected or unearthed memories, actually structures many of these narratives, as with the Chais’ *The Girl from Purple Mountain*, Kamdar’s *Motiba’s Tattoos*, or Yasui’s *A Family Gathering*.⁴ As Jacqueline Dowd Hall explains,

We bring to our writing the unfinished business of our own lives and times; moreover, the experience of travelling so long in the country of research *becomes* our past, for our stories grow from a process of remembering and forgetting our encounters with the relics, fragments, whispers of an always already-recollected time. In all these ways, we live both the history we have learned through reading and research and the history we have experienced and inherited, passed down through the groups with which we identify, sedimented in the body, and created through talk. (441)

The idea of a family memoir’s process, structure, and information being supported by “official” documents leads us to consider the relationship between personal stories and narratives of nation. In the context of writing about the Asian diaspora, family narratives of loss of country often oblige the writer (and the reader) to negotiate the critical connections between family stories and the remembered nations. In all the texts I consider, the writers consciously or unconsciously use the family stories to reenact the narrative of the loss of the nation, immigration, and the shaping of ethnic communities. They evince a range of ways that show how historical events influence personal lives and how, conversely, the personal affects the historical. In this context, a discussion of these texts as historical mediation is imperative.

Family Memoirs as Historical Mediation

Critical discussions on the relation between autobiography and history—understood as the events of the past and the accounts of those events of the past—support my proposal to utilize family memoirs as forms of historical mediation. In the context of the fraught racialized politics in the United States, negotiating with historical memory has become both a cultural obsession and a powerful political weapon. Though we now generally agree about the use of memory (and the writing thereof) as a legitimate source of historical truth, we need to continue to examine the *ways* in which these historical mediations occur. Moreover, as Jacqueline Dowd Hall suggests, we need to explore “the phenomena that travel under the sign of ‘memory and history.’ First, personal memories (the chains of association that seem to come unbidden to the mind, rely on concrete images, and split and telescope time); second, social memories (the shared, informal, contested stories that simultaneously describe and act on our social world); third, history (the accounts we reconstruct from the documentary traces of an absent past); and, finally, political imagination (the hope for a different future that inspires and is inspired by the study of the past)” (442–443). These different phenomena function simultaneously in the family memoirs of writers of the Asian diaspora, giving the texts a Janus-faced perspective and complicating our notions of how previously discrete methodologies function together in changing situations.

The work of Karl Weintraub, Philippe Lejeune, Paul John Eakin, and Jeremy Popkin, among others, has engaged the ways in which auto/biographies serve to inform or enrich our readings of public experiences.⁵ From a literary perspective, Eakin, in *Touching the World* (1992), describes autobiography as more than “an imaginative coming-to-terms with history” because “it functions itself as the instrument of this negotiation” (144,139). These reflections authorize the use of autobiographical writing as interpretative frames for historical information, validating the methodology of life writing for historical discourse. In particular, Jerome Bruner’s reflections on the nature of autobiographical writing as historical mediation are useful for this discussion on Asian American family memoirs. Noting the development of the ideas that have validated autobiography as history, he discusses a series of discourses involved in the autobiographical act: first, he posits autobiography as “a discourse of witness: accounts of happenings in which one participated if only as an observer. These accounts are most often marked by the past tense, by verbs of direct experience such as *see* and *hear*, and by declarative speech acts. Witness cre-

ates existential immediacy for both the writer and the reader” (45). When the auto/biographer is not herself the “witness” but is a relative of that witness, as is generally the case in family memoirs, the genre’s conventions allow the reader to receive the information as coming from a witness. In a sense, therefore, the writer bears witness to the witness. The auto/biographer’s position as receiver and preserver of her family stories authorizes her voice, granting a similar immediacy to the narrative. Second, autobiography is a “discourse of interpretation”, *diegesis* in the classical sense, that “organizes the detailed constituents of witness into larger-scale sequences (holidays, careers, ‘declining years,’ and the like) and it places them in evaluational frames (instances of ‘struggle,’ of ‘devotion,’ for example). Diegesis has a way of being more subjunctive than mimesis: it considers paths not taken; it is crouched retrospectively and counterfactually; it is more apt to ride on epistemic verbs like *know* and *believe* rather than see and hear; and it is usually crouched in the present or timeless tense” (Bruner 45). This interpretational process leads to the third point, “stance”, referring to the “autobiographer’s posture toward the world, toward self, toward fate and the possible, and also toward interpretation itself” (Bruner 45).⁶

Asian American auto/biographers often structure their texts as entering the critical dialogues established in Asian American historiographical writing.⁷ Bruner notes that the task of the autobiographer consists in uniting the discourses of witness, interpretation, and stance to create a story that has both verisimilitude and negotiability (46). By negotiability, he refers to a quality that I will engage in more detail below, which is basically “whatever makes it possible for an autobiography to enter into ‘the conversation of lives’”. In other words: ‘Are we prepared to accept this life as part of the community of lives that makes up our world?’” (Bruner 47). Quoting Hayden White, Bruner affirms the final result of autobiography’s historical quality: “one cannot reflect upon the self (radically or otherwise) without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists. And one’s reflections on both one’s self and one’s world cannot be one’s own alone: you and your version of the world must be public, recognizable enough to be negotiable in the ‘conversation of lives’” (43).

We need to ask ourselves at this point: *what* specific histories do these Asian American family memoirs mediate? And, importantly, *how* is that mediation realized? To answer the first question, I will discuss briefly two interrelated points, as one leads to the other, though they remain essentially separate.

First, we have to consider the history of the Asian diaspora and the posi-

tions of diasporic subjects. When actual physical separation from a homeland marks a person's life, concepts like "home" or "identity" become complicated. James Clifford's replacement of "routes" for "roots" remains an apt metaphor as "practices of displacement" are increasingly emerging as constitutive of cultural meaning (3). For the older generations in the family memoirs, separation from the homeland usually stems from and promotes a crisis on personal, social, cultural, and familial levels. As Wannu Anderson and Robert Lee explain, the discourse of diaspora in the case of Asians in the Americas "is deeply grounded in the notion of banishment, exile, and return to a real or imagined homeland [which] must be juxtaposed with transnational practices in everyday life. The concept of transnationalism describes the practice among immigrants of establishing and maintaining kinship, economic, cultural, and political networks across national boundaries, and the creation of multiple sites of 'home'" (9). Indeed, earlier generations generally immigrated to settle; more recent immigrants have become more transnational, maintaining closer connections to the homeland. They are more comfortable living between the cultures, traveling back and forth physically and culturally. This transnational awareness, I argue, becomes part of the motivation for writing the family memoir. Further, the process of examining these family memoirs, negotiating the family-stories-in-history, requires us to think about how these texts dialogue with current identity politics. Can a Chinese American family memoir be said to represent the Asian American community? To a large extent, the pressures that led to the 1960s and 1970s political unification and mobilization of Americans of Asian descent no longer exist. Yet, because the forces of political mobilization that created the paradigm "Asian American" continue to influence self-identification, there is enough of a sense of community and recognition among the diverse Asian groups to make literature, for example, resound among them.

At this point, we need to consider briefly the discourse of biraciality within the Asian American family memoir.⁸ Several critics have stressed the implications of biraciality as a narrative position in ethnic writing. Jonathan Brennan posits that examining the construction of identity in mixed-race autobiographies sheds new light on identity formation and representation in American autobiography because, for the mixed-race writer, "identity exists in a state of liminality, a site where a mixed race narrator negotiates and transforms identity, yet often the communities in which the writer negotiates attempt to overwrite multiple identities, to maintain limitations on both form and content" (49). I favor Françoise Lionnet's notion of *métissage*, which, she

explains, allows us to articulate “new visions of ourselves, new concepts that will allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility of thought, of ‘clarity,’ in all Western philosophy. *Métissage* is such a concept and a practice: it is the site of undecidability and indeterminacy, where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages” (6). Incorporating this term into our critical vocabulary permits us to consider new realities, to re-imagine previously unquestioned forms of affiliation. From the perspective of autobiographical writing, Lionnet claims that *métissage*, as “aesthetic concept”, merges biology and history, anthropology and philosophy, linguistics and literature (8).

Several of the auto/biographers analyzed in this book are biracial. May-lee Chai, Bruce Hall, Mira Kamdar, Lisa See, Lise Yasui, Ruth Lounsbury, and Ann Marie Fleming discuss their grandparents’ or parents’ interracial marriages in different ways but clearly posit their biraciality as part of their personal impulse in unraveling their Asian family’s history.⁹ In a sense, because of the paradigms of racialization that exist in the United States, biracial writers often need to develop their own forms of discourse because they do not fit comfortably into the established categories of ethnic writing. Further, they may find themselves alienated from the racialized position—and its consequences both in Asia and the United States—of their families and, as a result, from their families’ histories. There is a clear sense that by articulating their families’ stories, they claim that history for themselves. As Bruce Hall succinctly puts it: “I guess I’m searching for continuity” (1).

Second, cultural criticism increasingly links the history of family to the idea of nation. In the case of the family memoirs of the Asian diaspora, Benedict Anderson’s suggestion, in *Imagined Communities* (1983), that the narrating of auto/biography is similar to the narration of national origins allows us to connect this form of life writing to a larger emancipatory project that links the personal to the collective. Indeed, as Anderson notes, a nation’s history is inscribed as family history, reminding the nation-family of its collective genealogy of events and key players (201). The narrative of the reconstruction of origins typical of the memoir and of national chronicles needs to be supported by all types of documentary evidence. The use of auto/biography to negotiate identity is like “the need for a nation to anchor itself in the fiction of continuous time against the ruptures and social dislocations of modernity itself, and to construct for itself an origin in serial time which gestures toward the future” (Anderson 204–205). More specifically, Anderson connects the narrative of

family to the narrative of nation. Indeed, as Angelika Bammer notes, in a world that is being remapped and in which “the concept of nation has been dispersed into the reality of diasporic identity”, many writers struggling with the questions of “how and where to reorient and regroup oneself” turn to the family (“Mother Tongues” 95).

Family memoirs epitomize this connective process as they privilege the stories, rituals, and traditions taken from the former home to the new in order to forge a connection between the past and future. The baggage (stories, documents, rituals) of the *routes* are harnessed to provide *roots*. As these texts participate in community formation, they invite other members to use the narratives as forms of grounding themselves through a sharing in the collective voice of the stories. As Bammer asserts, “It is the relationship, finally, between these two—the families to whom we are born and the communities to which we are joined by choice, tradition, or force of historical necessity—that shapes our sense not only of who we are but of our location as subjects of/in history” (“Mother Tongues” 105).

Specifically, I want to make a proposal regarding how these auto/biographical texts mediate Asian American history. In general, we may distinguish three interrelated ways. The first manner of historical mediation might simply be the recovery and safeguarding of particular stories from historical erasure. Costantino and Egan, quoting Janice Kulyk Keefer, who writes in her family memoir that “memory [remains] invisible until it becomes a story”, posit that the auto/biographical text functions like “a museum in which the past can be preserved and explained to present generations” (108). The curator of the museum, so to speak, is the author herself, who selects the forms by which memory is resurrected, presented, and preserved. Importantly, the writer contextualizes these stories, often blurring the boundaries between historical accounts and personal memories. In the act of writing, the writers bring these hidden or disenfranchised stories back to life, firstly as access to a valid identity for themselves and then as a usable past for a community. Indeed, “auto/biographers ‘here and now’ stake their claim on collective identity ‘then and there’. As they do so, they transform the relevance of their new belonging precisely because of the cargo that they carry” (Costantino and Egan 110).

The second form of historical mediation involves a direct dialogue with narratives of public histories. Unlike most other autobiographies, these family memoirs evince their relationship with public and academic writing of history by presenting, in many cases, substantial references and indexes at the end of the book. See’s *On Gold Mountain*, Elliott’s *The Sacred Willow*, and Silliman’s

Jewish Portraits, *Indian Frames*, among others, provide comprehensive bibliographies and lists of works cited, to acknowledge the work of previous scholars and to insert their family stories into an ongoing examination of the past. By connecting their stories to prevailing critical discourses, they contribute to the progress of historical revisioning. These auto/biographers “position family stories as authoritative within the histories of different communities and nations, thus disturbing traditional hierarchies of knowledge” (Costantino and Egan 109–110), altering perspectives on the past and present, opening up possibilities for the future. Importantly, these personal texts prevent historical erasure as they help attain a sense of group identity, which may serve as a basis for political mobilization.

Jeffrey Partridge’s study, *Beyond Literary Chinatown* (2007), addresses this issue as he focuses on the dynamics of reception in the works of Chinese American writers, particularly what he calls “the author’s reception of the reader’s reception”: apart from a change in horizon on expectation, there is evidence (from essays by Maxine Hong Kingston, for example), that “an Asian American author may be deeply concerned with the impressions of readers—about her books, about her designs, and about her ethnic community and history” (5). Speaking of the chapter in *China Men* entitled “The Laws”, Partridge notes that readers do not really need “this extra-textual evidence to explain the historical section in *China Men*. By providing cultural context and historical background within her narrative, Kingston shows her own horizon of expectation towards her audience. Why else would she include the historical section if not to fill in gaps of knowledge in her perceived readers?” (5). A case in point are the auto/biographical (as well as fictional) texts about the Japanese internment in the United States, an event that finally received recognition and redress from the government. Though I do not contend that the auto/biographical writing about the experience was singularly crucial in achieving this end, I do argue that the texts invalidated official accounts of the time, disproving the government’s position. Moreover, these texts interpellate history epistemologically. Ajay Heble, discussing the forms of writing Canadian history, asks telling questions in this context: “Who has the institutional power to determine who speaks (and who doesn’t speak) and to determine whose histories count as knowledge and whose get disqualified as unpleasant and inharmonious noise. What’s the relation, these texts compel us to ask, between those who teach, produce, or authorize history and those who live it?” (27).

Nonetheless, as many writers of family memoirs explicitly note, auto/

biographical writing does not simply aim to provide cognitive access to the past; it aspires to transmit a sense of responsibility for the past events. As Ross Poole explains, “The role of memory is not, or not only, *epistemological*; that is, to supply us with information about the past that we need to make our way in the present. It is also *normative*; that is, it informs us of the obligations and responsibilities we have acquired in the past, and that ought to inform our behavior in the present” (152). Clearly, for the auto/biographers the didactic purpose of these texts is subservient to the personal. Claiming the family by writing its story, the auto/biographers also commit to the family’s future. Helie Lee’s recounting of her grandmother’s and mother’s lives seeks to acknowledge the sacrifices they made by leaving Korea precisely so that they could be Korean; Silliman uses her generational account to explore her family’s changing religious and national identifications; Kamdar wants to understand the tattoos on her grandmother’s body, markings that established belonging within a family characterized by repeated dislocations.

Finally, these texts mediate history by proposing a textual and cultural model for present and future communities. This is what is ultimately at stake in looking at the ways mediation occurs in these memoirs. Using Leigh Gilmore’s ideas on autobiography, I argue that “autobiographical performances draw on and produce an assembly of theories of the self and self-representation; of personal identity and one’s relation to a family, a region, a nation; and of citizenship and a politics of representativeness (and exclusion). How to situate the self within these theories is the task of autobiography, and entails the larger organizational question of the ways selves and milieus ought to be understood in relation to each other” (135). Thus, we need to consider how this form of auto/biographical mediation functions *in* and *for* the present as well as for the future. Though most of the material in family memoirs is set in the past, we have to acknowledge the auto/biographer’s task of selection, ordering, emphasis, formal choices, and narrative projection. What it means to be Asian in the United States (of whichever specific ethnicity) depends largely on what people choose to remember about the heritage country and their attitudes towards those memories.

We have to discern, in our analysis of the texts, how particular events are selected because of a particular meaning they have for the writing present, more perhaps than for the remembered past. Further, by examining the ways that (Asian) American history is written, we tease out the implications of these cultural products within and for our societies. The mediation, therefore, is not limited to merely inscribing versions of historical events, but using these ver-

sions to shape collective memory and promote social mobilization. I want to argue that the family memoir, therefore, serves a vital role in the creation and sustenance of collective memory for the Asian American community. By promoting knowledge of the past, it invites a personal, psychological, and creative connection to that past.

Promoting Collective Memory

Though I have noted the advantages of reading family memoirs as an intellectual quest for understanding the past, to address these Asian North American texts effectively we need to attend to what this aesthetic project enacts in the present and for the future. As David F. Krell explains, “Remembering instigates a peculiar kind of presence. It ‘has’ an object of perception or knowledge without activating perception or knowledge as such and without confusing past and present. For while remembering, a man tells himself that he is now present to something that was earlier” (15). As pointed out earlier, the formal engagement with the family memoir suggests that writers may have a more ambitious cultural purpose—which includes history making and community building—because of the important emancipatory possibilities of ethnic life writing. The writers’ formal choice implies a cultural purpose that stems organically from the completed text, which becomes part of a dynamic body of writing within a community.¹⁰

Family memoirs can nourish and sustain communities by providing stories that explain the past and heighten connections between generations. I will discuss here a point mentioned earlier regarding the second aspect of relationality: the development of a textual link between the writer and the reader to the extent that the auto/biographer’s story does not only exist in connection to personal family stories, but also to the stories of those in the ethnic community. Janet Varner Gunn lists three key features of what might be considered the “autobiographical moment”: “Impulse is the attempt to make sense of experience, perspective is the process of writing the impulse, and response is the way the reader and writer react to the text” (12–13). Stephanie Hammerwold takes this proposal a step further by inventing the term “realization” to describe the part of the auto/biographical moment in which the writer establishes “a connection to others and recognition of the role writing the self plays in creating a space for others’ own stories” (“Writing Bridges”), which takes place after the point of response. Hammerwold feels it is necessary to extend Gunn’s discussion because her description elides

the initial trigger that is so important for those who feel alienated by dominant modes of storytelling. When the need to tell a story is squelched by forces like sexism, racism, and heterosexism, there needs to be a part of the autobiographical moment in which the writer realizes her potential to make her stories and experiences real through writing them. . . . The writer feels compelled to write, because she comes to the realization that my life matters. My life not only deserves to be told, it needs to be told. In both content and form, stories are drawn from this moment of realization. (“Writing Bridges”)

Further, according to Hammerwold, realization also implies connecting to community stories. The process is reciprocal: reading one’s story leads to a moment of realization and also brings the self in contact with the stories of others. Quoting Jeanne Perreault’s ideas about the transformative power of community through writing autobiography, she explains that “it is in the shared space of public discourse that the ‘I’ of self-writing is written into existence. The community shapes the ‘I,’ which in turn influences the ‘we’ to moments of realization. . . . The narrative of these memoirs is informed by the community metaphorically and physically surrounding the memoirist, whether positive or negative (“Writing Bridges”).¹¹

A brief discussion of the notion of collective memory allows us to examine how the family memoir might serve to promote this manner of cultural intervention. In general, we may consider collective memory as the form of memory arising from the development and preservation of memories of social groups such as families, communities, or nations. I base my understanding of collective memory on Maurice Halbwachs’ notion of the constitutive connection between individual and collective memory, as individual experiences are reinforced and validated by peers and later generations. In turn, these collectively retained memories serve as the source for a group’s social identity and, by extension, the individual’s notion of self.¹² In other words, collective memory lives within and is perpetuated by specific groups who maintain a connection to historical memory, and it is only within such groups that individuals can express personal memories. Three forms of memory intersect in this paradigm: the personal and the historical with collective memory. Halbwachs notes the continuing interpenetration between lived or personal history and collective memory, which he defines as “a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive” (80). There is thus an identification between

knowing the past and its existence in the present. History, in general, may be understood as the past we remember and narrate, though we no longer have a direct connection to it. Historical memory, articulated as narrative, is one way of transmitting collective memory, and, reciprocally, collective memory serves as the frame within which historical remembering occurs.¹³ As Susan Crane explains, “The difference between collective memory and historical memory was marked by the creation of a distinction between a lived experience and the preservation of that experience: between one’s own sense of having an experience and an external representation of that sense which is presumed to be valid for others as well as yourself” (1375). Methodologically speaking, according to Wulf Kansteiner, “memories are at their most collective when they transcend the time and space of the events’ original occurrence. As such, they take on a powerful life of their own, ‘unencumbered’ by actual individual memory, and become the basis of all collective remembering as disembodied, omnipresent, low-intensity memory” (189). Kansteiner uses the Holocaust as a case in point: millions of people now share stories and images about the Holocaust though few of them have actually experienced it or are even personally linked to it (189). The same may be argued for the Chinese Cultural Revolution, as numerous fictional and auto/biographical texts have provided readers worldwide with access to the particulars of the experience, shaping notions of Chineseness, for example. Collective memory may be thus understood in an active sense, as the shared representations of past that shape our sense of cultural selves in the context of our identification with a particular group.¹⁴

Kansteiner posits we should conceptualize collective memory as “the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors: the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts according to their own interests” (180). These multilayered paradigms for recovering the past for and by communities who need to make them present obviously influence the ways contemporary readers receive the texts. The political, cultural, and social agendas surrounding the writing, publication, and distribution of these texts need to be considered when discussing these auto/biographical acts. Crane further explains that ideas about collective memory give us a way to understand the particulars of the debates on memory and forgetting in relation to especially dramatic historical events like the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Japanese internment. Here, individuals with lived experience

(immigrants from the Revolution or those who had been interned) interact with individuals of the same ethnic group who have not experienced those events, transforming the memory of those events into a “learned historical experience”: “Individuals provide interpretations for other individuals, and these are dealt with as information to be assimilated, remembered, or archived” (Crane 1378). They can even, in a sense, produce in individuals memories they did not experience personally.

Reading Asian American family memoirs within this frame allows us to understand that the texts do not simply reproduce historical events, social realities, or ethnic identity; they must also be analyzed to unveil their efforts to shape the collective memories of the group, which harnesses the memories to establish their particular sense of identity, or promote political agendas. Poole observes that collective memory has some of the qualities of myth as it promotes shared stories that members refer to in order to “identify salient characteristics of the kind of people they believe themselves to be” (157–158). Family memoirs, by telling the group’s story over decades or centuries, remind the group of its history and of the characteristics of its identity. The stories typical of Asian American family memoirs, which most often include narratives of revolutions, wars, immigration, and assimilation, are also narratives of personal victories and endurance.

As James St. André explains, “Literary texts are one important constituent factor of collective cultural memory, a purposeful activity undertaken to influence social reality. Even as they foreground the issue of an individual’s memory of [Asian] culture, they are themselves a type of memorializing practice which seeks to preserve certain types of cultural memory and thus shape the individual’s identity” (34). For this reason, the history re-presented in family memoirs reenacts the past; it is never mere spectatorship. There is an important element of performance in these family memoirs because writers are often passionately involved in the stories they tell and readers are clearly invited to draw on these stories for their own self-identification. The narratives therefore provide the materials for memory and stimulate individuals to remember particular events (and also, in some cases, disregard others). Moreover, we acknowledge that the literary strategies used in the configuration of these family memoirs dialogue with the forms of contemporary culture as they respond to the needs of present communities. Indeed, as Iwona Irwin-Zarecka notes, collective memory “as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past—is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share” (4). Those resources, which include historical texts, auto/biographical narra-

tives, photographs, documents, and, increasingly, film and media, become part of that process of collective memory.

Importantly, Halbwachs states, lived experience and collective memory “interpenetrate each other through autobiography, the self-conscious memory of individual members of a group” (64). As we explore the literary strategies that these family memoirs enact to promote collective memory, we observe possible sites of those memories. St. André proposes three categories for the classification of sites of collective memory: memories of events (history), memories of places (geography), and memories of things (46). Reenacting historical happenings through biographies of forebears simultaneously offers accounts of events that affected numerous persons but maintains the individuality of the experience, making that experience indelibly personal and, I would argue, more effective in producing collective memory. Geographical details, for texts that describe the experience of diaspora, locate the originary home of generations born outside it. By describing, usually in idealized terms, the Asian country of origin, the auto/biographers themselves establish their connection to this place. Finally, emphasis on things—diaries, photographs, or other mementos—promotes collective memories partly because they are historical residues but mostly “because they have *as part of their meaning* a reference to some specific aspect of the past—a person, an achievement, or something of the sort” (Poole 151). These objects acquire symbolic meaning for the entire community in terms of the past they contain and represent. Each of the texts discussed in this book focuses on all these sites, in differing degrees, and I will explore the ways authors harness these sites of collective memory to promote a particular form of identity and acting on the world.

As I have highlighted the ways in which these family memoirs mediate history, we could ultimately ask ourselves whether because these family memoirs so effectively engage history and oblige us to rethink our forms of access to history, are the boundaries between auto/biography and history still valid? Carolyn Steedman’s thoughts on this question provide me with a usable answer. She asks: “What function does the historical past serve me in *Landscape for a Good Woman*? I am very eager to tell readers, close to the beginning of the book, that what they are about to read is not history. At the end, I want those readers to say that what I have produced is history” (*Past Tenses* 45).

This analysis of Asian American family memoirs explores the ways the personal connects with the public, family stories with national history, memory with documentation, self with family, and family with nation. By promoting a manner of self-representation that transcends the individual to privilege

the relational, I argue that family memoirists actively enter into public dialogues through the stories they unearth, remember, and tell. The dialogue then becomes a part of community narratives of self-identification that helps preserve a sense of identity and connection to the members of the community and their shared history. Reading family memoirs critically allows us to theorize the ways ethnic auto/biographies function in our contemporary society, unveiling the processes that sustain communities.

Chapter 3 **Representing Asian Wars and Revolutions**

. . . I came to discover that the story of my family, and my grandmother, was not only what actually happened to them in China, but also how these events were later both remembered and repressed in America.

—May-lee Chai, *The Girl from Purple Mountain*

The narrative of Asian wars and revolutions in the twentieth century, which led to massive immigration to the United States, is the subtext of a significant number of Asian American family memoirs. Events of the mid-twentieth century that have become part of our general knowledge of world history—the war in China and the Cultural Revolution, the Korean and Vietnamese wars, in particular—are the focus of the four texts I examine in this chapter: Pang-Mei Natasha Chang’s *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, May-lee and Winberg Chai’s *The Girl from Purple Mountain*, K. Connie Kang’s *Home Was the Land of Morning Calm*, and Duong Van Mai Elliott’s *The Sacred Willow*. I will discuss these texts highlighting how formal choices and strategies allow them to mediate history. These auto/biographies, which focus on events that have particular resonance (generally negative ones) in the American public consciousness, clearly address the ways wars and revolutions in Asia might be rearticulated. By focusing on the personal in the midst of the public, they re-imagine events of Asian history, giving the reading public more nuanced versions of the past. Moreover, these narratives stress the intersection of the individual with the collective, making important historical statements by presenting a plurality of perspectives on history. Conversely, they also emphasize individual stories behind received general history, inviting readers to consider how personal narratives elucidate public histories.

Double-Voiced Narratives and the History of China in the Twentieth Century

A brief historical note might help contextualize the family memoirs and demonstrate the authors’ determination to locate family stories within the narratives of historical events. Indeed, most of the auto/biographers in this book

include chronologies, maps, photographs, or family trees to orient the reader, foregrounding their narrative's referentiality. The history of China in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries serves as the context for the family narratives by Pang-Mei Chang and May-lee and Winberg Chai. The most important frame events include the end of the Manchu/Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and the birth of the Republic of China in 1911; World War I (1914–1918); the warlord era, which divided China among competing military cliques from 1916 to 1928 and which ended with the fall of the Nationalist government in several vital mainland regions; the unification of China with Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Koumintang in 1928 and the beginning of Mao Zedong's Communist guerrilla movement in southeastern China; the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the establishment of the last Chinese emperor, Pu Yi, in 1931; the Japanese occupation of Shanghai and the Rape of Nanking in 1937, which led to the Communist-Koumintang alliance, until the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945, a part of World War II; Mao's proclamation of the People's Republic of China and Chiang Kai-shek's fleeing to Taiwan to establish the Republic of China in 1949; the Koumintang-Communist civil war (1949–1950); and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

The political changes in China were accompanied by important shifts in mindset and culture. The overthrow of the Qing dynasty marked the end of thousands of years of authoritative imperial rule and theoretically introduced an era inspired by democratic ideals. However, China was a fragmented nation dominated by military cliques that were more concerned with their own political power and private armies than national interests. The thirty-seven-year Republic of China thus failed because of internal divisions, the lack of democratic consciousness of most parts of the ruling class, and external pressure from the Japanese forces. One of the most important events of this period, the May Fourth Movement, consisted of intellectuals clamoring for change: Confucianism was denounced as the cause of China's backwardness compared to the West; writers looked to Western artistic forms and themes for inspiration and began using modern rather than classical Chinese; democratic parties and the Communist Party were founded; and cities began reflecting the culture of the West in their tastes for music, fashion, and mores. For the Chinese, this period implied a radical rethinking and, in many cases, a rejection of tradition, as Western forms of culture and politics began to challenge the perceived backwardness of the old ways. The Chinese understood that modernization was key to becoming a major player on the world stage, but the definition of that notion was contested. Western individualism began to oppose China's tra-

ditional values, eroding the old traditions, changing the shape of families and of cities. The wars that followed the Republic—internal strife and the Japanese invasion—further damaged the fabric of Chinese society. The final break came with Mao Zedong’s proclamation of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949, and Taiwan’s political separation from the mainland.

Chang’s and the Chais’ memoirs reflect these events as their families’ locations, decisions, and possibilities in these years shaped their fortunes and family stories. The inclusion of a chronology that juxtaposes public events with family milestones, a chart that has become a regular section of many family memoirs such as Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans*, illustrates this. Natasha Chang’s chronology is composed of three tables: “History”, “Chang Yu-i”, and “Hsü Chih-mo and Others”. Beside each date she lists the events in each of the categories. For example, for 1900, under “History” she writes, “Boxer Rebellion against Europeans in China” and under “Chang Yu-i” she notes, “Born in Baoshan, Jiangsu province” (*Bound Feet* xiii); for 1918, under “History” she writes, “World War I ends”; under “Chang Yu-i” she states, “Gives birth to son, Hsü Chi-kai”; and under “Hsü Chih-mo and Others” she explains, “Hsü Chih-mo travels to U.S. to study at Clark University; Second Brother studies in France and Germany until 1922” (xv); for 1949 she notes that Chang Yu-i immigrates to Hong Kong and that “Most of Chang family quits China” (xix). This outline sets the family story firmly within the history of China and, specifically, within the movements towards modernization and nationalism. Moreover, because many of her family members actively participated in China’s political, economic, and cultural scenes, Chang’s account of the family story effectively illuminates the country’s history. In turn, May-lee Chai notes, for example, that her grandparents

were both born somewhere near the beginning of the twentieth century, which meant they had the great misfortune of living through interesting times. They witnessed the fall of the Qing dynasty and the birth of the Republic of China. They then saw the promise of democracy dashed as their country disintegrated into regions controlled by warlords. They survived the Japanese invasion of China, fleeing the Rape of Nanking in 1937, moving from city to city, one step ahead of the Japanese army. After the communists won the civil war, they fled to Taiwan then finally immigrated to New York in 1955. (*Girl from Purple Mountain* 9–10)

This summary of the family’s trajectory through public events empha-

sizes the auto/biography's usefulness as a tool for historical mediation. Indeed, the writers suggest that only by understanding history can the family narrative be realized.

From a wider perspective, these historical events—the Communist takeover of China and the Cultural Revolution—have arguably produced the most thematically unified body of fictional and auto/biographical writing in Asian American literature. Autobiographies such as Yuan Gao's *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* (1987), Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1988), Rae Yang's *Spider Eaters* (1997), Hong Ying's *Daughter of the River* (2000), and Da Chen's *Colors of the Mountain* (2001), and novels ranging from Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* (2001) to most of Ha Jin's award-winning fiction, allow us to make the claim that the Communist takeover and the resulting Cultural Revolution have become the defining experience of twentieth-century Chinese history for Americans and Asian Americans, in a manner similar to the way the Holocaust may be considered the defining experience of modern Jewish history. The number of texts on the Communist takeover and the Cultural Revolution as the pivotal experiences for many Chinese American autobiographers has converted these into a structural myth in life writing that carries particular ideological resonances.

Sau-ling Wong, Christine So, and Q. S. Tong and Ruth K. K. Hung, among others, have called our attention to the similarities in structure, ideological configuration, and intention across a significant number of these texts. Helena Grice signals that these texts conform to an "Escape from Asia Tradition" but also warns that superficial similarities often mask real differences in style, social circumstances, and focus (14). In general, So explains, these texts are written by women, and though they might diverge in details like number of narrators, ages, or the date on which they flee from China, they are similar in two respects:

first, their focus on several generations of women and the pressures they faced in the "modern" era in particular, and second, their dependence on "History," specifically twentieth-century Chinese history, imagined as a set of objective and agreed upon facts, dates, and political events to function as another character, an overwhelming series of challenges that generations of Chinese women must confront and overcome. The memoirs highlight authenticity and epic history by often incorporating detailed chronologies of national and global events, extensive family trees, and/or maps of China. Often beginning with the early part of the twentieth century, they stress the social changes that occur during the rise of

the Republic and of Sun Yat Sen, especially the loosening of social restrictions on women, taking care to emphasize the merging of “Eastern” and “Western” beliefs and the celebration of modernity. . . . Highlighting the diminished value of women . . . the narratives then emphasize each woman’s rebellion against social restrictions and her subsequent economic and social triumphs over the catastrophic events that perpetually threaten her survival. (138)

So’s perspective calls attention to the kind of connected reading (and, I would add, literary production) triggered by narratives about specific historical events. Publishers have been quick to take advantage of a cultural moment that has seen narratives about suffering in Communist China become an increasingly fashionable, and therefore profitable, trend for American readers. Connected reading—a process through which “making links between and across various narratives, tropes, sites, figures, movements” readers participate in a process of “supplementation rather than completion, for complexity rather than closure, for the making of truth rather than its revelation” (Whitlock 203–204)—actively creates and preserves collective memory. The number of memoirs and novels published promotes a kind of general consensus about the actual events—which may or may not correspond with reality. William Boelhower uses the term “documentary level” of autobiography to refer to the level of the collective subject, the identical homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of cultural creations (23). These memoirs supplement each other’s content, while creating idealized figures that invite readerly sympathy or identification.

Q. S. Tong and Ruth Hung, in their article “‘To Be Worthy of the Suffering and Survival’: Chinese Memoirs and the Politics of Sympathy”, suggest that the extraordinary success of memoirs about the Communist takeover and Cultural Revolution in the West, particularly in the United States, stems from their documentary value as personal perspectives on historical experiences, but also “because they seem to have touched the moral pulse of the US body politic and have struck a sympathetic chord among the children of those who formulated and defined the foundational values of the United States in the era of the American Revolution. These memoirs collectively and discursively form a textual space in which authors, publishers, and readers support, comfort, complement, and complete one another, and in which a community of sympathy is imagined and created” (66).¹ These representations of female repression, political injustice, and lack of freedom in China, topics that touch the general American readership’s sense of moral righteousness, “are largely

intended to be both emotionally affective and politically effective” (76). As, indeed, they are, if only to inspire readers to read more about this particular type of suffering, generally in “other” countries.² Sau-ling Wong has dubbed these narratives “Gone with the Wind epics” (a phrase taken from a reviewer’s praise of Linda Ching Sledge’s *Empire of Heaven*), as she explains, “Virtually all involve a multigenerational family saga interwoven with violent historical events...as well as a culminating personal odyssey across the ocean to the West, signaling final ‘arrival’ in both a physical and ideological sense” (“Sugar Sisterhood” 200).³ In a sense, therefore, these texts generally advocate a particular configuration of Asian American identity, one that ascribes to an uncritically articulated superiority of the West over Asia and may be said to endorse orientalized visions of Chinese women’s repression.⁴

Notwithstanding the ideological and political contexts of these auto/biographies’ production and reception, family memoirs about Chinese history and, in particular, the experience of Communism are particularly symbolic cultural artifacts. Because the Cultural Revolution produced a generalized paranoia wherein parents and children, husbands and wives, neighbors and friends were encouraged to denounce one another, “together they destroyed the possibility of the formation of a harmonious and compassionate community...This inability to love and to be loved...turns out to be one of the most tragic aspects of the whole experience of the Cultural Revolution” (Tong and Hung 61). As Tong and Hung explain, memoirs of the Cultural Revolution unveil “the working of a gigantic state machine—its radical and systematic destruction of humanity and, along with it, human community” (62). Because many family bonds were shattered by betrayal or separation, the family memoir, which offers the possibility of narratively uniting fragmented groups, becomes a gesture towards healing and connection with a community that shares this disruptive history.

