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and Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow*

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**MEDIATING HISTORICAL MEMORY  
IN ASIAN/AMERICAN FAMILY MEMOIRS:  
K. CONNIE KANG'S *HOME WAS THE LAND OF  
MORNING CALM* AND DUONG VAN MAI ELLIOTT'S  
*THE SACRED WILLOW***

ROCÍO G. DAVIS

Family memoirs, the auto/biographical story of at least three generations (or one hundred years) in the life of one family, have become ubiquitous in ethnic writing in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In the field of Asian American writing, Gus Lee's *Chasing Hepburn*, Mira Kamdar's *Motiba's Tattoos*, and Lisa See's *On Gold Mountain* are among many examples of what have also been called "relational lives," or "multigenerational" or "intergenerational auto/biographies." Family memoirs focus as much on members of one's family as on oneself, typically blurring the boundaries we tend to draw between autobiography and biography. In many cases, as I argue for Asian/American memoirs, they function as historical narratives.<sup>2</sup> These texts negotiate personal identity through a relational narrative that also engages cultural and collective processes of community formation. Generally written by one person, the stories that make up the text display both an *inter-* and *intra-*generational collective voice that connects with readers in important ways, evincing a cultural project that resonates with current issues of self-representation in ethnic discourse.<sup>3</sup> The relational approach to auto/biographical identity in these family memoirs functions on two levels: first, within the text itself, as the author draws upon the stories of family members to complete her own, and second, as these texts deliberately interpellate a historical past and a present audience. The texts analyzed in this essay, K. Connie Kang's *Home was the Land of Morning Calm* (1995) and Doung Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* (1999), demonstrate the ways in which family memoirs mediate Asian/American history and cultural memory.<sup>4</sup>

These texts manifest the individual author's self as discursively constituted, as family stories, literary traditions, Asian and immigrant history, identity politics, and cultural contingencies participate in the construction of the self-in-the-text.

Relational approaches to life writing complicate notions of self-representation by privileging the intersubjective over the individual. One of the key insights in autobiography theory in the 1990s was that identity—for both men and women—is necessarily relational, formed and defined in the context of others. This perspective discredits the notion of the autonomous self—the idea that one alone defines and creates him/herself—traditional to Western theories of life writing.<sup>5</sup> The Asian American challenge to the pervasive Western notion of the individual as the prime subject of autobiography reached a critical point when Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* demonstrated how the first person in autobiography is, as Paul John Eakin argues in *How Our Lives Become Stories*, “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” (43). Several critical studies on autobiography have emphasized this new understanding, noting how the relational configuration of autobiography also controls the shape of the text, leading to innovative formal choices. Eakin 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 writing subject therefore views and inscribes individual stories from the prism of intersecting lives. In her influential book, Susanna Egan defines her eponymous operative term “mirror talk” as a process that 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 ideas about identity and self-representation, specifically the formal remembering and re-imagining of intersecting lives in particular contexts.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the renewed aesthetic experience of these family memoirs stems precisely from the tension created by this complex dialogue, the performance of intersubjectivity, which locates the narrating subject most often in the context of a community—a family or ethnic group.

Family memoirs develop from a series of overlapping motivations, and tell stories that often challenge uncritical views on ethnic persons and communities.

First is the consciousness that the stories of one's relatives are constitutive of one's own story. The family memoir generally highlights the acknowledgement of a cultural debt to family, while exploring the meanings that the family history might have for the writer's present family or community. A second motivation is a recognition of the power of personal narratives inserted into the public forum to engage historical and cultural issues, in order to challenge dominant mainstream versions which have often hidden, misrepresented, or invalidated ethnic history. 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). Because Western culture generally privileges the written over the oral narrative, these texts become important forms of political or cultural intervention: we believe what we read, particularly when it is published by a reputable press.<sup>7</sup> Third is a commitment to provide the ethnic communities with potentially empowering narratives. These three motivations function simultaneously on the personal and collective level. So, though the auto/biographical act generally springs from personal intentions, many forms of life writing—the family memoir among them—exist for "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).

