Even before opening its covers, there is something always already very familiar about a novel by an Asian American writer. Its reception from both popular and critical audiences is likely to be preceded by preconceptions about its writer, its subject matter, its prose style, and, most significantly, the information it will provide about the culture and history of the particular Asian group with which the author is affiliated. For Asian American writers, the “text” that precedes them is the immigrant narrative, for the reigning assumption of the mainstream literary market is that works by Asian American writers are de facto immigrant narratives, whether or not immigration is the principal subject of the works. As a result, Asian American writing, fiction and nonfiction alike, has become a veritable genre with its own set of conventions, exemplifying what Fredric Jameson describes as texts that “come before us as the always-already-read” as well as the “always-already-written.”

From the writer’s perspective, such audience assumptions and habits in turn translate into implicit but powerful imperatives that shape their narrative choices and strategies. Asian American writers, then, are subject to the demands of what I call the “autobiographic imperative,” an interpretive disposition of readers who habitually read fiction by ethnic writers as autobiography, as testimonies to lived experiences, typically assumed to be those of immigrants.

Clear examples of such thematic and autobiographic imperatives permeate mainstream receptions of classic and contemporary Asian
American writing. Countless dust jacket and back cover blurbs of books by Asian Americans—and by ethnic writers more generally—declare the work a testimony of the immigrant experience or “what it means to be (fill in the appropriate ethnic or racial label).” Such descriptions, along with the dust jackets and paperback covers on which they appear, are part of what Gerald Graff calls the “unofficial interpretive culture”—paratextual materials that “provide a clue not just to the meanings of a single work, but, much more important, to the type of thing that a meaning can be (its intrinsic genre) and the type of talk it is possible to construct about it.” John K. Young also points out that “The usual first step in reading books . . . is to orient the enclosed text by the cultural markers contained on its front, back, and inside jacket copy (for hardcovers),” and that a dust jacket functions as an important sign in “the book’s broader bibliographical environment.” Such paratextual information precedes, frames, and mediates the reader’s interpretive process, so that, as Jameson observes, “we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself.” For works by Asian Americans, such descriptors also make implicit promises to the reader: the text will provide a bona fide account of the Asian American and Asian immigrant experience, the writer serves as a synecdoche for the racial or ethnic group with which he or she is affiliated, and the reader may rely on generic immigrant narratives as an interpretive frame for the account into which he or she is about to enter. Thus, Asian American literature is, we might say, always preceded by established genre imperatives.

Reflecting the tastes of the market, such genre imperatives serve a significant regulatory function: they discipline the production of narratives by determining thematic and structural parameters. For Asian American writers, the imperatives can function hegemonically, as instruments of social and literary assimilationism. Like the model minority discourse that regulates Asian American subject formation through socially approved models of citizenship, the autobiographic imperative induces the writer to prove her quality by exemplification. The result is that Asian American writing is rarely sui generis, but always expected to be generic, its worth measured by how capably the writer executes the essential elements of the expected immigrant narrative and how the immigrant protagonist exemplifies “what it means to be an Asian immigrant.”

The autobiographic imperative is, not surprisingly, particularly unyielding in American immigrant fiction. Autobiography, Shu-mei Shih points out, is “the genre for ethnic representation fetishized by