The two family memoirs I examine in this section, Pang-Mei Natasha Chang’s *Bound Feet and Western Dress* and May-lee and Winberg Chai’s *The Girl from Purple Mountain*, focus on the retrieval of family history through two forms of the highly suggestive strategy of auto/biographical collaboration. Importantly, because of their collaborative nature, these texts invite readers to think of the ways auto/biographical narratives may be inscribed, particularly the way auto/biographical voices function together in a single text.⁵ While most of the family memoirs I examine in this book were authored by one person (who nonetheless acknowledges his or her family’s assistance and support in the project), Chang’s and the Chais’ texts were collaboratively written. Chang

appropriates the story that Chang Yu-i, her great-aunt, told her and recounts it in first person, blending it with her own story of growing up in America; May-lee and Winberg Chai write alternating first-person chapters in an attempt to remember (or discover) the character of his mother, her grandmother Ruth Mei-en Tsao.⁶ These collaborative family memoirs become complex historical documents because they invite us to consider the ways intergenerational auto/biographical collaboration functions in shifting cultural contexts. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, among others, have theorized the ways these collective acts of memory (and the inscription thereof) might function, highlighting the intersubjective quality of memory, noting that “The collective nature of acts of remembering extends beyond the acknowledgement of social sites of memory, historical documents, and oral traditions. It extends to motives for remembering and the question of those on whose behalf one remembers” (*Reading Autobiography* 21). Further, the narrators of many family memoirs make the act of remembering and the process of uncovering memories and facts a theme of the narrative itself, as we will observe in Chang’s and the Chais’ texts. In Smith and Watson’s words, “They may be self-reflexive about the problem of remembering and the value of particular kinds of remembering” (*Reading Autobiography* 24). This reflexivity elevates the text’s performative value as a dynamic cultural artifact that supports the writer’s personal itinerary of self-representation and also for a family or community’s process of identification. Paul John Eakin’s description of “a shift from a documentary view of autobiography as a record of referential fact to a performative view of autobiography centered on the act of composition” becomes significant in the context of these collaborative exercises (*Touching the World* 142–143).

Collaborative auto/biographies challenge the fundamental paradigm of the unified self of traditional autobiography, as well as the concept of monologic representation, heightening the notion of the intersubjective in life writing. Indeed, the renewed formal and aesthetic experience of these auto/biographical texts stems precisely from the enacted dialogue. Collaborative writing, defined succinctly as a text composed by more than one person—as-told-to, ghostwritten, and co-produced or collectively produced texts—is the clearest textual manifestation of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity. The interaction between the participants in this autobiographical act interrogates the relationship between lives and narrative construction, stressing the discursive potential behind generic choice. Collaborative texts that enact a dialogue between two voices—two positions—radically alter not only the idea of individual self-representation, but also that of autobiographical form. To authorize

a dialogue, rather than the traditional monologue, as the central discursive strategy in life-writing texts suggests a multilayered project with formal and cultural resonances. Both of the texts considered here evidence that dialogue: though Chang appropriates her great-aunt's voice, she reproduces the conversations that gave her the information. Indeed, Yu-i repeatedly interrogates her grand-niece, questioning her or offering advice, comparing traditional Chinese customs and opportunities to the ones available to Pang-Mei. When the text is a family memoir that engages personal experiences as historical mediations, we observe, as Susanna Egan notes, that "parallels between life and text become even closer when both subjects are involved in the preparation of the text. Narration then takes the form of dialogue; it becomes interactive, and (auto)biographical identification becomes reciprocal, adaptive, corrective, affirmative, as is also common in life among people who are close to each other. . . . These autobiographies, in other words, do not reflect life so much as they reflect (upon) their own processes of making meaning out of life" (7–8).

In our reading of these collaborative family memoirs that center on the history of the Chinese diaspora, we need to recognize and trace the interaction between discrete categories of experience and different cultural discourses. Because of the weight of historical experience in these life-writing texts, our reading must contextualize not only the representation of events, but the act of inscribing those events. The presentation of voices from diverse generations stresses the importance of the amalgam of cultural conventions and attitudes as well as personal responses. The collaborative performance, that is, the relationship between the individuals involved in the creation of the text, involves a coming together of different positions, attitudes, categories, and approaches. This, I believe, produces a more nuanced historical mediation, as it takes into account, in its very construction, the necessarily subjective positions of the authors.

Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's process of understanding her position as a member of the illustrious Chang family and as a Chinese American arises from an appreciation of her great-aunt, Chang Yu-i's, life. *Bound Feet and Western Dress* develops from Chang's curiosity about her great-aunt, whom she had known as an unobtrusive and kind relative, when she reads about her in a college textbook. At the end of a reference that describes two of her great-uncles who had excelled in government and finance, she states,

To my surprise, my great-aunt, Chang Yu-i, had also been mentioned in connection with her divorce from Hsü Chih-mo, a noted romantic poet of that time,

who introduced Western forms of meter and rhyme to modern Chinese poetry and helped found an influential journal, the *Crescent Moon Monthly*. Their divorce is often referred to as the first modern divorce in China. . . . Could this same woman I regarded as part respected elder and part unsophisticated immigrant be the same romantic heroine I imagined from my textbooks? A day or so after her arrival, I brought out the book with her name in it and asked her to tell me her story, from the beginning. (5)

Chang's family memoir is thus presented as a narrative that developed from hours of interviews and conversations with Yu-i, who died in 1989, seven years before the book was published. Yu-i's sections of the text are conversational, and Chang reproduces moments of direct address—"Do you know all those Chinese paintings your father has hanging in your house in Connecticut?" (6), for example—giving the text immediacy and capturing the intimacy of an ongoing conversation between two people and, ultimately, two positions. When they first met, Chang was a teenager in the middle of the acute identity crisis typical of second-generation Asian Americans: "Chinese-American, I longed for a country I could call my own. I wanted a future but could relate to nothing of my past. I yearned to understand my origins but felt shame about my heritage" (4). She appropriates her great-aunt's story as a model for her own life, narratively demonstrating this strategy by alternating chapters about her Chinese American experience with her great-aunt's life story. The difference in narrative voice is noted by a shift in register: Yu-i's story is recounted in a formal, composed prose, as though the speaker were translating, while Pang-Mei's voice is more contemporary and informal. Chang uses her great-aunt's story not only as a narrative that gives her a more rounded account of her Chinese family's history and their experiences in twentieth-century China, but also as a female model with whom she can identify.

Chang's auto/biography becomes an attempt to connect with both a family and a political and cultural history. Each chapter has, as it were, two sections: first Pang-Mei describes her experiences as a Chinese American growing up in Connecticut, and then the voice of Yu-i tells her story of episodes in her life that allow Pang-Mei to rethink her perspectives. Pang-Mei tries desperately to fit in by assimilating to the model of the typical American child, which implies speaking only English at home, watching the right TV shows, knowing how to order ice cream at the mall, preferring to be called Natasha (which her mother chose after reading *War and Peace*) over Pang-Mei (her generational Chang name), which made the other children laugh. She learned

to love China through her beloved amah, Xu Ma. But away from home, “I skirted precariously the brink between the borders. When the other kids called me ‘Chink’ or squashed their faces flat against their hands in imitation of my slanty eyes and broad nose, I stumbled inside and fell into the crack. From there, I stood outside China and looked on it with ridicule and ignorance” (28). Her family’s pride in themselves and their achievements mark Pang-Mei’s childhood, yet a lack of information leads her to identify Chang family idiosyncrasies with Chinese culture: “I thought that to be a Chang meant to be a Chinese. I did not separate the two. I did not realize how many things were peculiar to the Chang family: their pride, their sense of righteousness” (39). This is one of the facets that her conversations with Yu-i helped clarify. Learning the complete family story, the episode of injustice that led to their exile from home and the need to start again, permits Pang-Mei to reconsider the received version of her family’s story and put it in perspective. After years of family gatherings where she listened to accounts of the Chang family’s unity and their economic and political position in China before the 1949 Communist takeover, she finally learns from Yu-i the reason for their obsession with their own achievements: “Had someone shared [the story] with me, I believe I would have better understood the Changs. I would not have mistaken their pride for arrogance, or their desire to be above reproach as self-righteousness. As it was, I always wondered if I could measure up to their standards” (38).

The stories of the Chang forebears’ accomplishments sustain the family’s current situation: in the 1930s, Pang-Mei’s grandfather, Chang Chia-chu, developed a ground-breaking use for soybeans and founded the China Vegetable Corporation; his brother, Chang Chia-sen, founded the National Socialist Party; their fourth brother, Chang Chia-ao, was president of the Bank of China. Chang ironically notes that she “knew of the achievements of my ‘great’ uncles long before I understood the term ‘great-uncle’ as a measure of consanguinity” (39). Yet she admits that while she was proud of her family’s achievement, she could not (or dared not) identify with these Chang men. The Chang women were praised, according to her, for “successful marriages to educated or wealthy men, and their elegant skills in social situations. . . . I worried where that left me, a first-generation Chinese-American girl who had never even been to China” (39). Christine So suggests that her act of writing the family story, therefore, centering on a woman, “presumably serves to disrupt the formal narrative of the Chang family from which Pang-Mei finds herself alienated” (“A Woman Is Nothing” 149). What is most interesting, So argues, is that in the context of trying to find a place for herself as a

Chinese American who cannot identify fully with either China or the United States,

Chang instead turns toward her great-aunt's notoriety as the first divorced woman to claim national status, a move that counters her great-uncles' educational, economic, and social achievements within the national context. To claim one's place in history in the postmodern global era, in other words, does not necessitate, as in the case of writing Asian American history, the establishment of one's position in the economic, social, and political structures of U.S. history, a narrative that has been constructed around and against the "absence" of Asian Americans. Instead it involves linking one's identity to a woman who personifies the "in-between," who moves back and forth across the borders of gender, nation, and time. (150)

Chang repeatedly connects her family's story to China's. As explained earlier, she provides a "Chronology of Events" that juxtaposes "History", "Chang Yu-i", and "Hsü Chih-mo and Others", situating her great-aunt at the center of China's historical and cultural events of the twentieth century, embodied by her first husband and the Chinese intellectuals of the time. As Yu-i (whose formal name is Chang Chia-fen) explains, using the poem her father wrote for his family as a trope that connects family and nation, the couplet *chia kuo pang ming* (fine kingdom, bright country) "was meant to express Baba's deep love for and loyalty to China. Each character in the poem is selected as a generation name. My generation is all named with the character 'Chia.' . . . Each new generation takes the next character in the poem until we finish and then begin again" (*Bound Feet* 12). Chang's own name also connects with this tradition: Pang signifies "country", and Mei stands for "plum blossom", the national flower of China. Thus, through their given names, the Chang family emphasizes their connection and loyalty to China and to each other. Indeed, Yu-i notes how her father loved his country so much that the words of the family poem contained a second meaning, through a play on almost identical sounds "but with two differently written characters, the family poem could also mean 'from the family to the country to the people'" (43-44).

The story of Yu-i's life offers Pang-Mei a model of how to be both a Chang woman and a Chinese American. The author, by juxtaposing her existential dilemma about her own life with Yu-i's story, teases out the parallels that provide her with the psychological and cultural sustenance she needs. For example, Chang connects the account of how her parents tried to protect her

from her classmates' racism by emphasizing the superiority of the Chinese with the story of how Yu-i's father tried to live their poverty elegantly. Chang's experience of racism and the notion of being Chinese American resounds against Yu-i's family's loss of their home and fortune. In chapter 6, for instance, after Chang describes her uncertainties about marrying or not marrying a Chinese to please her parents, she segues into Yu-i's story about her arranged marriage. In fact, both Yu-i's and Chang's stories have a similar theme: the need to negotiate the liminal situations they find themselves in, specifically Chang's definition of Chinese Americanness and Yu-i's position as either/both a traditional and modern woman. Where Chang's conflict comes from the cultural choices she needs to make, Yu-i's dilemma arises from the contrary forces of tradition and modernity in China.

The events surrounding Yu-i's arranged marriage to Hsü Chih-mo when she was fifteen, which ended in divorce five years later, lie at the center of her personal and cultural drama. The story illustrates the way private and public stories intersect: Yu-i's personal story embodies the cultural changes occurring in China in the early decades of the century. She was raised at a time of strong Confucianism, which required her, among other things, to be submissive to her parents and to accept that "a woman is nothing". As she explains, "I was born into changing times and had two faces, one that heard talk of the old and the other that listened for talk of the new, the part of me that stayed East and the other that looked West, the spirit in me that was woman and the other that was man" (15). Yet tellingly, when Yu-i's mother set to binding her feet when she was three, the child's sobs made one of her brothers stand up for her and tell their mother to remove the bandages, promising that he would take care of her in the future. When she married Hsü Chih-mo, who would soon leave for the United States and England, where he would become the poet who would introduce Western meter and rhyme to Chinese poetry and befriend intellectuals like Liang Qichao, she continued to deal with the conflicting demands of tradition and modernization. Though she was too "modern" for the China she grew up in, because of her unbound feet and desire for an education, she was too traditional for her husband, whose egotistical ambitions required a more sophisticated wife. The trope for this situation was articulated by Yu-i herself as she described how, when they were living in Cambridge, her husband invited a Chinese woman to dinner. The woman, who was "trying very hard to be Western", wore her hair short, red lipstick, and a blue woolen jacket and skirt yet had "two little stumps thrust into embroidered Chinese slippers", leading Yu-i to exclaim to her husband that "bound feet and Western dress do not go

together” (122). He turned the metaphor on her and exclaimed that that was why he wanted a divorce. Soon after, he abandoned her, alone and pregnant with their second child, in Europe (their first son, born in China, had been left with his paternal grandparents when she went to join him in England). Yu-i survived through the care of her brothers and the kindness of friends and gave birth to her son, Peter, in Germany. There she worked as a teacher until the boy’s untimely death at the age of three. By then the divorce was final, and she returned home to her oldest son.

Yu-i returned to China a more resolute and educated woman and became vice president of the Shanghai Women’s Savings Bank before immigrating with her son to Hong Kong (where she remarried) after the Communist takeover. She eventually moved to the United States when her husband died and remained there with her son, grandchildren, and extended family until her death at the age of eighty-eight. Yet throughout the process of her increasing independence, Yu-i was obliged to act according to tradition: not telling her family about her divorce so they would not lose face, continuing to be a dutiful and caring daughter-in-law to her ex-husband’s parents. As a matter of fact, her ex-parents-in-law continued to consider her part of the family, beyond her position as the mother of their grandchild, even informally “adopting” her as their child.

When Chang describes her first meeting with Yu-i, she notes “a flicker of recognition” in her great-aunt’s eyes, “as if she registered me from a place far away. I remembered feeling immediately that I could trust this woman” (3). By the end of the narrative, the connection between the two women is profoundly realized and, most interestingly, resounds deeply as both family narrative and chronicle of cultural appreciation. Chang’s process of receiving and writing her great-aunt’s story appears to have changed both women: Yu-i, as she remembers and tells her story, understands her family more, particularly her ex-husband and his family; Chang also becomes more comfortable about her heritage and learns how to harmonize her own ambitions with her family’s expectations. The two women who, each in her time and in her cultural context, had to come to terms with the demands placed upon her by family and heritage appear at the end to have achieved a sense of completion. Indeed, the family memoir ends with Chang’s wedding to a non-Chinese. As she contemplates her two wedding dresses (“The first, a gown of white chiffon—the stuff of my American childhood fantasies—I wore as I pronounced my marriage vows. The second dress, a full-length silk sheath in bright red, the Chinese color for felicity. Slim, slitted and topped with a stiff, stand-up

collar, my cheongsam is modeled after those worn by Yu-i and my mother”) that she keeps in a trunk alongside Yu-i’s cheongsams, she remembers, “When I changed into my cheongsam for my wedding reception, I felt vibrant and proud, at once a filial daughter and self-reliant sister, though I had broken with tradition and married, with my parents’ blessings, outside of my heritage” (211–212).

Though the two interlinked accounts narrate forms of breaking with tradition, Christine So observes that the text ends with a wedding, a fairly typical symbol for closure: “Even though her great-aunt’s public identity revolves around her dissolution of marriage vows, Chang’s resolution of Pang-Mei’s own marriage ‘outside of [her] heritage’ signifies the dependence of her own racial identity on her nontraditional-yet-traditional position to marriage” (So 150). The critic reads this ending as a way of presenting early twentieth-century China as “historical time that captures the ‘traditional’ customs of feudal China rituals that evoke ‘the Orient’ for a Western audience—while also standing for the revolutionary spirit of the era, the birth of the new republic, the new freedoms for women, and increased interaction with the United States and Europe” (151). Chang deploys the figure of Yu-i as the representative of a new nation, at the same time as “a quintessential Chinese foremother for contemporary Chinese American women, located within a specific history and geography yet transcending all boundaries of time and place” (So 151).

May-lee and Winberg Chai similarly appropriate the figure of foremother as a model for diasporic Chinese Americans in *The Girl from Purple Mountain*, which also uses the process of uncovering past stories to structure a family memoir. These auto/biographers exemplify Roger Porter’s notion of “sleuths of selfhood” (100); indeed, Eakin’s notion of “the story of the story” (*How Our Lives* 59) structures Chang’s narrative, as it does the Chais’ auto/biographical exercise. The Chais’ narrative is a family story that highlights two forms of knowledge and access to the past through a father-daughter collaborative life-writing exercise that aims to give voice to a lost character whose presence significantly influenced their family.

The Girl from Purple Mountain opens with family matriarch Ruth Meien Tsao Chai’s instructions to bury her in “a spot where she would be encircled by strangers, where my father could not be buried beside her” (1). This command unsettles the family and leads her eldest son and biracial granddaughter to revisit her life—an odyssey of civil and foreign wars, revolution, betrayal and tragedy, and immigration. In her introductory note to the text, May-lee explains how, in the process of writing this story, she discovered that the

story of her family did not involve “only what actually happened to them in China, but also how these events were later both remembered and repressed in America” (xi). Caught as a child between the tension of remembering and ignoring the past, May-lee collaborates with her father to attempt to trace and understand the life of her remarkable grandmother. Ruth, an independent and determined woman, a Christian and champion Bible student, one of the first women admitted to a Chinese national university and later to graduate studies at Wittenberg College in the United States, a professor of English and Lady Mountbatten’s Chinese translator, who raised three sons while fleeing the invading Japanese forces and later immigrated to the United States, is the inspiration and core of this memoir. In important ways, as well, she is a forerunner of the late twentieth-century transnational figure—both she and her husband, Ch’u “Charles” Chai, went to college in the United States and were the first Chinese couple to be married in Springfield, Ohio, before returning to China for the birth of their first son. But ultimately Ruth will remain a mystery to her son and granddaughter, her figure a trope of memory itself and the attempts to capture and understand it.

The tension between forms of knowing is textually represented by the discrete chapters in the memoir. The Chais’ approach is complementary: May-lee provides historical contextualization with facts and data, information that supplements Winberg’s childhood memories. The use of the scholarly method in writing auto/biography, according to Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, evinces attempts to distance oneself from existing or desired relationships with the subjects, to prevent the forebear’s story “from becoming subsumed within the private nature” of a familiar relationship (195). This way, the auto/biographer may observe the subjects “objectively as people formed by their environment and their times. It is a method the writers alternately seek and resist. Thus the texts constantly move between the public and the private spheres, between the subjective and the objective. They move between the sphere of biography and the sphere of autobiography, between historical and private knowledge” (Gudmundsdóttir 195). This strategy evinces May-lee’s own attempts at solving the confusion of her childhood—because her firsthand access to her grandmother was limited by their generational and cultural gaps, she resorts to other forms of knowledge to, in a sense, contextualize her grandmother. As she explains, “It was this atmosphere of political intrigue, of paranoia, of assassinations and executions, that I needed to understand before I could begin to comprehend my grandparents’ life” (*Girl from Purple Mountain* 189). Indeed, May-lee’s chapters are historically and culturally grounded, based on scholarly insights

rather than on the transparently subjective filial perspective Winberg provides. These complementary operations produce a complex narrative composed of contrasting manners of approaching and inscribing history.

Despite the juxtaposition of family stories, historical data, and cultural analysis, the axial point of this multilayered construct—the grandmother—remains elusive. What is clear, nonetheless, is a renewed locating of both son and granddaughter within the larger story of twentieth-century Chinese history of revolutions, diaspora, and adaptation to America. Indeed, the Chais' family memoir dialogues with other auto/biographical texts that emphasize what Christine So calls “the endurance, value, and empowerment of Chinese women, [and] to position Chinese women as emblematic of the modern and epic sweep of history”, such as Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves*, or Rae Yang's *Spider Eaters*, among others (So 145). As they tell Ruth's story, Winberg and May-lee stress their affiliation to that story and to the larger context of Chinese and American history, claiming a place for themselves in both spaces. But they also enact a liminal space—the gaps between their narratives attest to an irrecoverable loss—of a history, of unquestioning belonging, of family.

Tension in the narrative arises from the father's and daughter's opposing views of memory. Winberg, during most of his adulthood, tried to repress the memories of hardships and war, frustrating his children; May-lee, as an adult, wants to engage her family's past (partly because of her adolescent frustration at feeling racism and needing to understand more about her father's family).⁷ As she explains,

The years I lived in South Dakota were painful because I experienced racial hatred on a daily basis. I lived in fear. . . . I felt that I could not call myself Chinese as I didn't know the language and had never been to China, but I was not considered “American” by the people I encountered. I was a freak. But in China, no one cared. My father's family had far greater problems to worry about than my racial mix. They wanted me to understand what they had suffered under the Cultural Revolution and they wanted me to have pride in my Chinese heritage. (284)

Undertaking two journeys together to China, in 1985 and 1986, allows both of them to revisit the past and come to terms with the role of memory in their lives.

But both narrators need to remember, and memory's imperative drives

their accounts because, they imply, knowledge and understanding of the past are crucial to functioning in the present. Winberg believes that “it is my duty to understand my mother, to seek answers. To ignore the past is too much like forgetting. And to forget the past would be to dishonor my parents” (7). The crucial point, however, lies in *how* memories are accessed to produce that necessary history. May-lee laments her inability to see beyond the piecemeal “official story” she has been told because “nothing in the official version of the story of their lives helped me to understand my grandmother”, and she despaired of ever understanding (19). For Winberg and May-lee, making sense of the information, writing to understand, marks the process of this family memoir. The history of China acts primarily as a vital contextualizing element against which the family story evolves and personal knowledge may be achieved.

Their manner of remembering separates the father and daughter’s narratives, while offering an interesting complementarity. Winberg, who admits that he was the spoiled eldest son, incapable of doing wrong in his mother’s eyes (until he “betrays” her by going to his paternal uncle’s deathbed, under his father’s orders), seems to have repressed the memories of the war. As he recounts the family’s repeated dislocations, he focuses on his enjoyment of the games they played, the children’s excitement at identifying Japanese bombers, and so on. He admits, at one point, that his memories are filtered by his childhood perception and that he should look at things from his parents’ point of view. But, self-centered as he was, he was incapable of that. May-lee’s relationship with her grandmother was clearly more distant, so she resorts to providing the background information that will contextualize her grandmother and her time, hoping, in this manner, to gain access to a personality. The use of photographs to introduce each chapter gives the text heightened personal and political meaning, offering a form of ostensibly objective documentary evidence. Photographs emphasize the presence of the past and serve as material support for memory. As Marianne Hirsch explains, “Photographs, as the only material traces of an irrecoverable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life”, making these visual texts the only objective material that both authors can reflect on in the present (5).⁸ On several occasions, Winberg and May-lee describe the photograph that has been included and others that have not, to either remember the event or the occasion of having the picture taken, or to reflect upon the situation frozen in time.

One of the central themes in the story, engaged by both authors, is the shifting political climate: how Ruth’s generation was caught between the tradi-

tional and the modern. Winberg and May-lee portray Ruth as an embodiment of China's modernization and locate her story in the context of the rise of the republic, during which "the Chinese character for ocean, *yang*, also came to mean 'foreign,' 'Western,' and 'modern'" (55). Ruth's marriage to Charles is depicted as a "modern" act because she establishes the conditions for agreeing to wed him, which included a jade engagement ring, the opportunity to get to know him by receiving daily letters from him for two years, and his conversion to Christianity. Charles, who fell in love with Ruth after seeing her picture, "found these conditions sensible and fair. He wrote her a letter immediately, accepting her conditions and expressing his relief and happiness that his fiancée was so modern in her thinking, so logical, sensible, and clever" (71). Indeed, many of Charles' actions defied the traditional Chinese rules of relationships between the sexes. After they became engaged, he went to Northwestern University Law School in Chicago to be closer to Ruth, who had received a scholarship to study at Wittenberg College in Ohio. The couple was married at the Fourth Lutheran Church on May 24, 1930: "It was the first time a Chinese couple was married in Springfield, Ohio, and cause for much excitement. The mayor declared a holiday, the president of Wittenberg himself walked my grandmother down the aisle, as her own parents could not be there. . . . In the year of my grandparents' wedding, they were filled with a buoyant, American optimism" (79, 81). Back in China, Charles worked for the government, drafted the new Chinese constitution, trained army officers in Hunan province, and became the founding dean of National Chongqing University Law School. After they immigrated to the United States, he co-wrote nine books on China with his son, Winberg. But as Charles' granddaughter states, "He always considered marrying my grandmother his greatest achievement. She'd had many suitors, after all" (10).

One of the elements effectively wielded by both narrators as a trope for the changes they experienced and the ways one remembers the past is the house Ruth builds when they return to Nanjing with the proceeds of her mother's inheritance. By focusing on this particular object, a "thing" in St. André and Poole's conception, that promotes collective memory because of its symbolic meaning for the persons who once possessed it and who mourn its loss, the authors manage to intensify their family memoir's resonance as a narrative that juxtaposes personal ambitions with the indifferent evolution of history. May-lee, who had heard about her grandmother's American-style dream house all of her childhood, describes the house as "the perfect home, the foundation for the rest of her life. Modern. Western. Two stories in brick, durable, with

indoor plumbing and running water and heat in every room. . . . In fact, the house resembled her college dormitory, Ferncliff. Most importantly, it was nothing like her family's compound, no single-story rooms clustered around an open courtyard, cold and damp. The past was past, she seemed to be declaring. A new house for a new life" (122–123). The family did not live in it long, as they were forced to flee Nanjing soon after they moved in. The house was then occupied by the Japanese forces, and in 1945, Ruth's brother rented it out to Russians who used it as a brothel. After evicting the Russians and fixing the house, Ruth rented it out to the Americans who came as advisors to the new Chinese Republic.

Winberg, who remembered only happiness in that house, was crushed when he returned there in 1985. As May-lee tells it, the house was still standing in a run-down neighborhood of shanties and squatters' shacks. Father and daughter both experience profound grief when they see the house. Expecting to see the vision evoked by her father's memories and grandmother's stories, May-lee is horrified to find "a long narrow brick house, now sooty-gray and dilapidated, with two brick columns that must have been imposing once but that now seemed merely in need of support" (123). In May-lee's account, Winberg begins to rant hysterically against the government, against the Communists who had ruined China, accusing them of being the source of the country's dirt and poverty, "because his mother's dream house, his childhood home, had been found and was nothing like he remembered" (123). Ruth's house, a witness to and casualty of China's social shifts in the twentieth century, also embodies those changes. Built as a sign of "modernity" at a time when China was opening its doors to winds of change, consigned to occupation by the forces that were shaking the country's foundations, it eventually succumbed to the decay that grows from abandonment. China, the authors seem to suggest, was forsaken by its own people against their will, just as Ruth's house crumbled when its inhabitants were forced to flee.

Apart from Ruth's house, Purple Mountain, a park filled with pine trees, buildings, and statues of animals from the Ming dynasty, serves as another site for collective memory. Here, Ruth had spent many happy hours during her college days, and her sons also played there as children. The image of the park functions in the family stories as a repository of memories of the good times, before the wars effectively erased that world. May-lee visits the park with her father on a trip to China in 1986 and sees the place, which becomes for her the embodiment and proof of her grandmother's stories and her father's memories: "I remembered these statues from the album my father had made of my

grandmother's life. He had posed here as a boy with his brothers and cousin in the final months before they left Nanjing. Until I saw them for myself, I had somehow never believed that such things existed. The photos seemed like an illustration of a fairy tale. Now I could touch these statues with my own hands" (294). Once more, the physical revisitation of a site of memory gives life to family stories.

Two episodes in particular capture the liminal moment in China's move towards modernization/Westernization that the symbolism of the house helps illustrate. The first is when Ruth and Charles return to China in 1933 after college in the United States only to discover that Ruth's mother had died and her father had rapidly married the maid he had been having an affair with. Ruth, after her initial desperation and anger, coldly orchestrated her father's downfall in the Christian community and Chinese society. May-lee, looking back at her grandmother's actions, actually pities her great-grandfather because she understands "they were caught between eras": if they had lived a generation earlier, no one would have criticized the patriarch's decision; a generation later, the Communists would have praised the wife's working-class background. As she notes, "It's hard to know how to live when the world is changing so rapidly that no traditions have been invented yet to justify your life. In another time, theirs might have been a happy story, a love story even" (120). The second illustrative moment is Winberg's recollection of a visit to the Chai family temple on their flight from Nanjing. His father shows the boys their names in a large rice-paper book and carved on polished stone tablets, as well as Ruth's name and academic achievements ("very modern", Charles tells his wife). "My mother pointed to the smooth, blank portion of the tablet. 'That is where your achievements will be recorded for the family,' she said to me. . . . As it turned out, nothing more would be recorded for our family. The war would scatter us across China and then across the world, and then in the 1960s, the Red Guards would come and destroy the family temple, smashing the statues and the stone steles, setting fire to the bamboo plaques and the rice-paper books recording the history of the Chai family" (151). These elements stress how complex the moment of the shift from tradition to modernization was for the Chinese in the twentieth century.

The metaliterary interaction between father and daughter also becomes a theme of the family memoir. Winberg's amusement at his daughter's historical obsession as she pores through old pictures and papers—"I don't know why she likes to look at these old pieces of paper. . . . When I was her age, I liked to sing and dance, I liked to get out and enjoy myself. She likes to look at these

old pieces of paper. Who can understand the young?" (179)—is matched by her frustration as to why he will not speak about his past. "His silence was a wall between us, and I had no idea how to penetrate it", she says, wondering if he had unconsciously blocked out the memories or simply refused to talk about the past because he was too overwhelmed with emotion (195). To an important degree (perhaps signaled by May-lee's appearance as first author of the memoir, which would be unusual in the traditional Chinese context, considering that she is the daughter), we understand that she is the driving force behind this collaborative family memoir. She explains in the book's prologue the reasons for choosing to present both their voices. The original plan involved writing the memoir in Winberg's voice, as he was a participant and witness to many of the events they describe. But because his childhood experiences were so traumatic that he repressed those memories for much of his adult life, they discovered that his voice alone would not suffice. Also, May-lee discovered that the ways the stories were buried in her family's memory had to connect with their experiences in America: "As a child, I found this tension between remembering the past and ignoring it extremely frustrating. Why couldn't my family just tell me what happened? But nowadays as an adult, I realize that there is no single version of the past in a family history" (xi). Indeed, she realizes that her frustration at the lack of understanding about her family became the impetus for writing the memoir. Research and travel to China gave her access to her family's past, so "by describing my efforts to understand the past and my father, I am trying to show how these stories pass imperfectly from one generation to the next yet how important it is to make the attempt to understand them" (xii). *The Girl from Purple Mountain* importantly, then, reproduces a dialogue that not only centers on memories of a person, but also engages the reasons for remembering or forgetting, and the consequences of doing both.

The act of collaboration heightens the text's immediacy. A crucial aspect of this text's auto/biographical nature is its foregrounding, as Egan contends, the "real presence" of the speakers, confirmed "by the responsiveness of each to the other and by the fact that their dialogue is comprehensible only in terms of the involvement of both" (9–10). Couser explains that collaborative autobiography is "inherently ventriloquistic", inviting us to consider the positions of power in transcultural dual-authored texts ("Collaborative Autobiography" 223). As much as a collaborative text of this nature ostensibly presents a relationship of symmetry and balance, subtle manipulations appear that might correspond to the writers' public roles or agendas. Thus, May-lee's questions

oblige her father to critically revisit his sanitized version of the past. Chafing under his insistence “that nothing bad had happened to the family during the war”, she notes that “the way my father described the past, it seemed as though there had been no war at all. He talked about his mother’s grand house, their servants, his parents’ prestigious positions. It was very confusing” (195). Significantly, Winberg Chai, professor of political science at the University of Wyoming, has published over twenty books about China, like *The New Politics of Communist China: Modernization Process of a Developing Nation* (1972) and *The Search for a New China: A Capsule History, Ideology, and Leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921–1974* (1975), attesting to his ongoing intellectual engagement with China’s history, culture, and politics. Yet the memoir suggests Winberg had managed to maintain a critical distance (or selective amnesia) that his daughter had to struggle to correct. Writing this family memoir thus became for Winberg an opportunity to emotionally revisit the past, guided and accompanied by his daughter.⁹ His reticence is evident throughout the text, as he tries to elide the more painful episodes of his mother’s life. When he wonders at this daughter’s obsession with the past, might he not actually be refusing to really look back?

Both authors have to deal with the frontier between biography and fiction, “as they face the difficulty of the ultimate ‘unknowability’ of others”, even those of our own families (Gudmundsdóttir 185). They eventually have to admit that they cannot discern Ruth’s inner motivations: Winberg because he cannot overcome his idealization of his mother and his reluctance to remember the tragic experiences of the past, May-lee simply because she has no personal access to her grandmother. Her consistent inclusion of political and sociological information during each period of Ruth’s life shows her need to fill gaps with something solid. Interestingly, apart from historical information, both of them resort to fictionalization to fill the gaps in memory or lack of information (on several occasions May-lee notes her father’s penchant for destroying letters that caused him emotional distress, lamenting the loss of potentially vital sources of information). One of the most striking examples of the incorporation of necessary fiction is the story of Ruth’s rejected suitor, a tale gleefully recounted often at family gatherings. Winberg admits that his mother never told him anything about it, probably because it was an inappropriate conversation between mother and son, so he has to rely on his imagination, and May-lee fabricates her grandmother’s suitor’s desperation at being rejected. Winberg, in turn, also embellishes the account of his father’s arrival at his in-laws’ house, a story that has clearly become almost farcical from

repeated tellings. Where missing facts leave stories fragmentary, they imply, imagination may be used to complete the picture. As May-lee notes, “If I am to understand the woman she became, I must try to see the girl my grandmother once was” (38), with which she justifies her use of imagination to fill in the blank spaces of her grandmother’s life or imagines, for example, while looking at her official picture at university, how she must have felt about the prickly stocking she was wearing. Indeed, Winberg admits as much, acknowledging there were many things his mother never spoke about.

Ultimately, May-lee offers her own view on why her grandmother chose to be interred alone, which provides another version of the way memory can be maintained. May-lee reasons that, knowing how much her grandmother valued memory and how fearful she was at her sons’ forgetfulness, she worried that “if they could forget the past, they could forget her” and therefore “decided to hedge her bets. She arranged secretly to change her burial plans. Better this way when it was still her choice to make and not a decision imposed upon her by a fickle husband” (266–267). This rather contrived explanation of Ruth’s decision about where she would be buried—to insure herself against her family’s forgetfulness—makes sense in the context of her experiences and her paranoid as she grew older (she was convinced, for example, that Charles would remarry as soon as she died, as her father did). In the end, nonetheless, this remains a granddaughter’s speculation, because Ruth did not confide to anyone her true motivations.

