



Introduction

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In a country such as the United States, where nearly everyone's ancestors arrived recently, the issues raised by the Discovery and Conquest of the New World are vital. New World history begins with Columbus, if by history we mean modern history, hence it behooves us to ponder the reasons for the Discovery and its aftermath. The Quincentenary has, needless to say, heightened this awareness, but in the Americas the Columbian question is never absent from all considerations of history, and is ever present in many manifestations of art.

What does it mean to discover a New World? Isn't it presumptuous to speak of discovering a world already inhabited by others? How did the natives of the New World "discover" the Europeans? When do Europeans settled in the New World become Americans?

In our seminar we approached these questions by reading modern Latin American novels that deal explicitly with them. The wounds of conquest are still open in Latin America; the present still includes the colonial period. Hence novelists like Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa, among others, write about figures such as Columbus, or the plight of native Americans, with a sense of urgency. Reading and discussing these novels allowed us to glimpse into how Latin Americans are dealing today with problems whose solution seem as difficult now as they were when Cortes took Mexico City and claimed it for the Spanish Crown. Latin American fiction incorporates Latin American history because it is such a dramatic process, involving events of incalculable repercussions for the present. Fictionalizing those events and figures is not a way of avoiding the very tangible demands made by current Latin American politics, but an effort to understand those demands in the broadest terms.

The curriculum units prepared by the participants reflect all of these issues, particularly how the Indians saw the Europeans. This perspective reflects in turn the multicultural group of students these teachers face. Looking for a new, fresh perspective is the beginning of critical thought. It is to be hoped that by looking at the Discovery and Conquest from such a variety of points of view both the teachers and the students will be as enriched as I have.

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