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## Review of Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*.

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**Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. 369 pp. ISBN 0674050312.**

**Reviewed by Juana María Rodríguez, Bryn Mawr College**

In *At Home in the World*, Timothy Brennan has written an elegant, seductive and polemical treatise on the deployment of cosmopolitanism as an ideological weapon of cultural warfare. His claims are far-reaching and his critiques unflinching. He suggests that the current focus in cultural studies on hybridity, transnationalism and globalization is not merely commenting on the inevitable but is in fact working in the service of U.S. cultural imperialism and domination. In other words, cultural theorists who attack nationalism, cultural essentialism, and clearly delineated binaries of colonizer/colonized have become the unwitting propagandists for transnational capital. Swimming against the tidal wave of contemporary thinkers who have abandoned Marxism, Brennan attempts to remind us that what are really at stake are the ideals of "collectivity, community and self-sufficiency" (2). In the process of constructing his often persuasive, frequently infuriating, and never dispassionate argument, Brennan touches on an eclectic array of cultures, critical models, and political geographies. DuBois and Kissinger; Chiapas and the Lower East Side; the managerial training manuals of transnational corporations and the *bembes* of Havana's *solares* all become fuel for his investigation of emerging postmodern readings of culture and society.

The first two chapters chart the terrain of globalism through extensive, if at times disconnected, ideological and cultural threads. Brennan positions himself against a wide range of contemporary cultural theorists in order to support his claim that cosmopolitan theorization of world cultures has often served as a rearticulation of American cultural hegemony, an erasure of local particularities, and a devaluation of sovereignty as a political ideal. His range of citational references is nothing short of impressive, reaching out both historically and geographically to encompass the fields of philosophy, literature, economics and cultural studies. For example he cites Lipsitz's reading of Queen Latifah's video, *Ladies First*, as demonstrating "what is positive about the globalization of representation" while ignoring how the medium of a U.S.-based music video sublimates and domesticates images of revolt and insurgency, as well as African cultural expression (7-8). He applauds James Clifford's scholarship on the ethnographic subject in "Traveling Culture," while arguing that "[t]he problem is not what the argument does so much as what it finds unnecessary or unappealing to do: hold out a sophisticated theoretical space for a defensive nationalism, that relies, inevitably, on a grounded sense of sociocultural belonging to a polity" (17). Sometimes his theoretical moves and attachments seem disjointed and dismiss seemingly potential allies. The most glaring of these omissions is his singular reference to Spivak, a postcolonial critic deeply invested in exploring the material consequences of political theory. He writes, "[m]ore than anything else, perhaps, the appeal of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work has been her anecdotal insights into the precritical assumptions of the literary profession" (68). While many of his critiques are compelling, they often appear in these early chapters as short jabs, rarely more than one or two pages, rather than as sustained critical readings.

Brennan hits his mark most persuasively when he takes on the business of academic publishing in his discussion of how third world writers enter and are received within the U.S. academic

canon. He hammers away at the need to stay focused on what *escapes* public discourse on globalization, on those multi-cultural authors who never enter the mainstream, and on the role academic institutions play in formulating and circulating ideology. He then skillfully links this to the discourse of transnational corporations to demonstrate how postnation theorizing has been taken up by economic power brokers to push forward an agenda to legitimize unchecked global capitalism and the suppression of local claims for national sovereignty. He goes on to press the point that the current push towards globalization operates concurrently with a renewed defense of U.S. national citizenship, even as the U.S. insists on the globalization of U.S. domestic law and commercial expansion.

His arguments undoubtedly pick up steam as the text proceeds, culminating in two final chapters that are in many ways the most gratifying. These are both close, in-depth biographical studies that manifest the detailed attention to local particularities within a global context and the exacting recovery of intellectual trajectories that, Brennan suggests, are lacking in much of contemporary academic discourse. He begins his chapter on Trinidadian writer and critic C.L.R. James with the question of what is socialist desire in order to explore the contemporary urge to undo utopian socialist visions. Beginning with an examination of Ernst Bloch, Brennan elegantly deploys psychoanalytic methodology to contrast the underpinnings of socialist utopian yearnings with the "addictive" qualities of capitalism. In a move that is repeated in the subsequent chapter on Alejo Carpentier, Brennan does not focus on *The Black Jacobins*, James's most widely distributed text; instead he traces the larger trajectory of James's body of work and the intellectual and political currents that shaped it. Never shying away from the controversial, he analyzes the West Indian author's preference for European art, and links this to Lenin's insistence on education for the masses, and the subsequent postcolonial African elite's demand for access to culture, literacy and education. The essay argues that critics have often ignored the socialist loyalties that empowered James's anti-colonial critiques, and which have created both the vocabulary and theoretical foundations for contemporary multiculturalism. Equally as relevant, however, Brennan uses James to signal a kind of self-censorship and strategic assimilation into dominant academic discourse that remains operative.

