

INTRODUCTION

READING MEMOIRS BY IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

Monarchs migrate. This is different than species that emigrate. Species that emigrate only travel one way. Species that migrate travel back and forth between two different places. They have two homes.

—Jane Jeong Trenka (*The Language of Blood* 37)

Although love of country is required by the Prophet, / one should not live in misery / merely because one was born in a certain land

—Sa’adi (qtd. in Sattareh Farman-Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia* 145)

In her memoir, *The Language of Blood* (2003), South Korean adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka frequently makes reference to monarch butterflies as symbols of her transnational existence. In the first of the epigraphs above, Trenka challenges the notion that immigration has a starting and an end point, instead using the notion of perpetual “two-worldliness.” Born in South Korea, raised in Minnesota, and now living again in Seoul, her ongoing negotiation of a multiplicity of homes frames many immigrant women’s life writing.¹ *Lives beyond Borders* is interested in how racialized and minoritized immigrant women’s rootedness in multiple spaces grows life writing as a social justice instrument that establishes a communal and relational sense of self and offers crucial intersectional insights into varying forms of multilayered oppression.²

When Iranian writer Sattareh Farman-Farmaian references the medieval Persian poet Sa’adi in her memoir, *Daughter of Persia* (1992), as seen in the

second epigraph above, she bravely declares that the Prophet Mohammed's demand for devotion to one's country of birth cannot justify having to live in "misery." When your place of birth cannot guarantee your well-being or even survival—due to poverty, gender discrimination, or other types of oppression—then, Sa'adi claims, it is a person's human right to migrate. I use both Trenka's insistence on the existence of a transnational self and Farman-Farmaian's appeal to a human right to migrate to develop a more inclusive analysis of immigrant women's life writing.

Due to its long history as a tool of resistance for minoritized communities, life writing provides a fruitful foundation for crucial discussions about migration, intersectionality, and social justice.³ According to Gillian Whitlock, "autobiography is fundamental to the struggle for recognition among individuals and groups, to the constant creation of what it means to be human and the rights that fall from that, and to the ongoing negotiation of imaginary boundaries between ourselves and others" (*Soft Weapons* 10). To this humanizing effect, Eva Karpinski adds a special focus on immigrant women by stating that "writing as an immigrant woman in the genre of autobiography means writing both in a borrowed tongue and in a borrowed genre—grappling with a legacy of (or indebtedness to?) inherited models of androcentric or mainstream autobiographical representation" (*Borrowed* 2). Like Karpinski, I am intrigued by how "women have consistently attempted to rewrite and remake autobiography, by 'translating' the traditional project of autobiography into new forms and theories of self-representation" (*Borrowed* 13).

Lives beyond Borders seeks to establish that immigrant women's life writing not only modifies literary norms but also has the potential to change cultural and social perceptions that shape traditions, laws, and understandings of nationality and social justice. Such changes might be especially called for in a political climate that, in 2019, empowered the then President of the United States to admonish four female U.S. citizen lawmakers of color to "go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came" (Rogers and Fandos), and when an unprecedented number of arrests of nonviolent undocumented migrants were made under said president's administration (Gomez). In this light, life writing matters because, as Elsa Lechner optimistically asserts, "through life narrative . . . we might get closer to each other and build a common history of peace and respect, regardless of eventual and sometimes radical personal differences" (637).

This book employs Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's definition of life writing as an "umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and

diverse modes of personal storytelling that takes experiential history as its starting point” (7–8). While autobiography is often considered the more sophisticated and literary subcategory of life writing, memoir has established itself as a popular format. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, memoir “directs attention more toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator” (*Reading* 198). Whitlock calls it “a form of self-reflective writing that is personal, often conversational, and a meditation about the place of the self in history” (*Weapons* 20). And G. Thomas Couser adds that memoir “has been a threshold genre in which some previously silent populations have been given voice for the first time” (*Memoir* 12). It might not come as a surprise then that publication of memoirs has increased 400 percent between 2004 and 2008 and that, as Ben Yagoda surmises, memoir has become the “form of the culture: not only the ways stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, etc.” (7). Memoir’s popularity and its more accessible, relational, and less stylized nature is conducive, I argue, to immigrant women’s social justice advocacy.

My discussion of migration, gender, and memoir, is based on Steven Hunsacker’s definition of nation as comprised of the “importance of territory, history, and some shared means of self-definition (whether linguistic, religious, or ancestral)” (2). In my understanding of how immigrant women negotiate their identity in their memoirs, the “trans” in transnational implies multiple crossings of places, boundaries, and times, but also captures the possibility of transgression, of “changing the nature of something” (Ong 4). It certainly does not merely capture a singular or binary geographical existence. According to Mae M. Ngai, “a focus on the transnational, with its emphasis on multiple sites and exchange, can potentially transform the figure of the ‘other’ from a representational construct to a social actor” (60). Representations of migration in a transnational vein establish understandings of a plural sense of self that challenges controlling images of immigrant women, redefines the link between nation and life writing, and demands social action. Considering this transnational focus, it might seem paradoxical that my study limits itself primarily to the writing of women who have migrated to the United States. Yet, I propose that a spotlight on the experiences of female U.S. migrants is instructional as the United States remains a highly desired destination for migrants globally and because the United States has the geopolitical power to shape perceptions of migrants as well as migration policies and patterns worldwide.⁴