For May-lee and her father, returning to China and then writing the collaborative text become acts of healing as they revisit their family’s past and acknowledge the ways in which the personal and the historical blend into a narrative for the present. The trope of counter-memory, highlighted here as the juxtaposition of the remembered past and the reality of present evidence, obliges us to reframe the narratives of history attending to developing self-understanding of a culture and its historical memory. By privileging this trope, the writers create a structural tension between documentary evidence and memory (or, in this case, diverse versions of memory). For the auto/biographers in this section, Pang-Mei Chang and the Chais, appropriating the figure of a foremother illustrates how, particularly in the context of the history of China in the twentieth century, the personal could be political. Highlighting the stories of Yu-i and Ruth shows how the ways people lived and remembered their lives also explained the changes in society at the time. Indeed, Christine So speaks of a “hyper-identification of Chinese women with nation, its history, conflicts, landscape, chronology, past and future” (139).¹⁰ In the context

of writing about the Chinese diaspora, family narratives of loss of country often oblige the writer (and the reader) to negotiate the critical connections between family stories and the narratives of nations. In all the texts I consider, the writers consciously or unconsciously use the family stories to reenact the narrative of the loss of nation and the shaping of ethnic communities. Importantly, the texts revise the notion of the individual voice of the traditional auto/biographer, privileging a connection to a collective voice, linking personal stories to each other and to public histories. They evince a range of processes that illustrate how historical events influence personal lives and how, conversely, the personal affects the historical, clarifying the ways in which the texts mediate history.

Unveiling Myths of War, Understanding Histories of War

The two family memoirs I will examine now, K. Connie Kang's *Home Was the Land of Morning Calm* and Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow*, are similar in several ways: they begin with stories of great-grandparents in Korea and Vietnam, respectively; both explain how their countries became pawns of U.S. postwar negotiations; both narrators left their countries to settle in the United States and share a commitment to their ethnic communities, deliberately harnessing their auto/biographies to promote collective memory and teach mainstream America about Asian history in the twentieth century. The political and social focus of these texts is the narrative of the consequences of American intervention in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

A brief background in Korean and Vietnamese history helps contextualize the family narratives. From the seventh century to 1910, Korea was ruled by a single government, maintaining its political independence and ethnic identity in spite of frequent foreign invasions. The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), a conflict that grew from Russian and Japanese intentions to occupy Manchuria and Korea, resulted in Korea's becoming a nominal protectorate of Japan in 1905. The Japanese annexed the country in 1910, inaugurating a period of colonization and humiliation for Koreans that lasted until the end of World War II in 1945. During this period, the colonial government suppressed Korean culture and language, obliging citizens to change their names from Korean to Japanese ones, banned the speaking of the language and any other cultural manifestation, enlisted many Koreans into the Japanese army, and organized the official recruitment of over five million Koreans to work in factories or mines in mainland Japan. During this period many Koreans also

fled to China to escape Japanese oppression and participate in independence efforts.

The thirty-five years of Japanese occupation led to increasing nationalism and struggles for independence, notably the March 1st Movement of 1919, wherein a Declaration of Independence was read in Seoul before over two million people. The Japanese army violently suppressed the protests, but this act led to the establishment of the provisional government of the Republic of Korea, an administration in exile based in Shanghai and later in Chongqing. Its first president was Syngman Rhee (Yi Seungman), who also became the president of the Republic of South Korea in 1948. Though the provisional government never received formal diplomatic recognition from most other countries (the United States did not recognize it because it did not want to complicate its relations with Japan), it strove for the liberation of Korea, coordinating resistance against the Japanese and lobbying for international support. The Japanese surrender to the Allied forces after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 ended the occupation. At the Potsdam Conference, in a proposal opposed by nearly all Koreans, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to temporarily occupy the country with the zone of control demarcated along the 38th Parallel. The Russians would be stationed in the north and the Americans would set up a military zone in the south. This partitioned the country more or less equally but left the capital, Seoul, in the south. The U.S.-supported Republic of Korea was established in the south after three years of U.S. military government (1945–1948) and the Communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea, under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung, in the north. Ironically, therefore, liberation from the Japanese did not bring Korea its independence, but provoked dramatic ideological conflict in a country split by international treaties.

The Korean War, fought from 1950 to 1953, began as an attempt by the North Koreans to reunite the country after the United States and the Soviet Union had withdrawn most of their occupying forces. On June 25, 1950, North Korean troops launched a surprise attack on the South across the 38th parallel. The United Nations Security Council, in response to an appeal by the Republic of Korea, encouraged all member countries to give it military support. U.S. troops, led by General Douglas MacArthur, fought for the South. The fighting ended three years later with an armistice that restored the original border between the two Koreas, known as the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Vietnam also underwent successive colonizations and saw itself divided

by international treaties. France had colonized Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) in the late nineteenth century. Though there had been several opposition campaigns against the French, it was Ho Chi Minh's nationalist Viet Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam), founded in China in 1941, that seriously began to undermine French control and fight against Japanese occupation during World War II. The popularity of this anticolonial force, which supported the people, particularly, for example, during the dramatic famine of 1944–1945, allowed them to claim power after the Japanese surrendered in 1945. In what was known as the “August Revolution”, the Viet Minh took advantage of the power vacuum across the country at the end of the war and, on September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi. In his speech, he paraphrased the U.S. Declaration of Independence, claiming equality and inviolable rights for everyone. Simultaneously, the French restored colonial rule. In January 1946, the Viet Minh won elections in central and north Vietnam, but the French ousted them from Hanoi and the south, leading to the First Indochina War between France and the Viet Minh (1946–1954). By 1950, Communist nations, led by the People's Republic of China, recognized the Viet Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam as the government of the country. The State of Vietnam, supported by the French and led by the former emperor Bao Dai, was recognized by non-Communist nations. The Geneva Accords between France and the Viet Minh in 1954, which granted the country its independence from France, partitioned the country along the 17th Parallel, with the British and allies occupying the south and the Chinese moving in from the north, with the idea of holding national elections to reunite the country.

As with Korea, partition led to the Vietnam War (1959–1975), with China and the Soviet Union supporting the North and the United States and member nations of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) fighting for and with the South to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese Army was aided in its campaign against the South by the southern Viet Minh (which began to be known as “Viet Cong”—“Vietnamese Communists”), who waged a fierce guerrilla war against the allies. The war then spread to Laos and Cambodia, where the Communists organized local groups based on the Viet Minh. U.S. involvement was intense in the 1960s, making this war one of the most controversial public issues in the country and, subsequently, transforming the Vietnam War into a symbol of unjust foreign intervention. The war ended with the fall of Saigon to the North in April 1975, after over three million Vietnamese had died and

the Americans abandoned the country. Millions of Vietnamese in the South fought to leave the country with the departing American army and personnel and, later, in boats to neighboring countries.

The Korean and Vietnam wars are the structural core of Kang's and Elliott's narratives. In their accounts, the events of the war are filtered through war stories that tell us personal stories—what happened to those who lived it. Both women were children during the wars, and most of the accounts are based on either personal or family memories. Collectively, shared through the process of connected reading, these war stories may be said to evoke “vicarious memory”, what Samuel Hynes calls the “myth of war”. Myth, he notes in this context, does not imply falsehood, but identifies “the simplified, dramatized story that has evolved in our society to contain the meanings of war that we can tolerate, and so make sense of its inconsistencies and contradictions” (207). Auto/biographical narratives of war—what Hynes calls the “war-memoir”—play a crucial role in developing this myth, most clearly because they invite easy identification.¹¹

Jay Winter, writing about World War I, argues that because the war was such a “monumental disaster in *family* history”, it has been remembered “initially and overwhelmingly as an event in family history. In a rush, with the war, family history and national history came together in unprecedented ways. To this day, through the study of genealogy, through retelling family stories, the war is kept alive as a vivid moment in popular history” (42). We can extend this idea to these family memoirs of Asian wars. Indeed, although political and historical events structure the persons' lives, Kang and Elliott deliberately and consistently filter the narrative of the events through the eyes or voice of their forebears or themselves. Both autobiographers begin the prefaces of their texts by explaining, to different degrees, how personal stories might structurally replace events as the configuring element of their narratives. In what Helena Grice describes as “a distinct blend of traumatic personal recollection, impeccable historical research and political determination”, Kang recounts the 1951 North Korean invasion of Seoul by telling of her escape, with her mother, on the rooftop of the last train bound for Pusan (Grice 94).¹² In a sense, the invasion itself becomes secondary to the effect it produced for the Kang family: separation, danger, eventual immigration. Elliott also explains that the stories and anecdotes she heard from relatives as she was growing up merged into a tale that reflected the history of Vietnam, evidencing her privileging of persons as the prism through which to view events. Indeed, as they relate their stories, they insist on how these events were lived by the diverse

members of their family, recognizing the validity of the subjective over an illusive objectivity.

Kang's and Elliott's texts evince a personal need to publish these stories, as the families that could preserve them have been dispersed by the diaspora.¹³ From the beginning, Kang locates her family story within that of Korea by explaining her project in these terms: "This, then, is a story of the Korean diaspora. It is a story of my native place, a rabbit-shaped country we call the Land of Morning Calm. This is also a story about my family and how we lived through the turbulent changes of the twentieth century, and my own journey to America, my adopted home, which began when my great-grandfather Bong-Ho Kang embraced Christianity and set the Kang clan on the road to Westernization" (*Morning Calm* xvii). Similarly, Elliott explains how the funny and tragic stories that "spoke of family continuity, values, and Vietnamese traditions", recounted at informal family gatherings, began to coalesce in her mind into a continuing narrative that "merged into a whole—a tale that reflected, in miniature, the history of Vietnam in the modern era" (*Sacred Willow* xi). Remembering these stories as an adult in America, she says, "I began to see the common threads that ran through the lives of my great-grandfather, grandfather, parents and siblings: the struggle to adapt and survive in the face of upheavals that more than once turned their world upside down, and the attempt to make the right choices for their families, for themselves, and for their country, often in very confusing circumstances. Someday, I told myself, I would write that story" (xi).

Both writers then proceed to recount their family histories chronologically, reveling in anecdotal details of many family members. Beginning with their great-grandfathers (although Kang briefly introduces her great-great-grandfather), they use family stories to describe the events in twentieth-century Asia. Kang and Elliott come from educated middle-class families who were, in different ways, influential in their societies. They stress their families' emphasis on education and traditional values, and both texts describe the family crises that arose with the influx of "Western" ideas into Korea and Vietnam. Kang begins by describing her family's placid existence in Boshigol, in the northeastern part of the Korean peninsula, and traces the changes in the family's fortunes: her great-great-grandfather was a peasant who became a country judge in spite of a lack of education; her great-grandfather converted from a life of women and leisure to become a Christian evangelist; her grandfather fought with the Korean resistance against the Japanese and was tortured and imprisoned; her father worked for the United Nations and the U.S. government in Asia.

An important part of the history that Kang engages is the chronicle of the development of Christianity in the country. Though there were Korean Christians in the sixteenth century, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism did not flourish until the nineteenth century. Catholic, American Methodist, and Presbyterian missionaries (notably, for example, Henry Appenzeller and Horace Underwood) founded numerous schools for both boys and girls, which introduced Western thought and converted many to Christianity. Interestingly, because the Japanese viewed Christianity as a potential threat, they destroyed churches and imprisoned or tortured the Christians, leading many to link Christianity with Korean nationalism. Further, Christianity in Korea spread as an indigenous lay movement, which facilitated its dissemination among the population. Many early converts became pastors, and the religion they proclaimed was therefore more readily accepted as “Korean” rather than as a foreign imposition.¹⁴ Indeed, Kang’s great-grandfather, Bong-Ho, was one of those lay preachers, who eventually established seventeen churches throughout North Korea, opening the family to the liberating perspective of Christianity, which aided them psychologically in dealing with Japanese oppression.

Because Christianity was allied to Western forms of thinking, Kang describes the ways in which the family began to deal with modern forms of behavior. Significantly, for example, when her grandmother Myong-Hwa decided to enroll at a women’s seminary to qualify as an evangelist after her husband joined the resistance, her great-grandparents were scandalized at the thought of a married woman with a child seeking an education: “This was unheard of in old Korea” (34). Ironically, though her father-in-law’s beliefs led Myong-Hwa to want to take this step, he was incapable of championing her cause against his wife’s wishes. In spite of being a Westernized Christian, Bong-Ho was yet unable to overcome his traditional perspectives regarding women’s education. Generations of Elliott’s family also had to deal with the rapid cultural changes brought about by French colonization. Her great-grandfather, a mandarin, struggled with issues of loyalty to Vietnam during the period of colonization, suffering from “the conflicting pull of what scholars at the time called ‘engagement’ and ‘withdrawal’”. He had to rethink his concept of loyalty to his country, even as he felt he could make a difference: “Could he, in ‘engaging,’ separate loyalty to the court from loyalty to France, which controlled it? And could he, as a mandarin, be loyal to the people and their welfare, without also furthering the interests of France?” (13).

The tug-of-war of loyalties, between traditions, colonizing forces, and

change, recurs in both narratives, as family members from different generations negotiate their positions in these shifting contexts. Elliott describes her parents' generation as the crucial group who "had their feet in both the old Vietnam that was disappearing and a new Vietnam that was only just taking shape" (80). Though they had acquired French educations, at home they continued to live Vietnamese family traditions, and their children's desire for individual freedom at what they considered expense of the family values alarmed them.

The clash of traditional Asian perspectives with Western forms of behavior reaches the climax in both narratives when, after finishing their college degrees in the United States in the 1960s, the writers decide to marry white Americans and immigrate there. For both families, interracial marriage undermined profound cultural mores. Kang mistakenly believed that her parents, particularly her open-minded father who had worked for years for the Americans, would take a liberal view on her engagement to an American: "But I realized that the Korean psyche prevented liberal ideas from going too far when it came to such close-to-home things as interracial marriage" (185). Buckling under the pressure, she breaks off the engagement, but eventually marries another American she meets while working in Korea. This marriage, clearly a mistake from the beginning, ends in divorce a few years later, after Kang has immigrated to the United States. Elliott undergoes similar opposition from her family when she announces her marriage to David Elliott, who would be serving in the army in Vietnam. Yet, she explains, "My father was more distressed by the shame that my marriage to an American sergeant would bring to our family than by my breach of filial piety. He told me that only prostitutes and bar girls got involved with foreigners, and if I married an American, everyone in Vietnam would take me for a whore. My relatives would despise me, and my family's honor would be stained" (307). Eventually, in Elliott's case, the story ends happily, with her husband becoming a part of her family.

Kang and Elliott structure their narratives by privileging the patriarchal family line, following the general practice in both the Asian and Western traditions.¹⁵ The male family members' public positions made them protagonists in the changing political scene of their countries while the women inhabited the home space. Yet the writers evince how they receive more personal and cultural sustenance from their mothers and foremothers. Kang and Elliott clearly identify more with the women's narratives than with the men's, although their fathers' stories frame the family and national histories. Kang's foremothers include her paternal grandmother Myong-Hwa, who set off on her own to

acquire an education, and her maternal grandmother Ke-Son Han, who, after the division of Korea along the 38th Parallel, crossed the border on several occasions to help her family escape to the South. Kang writes with admiration, “She was fifty-one, my age as I write these words; I wonder if I would have had the courage, vision, and strength she possessed to see that her family members got safe passage” (81). Earlier, Ke-Son had risked alienating her family with her conversion to Christianity. She left her comfortable life in North Korea to become a refugee in the South because of her determination to retain her freedom to worship. Kang’s mother’s struggle to escape with her and her efforts for survival when they are refugees merits the daughter’s respect.

Elliott also foregrounds stories about the women in her family. Interestingly, she notes that her family chronicle “did not say much about my great-grandmother (or any of my female ancestors, for that matter) except to praise her virtues, in particular her filial piety, her devotion to her husband and children, and her harmonious relationship with everyone. Family records were not written to reveal the truth, but to inspire awe and respect for ancestors” (15). As though to challenge this official and clearly inadequate version, she describes the women in her family such as her maternal grandmother, who, left a widow with young children, opened up a successful silk business. This grandmother, a forerunner among women in her generation, also made sure her daughters received an education at a French private school. Elliott connects her grandmother’s life to “the indigenous tradition of Vietnamese women. Before Confucianism restricted what they could do, women would compete in exams or even lead armies. . . . This traditional independence was so strong that Confucianism could not destroy it entirely. Among the merchants, in particular, there were many women like my grandmother. Together, they dominated commerce” (64). Elliott’s mother figures importantly in her daughter’s narrative. Her perseverance and quiet strength sustain her in her marriage, the birth of seventeen children (five of whom died in infancy or childhood and one of whom, Mao, was probably a schizophrenic), and her husband’s long-term affair with a singer. Elliott does not idealize her mother; indeed, she criticizes harshly what she considers her parents’ favoritism towards some of their children. These writers’ focus on their male and female forebears presents a complex portrait of families in flux. Recounting the complementary stories of fathers and mothers, we perceive how the writers identify in different ways with each of the persons. Though the men’s actions changed family destiny, the women assured the family’s survival.

Kang and Elliott appropriate not only their forebears’ voices and stories,

but also those of family members of their generation, widening our perspectives on the political positioning that functioned so crucially during the twentieth century in Korea and Vietnam. Modifying the traditional primary focus on the vertical family narrative, these texts also highlight horizontal affiliations. Kang's brother, Emmanuel, is born when they are in Tokyo, when she is twelve. The age gap, together with Kang's departure for college, makes a close sibling relationship difficult, although the two become closer as adults. Kang analyzes what she calls the "tragic figure" of her brother, the embodiment of the diasporic subject: "Born and raised in Japan, but educated in American schools, he thought like an American. Yet because of my parents' extraordinarily strong Korean emphasis at home, Emmanuel had been unable to break away from the grips of Korean culture. If I felt marginal, he was a thousand times more so: he truly belonged nowhere" (232). She identifies current generations of Korean Americans with her brother and empathizes with them.

Elliott draws from the stories of her numerous siblings and extended family to create a multihued portrait of a Vietnamese family. In particular, she focuses extensively on her sister Thang, who supported the Viet Minh and joined the resistance. Though she does not support her sister's beliefs, Elliott manifests her admiration for the sibling she considers "the most morally pure person, someone with a very strong sense of what is right and wrong, and an unshakable sense of duty. She is compassionate, extremely straightforward, and unselfish" (124). Elliott narrates Thang's life in the jungle, her long separations from her husband, her dedication to the Communist ideal, her joy when the Communists finally enter Hanoi, and later Saigon, triumphant. By writing Thang's story, as well as that of a cousin, Luc, who also left his family to fight with the Viet Minh, Elliott provides multiple perspectives on the conflict in Vietnam, showing how contrasting ideologies separated families. By writing about the family members who participated actively in the Viet Minh resistance, she gives a human face and story to this generally vilified mass of guerrillas. She portrays her sister and cousin as loyal Vietnamese, willing to give their lives to liberate their country and people from foreign oppression. Ironically, Elliott notes how Thang's decision to leave the family arose from "two basic traditional values: compassion for the poor and loyalty to one's husband. The famine had horrified her. When her husband told her about the Viet Minh, she concluded that a movement that distributed food to the starving, tried to end the famine, promised to help the poor achieve equality, and wanted to get rid of the Japanese deserved her allegiance" (129). This allegiance would be severely tested for over thirty

years, until the American abandonment of Vietnam and the Viet Cong's takeover of Saigon.

It is impossible and, indeed, counterproductive to separate Kang's and Elliott's personal family stories from their historical contexts. Though the stories focus primarily on individuals, these accounts are located within charged political situations. Both Kang and Elliott highlight the family stories' political context, engaging readers in the personal story behind the public version and inviting them to consider the implications of these events on family histories. Kang's intention to link the personal with the public shows in her narrative style, which repeatedly juxtaposes private and public events in the same sentence, consistently framing the family story within the narrative of imperialist negotiations in Asia. She notes, for example: "The president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, whom my ancestors had not even heard of, was a key player in the geopolitical decisions that forever changed the Kangs' lives" (15). She describes her grandfather's and father's lives under Japanese colonization, stressing their loyalty to their Korean identity and struggles to transcend the insidious influence of the Japanese: "Without their country, and stripped of even their family names, language, national anthem, and flower, Koreans suffered under the Japanese as few peoples ever had under an invading country's rule" (63). Her grandfather, Myong-Hwan, imprisoned several times for his collaboration with the resistance, emerges a broken man; her father, Joo-Han, is a victim of the escalating campaign to eradicate Korean culture. At school he was taught only Japanese history and forbidden to speak Korean, told to dress and cut his hair in the Japanese style as part of Japan's policy of "remaking Koreans into second-class Japanese" (49).¹⁶ When Joo-Han decided, in sixth grade, to learn English—inspired by the missionaries who "always seemed so well mannered, helpful, and generous" (50)—he did not realize how this would influence his family's history. His knowledge of English allowed them to survive during Japanese rule and later gave him employment when they were refugees in Seoul. It would also lead them to leave Korea.

As she recounts the specific moments that transformed her family's history—her great-grandfather's conversion and her father's learning English—Kang also highlights how these private decisions functioned against the backdrop of world politics. She laments how the international community ignored the plight of Koreans and how American intervention repeatedly frustrated Korean desire for independence: "Now two Roosevelts had betrayed Koreans. The United States, the supposed protector of democracy, had once again turned its back on Korea just as it was finally on the verge of freedom

and human dignity. My father cursed the two Roosevelts: cowboy Teddy, for conniving with Japan in her takeover of Korea, then refusing to acknowledge the Korean government in exile; and FDR for selling out to Stalin in Yalta and at the 1945 Potsdam Conference” (75). Her family lost everything and had to move from the North to Seoul, and later to Pusan—riding on the roof of a train—to live as refugees, and finally, entering illegally, to Japan, to join her father, who was working there for the United Nations. Kang’s story of successive displacements continued as she moved to Okinawa as an adolescent and later to the United States for college.

Elliott has a very specific purpose in writing a memoir about Vietnam, a country that has figured so prominently and yet has been woefully misunderstood in American popular culture. As she explains, a work of this scope and depth had not been written by a Vietnamese in English, and she wanted to “show Vietnam in all its complexities at peace and at war, good and bad, traditional and transformed. I have elected to tell a story, rather than write an academic analysis, because I believe that a personal narrative can render history more immediate to readers and make them empathize better with the people who lived through the events.... I have shown them—as they saw themselves—as the central players in their own history” (xii). She also attempts to revise the common stereotype of American writing and film on villagers, soldiers, or bar girls, to center on middle-class Vietnamese, who experienced the transformations that successive colonizations forced upon Vietnamese history and culture. For example, by describing her sister’s and cousin’s involvement with the Communist-led resistance, she portrays the type of family divisions that extended throughout the middle class in the mid-1940s, when numerous patriotic Vietnamese chose to fight the French who were trying to re-impose colonial rule. Elliott’s characters—“scholars and mandarins, the silk merchants, the military officers, and the revolutionaries”—were both witnesses to and participants in these events. Their stories encapsulate the events of a little over the last hundred years, from “the French conquest of Vietnam, the war against French colonial rule, the brief years of peace, the socialist transformation of the north, the resumption of fighting in the south with American involvement until the communist victory in 1975, the evacuation of refugees from Saigon, and the effect of the communist victory on my relatives who remained in Vietnam” (xii). Her account, like Kang’s, mediates history by placing individuals against a background of historical events beyond their control. In many ways, therefore, these are important stories of survival. Writing the story gives Elliott an important sense of closure; the auto/biographical

act allows her to critically examine family and history and perceive “the irony and unpredictability of history. The choices each person made had unforeseen consequences that, at times, made losers of winners. I see also the tenacity of family bonds that, although strained, were ultimately stronger than any political differences” (xiii).

These writers’ approaches to their auto/biographies emphasize the connection between family stories and national histories and, significantly, illustrate how the history represented in family memoirs always reenacts the past, rather than simply views it. There is an important element of performance in these family memoirs. If, as Janet Gunn proposes, autobiography is not conceived as “the private act of self-writing” but as “the cultural act of the self reading” (8), then autobiographical discourse ultimately focuses on not merely the subject’s authentic “I”, but her location in the world through an active interpretation of experiences, a willful self-positioning in history and culture. In this respect, Ien Ang posits auto/biography “as a more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of a ‘self’ for *public*, not private purposes: the displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a *useful* identity, an identity which can be put to work” (3). The useable history that develops from these narratives promotes collective memory in the communities that have arisen from these diasporas.

To read Kang’s and Elliott’s texts effectively, we must also take into account the ways they work within the Asian American communities. By providing a history of these communities, they explain to the members their own histories and validate their presence in the United States. Also, these personal texts, in important ways, oblige us to reexamine America’s policies in Asia throughout the twentieth century. As Grice notes about *Home Was the Land of Morning Calm*, the memoir blends the author’s personal memories with “a consciousness of the importance of international intervention in human rights issues within Korea. . . . Somewhat unusually, her memoir is framed by a politically interventionist preface, that serves to set the overtly political tone of the narrative that follows, plus an epilogue calling for international support for Korean reunification” (114).

These texts mediate history by engaging processes of memory, as Mieke Bal explains when she says that “the memorial presence of the past takes many forms and serves many purposes, ranging from conscious recall to unreflected reemergence, from nostalgic longing for what is lost to polemical use of the past to reshape the present” (ix). The existence of a community of readers, susceptible to processes of collective memory, marks these Asian American family

memoirs. The amount of factual information in Kang's and Elliott's texts—names, dates, locations, detailed descriptions of battles and meetings—allows us to classify these texts as versions of history. Moreover, the texts dialogue with issues that have shaped uncritical epistemological perspectives on Asian Americans, such as model minority discourse. Many readers of these texts identify with that community and view themselves as subjects fully committed to furthering cultural politics, policies, and developing cultural knowledge in diverse forms. Interestingly, the historian Carolyn Steedman writes that “it is for the potentialities of that community offered by historical consciousness, I suppose, that I want what I have written to be called history, and not autobiography” (*Past Tenses* 50). Steedman makes this point because she believes that the form of autobiography implies a closure, embodied by the person of the autobiographer. History, on the contrary, is always subject to revision. This purpose is manifested explicitly by the writers, who highlight their commitment to a wider project of ethnic validation and cultural memory. In particular, Kang's experience of the Los Angeles riots in 1992, for example, made her see the need to explain Korean Americans' positions in American cities.

Questions of ethnic identity—a vexed issue in ethnic studies—resound on diverse levels in these texts as the authors' focus on cultural allegiances gives the community diverse perspectives on how historical events influence processes of self-identification. Indeed, these writers offer a personal perspective on Asian American identity that may be considered problematic by some Asian American scholars who would judge it as “assimilationist”. I believe that the diasporic or immigrant experience is as plural as the persons who experience it and that we cannot establish prescribed frames or an authorized vocabulary to engage this experience “correctly”. In these texts, Kang and Elliott recount their personal histories, which should be read precisely as such, and not assessed according to (or made to conform to) currently fashionable politically correct critical perspectives. For example, Kang's family's repeated dislocations made her ambivalent towards her Korean identity as she grew up. Living in Japan, even as “my Koreanness was so drilled into me that it became like a religion”, she has to negotiate the contradictions between those practices and values and what she was learning at the American school: “I was Korean and Japanese, and about to become American, too. So, in Tokyo, I went from a nine-year-old . . . to a fifteen-year-old, juggling three cultures and three languages and keenly feeling the conflicting pulls of each” (145–146). Ironically, her Koreanization begins in earnest at university in the United States. Meeting Korean students with absolute cultural confidence allows her to approach

Korea from a contemporary—even cynical—perspective, rather than through her parents' nostalgic idealization of the Korea they left behind. The story of her growing into her Korean identity and of moving to Korea to work offers the community another perspective on ethnic authenticity. Kang's personal journey towards cultural appreciation is fraught with difficulties, revealing the complexity of the diaspora experience, even suggesting that one cannot ever truly return "home". Kang's pragmatic view on the situation of Asians in America—that, because they are not Caucasians, they will never be allowed to fully assimilate—leads her to champion the need to maintain collective memory as well as bilingual and bicultural identity: "We become better citizens with a greater appreciation for America when we know who we are, where we come from, and why we came. A strong identity is not only crucial to our well-being but will contribute to making the great American experiment work—and everybody has a stake in making the experiment work" (299).

Her own history leads Kang to consciously engage the stories of immigrants in the United States. Her identification as an immigrant bearing memories of another land and another history inspired her to work for the community, and to provide it with sustainable knowledge. Her awareness of her responsibility as one of very few Korean Americans writing for a major American newspaper allows her to influence public opinion and disseminate important information about Asia and ethnic communities. For this reason, she explains, "At last, I was fulfilling my goal to introduce and interpret Asians to the non-Asian mainstream on their terms. And in doing so, I followed the lodestar of the sage Confucius by reminding myself that people's natures are alike, it is their habits that separate them" (290).

Elliott, because she did not leave Vietnam definitely until she was an adult (apart from four years in college in the United States), does not undergo the process of ethnic identification that Kang does. She acknowledges her multiple legacies: "I view myself as a mixture of Vietnamese, French, and American cultural strains and feel comfortable moving in all three countries. Yet, underneath the French and American layers, I remain Vietnamese at the core and, as I grow older, I feel the pull of my heritage and an urge to return to my roots" (468). But her work serves an equally vital service to the growing Vietnamese community by providing insider accounts of Vietnam, whose public image in the United States tends to be reduced to faceless masses and stories of war. She likens the writing of the family memoir to a journey home, after exploring the world, that grew from a desire to "return to the source", using a Vietnamese phrase (468). The book is intended for her family—her

nephews and nieces who have become French, Canadians, Australians, and Americans—in order to give them the family story, and for all the Vietnamese of the diaspora, because this is their story as well. Both these unequivocal purposes become part of their authors' conscious or unconscious political performance strategies. By proposing their texts as narratives that speak for and therefore serve the community, Kang and Elliott invite identification and mobilization.

In connection to the trope of countermemory, many Asian American family memoirists choose to highlight particular metaphors as unifying prisms to their stories, such as food, music, or particular ethnic artifacts. Kang and Elliott each use a specific term to designate the kind of connection they and their communities have with their heritage country. Kang explains the meaning of the word *han* as “this indescribable fate that Koreans feel in the depths of their hearts and deepest recesses of their souls . . . the Korean tenet of eternal woe, unrequited love, and unending hope and wishes” (298), and Elliott incorporates the word *minh*, or “we”, which “denotes the ethnic and cultural bond Vietnamese feel with one another” (184). In important ways, these key terms, which resonate in the texts in question as well as within the Korean and Vietnamese communities, also describe the work these family memoirs operate in the American context. These family memoirs, read together, play a pivotal role in the construction of this kind of collective memory because of the way they validate each other and expand the meanings of similar experiences. Further, because both texts end with the auto/biographer establishing herself in the United States, they rewrite the traditional scripts of national belonging. *Home Was the Land of Morning Calm* and *The Sacred Willow* convey the sense of a painful separation from the homeland, brought about by wars that, in significant ways, have modified Korean and Vietnamese cultures and created new communities in the United States.

Chapter 4 **Multiple Journeys and
Palimpsestic Diasporas**

What a paradise Burma must have seemed to my ancestors, a land of limitless opportunity and easy living. Burma was my family's first America. *Suvarnabhumi*, in Sanskrit; *Sonapranta*, in Pali; Burma, the golden land.

—Mira Kamdar, *Motiba's Tattoos*

The family memoirs analyzed in this chapter illustrate an important facet of Asian history, namely the experience of travel and displacement within Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Current criticism on Asian American writing generally focuses on issues of displacement, acculturation, or transculturation within American borders, but an examination of the history of immigrants to the United States often reveals a previous narrative of cultural transitions—usually brought about for political or religious reasons—that complicates our notion of the cultural baggage that these immigrants carry. Privileging narratives of multiple displacements, which Angelika Bammer suggests we think about “as a theoretical signifier, a textual strategy, and a lived experience” in a family memoir, marks these texts with “the tension of the historically vital double move between marking and recording absence and loss and inscribing presence” (“Introduction” xiii, xiv). In the memoirs I examine here, the authors depict their forebears’ travel to and existence within spaces where they were classified as “other”, illustrating a history of multiple/continuing diasporas that has often been elided after the family’s immigration to the United States. Jael Silliman’s *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* recounts the history of the Baghdadi Jews’ settlement and progressive acculturation to India through the story of four generations of women in her family. Helie Lee paints a portrait of her Korean grandmother’s life as a refugee in China in *Still Life with Rice*, and Mira Kamdar, in *Motiba’s Tattoos*, describes her Indian family’s settlement in Burma as part of the process of mobility within the British Empire.

The narratives of these experiences of relocation within Asia before what

becomes, in a sense, the final journey to the West remind us that, as scholars of Asian American studies, we should not overlook the implications of these pre-immigration experiences of international contact and settlement in our description of the nature of Asian immigrants. The existence of persons who might be called “serial migrants”, whose experiences challenge the simple binary, origin-and-destination model of migration, provokes critical thinking about displacement, assimilation, and what it means to be “cosmopolitan”. Susan Ossman explains that these subjects, whose family lives are characterized by global mobility, offer “interpretations of how subjectivity, modes of action, and strategies for social visibility are shaped in the process of moving from one place to another” (2).

These memoirs posit the idea of travel and displacement as part of the family’s history, before immigration to the United States, highlighting the dynamic nature of cultural affiliation, practices, and identification. By examining the ways that people in transit preserve, adapt, adopt, and devise cultural practices, we attend to new forms of cultural development, which often grow from the concessions necessary for survival. These family memoirs, therefore, revise previous notions of Asian immigrants as possessors of “pure” cultures as they show how Asian countries have been, in Mary Louise Pratt’s words, “contact zones”, “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). Interestingly, all the relocations described in these family memoirs were required or compelled by the structures of colonial expansion: Silliman’s and Kamdar’s families settled in India and Burma as part of the British Empire’s labor apparatus and Lee’s family left Korea to escape Japanese oppression. These family histories illustrate how many people took advantage of colonial structures to improve their family’s economic and social status—all the families studied here became substantially wealthy in these contexts. Though most of them lost their fortune (and sense of location) to war, this part of the family’s history became part of family legend, an important subtext of the personal story and vital information about the community’s experience.

The kind of cultural consciousness enacted in these memoirs, which focus on how families decide to move to other countries yet continue to maintain a strong sense of cultural identification with their originary ethnic group, might be said to illustrate the notion of the “changing same”, as deployed by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993).¹ The term has also been used in the context of the South Asian diaspora by Sandhya Shukla, who explains

that it illuminates “the apparent paradox of the amazing persistence of South Asian traditions and forms of expression around the world and the increased visibility of innovative renderings of national, regional, and religious identities under the sign of ‘South Asianness,’ ‘Indianness,’ or even ‘Islam.’ Things stay the same and they change in South Asian as well as other diasporas. To faithfully maintain the duality of that fundamental truism, though, is to resist the reduction of any cultural moment to national or homeland difference” (552). In the three texts examined in this chapter, families move to other countries to take advantage of economic opportunities, but with the clear intention of preserving their cultural practices and affiliations. Helie Lee states this unambiguously when she titles one of her chapters “Going to China to be Korean”. Thus, the notion of “changing same” limns alternative configurations for understanding continuity and change in the context of diaspora, as it “pointedly stresses how remembrance and commemoration, rather than a primordial culture, are the principal grounds of belonging in diaspora” (Fortier 146).

This notion functions in this discussion because of the multiple diasporas the families experience and how complex the process of cultural affiliation becomes. As Anne-Marie Fortier explains, the “changing same” “seizes the ways in which the tension between having been, being, and becoming is negotiated, conjugated, or resolved. . . . Though some collective recollections may be lived as enduring traditions, they result, rather, from the processing and re-processing of cultural forms. . . . The double process of unforgetting and remembrance stitches together elements of the past in attempts to draw lines of continuity that buttress common grounds of belonging” (159). Rituals, particularly storytelling, become the living memory of the “changing same” and become “embodied and lived as expressions of an inherent core and enduring identity that is organically linked to a larger, imagined community. Constructed through memories and duration, spaces of belonging are themselves, to some extent, continually produced as images” (Fortier 173–174). The notion allows us to understand the relationship between ethnic continuity and discontinuity, sameness and variety. By reading these texts through the notion of the “changing same” we negotiate the paradoxical idea of both stability and transformation, not only in the narratives about these groups but in the persons who retell the stories. The narrators of these family memoirs play particularly crucial roles because of how they articulate or represent a past subjected to repeated disruptions by insisting on processes of ethnic continuity.

