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Review/Reseña

Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!/: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Negotiating Culture in Cuba's Special Period

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Beginning in 1990 and continuing into the present day, Cuba's "special period in times of peace" has brought about historic changes in Cuban socialist society. The virtual overnight disappearance of economic subsidies after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc initiated a crisis marked by severe rationing and shortages in food, fuel, and medicine. In order to avert the collapse of Cuban socialism, conditions forced the state to implement economic reorganization geared toward a level of integration into the global economy. Signaling these changes, tourism eclipsed sugar production as the island's primary industry in the new millennium. New joint economic ventures with foreign investors in tourism, mining, and biotechnology are

gradually reviving a Cuban economy that was in profound crisis a decade ago. That the Cuban Revolution is experiencing an unprecedented transformation is undeniable.

Curiously, in the midst of the economic changes brought about by the crisis of the Special Period, Cuban arts have flourished as a public space where criticism of state policies is voiced; this occurs even as most cultural production is in state hands. Art in today's Cuba cannot be dismissed as simply the expression of official ideology, as filmmakers, rap musicians, and performance artists critique the social conditions engendered by Cuba's tenuous integration into the global economy. This new reality seems to contradict standard accounts of the Cuban state as a repressive, authoritarian regime where all dissent is stifled and public expression is limited to those who tow the Communist party line. Certainly, writers, independent journalists and dissidents engaging in formal political activities against the Cuban state are prosecuted. Yet, through the arts new visions of Cuban society and revolution are being openly expressed. This necessitates a reconsideration of how we conceive of power and cultural agency in the Cuban context.

In her study, *Cuba Represent!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*, activist-scholar and musician Sujatha Fernandes sets out to understand the implications of critical art in the context of the Special Period. Fernandes argues that the significance of this new trend lies in what it reveals about how hegemonic institutions sustain themselves in moments of transformation by incorporating alternative and at times oppositional perspectives. Rather than viewing the (Cuban) state merely as a repressive apparatus that imposes its will onto society from above, Fernandes considers state power to be shaped by dynamic interactions between social forces, which the state in turn also shapes and constitutes. Put simply, the (Cuban) state is not merely a fixed entity that bends the people to its will; the state is a product of negotiations and contestations of its power. Theorizing state power in this manner allows Fernandes to explain how the Cuban Revolution has maintained its legitimacy in the Special Period by actively or partially incorporating critical perspectives expressed through the arts.

Not all critical perspectives can be incorporated to legitimate state power, however. "All political regimes attempt to monopolize power," writes Fernandes, "but citizens retain the power to bargain and can use it to shift the grounds of the dominant ideology in ways that privilege their own interests and concerns" (190). In addition to its examination of the implications of critical art in Cuba's Special Period for the field of social theory, *Cuba Represent!* is about how ordinary Cubans have experienced the transformations in Cuban society. To this end, Fernandes employs an interdisciplinary method that draws on ethnography to conceptualize how artists and their interlocutors see themselves as participants in a public sphere of dialogue. Central to the analysis is her concept of "artistic public spheres" which she defines as "sites of interaction and discussion among ordinary citizens generated through the media of art and popular culture" (3). Rather than see Cuban hip hop fans or movie viewers as mere consumers or spectators of art, Fernandes observes how people produce their own meanings in their engagements with works of art and with one another.

In the prologue, the author recounts how these academic, political, and artistic concerns stem from her own experience as a scholar, activist, and musician. The book's introduction, "Artistic Public Spheres and the State" lays out the parameters of the study, defines her methodology and the concept of "artistic public spheres," and provides an overview of theorizations on state and civil society and their applicability to Cuba. Chapter one, "Remaking Conceptual Worlds: Changing Ideologies in Socialist Cuba," delineates the shifts in discursive frameworks that have defined Cuban nationalism and socialist politics in the twentieth century. In its careful attention to shifts in socialist ideology and practice – ranging from moments of critical dialogue in formal political institutions to censorship and repression of oppositional voices – the chapter underscores the multiple contestations and incorporations that constitute state power. Educators will find chapters one and two especially useful as an overview of ideological and structural transformations of the Cuban Revolution before and during the Special Period.

