



Introduction

Autobiography, in appearance so straightforward and simple, so eager to convince the reader of the truth it purports to tell, is a deceptive and finally complex exercise in self-figuration. While not neglecting the philosophical quandary posed by all self-writing, our seminar on Latin American autobiographies addressed issues that were basically cultural and ideological in nature. Examining the strategies that informed those texts, we explored the changing nature of the self-images governing Latin American autobiography from the nineteenth century onward, such as self as embodiment of nation, as privileged historian, as communal witness. Questions of generic hesitancy in Spanish American autobiography (is it history or is it fiction) and of gender inflection (autobiographies written by men vs. autobiographies written by women) were also addressed.

The units that follow, roughly falling into three categories, illustrate our multiple preoccupations and interests. The first category deals precisely with autobiography as genre. One unit focuses on autobiographies written *in* Latin America: these are often stories of oppression and struggle, admirable for their dignity and strength. Another unit prefers to study autobiographies written *outside* Latin America, texts written by Hispanics born and raised in the United States, in an effort to examine the complexities of subject formation in minority communities. A third unit attempts to study both types of texts. In the second category, we find units dealing with contextual issues that necessarily influence autobiographical writing. Not surprisingly, one unit focuses on immigration and exile. Other units take a fresh look at diverse forms of social oppression in Latin America, slavery in particular, and consider autobiography a form of denunciation of those practices. The two units in the third category delve into the Colonial past and consider first-person narratives written by sixteenth century Spanish explorers and settlers as precursor texts to present day autobiographies. All units are prime examples of the intellectual curiosity and authentic professional commitment of the group as a whole. Not only were Fellows responsive, they were demanding in their desire to improve their awareness of Latin America and eager to integrate that awareness into their teaching. The quality of these units is proof of the care and thoughtfulness that have been devoted to this enterprise.

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