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Davis/Begin Here

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In the final chapter of *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston travels back to the internment camp she had lived in as a child, this time with her husband and three children, in an act of reconciliation and recovery. Manzanar, which in the summer of 1942 was “the biggest city between Reno and Los Angeles” (135), is now deserted. As she looks around at the ruin that had been her home during the war years, she contrasts her conflicted feelings with those of her children, who run around oblivious to the multiple stories of their own past buried in that desert. For Houston, the trip and the actual writing of her autobiography are occasions of historical, cultural, and personal processes of recovery: “until this trip I had not been able to admit that my own life really began there. . . . Much more than a remembered place, it had become a state of mind. Now, having seen it, I no longer wanted to lose it or to have those years erased” (140). The act of writing an autobiography of her childhood in the camp, as well as the early years after leaving it, becomes an important literary and cultural gesture that resonates as genre and as a contribution to the creation of cultural memory.

What Houston enacts in her text lies at the center of my critical perspective on the writing of Asian American and Asian Canadian autobiographies of childhood. The role of autobiography in ethnic writing continually obliges us to read through the strategies the authors engage in their life writing projects, to accommodate both literary and cultural aims. This study limns the forms that this process takes in Asian American and Asian Canadian writing. Considering the progressive development of life writing and the politics of identity formation in this century, writers and critics have become increasingly conscious of the play of the autobiographical act itself. I argue that Asian North American memoirs of childhood are challenging the construction and performative potential of the national experience, particularly in the experiential categories of epistemology and phenomenology. This understanding has important implications for ethnic life writing, which has consistently challenged and widened the boundaries of traditional autobiography by negotiating narrative
techniques, experimenting with genre, and raising increasingly complex questions about self-representation and the construction of cultural memory. Here, I trace a crucial transition in the development of the autobiographical subgenre defined as the “Childhood” by Richard N. Coe and address its increasingly creative and subversive appropriation by Asian North American writers. I examine the artistic project of Asian American and Asian Canadian writers—from Phan You Lee and Ilhan New to Jade Snow Wong, Wayson Choy, Rae Yang, Michael Kwan, Lynda Barry, Kien Nguyen, and Luong Ung—who choose to deploy narratives of their childhood years as literary acts that articulate their individual processes of self-identification and negotiation of cultural and/or national affiliation.

The title of this book gestures toward the critical process I see enacted in Asian North American Childhoods. Coe notes, “Childhood revisited is childhood recreated, and recreated in terms of art” (When the Grass 84). The statement “begin here” signifies on generic, thematic, and discursive levels. It reminds us of Georges Gusdorf’s concept of autobiography as “a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it” (38) and echoes Paul John Eakin’s idea of life writing as a process of “narratively constituted identity” (How Our Lives 139). The formulation signals the specificity of the Childhood, a contemplative text that narrativizes processes of self-awareness. The writing of the text itself may constitute that new beginning, when the writer is enabled to produce the story of his or her own life, a vital metaliterary gesture. Further, the genre problematizes two mutually enhancing processes—a simultaneous awakening of temporal and spatial consciousness; “here” and “now” become axiomatic of the subject’s itinerary of selfhood and function as a frame for understanding and claiming the past. As Rosemary Lloyd points out, some form of justification establishes the starting point in memoir, just as the search for an opening, “the act of recapturing the first memory, or isolating the moment when the child first becomes aware of its identity” frames the narrative act (41). Reliving early memories or events that lead the subject to contemplate him- or herself as an individual heightens the performative aspects of autobiography as it foregrounds the manner in which personal circumstances and cultural contingencies function in the process of self-inscription.