Between Religion and Nation

Jael Silliman's *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* opens with the observation: "There was a thriving Jewish community in Calcutta in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, only a handful of elderly Baghdadi Jews remains. A few matzahs are still made locally by non-Jews (supervised by Jews) for the Jews who are left. Very soon matzahs will no longer be made in Calcutta" (2–3). The prospect of the disappearance of what was once a lively and influential community leads Silliman to embark on a family memoir that provides important historical information about the arrival, settlement, and eventual departure of the Baghdadi Jews of India. The Baghdadi Jews were one of three relatively small Jewish diaspora groups—the others being the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews—that lived harmoniously in India for centuries or decades, until increasing Hindu nationalism in the mid- to late twentieth century led them to leave for Israel or the United States.²

Each of these Indian Jewish diasporas has a unique history: the Cochin Jews settled in India in the year AD 78, after the Roman destruction of the second temple; the Bene Israel Jews of Bombay arrived sixteen hundred years ago, to escape persecution; and the Baghdadi Jews of Bombay and Calcutta fled the Ottoman Empire and Iran in the late eighteenth century to avoid forced conversion to Islam. The Baghdadi Jews began to trade in India in the late eighteenth century and many began to settle in large commercial and industrial cities like Surat (Gujarat), Bombay, and Calcutta, as well as Rangoon in Burma (now Myanmar). Over the years, they began taking over the textile industry, opening stores, and participating actively in the financial activity of the cities. The Baghdadi Jews were the least Indianized and most Anglicized of the three Jewish groups in India: Ruth Cernea entitles her study on them *Almost Englishmen* (2007). Jay Prosser, in his autobiographical essay about his Baghdadi Jewish grandfather, explains, "Baghdadi Jews are known as the Empire's Jews. From their centre in Baghdad they spread throughout the East, prospering in waves of migration under successive empires: Islamic, Ottoman, and most lately British" (103).

Using the stories of her great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and herself, Silliman traces the evolving self-identification of these women with a particular form of Judaism and with India, which illustrates the notion of "changing same". As an academic trained in the social sciences, Silliman combines memoir, ethnography, and sociocultural history to describe the ways she

and her foremothers negotiated their Jewish identity within the colonial, postcolonial, and immigrant spaces they occupied at different times.³ She uses the term “Jewish Asia” to refer to the communities her family belonged to, which she argues was culturally like the “Black Atlantic” and the “medieval Jewish Mediterranean”. Her theoretical knowledge of issues related to women’s studies, postcolonial theory, identity, nationhood, and travel leads her to contextualize her family’s history, signaling the cultural and sociological implications of individual actions, forms of behavior, and choices. Indeed, she explains that the second part of the book’s subtitle, “Diaspora of Hope”, was taken from Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), locating her project clearly within a continuing dialogue about new forms of living in the world.

Silliman calls her text a “collaborative narrative” that she undertakes in dialogue with her mother, Flower Elias, who (in collaboration with Judy Elias Cooper) had also published a book about the Baghdadi Jews titled *The Jews of Calcutta: The Autobiography of a Community, 1798–1972 (Jewish Portraits 7)*. The process begins with the author asking her mother for her thoughts or memory of characters, places, or events, which she later inscribes and comments on or develops, using interviews with other family members or sociological data to fill in the gaps. Silliman reproduces her mother’s narrative as extended block quotations within the text, giving the memoir a feel of a family conversation, though she calls it “a scholarly and family endeavour” (8). The author also acknowledges her own perceptions, ideas, and position in relation to her forebears’ stories, as well as to the fragmentary nature of her information. Though she writes that she has tried to fill in the gaps with data gathered from family or academic sources, she is “fully aware that in my accounts ‘some memories are elaborated, some elided, some never summoned at all’, making these portraits only fragments selected from the totality of their lives” (9). The academic nature of Silliman’s narrative is also clear in her extensive use of footnotes, an index, and a bibliography that cites the major critics of postcolonial studies, women’s studies, and other related fields: Benedict Anderson, Gloria Anzaldúa, James Clifford, Stuart Hall, Caren Kaplan, and Mary Louise Pratt, among others. Though other family memoirs analyzed in this book also contain substantial references, such as Elliott’s *The Sacred Willow* or See’s *On Gold Mountain*, Silliman’s bibliography is striking because of its highly theoretical nature. Elliott, See, Hall, and other family memoirists cite mostly historical books to provide factual information for their family narratives; Silliman harnesses multidisciplinary cultural studies to elucidate the diasporic

nature of her family's history. As she describes particular events or practices, she also includes a critical approach, examining many of the anecdotes from the perspective of cultural theory. She also writes an extended critical introduction and final essay that place the personal stories in their historical and cultural context. The introduction discusses the history and religious identity of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta; the concluding essay, "Dwelling in Travel", analyzes the stories she has told and reconsiders her family's shifting position within this unique diaspora.

Each of the extended chapters—what the author calls "portraits"—centers on one of the women of the story, and Silliman uses the life story of that foremother to highlight specific issues related to the history of the Jews in India. Most interestingly, she teases out the ways these generations of Jewish women lived transculturally through their subtle but definite increasing adaptation to and identification with India. The ways they negotiated the role of religion and culture in their lives shift as subsequent generations become more implicated in national, rather than merely religious, spaces. Beginning her story in the nineteenth century, Silliman tells of her great-grandfather, Saleh Abraham, who immigrated from Iraq to take advantage of British India's economic potential and started a trade of cloths and spices. In 1900, at the age of fifty, he married his Iraqi partner's fifteen-year-old daughter, Farha, and brought her to India. Farha's story, subtitled "Crossing Borders, Maintaining Boundaries", describes the life of the earliest Baghdadi Jews to settle in India, who brought with them and preserved their Judeo-Arab identity, exemplified by the languages they spoke: Hebrew for prayer, Arabic in conversation, and basic Hindustani to communicate with servants. The author describes in detail where they lived (usually rented apartments in Jewish areas), their food, rituals, celebrations, prayers, and clothes. Farha always dressed in the Arabic wrapper and never considered wearing a sari or any other Indian dress. The family had seven children (her second son, Eliyahu Hayeem, known as Elias, was Jael's grandfather), all of whom married within the Baghdadi Jewish community.

The center of Farha's life was her family and community. This portrait unveils the interconnectedness of the Baghdadi Jews in the Far East, from Calcutta, Rangoon, and Singapore. The subtitle for this portrait elucidates Farha's unique position: though she, technically, immigrated to another country when she married, nonetheless, because she never truly left her community, she never crossed the boundaries she had been born within. Silliman deploys her great-grandmother's story to represent the narrative of all

the other middle-class Baghdadi Jewish women who, quoting Nathan Katz, were “living in India but not being of India”, in contrast to the Cochin and Bene Israel Jews who were more assimilated (*Jewish Portraits* 52). Silliman’s narrative of her great-grandmother’s life is full of sociological detail, which serves to supplement the few real memories they have of her. Silliman arguably uses the figure of her great-grandmother to disclose “the processes by which a generation of middle-class Jews shifted from one dual or hyphenated identity, Judeo-Arabic, to another, Judeo-British. In this process of ‘transculturation’, their Jewish identity remained the constant and primary identity—the first part of their hyphenated selves. Farha’s story highlights the ‘deterritorialized’ nature of the community, in which identity was delinked from territory. Its members moved fluidly across borders and large geographic spaces but were able to maintain strong boundaries and real communities even as they moved” (50). Indeed, she explains that moving from Baghdad to other locations in Asia was not traumatic for them because of the strength of community cohesion and, more importantly, because the group flourished in these new places.

Silliman’s narrative of the Baghdadi Jews in India is a chronicle of harmonious co-existence, unlike many of the accounts of the Ashkenazi Jews’ attempts to settle in Europe. Silliman explains how the Baghdadi Jewish presence in India was connected to the British colonial system and expressed in trading. Their pivotal role in the development of mercantile capitalism, for example, was important to the British colonial project: “The Baghdadi Jews’ relationship to India was complicated. They played an exploitative role as outsiders in the economic colonization of India, while facilitating the colonial project from the inside. They were loyal to, but never considered themselves, British—nor were they so regarded by the colonial powers” (18). But the author does not refrain from criticizing her group’s actions, for example, when they passed from successful trade with merchandise to opium.

The author’s grandmother, Miriam, who married Farha’s son, Elias, was of the first generation of Jews born and raised in Calcutta. Though the most religious of Silliman’s foremothers (her portrait is subtitled “Coming Home to the Mount of Olives”), she was also profoundly immersed in English culture. Preferring to call herself “Mary”, she worked as a teacher, married for love, and was determined to give her children “a sound Jewish upbringing and an English education” (70). Mary belonged to the generation of Calcutta Jews whose tastes were increasingly Western; they had no access to the Arabic music that their mothers listened to, except perhaps at weddings or community

gatherings, and they did not enjoy Indian music. Indeed, Mary's day, according to her granddaughter's description, was quite culturally eclectic.

It was perfectly natural for my grandmother to say her *brachot*, settle down to eat a kosher meal of Indian food, listen to Western popular music after her meal, and to curl up in the cool of her room in the hot Calcutta afternoon with a British novel. Although she might be regarded as an example of 'hybridity', Mary did not feel as though she was mixing cultures nor did she feel fragmented. I contend that the term 'multilocationality' across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries captures her sentiments more accurately than 'displacement'. She effortlessly seemed to face in several different directions at once. (90)

In the 1940s Mary obtained work as a teacher of sewing and English for the women of some wealthy Marwari families, leading her to enter the Indian world on a regular basis. Through this contact she began to sample Indian food, some of which she incorporated into her own household. This generation of anglophile Jews, who generally wore Western clothes, would never have considered wearing Indian clothing. Silliman explains, "Wearing Indian clothes was seen as a shameful betrayal in the Jewish community, tantamount to identifying with India and Indianness. Yet Mary was quite comfortable speaking in Hindustani and eating Indian food at home—more private acts which did not mark her publicly" (78–79). Nonetheless, the author wonders whether this insistent differentiation from India and Indianness arose from a kind of racism or a fear of assimilation, though "what is clear is that the Calcutta Jews were always engaged in a selective process regarding which parts of India and Indian culture to adopt and which ones to keep at bay" (78). Late in life Mary moved to London and still later to Jerusalem, where she was eventually buried in the Mount of Olives. Silliman describes the last years of her grandmother's life as less settled than her earlier ones, as she moved from one relative's house to another and tried to find a place for herself in Israel.

This Baghdadi Jewish family's position in relation to India changed with the author's mother. Born in 1925 and named Farha but always known as Flower, she belonged to the generation that committed itself to the cause of India. Once again, Silliman explains how language illustrates position: Flower's generation was primarily English-speaking though they were comfortable in Hindustani, which they picked up from the servants and through street interaction. Ironically, since they spoke no Arabic, their communication with the older people in their community was in Hindustani because, though they

could read and write Hebrew, they could not speak it. Flower went to a Delhi Christian co-educational school for safety during the Japanese invasion of Calcutta in 1943 and interacted with non-Jewish girls for the first time, forming friendships that opened her eyes to the world outside the “claustrophobic Jewish community environment” (118). Anxious to go away to college, she was permitted to enter Lady Irwin College (a domestic science college, one of whose founders was a Jewish woman, Hanna Sen), a project of the All India Women’s Conference and deeply committed to the nationalist cause. During Flower’s first weeks at the college in September 1946, she met Gandhi, Nehru, and other Congress members on campus. Inspired by the college’s ideals of creating “a ‘composite nationality’ from the diverse cultures of India, stressing the values and importance of cultural assimilation and social intermingling between different religions, creeds, and classes”, Flower began to understand that “being Indian could encompass being Jewish” and that these two identities did not have to be in conflict (120). She began to dress in Indian clothes, learn a more formal Hindi, sing Hindi nationalist songs, cook (kosher) Indian food and eat them with her fingers, participate actively in the India National Congress activities, and celebrate the country’s independence. She also worked tirelessly when the college helped hide numerous refugees during the violence after the Partition. Tellingly, this portrait is subtitled “Meeting India at the Midnight Hour”, which underlines Flower’s political commitment and view of herself as Indian as much as Jewish. Her engagement with Indian nationalism made her see that there was no essential contradiction between being Indian and being Jewish: “India and Indians, which her parents had always presented to her as ‘foreign’, no longer seemed so. It was a place, a people, and a struggle with which she could now identify” (128).

Flower married David Silliman, a wealthy businessman who, though given the chance to move to England, decided to remain in India. The couple perceived many economic possibilities for themselves and were committed to the new India. With her marriage, Flower left her traditional Jewish community and entered a more cosmopolitan world, becoming part of the new elite that grew after India’s independence. Mary disapproved of her daughter’s marriage because Flower’s new lifestyle contrasted sharply with her more simple religious customs: “The Sillimans moved not only in Indian but also in international circles in Calcutta because many of David’s clients were foreigners working for foreign banks. Flower reinvented herself as a ‘memsaab’ as she crossed these boundaries” (130, 133). The couple had five children but

divorced some years later. Flower left India for Israel in 1978 and opened the first kosher nonvegetarian restaurant in Jerusalem, the Maharaja.

Jael's self-portrait, called "Indian Portrait, Jewish Frame", reverses the formulation of the book's title. The general title suggests emphasis on the story of Jewish women in India; yet she represents herself as primarily Indian, acknowledging the context of her family's Jewishness. Silliman's autobiographical section validates my classification of this family memoir of the Jewish diaspora within the parameters of Asian American studies—the author identifies primarily with the South Asian intellectual and professional diaspora to America. Her personal narrative thus depicts and illustrates the vital transcultural movements that I posit need to be considered when we speak of Asian American immigration. Indeed, for Silliman, the book project was also an occasion for her to know her own background, because "immersed in and committed to my 'Indianness', my socialist politics, and my feminism, I ignored my Iraqi Jewish heritage" (6). Silliman experienced in her life not only the waning of the community through emigration, but also the increasing identification of the Jews with India: "I grew up in a cosmopolitan and Indian world, rather than a Baghdadi Jewish one" (4). Indeed, she identifies herself as "part of the Calcutta elite. . . . Ever since I can remember, I considered myself Indian, as did my parents" (140). Moreover, she notes that it was becoming more difficult to carry out some of the basic rituals of Jewish life in Calcutta, and her parents had to send for a mohel from another city to perform the *brit* (circumcision) of their first son.

As a child, Jael considered her grandmother an anachronism: someone who was alien to Calcutta but seemed perfectly at home in it. Her family's social circle consisted mostly of assimilated Jews like them. Indeed, several of her father's sisters had married Hindus. But though Jewishness was not a part of her everyday life, it was still a marker of identity in a country that prided itself on diversity.

When people asked me what I was, I knew they were asking me to which community I belonged. I would be quick to respond: "I am Jewish," and they would know how to place me. Our Jewishness set us apart, made us different from others, and made us like the others around us. All my friends who were Indian like me, were also something else. They either identified themselves as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, or as Bengali, Punjabi or Marwari. All of us belonged to the same community, even if only in name. We were all Indian, though the gods we followed, the festivals we celebrated, and the languages our ancestors spoke were distinct. (142)

After her parents' divorce, Jael and her siblings eventually relocated to the United States for college, where they had to reexamine their cultural affiliation. She notes that her brother Albert, who went to Brandeis University, a predominantly Jewish school, wrote in his yearbook, "In India I was a Jew among Indians, at Brandeis I am an Indian among Jews" (153). When she moved to Boston, she connected more easily with other South Asian students. As she describes her process of cultural and social awareness, there is a sense that, after college, her more dramatic experience lay in her growing class consciousness, rather than awareness of race. In the late 1970s, as she was marking her Indian political identity, her family began to leave India. She, on the contrary, married Amitava, a man from a traditional Bengali Brahmin family, and moved to the United States.

The author's own current position is clearly marked:

Though I organize and identify as an immigrant and as a woman of colour, I am always conscious of the privileges I have by virtue of my upper-class background, my education, and my professional status. . . . Whereas I organize as an Asian American and a Woman of Color in the racially and ethnically based politics of the United States, these are strategic and political identities. They do not capture the essence of who I am. . . . While organizing as a woman of colour is strategically important, being a woman of colour is not a primary identity for me. Being an Indian and a feminist define me more completely. (161)

She thus identifies strongly with the South Asian diaspora, in opposition to her foremothers' connection to the Jewish community. Indeed, she teaches her daughters, Shikha and Maya, about Indian traditions and dances. Only when her mother came to visit once did she consider seriously that Jewishness was also part of her heritage and should be passed on. As she concludes, "Perhaps I have come to understand the significance of my own Jewish heritage because I want to pass it on to my daughters. Sometimes we must travel great distances to come home. I had to leave Calcutta to meet my Calcutta-born, Indian husband. To understand and affirm my Jewish heritage I have had to travel even further through time" (163).

Silliman uses a series of recurring concepts and themes that allows her to trace the "changing same" of the cultural and ethnic identifications of the women in her family. She chooses to focus on the women because, she argues, they do not appear in the historical or sociological accounts of the community. Also, by reading the women's lives, she can explore the shifting categories of

“Jewishness” and “Indianness” in the succeeding generations or, crucially, the ways these associations eventually blended. As she explains, “In four generations we have variously identified ourselves as Baghdadi Jews, as British subjects, as Indians, as Israelis, and as Americans. The only identity maintained throughout the four generations was a Jewish identity. Yet what it meant to be Jewish differed considerably among us. . . . My grandmother and great-grandmother would not recognize my life as Jewish and would be saddened by this knowledge” (4–5).

The central notion that Silliman engages is “diaspora”, and she describes the “diasporas” that each of the women pertain to. Farha, for example, lived the diaspora “in the traditional sense of the term”, finding herself at home within community, irrespective of place. She conceived the diaspora as “an interconnected web of relationships sustained over spaces but not contained by any one place” (13). Mary’s life epitomized “the roles that women played in relocating community as the diaspora shifted from its base in Calcutta to new sites” (3). Though her grandmother maintained her distance from India, Silliman notes that when Calcutta Jews of Mary’s generation speak of “home”, they refer to Calcutta: “‘home’ was not a consistent geographic space; rather, it was a shifting site. As the locus of the community shifted, so did she. Calcutta, or, more specifically, the Jewish community in Calcutta, was her ‘home’ for most of her life. That was the only Calcutta she knew and, when there was no more Jewish community left, she felt compelled to leave the city in search of home. Mary did not see herself as a citizen of any particular place and kept her ties to many places; her form and practice of Judaism defined and sustained her” (87). Ironically, when Mary finally fulfilled her dream of travelling to Israel, she felt displaced by the majority Ashkenazi Jewish culture, which shows how it was not Judaism that provided her with a sense of community, but a particular kind of Jewish practice. Flower experienced a double transition—her own and India’s—and many of her generation, by emigrating, “bridged the Baghdadi Jewish experience from the Eastern diaspora to the Western world” (3–4). Silliman’s own experience of leaving India makes her a part of the South Asian diaspora, and “although I maintain tenuous ties with the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora community through my mother and through this act of writing, I am not part of the diaspora to which my forefathers and mothers belonged” (3–4).

Silliman includes photographs of the women she writes about, using them to emphasize a particular cultural point. Each of the portraits opens with a photograph of the women described, which captures in interesting ways the

character of the foremother and her time: Farha's photograph shows an elderly woman dressed in a wrapper, sitting by a window, facing the camera; Mary's picture is a professional upper-body shot of a woman in horn-rimmed glasses and a European-style dress; Flower's portrait is a full-body pose of a smiling young woman leaning on a tree with some Indian children in the background; Jael's picture captures the moment in her wedding when her Hindu husband puts *sindoor*, the red vermilion powder that is the mark of a married woman in India, in the parting of her hair, "marking their marriage in traditional Hindu fashion" (163). The photographs of Silliman's daughters have them dressed in traditional Indian costumes, with *bindi* on their foreheads. The photographs, as much as the story of each of the women, vividly illustrate how they lived.

This family memoir therefore gives us an interesting perspective on the notions of diaspora and displacement in "Jewish Asia". The author argues that "because they travelled and lived as part of a community, their experience was not one of displacement. To be part of a diaspora and not rooted in one place is distinct from being 'displaced', which suggests that one is out of place and disoriented or disconnected from community. The Baghdadi community rooted its members and provided them with a sense of place in diverse settings" (5–6). She therefore suggests that the roots of this community lay buried in the community itself, rather than in a particular place. This is most evident in her description of Farha as a Baghdadi Jewish woman whose life was lived primarily within a community, strengthening it with her presence and promoting its continuance. Though there is proof that Farha traveled widely to other places in Asia, it never seems that she does because accounts of those travels as touristy events were not preserved in family stories. Silliman explains that the places her great-grandmother visited were meaningful "only as locations where family and relatives lived. Thus, whether in Calcutta, Rangoon, or Penang, Farha was part of the Baghdadi Jewish community to which she was connected through kinship or other ties. It was a familiar space surrounded by worlds she did not know, as alien as her surroundings in Calcutta were, places from which she maintained her distance" (35). To a large extent, Mary also lived in that familiar world of a tight-knit Jewish diaspora community, which remained stable regardless of where it was located on a map. Importantly, as the author notes, Farha and Mary embodied "a notion of 'belonging' that does not correspond to prevailing narratives of nation" (168). Though they were British subjects because they lived in India, they did not see themselves as anything but Iraqi Jewish women—nor did they desire to: "their identification

was with Judaism, a shifting community, and with the memories and practice of their inherited religion and cultural traditions” (168).

Flower’s moving out of this community into a secular and transnational Indian world led to a shift in the family’s identification with India. The distance she traveled away from her community’s tradition can be noted in her mother’s horror at seeing Flower come home for a vacation from Lady Irwin College dressed in a *salwar kameez*, the popular long tunic and pajama-like trousers worn by other men and women. As Flower recounts, “My mother was speechless on the long ride home, anger welling up deep within her. I remember stepping out of my bath to find her picking up my Indian clothes, putting them in the dhobi hamper. She said to me in no uncertain terms that as long as I was in her house I was never to wear these clothes” (172). Postcolonial India, the setting for Flower’s and her daughter’s coming of age, was also nonetheless lived differently by each one. Flower and her generation had to struggle against community pressure while Jael’s generation “could take being Indian for granted” (182). Silliman recognizes that “I am the first of the four generations of Calcutta Jewish women to think of myself as unambivalently Indian. Growing up in an independent and secular India in a predominantly Indian environment, I took my Indian identity as a given” (166).

Silliman’s family memoir, one that literally deploys the notion of “dwelling in travel”, effectively describes the diasporas the women in her family experience and unveils previously untold stories. Focusing her account on an exploration of what the categories of “Jewishness” and “Indianness” meant to the women of succeeding generations, she enacts a fascinating critical juncture in current ethnic studies, in the contexts of the “changing same”. “Whereas Farha and Miriam only identified with Judaism”, the author notes, “my mother and I embraced several different identities. In four generations we have variously identified ourselves as Baghdadi Jews, as British subjects, as Indians, as Israelis, and as Americans. The only identity maintained throughout the four generations was a Jewish identity. Yet what it meant to be Jewish differed considerably among us” (5). By exploring the shifting interrelationship between religious, ethnic, and national identity, Silliman’s family memoir contributes to a necessary widening of our perspectives on immigrant affiliation and cultural identity.

Stories of Resettlement and Structural Configurations of Ethnic Identity

Helie Lee’s *Still Life with Rice* and Mira Kamdar’s *Motiba’s Tattoos* illustrate other forms of travel and settlement within Asia in the mid-twentieth cen-

tury. Both family memoirs focus on an Asian American woman's search for and discovery of her grandmother's life story: knowing the context of her grandmother's life teaches the author about her community's chronicle of relocation, connecting her to the family story. The books, though completely different, share interesting characteristics. Specifically, they use innovative narrative techniques to tell family stories about ethnic identity in connection to family relocation within Asia before finally moving to the United States: Lee appropriates her grandmother's voice to tell the family story in first person from the point of view of the past, and Kamdar juxtaposes the past and present as she recounts her grandmother's and father's lives as she visits the places they inhabited.

Lee explains in the opening chapter how she underwent the stereotypical Asian American process of rejecting her mother and grandmother, punctuated by the "I am who I am. I'm not like you" (12) declaration of independence. As she narrates: "Once someone said to me I am my mother's daughter. I never believed it to be true and now I believe it even less. I've always hated being Oriental/Asian" (14). Lee's mother counters this position by explaining, "Your father and me give up everything, our home, our life, to bring you kids to America, not to be American people, but so you can be Korean. Here, there is no Cold War, no hunger, no losses. . . . When others see your Oriental face, I want them to say, 'Ah, she Korean lady, they so proud people'" (13). This is precisely the identification that Lee rejects, until she impulsively left the United States at twenty-five to spend two years in Korea and China. Her serendipitous discovery of displaced Korean communities in China became an epiphanic moment: seeing them makes her want to recover their erased histories. And seeing her face in those *Hangoosahlam*—Korean persons—"I realize for the first time that I am my mother's daughter and my grandmother's granddaughter" (24).

There is a strong metafictional quality to Lee's narrative: she admits at the beginning that she has had to dig deeply into her grandmother's and mother's memories to look at herself "through the prism of their lives" and come to peace with herself: "The emptiness and chaos I once felt is now filled with the past I rejected and the future I will passionately embrace" (25). Having arrived at this conclusion, she proceeds to narrate her grandmother's story in the first person. A short third-person chapter that recounts her grandmother's birth separates the two parts of her text, which then centers on her grandmother's and mother's stories. Her grandmother, an intelligent, independent, resourceful woman, recounts her story of survival—the Japanese occupation of Korea,

relocation to China, and a joyful return after World War II—of the Koreans’ indomitable pride and courageous fight for democracy, her arranged marriage and love for her husband, his infidelities and her loyalty to him, the Christian faith that uplifts them, and the loss of her oldest son when the two Koreas were violently created.

The grandmother, Baek Hongyong, situates her narrative carefully within the twentieth-century Korean history of colonial repression and war: she notes that the Japanese “marched into our country on August 29, 1910, two years before my birth” (30). She explains how they were forced to take for themselves and give their children Japanese names. Lee’s mother was officially named “Tanaka, Katsuko”, though the family secretly called her “Lee, Dukwah”, which meant “Grand Flower”, because she “would grow and blossom even under the malevolent rule of our Japanese oppressors” (105). In the chapter “Going to China to be Korean”, she recounts one of the family’s most crucial decisions. Because they could no longer tolerate humiliation—“Husband was a proud man—proud of our pure blood, proud of our culture and traditions”—by the Japanese, they decided, in 1939, to leave for China (106). Moving to China allowed them to live as Koreans, use their real names, and openly express their pride at their heritage. They became part of the growing Korean settlement, numerous families who moved to China to escape Japanese oppression, take advantage of the economic opportunities it offered, or use the country as a base for Korean independence movements.⁴ Nevertheless, Hongyong notes that many Koreans had assimilated, and their children were already speaking Mandarin as their mother tongue.

In China, Hongyong discovered her daring business acumen and the family steadily grew wealthier, first through their sesame oil business and then by smuggling opium. This part of the narrative becomes, for Lee, problematic. Though other family memoirs do describe actions that might be judged morally wrong, she is faced here with the dilemma of describing clearly unacceptable behavior: her grandmother’s greed, as well as her illegal and arguably immoral actions. Hongyong was fully aware of the consequences of opium from the beginning and, observing firsthand the devastating effects of the drug, vowed that no one in her family would ever use it. Nonetheless, she continued to smuggle and sell it for profit, to the point that there was no more room in the house to hide the coins and bills they earned. In narratives that contain these morally complicated details, auto/biographers have to negotiate the tension between what Gudmundsdóttir calls “attempts at objectivity and anxiety over the effect of that objectivity” (196). Lee does this by carefully

contextualizing her grandmother's actions possibly in the hope of reducing the negative effect of her behavior. The years of opium smuggling exacted its toll: Husband was imprisoned for a time, and their affluence led him to look for entertainment elsewhere. As she steadily grew richer, Hongyong became lonelier.

Their lives changed again when, in 1945, after Japan surrendered, they returned to Korea wealthier than ever and full of hope.

With family and land, I was happily embarked on this perfect life, this splendid time. We were free to dress, act, and speak Korean openly in our homes and on the streets, and the Russian troops would help us maintain our culture on the north side of the 38th parallel. The Americans would assist our people in the south. We welcomed our liberators because we believed and trusted in them. Tragically, none of us knew then that this imaginary line drawn by the single stroke of someone's pen would forever divide our country and destroy 1,277 years of unity, something even the Japanese were not bold enough to do. (156–157)

The war of 1950 soon forced them to leave their new home and make their way as refugees to the South. Their perilous journey, the months of life in a refugee camp, their eventual reunion with Hongyong's sisters, and the beginning of a new life are shadowed by the loss of her oldest son, Yongwoon, who remained trapped in the North.⁵

Hongyong also tells, though in less detail, the story of her oldest daughter's life. Dukwah, a spunky child obsessed with an education (she carried a schoolbook and a Bible when they left North Korea), substitutes for her mother at many crucial moments in the family's history (for example, she saved her baby sister's life by taking her to be breastfed by their mother when Hongyong was imprisoned for months). This daughter would relocate her own family, ironically enough, for the same reason Hongyong and her husband moved them to China decades earlier: so they could be Korean. Haunted by the 38th parallel and the Cold War, Dukwah and her husband decided to move to the United States with their two small daughters, whom they had decided, even before they were born, would be raised in a place where "they will never have to fear war. They can be children and when they become adults they will be God-loving, intelligent, and respectful, so when people see their Oriental faces they will know what a great country Korea is" (299).

The notion of the need to migrate to another country in order to "be

Korean” and preserve Korean culture shapes the story of two generations of this family. Appropriating her grandmother’s voice and narrating her mother’s experiences, Lee explains to the implied reader numerous details of Korean life and customs—the rituals that surround birth, marriage, death, architecture, culinary customs, philosophy, and religion. She engaged in exhaustive research to re-create a time and an experience, interviewing family members and reading books on Korean society, “military strategy books on the Korean war, books on the Japanese occupation and the Japanese culture, information on China. I read Korean authors and I also started reading other women writers—Alice Walker, Sonya Sanchez, Toni Morrison. . . .” (Shiroishi). Lee has also explained that she wants the book to serve a cultural purpose and be used in courses on Asia, which is why she filled it with cultural information and historical data: “It can’t be just a Korean book. It needs to be exposed to American culture and [in] Japan and Hong Kong and China and Taiwan because the Koreans have been so overlooked by history and by the media. At last, people will be able to put a face on us” (Shiroishi). The desire to preserve Korean culture, in memory as family story and on the page as cultural artifact, clearly lies behind the publication of this book.

Yet, because Lee admits to writing the text in order to connect with the grandmother and mother she had refused to acknowledge, we understand that the principal implied reader is Lee herself. By performing her grandmother’s voice, Lee gives herself the chance to listen to the stories she had previously ignored. As noted earlier, this appropriation of her grandmother’s voice is thus complex and nuanced. Lee does not skim over the less positive episodes of her forebear’s life, like her experiences as an opium smuggler, recounting moments of selfishness and cruelty, balanced by the story of her genuine devotion to her family. Indeed, Lee does more than just speak in her grandmother’s voice; she enacts her life to provide herself with the basis of her experiential authenticity as a diasporic Korean connected to a family and ethnic history and rerooted because of that history. Interestingly, Lee illustrates what Ji-Yeon Yuh notes has become the “direction that the Korean diaspora as a whole is taking. Their origins may be in wars fought in the homeland, and assimilation into the majority culture of their countries of residence may be the expectation; but, their envisioned future is in diasporic communities and identities that privilege neither the homeland as the center nor assimilation as the goal” (288). As Lee’s epiphany regarding her foremothers’ lives came through the discovery of Korean communities outside Korea, she thus identifies with the communities of the diaspora, rather than

with Koreans within Korea, precisely because those are the paradigms of her personal story.

The moment of mutual recognition is the central point of the text. At the end, the grandmother narrates how her granddaughter, Helie, “has been gone two years, working in Korea and traveling through China. Just imagining her following my footsteps all over the Orient fills me with pride. Of all my grandchildren, she reminds me the most of myself. She has the same stubborn, spunky streak” (312). This affirming recognition validates Lee’s role as granddaughter and daughter and authorizes her to write the text. Though we might read this affirmation as self-serving, we can also read it as necessary. Just as Lee learned how much she needed the connection to her foremothers, she feels compelled to establish the mutuality of that identification. The maternal story in this family memoir concludes on this note of mirrored recognition.

The need to know a grandmother, and use that figure as a source of root-ness, lies at the heart of Mira Kamdar’s memoir as well. Her choice of the idea of her grandmother’s (Motiba) tattoos as a structuring motif is potentially enriching. These markings, “thin lines, dots, and crosses of a blacking blue-green” on her cheeks, chin and forearms, were, according to the author, “one of the great mysteries of my childhood . . . mute signs of the unknowable world out of which she came” (xi). Though she never really engages the meanings of the specific tattoos, Kamdar does note their one essential significance: “the style and placement of her tattoos marked her as a daughter of her community. They also protected her against the evil eye. Part beauty mark, part brand, part talisman, Motiba’s tattoos were a legacy of the tribal values she carried literally inscribed on her person into the modern age” (xviii–xix). The tattoos, as was customary in many Indian tribes, were ways of marking a person, signaling each one’s place in a family and the community. Because Motiba and her descendants’ stories are narratives “of leaving home, of losing one’s tribe”, the author privileges those markers that establish proof of belonging in the context of the experience of repeated dislocations (xxv). Additionally, Kamdar’s project involves decoding the time and place in which these tattoos carried significant cultural meaning and were not the capricious fashion statement they have become in today’s globalized world.

The sense of belonging that these physical markers signal is especially important to Kamdar’s family, originally from the Kathiawar peninsula of western India, a group whose history of repeated resettlement illustrates the notion of “dwelling in travel”.

An ancient nomadic tribe, the Kathiawars who spawned my family were always, in the words of my father, “people from someplace else.” Certainly, in the century just ended that is who we became more than at any other time in our history: people from someplace else. The wanderings my family has undertaken in the past one hundred years in pursuit of more tempting opportunities have added layers of lost homelands to our past. Kathiawar remains the land of origin, but the decades-long sojourn in Burma is layered on top of it, a second lost homeland. (127)

Kamdar’s family’s particular history included moving to Rangoon, where they became prosperous merchants, expulsion by the Japanese during World War II, later losing their fortune through expropriation by the Burmese government, and starting all over again. Her father, Prabhakar (known as Pete), had, by that time, moved to the United States for college and married a Danish American woman from Oregon. Though the family lost their livelihood and fortune, they preserved their sense of connectedness through their attachment to their originary homeland. Indeed, as she notes, asked where they are from, “members of my family now comfortably settled in London or Chicago are more likely to reply, with considerable pride, that they are Kathiawari than that they are from India. India is an abstract political entity; modern, secular, a mere ideal. Kathiawar is home” (7–8).

