Book Review: España: temas de cultura y civilización (review)

Chad M. Gasta
Abstract
A Spanish civilization and culture text for American undergraduates is difficult to write. No particular approach will appeal to all audiences whether it is organized thematically, historically, politically, geographically, etc. España: temas de cultura y civilización will not satisfy all readers, either. This textbook is directed at intermediate-advanced learners and is organized geographically, devoting each chapter to a particular Spanish autonomous community, though some chapters focus on two regions. The only difference with regard to that organization is Chapter 1, "España y la Comunidad Europea" and the final chapter, "España en el mundo." It needs to be stated from the outset that this text does not follow a historical pattern as many other civilization texts do. The textbook does include a rather short overview of Spain's history and is followed in each chapter with some references to certain historical events, but for the most part general Spanish history does not figure as a large component.

Disciplines
American Studies | Book and Paper | Cultural History | Modern Literature | Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature

Comments
thereof), a gargantuan highway network, the suburbs it has spawned, and halting efforts to reclaim the urban center. Part II, "Places of the City," explores Houston through detailed and grounded accounts of the city’s prominent and hidden locales—boulevards and housing projects, municipal parks and immigrant enclaves—and what they say about the city and American urban life in late twentieth century. In part III, "Buildings of the City," the focus is architectural, how Houston’s economic booms, loose planning, and daring design make the city a place astounding to its critics in ways both positive and negative. Contributors chronicle the rise and rise again of the Houston skyscraper, the city’s changing housing, the aging modernity of the Astrodome, and the postmodernity of Conoco’s new corporate headquarters. Luckily, the editors chose to append updates to these essays—some twenty years old—rather than revise them, leaving these dispatches intact and redolent of the 1980s and 1990s Houston from which they emerged. The result is a compelling, aggregate portrait of city making in its time and place.

Three audiences will find this book appealing, each more general than the last. First is the aficionado of Houston and urbanism in Texas, for which this book’s specificity is miracle. Second is the reader interested in late twentieth century Sunbelt city, tired of hearing about the post-industrial Northeastern U.S. or the disaster-prone California metropolis, for which this account of a city in the middle will be refreshing. This book will speak to inhabitants of similar cities not so lucky to have a corps of such skilled and prolific observers. This brings up the third, and most generalized, audience. Getting a handle on our jealousy, we may find it inspirational to hold in hand a book so devoted to the ongoing critical engagement with just one city, a forum outside local media boosterism or academic jargon where thoughtful commentary can be aired in clear English prose.

For criticisms of this book, please hold a mirror up to my comments above. This is a highly specific and place-bound kind of book, which assumes you think Houston is interesting and has something to teach us. Because Cite is specifically pitched as critical commentary and not theoretical analysis, the reader must often draw out broader lessons and be willing to extrapolate from this city’s experience. These essays remain dispatches more than case studies, since there is no conceptual framework being developed or grounded in the particular. If you are contented with Houston’s specificity, or willing to do some analytical work of your own, this may be your book. If not...

One may, in the end, like Houston less after reading this book than before. But Ephemeral City makes the contribution of looking carefully and without undue prejudice at sprawling metropolis that increasingly defines urban life. Houston may be, as in the words of the editors, “a wild, confusing place.” But such cities more of motion than fixity may be our urban future. This book reminds us that paying attention, getting it down on paper, and debating it is not only necessary, but also possible. Why can’t it be like this more often?

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España: temas de cultura y civilización
Heinle, 2003
By Luisa Piemontese-Ramos and Carlos Arboleda

A Spanish civilization and culture text for American undergraduates is difficult to write. No particular approach will appeal to all audiences whether it is organized thematically, historically, politically, geographically, etc. España: temas de cultura y civilización will not satisfy all readers, either. This textbook is directed at intermediate-advanced learners and is organized geographically, devoting each chapter to a particular Spanish autonomous community, though some chapters focus on two regions. The only difference with regard to that organization is Chapter 1, "España y la Comunidad
Europea" and the final chapter, "España en el mundo." It needs to be stated from the outset that this text does not follow a historical pattern as many other civilization texts do. The textbook does include a rather short overview of Spain's history and is followed in each chapter with some references to certain historical events, but for the most part general Spanish history does not figure as a large component.

Each chapter is then sub-divided into "Geografía y datos importantes;" "Gente y personajes ilustres;" "El idioma;" "El arte y la arquitectura;" "Las fiestas y el folclore;" "Gastronomía;" and "Aspectos sociopolíticos." While this sort of organization does favor a variety of culturally-rich themes, personages, festivals, etc., it also forces unrelated topics into those categories, or simply does not treat some themes. For example, in the chapter on La Comunidad de Madrid, in the sub-section "Gente y personajes ilustres," the authors chose to highlight La movida with reference to director Pedro Almodóvar, and this obviously means that other famous madrileños are not mentioned. This dilemma is more pronounced in the sub-sections on food where some delicacies are forced into certain geographical regions even though they are mostly produced in others. For example, although a majority of olives and olive oil is produced in Andalucía (and Extremadura), the text highlights Aragón's historic contribution.