My concern in this project is twofold: first, I want to negotiate the manner in which Asian North American writers rewrite the inherited scripts of the Childhood, as defined by Coe in his germinal study, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*. I read the texts as generic engagements that dialogue with the manner in which North American autobiography is being written and read, and analyze methodological approaches to this form of literary production. Second, I examine these texts’ performative
potential within a wider project of creating a reader and a community as a tool for the production and preservation of cultural memory. I argue that these texts function importantly in the intersecting projects of reclaiming history and building community. These two 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 and intertwined purposes. To address only the cultural project of writers is to elide important aesthetic choices and ignore the carefully wrought formal investment of the authors who are clearly writing in a context of literary and cultural criticism. This project is closely related to my earlier work on Asian American appropriations of established Euro-American genres such as the short story cycle and, in particular, to a recent collected volume, edited by Sue-Im Lee and myself, titled Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing. This collection proposes a revised perspective on Asian American literary criticism, one that transcends the currently fashionable dominance of sociological and cultural materialist approaches to engage writers’ formal and aesthetic choices as part of a responsible and holistic analysis. Crucially, we argue, though materialist and political examinations of race, gender, history, and nation need not exclude a literary perspective, this balance has not been successfully maintained in recent criticism. As Sue-Im Lee points out: “Asian American literary criticism at large has been slow to extend the analysis of the constructedness of human-made categories and institutions to include the examination of Asian American literary works as aesthetic objects—objects that are constituted by and through deliberate choices in form, genres, traditions, and conventions” (2).

The concerns that have guided my earlier work continue to motivate this project: to foreground literary perspectives in order to avoid the dangerous pitfall of allowing a body of literature susceptible to political, social, or materialist readings to be considered exclusively from that perspective. The literary quality of Asian North American writing, because of its highly racialized and political nature, is constantly in danger of being elided in favor of those concerns. Asian North American autobiography, because of the genre’s relation with history and personal story, is in even more danger of losing its perspective. I contend that a primarily ethnographic perspective denies these texts both their formal and aesthetic complexity, the existence of a dialogue with established cultural forms, and importantly, their power to act upon and transform genre itself. As Marianne Gullestad notes, life stories are constructed from the cultural contexts in which lives are lived, and autobiographies allow us to examine how cultural resources, conventions, and histories are deployed in the recreation of that life: “a life story is shaped not only by the material facts of social existence, but also by deeply embedded notions and expectations of what
is a culturally normal life, as well as by conscious and unconscious rules about what constitutes a good story" (12). To use a well-known example, any responsible reading of the reception of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* not only reveals an important intervention in the definition of Chinese America and what it means to be Chinese American but, perhaps more importantly, it unveils the challenges that this text produced to contemporary criticism on autobiography in general. It obliged us to rethink feminist, postmodern, avant-garde, or ethnic perceptions and enactments of the autobiographical mode. To a large extent, we can affirm that after Kingston, American autobiography was never the same. Formal and aesthetic issues have become protagonists of the autobiographical act, serving as ways of signifying. We no longer ask only what the text is about, but are equally concerned with how processes of self-representation are articulated.

For these reasons, I consider how these autobiographies of childhood dialogue with other texts of the same genre and as interventions in American literary history. I focus on these autobiographies as writerly acts and, simultaneously, I also consider the reality of a larger project—the production of cultural memory and the creation and/or preservation of a community of readers. From a generic perspective, life writing narrativizes memory, reflection, and imagination, as the autobiographer configures his or her past into a shape that takes its formal design from established modes. But because the content of the narration in the context of Asian North American writing necessarily involves racial negotiation, social experience, and political engagement, the narrative becomes “history”—the public story of a past shared with others and assumed to have actually occurred. Important for our purposes, these stories promote that history and prevent its erasure by means of the physical existence of the text. Albert Stone refers to this process when he conceives of life writing “not simply as a literary convention but more broadly as a cultural activity” (2). By presenting a reasoned theoretical approach and reading the texts to unveil what they operate on both aesthetic and cultural levels, I offer a new perspective on the intersection between formal and cultural designs within the context of Asian North American writing.

By reading these texts in this manner, I suggest that these autobiographies intervene significantly in our critical conception of both genre and ideas of reception. More important, when crucial events of history itself—war, diaspora, the civil rights movement, among others—are part of the context of these works, the genre becomes a doubly valuable historical document. Or, as Shirley Neuman puts it, “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). Similarly, I argue, there is a history that shapes individual autobiographies—a history of a literary and
cultural tradition—that, in its turn, influences the shapes taken by later autobiographies. Interestingly, life writing acknowledges the multiplicity of histories as strongly as the intersection of histories, where the differences between the subjects and texts invite plural identification. These autobiographies of childhood thus execute important historical projects, as Kate Douglas has suggested in her work on Australian and British Childhoods, noting that these texts are “used to write particular childhoods into history” (12).

