Memoirs

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Introduction

The genre of the memoir is nearly as old as writing and dates back to at least the 5th-century “Confessions” of St. Augustine, although it was not until the 19th and 20th centuries that the memoir became one of the dominant literary forms in the long history of American immigrant autobiographical writing. A historical panorama of the Hispanic memoir would also date back to the middle of the 19th century, although this review article is devoted exclusively to autobiographical memoirs written by Latino and Latina writers between 1960 and 2010. The Latino memoir is an important document reflecting the history of Latinos in the United States. Yet, given the separate histories and diverse experiences of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans—to name only the three major groups of writers residing in the United States today—it is not surprising to find that each represents quite a distinct literary expression. Writers of Spanish heritage raised in the United States, such as Chicanos and Puerto Ricans from New York, write a literature of political engagement, speaking of issues in their lives as minority groups within American society. Compared to the ideological dimension historically associated with these literatures, the Cuban American corpus as a whole has not displayed a clearly delineated political stance. Yet, there are also similarities in these memoirs. The bicultural and sometimes bilingual memoirs produced by all Latinos evolve from an autobiographical style that responds to needs outside the mainstream tradition of American immigrant autobiography. These self-narratives align themselves with other ethnic autobiographical writings that do not so much aspire to achieve the traditional ideal of the American Dream but use the memoir in order to “talk back” to the American Dream. At times, these writings attempt to redefine and expand just what being Latino in America really means. This is important because there are many well-known autobiographical fictions in the Latino literary tradition that fall outside the boundaries of this review, such as Junot Díaz’s Drown (1996), Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street (1984), Cristina García’s Dreaming in Cuban (1992), and many others too numerous to mention.

General Overviews

The works included here offer overviews related to Latino/a autobiographical literature and also specific overviews by country. The most complete source and necessary point of departure for the research of any genre of Latino literature, including the memoir, is Stavans, et al. 2011. For specific sources on self-writing, the most thorough is Torres-Saillant 2004, which covers the subject from the perspective of genre and content and also dwells on the most significant autobiographical writings available among the various Latino ethnicities: Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Ricans. While the emphasis of Torres 1998 and López 2001 falls on the feminine memoir, Stavans 1995 and Luis 1997 offer panoramas of the literature by Latinos that cover both female and male writers. By contrast, West-Durán, et al. 2004, a two-volume anthology, offers an extremely useful introduction to Latino writing and has valuable essays and detailed bibliographies. Torres-Saillant 2004, an essay on the Latino autobiography, directly relates to the subject at hand and offers a good point of departure. All primary texts selected in this review article conform to Phillipe Lejeune’s definition of the “autobiographical project,” which requires a signature or correspondence of name between the author and the narrator of the memoir (Lejeune 1989).

According to Lejeune, an autobiographical pact occurs between reader and writer only when the latter discloses his or her identity as that of the person who authored the autobiography or memoir.


Provides an insightful and well-informed overview of the literature (poetry in particular) of Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican writers in the United States.


Stavans delves into the similarities and contrasts of the major Latino groups in the United States. Contains a very valuable secondary bibliography on works by Latino writers.


This volume includes the memoirs and creative work of 201 Latino writers from Chicano, Cuban American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican American traditions, as well as writing from other Spanish-speaking countries. Contains a very informative preface by editor Ilan Stavans about the essence and character of Latino literature. The selections in this anthology are extremely useful as a point of departure in the study of the different ethnicities that comprise Latino/a literature.


Examines the relationship between race and sexism in Latina writing and the deleterious impact on women of color.


A very useful point of departure for the study of the various contexts of Latino autobiography and memoir. Provides a helpful historical panorama of the different Latino ethnicities.

This is a thorough, two-volume reference work. Contains well-written introductory essays by West-Durán, Augenbraum, and Torres-Saillant, as well as extensive essays on the individual Latino writers, followed by a selected bibliography on each author.