Critical discussions by scholars such as Karl Weintraub, Philippe Lejeune, Paul John Eakin, Luisa Passerini, Carolyn Steedman, and Jeremy Popkin on the connection between autobiography and history and on the ways life writing informs or enriches our readings of public experiences support my use of family memoirs as forms of historical mediation. In the context of the fraught racialized identity politics in the United States, historical memory has become both a cultural obsession and an effective political weapon.<sup>8</sup> Though we now generally agree about the use of memory (and the writing thereof) as legitimate access to historical truth, we need to continue to examine the ways in which these historical mediations occur. 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 in changing situations. These reflections authorize the use of auto/biographical writing as interpretative frames for historical information, validating the methodology of life writing for historical discourse. For Asian North American auto/biographers, these points help define the ways in which authors conceive of the text as entering the current critical dialogues in Asian American historiographical writing.<sup>9</sup>

Kang's and Elliott's auto/biographies perform effectively as forms of historical mediation for Asian/Americans. As texts produced in the United States, yet focusing on both Asian history and a disenfranchised American present, they serve an important didactic purpose. They introduce perspectives on Asian history and the history of immigration to mainstream or ethnic Americans, inviting them to rethink the processes that created particular ethnic communities. Kang's and Elliott's texts 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 US post-war negotiations; both left their countries to settle in the United States and share a commitment to their ethnic communities; and both deliberately harness their auto/biographical texts to promote collective memory and teach mainstream America about Asian history in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At this point, I will analyze *how* these auto/biographical texts mediate history. Briefly, using Kang's and Elliott's texts as examples, I argue that family memoirs mediate history on both structural and thematic levels, which are organically fused in the texts. Structurally, they mediate history by revising the ways historical texts are traditionally inscribed, by substituting events for persons, by engaging specific tropes and metaphors, and by revising the notion of the individual voice in autobiography. Thematically, they function in three ways: first, through the recovery and safeguarding of family stories from historical erasure; second, by entering into a dialogue with official or public histories; and third, by proposing a textual and cultural model for present and future communities. Thus, though these texts look to the past, they are future-oriented, and their work of recovery becomes an occasion for literary revisioning and action in the present.

### **STRUCTURAL REVISIONING OF HISTORICAL INSCRIPTIONS**

From a structural perspective, these texts mediate history in three ways. First, they privilege personal stories over the accounts of public events as the governing plot of the narrative. Although political and historical events necessarily structure the persons' lives, Kang and Elliot deliberately and consistently filter the narrative of the events through the eyes or voice of their forebears or themselves. Both autobiographers preface their texts by explaining, to different degrees, how personal stories might structurally replace events as the configuring element of their narratives. Kang recounts the 1951 North Korean invasion of Seoul by telling of her escape, with her mother, on the roof of the last train bound for Pusan. In a sense, the invasion itself becomes secondary to the effects it produced on 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 (xi), showing her privileging of persons as the prism through which to view events. Indeed, as they relate their stories, they repeatedly recount how these events were lived by the diverse members of their family, recognizing the validity of the subjective over an illusive objectivity.

Second, the texts restructure traditional historical narratives through the trope of “countermemory,” a Foucauldian term that George Lipsitz has revised in the context of American popular culture to refer to

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. (212–13)

This trope obliges us to reframe those narratives of history that attend to the developing self-understanding of a culture at the cost of its excluded historical memory. By giving us new perspectives on the past, these texts resist the prejudices, erasures, limited perspectives, or inventions typical of official versions of the past. By invoking countermemory, 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 authorized as “responsible recipients and interpreters,” Manuela Costantino and Susanna Egan assert that “authority comes to rest where autobiography, and not history, places it—in the personal” (100).

In connection with the trope of countermemory, many Asian American family memoirists highlight particular metaphors, such as food, journeys, and war, to unify their stories. Kang and Elliott use specific terms to designate the kind of connection they and their communities have with their heritage countries. Kang invokes the word *han*, “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), while Elliott uses the word *minh*, or “we,” to denote “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 do in the American context.

Finally, the texts revise the notion of the individual voice of the traditional autobiographer, privileging a collective voice that links personal stories to each other and to public histories. 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. A detailed discussion of these structural issues will develop as I consider the auto/biographers' thematic concerns.

### RECOVERING AND PRESERVING FAMILY STORIES

The first category of thematic historical mediation consists of recovering and safeguarding stories from historical erasure. Quoting Janice Kulyk Keefer, who writes in her family memoir *Honey and Ashes* that "Memory [remains] invisible until it becomes a story," Costantino and Egan 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 in which memory is resurrected, contextualized, and preserved. In the act of writing, the writers bring these stories back to life, first 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).

Kang's and Elliott's texts evince a need to insert these personal stories into the public forum, as the families that could preserve them have been dispersed by the diaspora.<sup>10</sup> From the beginning, Kang locates her family story within that of Korea:

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. (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" (xi). Remembering these stories as an adult in America, she

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 both briefly mention their great-great-grandfathers), they harness family stories to describe the dramatic events in Asia in the last hundred or so years. 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 in the Korean resistance against the Japanese and was tortured and imprisoned; her father worked for the United Nations and the US government in Asia.

Kang's great-grandfather, Bong-Ho, became a preacher and 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 notes 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 faith 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 inevitable 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 the expense of what they considered immutable family values alarmed them.