Piemontese-Ramos and Arboleda provide an introductory reading or an original text from other writers for each sub-section. These readings discuss a specific artistic work, historical person, celebration, etc. In general, the readings are quite good, containing a number of very interesting and relevant topics that often go untreated in similar texts. A few examples include: calo y árabe; cerámica Lladró; los castells de Cataluña; Nebrija's Gramática; Agustina de Aragón, all of which do indeed present "the diversity of Spain's society, people, and language [...]" (xi). One downside is that some readings would have solved this problem. Also, a few readings are not particularly relevant to improving understanding of the topic in question. For example, a text on the Real Academia de la Lengua became a discussion about Spanglish, a phenomenon existing mostly in technology, or a reading on fútbol centered mostly on the sport's popularity in Latin America. Vocabulary related to the readings is sporadically defined in footnotes but most key vocabulary words are left undefined.

Each chapter reading is followed by a "Para conocer mejor" section with approximately ten discussion questions designed to help students synthesize information and make connections to other readings. Unfortunately, most questions require students to refer ahead to, or back to, other chapters where they must review various other readings, then return to the discussion questions at hand. At the same time, some questions could probably not be answered even if students did read ahead. For example, "Compara el cochinillo con la oveja manchega" (154), or "En tu opinión, ¿cómo son la locura de Juana la Loca y los otros problemas de demencia de otros monarcas españoles las causas [de] la pérdida de poder en el Imperio [...]" (157).

The text might be improved by including more photos, and making others clearer. More vocabulary could be defined to help students and a key vocabulary list should be included in each chapter. Also, though intermittent, spelling and accent errors as well as typos should be corrected: "la culturales" (8); "preten-siones" (90); "[...] del poema" (166); "Velásquez," "reflexiva" (195); "se convierte" (197), among others. Other concerns center on more important matters: some information is either factually incorrect (Philip II named Madrid the capital in 1561—not the Catholic Monarchs [32]); questionable (most linguists would agree that "'Lengua,' 'idioma,' 'lenguaje,' 'habla'" are not "términos sinónimos" [100]); or just silly:

Madrid está ubicada hacia el centro del país y su Puerta del Sol constituye el kilómetro 'cero' de España. Desde este centro irradian todas las
calles hacia el resto del país. No es extraño entonces que el plato más famoso de esta región sea la tortilla española [...] cuya forma redonda simboliza la misma simetría circular. (44)

In addition to the already mentioned concerns, some will look unfavorably on the familiar use of “tú” and “Vosotros” in all discussion questions, especially when their use is not always standard: “¿Habéis visto alguna vez a un individuo sin hogar y de bajos recursos económicos en las calles de su pueblo o ciudad?” (141, emphasis mine). Others will not appreciate the use of a few Latin Americanisms within a text on Spanish civilization and culture. Also, the “Materiales Suplementarios” section is, at times, missing bibliographical information such as publisher or year of publication.

At the end of the book there is an interesting “Cronología” that locates important events in history, government, art and architecture, and literature. The “Glosario de términos literarios y artísticos” does an excellent job of defining many important concepts, but does not include terms associated with religion, politics, society, etc.

Despite the drawbacks mentioned here, any text that takes on the challenging goal of representing Spanish culture in all its varied richness is a step in the right direction.

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_Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora_
Duke University Press, 2004
By Michelle M. Wright

_Becoming Black_ (2004) by Michelle Wright is a thoroughly investigated topic, written in a style and language which some readers might find difficult, even those who are involved in investigations about biracialism or reclaiming national roots, in order to authenticate themselves.

Dr. Wright, an associate professor at Macalister College, tells us in the well written introduction:

In this book I argue that there is a twentieth-century intellectual tradition of African diasporic counter discourses of Black subjectivity that is defined not by a common history or a common cultural hope but by a particular theatrical methodology. (3)

With this statement she begins to “complicate” the issue of ethnic and racial language by saying throughout all of the next five chapters, that we can no longer use the “old,” “ethnically specific,” but that “Black subjectivity must be negotiated” (3). The problem which arises with this position is that Wright immediately either alienates some readers or gains their allegiance. Very importantly, though, Wright defines the book’s title which really helps and guides us to the following chapters. She says:

In using the phrase ‘becoming Black’ I do not mean to imply that, until the beginning of the twentieth century, peoples of African decent in the West were bereft of either an individual or a collective identity [...] I use the term ‘Black’ as a signifier for the complex negotiation between dominant and minority cultures that all peoples of African descent in the west [...] ‘becoming Black’ highlights the fluidity of Black identity in the West, and our evolving understanding of it. (26)

Wright then goes on to comment on postcolonial theorists Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha who negate and barely discuss peoples of African descent but do focus on those of South-Asian descent. This is a point well taken.