That essay also lays the ground for the subsequent chapter that highlights Cuban popular music as a politically charged and "pleasurable" mass art form. He relates the international success of Cuban popular music in the 20s and the 30s to the project of Cuban independence and postcolonial nationalism through the figure of Alejo Carpentier. Rather than focusing on Carpentier the novelist, he centers the chapter on his role as a musicologist and cultural critic through his study of Cuban music and its influence and consumption in the circles of European art and culture. Brennan situates the Cuban writer within the milieu of the interwar European avant garde with meticulous biographical and archival documentation to argue that Carpentier's claims of the uniqueness of the transnational popularity of Cuban music bore with them an internal reproach of the Eurocentric appropriation of "primitivism" into high art. Additionally, he suggests that contemporary readings of the era erase the Marxist sensibilities and the political significance that popular forms played in bridging high and low art. In his reading of *The Lost Steps*, Brennan posits that the novel is an allegory about the influence of working-class and indigenous communities in shaping the national identity of the cultural elite, a move that Carpentier had described ethnographically in his book *La Música en Cuba*. Both texts, he suggests, are about "the class exasperations of crossing over" (280).

He concludes the chapter with a discussion of salsa, and states defiantly, "salsa *is* Cuban music in its New York life," arguing that "to claim this is to confront what is precisely at issue between theories of diaspora, on the one hand, and the rather distinct phenomenon of an exported national-popular culture on the other" (288-89). He makes another, more subtle and significant point, however: that contemporary Cuban music manages to maintain its politicized working-class and African roots *and* function successfully as a socialist export. Brennan argues that unlike comparable U.S. global exports of national culture, Cuban exportation of music as a national product is not invested in a project of empire and imperial expansion. He uses this point to counter the cosmopolitan claim that socialist art production lacks global appeal because it fails to address economies of pleasure. Aside from the vexing issues of hybridity that he so assiduously disclaims, his discussion of Cuban music, like the rest of his text, is devoid of any mention of gender. Instead of analysis, he states "'[y]outh,' 'women,' and 'gays'—as cultural tropes rather than as actual people in specific contexts of complexity and contradiction—have often been used in assessing third world cultures for the purpose of holding on to a belief in Western superiority. This is doubly true when the third-world culture is also, like Cuba, socialist" (300). Throughout his text, however, he engages them neither as cultural tropes, nor as agents of theoretical intervention, nor as actual people.

Brennan insists that it is really not that complicated, and that in fact cultural theory's insistence on "complexity," to which he devotes an entire section, is part of the problem. He writes: "complexity in the sense discussed here is a self-maintaining aesthetic preference antagonistic to theories of practice—that range of subtle and (in a different sense) complex problems associated with how to bring ideas already agreed upon into the real" (72). There is something hauntingly true in his observation: the move toward "problematizing" an issue or "complicating" our analysis *does* permeate academic discourse, while plans of action that "bring ideas already agreed upon into the real" seem noticeably absent. Brennan rightfully asserts that the socialist history of postcolonial theory has all but been erased or forgotten, and he cites how contemporary cultural theory "samples" in the hip-hop sense, Marxist jargon, without paying homage to its revolutionary roots and implications. His continual emphasis on the need to unearth origins, however, ultimately does little to illuminate the process through which these terms have acquired new meanings. Instead, by failing to engage the critiques of subjectivity and identity brought about by feminism, queer theory and their historically problematic relationships to nation and community, his own discussions of how constituents come to form "ideas already agreed upon" remains unsatisfying. In a move that seems all too reminiscent of earlier class-based discourses that saw such interventions as either divisive or secondary, he links these academic interlocutors of nation with the project of U.S. imperialism and the repression of emergent voices and nation states. Brennan's text suggests that negotiating these complexities is simply too risky. Yet, for those of us who dare to tread in the interstices of competing nationalist and political claims, his unwavering insistence on examining the context and consequences of contemporary theory serves as a reminder of what a dangerous world it is.