My investigations explore the following questions and more: How do immigrant women work with and extend forms of resistant autobiographical

writing by feminist and minoritized communities? How does their life writing—which challenges nationalism and established “Truths”—broaden our understanding of the genre as well as of immigrant experience, history, identity, national belonging, and literature? How is our perception of social justice—and its links to gender, nationhood, and artistic and literary engagements—altered when studying female migrants’ narratives? My cross-cultural, comparative study of life writing by immigrant women in the United States extends the existing critical work on immigrant life-writing studies. Texts by immigrant women—through genre mixing, figures of a “doubled self,” and the inclusion of unconventional elements like fairy tales and crossword puzzles—challenge fixed identities based on nationality, essentialisms, stereotypes, and patriarchal hierarchies to use memoir as a rhetoric of social justice. This book uncovers doubled constructions of identity and reevaluates the purpose and form of life writing for immigrant readers who might find themselves in these narratives as well as non-immigrant audiences who are encouraged to look at migration on a more personal and concrete level.

GENDER AND MIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND WORLDWIDE

In 2017, 44.4 million people (13.6% of the population) had migrated to the United States in their own lifetime. Forty-five percent of them were naturalized citizens while 27 percent were permanent residents. About 23 percent were undocumented (Radford). Historically, the U.S. immigration system is built on family reunification, skills-based entry, diversity (through the so-called visa lottery), and protection of refugees (“How the United States Immigration System Works”). The current Immigration and Nationality Act provides for up to 675,000 annual visas, across all immigration categories, in addition to an unlimited number of visas for spouses, parents, or children under the age of twenty-one of U.S. citizens. The president, in consultation with Congress, sets a limit each year on the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States. In order to become a U.S. citizen, immigrants must live in the United States as lawful residents for five years (in some cases three years, such as for spouses of U.S. citizens).

While proposals in the past have pushed for a reform in immigration laws that would prioritize immigrants with higher educational or professional skills levels, the Trump administration linked green cards to education, age, and English language skills as well as prohibited immigrants it deemed

likely to rely on public assistance from receiving permanent residency (Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera). When he became president, Trump also halted refugee resettlement and significantly lowered the numbers of resettled refugees; he further suggested that the diversity visa lottery should be abolished and announced that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program (DACA) would be ended. Under the Trump-Pence administration, the issuance of H-1B visas for highly skilled workers decreased. Additionally, this administration decided to not renew Temporary Protected Status for 98% of about 320,000 people currently living in the United States due to war or natural disasters in their home countries (Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera). Last, a 2019 “Remain in Mexico” policy, also ironically known as “Migrant Protection Protocols”—which might be violating international law—is trapping thousands of people legally seeking asylum in the United States in Mexican detention camps, waiting for their court dates (Pitzer). Considering this multilayered attack on immigrant rights in the United States, many people find it crucial to share their stories to speak up for their communities, especially at the intersection of migrant and gender identities.

According to the 2017 United Nations International Migration Report, 48.4 percent of all migrants worldwide are women (15). *Lives beyond Borders* posits that whether they migrate voluntarily or desperately, whether they are trafficked or displaced, their stories matter as they can shape cultural, social, and political reactions to migration in productive ways. But while women are migrating in great numbers, including to the United States, their economic, creative, cultural, and other contributions are still inadequately acknowledged.⁵ When immigrant women’s existence receives recognition, especially in nonscholarly political and popular contexts, it often reduces them to their supposed hypersexuality and hyperfertility, which are seen as a “threat to racially grounded definitions of national identity” (Guzmán and Valdivia 223). Hence, as Donna Gabaccia illuminates, once more female migrants arrived in the United States, concerns were voiced that “immigrants were no longer the productive and ambitious contributors who had arrived in earlier migrations” (39), and the constant questioning of women’s loyalties led to “intensive scrutiny both from other immigrants and from Americans” (xi). To push against such sexist and nativist portrayals, *Lives beyond Borders* makes an intervention in the presentation of women’s transnational experiences through the genre of life writing. It builds on a powerful body of scholarly writing about women’s life narratives and adds an essential comparative focus on migration, citizenship, and intersectionality. It revises

dominant narratives of migration and life writing as immigrant women's life writing disrupts representations of migration and calls into question prevailing historical narratives of nationality and assimilation.

As I will show in the following chapters, innovative negotiations of assimilation forces in the works I study constitute a major divergence from traditional patterns. Much male and European immigrant life writing offers assimilation as a central trope. Nationalist narratives set a seamless assimilation as the ultimate goal of immigration. *The Promised Land* (1912) by Mary (originally Moshke) Antin, for example, describes her Russian self as dying after coming to the United States. Traditionally, the immigration process has been perceived as the loss of the immigrant's original culture, and new immigrants are discussed in terms of their adaptability to American culture and their eagerness to change their identity. They are expected to lose their birth identity as it is supposedly unsustainable in a new country. Only if assimilation occurs is migration seen as successful, and often immigrants are confronted with the burden of proving their Americanness by verifying they have given up their cultural heritage, whether that is a viable choice or not.