The clash of traditional Asian perspectives with Western forms of behavior reach their 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 to the US. For both families, interracial marriage challenged profound cultural beliefs. 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 went on to serve 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 relate 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 thirty-eighth parallel, crossed the barrier 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, merit the daughter's respect.

Elliott also foregrounds stories about the women in her family. 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). To counter 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, opens 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 sustains 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 complex portraits 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 helped the family survive.

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, make 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 endorse 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, and 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.

## DIALOGUE WITH PUBLIC HISTORIES

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. By inserting their stories into official discourse, they contribute to the process and 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). The narrators function almost as builders who, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, take up "bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining and joining them in excessive ways, create a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space" (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" (14). Importantly, these personal texts prevent historical erasure and interpellate history-telling epistemologically, which may serve as a basis for political mobilization. As both autobiographers perform their stories, they invite their readers' identification with the events of the past, inviting the communities that receive the stories to claim agency for themselves.

Kang's intention to link the personal with the public appears 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, that "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 their 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, and 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).<sup>12</sup> When Joo-Han decides, 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 loses everything and has to move from the North to Seoul, 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 continues as she moves 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 been so woefully misunderstood in American popular culture. As she explains, a work of this scope and depth has 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 stereotypes found in American writing and film of villagers, soldiers, and bar girls, focusing instead on middle-class Vietnamese, who experienced the changes that successive colonizations enacted on 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 late 1940s, when numerous patriotic Vietnamese chose to fight the French who were trying to reimpose 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, places 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 a strong sense of closure; the auto/biographical act allows her to examine critically family and history, and to 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 highlight 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 presenting it. There is an important element of performance in these family memoirs. If, as Janet Varner Gunn proposes, autobiography is not conceived of 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 on 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 and identity that develops from these narratives create cultural 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.

### CREATING CULTURAL MEMORY

Finally, these texts mediate history by proposing a textual and cultural model for present and future communities. I consider cultural memory in this context as Mieke Bal does, when she suggests 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). To understand this, we need to consider how this form of auto/biographical mediation functions *in* and *for* the present. Family memoirs can nourish and sustain ethnic community by providing stories that unveil connections between peoples and the communities they form. I will discuss here a point mentioned earlier regarding the second point of relationality: the development of a textual link between the writer and the reader to the point that the auto/biographer’s personal family stories connect to the stories of those in the ethnic community. Stephanie Hammerwold takes Janet Varner Gunn’s idea of the three points in the “autobiographical moment”—impulse, perspective, and response—a step further by formulating the term “realization” to describe the part of the autobiographical 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.”<sup>13</sup> According to Hammerwold, realization 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, Hammerwold 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 transformative character of life writing acts on the reader as well as on the writer. Readers are therefore closely implicated in the processes that create meaning. There is often clear textual evidence that writers are conscious of their implied readers, who are, in turn, aware of their role in validating, disseminating, or as the case may be, canonizing a given text as emblematic of an ethnic identity or position. Importantly, readers who implicate themselves in the text are potentially altered by the experience because larger historical and social contexts are always present, complicating perspectives on cultural issues. Just as important transformative processes take place in the act of writing one’s memoirs, significant transformations are also enacted on the reader, from the perspective of historical information and community formation. The text becomes an occasion for dialogue, as shared experiences—even those of difference—contribute to collective memory. Indeed, the act of sharing the stories becomes as transformative as the content of the stories themselves.

The existence of implied readers marks these Asian/American family memoirs. In a general sense, we can categorize these readers into two occasionally intersecting groups. On the one hand, auto/biographers write for mainstream America, to transmit information about history and heritage culture from an insider's view, and to write their own stories into existing "official" versions. 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. On the other hand, autobiographers also write for the members of their communities, to give them characters with whom to identify, and to preserve a history in danger of obliteration. In the encounter between text and reader, Marianne Gullestad observes, "readers create the text while interpreting it, and, to some extent, they find *their own truths* in the texts under study" (31). A 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 cultural or collective memory that validate its history, its positions, and even its political agendas. In this context, Carolyn Steedman's questions 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 Asian American life writing texts identify with that community, and view themselves as subjects fully committed to furthering cultural politics and policies, and developing cultural knowledge in diverse forms.<sup>14</sup> The writers manifest this purpose explicitly by highlighting their commitment to a wider project of ethnic validation and cultural memory. In particular, Kang's experience of the Los Angeles riots in 1992 made her see the need to explain Korean Americans' positions in American cities.

In short, these Asian/American family memoirs create a reader by interpellating an implied audience for culture and history. This idea requires us to unravel what the existence of a community of readers might mean in the context of Asian American literary and cultural discourse. 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.<sup>15</sup> 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" (145–46). 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, as well as that 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, and even suggesting that one can never truly return "home." Kang's pragmatic view on the situation of Asians in America—that, because they are not Caucasians, Asians will never be allowed to assimilate fully—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).