Kamdar deploys an interesting structure to tell her forebears’ stories, collapsing the boundaries of time and place. She uses, as a frame for the memoir, accounts of her trips to the diverse places her family lived in. The chapters of the book correspond to the cities or areas they settled in: “Kathiawar” (which contained the village, Gokhlana, where Motiba was raised), “Rangoon” (where Motiba lived as a child and where several of her children were born in the 1920s and 1930s), “Bombay” (where the family settled after being ejected from Burma), “America” (where Kamdar’s father went to study and where his family lives), “Kaliyuga” (which refers to Hinduism’s phase of those who are “condemned to err through infinite incarnations, adopting endless, myriad identities” [270]), tracing the family’s journey around Asia, to the United States, and back again. As she describes her experience of these places, she also re-creates the story of her relatives in those places, focusing primarily on her grandmother and father. Her use of the conditional form in the description of her grandmother’s wedding preparations, for example—“Motiba would also have had holes pierced all the way up the side of each ear to hold multiple sets of gold earrings. She would have had her body hair waxed and then

been rubbed down with milk and sandalwood paste so her skin would be smooth and soft. A Marwari specialist was certainly summoned to the house to trace elaborate paisley swirls on her hands and feet with *mehndi*, or henna paste” (xviii)—shows the kind of juxtaposition between cultural information and imagination she employs in the memoir. She thus describes places on two levels: as they were when her forebears lived there and as they were in the late 1990s. The structure of the journey allows her to include substantial cultural detail, heightening the collective nature of the memoir; the incorporation of her family’s stories stresses the personal. Kamdar contextualizes her family within the evolving history and culture of India and those of the diaspora—“from the rural to the urban; from the local to the global; from a cohesive identity to a vague cosmopolitanism” (xxv)—demonstrating how family relocations and transformations emblemize the changes in South Asian history.

Burma under British rule became the site of the family’s fortune and position. “It is the paradise my family found,” Kamdar affirms, “and then, like so many other Indian families, lost—suddenly, brutally, irretrievably” (76). Because it was an extension of the British Indian colony, Indians could travel freely to Burma and establish businesses with more ease than in India, while maintaining close cultural and family ties with their homeland. Motiba and other women like her regularly traveled back to India to visit family, for ceremonies, or to be with their mothers when they gave birth. The story of the first member to make his way to Rangoon has become the stuff of family legend. In one of the versions, Motiba’s uncle, on the way to repair some of his mother’s jewels, captivated by stories he had heard about Burma, sold the jewels to buy the passage to Rangoon. There, he made enough money to bring his siblings over and build up a family business. Though some family members offer different versions, Kamdar argues that “in any case, a different truth, if there is one, has long vanished. All that remains is memory, myth, and legend. And even if another, truer story could be discovered, it is by telling its very own rags-to-riches tale that the Khara [Motiba’s] family created an identity and gave the inchoate flow of its members’ collective experience meaning and history” (80–81). Other family legends about Rangoon include her aunts remembering that they had chosen splendid jewelry in pearls, rubies, sapphires, and diamonds for their future weddings, only to have all of it confiscated by the Burmese government.

The section on the family’s settlement in Rangoon is a well-researched portrayal of the Indian diaspora in British Burma.⁶ As Kamdar explains, “Rangoon was the business capital of the country and by the time the Kharas got

there, fundamentally an Indian city. In fact, by 1931, the year my father was born in Burma, fully half the population of Rangoon was Indian. Most of the buildings were owned by Indian landlords, most of the shops were run by Indians, most of the money was exchanged through Indian hands. The lingua franca of the city was Hindustani, liberally peppered with Burmese, Tamil, Chinese, and English words” (86). Though Indians had lived in Burma for centuries, a great majority moved there when the country became a part of India under British colonial rule in 1824, to work as civil servants, entrepreneurs, politicians, indentured laborers, and traders. The infrastructure initiatives of the British led to spectacular economic development in the country, inspiring more Indians to immigrate. Burmese nationalist groups began agitating against the Indians in the 1930s, mostly out of frustration at the Indians’ prominent place in government offices and the courts. Nonetheless, Indians continued to live there freely after Burmese independence in 1948 and even occupied positions in the cabinet. In 1962, General Ne Win seized power after a coup d’état and ordered the expulsion from the country of all Burmese of Indian ethnicity. Many of them, including Kamdar’s family, were forced to leave after their businesses and stores were nationalized and their possessions seized.

The memoir is therefore also an emotional rendition of the Indians’ ambivalent relationship with Burma. On the one hand, the author notes, “They have never forgotten Burma”, to the point that, for example, nearly sixty years after leaving Rangoon at the age of seventeen, Kamdar’s uncle is able to sketch an accurate map of the entire central city from memory (109). Indeed, many of the Indians in Burma, having been there for generations, really knew no other home in the world. Though they were acutely aware that they came from India, they had no direct connection to a city or village. Ejected from Burma, they were obliged to “return” to a “home” they had never been to. Their narratives of departure are articulated, Kamdar notes, as “stories of an exodus from a promised land” (100). On the other hand, she understands that though “Burma was my family’s first America”, the one thing they truly regretted about leaving it was “the personal loss of home and property and not the greater dispossession of the entire country from its people at the hands of a military junta. I know that however much the Indian merchant community suffered in Burma, however unfair their dispossession, almost none of them would have willingly sacrificed much to save Burma” (123, 126). After their violent expulsion from Rangoon, they began life again in Bombay, though they never managed to reach their former socioeconomic position.

Re-beginnings appear to be the family's destiny. Kamdar's account of her father's experience as a nineteen-year-old Indian in the United States in the 1950s who had been prepared for immigration through a diet of American films so that he would learn the nuances of cultural behavior and language, reproduces the American immigrant story. She reads the romance between her Danish American mother and Indian father as an attraction of opposites: her father seeking to invent a new life for himself in the United States and her mother dreaming of escaping from small-town America. They sincerely believed that marrying someone from a different culture was a "constructive step toward the project of building a more harmonious world", as exemplified by the verse by Walt Whitman they engraved on their wedding invitation: "Lo, sour, seest thou not / God's purpose from the first? / The earth to be spann's, / connected by network, / The races, neighbors, to marry / and be given in marriage, / The oceans to be cross'd, / the distant brought near, / The lands to be welded together" (199, 197). She explains that her father didn't want his American-born children to learn Gujarati because he "was an immigrant in the old-fashioned quaintly assimilationist style. There would be no bilingual, bicultural confusion for his children: he would do everything to make sure we melted into the great American pot" (215). Her position changes as she grows up—she simultaneously loves her family but tries to make sure her friends don't realize her father has an accent. Visiting her Danish maternal grandparents, Bestemor and Bestefar, gave the children a sense of "what we imagined was normal American life... Lulled by the sweet scent of Oregon summer hay, we forgot our split personalities of ethnic confusion and relaxed into a kind of easy wholeness" (231).

The final chapter of the book looks to the present and the future of this itinerant family as part of the increasingly global migration. Indeed, Kamdar herself, though possessing a name that immediately identifies her as Indian, repeatedly has to explain why she doesn't "look Indian". She therefore embodies the transnational shifts that her family lived. But though Kamdar's physical journey to India to honor Motiba and her emotional journey to her family's past allow her to appreciate their history, she is clearly ambivalent about her cultural identification. But she chooses to take this ambivalence as a positive position, rather than as a limitation. As she explains, the only piece of advice she remembers verbatim from her father is his belief that "It's best to be in, but not initiated", which meant that it was limiting "to belong to a single group. The best of all situations is to be able to drop in, speak the lingo, be accepted, but retain all the while an outsider's perspective, and to be able to do this with

respect to as many groups as possible” (252–253). As with many of the other family memoirs examined here, Kamdar notes this ability within her family to cross borders easily. Motiba’s descendants, settled in Bombay, Singapore, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, London, and Nairobi, identify with more than one culture or location: her cousin “Prashant, whom we call ‘Pete’, has just gotten engaged. His wedding promises to be even more ‘diasporic’ than his brother’s. Pete works for Goldman Sachs in London, where he met his fiancée Dimpel Doshi. Dimpel comes from a Gujarati family settled in Singapore. The couple’s traditional engagement ceremony was performed in Chicago, they will be married in Singapore, and then make their home in London” (264–265).

This description of Kamdar’s relatives connects with the kind of diasporic narrative that Silliman and Lee also produce. In Benzi Zhang’s words, “Diasporans, in the process of crossing and recrossing multiple borders of language, history, race, time and culture, must challenge the absolutism of singular place by relocating the trajectory of their identity in the multiplicity of plural interrelationships” (69). These family memoirs based on stories of repeated dislocations posit that the subjects identify, to a very strong extent, with the diaspora, rather than with the original cultures and countries. The Baghdadi Jews identify with other Baghdadi Jews and their histories, rather than with those in Israel, for example. Lee’s epiphany comes not with her trip to Korea, but rather with the discovery of Korean communities *outside* Korea, leading her to comprehend her grandmother’s and mother’s obsession with being free to be Korean. Kamdar’s experience of meeting the few Indians who remain in Rangoon, where she is welcomed as “a rare emissary of a piece of the community that had gotten away and they were what was left of the piece left behind, and so my entire stay had the feel of a reunion among long-lost family members, though I was related to none of them by even one drop of blood” (120), also connects her to a history of multiple diasporas. More importantly, because after Motiba’s death, “Bombay is no longer a city we can go home to. With Motiba gone, we’re stuck in America” (175), she understands that they must identify primarily with a global community, rather than with a specific place. These three family memoirs thus establish the paradigm of a necessary relationship to a lost community, connecting not only to a particular family but to a particular diaspora and the reality of a “changing same”. The texts therefore promote the kind of collective memory necessary for mutual recognition. As Kamdar notes about people who are always outsiders: “their rootlessness breeds a kind of tribal loyalty. In the absence of a continuum of

place, we cling to a continuum of religion, custom, language, cuisine, and the recognition and sharing of these with people like us no matter where they live in the world. It is a cultural continuum that is portable” (127).

James Clifford has noted that “the empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation” (269). In many of the texts examined here, the imaginary place of connection becomes the space of dwelling, because the subjects have lost access to the original home and have, by force of circumstances, established vital connections with the results of the process of loss. Turning back to the notion of the “changing same”, these narratives propose ways to celebrate the progressive potential of such positions, to overcome fixed and essentialized assumptions about cultural identity, identification, and homelands.

The Chinese in America

Histories and Spatial Positions

No stories. No past. No China. . . . Do you mean to give us a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past?

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*

I guess I'm searching for continuity.

—Bruce Edward Hall, *Tea That Burns*

In his book, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asian American History and Culture* (1994), Gary Okihiro explains that “Asian American history is more than an assemblage of dates, acts, names; it is more than an accounting of the deeds of the famous and wealthy; it is more than an abstraction from the realm of the senses to the reaches of theory and discourse. To be sure, Asian American history is all that, and more” (93). He then describes the kind of history that connects with the practice of family memoirs, what he calls “family album history”, which is “inspired by the strands in Asian American history that reach to those regularly absent from the gallery of ‘great men,’ to activities excluded from the inventory of ‘significant events,’ and to regions usually ignored by the world of science” (93). These albums, he continues, are filled with stories of life itself, of relatives and friends, events that linger in one’s memory, and the places the family has inhabited (93–94).

We observe this trend in historical books on Asian American immigration that have, to a large extent, tended to privilege this kind of personal approach to the events of the past. The excellent histories of Asians in America published over the last two decades call attention to immigrants’ personal narratives rather than merely list events, data, and statistics. For instance, Ronald Takaki, in his groundbreaking *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1989), contends that as we write these histories Asian immigrants “are entitled to be viewed as subject—as men and women with minds, wills, and voices”, a right denied to many of the first arrivals (7). Similarly, Sucheng Chan, in *Asian Americans: An*

Interpretative History (1991), states that she strove to “depict Asian immigrants and their descendants as agents in the making of their own history” as she framed their individual stories within the broader narrative of the journey and attempts to adapt (xiv). Okihiro’s general reference book, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (2001), opens with a chapter entitled “Narrative History”, which aims to amplify the book’s necessary chronology, “the mere skeleton for the more substantial, fleshy matters of history—the thoughts and actions of a more diverse group of people, raced, gendered, classed, and sexualized, who shape and are molded by social institutions and processes” (3).¹ In Iris Chang’s masterful *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (2003), the author explains that the experience of writing this history was a journey that showed her “the vast range of experiences of a people that have truly helped shape America”, and she invites the readers “to look past ethnicity and see the shared humanity within us all” (xvi). The commitment to the narratives of the history that shaped Asian American collective memory on the part of these respected historians is shared by many other writers who, through the family memoir, revisit the same events.

In this chapter I will focus on three memoirs that center on generational stories of the history of Chinese immigration to the United States. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, Lisa See’s *On Gold Mountain*, and Bruce Edward Hall’s *Tea That Burns*, family portraits of the Chinese in America, creatively complement the academic histories on the Chinese immigration. In a sense, these authors write from the perspective that the professional historians seem to want to engage but cannot because of the restrictions of their discipline. The memoirs I read all reveal the personal stories behind the well-known paradigms of the history of the Chinese in America: the arrival of the first wave during the California Gold Rush in the 1850s; the building of the Central Pacific Railways; the fears about Chinese taking jobs away from Caucasian Americans, which stimulated a series of laws that substantially reduced immigration, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924; work in plantations and Chinese laundries; the creation of Chinatowns; the bachelor society; the existence of “paper sons”; anti-miscegenation laws; and the struggles of second-generation children to define their cultural identity in the land of their birth. In different ways, each of the texts uses family stories as a tool for historical agency, and consciousness of the urgency to unveil these hidden lives in order to expand and deepen collective memory drives the authors.

Oral Histories, Talk-Stories, Reinvented Myths

Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, chronologically the earliest of the texts (it was published in 1980) I examine in this study, is also arguably the most experimental book, a blend of research, essays, talk-story, fiction, and reinvented myths. The author's attempt to record the stories of generations of her male forebears' struggle to "claim America" produced a multilayered narrative that transcends any attempt at generic definition.² Linda Ching Sledge summarizes many of the critical approaches by saying that "in some respects, *China Men* is so close to the 'facts' of history that it can serve as a casebook for the evolution of Chinese-American family life over the last century; in other respects, it is wildly inventive and poetic" (3). In her work in general, Kingston consciously takes on the role of family historian, inspired by the challenge to write about family members she was not told about (her "No-Name Aunt" in *The Woman Warrior*, for example) or unveil stories that were kept secret in order to hide the family's immigrant status. Originally conceived as part of *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* nevertheless acquired a life of its own as the author began engaging the stories of generations of Chinese men in America. Kingston describes the connection between nation, history, and narrative in both these books in these terms: "One might roughly say that China is a landscape inhabited, at least in the narratives, by the women and their myths, and the Gold Mountain, America, is really where the men are and that's where history is" (Rabinowitz 180). Indeed, she explains that the first memoir was a self-centered "I-book" that she needed to write to establish who she was.

That was the function of *The Woman Warrior*, self-understanding, understanding myself in relation to my family, to my mother, my place in my community, in my society, and in the world. Then, [in] the next book I felt I didn't want to concentrate on me anymore. My growth is that I would understand the other . . . to get into the point of view of people who are very unlike myself. I wrote about men, *China Men*. My concerns were larger than just myself or even my gender but to write about the other gender and a larger history. I saw *China Men* as a history book, and it would be a story that has been left out of history, the migrations coming from China, the migrations to America that came from the east and not from Europe. (Lim 158–159)

Kingston's use of talk-story as a theme and strategy, her insistence within the text of writing the truth (or versions of it), her attempt to link stories

of specific family members with communal histories, her blend of fact and invention, has made *China Men* a powerful contribution to Chinese American historiography. Rather than presenting substantial data in a chronological and systematic manner (as most of the other family memoirs discussed in this book do), Kingston proposes an imaginative re-visioning of the story of her family's immigration as a prototype for Chinese immigration in general. As Sledge argues, "That authentic, if idealized, family history is reified in the distinctive dialect of immigrant forebears; it is an extremely rich, consciously verbal style springing from a Cantonese village society that 'talks' or 'sings' its history" (3). The significant amount of critical attention on the book has highlighted, for example, aspects of oral history and historical representation, male subject positions and the representation of Asian masculinity in American writing, and the construction of family in the immigrant context, issues that connect with my consideration of the text as a family memoir.³ Because of the abundance of studies on the text, I will not explore *China Men* in detail, but will focus on the specific ways Kingston develops her family memoir in the context of my proposal on mediating history and collective memory for the Asian American community.

Kingston's technique for the writing of family history mirrors the ways the early Chinese articulated their own histories, which included claiming fictitious family connections in order to be able to enter the country, reforming identities through a series of adopted or revised names, and hiding details of stories that might lead authorities to trace particular persons. As she explains, "In my father-book, *China Men*, I used the very techniques that the men developed over a hundred years. They made themselves citizens of this country by telling American versions of their lives" ("Imagined Life" 563). The form of *China Men* reproduces the ways the stories of the first generations have been handed down (or not), privileging the keeping of secrets and the existence of multiple versions that served to deflect official scrutiny.

For example, not knowing at the time she wrote the book the real story of her father's immigration, Kingston invents five possible scenarios. Her commitment to discovering factual or poetic truth moves her to engage the ways in which these men's immigration histories contributed to the general narratives of the community. Because of the Chinese Exclusion Acts and other restrictive legislation designed to eliminate the Chinese presence in America, the entrance of Chinese immigrants into the United States depended, the narrator explains, on how well the purchasers of reentry and citizenship papers could "memorize another man's life, a consistent life, an American life" (46) and pass

before the “Immigration Demons” in their new, factitious identities (Y. S. Lee 473). Thus, though Kingston wants to function as a “sleuth of selfhood”, she is conscious that the few documents she does find were actually meant to hide the truth and prove the lies, rather than the opposite. Finding documental evidence, consequently, does not mean having arrived at the facts but having to negotiate even more possible versions of the truth.

Paradoxically, the lack of reliable data gives Kingston’s text its collective character, as it inspires her to creatively juxtapose personal stories with collective representation. Monica Chiu explains that Kingston’s characters “trace a personal, ancestral map, on the one hand, while collectively representing nineteenth-century Asian immigrant labor, on the other. BaBa, Ah Goong, and Bak Goong are family figures as well as generalized historical figures in that they translate from Chinese as ‘father,’ ‘grandfather,’ and ‘great-grandfather’ respectively” (“Being Human” 189). Kingston uses these figures to compose an archetypal portrait of the early Chinese immigrants. In the vignette titled “On Fathers”, Kingston exemplifies her endeavor to bring together individual histories by recounting the simple story of how she and her siblings once mistook a stranger for their father returning from work. This anecdote suggests that, though Kingston wants to know her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, the slippery nature of their stories allows many other Chinese to claim those relatives for themselves. The desire to connect individual family members with community history recurs in the text. As the author remembers, “Once in a while an adult said, ‘Your grandfather built the railroad.’ (Or ‘Your grandfathers built the railroad.’ Plural and singular are by context.)” (126).

Kingston’s plan to inscribe generational family history is evident from the section and chapter titles. The book opens with vignettes titled “On Discovery” and “The Father from China”, followed by sections that foreground the male family connection: “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountain”, “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains”, “The American Father”, and “The Brother in Vietnam”. The fourth section, “The Making of More Americans”, also stresses family connection, though there is no explicit reference to male family members. Apart from the direct family line, the narrator also speaks about numerous “uncles”, the respectful and familial—though not necessarily biologically accurate—term that links family and nation, because all the Chinese in America are, in a sense, related. Kingston’s way of creating collective memory through this family memoir can be understood by examining the sections on her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and brother and how she places these in the context of myths and laws. Interestingly, all these

biographical sections open with an anecdote from Kingston's own life, perhaps to stress the connection between the locations—California and Hawai'i—that family members claim as their own.

The second section of *China Men*, “The Father from China”, is articulated in the form of direct address to her father, Tom Hong. It begins with the daughter challenging her father to clarify the truth about the possible stories of his coming to America: “You fix yourself in the present, but I want to hear the stories about the rest of your life, the Chinese stories. I want to know what makes you scream and curse, and what you're thinking about when you say nothing. . . . I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and a few words and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong” (15). This approach requires Kingston to examine the ways Chinese men traveled to the United States, making this section an exercise in historical reflection based on investigation and imagination. This section presents her BaBa's biography: the story of his birth in China, his studies and job as a teacher, his marriage and children, his trip to the Gold Mountain and attempts to settle, first in New York, and then, after being reunited with his wife, in Stockton. The daughter's interrogation of the father becomes an important part of her historical project that, interestingly, will eventually be completed as her father writes his comments on a copy of *China Men*, transforming her monologue into a literary dialogue.⁴

The third section, “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains”, centers on the immigration to Hawai'i of men promised work in sugarcane plantations but who found themselves being exploited and made to clear the forest for little pay. Here, Bak Goong rebels against the rule of silence by coughing out his anger, reasoning that the men's many physical illnesses were due to “congestion from not talking” and that they had to “talk and talk” (115). The men dug holes in the ground and began shouting words into the earth: “They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets” (117). Patricia Linton suggests that “the metaphor of the men planting their words in the earth is a multifaceted gesture of relationship; it represents both the impulse to return and the fact of exile. It acknowledges both fidelity and infidelity, rootedness in the sense of being grounded in old cultural and personal bonds and rootedness in the sense of sinking roots in the new land” (46). The struggle to give voice to the generations of silenced immigrants is also reflected in the book's title. Kingston has explained that she chose the title “China Men” (rather than the more commonly used “Chinamen”) precisely “because it expresses the difference between the way Chinese immigrant men

viewed themselves and the way they were viewed in a racist society” (quoted in Elaine Kim 211).

The section “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” focuses on another exploitative situation, the Chinese men’s work on the Union and Pacific railroads. Through the eyes of Ah Goong, who has to set dynamite charges to break through mountains, Kingston highlights the perils that this generation suffered. “The Making of More Americans”—an expanded version of Kingston’s childhood story presented in *The Woman Warrior*—and “The Brother in Vietnam”—the story of her brother’s deployment to Asia as part of the U.S. Navy—bring the generational narrative to the present yet emphasize the recurrent struggles of the Chinese in America. Kingston has noted that this brother is not literally one person, but an amalgam of her two brothers, a literary choice consistent with her attempt to collectivize the Chinese American experience.

These biographical sections are linked and embellished by Kingston’s rewriting of myths, illustrating how her search for the stories leads her to mythologize Chinese American history by adapting literary and historical constructs from Chinese and American traditions.⁵ These fictional parallels to historical sections—such as the legend of Tang Ao, the tale of Robinson Crusoe, techniques traced back to Sima Quan, a Polynesian tale, among others—attest to the importance of talk-story as a source of information. The connections also allow the author to collectivize individual experiences and heighten the symbolic implication of the stories on immigration, isolation, and adaptation. Social issues such as the feminization of Chinese men and the exoticization of women in American popular culture, for example, become part of her historical reenactment of the family story. For instance, through Tang Ao’s story, Kingston provides a feminist critique of Chinese sexism and American racism that allows her to simultaneously claim Chinese history for Chinese Americans and examine the place of the Chinese in American history.

The chapter entitled “The Laws” securely connects Kingston’s creative approach to family stories with empirical history, as it displaces any doubts that the highly imaginative stories developed in a real context that increasingly limited the China men’s lives and possibilities. This chapter, which produces a drastic shift in tone from the earlier sections, simply catalogues a list of dates with a description of a series of exclusion acts, constitutional conventions, treaties, state laws, taxes, and court cases, among others, that referred to the Chinese. Reading the list of changing immigration laws, readers connect this information with the characters in the earlier sections. As Kingston explains in

an interview, “The mainstream culture doesn’t know the history of Chinese-Americans, which has been written and written well. The ignorance makes a tension for me, and in [*China Men*] I just couldn’t take it anymore. So all of a sudden, right in the middle of the stories, plunk—there is an eight-page section of pure history. It starts with the Gold Rush and goes right through the various expulsion acts, year by year. There are no characters in it. It really affects the shape of the book and it might look clumsy” (quoted in Goellnicht 208). Indeed, as Goellnicht points out, this straightforwardly factual section “stands out as anomalous” in Kingston’s “variegated/multivalent/polyphonous narrative” (196). But he also suggests that the section carries a subtly ironic undertone.

By imitating the monological voice of authorizing History—the history imposed by the dominant culture that made the laws—this section uncovers both the dullness of this voice and its deafness to other, competing voices, those of the minorities suffering legalized discrimination. This undertone of irony becomes most resonant when Hong Kingston quotes from the exclusionary laws enacted by federal, state, and municipal legislatures against Chinese workers and immigrants, especially when we measure these “laws” against the “invented” biographies of *China Men* that make up the rest of the text. Paradoxically, the imagined/fictional history proves more truthful than the official version. (196)

Following the stories Kingston has already recounted about the great-grandfather and grandfather, the lack of characters in “The Laws” is irrelevant, considering that the personal stories have already been unveiled. The historical data supplements the stories, chronotopically affirming their poetic truth.

Ultimately, however, the text asks itself and the reader whether these stories can truly be known. As Yoon Sun Lee suggests, Kingston’s text hints at how the model of multiple versions “may be discredited by the marks it bears of the context of its own production: the irony and the frustration of its own attempts to construe the *China Men* as objects of knowledge” (466). Yet, this issue becomes less important than the exercise of establishing the legitimacy of the Chinese presence in America, mediating their historical experiences, and developing collective memory through the stories. Kingston’s narrative makes a case for recognition of Chinese Americans as founding fathers of the country: “When I say I am a native American with all the rights of an American, I am saying, ‘No, we’re not outsiders; we Chinese belong here. This is our country, this is our history, we are a part of America. If it weren’t for us, America would

be a different place'” (Yalom 16). Kingston thus seeks and reconstructs the history of her forebears through a narrative that accesses memory, documents, “talk-story”, legends, imagination, and photographs. Coming to “know” her family’s identity and stories through these multiple sources equalizes their value in the process of creating collective memory. *China Men*, which opens with the Chinese men’s lament, closes with two short but eloquent vignettes, one on an immigrant’s one-hundredth birthday and another about “listening”, as the narrator recounts a party she attends where a Filipino scholar talks about the multiple versions of the history of Chinese immigration, and she watches the “young men who listen” (308). Connecting the stories of lives and the telling of these tales privileges the unifying purpose of Kingston’s narrative. As long as there are generations who listen, she seems to imply, people will know of their links with the people in the past and the histories that made all of them.

Writing Chinatown and/as Family

Family memoirs that center on the representation of the development of Chinatowns in Los Angeles and New York in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries illustrate how auto/biographical narratives provide stories that help create and/or explain communities, emphasizing transnational connections. Chinatown is one of the most common stereotypical icons in literature about Asians in America. K. Scott Wong refers to Chinatown as a residential, business, and cultural space “layered with imagery”, a “contested terrain” in the process of defining and reinforcing notions of American and Chinese culture (3). For early American writers, Chinatown was a site of negation and definition, as conflicting images were harnessed to portray a community that was deemed alien to WASP sensibilities and, consequently, completely unacceptable. Literary images of Chinatown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to cluster around a number of common themes: “the physical ‘mysteriousness’ of Chinatown, unsanitary living conditions, immoral activities, and the general Otherness of the Chinese themselves, all of which contrasted with familiar idealized images of ‘American’ communities” (K. S. Wong 4). Family memoirs that focus on Chinatown tease out deep repercussions regarding larger issues of self-representation within Asian American identity politics. Sau-Ling Wong argues that in texts with interventional ambitions, such as these auto/biographical texts, “Chinatown becomes a particularly contested territory, for the same reality found within its boundaries may be coded

in vastly divergent ways depending on who is looking and who is speaking. How Chinatown is represented in a writer's work is often regarded as a touchstone of his/her artistic credibility. This is especially true of the American-born Anglophone writers of Chinese ancestry for whom the American scene is the sole arena for their creative energies and being ethnic is not a matter of choice" ("Ethnic Subject" 252). The word "Chinatown" itself is laden with sociohistoric connotations, and a realm of complex, dynamic valences lies beyond the name. As Sau-ling Wong explains, to a sizeable portion of the Chinese population of any given large American city, Chinatown means *habitation*, permanent home, a locus of familiarity, security, and nurturance, while to the tourists in quest of exciting but ultimately safe cultural encounters, however, Chinatown provided *spectacle*, a diverting, exotic sideshow (253).⁶

Jeffrey Partridge makes a useful proposal that links the existence of Chinatown with the development and reception of Chinese American literature: "The relationship is on the one hand *metaphoric* because the dynamics that produce what I am calling the 'literary Chinatown' are like those that produced the historic American Chinatowns. That is, what readers reading from a Euro-American perspective assume about, and expect of, Chinese American literature has to a large extent shaped it as a virtual version of the American Chinatown. The relationship is on the other hand *metonymic* in that the dynamics that produce the literary Chinatown are in fact *derived from* those that produced the historic Chinatowns" (23). Auto/biographers who use narratives of Chinatown to enact the history of the Chinese in America also deploy existing cultural structures to revise received histories. By challenging uncritically accepted orientalist images of the place and inviting us to re-imagine Chinatown through the stories of its inhabitants, writers like Lisa See and Bruce Edward Hall subvert the Euro-American frame of reference for Asian American imagery.⁷

See's *On Gold Mountain* and Hall's *Tea That Burns* perform effectively as forms of historical mediation for Chinese Americans because they serve as academically grounded texts that unveil aspects of Chinatown history generally unknown to the American public. Moreover, though the memoirs were clearly inspired by a desire to "know" the family's past and emphasize family stories, the number of footnotes and the extensive bibliographies at the end make them valuable historical texts. Lisa See, already a published writer when she began this project, states that her relatives encouraged her to write their stories and participated actively in helping her collect information; as noted in the epigraph to this chapter, Hall sought continuity. He explains,

Chinatown was the only constant in my life, it seemed, the only spot to which I could always return to familiar surroundings and see the thumbprints of generations that had died before living memory. . . . It was a place with tradition, with customs, with old people who knew my father and would call him by baby names I never heard anywhere else. It was a place that America hadn't homogenized out of existence, and there one could smell the village where the Ancestors had lived for perhaps a thousand years before. (2)

See's and Hall's texts are similar in several ways: they begin with stories of great-grandparents in China who immigrate to the United States; both describe the complicated journeys back and forth from China to the United States that the generations experienced; both share a commitment to their family's history and community, deliberately harnessing their auto/biographical texts to mediate that history.

See's version of her Chinese American family story may be classified as the stereotypical American immigrant success story. Her great-grandfather, Fong See, traveled to San Francisco in 1871 at the age of fourteen to search for his father and, from a small business in Sacramento manufacturing underwear for brothels, built up an antique furniture business in Los Angeles that would last till the end of the twentieth century. In 1897 he married Letticie ("Ticie") Pruett, the orphaned daughter of Oregon farmers. The "marriage" was actually a contracted partnership signed at a lawyer's office, since California law forbade miscegenation. Her family immediately disowned her for marrying a Chinese. They raised five children (including See's grandfather, Eddy) until, as a consequence of the family's renewed ties to China, Fong See decided to take a sixteen-year-old for a second wife in 1921. In 1924 the contractual marriage between Fong See and Ticie was made null and void, and the couple divided their accumulated properties and stores between them. Though they lived separately the rest of their lives, See believes that they never stopped loving or needing each other. Indeed, Fong See would regularly visit Ticie, and the seven children from his second marriage were very close to the Sees. The narrative then focuses on the lives and fortunes of the children of both marriages. See consistently sets the narration of the family drama against the backdrop of U.S. politics and immigration laws. Interestingly, she uses the changes in her great-grandfather's name to illustrate some of the issues pertinent to Chinese immigration at the time: "Fong" was her great-grandfather's last name and "See", meaning "fourth", referred to his position as the fourth son in his family. In the United States, his name, "Fong See", led to the children from his

first marriage having the last name “See”. After he married a second time, he reverted to Fong, and his second group of children were surnamed Fong.

The auto/biographer describes how the anti-miscegenation laws in California, the 1924 “Second Exclusion Act”, severely limited the immigration of Chinese, even those married to U.S. citizens. Indeed, of Fong See’s children from his first marriage, only his daughter, Sisee, was able to marry legally in the United States because her husband was Chinese, though an American citizen. The other See children, who all married American (read: white) women, were obliged to travel to Mexico, where such marriages were legal, for the ceremony.

See’s juxtaposition of politics and family history complicates historical accounts of the Chinese in the United States as it emphasizes the personal drama that arose from political decisions. She mediates history by foregrounding family members as subjects experiencing the historical events that shaped ethnic America in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cultural and economic changes in the early decades of the twentieth century brought about a transformative impact on Los Angeles’ Chinatown and its denizens. Fong See’s sons were part of the jet-set that experienced the rise of Hollywood and benefitted from its orientalism: their stores provided many of the sets for Asia-themed movies, such as *The Good Earth*, which used many of the Fong and See furniture as props. Fong See’s sons became successful entrepreneurs, expanding the furniture business, opening up factories and restaurants, and devising new ways to harness to their advantage the constantly shifting feeling about Asians in America. History thus becomes a subtext (though one that actively influences people’s lives, possibilities, and choices) to the family story, which remains the central structuring frame of the narrative.

To narrate her family stories, See harnessed material gathered from extensive interviews with relatives and experts on Chinatown to embellish the accounts of Tong Wars, Chinatown characters, prostitutes, and the Caucasians—the *lo fan* (literally, “white ghosts”)—that she remembered as a child visiting her family’s F. Suie One emporium. She acknowledges the difficulty she encountered separating fact from competing family legends (each one more extravagant than the other) about her great-grandfather and his children. Often unable to ascertain the truth behind the diverse versions, she functions on occasion as a novelist more than as a chronicler, entering her characters’ minds to offer personal accounts. The auto/biographer traces in great chronological and psychological detail the story of the members of her family, their economic and romantic adventures, and, consequently, the development of

the place where the family lived, Chinatown. One understands that a vital part of See's historical re-presentation of Chinatown and its people involves an important personal project of locating herself in the context of a family.

The two central characters in *On Gold Mountain* stand, in a sense, as contrasting figures. Fong See's life, to a great extent, orders the plot of the memoir: his success story is the narrative center of this immigrant story. Like Connie Kang and Mai Elliott, See structures her narrative along the patriarchal family line. Because it was the male family members who ostensibly made family decisions, it appeared that they were the protagonists of family fortunes and destiny, while the women inhabited the home space. Yet Ticie's story constitutes the emotional center of her great-granddaughter's auto/biographical narrative. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that it was Ticie's business acumen that led to Fong See's success: she offered him ideas for expanding the business, firstly serving as a clerk, which improved relations with customers, and later as his adviser whose intuition for new possibilities such as imported curios and, ultimately, Chinese furniture would make the family's real fortune and cultural legacy. On the other hand, See consistently evinces how the family was sustained by the women and how she identifies more deeply with the women's narratives than with the men's, although the male storyline frames the family history. She thus connects more deeply with her great-grandmother, her great-aunt, Sisee (a brilliant businesswoman), her grandmother, Stella, and her mother, Caroline, also a novelist.

See's descriptions of the associations between the Chinatown men and white women broaden our perspectives on the fact of interracial relationships in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In general, See presents her text as "a story of melting—how peoples and cultures melt in all directions" (xx)—and describes the white women who married into her family in positive terms, stressing their willingness to adapt to their husbands' culture. Nonetheless, her optimistic point of view might simply be shielding the painful truth about the real possibilities and opportunities available to poor white women, which Hall explicitly engages, as I will explain below. Ticie had been an orphan with little hope for a future until she entered Fong See's shop; Stella Copeland, who had been shuffled among relatives all her life, found a family when she fell in love with Eddy See and his world. This family's good-natured relationships and the exotic store captivated Stella: "She'd never been in such a beautiful, mysterious place, and she would do everything within her power to stay there forever and ever" (155). Speaking about the Stella she would know later, See says,

My grandmother—like my great-grandmother—was Caucasian, but she was Chinese in her heart. She had melted into that side. Over the years, she had packed away her eyelet dresses with their cinched waists, and had adopted black trousers and loose-fitting jackets, which she always wore with a beautiful piece of chinese [*sic*] jewelry. She learned how to make lettuce soup, how to give those brides their *lai see*, how to be a proper Chinese daughter-in-law. My great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother were as Caucasian and “American” as they could be, yet they all chose to marry men whose culture was completely different from their own. (xx)

Yet, in a sense, the consequences of choosing to marry a Chinese—generally ostracism from one’s family and social group—led to these women needing to make themselves truly part of the community.

The author stresses her connection to this community, to the point that when she herself, as a young redheaded child, is described as Caucasian, she admits to feeling “startled”, “because all those years in the store and going to wedding banquets, I thought I was Chinese. It stood to reason, as all those people were my relatives” (xx). This perspective lies at the heart of See’s auto/biographical exercise: though her narrative engages the history of Los Angeles’ Chinatown, it serves fundamentally to connect the writer herself to the family that lived that history, since the public gaze generally denies her the link. And, as she underscores her blood connection to this family and this place, she also connects to the generations of Caucasian women who found a home there.