In contrast to fantasies of assimilation, female migrants remain at high risk of experiencing exclusion and violence not only because of their gender but also their nationality, migration status, race, ethnicity, class, language, religion, ability, sexuality, as well as possible lack of cultural knowledge and access to support networks. They show remarkable courage and perseverance to overcome structural hardships; their unexamined coping mechanisms differ in important ways from men's. Chapters on the works of authors who were born in Mexico, Ghana, South Korea, Iran, Vietnam, and Syria offer a broad geographical perspective and tackle important current justice issues, such as undocumented migration and the Syrian refugee crisis.

Paralleling immigrant women's social invisibility, many academic and scientific approaches to studying migration used to be male-centered or looked at women merely as dependents of migrating men.⁶ According to Gabaccia, when she published *From the Other Side* in 1994, "most histories of immigrants in the United States begin with the experiences of migratory men disguised as genderless humans" (xi). Since the 1990s, feminist researchers have, in larger numbers, started to challenge approaches that ignore gender, and with a strong recent research focus on female migrants within the U.S. care industry, gender is becoming a more and more essential methodology in studies about global human movements (e.g., see Hondagneu-Sotelo). With this book, I follow Gabaccia's call to "write more monographs on immigrant women . . . [and] identify topics that beg for comparative study" (xiii).

While all migrants share some of the same risks and experiences, women's reasons for migrating, levels of bodily safety during migration, and life after migration can be vastly different. As Christiane Timmerman and colleagues clarify, "personal migration motives and decisions are influenced by gender roles and positions, which are highly dependent on the opportunities that men and women have to migrate. . . . Men and women have different migrant networks, which lead to divergent migration experiences; [and] the existence of a gender ideology that penetrates all spheres of society" affects people's opportunities differently (8). We can, thus, gain invaluable insight into migrant lives from focusing on women and, in particular, their life writing, an approach that the social sciences have mostly ignored. Because stories written by non-celebrity women-of-color only rarely receive support from publishers in the United States (Rak 133), the complex information that immigrant women's lives make available is often lost.

Lives beyond Borders follows Cynthia Huff's call to "foreground the existence and importance of women's writing traditions" with a specific focus on immigrant women (4). I analyze the memoirs of female migrants that build on a rich history of modifications that women and minoritized communities have made to traditional autobiographical techniques, which center authority, rationality, legitimacy, and universality in the white, male, heterosexual experience. Indeed, "deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain, [a female author] may constitute an 'I' that becomes a place of creative and, by implication, political intervention" (Smith and Watson, "Introduction: De/Colonization" xix). The women whose works I discuss adapt practices to establish a communal authorial subject and a subjectivity dedicated to equity and survival that sensitizes the public toward social justice issues in their communities. They powerfully share immigrant women's pain and resilience.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

In *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994), Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan proclaim that effective transnational feminist analysis needs to be interdisciplinary, transnational, and intersectional in its comparison of cultural divides and must take cultural, social, economic, and other differences into consideration without relying on ethnocentrism. In this book, then, I accept Grewal and Kaplan's challenge to design a comparative project that is interdisciplinary (ranging from literature to Women's and Gender Studies to Political

Science to Social Work), intersectional (being conscious of connections between immigrant women's identity markers such as race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, and religion and how these intersections shape access to power and experiences of oppression), and transnational (following women's movements between Mexico, Ghana, South Korea, Iran, Vietnam and the United States, as well as between Syria and Turkey). In my application of intersectionality as an analytical framework, I am deeply indebted to the Combahee River Collective's 1977 "Black Feminist Statement," which declares the "multilayered texture of black women's lives" (328), as well as Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal 1991 essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," in which she conceptualizes intersectionality as "multilayered and routinized forms of domination that often converge in . . . women's lives, hindering their ability to create alternatives" (1245).

I began this manuscript as an international student from Germany on an F1, non-immigrant visa. Since then my status has changed to that of a permanent resident through a marriage-based green card. I, thus, write as a racially privileged, transnational subject myself, and my research is necessarily informed by my own moving between national spaces and cultures. I am acutely aware of the differences that separate authors, readers, and critics in this scholarly endeavor and attempt to read and analyze my case studies ethically and empathically. I certainly strive for a feminist methodology and epistemology. Leaning on Sandra Harding's approaches to establishing a feminist standpoint, I value women's diverse experiences and emotions as a powerful methodological tool. Much like the memoirists in this study, I perceive my writing, research focus, and methods as political.

