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 auto/biographies”, 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 Lounsby’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. 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 Murà’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 auto/biographical 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
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 auto/biography 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’ metalinguistic 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.