Lisa See and Bruce Edward Hall harness metaphors in the titles of their memoirs to stress what they consider the central point in Chinatown narratives. See’s title, the idealized Chinese name for America, “Gold Mountain”, reflects the hopes that inspired generations to immigrate. The title of Hall’s memoir, “Tea That Burns”, refers to the bootleg scotch served in teapots at gambling parlors during the Prohibition. These choices signal, in general terms, the kind of history each of them writes: See’s account reads like a novel, with particular concern for the inner lives of her characters. Hall’s title hints at a more playful narrative approach that foregrounds Chinese strategies for survival in a generally hostile land. “Tea that burns” becomes a metaphor for the myriad strategies the Chinese deployed to survive and thrive in the United States, including the existence of gambling halls and benevolent associations or the reality of paper sons and the need to keep secrets about the past by changing names and personal histories.

Tea That Burns juxtaposes the story of Hall’s family with the history of the

development of Manhattan's Chinatown. His narrative style evokes journalism through the use of the present continuous sense, the incorporation of abundant factual information, and frequent digressions into sociological exploration. Hall's superlative archival work produces a text that negotiates the racism that Chinese immigrants faced in the late nineteenth century, including the Exclusion Act of 1882, the perception of the Chinese by the Americans, and the bachelor society that developed because of a dearth of Chinese women at the time. He also includes numerous trivia about the Chinese in America, complete with names and dates, of the Tong Wars and truces, the effects and problems with the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese and Taiwanese politics and Chinatown support for Dr. Sun Yat Sen, and even about the Chinese who were on the *Titanic* (five of the six Chinese on board in third class survived and then sued the White Star Line for their lost luggage), and so on. Hall's text brings Chinatown to life through the inclusion of details about festivals and food, opium dens and mahjong games, and numerous characters, many of whom are his relatives. This portrait of Chinatown includes detailed stories about the notorious Quimbo Appo, one of the earliest Chinese in New York, and his biracial son, George Washington Appo, involved in organized crime; Wong Chin Foo, the handsome journalist who in 1883 published the first Chinese-language newspaper in New York, the *Chinese American*, and fought to dispel many of the stereotypes about the Chinese;⁸ and Tom Lee (born Wong Ah Ling), who, when he died in 1918, "there was virtually no one left who could remember a time when the wily old fox hadn't been pulling all the strings" (*Tea That Burns* 181).

Hall begins his family story in the village of Hor Lup Chui, in the Toi-shan district of Kuang Tung Province, in southern China. The original family name, "Hor", was anglicized, for obvious reasons, by the author's white American mother in the 1950s, before her children began school. His great-great-grandfather, Hor Jick Wah, was probably an artisan and, because of the Opium Wars, sent his son, Hor Poa, to the United States in 1873. The son did so well he was able to return home in style six years later, to marry his first wife (Hall's great-grandmother was the third wife whom Hor Poa married in the United States) before returning to California. Because of the increasing anti-Chinese sentiment in the West, Hor Poa joined others who traveled to New York to establish themselves there. This transcontinental move sets the stage for Hall's narrative of Manhattan's Chinatown, "the 'old' Chinatown, those few blocks of Mott Street from Canal south to Chatham Square, and then up Bowery to Doyers and Pell Streets, then west back to Mott—three little thor-

oughfares to which a whole universe had been transplanted, in miniature” (7). The Chinese American family grew when Hor Poa, though he already had two wives in China, married a beautiful sixteen-year old Chinese girl (known as Gon She) in New York in 1896. This marriage led to the birth of several children, notably Hall’s grandfather, Hor Ting Pun (later known as “Hock Shop”, one of the most important bookies in Chinatown of the 1920s and 1930s).

As with many of the other episodes in his family history, Hall harnesses the story of his great-grandparents’ marriage to probe sociological issues and illustrate the ways history is subject to revision. He explains that his great-grandmother may have been mentioned in Louis J. Beck’s 1898 book *New York’s Chinatown*, which describes a teenager living at 19 Mott Street (precisely where Gon She was living) as “the Belle of Chinatown” and that a Chinatown merchant had paid twelve hundred dollars for “the privilege of marrying her” (*Tea That Burns* 105). This was a reasonable price, considering that at the time of their marriage there may have been only about five or six eligible Chinese women in New York. But, Hall continues, Beck alleges that the teenager was a prostitute. The auto/biographer’s reaction to this piece of information is an interesting exercise in historical revisioning: “*Prostitute?* Oh dear. Perhaps I should say *slave*. No, that’s not any better. *Concubine?* No. *Number Three Wife?* Well, yes, but . . . it is so frustrating trying to pin down my great-grandmother’s origins exactly, and any source written by a white person of this period is just hopeless” (106). This line of inquiry leads Hall to describe family practices that include “selling” (the American word) or “adopting” (the Chinese word) daughters of poor families. In this manner, the author explores the ways we inherit past stories and the ways history has been written or handed down through family tradition.

Though most of his relatives managed to marry Chinese women, Hall explains in detail the interracial relationships in Chinatown, beginning with the late 1800s, when several Chinese in New York’s Five Points slum married Irish girls (not Germans, nor Polish, nor African) simply because, though Chinese women would be more acceptable, there were none around. He examines this social convention by trying to look at it from both sides.

As for them, why would good Irish Catholic girls consent to unite with these strange and exotic “Mongolians”? Perhaps it is a way out of the grinding poverty that their new American lives have provided them. Perhaps it is because Irish girls of the period are at the absolute bottom of New York’s white society and can’t find anyone else. One thing is certain—it is a sign of desperation on both

sides that one would agree to consort with the other. After all, this is still Five Points, where conventional morality is stretched to fit around any circumstance that hunger and poverty can provide. (38)

As a result of these marriages between Chinese boys and Irish girls (Hall adds a caveat: “at least both parties claim to be married”), “the first generation of Chinese children in New York is actually Eurasian” (38). Most of these children, though, were condemned to live on the fringes of both societies—they were not Chinese enough for the Chinese and they were definitely not white.

Hall’s sociological analysis of Manhattan’s Chinatown includes various depictions of the characters that populated it. An emblematic illustration of the way he presents this place, connecting it to his own story, is this extended portrait:

The oldest New York-born Chinese man would be 27 in 1912. He may have fathered children himself by now, although the chances of him having found a Chinese wife in New York are very slim. There are only 56 “pure” Chinese families in Chinatown this year. They have produced perhaps 150 children between them, who have grown up walking around puddles of blood on the sidewalk and keeping their eyes demurely cast downward so as not to see what they shouldn’t see. These children have long grown accustomed to listening for the sound of gunfire and keeping away from the windows, but, like their parents, they just mind their own business and soldier on. . . . The first generation has also grown up to be wary of the white Authorities. They remember the raids, the swinging nightsticks, the arbitrary, wholesale arrests of people suspected of being illegal immigrants. They know that while they themselves may have been born with American citizenship, a slip on their part could get their parents deported. If their uncles, or fathers, or neighbors are, in fact, “paper sons”, the children know that those men may be called by certain names in private, but they are always strictly meticulous in remembering to use the “paper” name when addressing them on the street. Even the smallest children, if travelling outside the country, are subject to the same gruelling interrogations given to their elders, all of which take place in the Chinese Inspector’s branch office directly over Hor Poa’s store. (163)

This form of historical depiction characterizes Hall’s narrative style and purpose. By foregrounding characters, many of whom were family members, but also those that made Chinatown what it was, he tells the history as lived

by the people, highlighting the conflict between their desire to belong and the politics that governed this liminal place.

As time passed, nonetheless, Chinatown did become more fashionable and its wealthy denizens, such as Hock Shop, who lived active social lives in Los Angeles, began to mix socially with whites. After the death of his wife, leaving him with five small children, Hall's grandfather married the German-Irish flapper Frances Wolff in 1927. Though, as Hall notes, prejudice had lessened, a Chinese man living with a white woman aroused suspicion and even hostility. Narcotics agents, for example, entered their apartment, convinced that his grandfather had seduced the woman with opium: "As for the new Mrs. Hor, there are the snide remarks and leering looks from the milkman and the iceman when they learn her name. Frances soon becomes as retiring and home-bound as the most old-fashioned Chinese matrons" (198). For many of the Chinese, including Hock Shop's children, Chinatown was no longer the center of their world.

Being sent to be raised by an aunt in Brooklyn after their mother's death became their first step out of Chinatown. Hall's father, Herbert, the youngest of Hock Shop's children, was only three when he left, and, his son notes, "he will not often look back" (195). Indeed, their aunt consciously strove to make these Chinese children assimilate, even sending ten-year-old Herbert to speech class to lose his heavy Brooklyn accent. Hall notes that his father emerged from those sessions "sounding like Edward R. Murrow" (221). Though Herbert grew up "very poised and very sure of himself, while also being very handsome, with a beautiful singing voice and stellar report cards . . . he is still Chinese, still named Hor, and this is America, circa 1940" (221). Though he can ignore the comments about his name, he cannot avoid the mothers of the white girls he dates taking him aside politely "to suggest that maybe such a relationship isn't 'appropriate,' and he will withdraw, because he knows that it is true" (221). Herbert eventually married a blonde Caucasian, Jane Ann McConnell, whom he met when he was in cadet training, and the family moved farther and farther away from Chinatown as Herbert rose up the executive ladder. Changing their name to "Hall" was meant to help their eldest son, Bruce, "negotiate the traumas of grade school in lily-white suburbia" (234). Indeed, many of the other family members had also changed the spelling of their names—to "Ho" or "Halle", among others.

His father's detachment from Chinatown fuels his son's growing curiosity about the Chinese part of his family: "Perhaps it is because of my father's apparent denial, or because I know absolutely no Chinese kids outside our

family, or perhaps because of my own naturally contrary nature that I develop a defiant interest in all things Chinese, as well as a list of ready responses to the occasional ridiculous comment from people” who, for instance, ask him to “say ‘hello’ in your native language” whereupon Hall growls “hello” (247). More significantly, his observation that “there is none of our family left in Chinatown now” (268) explains the genesis of this personal project, which resonates culturally.

Though See’s and Hall’s auto/biographies illustrate the personal motivations that David Parker suggests impel this kind of writing, we also note how the existence of an implied reader marks these Asian American family memoirs. In a general sense, we can classify this reader into two main groups, which may occupy interacting/intersecting positions. On the one hand, auto/biographers write for mainstream America, to transmit information about historical events, explain their heritage culture from an insider’s perspective, and write their own stories into existing “official” versions. The information in See’s and Hall’s texts—names, dates, locations, detailed descriptions of customs and practices—makes these texts valid histories of Chinatown. On the other hand, auto/biographers also write for the members of their communities, to give them characters with whom to identify and preserve the community history as they unveil its nuances.

On Gold Mountain and *Tea That Burns* contribute to the project of reexamination of the history of the Chinese in America by engaging, in particular, three issues that have often been elided in the discussion of the early decades of immigration. First is the existence of a significant merchant/business class within or connected to Chinatown. Most of the historical studies on Chinese immigration have tended to focus on the working-class immigrant, the “bachelor society”, economic difficulties, and poverty of the early decades of the twentieth century, even though there were interesting cases of successful business families, such as Fong See’s, who built up a furniture emporium. Another memoir of family life in Chinatown, Louise Leung Larson’s *Sweet Bamboo: A Memoir of a Chinese American Family* (1989), also unveils the reality of a privileged lifestyle for a Chinese family.⁹ The Leungs’ family business was a Chinese herbalist practice that catered to the Chinese community and to mainstream Americans. The family had a large home in a predominantly white neighborhood, with black and white servants, and lived very comfortably in a period of legal racial discrimination against the Chinese. Historian Shirley Hune notes the importance of Larson’s text, which, like See’s and Hall’s, helps complete the picture of life for the Chinese in America in the early decades of the twentieth

century: “Greater attention to the different groups of Chinese immigrants and the experiences of middle-class and upper-middle-class life before World War II enhances our understanding of the range of Chinese American lives and uncovers long-standing differences within the community” (xi). The personal narratives of these families, therefore, oblige us to nuance our perspective on the real possibilities and situations of the early Chinese in America, avoiding simplistic categorizations regarding economic, social, and class positions.

Second, these texts emphasize the important transnational character of early Chinese immigrant life. These texts prove many of the points made in two notable studies about the Chinese in America: Judy Yung’s *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1995) and Madeline Hsu’s *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (2000).¹⁰ These scholars discuss two issues that are illustrated in See’s and Hall’s texts. The first point focuses on how many middle-class Chinese continued to maintain important links with China, traveling back and forth for business or family visits. Hsu, who centers on the ways that Chinese immigrants continued to connect southern China and the United States even during the exclusion era of 1882–1943, explains how thoroughly transnational links provided a foundation for early Chinese American history. Attending to the impact of immigrants on the economic and cultural situation of their homeland, Hsu invites us to view “migration as a fluid process of mobility and diversification rather than as an invasion or uprooting” (11). Her study, therefore, nuances the idea of the so-called “bachelor societies” of Chinese laborers in North America by describing the continuing connections between these male-dominated communities in the United States and their wives, children, and other relatives in China, arguing that such extended families were the norm rather than the exception. Indeed, the economic foundation of many of the Cantonese villages these men came from depended upon the remittances sent from the United States. By shifting the frame of analysis to include the situation in China, we are given a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese American migrant families. See’s and Hall’s narratives illustrate Hsu’s points: in both texts, family members travel back and forth to China, on business or to revitalize family ties, dispelling the notion that all Chinese immigrants were “stranded” in America. Indeed, these memoirs problematize the public stereotypes of Chinese immigrants as servile victims in the debased environment of Chinatown, presenting them, rather, as active developers, businessmen, and international travelers.

Related to this is how the texts evidence how events in China influenced the politics and, in particular, gender relations in the Chinese community.

Early twentieth-century nationalist and women's movements in China were pivotal to legitimizing the rejection of patriarchal traditions among Chinese Americans. As Judy Yung explains, views on gender roles and relations for educated, middle-class Chinese American women were greatly influenced by Chinese nationalism, Christianity, and Christian institutions and workers, and by their desire to be acculturated into mainstream American culture (5–6). Protestant churches and affiliate organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) provided support and refuge for many Chinese women and played a crucial role in helping women assimilate to middle-class Christian values, morality, and gender conventions in American culture, which externally, at least, implied freedom from the restrictive norms of Chinese patriarchy. Again, the memoirs illustrate these points and show, through stories of the family and the extended community, how women's rights increased as they assimilated. Indeed, both narratives describe, for example, the first generation of Chinese girls entering universities and/or taking over businesses.

Third, the family memoirs invite us to reconsider the diverse ways race relations and racial dynamics played out between the Chinese community and the denizens of the city: other Asians, whites, and blacks. Proof of these interracial relationships, which challenge the notion that Chinese Americans were completely segregated, occurred in two areas: business and marriage. Many Chinese businesses, such as Fong See's lingerie shop, hired white girls (though he later married the first shop girl he hired), and wealthy Chinese had black servants. Interestingly, though racialized to occupy a lower social level than whites, for example, the facts demonstrate that a significant number of Chinese were economically superior and thus able to employ whites (and blacks). There are also numerous accounts of white-Chinese unions and the birth of an entire generation of biracial children.

These points show the ways in which family memoirs revise not only "official" versions of history but, significantly, "received" history. See's and Hall's family stories give alternative visions of the more stereotypically pathetic and enclosed bachelor society of Chinatown. By writing these family stories, these auto/biographers encourage a particular kind of encounter between the text and reader, one that would invite readers to "create the text while interpreting it, and, to some extent, . . . find *their own truths* in the texts under study" (Gullestad 31). A more sophisticated reader emerges when writers present texts that propose new perspectives on shared experiences. The community that receives these texts comprehends how these works support its creation and sustenance by providing the narratives of collective memory that validate their history,

their positions, and even their political agendas. In this context, questions that historian Carolyn Steedman asks about the making and writing of the modern self resound: “Who uses these stories? *How* are they used, and to what ends?” (“Enforced Narratives” 28). Many readers of Chinese American life-writing texts identify with that community and view themselves as subjects fully committed to furthering cultural politics and policies, and to developing cultural knowledge in diverse forms. Steedman notes, “It is for the potentialities of that community offered by historical consciousness, I suppose, that I want what I have written to be called history, and not autobiography” (*Past Tenses* 50). Steedman makes this point because she believes that the form of autobiography implies a closure, embodied by the person of the autobiographer. History, on the contrary, is always subject to revision. This purpose is manifested explicitly by the writers, who highlight their commitment to family stories as part of a process of the development of collective memory.

The Asian American Family Portrait Documentary

Multiplying Discourses

Family relationships are like family stories. You have to practice them to keep them alive.

—Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury, *Halving the Bones*

Current scholarship on film studies underscores the role of the photograph, the film image, and the documentary in the construction of historical chronicles and invites us to analyze films as forms of historical mediation. “Independent video constitutes a field of cultural memory, one that often contests and intervenes into official history,” Marita Sturken explains in “Politics of Video Memory” (2002), as “many independent videotapes are deliberate interventions in the making of history and conscious constructions of cultural memory” at a point in time where “the photograph, the documentary film image, and the docudrama are central elements in the construction of history” (174). The possibilities offered by technical advances in video, films, and photography have led many Asian Americans to engage these mediums in their storytelling processes. They have increasingly been producing what Jim Lane, in his germinal study titled *The Autobiographical Documentary in America* (2002), calls “family portrait documentary”, a form wherein “the private worlds and stories of family members are publicly formed, contested, and reshaped. The story of the filmmaker’s life, who that filmmaker is, emerges in relation to the mosaic of the family as auto/biography encompasses the biography of the family” (95–96).¹ Patricia Aufderheide explains that this kind of work, “whose compelling quality is the drama of its storytelling, crosses the makeshift line between journalism/public affairs and culture/art/fiction. As it becomes a minigenre of its own, it stands both as symptom of and response to the challenge of social location in a postmodern society” (16). Lane affirms that, like other modes of autobiographical writing, these documentaries are “a potent site of American cultural production where private individuals and history coalesce” (5). Further, Lane explains, these family portraits often exist in

tension with “official” histories, narratives challenged by the personal stories recounted by diverse family members, and, consequently, the family and its stories themselves become reference points for the examination of official history (96). Indeed, these family documentaries illustrate how representation of the past involves the construction and manipulation of material as much as it requires a diligent search for data, photographs, and stories.

History and family are at the center of many Asian American documentaries as filmmakers use family stories to claim for their forebears and, by extension, for themselves, a place in America’s historical and cultural narrative. As Luis Francia explains, the Asian American documentary has become “an alter ego to the filmmaker’s ‘I,’ probing for the parameters of what it means to be Asian American” (quoted in Xing 88). Importantly, in the context of Asian American cultural production, these documentaries—visual and, therefore, *visible* texts—place Asian American persons as elements of the portrait of the United States. This strategy acknowledges the discourse of ethnic (in)visibility in America, which is often fraught with the problem of recognition or non-recognition by the mainstream, as well as questions regarding whose voices are heard and whose stories are considered authentic or valid. These films illustrate the multiple discourses involved in the recollection and narration of family histories: their combination of documentary evidence, interviews, and history telling with the filmmaker’s creative reenactment—through the highlighting of particular symbolic elements or the creative use of home movies and official videos, for example—makes these films important examples of Asian American cultural production.

Michael Zryd, speaking of what he calls the Asian American personal autobiographical documentary, “a genre which often specifically examines the relation of the filmmaker to family through the thematics of loss”, notes a number of “common tropes: first person address, a therapeutic motivation regarding family integration and understanding, and a thematization of memory as unreliable, traumatic, characterized as much by silence and erasure as presence and clarity” (126–127). In particular, to name a few emblematic films, Rea Tajiri, in her outstanding *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991), revisits her parents’ experience in a relocation camp; Janice Tanaka’s *Memories from the Department of Amnesia* (1989) and *Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* (1992) explore her relationship with her parents and their memories of camp; in Felicia Lowe’s *China: Land of My Father* (1979), the filmmaker seeks to connect her children with the history of their grandfather; and Midi Onodera’s *The Displaced View* (1988) narrates the filmmaker’s

search for identity through her grandmother, the last of their family born in Japan.² These documentaries become multilayered discourses as they privilege how “seemingly insignificant, one-off, minor events attract layers of political and cultural meaning. Personal discoveries and losses are cultural discoveries and losses; investigations into the familial lead to findings about the cultural. Family loss signifies cultural catastrophe, conversely matters of cultural consequence have a resonance that is deeply personal” (Erhart).

The discussion on documentaries in this chapter will focus on the ways Asian American family memoirists Lise Yasui in *A Family Gathering*, Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury in *Halving the Bones*, and Ann Marie Fleming in *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam* manipulate the possibilities film offers in representing generations of their families.³ In ways unique to the form, these films show how “family histories and political histories unfold as difficult processes of remembering and struggle. Specific, resonant images echo across distances of time and space. Documentary truth is freely mixed with storytelling and performances” (Russell 278). The construction of a family portrait documentary is generally determined, on the one hand, by individual understandings of identity, family traditions, and history that have molded one’s cultural perspective, as well as community positions in society. On the other hand, the availability of material in the form of memory and documentary evidence—photographs, documents, home movies—influences both process and product. Assembling this information and producing the film often becomes a syncretic process that reconsiders the ways family stories may be remembered and represented. The use of home video and archival footage, documents, family photographs, interviews and reenactments makes these family memoirs peculiar exercises of memory, as the past is preserved through technology rather than only through personal memory. Indeed, we should not underestimate the power of the image as a vehicle for historical memory. As Sturken explains, because the image has been understood as a “receptacle for memories, an artifact in which they reside, or as the raw material of personal histories and historical narratives”, we accept how events were remembered because we have photographic evidence of them, while other events were forgotten simply because we no longer have visual access to them (173). “History has come to be represented by a black-and-white photographic or cinematic image, a faded colored film image, or a low-resolution television image”, Sturken notes (173). Further, photographs and video footage do not merely *preserve* memory, but also *produce* it. For that reason, the presence of archival footage, family pictures and movies, and photographs may be said to

construct a vision of the past—arguably more vivid than merely a narrative of the past.⁴

As we will see in the discussion, Yasui, Lounsbury, and Fleming exploit the performative possibilities of their medium even as they ask crucial questions about private and public negotiations with history and family stories. In the three films we comprehend how, as Julia Erhart notes, first-person documentary makes both a representational and political choice “not to conceal the personal and institutional difficulties surrounding the explorations that each seeks to undertake, but to draw attention to the political history of the absence of evidence, that circumscribes and limits the stories each is able to tell”. In the gaps between the stories and the stories of the stories, we appreciate the limitations on historical narrative that exist and see the need—as exemplified in these films—to use all the means at one’s disposal to mediate that history.

Rewinding Memories

Lise Yasui’s *A Family Gathering*, nominated for an Academy Award for “Best Documentary, Short Subject” in 1988, juxtaposes the retrieval of family memory about historical events with an examination of the ways these stories have been recounted or hidden.⁵ Though Yasui notes in the *Study Guide* (1990) that her film “does not present a comprehensive and representative history of Japanese Americans or the World War II internment program[—rather,] it is about the process of discovering the past[—]FAMILY GATHERING traces the search for information about the internment through the memories of one family” (1), it is inevitable that narratives of this experience, because they were shared by so many and because of the place of the internment in the Asian American imaginary, contribute to collective memory. Though Yasui says she does not intend this to be a representative history of Japanese Americans, she very carefully locates it within the history of the community in the study guide. Indeed, the Yasui family story—the events and the ways the events were remembered and/or hidden—can only really be understood in that context.

Briefly, the history of the Japanese in the United States began in the mid-1800s, when sojourners arrived to work in the sugar and pineapple fields of Hawai‘i and the farms in California, as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 led plantation and farm owners to seek an alternative labor source. Nearly 150,000 Japanese came to Hawai‘i and about 30,000 arrived in California between 1882 and 1908. In 1907 the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” between the U.S. and Japanese governments ended the immigration of Japanese laborers,

but permitted the arrival of spouses of Japanese immigrants already in the United States. This opened the door to thousands of Japanese “picture brides”—women whose marriages were arranged through an exchange of photographs—until the Exclusion Act of 1924 closed the doors to all Japanese. The arrival of picture brides hastened the process by which Japanese immigrants established themselves in the United States. The birth of nisei (second generation) children transformed many Japanese from sojourners to permanent settlers. Life changed dramatically for the Japanese American community with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, as the United States entered World War II and anti-Japanese sentiment grew. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, giving military authorities the right to declare sections of the country as military areas “from which any or all persons may be excluded” without trial or hearings for reasons of “military necessity”. This executive order provided the legal authorization for the mass removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast and led to the forcible internment (or relocation) of about 120,000 ethnic Japanese in ten different camps across the United States, mostly in the West. Approximately 60 percent of those interned were American citizens by birth (second and third generations).

The internment has become the defining event for the Japanese American community. Gary Okihiko contends that “the mass removal and detention of Japanese Americans during World War II . . . is probably the subject most written about within that literature and perhaps even within Asian American history as a whole” (*Columbia Guide* 101). The critical and creative attention this experience has garnered attests to the place of the internment camps as the site of “the great temporal and psychic divide between ‘before’ and ‘after’ the war” (*Columbia Guide* 101). Autobiographies such as Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973) and Yoshiko Uchida’s *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family* (1982), novels like John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957), Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002), and David Mura’s *Famous Suicides of the Japanese Empire* (2008), and Lawson Fusao Inada’s book of poetry, *Legends from Camp* (1993), deal with the internment and its aftermath, reminding us that the scars of that experience continue to mark the community.

A Family Gathering opens with a black-and-white picture of the autobiographer’s grandfather, Masuo Yasui, who had come to the United States in 1903, opened a dry goods store, and settled with his wife and nine children in Hood River, Oregon, becoming a respected member of society.⁶ Lise’s voice-

over recounts, “On December 12, 1941, five days after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, my grandfather was arrested by the FBI. When my grandmother asked where they were taking him, the agents refused to answer. And when they drove away, no one knew how long he’d be gone.” Her grandfather was considered “a potentially dangerous enemy alien”, though no formal charges were filed against him and the evidence presented was, by all accounts, circumstantial. By opening her film in this manner, Yasui’s project clearly connects with the body of Asian American auto/biographical documentaries that seek to represent identity precisely in the interaction between official versions of history and personal or collective memory. As many critics have noted, films about the internment, such as those by Tanaka and Tajiri, are particularly potent sites of political revisioning.

The movies attempt to understand a “generation” of Japanese Americans, the word generation itself a metaphor that implies that “the people” (a historically constituted aggregate) are structured like a family. The stuff of these histories is not (merely) names, dates, and numbers, but stories, recipes, snapshots. This intimate ephemera informs not just Asian American history (as in the collective history of all Asian Americans) and the histories of Asian Americans (as in individual biographies of each and every Asian American) but Asian American histories, a constellation of different versions of the history of (an) ethnicity. (Feng, *Identities in Motion* 17)⁷

But, as Yasui pointedly notes, the film is primarily “the story of a search for one’s place in a family history” (*Study Guide* 1). For that reason, the historical introduction is followed by a home movie of Yasui’s grandparents, parents, and a young child (later identified as her older brother, Bobby) walking around a garden. The voice-over says, “I have a favorite memory from when I was young. My grandparents came to visit. My grandmother laughed a lot to herself, and spoke to me in Japanese, as if I could understand. One evening I stayed up late, listening to my grandfather as he talked into the night. He seemed tired but every now and then he would look at me and smile. . . . Later I learned that my grandparents never made such a visit together, that I had never met my grandfather at all”. From the beginning of the film, therefore, Yasui lays out the themes that run through her family memoir: the contradiction between facts and memory, the effect of missing information, and the possibility of choosing what to tell and remember.

The film is structured chronologically as Yasui tells the story of her

grandfather, his children, and her role in revising that inherited history. Masuo Yasui's story may be considered the classic narrative of the American Dream, until the bombing of Pearl Harbor. After immigrating in 1903 to join his father and brothers, he opened a store in Hood River, primarily to serve the numerous Japanese laborers who worked in the logging camps, sawmills, and farms. In 1912 he married Shidzuyo Miyake, a childhood friend from Tokyo, and they eventually had nine children. Masuo's store became an important social center for the Japanese community at Hood River, and he served as a community leader, aiding other Japanese with their legal and financial difficulties. He also became a prominent citizen within the white community and the first Japanese to become part of the Board of Directors of the Hood River Valley Fruit Growers Association. After Pearl Harbor and his arrest, the store was closed and the family's land seized. Ironically, his work for the Japanese community—for which he was given a silver cup by the Japanese government in appreciation—became one of the strongest arguments that justified his imprisonment. He was imprisoned from December 1941 to January 1946 while Shidzuyo and her younger children were relocated to Tule Lake in California. After the war, Masuo and Shidzuyo moved to Portland, where he continued to work for the Japanese American community. In particular, he helped many of the issei prepare for citizenship and himself became a naturalized citizen at the age of sixty-six. He died five years later.

The interviews Lise conducts with her father and his siblings reveal how important their father was in the community and how proud they were to be his children. By emphasizing the role their father had played in their community, one understands how devastating the accusation of disloyalty was for Masuo and his children and how difficult it became for him to rebuild a life shadowed by the specter of imagined guilt. Yasui also focuses on how some of Masuo's children made lives for themselves. Several, including Min and Robert, for example, were college students when the war broke out and escaped being interned because they were away from home. There is a sense of wanting to recollect the family stories that were dispersed during the war and bring the family together through a unified narrative.

As Peter Feng explains in his discussion of *A Family Gathering*, Yasui uses her father's home movies as the key to interpreting the way family history has been passed on: "Robert Shu Yasui's movies are transformed over the course of *A Family Gathering*, at first representing the young Lise's unquestioning acceptance of her father's storytelling, then marking her growing awareness of the ways these movies mediate her access to the past, and finally coming

to hold her conception of ‘the past’ in a remarkable state of flux (a state in which the films become the marker of a sanitized past, the hidden past, the false past)” (*Identities in Motion* 80).⁸ She highlights a very peculiar use that her family seemed to give to these movies and stories: rather than as material that would demonstrate the truth and preserve family history, she notes that her father used home movies to present the version of the family story that he *wanted* to remember, the “sanitized version”, so to speak, of their story. Yasui emphasizes from the beginning the different things that her father did not tell her, such as Masuo’s arrest after Pearl Harbor: “When I discovered this, I wondered what else I didn’t know”. Whenever she would ask her father about the war, he would “change the subject, or say nothing at all. The less he said, the more I wanted to know”. She finally wrenches from her father information about the tragedy that they wanted to forget, to the point that no one in the family spoke about it: her grandfather’s suicide. Indeed, Robert did not tell his wife or children of the manner of his father’s death until Lise was twenty-eight years old and well into the making of the film. As she recounts, “The night my father told me about my grandfather’s suicide, we were alone in the kitchen. I was asking about my grandfather’s life after the war, when my dad suddenly grew quiet and said, ‘Don’t you know how he died?’ And when he said that, somehow I knew. I cried because I could see my father’s pain. And I cried because in that instant my grandfather seemed more real to me than ever before”. This new information obliged the filmmaker to revise her entire project and, in a sense, “rewind” (Rai 26) her film to reread the images, this time with crucial information that led her to see everything in a different light.⁹ This illustrates Julia Erhart’s idea that “first-person documentary makes a representational and I believe political choice not to conceal the personal and institutional difficulties surrounding the explorations that each seeks to undertake, but to draw attention to the political history of the absence of evidence, that circumscribes and limits the stories each is able to tell”.

Yasui focuses on the gap between the real events of the past and what her family wants her to know and remember: she uses the images from home movies filmed by her father to represent the “approved” version of the family history and shows interviews of her relatives, particularly her father, her aunt Ruth, and uncles Min and Homer, recounting idealized stories of their childhood. When she asks Homer whether he had experienced “that classic All-American kind of boyhood? Or is that a myth?” her uncle replies, “Well, of course we did! Sure, we ate Wheaties, we drank Ovaltine, and yes, we went hunting and fishing. I mean all that is true, the good part of our lives, and

most people remember the good parts. They don't want to tell you their bad stories". Thus, as she says in her narration, "There came a time when nostalgia wasn't enough. Decades were missing from our history, and none more so than the war years". This awareness of what might be considered a unified family resolution to protect themselves from particular events of the past contrasts with our general idea of the state being the instrument of concealment of information. In ethnic studies, the unearthing of hidden histories often posits the state as the guilty party in the process of knowing the truth. Here, on the contrary, it is the family that chooses to hide what they believe should not be known, and they do so by smothering the truth in a wealth of media images and recollected stories that aim to deflect rather than provide information. Sturken's idea of the construction of American national identity through the remembrance of historical events as much as through the "forgetting and rescription of certain events" explains the Yasui family's position because the survivors themselves often "prevent history from being written smoothly and without disruption" (182).

To an important extent, therefore, the film is *about* the mediation of history because Yasui's project contemplates the ways people remember and are remembered, how they record and control information, how documents and media may be used to withhold and conceal rather than reveal. Richard Chalfen notes how valuable this film is for the way it suggests that home movies "represent a reality of the past and the ways they continue to construct, formulate, and restructure visions and memories", to the point that this form of "personalized home-mode imagery might contribute to—or even be responsible for—personal interpretations of family history" (526). At some point Lise admits that she never actually met her grandfather and that her vivid *memory* of him is actually "made up": "A creation drawn from all the stories I'd heard and the images on my father's movie screen. . . . My understanding of family history came from the movies we watched every Sunday night". So, because Yasui learns that she cannot trust her father's or relatives' versions, she embarks on her own search for material. In a manner similar to most family documentarists, she uses home movies, newsreel archival footage, old photographs and handwritten letters, government documents (mug shots and fingerprints), more pointed interviews with family members and friends, intensive research about Japanese American history, and her own reflections on the information gathered to support the narrative of her family story.

In particular, Lise interviews her uncle, Minoru Yasui (1917–1987), Masuo's third son, the first Japanese American graduate of the University of

Oregon School of Law (1939) and a key figure in the history of Japanese American civil disobedience during the crucial period after the implementation of Executive Order 9066. Min, as he was known to family and friends, sought to challenge the constitutionality of this executive order and the internment of Japanese Americans. He offered himself as a test case to defy Public Proclamation No. 3, which established travel limitations and a curfew on persons of Japanese ancestry. On March 28, 1942, he deliberately violated the curfew and was arrested. He spent most of the war in internment camps or prison and had his American citizenship revoked. After the war, he practiced law in Colorado and participated actively in community affairs.¹⁰

From this point, therefore, Yasui makes what Eakin calls “the story of the story” her central narrative structure: her search for information and the stories behind the facts moves the action (*How Our Lives* 59). The process of research then becomes the structuring frame of a documentary whose original purpose was completely revised: from planning to produce a family documentary about her grandfather and their family, the filmmaker develops a project that not only engages the Japanese American experience, but also requires her to rethink the inherited family story in light of her new knowledge of her grandfather’s suicide. Because of this complication, Cassandra Van Buren calls attention to the film’s “elliptical” structure, which, rather than developing chronologically, reveals events following Yasui’s investigation, one that “includes false starts; backtracking to pick up what was originally overlooked; re-evaluation, and, ultimately, progression. By no means is the process efficient, clean, or easy” (59). Yasui’s voice-overs constantly remind viewers that they are watching not only a film, but the making of a film, drawing them into her project of historical mediation. She frequently inserts personal references in the voice-over: “A year after I started this film, my father told me this story . . .”, “I heard”, “I asked”, among others. As one of her uncles explains to some people he’s seeking information from: “Lise’s here filming a kind of family documentary”.