In a 2018 special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* on "Lives outside the Lines: Gender and Genre," Eva C. Karpinski and Ricia Anne Chansky specify that the intent of the collected articles is "not to ascribe gender to specific genres or to decide who performs gender in their chosen genre more successfully than others, but, rather, to explore the nuances of generic particulars in a manner that allows us to better grasp the means by which medium extends the potential for expressing gender in life narratives" (507). I emulate these objectives in this book. I view the structures that immigrant women resist and write against through feminist and postcolonial frameworks and, consequently, shift between autobiographical, feminist, and postcolonial theoretical lenses. I expose different ways of knowing and show how cultural and historical values, interests, and unexamined assumptions

affect the production of these women's life writing and the nature of their experiences. I discuss power in the political and symbolic realms and systems of oppression at the intersection of gender, race, class, and citizenship.

My use of the concept of citizenship is shaped by Lisa Lowe's claim in *Immigrant Acts* (1991) that "although the law is perhaps the discourse that most literally governs citizenship, U.S. national culture—the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives that place, displace, and replace individuals in relation to the national polity—powerfully shapes who the citizenry is" (2). Rooted in a postcolonial perspective, I analyze how colonialist, imperialist, and neocolonialist practices and ideologies influence female migrants' identity formation processes as well as their practices of challenging master narratives and perceptions of citizenship and nationality. Through an interdisciplinary approach, I hope to answer, among others, the following questions: How and why do female immigrants adapt the norms of memoir? What identity formations and performances do they advocate? How do they use life writing as a political tool? Are they successful in challenging patriarchal constructions of knowledge?

Aware that "the 'I' of reference is constructed and situated, and not identical with its flesh-and-blood maker" (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 71), I contend that life writing offers a powerful and emancipatory site for the analysis of immigrant women's identity formation and their agenda of resistance. Aihwa Ong demands that studies of migration patterns take into consideration "everyday meanings and action . . . as a form of cultural politics embedded in specific power contents" (5). Life-writing texts, I propose, offer excellent access to these kinds of stories. Because memoirs tend to be concrete in their depictions of lived experiences, they can deliver nuanced insights and further our understanding of women's transnational lives.

The textual choices in this book reflect my wish to focus on texts, writers, demographic groups, and geographical regions that have not received enough academic attention. While only six core texts cannot capture the complexities and experiences of all immigrant women, I treat these memoirs as case studies that offer insights into prevalent *patterns* regarding the identity formations and political messages in immigrant women's writings. Much like the writers in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) employ life writing to acknowledge and celebrate differences and demonstrate their exclusion from systems designed by the white heteropatriarchy, the writers in *Lives beyond Borders* create a community across cultures, sexualities, and nations to demand social justice for minoritized peoples. All writers in this book

are linked in their acknowledgment of mutual oppression based in forces of racism, sexism, capitalism, and colonization, which makes an intersectional approach to reading these women's life writing absolutely essential.

WOMEN'S LIFE WRITING AND THE RELATIONAL SELF

The "power to say 'I' and to be heard is not something everyone can take for granted" (Karpinski, *Borrowed* 225); but immigrant women rely on a long history of feminist life-writing techniques that made it possible for marginalized populations to voice their selves. The analysis of women's autobiographical writing became an established field, taking women's experiences into consideration in the early 1980s (Smith and Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity" 5). Essential texts on the characteristics of female life writing include, among many others, Domna Stanton's *The Female Autograph* (1984), Estelle Jelinek's *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (1986), and Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987). These critics revealed how women's life narratives push back against the traditional autobiographical subject that is marked as "male, white, propertied, . . . socially and politically enfranchised" as well as, I would add, able-bodied (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 116). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson elaborate that conventional autobiography "entwines the definition of the human being in a web of privileged characteristics. Despite their myriad differences, of place, time, histories, economies, cultural identifications, all 'I's are rational, agentive, unitary. Thus the 'I' becomes 'Man,' putatively a marker of the universal human subject whose essence remains outside the vagaries of history" ("Introduction: De/Colonization" xvii). *Lives beyond Borders* builds on a strong foundation of scholarly insights into how women have manipulated the genre to represent their experiences that are not subsumed by a supposed male and privileged universality.

Critics have commented on memoir's "transgressiveness" and its "resistance to norms" (Kusek 38, 45) and, crucially, on its accessibility to "ordinary readers [as well as] non-literary writers" (Rak, "Are Memoirs" 323). Philosopher Helen Buss dissects how women's memoir "reveals the hidden thing, the forbidden knowledge, the shameful and guilty secret, and to make what was formerly a private matter into public knowledge" (12–13). Importantly, feminist scholars of women's life writing have established the feminine self as relational and communal. Susan Stanford Friedman posits

that women's autobiographical writing shows the interdependence of their relationships, which defies Georges Gusdorf's articulation of autobiography as autonomous and individualistic, which was seen as theoretically foundational for the genre of life writing. Instead, Friedman sees life writing by women demonstrate a "sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identification that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness" and that allows for a fluidity between themselves and other members of their communities ("Women's Autobiographical Selves" 44). Huff claims succinctly that women writers "did not follow the romantic conception of the isolated artist, but more relational and communal patterns" (5). In her groundbreaking reading of autobiographical works by Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet, Mary Mason identifies relationality and feminine imagery as core characteristics of women's life writing. According to Mason, "grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems . . . to enable women to write openly about themselves" (22). Women's writing is marked by an insistence that their stories and identities are worth knowing (33), which is a belief upon which the writers in *Lives beyond Borders* construct their own narratives.