Significantly, personal experience leads Kang to want to engage consciously with 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 like, 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 US), 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, which grew from a desire to, using a Vietnamese phrase, “return to the source” (468), to a journey home after exploring the world. The book is clearly directed to both family—her nephews and nieces who have become French, Canadians, Australians, and Americans—in order to give them the family story, as well as to all 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.

At issue in the discussion of how family memoirs create or endorse cultural memory in the context of Asian America is “the relationship between the experience of cultural displacement and the construction of cultural identity. It is thus marked by the tension of the historically vital double move between marking and recording absence and loss and inscribing presence” (Bammer xiv). By using stories of a “real” past, Kang and Elliott consciously reshape perspectives of those events to understand the present. Or, to continue to expand the historical paradigm, these texts invite us to reexamine our perspectives on uncritical narratives of history. As Marita Sturken explains, “[c]ultural memory represents the stories that are told outside official historical discourse, where individual memories are shared, often with political intent, to act as counter-memories to history” (31), suggesting that this process is always in flux. What I consider cultural memory in this discussion, then, arises from the dynamics of independence and interdependence of a series of texts that support the exchange of information, memories, perceptions, and designs among individuals who compose the group. These texts may then be used to empower a community through historical knowledge and awareness of cultural location in society. From a formal perspective, the development of cultural memory promotes continued participation through the writing of more texts. The strength of the auto/biographical tradition in Asian/American writing attests to the link between cultural memory and this form of remembering. Family memoirs, read collectively, play a pivotal role in the construction of this kind of cultural memory because of the way they validate each other and expand the meanings of similar experience. 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 which in significant ways have modified Korean and Vietnamese cultures and created new communities in the United States, with members committed to negotiating their positions through literary engagements with intersecting histories.

## NOTES

1. I use the term “auto/biography” to stress the blending of “biography” and “autobiography” in these texts.
2. I use the term “Asian/American” when I want to stress the importance of these stories for Asian as well as Asian American history. Also, since US intervention figures prominently in the history of both Korea and Vietnam, these texts are of interest to the general public, as they can help people think critically of the effects of American foreign intervention in the twentieth century.
3. Some important generational autobiographies have been written collaboratively, such as Rita and Jackie Huggins’s *Auntie Rita* and May-lee and Winberg Chai’s *The Girl From Purple Mountain*.
4. Other Asian/American family memoirs include Evelina Chao’s *Yeh Yeh’s House: A Memoir*, Pang-mei Natasha Chang’s *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, Louise Leung Larson’s *Sweet Bamboo*, and Garrett Hongo’s *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai’i*.
5. This idea clearly challenges Georges Gusdorf’s claim that a collective or community-oriented subject, with an “unconsciousness of personality, characteristic of primitive societies” cannot produce “autobiography” (30), or Philippe Lejeune’s famous definition of autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative that a real person makes of his own existence, when he emphasizes his individual life, especially the history of his personality” (4).
6. For perspectives on relational life writing, see Michael M. J. Fischer’s “Autobiographical Voices (1, 2, 3) and Mosaic Memory: Experimental Sondages in the (Post)Modern World,” and the special issue of *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies* on “Autobiography and the Generations” (2004) edited by Richard Freadman and John Gatt-Rutter.
7. An important issue to consider is the relationship between oral autobiographical narratives and the development of community listening strategies, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.
8. Specifically, we can think of the redress movements and subsequent governmental apologies and compensations to Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians interned or relocated during World War II, or the movement for compensation for the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act in Canada.
9. See Daniels for a discussion of the development of Asian American historiography. 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 in the third section, 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?” (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 alone: you and your version of the world must be public, recognizable enough to be negotiable in the ‘conversation of lives’” (43).

10. 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 US, their narratives are not representative of most of the Korean and Vietnamese working-class immigrants. My interest is in the writers' engagement with their country's history through the family story, rather than in their representative value 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 accounts more intensity and historical interest. As I note at the end of the article, though, both autobiographers do see themselves speaking for their communities, as they write the stories of the past.
11. 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)
12. 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 *The Lost Names* and Sook Nyul Choi's *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*.
13. 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. According to Gunn, "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). Hammerwold feels it is necessary to extend Gunn's discussion because "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. Therefore, I add a fourth part to Gunn's autobiographical moment: realization. . . . By realization I mean a connection to others and recognition of the role writing the self plays in creating a space for others' own stories."
14. 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.
15. Kang and Elliott offer a personal perspective on Asian American identity that will probably be judged problematic by some Asian American scholars who consider it "assimilationist." I do not judge these writers' personal opinions, believing that the diasporic or immigrant experience is as plural as the persons who experience it.

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