But to an extent, at least at the beginning, Yasui shares her father’s reluctance for facing the truth directly. This unwillingness to talk about certain events recurs with other people, most notably in a scene where her uncle Tsuyoshi, after a long conversation in Japanese with Hanna Endo, looks away when Lise asks him if she’s missed anything in the conversation and tells her “nothing”. She then concludes, “I felt frozen behind the camera—I kept expecting someone to mention the war, but it never came up. Then I realized I was avoiding it. I had inherited my father’s protectiveness of the past. If I

wanted to know what had happened, it was time to head home, and just start asking”. The film thus examines how Yasui’s relationship to the imagery her family promotes begins to shift, as new information obliges her to reconstruct knowledge. Yet as Chalfen notes, Yasui displays

a sense of reluctance to give in to new information, and a dedication to retaining a belief [she] held for many years. She says, “And although my grandfather died before I had a chance to meet him, I’ll always remember that one evening I stayed up late, listening to him talk into the night.” There is a sense of informed denial operating here as we see how Yasui wants to hold onto a memory even when presented with contradictory evidence—a nice example of how we have the ability to honor alternative versions of the past. (527)

Indeed, it appears that with regard to this particular “memory”, the auto/biographer prefers to retain the remembered version rather than the facts.

A Family Gathering asks who is ultimately accountable for the versions of history that we deploy to speak about our family and community. The title of the film may actually be read in two ways: as expressing the idea of a family “meeting” or “reunion”, or by reading the word “gathering” as a verb and thinking of family stories as a process that involves “collecting” or “bringing together”. Yasui’s family portrait documentary does both: she has had to draw together discrete versions of her family story in order to construct the complete portrait, with all its discursive nuances. None of their family stories is as crucial to the history than that of the manner of Masuo Yasui’s death. As her father explains, after Pearl Harbor his father lost all “the trust and respect my grandfather worked so hard for. . . . For many former friends and neighbors, the length of his sentence was proof that he’d been disloyal to his country. As my grandfather grew older, he got anxious and fearful, always worried that the FBI was coming once again to arrest him. After too many years of suffering these fears, my grandfather committed suicide at the age of 71. It took my father 28 years to tell me this”.

Yasui has to confront the double dilemma of her personal choice of the stories: as a filmmaker committed to revealing the facts about her family and community’s history, she is compelled to tell the truth. But as a member of this particular family, she also acknowledges how their decision to suppress the painful episodes marks who they are and their way of preserving the happy stories of their family life. In this process, Yasui’s film connects with other depictions of the way the internment has been remembered by Japanese

Americans. Her project also attempts “to describe the violent effect Internment had on the continuity of memory for Japanese Americans, how repressed parental memories affected the lives of those born after the barbed wire was taken down. These movies thus attempt to represent that which should have been represented: they must somehow depict the absence of depictions of the Internment, and that paradox is evident in an ambivalent attitude toward the processes of cinematic representation” (Feng, *Identities in Motion* 69). “So now,” Yasui tells her viewers, “I watch these movies and everything looks a little different, I’m aware that this is a past not to be taken for granted. It’s a past my family made for themselves, and it’s a past they gave to me.” In a sense, as Van Buren suggests, she “forgives her family’s reconstruction of the past, forgives their silences and omissions, because she now understands the incredible pain associated with the war years” and decides that “they deserve to create the past they want to have, after surviving the traumas associated with the camps” (61).

Feng argues that

Asian American identity is defined not by history, but by gaps in history: the absence of information bespeaks a historical trauma that defines Asian Americans. It is not just that these gaps correspond with founding moments in Asian American history, but that the investigation of these gaps returns us continually to those moments of crisis, renewing the traumas and thereby renewing (mis)identity. As multimedia artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha famously wrote, “Our destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search” (1995, 81). In the act of examining historical trauma, of theorizing why certain things are forgotten, these movies seek identity in the interplay between memory and history; in doing so, they further theorize the relation between family stories and the histories of ethnicities. (*Identities in Motion* 17)

Yasui’s *A Family Gathering* illustrates the complex relationship one might have with family stories and/as historical mediation as it provides a possible way to approach the multilayered drama of the recovery and acceptance of the past.

Manipulating the Components of a Story

Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury describes her *Halving the Bones* as “a documentary with fictional lapses”, acknowledging the elusive quality of memory and his-

tory and the ways we might be tempted to create memory when facts are missing.¹¹ The film, which focuses on the experiences of the author's grandmother and mother and herself, is a collage of images and objects that are made to resonate in diverse ways.¹² Divided into two sections, the film privileges the voices and images of these women whose stories of living in Japan and the United States, their sense of alienation from their homelands and family, complement and complete each other's. Once again, the filmmaker deploys a wide variety of narrative devices: documents, photographs, newsreel footage, fake home movies, visual poetry, letters, and interviews to construct the family documentary. Lounsbury opens the narrative with a shot of the words "Making a Family Album?" that indicates the nature of her project—but highlights the difficulty of the endeavor by appearing to question whether this may actually be possible.

A voice in Japanese-accented English begins to speak autobiographically, representing Lounsbury's grandmother, Matsuye Okubo, who had moved to Hawai'i as a picture bride in 1909. Matsuye's father, who believed that "the destiny of Japan lay beyond her borders and it was the duty of Japanese to disseminate throughout the world", sent her to marry Lounsbury's grandfather, a photographer who owned the Volcano Photo Shop. Matsuye worked with her husband and grew skillful at coloring photographs. It became her means of supporting the family when her husband was interned in New Mexico for four years during the war. The film then showcases photographs of plant life in Hawai'i and home movies of a woman walking around a luscious garden, looking out at the sea. Matsuye reflects on her life in Hawai'i, which she hated intensely at first, calling it a "country of savages", though she says she fell in love at first sight with her husband. To this, Ruth's voice-over immediately interjects, "My grandmother says it was love at first sight, but this appears to be an out and out lie". Michael Zryd notes that "Ruth's voice is baldly skeptical; its function in relation to the interaction of the grandmother's and her own voice is to undercut the sentimental conventionality of the immigrant saga so familiar to the autobiographical family documentary genre" (129). But Matsuye slowly began to love Hawai'i, finding freedom in the island. She has a son and later, supposedly diagnosed with a tumor, returns to Japan, where it is revealed that she is actually pregnant with Ruth's mother, Masako, who was born in Japan. A few years later they return to Hawai'i. Commenting on her grandmother's story, Ruth notes, "She chose to remember her life that way", probably making up some of the more romantic parts of it.

Apart from the narrative of her life, Lounsbury also figuratively includes

her grandmother speaking to and about her granddaughter as, in the opening moments, a voice speaking Japanese-accented English says, “Kanojo wa Rusu. Ha-fu desu. Hanbun wa nihonjin de, hanbun wa Americajin. . . . This is Ruth. She is half. That means half-Japanese and half-American. Five years after her Japanese grandmother died, she still had her bones in an old tea can, sitting in a closet, in her apartment in New York. That is the beginning of this story”. She explains that the name “Rusu” (the way she pronounces it) means “absent” or “not at home”, and notes that she cannot speak to Rusu because she doesn’t speak Japanese. “I wonder”, the voice of the grandmother asks, “will she remember me after I am gone?” Then a voice-over of a woman with an American accent speaks in the first person: “My name is Ruth, but I don’t like it. It’s not a good name for a young person. I don’t know why my mother chose it. My mother is Japanese, and Japanese people can’t pronounce ‘r’ or ‘th’”.

The juxtaposition of the two versions of her name—one that her grandmother notes means “absence” and the other that her mother cannot pronounce—evokes Ruth’s sense of confusion and lack of a clear identity in relation to Japan and the United States. At this point the filmmaker also introduces the notion of her being “mixed”, which, though it refers to herself, also connects with her mother and grandmother’s experiences. The sense of liminality is thus shared by these three generations of women, leading them to, in specific ways, experience separation from each other that Ruth seeks to heal through the process of revisiting family history.

Lounsbury admits that she barely knew her grandmother and had met her grandfather only once before he died. In a surprising twist, after the narration of her grandmother’s life, she also confesses that her grandmother never wrote her autobiography and that the narrative was written by Ruth herself, based on her relatives’ stories, to try to unravel the paradigms of her own cultural liminality. In fact, all of the voices in the first section of the film are spoken by Lounsbury herself, “who invites the viewer into a web of absent or siteless identities” (Zryd 128). She further divulges that the photographs were not real family shots, as her grandfather’s cameras and film were confiscated after Pearl Harbor. By admitting to this, Lounsbury calls our attention to her need for stories in order to understand her family: “I made up these things because I never really knew my grandparents. And now they’re dead, and I didn’t have very much to go on. I thought I would understand them better if I just pretended to be them. Anyway. I just wanted to set the record straight”. She insists, nonetheless, that the facts of their lives are true: “Family

relationships are like family stories. You have to practice them to keep them alive". This affirmation becomes her way of justifying a narrative creativity that deploys speculation to fill in the gaps. It also explains her insistence on giving her mother her grandmother's bones, as "practice" in daughterhood for both of them. Moreover, as Erhart explains,

What emerges with this confession is a subjective and present-tense dimension to the sequences that was not initially apparent. But there is something else: implicit in the director's preference for what seems a radically voluntarist version of history, is a critique of the matter and question of who gets to "have" a history to begin with. . . . While on the one hand, Ruth's seemingly willful "pretending to be them" empties the footage of its historical capital, on the other hand, it is not only personal choice that determines her actions, but distinct political, historical circumstances.

A division in the film is evident by the voice-over that notes, "Five years after her Japanese grandmother dies, she still had her bones. . . . Now Ruth has decided that something must be done about the bones. The idea of her grandmother, fragmented and ignored, has begun to bother her". In the more straightforwardly documental second section of the film, we hear the voice of Masako, who narrates her own story through interviews with Ruth and filming the scene of the handing over of the bones. Zryd explains how Masako "functions as yet another sceptical perspective to qualify both the grandmother's idealized autobiography and Ruth's contemplative but studied narration" (129). Her first words, spoken directly towards the camera, are, "Can I start? I'm Masako, Matsuye's daughter, and Ruth's mother, and I'm not a tumor". She then critically comments on the film's way of recounting the family's history: "I don't think you can talk about accuracy in memory. Without realizing it, you want to color it, make it somehow to your advantage". Indeed, though Masako clearly resists her daughter's project, she does cooperate and speaks candidly into the camera, also allowing some of their conversations to be filmed. She declares that if she had a story, its title would be "I was diagnosed as a tumor", which led her to be born in Japan and thus classified as an "enemy alien" in the United States during the war.

Ruth expands on her mother's fixation with having been diagnosed in utero as a tumor to connect with American images of Asian malignancy, explaining that "the metaphor contains something that I recognize: a deeply rooted conflation of sickness and race". She interjects images of American

anti-Japanese propaganda films and videos of her mother preparing a turkey for dinner as she considers the cultural paradigms that led to her mother's and her own ambivalence to Japanese culture.

The Yellow Peril, the malignant Japanese who had to be excised, the inscrutable Japanese who couldn't be trusted. I'd seen the images all my life and I believed them. Anyway, this was old history, but even so I knew I shared it. Mine was different from everyone else's in Connecticut, and obviously it was because of Mom. Her genes in my body had prevailed. So you see, it was this Eurocentric and primitive understanding of history and genetics that left me susceptible to a metaphoric confusion about my mother's origins. She'd started life as a tumor, and, cancerous, she'd spread. I was her offspring and hardly benign.

Lounsbury's meditation on the notion of the Japanese as the yellow peril and her mother's beginnings as a "tumor" key into one of the most critical paradigms of American representations of Asians. Used by anti-Asian publications in the early 1900s to describe the threat of Asian immigrant labor, the notion of "yellow peril" was later deployed to refer to the fear of interracial marriage and, further, of any other sort of contamination from the unknown and, therefore, dangerous oriental. Pulp magazines and dime novels of the time capitalized on that fear by promoting the image of "oriental" men preying on innocent white women, emblemized through Sax Rohmer's fictional character Fu Manchu. Asians in the United States, of whatever ethnic origin, thus *became* the "yellow peril", "a threat to nation, race, and family" (R. Lee, *Orientalism* 10). Monica Chiu has explained that in spite of the fictional origin of the "Yellow Peril rhetoric", "it paved the way for a symbolic institutionalization of the Asian American corporeal within this peril/(para)lyzing paradigm. Its operative narratives rose from biocultural foundations that were derivative of the discursive intersections between fact and fiction that have plagued social reaction and attendant legislative action against Asian Americans" (*Filthy Fictions* 7).¹³ This "quintessential stand of racial abjection" (*Filthy Fictions* 7) marked all Asians as threats. Lounsbury ironically appropriates those images in her portrayal of her mother and herself to complicate her sense of ethnic identity, acknowledging its development as an amalgam of family stories and popular culture.

Masako traveled back and forth from Japan all her life, eventually got a PhD from Yale, married, and had Ruth at the age of forty-two. Masako also talks about her father, his skill at calligraphy and writing haiku, and his talent

for photography. She notes her surprise that Ruth had taken an interest in photography, saying about her daughter that it is “strange that she likes little things that belonged to her grandfather”.

The crux of the film is the section where Ruth brings her grandmother’s bones to her mother, with whom she has a difficult relationship. In a sense, because Masako and her mother were estranged, Ruth struggles to reconnect mother and daughter after the mother’s death by passing on the bones and some things that she took from her grandmother’s apartment. Japanese Buddhist funerals typically involve the cremation of the body, after which the bones and ashes are collected by the family and placed into urns for burial. These bones have been given to Ruth by their relatives in Japan, who had saved them after the cremation, perhaps to allow Matsuye’s daughter and granddaughter to bury a part of her in the United States and be able to visit and honor her over the years.

The section where they open the box from Japan in Masako’s apartment is the center of the film, and the ostensibly casual conversation resonates with years of feeling. Masako begins to tell Ruth about her family, her father’s internment, and reads one of the haikus he wrote in camp. The film intersperses this scene with introductory shots of titles for what they will see: “Grandma’s Jacket” shows them pulling out a jacket and commenting on how it is reversible (Ruth has just shown a picture of her grandmother wearing the jacket); “Parts of a Letter”, “Junky Things”, “Enemy Alien”, “Espionage”, and so on, as they continue to pull out and comment on the diverse objects in the box. In the scene called “Passport” Masako opens her mother’s passport and sees a picture of herself as a child and exclaims, “What a cute child!” When Ruth points out that it’s her as a child, “Oh, I know”, Masako says, “but what a cute picture!” More crucially, when they open the can with the bones, Masako’s reaction continues to be that of a stranger looking at objects that are alien to her: “Interesting . . .” she notes, after commenting on the color of the bones. This small episode heightens the sense of Masako’s alienation from her mother and, indeed, from herself. Here we learn that Masako’s parents returned to Japan, disillusioned with America, after her father was released from camp. They both died there.

Masako and Ruth talk about one of the most crucial aspects of their story: why Masako never went to visit her mother and why she didn’t attend her funeral. Masako explains that because she spent so much time separated from her parents, she had forgotten how to be a daughter. It appears that Ruth fears the same, which is why she insists on this ritual—opening up the box

and giving her mother the bones. Indeed, Ruth admits that “I spend a lot of time poking around in the past or imagining the future”, while her mother “lives entirely in the present”. The film demonstrates, apart from the desire to recover family stories, the process of reconnection between the mother and grandmother. Clearly, the bond has been severed and Ruth struggles to make her mother recognize and embrace her own mother in the hope of being able to do so herself. Indeed, Ruth uses the bones as an excuse to embark on a conversation about her own past to untangle her own cultural confusion.

Lounsbury makes the bones a metaphor for memory and family connection, requiring herself, her mother, and viewers to rethink the implications of maternity and filiation. “Over the years”, the filmmaker says, “she had forgotten what it was to be a daughter. I didn’t want that to happen to me. That’s why I gave her the bones”. By literally giving Masako her mother’s bones, Ruth puts her grandmother’s legacy into her mother’s hands and confirms herself as a daughter and granddaughter. The numerous photographs displayed in the film are also potent metaphors. Though Masako notes that Ruth is quite like her grandfather in their talent for photography, it is Matsuye, who knew how to color photographs, whom Ruth resembles as she also manipulates the documents she has at hand. The bones and the photographs become, as Eva Rueschmann explains, “recollection-objects” or “transnational objects”, items that have special significance in the representation of diasporic identity (188). Indeed, Lounsbury pays an inordinate amount of attention to found and created *objects* that are repeatedly filmed in close-up: paper clips, paintings, flowers, a box with Japanese doll heads, old geography books, stamp collections, and minerals, among others. This obsessive filming conveys a sense of the director’s search for meaning within the objects, as by repeatedly focusing on them she makes them both strange and familiar. This technique supports her efforts to understand the process of cultural and emotional alienation within her own family. The objects she fixates on, particularly the bones and film footage, “become potent symbolic, even fetishistic objects of connection and rootedness, but also of transience and loss” (Rueschmann 189).

The documentary ends with an “Epilogue (a Lounsbury)”, which once again requires viewers to revisit the entire film from another perspective, that of her father. When Ruth stops by Hawai‘i on the way home from a trip to Japan, she visits Pearl Harbor and, among the list of the servicemen who died there, finds one named “Lounsbury”. She then introduces home movies made by her father, Floyd Lounsbury (1914–1998), a New Yorker and a Yankees fan who was professor of anthropology at Yale University and worked on linguistic

theory, Mayan hieroglyphic writing, Iroquois languages, social organization, and kinship systems. She explains that to get over his disappointment that she wasn't a boy he had named her "Ruth", "after the Babe", because "he wanted me to be an all-American kid". By introducing this information at the end of the documentary, Lounsbury ironically revises her previous explanations of her name and considers the other "half" of herself that had not been explored in any significant detail in her film.

Halving the Bones reconstructs, with an abundance of data and fiction, the history of the Japanese in the United States through three generations of women who have all been separated—geographically and psychologically—from a homeland and from each other. As Rueschmann explains, using Stuart Hall's formulation in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", the film "is not so much about the 'archeological' excavation of the past as it is about the *production* of cultural identity and the *re-telling* of the past" (186–187). The presumably straightforward story of Ruth's mission to give her mother her grandmother's bones becomes an instrument for revisiting important issues in Japanese American history: the issei and nisei's ambivalent relationship with both America and Japan, biraciality and "halving", the elusive nature of historical narratives and memory, and the possibilities of documentary itself. To achieve this, Lounsbury freely manipulates the possibilities of her medium, incorporating "fabricated images and found objects, documents of cultural and political history not necessarily her own to 'reorganize her subjectivity' and reestablish a connection with her ethnic heritage and family" (Rueschmann 190). But the film openly recognizes its own manipulative creativity, which is largely based on Ruth's need to connect with her mother and grandmother and so complete her family history.

Seeking Versions

Vancouver filmmaker Ann Marie Fleming's project is more complex because, as she notes, her great-grandfather, Long Tack Sam, though universally recognized as one of the most important vaudeville acts in the early twentieth century, seems to have been all but forgotten by his own family. "If he was so famous", she argues, "why was he forgotten? Why doesn't my family talk about him anymore?" Her observation that "differences and distances keep us apart and we forget to remind each other of our own stories" leads her to uncover and re-present what can certainly be considered one of the most fascinating lives in the twentieth century. Fleming never met her great-grandfather, and

her curiosity about him takes her all over the world—from China to Australia, to the United States, Canada, and Brazil—as she searches for stories about the man known as Long Tack Sam.

Fleming uncovers a story of multiple journeys, transnational affiliations, and the unifying power of art. Born in 1885 and trained in the three-thousand-year tradition of Chinese acrobats, her great-grandfather, Lung Te Shan (transposed to the more English-sounding “Long Tack Sam”) left China in the early 1900s with a traveling troupe. On a tour of Linz in Austria he met and married Leopoldine (Poldi) Roesler, a young shop clerk, converting to Roman Catholicism. He left Poldi and their two young daughters, Minna (Fleming’s grandmother) and Poldi, behind as he traveled to the United States with his troupe. There he became a vaudeville star who thrilled the crowds with amazing feats of dexterity and, Fleming notes, his exotic Orientalism, which was “very popular in the early twentieth century”. As one of the old-timers that she interviews explains, “There were more famous Chinese magicians, but of course they weren’t Chinese”—vaudeville featured several Caucasians who performed disguised as Asians because “it drew in the crowds”. After enduring years of separation from his family because of World War I, Sam vowed never to leave them again and incorporated Poldi and the girls into the troupe: his wife as their manager and the girls (who used the orientalized stage names “Min-Na” and “Nee-Sa”) as acrobats and dancers. Sam’s act consisted of acrobatics and magic, like having a long string of needles pulled from his throat, or producing a fishbowl full of water (and a swimming fish) after rolling out of a somersault. They performed all over the world—from Canada to Brazil, from New York to Australia and New Zealand—a show that George Burns called “the greatest vaudeville act I’d ever seen”. In a film clip, Orson Welles refers to Sam as his “teacher”, and we are told that he acted with the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, George Burns, and Gracie Allen, sold out shows at The Palace in New York, and was invited by Houdini to join his club.

The family’s history on the road responds first to the demands of the vaudeville circuit and then to the events of world history that could not accommodate a transnational family: the rise of Hitler, the Canadian Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, the Pacific War, and the Communist revolution in China. Sam and his family moved back to Linz for a time in the late 1930s with their third child, Frank (called Bobbie), but they were forced to flee in the face of World War II. Interestingly, Fleming uncovers a photograph of Adolf Hitler visiting a school in Linz, the city he envisioned as the capital of the Third Reich. As the camera pans over the photograph of Hitler sur-

rounded by schoolboys, it stops to focus, in the shadows, on thirteen-year-old biracial Bobbie Long, the epitome of all Hitler rallied against.

Politics and history intervene repeatedly in Sam's life, requiring him to keep renewing himself on many levels: for example, one of Sam's early acts involved hanging and spinning hair tricks that the acrobats performed with their long queues. In 1911 the new Chinese republic banned the braid because of its connection with the Qing dynasty and with it, effectively, Sam's main act. Unfazed, he revised his repertoire to accommodate the changing situation and tastes of the time, incorporating elements he perceived would keep his act in demand. In Germany in the late 1930s, a place that began to insist on purity of race, his daughters' biraciality became a problem and the act began to suffer, leading them to move again. Indeed, Fleming's narration of Long Tack Sam's life becomes the story of the world history and politics of the twentieth century.

"I come from a restless family", Fleming notes at one point, and her narrative illustrates this superlatively. To find evidence of Sam's life, Fleming retraces his journeys—to Sydney, Shandong, New York, Vancouver, Honolulu—and unearths unexpected material: stunning backdrops to his act at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, costumes stored in chests at a cousin's house in Hawai'i, posters at the Museum of Magic in Tennessee. She finds relatives in all these places—all descendants of Long Tack Sam—proof of the transnational nature of her forebear and his family. She also attends the International Acrobat Festival and visits the Wuqiao Acrobatic School in China, where Sam may have trained, a place where his name is kept alive. Fleming, another "sleuth of selfhood", uses the search for the forgotten Long Tack Sam as her film's structuring frame. Her discoveries bring her closer to her own family scattered all over the world, and, one might argue, to a renewed appreciation of her own art in the context of a family tradition.

On one level, therefore, Sam's story is the tale of a transnational family in the twentieth century; on another, it narrates the rise and fall of vaudeville. Fleming suggests that history is constructed as much from popular culture as from documents. Sam's "disappearance" from history, she seems to conclude, stemmed from his refusal to make the transition from live acts to Hollywood. He decided that his act "would stay on the stage, not the screen", rebelling against the stereotypical and unfavorable way Chinese were generally portrayed in American films of the 1920s. The last years of Sam's and Poldi's lives were shadowed by personal disappointments: they disapproved of their daughter Poldi's wedding to a Shanghai banker and their son Frank's marriage

to a woman of Japanese descent. Two of Sam's children, Minna (who had married a doctor from Hong Kong) and Frank, moved to Vancouver in the 1960s. The family eventually reconciled, and Sam and Poldi, after a time in New York, returned to Austria, where they both died in the late 1950s.

Fleming seems to want to prove she is a worthy descendant of Long Tack Sam: her documentary is itself an acrobatic feat of showmanship, an elegy for a lost form of entertainment, and an experiment in the enactment of family history. With lively vaudeville music as the film's soundtrack, Fleming deploys an amazing series of photographs, old film footage, press material, theater programs and posters, elaborately embroidered silk costumes, and backdrops to piece together Sam's life. The narrative is based on interviews with relatives, magicians, archivists, historians, and Chinese acrobats. As in many of the other texts analyzed in this book, some of the stories contradict each other, particularly those of Sam's childhood. But Fleming soon discovers that it was Sam himself who encouraged these different versions of his story, and, in a gesture of familial creative connection, Fleming presents us with all of the versions she uncovers, in comic-book animations that merely reenact what her great-grandfather himself did: hiding his childhood in a series of exaggerated versions of the same yarn. She incorporates into the film several Monty Python-inspired animations of Sam's childhood introduction to acrobatics and the story of his departure from China. But none of Fleming's images are simple or straightforward. In a documentary rich with playful collages, she breathes life into photographs by making cigarettes burn, characters wink or raise eyebrows, plates twirl, people wave—in a whimsical attempt to make Sam and his world come alive. Most interestingly, she blends photography and animation to reproduce his most famous acrobatic feats and magic tricks, allowing Long Tack Sam and his daughters to perform again.

Photographs of Long Tack Sam protagonize Fleming's documentary, reminding us that the image serves as the main storage house of memory and, importantly, as the basis for much of our access to history. Sturken notes that "throughout the twentieth century, events were remembered because they were photographed and moments forgotten because no images of them were preserved, and these image artifacts worked in tension with unphotographed memories" (173). Fleming's manipulation of Sam's photographs, making them move and come alive, deliberately locates him in twentieth-century history, as both an actor and a subject. By revisiting Sam's stories of his childhood, the paper trail of his articles, posters, and photographs, Fleming also examines his subsequent historical "disappearing act". By manipulating these

found objects and fabricated stories, she engages documents of cultural and political history to reconnect with her ethnic heritage and her family. This strategy, Rueschmann notes, acknowledges the subjective, unreliable character of memory that leads the filmmaker to give in to her desire to complete family history with imaginary images even as she recognizes the ultimate incompleteness of the project (190). As Yasui and Lounsbury do, Fleming multiplies the uses of her documents: the photographs and stories not only preserve, but also *produce*, even *perform*, memory. Indeed, the film opens and ends with the same film footage of Sam wearing Western clothes, soundlessly laughing and gesturing towards the person holding the camera. In voice-over in the opening scene, Fleming wonders what he might be trying to say to her; at the end, she concludes that he's saying, "Ann Marie, you can put the camera down now". Her task of remembering Long Tack Sam and his family history is completed.¹⁴

An important connection between these three filmmakers—their biraciality—invites us to reflect briefly on how their family position or identification might be crucial for their mediation of Asian American history. Yasui admits that she identified primarily with the relatives she was closest to, her mother's. Describing her father's side of the family, she notes that she considered them the relatives "who looked so Oriental". Because of her distance from her Japanese American family as she was growing up, the film reveals a sense of searching for connection at the same time that it acknowledges the advantages of being both insider and outsider to this family. Lounsbury foregrounds her status as "half" or "mixed", though she never speaks about her father (until the brief Epilogue) or his family. Nonetheless, Zryd posits that Lounsbury's consciousness of her mixed or hyphenated cultural identity produces "a structural, even embodied ironic perspective. Furthermore, the multiple modes of irony, from attacking sarcasm to self-irony to complex open irony, construct a voice appropriate to her sophisticated meditations on cultural identity, political commentary, and documentary ethics" (124). Fleming also highlights the diverse ethnic origin of her family and, most importantly, notes the consequences of public opinion regarding biraciality as she describes her grandmother's acting career. If only because biraciality distances the filmmakers from the more painful experiences of their relatives, there is a sense of urgency in acknowledging and/or embracing this history.

Michael Renov, in *The Subject of Documentary* (2004), notes that "historical discourse has, after all, come to be regarded as the representation of people, forces, and events from a particular perspective. . . . If we can say that

history belongs to those with the power to *re*-present it, little wonder that video and film practitioners have come to share the revisionist historian's suspicion for top-down institutional accounts" (109–110). We may argue that the validity of the family portrait documentary lies in the manner in which it incorporates intersecting modes of rendering or performing memory, history, lived experience, and records. Yasui's, Lounsbury's, and Fleming's projects resonate with collective validity as they reconstruct a familial and historical past that acknowledges the elusive nature of personal memory, as well as its performative possibilities in a postmodern context. Importantly, these family documentaries prevent historical erasure as they help attain a sense of group identity through a medium that increasingly serves to provide us with history.

Asian Diasporic Transnational Families

And that magical opportunity of entering another life is what really sets us thinking about our own.

—Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks*

This examination of the family narratives of Asian diasporic subjects gives us a sociohistorical portrait of an increasingly dynamic phenomenon. These stories explain particular histories by juxtaposing public events with private experiences, to reveal the ways families construct (or reconstruct) identity within the experience of diaspora. Giving a sense of cohesion and closure to the lives of grandparents and parents can establish a sense of authority and meaning to the writer's own life story. Access to these stories also allows readers to understand the development of particular ethnic communities, as the narratives support the production of a history and culture for the community. Writers of family memoirs, conscious of the implications of their project, deliberately promote these texts as community artifacts in the context of developing ethnic discourse.

The texts show us how writers examine their own lives and work through their engagement with their forebears' lives: the story of the family also becomes the story of the writer coming to being. In all these texts, Gudmundsdóttir notes, "prominent in some, but latent in others, there is a tension between the attempt to portray a life objectively and the attempt to convey the personal significance of the events for the writers" (193). The motivations that inspire subjects of the diaspora to write about their families—a sense of debt to that family, a need to remember a history in danger of obliteration, the obligation to bring certain issues to the public sphere, and the desire to contribute to collective memory—might arguably also move others to write *about* family memoirs. Exploring the forms and possibilities of the family memoir has allowed me to understand the transnational and transcultural character of my own family, a process, I realize, that has been part of my own academic choices from the very beginning. I noted in the introduction to this study that

this project connects with my earlier theoretical concern with the ways Asian Americans revise established literary genres to provide their communities with narratives that serve cultural or collective memory. But the project has become a bridge to my next concern: exploring the autobiographical nature of professional commitment.

The historian E. H. Carr suggested that, when taking up a work of history, we must “study the historian before [we] begin to study the facts”, to examine the perspective or position—the “bees he has in his bonnet”—from which scholarship develops (17–18). This engagement with Asian diasporic family memoirs has made me consider the links between the kind of scholarship I have focused on and my position with respect to my own family history. If, as Paul Valéry states, “there is no theory that is not in fact a carefully concealed part of the theorist’s own life story” (quoted in Klinkowitz 118), then I have to admit to being guilty as charged, though I do know I was ignorant of what was really happening and what I was really doing until very much into the project.

Exploring the ways other subjects of the Asian diaspora articulate their family’s lives has allowed me to think critically about my own family and our position with respect to each other, to the country we grew up in, the countries some of us have immigrated to, and to the next generation. The Philippines is the place where people from different countries became my family. On my father’s side, my American great-grandfather, Ira Davis, who was born in Rogersville, Missouri, in 1882, came to the Philippines as a soldier in 1902. Here is my cousin Betsy’s version of his story:

Ira Davis the father was quite a charming man, but also quite the cad. He was the black sheep of the Davis boys, always in trouble with the parents, and at the end of the day he basically ran away from home and joined the Army and that is how he wound up in the Philippines. He was first stationed in Mindanao, at Camp del Pilar, and then eventually came north and wound up stationed north, near Bautista, which is where he met Lola. May he rest in peace, the man was a gambler and a womanizer all his life, and at the end of the day, when Lola got fed up with him, he went back to Missouri “for a spell” and then continued on to San Francisco which is where he lived for the rest of his life. I believe he passed away in 1938 and he is buried at the military cemetery at Golden Gate Park. We have gone to his grave several times.

“Lola” (the Filipino word for grandmother) was Victorina Gonzalez of a

rather wealthy Filipino family. There's a story that she had another American soldier boyfriend who soon after died crossing a river on a horse. Ira clearly saw his chance and made his move, which involved climbing up to Lola's bedroom at 3:00 a.m. and making sure he was found there. Though Lola was sleeping with her younger sister, this was enough for there to be a wedding (also partly because they were already courting at the time). Ira and Victorina had six children: my grandfather, Ira Efren, was the fifth child.

The paternal side of my family, and thus my name, connects with a vital part of Philippine history in the twentieth century: the narrative of a new independent nation that begins with the arrival of the Americans who, ostensibly, would bring modernization to the country. This "inter-penetration of Asia and America" (Zamora 2), on a political and a personal level, changed the face of the country in many ways. My biracial grandfather was, therefore, heir to a promise of modernization and possibility. Though I never spoke to him about the world of his childhood, I imagine that the perspective that Norman Reyes—the son of an American and a Filipino—presents in his memoir, *Child of Two Worlds* (1995), aptly describes the context he grew up in. Unlike in countries such as Korea or Vietnam, where biraciality was viewed negatively, Reyes' memoir demonstrates that a positive view of the mix between the Filipino and the Westerner continued to exist (and still does) in Philippine society after Spanish colonization, where the mestizo—now also a blend of American and Filipino—is privileged and considered of a higher social class (even if economically this might not be the case). In general, upper middle-class Filipinos of that time were supportive of the new regime and hopeful about the advantages of American colonization. Reyes' biraciality and biculturalism are articulated in fundamentally positive terms by his parents, who teach the boy to consider himself the fortunate recipient of the advantages of both cultures. This is the world I imagine my grandfather inhabiting—one full of promise of a new way of being Filipino, in a country that was enthusiastically embracing the twentieth century. Indeed, even today, as Maria Zamora explains, "Asia" and "America" "continue to merge in different ways on different terrains of the imagination, as well as in real political, ideological, and economic arenas" (3).

Ira began his radio career in the 1930s, when radio was still a new phenomenon. The first radio stations were established in the country in 1922, becoming one of the most significant events that shaped the nation's culture for several decades. Radio was arguably one of the American colonizer's most effective tools as, apart from introducing the Filipinos to the kinds of variety shows, comic skits, and short newscasts popular in the United States, it

taught its audiences of all ages English. The most comprehensive study of radio broadcasting in the Philippines in those early years, *Appropriation of Colonial Broadcasting: A History of Early Radio in the Philippines 1922–1946* (2008), was published recently by Elizabeth L. Enriquez, who, as family stories would have it, happens to be my stepmother. Here, she discusses the history of the medium, tracing the ways Filipinos first imitated or mimicked American broadcasting styles and structure, to later subvert the form, making it uniquely their own to suit their needs and tastes.

According to his obituary in *The Inquirer* (Manila), Ira quit radio during the war “but helped the resistance by supplying the guerrillas in Nueva Ecija with radio equipment used to broadcast news from the guerrillas, as well as from the United States and the allies”.¹ He joined the Manila Broadcasting Company (MBC) after the war and hosted a number of programs for the popular radio station DZRH, the longest-running radio station in Manila. During his decades working for the radio, he experienced and participated in the shifts in programming: beginning with pure entertainment, he began introducing educational programs. He was hugely popular among schoolchildren, who called him “the man who knew the answer to all the questions”. He also delivered the “Pan American News” for over ten years. He once told us that he would write the scripts for the daily radio shows (with such celebrities as Pugo and Chuchay) in the car while the driver drove him from the house to work in the morning, and once he got to work they would all sit at a table and rehearse, and then, ta-da, the radio show! He developed several programs that were vital to radio broadcasting in the 1950s and 1960s, known as the “Golden Years” of Philippine radio, such as the melodramas or comedies that featured stars (or made stars of) Dolphy, Sylvia la Torre, Oscar Obligacion, and Chichay. He also produced “The Big Show” with these and other stars like Patsy and Panchito.