Paul John Eakin claims that, in fact, all life writing is relational, producing a self that stands in context with other selves. He writes that "all identity is relational, and that the definition of autobiography, and its history as well, must be stretched to reflect the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed" (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 43–44; emphasis in original).⁷ In Eakin's theory, "the self's story [is] viewed through the lens of its relation with some key other person" (86). Often taking the form of children writing about their parents, this technique "affords the opportunity to speak the previously unspoken, to reveal what was hidden or suppressed" (87), such as family trauma like mental illness, alcoholism, or incest. Friedman adds that not "essences or absolutes, identities are fluid sites that can be understood differently depending on the vantage point of their formation and function" (*Mappings* 47). As I will exhibit in the following chapters, immigrant women find usefulness in this kind of relational and fluid identity in their life writing to expose systems of intersectional oppression.

In his analysis of Native American autobiography, Arnold Krupat observed a communal self that presents a "synechdochic relation of part-to-whole" (220). I connect Krupat's ethnic synechdochic self, which captures an "individual life as comprehensible foremost in relation to the collective experience of [the] tribe" with the feminist theories of relationality I mentioned

above to support my discussion of immigrant women's self writing that focuses on social justice for their communities (229). For the women whose work I investigate, the self is central, but it is depicted as encompassing more than just one life to secure their communities' well-being.

Women of diverse identities have always molded life writing to fit their experiences and communication needs. Anne Goldman presents in *Take My Word* (1996) the "literary" qualities of 'extraliterary' texts—books marketed under the rubric of sociology, labor history, or cultural studies—in order to explore how [ethnic working-class women in the United States negotiate] the desire to speak autobiographically . . . in narratives that simultaneously write the self and represent the culture(s) within which that self takes shape" (x). Goldman analyzes, for example, cookbooks by Hispanic and African American women and women's collective narratives published by Jewish labor unions and reveals how "the speakers and writers [she] consider[s] . . . maneuver between autobiographical and politicalcultural texts, between 'I' and various forms of 'we'" (xxvii). Despite adopting a relational self, these stories "manage to be socially engaged without submerging individual voice in collective history" (Goldman xv). It is this use of innovative stylistic techniques and communal subjectivity for a political purpose that I have also observed in the books that comprise the core of *Lives beyond Borders*.⁸

Caren Kaplan, in "Resisting Autobiography" (1992), calls nonconforming autobiographical practices—like the *testimonio*, collective autoethnography, biomythography, or prison narratives—"out-law genres," which "challenge Western critical practices to expand their parameters and, consequently, shift the subject of autobiography from the individual to a more unstable collective entity" (134). Kaplan problematizes autobiography's rootedness in nationally confined identities at the expense of showing the fluidity of subjectivities and borders, which buttresses nationalistic rhetoric of intrinsic and insurmountable difference. In *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (1993), Sidonie Smith includes autobiographical manifestos in this category. My study adds to these interrogations about genre boundaries and identity by looking at how the intersections of gender and immigration status influence memoir as the writers' bodies are not only marked female but also considered "alien."

Throughout, I will focus on issues of embodiment and how patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism use gender, race, disability, and other identity markers to label, dis/respect, and besiege different bodies in distinctive ways. As Sasha Kruger and Syantani DasGupta allege, "the desire to study, categorize, understand, and ultimately demean the bodies of racialized and nonnormative others is a part of the ableist, patriarchal white-supremacist

project, as is the belief that those in the center have no bodies, skin, hair, or genitalia to remark upon” (483). Because this voyeurism can make life writing a place of violence, the “key is embodiment for and by the telling self as opposed to embodiment demanded and required by the more powerful receiving other” (Kruger and DasGupta 485). The women writers in my book proudly center their identities and push back against the othering gaze to establish their memoirs not as entertainment but as political tools to “access counterhistories to dominant social narratives as well as break the silence around embodied oppressions” (Kruger and DasGupta 484).

Like other out-law genres, immigrant women’s writings bring to light alternative creations of communal and individual identity and novel forms of subjectivity and agency, and they emphasize marginalized experiences, issues, and knowledge. Due to the intense connections between patriarchy, oppression, and migration that shape immigrant women’s narratives, their focus is especially on techniques for survival and human rights negotiations. These women’s main project with their life writing is to effect political change in their nations of birth and their current places of residence; my ultimate goal in this book, then, mirrors theirs—to further our understanding of these women’s and our own social and political worlds in a way that reveals the urgency of profound political and social change.