In the context of Asian North American writing, these Childhoods oblige us to rethink accepted Western concepts of childhood and identification as “American” or “Canadian” subjects, nuancing essentialist notions of the universal child. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, when reading autobiography we must examine how “larger historical and cultural conjunctions and shifts bear upon the composing and publication of a particular narrative” (166). For this reason, the literary, cultural, and political circumstances that surround the writing and publication of these texts help us understand why they are written, how they are shaped, and how they are read.

This position structures my arguments as I strive to identify the way in which generic choice has influenced how Asian American and Asian Canadian writers tell their stories to develop cultural memory. I ground my interpretative strategies on a minimum of theoretical positions, preferring to read the texts themselves, an approach that allows me to negotiate the ways in which generic choices produce cultural meaning without limiting myself to prescriptive modes and systems.10 This book thus interrogates the literary strategies and cultural significance of Asian North American autobiographies of childhood and considers the ways these texts are produced and read.

First, I analyze how these Asian American authors address and rewrite the paradigms of the Euro-American Childhood, as defined by Coe, to engage their own historical and cultural specificities. I explore how these Childhoods can be examined in terms of the negotiation of narrative perspective, style, metaphors, language, and structure to explore to what extent these texts dialogue with an existing Asian North American autobiographical tradition. Specifically, for example, although most of the texts under consideration are written in traditional chronological order, some employ inventive narrative strategies to expand meaning and enrich our reading process: Hilary Tham’s Childhood blends prose and verse; Sing Lim and Shichan Takashima merge drawing with text; Jade Snow Wong uses a subversive third person in Fifth Chinese Daughter to speak of herself; Lynda Barry designs comics.

Second, I am interested in showing how these autobiographies produce and develop a reader and a community where texts like these can flourish and, in turn, produce more writing. Issues of autobiographical mediation on historical, racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender issues in the context of questions of
identity and agency for their writers also direct my critical analysis. By attending to the formal strategies of these Asian North American Childhoods, we discern clear community-building strategies and identify a powerful means to address the intersection of literary genre and cultural position that allow us to understand the renewed sociocultural construction of childhood in contemporary American and Canadian societies.

This analysis develops following a thematic perspective, which helps unveil the writers’ diverse formal strategies. Though I have two separate aims in this project, I recognize that it is impossible and, indeed, counterproductive to divorce formal from cultural perspectives, and the book’s structure reflects that happy difficulty. The first chapter explores the theoretical definitions and positions I use as the basis for my reading of the texts. Subsequent chapters offer close readings that negotiate writerly strategies as well as cultural or community aims. I have chosen to order the texts according to their central thematic components, which reveal important narrative similarities, rather than chronologically. This organization allows me to reproduce the macrostructure of the immigrant narrative of Americanization, the most common thread that links these texts, emphasizing the metacritical component of forms of analysis. Each chapter title highlights both the thematic and formal reading approach used. Chapters 2 and 3, “The Asian Childhood: Writing Beginnings” and “Cultural Revolutions and Takeovers: War as Structure,” center on narratives set in Asia, which challenge accepted notions of the past of the “American” or “Canadian” subject and enact important processes of history making and community building. “The Liminal Childhood: Biraciality as Narrative Position” (chapter 4) focuses on an important paradigm in Asian North American narratives, biraciality, and the creation of the mixed-race subject and community. Chapter 5, “Citizens or Denizens: Inscribing the Tropes of Asian North Americanization,” explores the experience of immigration and the existence of segregated spaces such as Chinatown or the internment camps as tropes or metaphors for the arduous process of North Americanization. Chapter 6, “In North America: Formulating Experience,” explores the possibilities for new formal and structural representations of the Asian North American model of selfhood. The final chapter, “The Childhood for Children: The Cultural Experience of the Early Reader,” discusses the articulation of this genre of life writing as children’s literature to read the ways in which writers participate in the formation of American and Canadian children’s imagination and perception of cultural realities. The ultimate aim of this project entails reading the strategies of these Asian North American writers to show how literary acts significantly intersect with wider social concerns, the creation of a community, and the enhancement of its forgotten or disenfranchised history.