Ira married Wilhelmine Beverly Baumann, my grandma. Her Belgian grandfather, Léon Vincart, had been vice-consul of Belgium in Tunis (1888–1896), consul in Hong Kong (1896–1899) and Macau (1899), consul in Bangkok (1899–1901), consul general in Seoul (1901–1909), and finally consul general/minister resident in Caracas, Colombia, and British Guiana (1909–1914). A high point in his life was a reception and dinner that the emperor of Korea gave in his honor on March 5, 1902. His daughter Elise married German businessman Paul Frederick Baumann in 1908. They had six children, the first five born in Chemulpo (now Inchon) and the youngest in Seoul, Korea. They moved to Manila in the 1920s. Their oldest daughter,

Ermgard, was an Asian tennis champion at the age of fifteen, and then became a Maryknoll nun and lived in China and Japan the rest of her life. I remember her as “Sister Elise”; my sister is named after her. Their oldest son, Eitel, helped several priests escape from the Japanese during the war and was decorated by the Pope and the American government. My father, Roger, is Ira and Wilhelmine’s oldest son.

These stories, as well as the one about my mother’s grandparents, illustrate the kind of American-European diplomatic and trade relations with Asia that existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These may lead (as indeed they did in my family) to forms of diaspora that, according to Robin Cohen, are caused not by traumatic dispersals or forced immigration, but by a search for work (labor diaspora), the pursuit of trade (trade diaspora), or to further colonial ambitions (imperial diaspora) (57). Though there does not seem to be any consciousness of a diaspora among family members, our experience does connect with Cohen’s notion. Most of my European or American great-grandparents (and some of my great-great grandparents) actually moved to Asia for one or more of the reasons stated above: Ira Davis was deployed to the Philippines as part of the American army’s occupational strategy; Paul and Elise Baumann moved there for business reasons; my maternal great-grandfather, Matias García, settled there after falling in love with a Spanish Filipina.

This kind of mobility and the ease with which the immigrants seemed to settle in the Philippines point to a form of transculturalism or even cosmopolitanism that transcends limiting definitions. As Susan Ossman explains, “Collectively, [these migrants] develop an understanding of mobility that is not predicated on notions of integration into a fixed community, yet might be described in terms of a cosmopolitan practice that naturally emerged from thinking of oneself as a citizen of the world” (2). Interestingly, at a point where the Philippine nation was evolving, these migrants lived a cosmopolitanism that presupposed participation “in a wider order beyond the national culture and one which could also be appealed to as the universalistic foundation of all national cultures, be it universal humanity, Europe, or western civilization” (Delanty 365). Social and economic class, clearly, had much to do with the ways my family adapted or assimilated. Belonging to John Armstrong’s category of “mobilized diaspora”, “those whose members deploy their linguistic, network and occupational advantages to modernize and mobilize—thereby offering to the nation-state valued services and skills” (quoted in Cohen 58), the family had no issues with cultural and ethnic identification. They con-

nected to their originary groups—the extended family that remained or moved back to Europe or the United States—to the local communities they worked with or went to school with, and to communities of expatriates in the cities they lived in. But, more and more, they identified as “Filipinos”, a category that my generation, growing up in an era of new nationalism, would have to fight to defend, for the simple reason that we did not “look Filipino”.

On my mother’s side, there is a romantic story of my Barcelona-born paternal great-grandfather, Matías Garcia, a ship’s captain, who left the sea to marry my great-grandmother, Dolores Blanco, a Spanish Filipina, and settle in Manila. Dolores died young, leaving him with six children, the youngest barely a toddler. He fell in love with the *lavandera* (the washerwoman) and wanted to marry her. Because of his children’s disapproval he fell into a deep depression and eventually killed himself. This story was never told to his grandchildren, who found out accidentally. I see reflected in my own family story, then, the kind of elision of facts of family history that Lise Yasui engages in *A Family Gathering*. The shame, guilt, or pain at a father’s death inhibits the children from passing the story on to their children, in a sort of whitewashing of family history, to make it more palatable.

My grandfather, Antonio, Matias’ fourth son, made a vow to help other people die a good death. For years, people would call him to come to their relatives’ deathbeds, where he would pray with the dying person and the family. This, it is said, was his way of atoning for not being there when his own father died, and to make up for his rejection of his father’s wife. He worked at the Manila Stock Exchange and managed the YCO basketball team for a few years. In the 1950s he brought the team to Barcelona to challenge the Spanish teams. Apparently basketball was not one of Spain’s fortes at the time and the Spanish lost every game. All his grandchildren, fervent basketball fans, knew the team song and idolized the players: Freddie Webb, Arnaiz, and the others.

My grandmother, Maria Beech, was a Rocha on her mother’s side. This wealthy Spanish family owned a summer home, originally built in 1802, by the Pasig River; it was bought by the government, and from 1900 served as the house of the American governor-general, including William Howard Taft. It eventually became what is now Malacañang Palace (the home of the president of the Philippines). My grandmother’s father, Paco Beech (his father was British), was a *palikero*, a ladies’ man. He left his wife and had another family, the Pons, some of whom became good friends with their half-siblings, my grandmother’s brothers. The story is that when he grew older he returned to his first

wife and she took him back. My grandfather and grandmother were with him, praying, when he died.

From 1935 to 1946, the country was renamed the “Commonwealth of the Philippines”, having passed from being considered U.S. territory to a semi-independent state that would be trained in government to prepare for full independence. This officially marked the end of the colonial era, though the brief Japanese occupation (1941–1945) postponed plans for independence. General Douglas MacArthur, named Field Marshal of the Philippine Army in 1937 by President Manuel Quezon, was a hero to everyone. Both sides of my family lived in Manila during the war and vividly remember the bombings, their fear of the Japanese, the mothers hiding their teenage daughters, the lack of food and water. They welcomed MacArthur’s arrival at Leyte on October 20, 1944, having taken to heart, out of pure desperation, his promise, “I shall return”. I remember my father telling me that he had attended the official ceremony on July 4, 1946, where the Americans relinquished their dominion of the country and the Republic of the Philippines was born. Interestingly, we now celebrate that day as “Filipino American Friendship Day”, preferring to privilege June 12, 1898, the day General Emilio Aguinaldo and the Filipino revolutionary forces proclaimed the sovereignty and independence of the country from Spain, as our real Independence Day.

In my family, stories about World War II were either repeatedly told or completely hidden. My parents were children then and do remember some events. My mother tells of a family friend who, at the age of six, hid underneath his mother’s dead body for two days after the Japanese came and killed everyone in the house. The boy was later adopted by relatives but didn’t speak for a few years after that. The Japanese would cut the water supply and leave glasses of water near the houses and wait for people to come out from their hiding spots. My grandmother lost several siblings during the war with Japan, some of them very brutally. Her sister-in-law and her two toddlers were bayoneted in the famous siege of the German Club, where hundreds of people had gone for refuge, thinking they would be safe. I remember, about fifteen years ago, visiting my grandmother, and, over coffee, she began speaking of the war years. My mother, who was with us, had never heard these stories. Even now, when I ask my mother something specific, she replies, “I don’t know—they never told us these things!”

Here’s a story my siblings, cousins, and I love. Once, playing in my grandmother’s house, we found her autograph book and saw a little dedication in Spanish that my grandfather had written when he was sixteen and

she fourteen (he was her brother's friend). This little verse has become part of family legend. In Spanish, it reads: *Quisiera y no quisiera, dos cosas contrarias. Quisiera que siempre recordaras y no quisiera que te olvidaras, de este tu amigo, Tony*" (I wish and do not wish, two opposite things. I wish that you will always remember and do not wish that you forget, your friend, Tony). At a lull over Sunday lunch, for example, someone might suddenly recite it, causing both my grandparents to blush like teenagers. At the age of seventy, they would still sit holding hands as they watched TV. My uncle read the verse at my grandfather's funeral.

Filipino history is also part of the family. My brother-in-law Nick's great-grandmother was Gregoria de Jesus, the founder of the women's section of the Katipunan, the Philippine revolutionary association founded in 1892 that fought for independence from Spain. Known as "The Mother of the Philippine Revolution" (her code name in the Katipunan was "Lakambini", Tagalog for "muse" or "goddess"), she married Julio Nakpil after her first husband, Andres Bonifacio, died. Nick's Lola was her daughter, and so Lakambini's blood flows in my nephews' and nieces' veins. Interestingly, both my siblings have married Filipino Americans: my sister's husband is biracial, and my brother's wife is a naturalized American.

Jeanne Perreault's idea that "textual enactments of the 'I' and the boundaries of the 'we' are in play as elements of inquiry, as territories to be claimed and disclaimed, as constructions or as essences" certainly inspired this project on many levels (1). The past my family chooses to remember shapes the way we live in the present. We maintain connections with relatives all over the world, collect the stories, and retell them to the next generation. My nieces and nephews love to hear us tell of the "good old days" and hold stories of our childhoods as part of their memories. These stories promote our family's cohesion and connection, making the past crucial to our understanding of the present. They provide a form of knowledge of personal and cultural positions that in my family, as in those of the memoirs I discussed in this book, have been repeatedly modified by historical contingencies.

Growing up, we were vaguely aware of how transcultural we were, though we never articulated it in those terms. In fact, as the only academic in the family, I'm the only one who has ever given serious theoretical thought to this issue. My given names are all Spanish, my sister's French, and my brother's American. At home, we spoke English and Spanish to each other, Filipino to the household help. My mother speaks to her mother in Spanish and to her children in English. I spoke only Spanish till about the age of six, when *Sesame*

Street came into my life and I started going to school. English quickly overtook Spanish, and only when I came to Spain as a graduate student in the 1980s did I begin to speak it with relative fluency again. We have relatives all over the world: my dad's seven siblings all live in the United States, and we had aunts, uncles, and cousins living at some point in Hong Kong, Australia, Spain, Italy, the United States, England, Ireland, Germany, Singapore, and Japan. Colleagues I encounter at conferences in different countries have begun rolling their eyes at my having to meet up with another aunt or another cousin.

Just as my great-grandparents met in the Philippines, relatives from each generation also began to leave. One of my García grandfather's brothers moved to Colombia and returned several years later asking his siblings to adopt a couple of his children. When they refused, he left, never to be heard from again. Another García sister moved to Australia, a brother to Canada. My mother's cousins also live in Canada, the United States, Singapore, and Australia. Now fully immersed in the even more cosmopolitan possibilities of the twenty-first century, my cousins have married Filipinos, a Galician, a Basque, an Irish-Italian from Boston, Australians, and a Parisian. My stepbrothers and sister are German: one lives in Germany, another in the United States, another in Ibiza. My nieces and nephews have American, Filipino, Spanish, Basque, German, and Italian names. We are Catholic, Jewish, and agnostic; Filipino, Spanish, American, Australian, Canadian, German, and British.

Such a global family has made us critical of the established boundaries of race, cultural and national affiliation, and a uniformed sense of homeland. We are also conscious of the forms of continuity that have arisen from the discontinuities in our history. For instance, we don't look like average Filipinos because of so much interracial mingling, but staunchly defend our connection to the only homeland we know. Recently, on a trip to Manila, after showing my Spanish passport, I was asked at the immigration desk, "Are you a former Filipina?" I was shocked at the question, not knowing what the officer really wanted to know. I stammered that, yes, I was. A year later, on another trip, I was asked the same question. This time, I was ready: "I have a Spanish passport, but I'm always a Filipina!" It turns out that the question was merely bureaucratic: as a "former Filipina", I was eligible for a "Balikbayan visa", a one-year residency permit. Oh well.

Friends and colleagues have been encouraging me for years to write my family story, especially after I entertain them with anecdotes about my relatives, where they all come from and where they all are. I tried, once, several years ago, but it just didn't work. My critical engagement with these stories

might arguably be my last-ditch attempt to deal with my cosmopolitan family history as it connects with other narratives of family relocation and dislocation, definition and redefinition. Examining the family memoirs of the Asian diaspora from the point of view of a member of that precise experience—the proverbial bee in my bonnet—has provided me with an insider’s perspective on the multilayered discourses of the memoirs I analyze, just as it has given me more insight into the nature of my own family and the truth about stories. As Robert Rosenstone explains in the introduction to his family memoir: “Anyone who has done historical research knows that it takes more than access to documents to create a truthful or meaningful past. The reality of the past—national, familial, personal—does not lie in an assemblage of data but in a field of stories—a place where fact, truth, fiction, invention, forgetting, and myth are so entangled that they cannot be separated. Ultimately it is not the facts that make us what we are, but the stories we have been told and the stories we believe” (xv).

The diverse approaches to stories that the auto/biographers I have examined in this study promote—the collaborative dialogues in the Chais’ and Natasha Chang’s texts; the amount of documentary research in the family histories by Connie Kang, Mai Elliott, Bruce Hall, and Lisa See; the struggle with the act of narrating in Maxine Hong Kingston’s book and Lise Yasui and Ruth Lounsbury’s films; the consciousness of the implications of palimpsestic histories in Jael Silliman and Mira Kamdar’s stories; the liberatory potential of appropriating voices from the past in Helie Lee’s text—all converge in their negotiation of the crucial intersection of family stories, ethnic history, and community formation. These memoirs remind us that, apart from their personal value, history contains a narrativized logic as acts of representation participate in the dissemination of knowledge and negotiations of power. My scholarly engagement with what is also a possible version of my story reveals how these very personal narratives use the act of engaging (family) history to complement individual or community perspectives.

Notes

Chapter 1: Relatives and Histories

1. In this study I will focus specifically on Asian American texts and family documentaries. There are, nonetheless, numerous examples from Canada, including, apart from those mentioned above, Tri Lam's *Lam Chi Phat: The Chronicle of an Overseas Chinese Family, a Memoir* (2001) or Janice Wong's *Chow: From China to Canada: Memories of Food and Family* (2005). Yasmine Gooneratne's *Relative Merits: A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka* (1986) is an Australian example of the form. See my "Locating Family: Asian Canadian Historical Revisioning in Linda Ohama's *Obaachan's Garden* and Ann Marie Fleming's *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*" (2008) for a discussion of some of these texts.

2. There are also numerous Asian American examples of fiction based on forebears' lives, such as Aimee Liu's *Cloud Mountain* (1997), the story of her grandparents' immigration to Hawai'i, and Frances and Ginger Park's *To Swim Across the World* (2002), the account of their parents' lives in the divided Korea.

3. I want to stress the permeable nature of the boundaries I establish and note that several of these texts might comfortably fit into two or more categories. The classification I provide is meant as a guide and an invitation for further discussion on generic taxonomies.

4. A brief note on the notion of "family", which has been complicated in recent years primarily by critics who work on the gay/lesbian/transgender/queer experience and by those who study international adoption: both these situations would require us to rethink the notion of (biological) family and of "Asian American" in the context of transracial families. In this study, nonetheless, I will not engage these issues because the texts I examine do not challenge the traditional configuration of family (heterosexual spouses, biological children) either on a narrative or a theoretical level. Indeed, the family memoirs I examine celebrate and promote the traditional configuration, even when, as in the case of the late Bruce Edward Hall, the auto/biographer was himself gay.

5. See Couser's "Genre Matters" (2005) and the special issue of *alb: Auto/biography Studies* 19, nos. 1 and 2 (2004) on "Generations" for theoretical discussions on filial narratives (particularly Roger Porter's "Finding the Father" and Martin Redman's "Sons Writing Fathers").

6. My classification is based on family relationships in general and I do not specify texts that focus on specific gender affiliations, which introduces issues that, while fascinating and which have been studied elsewhere, are not germane to this discussion. I will, when the text requires it, attend to the question of gender in relationships, but have preferred to construct more general categories to provide broader critical perspectives. Thus, another form of categorizing forms of relational life writing (which would reclassify the texts I note) might focus on gender lines: (1) those that emphasize communities of women, stressing maternity and sisterhood, such as Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Luong Ung's *Lucky Child*; (2) those that focus on the male connection, stressing paternal links and brotherhood, such as Ved Mehta's *The Red Letters* (2004) and Andrew Pham's *The Eaves of Heaven* (2008); and (3) those that cross genders, where sons write about mothers, such as Murayama's *Five Years on a Rock*, and daughters of fathers, such as Goodyear's *Boys Will Be Boys*.

Chapter 2: Family Memoirs in the Context of Auto/biographical Writing

1. See Michael M. J. Fischer's "Autobiographical Voices (1,2,3) and Mosaic Memory: Experimental Sondages in the (Post)Modern World" (1994) for more perspectives on the relational component to life writing.

2. See Jennifer George-Palilonis' article, "Still Life with Rice: Narrative Strategies of Empowerment and Agency" (2004), for a discussion of the relational configuration of the text. Though she describes the intersubjective center of the autobiography, George-Palilonis does not identify the text as a family memoir.

3. Edward Said describes the collective nature of a knowledge production oriented towards "presenting alternative narratives" that "forestall the disappearance of the past" and constitute a kind of "countermemory" with its own counterdiscourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep": "The intellectual's role generally is dialectically, oppositionally, to uncover and elucidate the contest... (between a powerful system of interests on the one hand and, on the other, less powerful interests threatened with frustration, silence, incorporation or extinction by the powerful), to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible" (31).

4. For autobiographers who regard the search as important as the findings, indeed who make the investigation itself the subject of their texts, the process of scrutinizing documents and coming to understanding is not just an *aide memoire* but the primary concern of the work. I am not claiming that

“knowledge”—always provisional to be sure—gained through “evidence” and research is more definitive than “knowledge” gained by memory, merely that it is accessed differently, though it might be useful to ask whether, in this context, there is something especially compelling about the palpable artifact used to substantiate and confirm premonitions about the past or to replace memory. Do those scraps of tangible, physical matter, *objets d'outré-tombe*, speak to a certitude that mere memory cannot achieve? Or are they equally fallible in postulating any “truthful” reconstruction of the past, regardless of their seductive process? Does the autobiographer’s subjective reading of such material constitute as inconclusive a hold on the past as any potentially misleading act of recall? (Porter 100–101)

5. As Weintraub posits in his germinal essay, “The autobiographic genre took on its full dimension and richness when Western Man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of his existence. Autobiography assumes a significant cultural function around A.D. 1800. The growing significance of autobiography is thus part of that great intellectual revolution marked by the emergence of the particular modern form of historical mindedness we call historicism or historicism” (821).

6. Hayden White calls this level “diatactical”, explaining,

Considered as a genre, then, discourse must be analyzed on three levels: that of the description (mimesis) of the ‘data’ found in the field of inquiry being invested or marked out for analysis; that of the argument or narrative (diegesis), running alongside of or interspersed with the descriptive materials; and that on which the combination of these previous two levels is effected (diataxis). The rules which crystallize on this last, or diatactical, level of discourse, determine possible objects of discourse, the ways in which description and argument are to be combined, the phases through which discourse must pass in the process of earning its right of closure, and the modality of the metalogic used to link up the conclusion of the discourse with its inaugurating gestures. (*Tropics of Discourse* 4–5)

7. See Roger Daniels’ article for a comprehensive discussion of the development of Asian American historiography.

8. See chapter 4 of my *Begin Here*, “The Liminal Childhood: Biraciality as Narrative Position”, for a discussion of biraciality in Asian American autobiographies and further bibliography.

9. Other writers, such as Connie Kang, Mai Elliott, and Natasha Chang, married non-Asians, which produced interesting family reactions, discussed in chapter 4 of this book. Jael Silliman is an interesting case as she married an Indian, which constituted, in a sense, a biracial marriage.

10. See my *Begin Here* for a discussion of cultural memory in the context of Asian North American autobiographies of childhood.

11. See Hammerwold's article for ideas on how memoirs build community, which complements my focus on the creation of a reader and of collective memory.

12. Because of the limits of this study, I cannot discuss in detail the nuances of the definition of "collective memory". See Halbwachs. Also see Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn's special issue of *Representations* (1989), Hutton (particularly chapter 4, on Halbwachs), Cubitt, Assmann, Poole, Confino, Crane, Kansteiner, Lipsitz, Wertsch, and Zerubavel, among others.

13. Importantly, as Wulf Kansteiner notes, "Collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material. It is a collective phenomenon but it only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals. It can take hold of historically and socially remote events but it often privileges the interests of the contemporary. It is as much a result of conscious manipulation as unconscious absorption and it is always mediated" (180).

14. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan prefer the term "collective remembrance" to "collective memory" because, they explain, the shift in terminology avoids generalizations that cannot be true: "The 'collective memory' of war is not what everybody thinks about war; it is a phrase without purchase when we try to disentangle the behaviour of different groups within the collective" (9).

Chapter 3: Representing Asian Wars and Revolutions

1. The notion of a "politics of sympathy" that influences the publication and reception of these texts is interesting but applies more specifically to texts where the narrator herself (they note that most of these memoirs are written by women) experienced the Revolution. In none of the family memoirs I examine here do we have a narrator/participant, but their ideas about the life writing about this complex period in Chinese history are relevant.

2. More recently, this kind of morally righteous connected readership may be observed with regard to narratives by and about Muslim women, many of which center on stories of religious oppression and Islam-sanctioned male domination.

3. Some of the authors Wong lists as participating in the genre include Bette Bao Lord, Nien Cheng, C. Y. Lee, Linda Ching Sledge, Jung Chang, and Lillian Lee.

4. See chapter 2, "The Escape from Asia Tradition", of Helena Grice's *Asian American Fiction* for a nuanced discussion of these texts (pp. 11–43).

5. Because of the limits of this study, I cannot engage the theory of collaborative life writing in detail. For more information, see G. Thomas Couser's "Making, Taking, and Faking Lives", Carole Boyce Davies' "Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Story Production", Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Egan's *Mirror Talk*, Michael M. J. Fischer's "Autobiographical Voices (1,2,3) and Mosaic

Memory”, and Anne E. Goldman’s “Is That What She Said? The Politics of Collaborative Autobiography”.

6. Jael Silliman’s *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, which will be discussed in chapter 4, is also a collaborative text that incorporates a mother-daughter dialogue.

7. In 2007 May-lee published *Hapa Girl: A Memoir*, which focuses on her childhood as a biracial girl growing up in South Dakota in the 1980s, where she deals with her problems of adjustment in more detail.

8. See Hirsch’s *Family Frames* for a detailed analysis of the function of family photographs in the creation of postmemory.

9. Collaboration seems to be a Chai family custom. Winberg Chai has co-written or co-edited books with his father, Ch’u Chai (*The Changing Society of China* [1962], *I Ching: Book of Changes* [1969], *Confucianism* [1973], *The Philosophy of the Chinese People* [1973], among others); with his wife, Carolyn Chai, he co-edited the study *Political Stability and Economic Growth: Case Studies of Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore* (1994). May-lee and Winberg also collaborated on *Chinese Mainland and Taiwan: A Study of Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Relations* (1996) and the recent *China A to Z: Everything You Need to Know to Understand Chinese Customs and Culture* (2007).

10. Further, she notes,

While the proliferation of such texts seems to speak to China’s continued function as a site for U.S. fantasies about exotic and foreign lands, the narratives also reveal the value of Chinese women’s history as a means of negotiating a global capitalist present. Chinese women in these narratives become a means by which we imagine modernity’s potential; straddling the boundaries of gender, hemisphere, and time, they stand forever poised on the cusp of the modern era, the realization of which is perpetually deferred by the dramatic events that threaten to overwhelm them. Chinese women’s history thus functions as both a marker for the epic past as well as the potential for transformation and realization of worth. Through them, we simultaneously witness our past and our future, the reassurance of our triumph over epic events and the expansive possibilities of global capitalism. Chinese women’s history, written also as the history of Chinese American women, becomes global history, not grounded in the United States or in U.S. relations with China, but instead in the disjointed time and space of postmodernity. (So 151–152)

11. Hynes focuses on war memoirs written by soldiers and describes them as “the war-books . . . that collectively provide the fabric of our war-myths. They are distanced from their events by a decade or more, sufficient distance for the narrator looking back on his soldiering self to see almost another person, the young man who came out of innocence into war and was changed by it, as seen and reflected on by the later

self, the man after the change” (208–209). Though Kang and Elliott did experience the wars themselves, they were passive victims rather than active combatants, and their focus is broader, encompassing generations of colonization and their families’ stories of dislocation.

12. Some scholars, such as Paul M. Edwards in *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in American Memory* (2000), analyze the lack of scrutiny about the Korean War (known to most Americans mostly through movies and the 1970s television series *M*A*S*H*), noting that “while Americans tolerated the Korean War when it was being fought, they managed to forget it just as soon as it was over” (5). Indeed, other studies on the war emphasize its lack of presence in American memory: Clay Blair’s *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950–1953* (2003) or David Halberstam’s *The Coldest Winter* (2007), where he argues that we should resurrect the memory of a cruel and inconclusive conflict that was “orphaned by history”. Texts like Kang’s family memoir also serve to remind Americans of their role in the creation of the two Koreas, for example.

13. Both Kang and Elliott come from prominent families who could afford to give their children elite educations and send them abroad for schooling. Their accounts naturally reveal the possibilities associated with privilege. Because of the advantages they had received before final immigration to the United States, their narratives are not representative of most of the Korean and Vietnamese working-class immigrants. My interest is on the writers’ engagement with their country’s history through the family story, rather than on their representativeness as speakers for their communities. Indeed, I argue that the fact that their forebears were often in the center of many of the historical events gives the account more intensity and historical interest. Nevertheless, both autobiographers do see themselves speaking for their community, as they write the story of the past.

14. For more information on the spread of Christianity in Korea, see Chai-Shin Yu’s *Korea and Christianity* (2002) and Robert Buswell and Timothy Lee’s *Christianity in Korea* (2007).

15. Carolyn Steedman calls this structure “an emergent set of formulae about women’s autobiography, in which women’s stories are constructed through their relationship with other people, by a notion of dependency in women’s lives, and by fathers who are representative of patriarchy” (*Past Tenses* 42–43)

16. Kang does not mention that all Koreans were obliged to change their names to Japanese ones, which many considered the most extreme form of imperialist imposition. See Richard Kim’s *Lost Names* (1970) and Sook Nyul Choi’s *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (1991).

Chapter 4: Multiple Journeys and Palimpsestic Diasporas

1. The notion of the “changing same” was first used by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Bakara), describing the continuities in Black musical tradition, which, he argues, is

rooted in African religion and spirit worship. Though the music has changed in both vocal and instrumental forms, its basic patterns and impulses have remained the same, though some aspects have been “Christianized” in America. See Jones’ article “The Changing Same (R & B and New Black Music)” (1971).

2. For a comprehensive history of the Jews in India, see Nathan Katz’s *Who Are the Jews of India?* (2000) and Joan G. Roland’s *The Jewish Communities of India* (1998), among others. For an interesting study of images of Jews in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Indian attitudes towards the Jewish communities of the sub-continent, and the way Jews and Judaism in general have been represented in Indian discourse, see Yulia Egorova’s *Jews and India: Perception and Image* (2006).

3. As Silliman explains,

Narrating the history and experiences of this diaspora community from the vantage point of Calcutta, the nerve centre of the British Empire, contextualizes this diaspora in relation to processes of empire and nation building. The time frame of this narrative enables an examination of the ways in which members of this minority diasporic community, and the community as a unit, responded and adapted to both colonialism and decolonization. It highlights the particular roles that minority communities play in colonial and national processes, inviting us to rethink not only standard discourses of these historical processes but also notions of personal, communal and national identity formation. (12)

4. Though Koreans had been relocating to China for generations, the Japanese annexation of Korea (1910–1945) led to a more massive movement out of the country. According to In-Jin Yoon, in this period

farmers and laborers who were deprived of land and other means of production moved to Japan to fill a labor shortage created by Japan’s wartime conditions. This period was also characterized by the migration of political refugees and activists to China, Russia, and the United States to carry on the Korean independence movement against the Japanese. A massive migration of Koreans to Manchuria began in the early 1930s when Japan tried to develop Manchuria as a food supply base for Japan. As a result the Korean population in the region grew rapidly to about 460,000 in 1920, 607,000 in 1930, and 1,450,000 in 1940. (202)

For general information on the Korean diaspora in China, see Yoon’s “Korean Diaspora” (2004); for more specific information about Koreans in China, see Edward Taehan Chang’s “Korean Diaspora in China: Ethnicity, Identity and Change” (2001).

5. At the end of the book, Lee recounts the family’s discovery that Yongwoon is

alive and their first contact with his family by letter. Promising her grandmother that she will reunite the family, Lee travels to North Korea and eventually manages to get her uncle out, an adventure she narrates in *In the Absence of Sun: A Korean American Woman's Promise to Reunite Three Lost Generations of Her Family* (2002).

6. For more information on the history of the Indians in Burma, see Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti's *The Indian Minority in Burma* (1971), Usha Mahajani's *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya* (1960), and Hugh Tinker's *The Banyan Tree* (1977).

Chapter 5: The Chinese in America

1. See this book for a comprehensive list of resources on Asian American history in general and the histories of the diverse groups.

2. Qing-yun Wu, discussing the text from a “Chinese perspective”, notes, “In my view, *China Men* falls under historical fiction. The freedom of fictionalization enables Kingston to transcend the limits of historical events and individuals to reveal a reality truer in essence and spirit than biography and autobiography or any history book can reveal. The Chinese are accustomed to viewing the whole nation in the metaphor of a large family. That Kingston presents Chinese-American history in the form of a family saga is an invention, but one which is familiar and appealing to Chinese readers” (85).

3. For discussions on these aspects of *China Men*, see Donald Goellnicht's “Tang Ao in America: Male Subject Positions in *China Men*”, Patricia Linton's “‘What stories the wind would tell’: Representation and Appropriation in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*”, Linda Ching Sledge's “Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*: The Family Historian as Epic Poet”, Mary Slowik's “When the Ghosts Speak: Oral and Written Narrative Forms in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*” (1994), Alfred Wang's “Maxine Hong Kingston's Reclaiming of America: The Birthright of the Chinese American Male” (1988), and Jianping Wang's “Between Memory and History: Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*” (2004). I note these articles because they directly address the issues I engage in this study. Numerous other critical articles deal with other aspects of Kingston's text.

4. The story of Kingston's mother telling her the details of her father's immigration and her reading of her father's comments to *China Men* is recounted in *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003).

5. See Goellnicht, Chiu's “Being Human in the Wor(l)d”, and Qing-yun Wu, among others, for a discussion of Kingston's mythologizing strategy of appropriating figures from Chinese and Western traditions.

6. For detailed descriptions and analysis of the development of Chinatowns, see Takaki, Okihiro's *Columbia Guide to Asian American History*, Suchen Chan, and Iris Chang.

7. See Partridge's excellent *Beyond Literary Chinatown*, particularly the chapter entitled "Literary Chinatown: Dynamics of Race and Reading", for a discussion of the production, projection, and reception of the notion of Chinatown in mainstream American and Chinese American literature.

8. According to Hall, "Delivering speeches in flawless English to white audiences, he [Wong Chin Foo] tries to explain Chinese philosophy and customs, while dispelling some of the more outrageous myths about the Chinese themselves. 'I never knew rats . . . were good to eat till I learned it from Americans,' he quipped at Steinway Hall in 1877" (69).

9. Shirley Hune writes,

Sweet Bamboo also contributes to economic and racial history in its details of Chinese herbalist practices and its attention to Chinese professionals before the 1930s, a neglected topic. The window it offers onto that world discloses the racialized complexities of building an herbalist business: for example, the need to wear Chinese apparel to connote expertise but also to hire white receptionists to assist with non-Chinese clientele. A recent study argues that Chinese herbalists utilized skills and knowledge derived from their ethnic culture to create a profession in the United States that served different racial and ethnic groups. In resisting the racially defined occupational positions of the day, they made a significant contribution to the health care of the region, a face that transforms our understanding of the role of the Chinese in the American West. (xii)

10. See also Jan Lin's *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (1998) and Yong Chen's *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (2000).

Chapter 6: The Asian American Family Portrait Documentary

1. Lane's comprehensive study provides a thorough discussion of theoretical issues related to the genre and development of the autobiographical documentary. See also Marita Sturken, Audrey Levasseur, Patricia Aufderheide, Catherine Russell, Julia Erhart, and Michael Renov for ideas on the use of documentary in the inscription of history. For issues related to Asian American films and documentaries, see Peter X. Feng, Darrell Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, Glen M. Mimura, Amit Rai, Eva Rueschmann, and Jun Xing.

2. For critical studies on Tajiri's film, see Feng, Mimura's "Antidote for Collective Amnesia?" and Rueschmann, among others. For information on these and other Asian American documentaries, see Feng, Xing, and Mimura's *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*.

3. Asian Canadian examples of family documentaries include William Ging

Wee Dere's *Moving the Mountain: An Untold Chinese Journey* (1993), Linda Ohama's *Obaachan's Garden* (2001), and Colleen Leung's *Letters from Home* (2001).

4. Sturken argues further that "in these tapes, memory is not seen as a depository of images to be excavated, but rather as an amorphous, ever-changing field of images. This memory is not about retrieval as much as it is about retelling and reconstruction. It is about acknowledging the impossibility of knowing what really happened, and a search for a means of telling. This is memory within a postmodern context, not absent but often disguised as something else, not stable or tangible but elusive and fragile, entangled with fantasy, longing, and desire" (184).

5. There are two versions of *A Family Gathering*: the 1988 film (30 minutes) won several important awards, including a Golden Globe at the San Francisco International Film Festival, a Golden Hugo in Chicago, and invitations to international festivals. The success of this film led one of the editors of the PBS series *The American Experience* to invite Yasui to expand the film for television. I base my analysis of the film on the longer version, also called *A Family Gathering* (52.10 minutes).

6. The Yasui family is arguably the Japanese American family that has received the most literary and scholarly attention. Apart from Lise's film, her father, Robert Shu Yasui, wrote *The Yasui Family of Hood River, Oregon* (1987), and Lauren Kessler published *Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of a Japanese American Family* in 1993. Critical articles on their family include those by Barbara Ditman and Lauren Kessler. The University of Oregon has a website about the family: <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/ec/exhibits/manyfaces/yasui.html>.

7. Other documentaries on the internment include Steve Okazaki's *Unfinished Business* (1985), which focuses on three men who defied Executive Order 9066: Gordon Hirabayashi, Minoru Yasui, and Fred Korematsu, and his Academy Award-winning *Days of Waiting*, which narrates the story of Estelle Peck Ishigo, who voluntarily followed her Japanese American husband to camp and documented their experiences there. Several feature films have also been made about the Japanese American internment, notably *Farewell to Manzanar* (1976), directed by John Korty and based on Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's autobiography; *Come See the Paradise* (1990), directed by Alan Parker; *American Pastime*, directed by Desmond Nakano (2007); and *Beyond Barbed Wire* (1997), directed by Steve Rosen, which focuses on the Japanese Americans who left the internment camps to fight for the United States in World War II. The story of the Asian Canadian uprooting has also been the subject of interesting films, such as Linda Ohama's family memoir, *Obaachan's Garden*, and the 1995 CBS movie, *The War between Us*, directed by Anne Wheeler.

8. See Feng (*Identity in Motion* 80–84) for a discussion of Yasui's narrative voice in the film.

9. Lauren Kessler, in her biography of the Yasui family, tells us that Lise almost had to give up on her film project after learning about her grandfather's suicide, because, though she could not exclude the fact of the suicide from her film, many

family members did not want the information known. Lise's uncle, Chop Yasui, the oldest son, for example, "had never told his own children the truth about their grandfather and firmly believed that word of the suicide would besmirch Masuo's and the family's reputation" (276).

10. For more information about Min Yasui, see <http://minoruyasui.com/>. An autobiographical essay by Min Yasui on his experiences in the internment camp, entitled "Minidoka", is published in John Tateishi's *And Justice for All* (46–93).

11. Quoted in <http://www.ruthozeki.com/meats/conversation.html>. *Halving the Bones* was directed and produced under her real name, "Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury", though for her later work, particularly the novels *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, the author chose to use "Ruth Ozeki". See her Web site, <http://www.ruthozeki.com>, for more information on her work.

12. For a discussion on *Halving the Bones*, see Erhart, Rueschmann, and Zryd.

13. For more information on "yellow peril" rhetoric, see Chiu's *Filthy Fictions*. Other studies on the "yellow peril" include Robert G. Lee's *Orientalism*, William F. Wu's *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850–1940* (1982), Gina Marchetti's *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (1993), and Jenny Clegg's *Fu Manchu and the "Yellow Peril": The Making of a Racist Myth* (1994), among others.

14. In 2007 Fleming published a full-color graphic version of the film, also entitled *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*.

Chapter 7: We're Everywhere

1. See http://www.inquirer.net/saturday/jan2000wk3/spc_6.htm.

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