THEORIES ON IMMIGRANT LIFE WRITING

As Whitlock asserts, “subaltern subjects are not voiceless and nor are they victims, however their visibility, legibility, and audibility are tactical, contingent, and constrained” (*Postcolonial* 8). She further confirms that life writing affords “those who lack social, cultural, and political power . . . agency and carefully defined authority” (*Soft Weapons* 18). I am interested here in how immigrant women use life writing to have their voices heard, to push back against their victimization, and to create the tactical visibility to which Whitlock refers. My study builds on earlier achievements of immigrant female life writers, who have shown that “migrant texts legitimize alternative forms of subjectivity, knowledge, literacy, and offer counter-discourses to the dominant ones” (Karpinski, *Borrowed* 226).⁹ Whitlock adds that the field of postcolonial life narratives has broadened the limits of autobiography beyond the “rational, sovereign subject that is conceived as western, gendered male and . . . racially white” as well as “assumptions about autobiographical authorship and authority [that] prioritize authenticity, autonomy, self-realization, and

transcendence—western Enlightenment values” (*Postcolonial* 3). The works at the heart of *Lives beyond Borders* contribute to this widening of the genre.

According to Heike Paul, immigrant literature has been “viewed predominantly in a national setting and has been analyzed as articulating . . . processes of formations of national identities along the lines of race-ethnicity, gender, and class” (1). Indeed, early critical analysis of specifically life writing by immigrants to the United States was Eurocentric in its approach. Its origins lie in William Boelhower’s *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States* (1982). Boelhower’s work was groundbreaking in arguing that similarities exist between ethnic groups; before him, the predominant assumption was that such literary works embody group-specific experiences. Despite its inclusive title, however, *Immigrant Autobiography* discusses only male Italian immigrants’ lives and includes mostly second-generation works. Boelhower problematically treats “immigrant autobiography” as equivalent to “autobiography of Americanization.”

Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong’s “Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach” (1992) challenges Boelhower’s approach by showing how male and female Chinese immigrant memoirs deviate from his definitions, claims, and prescriptions. I see a similar departure from Boelhower’s theory and a reconstruction of the purpose of life writing in the works I analyze. For example, Chinese immigrants, according to Wong, do not see the United States as a mythical land, but show a “pragmatic, matter-of-fact attitude” toward immigration (155). The Mexican immigrant Rosalina Rosay (whom I discuss in the next chapter), too, admires the United States as a place that offers toothbrushes, commodities so expensive in her Mexican village that her family cannot afford them. I build on Wong’s astute observations in my comparative inquiry and hope to expand her findings in a more global and feminist context.

Despite critical work on life writing and migration, more studies need to address the concerns and questions that steer this book. In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson cover immigrant autobiography only sparsely and present a definition of the term under the heading “*Ethnic life narrative*” (194; emphasis in original). They offer the following brief point about immigrant life writing’s importance: “Immigrant narratives and narratives of exile become sites through which formerly marginal or displaced subjects explore the terms of their cultural identities and their diasporic allegiances” (107). Autobiography as a narrative site *can* serve as a tool to negotiate cultural locations. It *can* effectively capture identity formation practices of an immigrant subject-in-process. The connection of “site” with “former” marginality seems to me a textual and cultural problem that needs

to be investigated. Why can immigrants only write autobiography once they have moved from the periphery to the center? Do all immigrants necessarily desire to become part of the center? Why is their textual placement paralleled with their cultural placement?

As Paul—whose *Mapping Migration* (1999) analyzes how women migrants use creative writing to connect identity and location—proclaims, “women’s immigrant writing has re-energized the genre of immigrant literature” (1); and much important critical work, especially in the field of American Ethnic Studies, has looked at women of diverse backgrounds and with intersectional identities in the United States. Dolores Mortimer and Roy S. Bryce-Laporte’s *Female Immigrants to the United States: Caribbean, Latin American, and African Experiences* (1981) is considered one of the foundational studies of the experiences of women-of-color immigrants in the United States after the Immigration Act of 1965. Mortimer and Bryce-Laporte examine how an increase in women migrants affected the United States socially, politically, and economically as their intersectional identities increased angst about the impact of the feminization of migration particularly on issues of labor, overpopulation, and representation.

Alix Naff’s collection of Arab immigrant testimonies in the United States, *Becoming American* (1993), importantly foregrounds women’s voices and the important role they played as peddlers and shopkeeper in the integration process of their communities. Huping Ling’s *Voices of the Heart* (2007) collects oral histories of Asian immigrant women from a wide range of countries who settled in the Midwest. The stories speak to these women’s hardships, goals, strength, and successful cultural negotiations to raise healthy families. They negate stereotypes of Asian women as silent, submissive, and passive. Martha Cutter investigates in *Lost and Found in Translation* (2005) how writing by ethnic Americans raises “questions about the feasibility of inhabiting multiple linguistic worlds and creating multiple ethnic cultures” (2), looks at how migrants develop a “new mode of voice, language, or subjectivity . . . that meshes—but also exceeds—prior subjectivities or languages” (3), and investigates a “struggle to transcode the meaning of ethnicity itself so that one can be both ethnic and ‘American’” (5). In *Sucking Salt* (2006), Meredith Gadsby analyzes how Caribbean women use the cultural and historical significance of salt in the Caribbean in their fiction and poetry to fight creatively various forms of oppression and tackle hardships in their communities.

