

Barbara Rodríguez. *Autobiographical Inscriptions: Form, Personhood, and the American Woman Writer of Color*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 228p.

Becky Jo Gestel and McShane
Weber State University

As I began this book I was intrigued by Barbara Rodríguez' choice of autobiographies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Mary Rowlandson's *Captivity Narrative*, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Hisaye Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, Adrienne Kennedy's *People Who Led to My Plays*, and Cecile Pineda's *Face*. I found the text selection a lively grouping and thought that the book seemed likely, as Rodríguez says in her first sentence, to enter "into the current, increasingly lively revisiting and repositioning of autobiography studies" (3). If I was put off by the jargon of this first sentence, I didn't let on—I simply dismissed my response as a preliminary reaction to writing more sophisticated than the writing produced by my undergraduate students. The introduction fed my curiosity. Here, Rodríguez provides an essential history of autobiography theory, reviewing the key critical movements and their most influential theorists. She then explains her use of the prosopopoeia trope, "a trope preoccupied with giving face and voice to an historical abstraction of a nation or a people" (7), and outlines the theories most important to her project: Sidonie Smith's critique of patriarchal influences on autobiography, Leigh Gilmore's history of the signature, Barbara Johnson's analysis of autobiography across generic boundaries, King-Kok Cheung's strategy of silence, and Françoise Linnet's study of cultural *métissage*. So far so good.

Then I encountered a thesis: "I illustrate, finally, the ways in which the shifting presumed marginalities recorded in these narratives illuminate issues of subject construction that have a very challenging centrality to the structures and conventions of the genre, and to the autobiographical project itself" (7). I wrote "huh?" in the margin and pressed on. But I had happened upon a characteristic of *Autobiographical Inscriptions*: the close readings of texts, primary and secondary, are acute but the theoretical conclusions are obtuse. In the chapters that follow, Rodríguez reads texts across historical periods, across cultural contexts, and across artistic media and she reads them well. But in almost every chapter I suffered the same frustration over and over again. When it comes time for synthesizing, for pulling it all together, Rodríguez' language fails her.

For example, at the end of Chapter 2, on Rowlandson and Jacobs, she provides only one concluding sentence, which seems to contradict the very mission of the

book—to revisit and reposition autobiographies by American women of color. Here, in an almost-paragraph-length sentence, she claims that Rowlandson’s “descriptions of the Native American, her own acts of identification with the Other, and her struggle for subjectivity . . . frame the efforts that Harriet Jacobs and other later American women autobiographers of color make to redefine that space as their own” (95). I don’t think Rodríguez intends to reposition all of the autobiographies she surveys within the frame of a white woman’s experience—she certainly does not do this in her book. And yet, rather than a careful synthesis of the two autobiographies, she hurries to a conclusion that obscures the significance of her analysis.

Chapter 3, on Kingston and Yamamoto, provides a formal conclusion but it revolves primarily around Kingston. In fact, the bulk of the chapter is about Kingston. On the surface this imbalance is not necessarily bad but it made me think that Rodríguez privileges certain texts over other, perhaps lesser-known, texts. (The same imbalance exists in the Rowlandson/Jacobs chapter, where she devotes much more space to Jacobs.) At times, as in Chapter 4 on Silko and Kennedy, I wondered why she pairs the autobiographies at all, since she rarely compares the two texts. The pairings often seem arbitrary and the links between chapters, if they exist, seem superficial.

Fortunately, the Conclusion combines the autobiographies in more meaningful ways. As she analyzes Pineda’s *Face*, Rodríguez weaves the other texts in and out of her argument, synthesizing and distilling meaning. At one point she states that “like the authors treated in the rest of the project, Pineda constructs a text that offers a revelation at the same time that it offers a cover-up; the Chicana writer signifies on the strategies developed by Zora Neale Hurston, Harriet Jacobs, and Adrienne Kennedy to both narrate and mask the self; in Pineda’s hands, the strategy most clearly evokes Hisaye Yamamoto’s decision to fictionalize the autobiographical act” (202). These are compelling ideas that resonate with theoretical implications—if only they hadn’t come so late in the book. Perhaps if her editor had taken more time to clarify her ideas and polish her prose Rodríguez’ *Autobiographical Inscriptions* might be a more cohesive work and thus a more lively argument about autobiographies by American women of color. As is, I cannot say that it contributes much to the discussion. ✨