While not focused specifically on issues of gender, Rocío G. Davis, Jaime Aurell, and Ana Delago’s *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories: Genres, Performance, and Culture* (2007) looks at life writers who “consciously negotiate

issues of ethnic self-representation and history” (10). The chapters in their collection explore the “intersection between the discourse, practice, and social function of life writing, history, and ethnic identity” (12). Davis, Aurell, and Delago find that ethnic life narratives “challenge dominant mainstream versions which have often hidden, misrepresented, or invalidated [ethnic communities’] stories” (13) and that they bring “hidden or disenfranchised stories back to life, firstly as access to a valid identity for themselves and then as a usable past for a community” (17). Furthermore, the collection exposes how autobiographical texts can “attain a sense of group identity, which may serve as a basis for political mobilization” (18). It is this use of life writing as a means for collective identity development, community survival, and politicization around social justice efforts on which I focus my reading of immigrant women’s memoirs.

Rather than centering in assimilation and ignoring the pains that come with it, the analysis of and a theory about immigrant women’s life writing need to be focused on reading the narratives of immigrant women with regard to how they navigate the conflicting demands that their intersecting identity markers place on them. Especially postcolonial and poststructuralist approaches to life writing and subjectivity capture this “nonunitary, indeterminate, nomadic, and hybrid nature of a linguistically constructed identity” (Friedman, *Mappings* 47). Speaking about Asian immigrants’ writings, Traise Yamamoto proposes that reading such texts as being about “‘becoming an American’ suggests that the writers themselves have accepted the terms and their own implied status as (former or present) outsiders” (110). Instead of consenting to outsider status, immigrant women, I suggest, courageously redefine what it means to be American. Studies about immigrants’ assimilation patterns show that, in contrast to male migrants, women often do not seek to assimilate fully to the national identity of their new country of residence, but tend to create their own personal, fused identity. To them, American culture does not appear as a static concept to which one must conform, but as a flexible construct to which they can contribute (Pearce, Clifford, and Tandon 248). In doing so, gender identity seems more important to them than national identity, as for “women it is about becoming an American *woman*” (Pearce, Clifford, and Tandon 246; emphasis in original); they aim to secure for themselves and their children the erosion of traditional gender roles, more personal freedom, and education. Based on immigrant women’s self-perception, it is important to question concepts such as hybridity as not merely suggesting “the assimilation of . . . immigrant practices to dominant forms but [as] instead mark[ing] the history of survival within

relationships of unequal power and domination” (Lowe 67). As their life writing demonstrates, survival is at the heart of many women’s migration, not the specific desire to become American.

LIFE WRITING AND NATIONALITY

Ricia Anne Chansky accentuates the power that life writing has to facilitate notions of belonging at a time when large-scale diasporic movements and waves of displacement destabilize national identities: “The potential multiplicity of national identity (identities) and the complications that arise from imagining a transnational self are vital . . . Comparatively reading auto/biographical narratives . . . holds the promise of promoting understandings of both the other and the self, as separate and intertwined agents” (5–6). She adds that “understandings of national identities are not stable; they are made, broken, and remade among the constant mutability of globalism” (14–15). *Lives beyond Borders* adds to these necessary conversations about nationality, identities, and relationality on a global scale.

Life writing as a genre is inherently tied to ideas about nationality. Analyzing trauma and self-representation in works by Dorothy Allison, Mikal Gilmore, Jamaica Kincaid, and Jeanette Winterson, Leigh Gilmore remarks that “the cultural work performed in the name of autobiography profoundly concerns representations of citizenship and nation. Autobiography’s investment in the representative person allies it to the project of lending substance to the national fantasy of belonging” (*Autobiographics* 12). Autobiographical texts and their representations of the individual influence how the national community defines itself and how identity traits are used to shape policies of inclusion and exclusion and, in the U.S. context in particular, ideologies of meritocracy and individualism.

Julie Rak inserts that memoir, specifically, “is one of the genres of writing that is about the movement from private to public. For this reason, it often contains ideas about citizenship, and it is taken up within other debates about the meaning of individual experiences in the public realm” (212). Life writing has historically been used as a vessel to convey how “Western eyes see the colonized as an amorphous, generalized collectivity” (Smith and Watson, “Introduction: De/Colonization xvii). Hence, it has buttressed a master discourse “that has served to power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West” (Smith, *Subjectivity* 18). In turn, imaginations of nationalism are decidedly masculine.

Huff exposes, for example, how Benedict Anderson's highly praised *Imagined Communities* (1992) feeds sexist analytical approaches: "By focusing on mainstream national symbols and cultural practices, Anderson slights the voices and texts of women and the intricacies of their subjectivities as these influence nation-building" (7). Life writing by immigrant women, as I demonstrate, contributes meaningfully to our understanding of how women influence conversations about nationality.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq, the United States has experienced a memoir boom, which, according to Rak, "participated in and reflected changes in how Americans understood themselves as citizens of a public" (35). This particularly traumatic time period necessitated a redefinition of what it means to be American, and the memoir genre promised to deliver the knowledge needed to negotiate that definition. Rak continues that "memoir makes many people feel connected, and it connects individual feelings to group ideas. Therefore, citizenship—and not narcissism—should be a key way to understand the popularity of memoirs with many American readers at the present time" (33). The memoir boom, then, constitutes an opportune moment for immigrant women to add their experiences to common, often xenophobic and exclusionary, understandings of U.S. citizenship.

Concurrently, as Leigh Gilmore establishes in *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say about Their Lives* (2017), the boom has been accompanied by a backlash against and discrediting of especially women's memoir and crafted a popular form of neoliberal life writing that does not acknowledge systemic oppression but puts the burden for a fulfilled life solely on the individual. Such works do not challenge systems, nor do they encourage their readers to become politically active. Texts in this subfield stand in stark contrast to autobiographies by women of color who "transformed nonfiction" "by establishing it as a newly important form for a civil rights era" (Gilmore, *Tainted Witness* 90). Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Audre Lordé's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others, generated a "politicized 'I' of self-representation" and offered "historical or political analysis or contextualization" to expose minoritized people's oppression (Gilmore, *Tainted Witness* 92, 93). The memoirs I investigate build on this social justice legacy with a special emphasis on issues of nationality, belonging, and citizenship.

The symbiosis between nationality and life writing, according to Whitlock, has further led to the establishment of autobiography as an “alterity industry” based in the sensationalization of suffering for a Western readership (*Soft Weapons* 15). Whitlock claims that current geopolitical situations have created an audience for memoirs that preserve a north-south divide. Purchasing global memoirs functions as “a way of indicating cosmopolitan tastes, openness, sympathy, political commitment, and benevolent interest in cultural difference” (Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 55). Whitlock designates such life writing as “soft weapons” that can be co-opted and commercialized for their exoticization of cultural difference and used to justify Western military and other interventions in nations that are deemed threatening; at the same time, they are effective vessels “to describe experiences of unbearable oppression and violence across a cultural divide” (Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 55). This dichotomy inherent in memoirs’ affect informs my discussion of immigrant women’s memoirs and their political power.

Western societies, especially, tend to see immigrants as large categories of identity, conflating their backgrounds with often toxic outcomes, such as the current political rhetoric that the United States is being overrun by “caravans” of Latin American migrants. I am interested in how immigrant women use life writing to individualize their experiences while also speaking up in support of their communities. As the women in this book describe, wide-spread conflation exists in U.S. media, popular culture, and popular opinion of all Latinx peoples, migrants from various African countries and African Americans, Asians and Asian Americans, as well as members of specific branches of Islam and different Muslim-majority countries. If life writing as “alterity industry” is written for Western eyes, the genre is complicit in reducing non-Western identities to amalgams that, I argue, can be easily abused for xenophobic purposes.

That is why it is crucial to pay attention to immigrant women’s life writing, which destabilizes supposedly clearly defined concepts such as “immigrant,” “home,” and “nation.” Jane Trenka’s adoption memoir, for example, expresses traumatic struggles with being seen as neither American nor Korean and attempting to re-negotiate what family, community, and national identity mean for her. A disruption of “clear” and “established” narrative techniques—as captured, for example, in Trenka’s disinterest in a chronological plot line unaffected by trauma—allows for feelings of being “at home” and “homeless” at the same time. Such redefinitions call for courage. For many members of minority groups, “home” has historically connoted

shelter, for example from racism, and nurture. bell hooks, in “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance)” (1990), powerfully observes how African American women have established homeplaces as radical, political “spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination” where the oppressed “could strive to be subjects, not objects” (384).

But just as hooks points to efforts within the African American community “to change that subversive homeplace into a site of patriarchal domination” (388), ‘home’ for many immigrant women conjures up experiences of oppressive hierarchy and inflexible gender roles. Instead of accepting the real possibility of “not belonging” and not being seen as a subject, they create a “relationship between home, identity, and community that calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous, stable identity and works to expose the political stakes concealed in such equations” (Martin and Mohanty 296). Embracing this volatile sense of self complicates life writing’s reliance on a clearly defined national background.

Autobiographical works that express doubleness on multiple identity levels can be a critical means to change national master narratives and to rupture hegemonic representations of nation, immigration, assimilation, and belonging. For example, the nine writers (including Rigoberta Menchú, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Richard Rodriguez) whom Hunsacker discusses in *Autobiography and National Identity in the Americas* (1999) “imagine new versions of the community against dominant forms of national identity in an attempt to clear space for themselves within otherwise restrictive national situations” (5). I am particularly attentive to how the ways in which immigrant women practice memoir may alleviate injustice caused by social misrecognition through which immigrant women are constituted as problematic objects, often as hypersexualized and putting at risk the existing “national identity” through their child-bearing; in giving voice to the experiences, demands, and self-interpretations of minoritized groups, immigrant women’s life writing challenges narrative conventions that are non-inclusive as they are based in white, European experiences.

Because their lives are just as much informed by the people and conditions in their land of origin as by their new home, immigrant women do not position themselves as the sole heroines of their own life-writing texts but expose a plural sense of self by projecting the voices of those who are rarely heard to effect social change. Concerning this form of identity formation, Yamamoto makes a connection between (immigrant) women’s life writing and other marginalized groups when she points to a “group consciousness, a sense that the individual is not an extirpated self” (108). Such a sense of