The next three chapters of the study look at artistic public spheres in three modes of cultural production: film, hip hop music, and visual and performance art. Chapter two, “Old Utopias, New Realities: Film Publics, Critical Debates, and New Modes of Reincorporation,” focuses on film production and film publics in the Special Period. Given that cultural institutions like ICAIC (Cuban Institute of Cinema Arts, Cuba’s state film agency) coordinate film production on the island, the chapter argues that Cuban film is a fruitful site for examining the relationship between art and the state. For Fernandes, Cuban filmmakers act not simply as ideologues on behalf of the state, but as cultural mediators between film publics and the state. Considering filmmakers and film production in this manner allows her to address dynamics of co-optation, state censorship, and self-censorship with a complexity that avoids ideological polarization. To examine the significance of contemporary films like “Fresa y chocolate” and “La vida es silbar,” Fernandes crafts an interdisciplinary methodology that combines archival research on film production with cultural analysis and reception studies. In reception studies in particular she moves beyond the trend in Cuban reception studies to rely on short-answer viewer-response surveys that are limited in scope and method. Instead, Fernandes screened films for small audiences and documented the conversations that emerged. In this manner, her study is not limited to sociological analyses that focus on state propaganda or aesthetic analyses that focus on questions of textuality or authorial intent. Her innovative use of ethnographic methods in tandem with political economy and cultural analysis provides a more comprehensive account of the role of film in Cuba.

In chapter three, “Fear of a Black Nation: Local Rappers, Transnational Crossings, and State Power,” Fernandes explores convergences and divergences between rap public spheres and Cuban revolutionary ideology. Drawing on the work of scholars like Tricia Rose, the chapter provides a political economy of Cuban hip hop. Fernandes delineates Cuban rap’s origins in the geographical and social dislocation produced in Revolutionary housing projects that attempted to resolve problems of substandard housing and racial and economic segregation by relocating citizens to new housing developments. In housing projects like

Alamar, in eastern Havana city, rap emerged as a means for youth (many of them Afro-Cuban) to express social critiques, especially given the lack of public forums for Cubans to express criticism. Fernandes highlights the transnational dimension of the Cuban rap public sphere. In the 1980s and 1990s U.S. rap music traveled to Cuba through informal networks established through radio airwaves and returning emigrant relatives. Today, the Cuban rap public sphere is shaped by Afro-diasporic networks between U.S. rappers, multinational music production companies, and Cuban state cultural institutions that regulate venues and salaries. Fernandes sets out to understand how the transnational character of the rap public sphere affects its ability to critically intervene in Cuban public discourse.

Through the analysis of rap performances and lyrics by Obsesión, Krudas, Anónimo Consejo, and others, the book shows how rappers articulate critiques of racism, sexism, consumerism, and global relations of power and production in Special Period Cuba. The Cuban state, meanwhile, has demonstrated an ambivalent attitude toward these critiques. On the one hand, the state is wary of charges of racism and criticisms of its revolutionary policies. Yet, state support of hip hop is valuable to its maintenance of hegemony through the co-optation of language that is critical of racism and global capitalism. Fernandes' ethnographic analysis reveals that rappers also express ambivalence about the state. Rappers find it useful to adopt the official language of a Cuban black rebel nation and thereby gain state support. However, there is much wariness surrounding the state's co-optation and regulation of hip hop through cultural institutions like the Agencia del Rap (Cuba's rap agency). Like film, Cuban hip hop can serve the state's goal of maintaining its hegemony. However, Fernandes demonstrates that rapper participation in transnational networks presents alternatives to rap's wholesale co-optation by the state. These transnational networks can produce multiple identifications and alliances that exceed those authorized by the state. This creates *possibilities* for critiques that do not correspond to state preservation of hegemony. Even so, Fernandes is appropriately cautious about overstating the potential for rap's critical intervention unless it is accompanied by

sustainable alliances with social and political groups. Unfortunately, Fernandes does not expand on what these alliances might look like in today's Cuba.

Chapter four, "Postwar Reconstructions: State Institutions, Public Art, and the New Market Conditions of Production," examines the effects of the transnational art market in Cuban visual and performance art. Since the early 1990s the lifting of regulations on the sale of Cuban artwork has created what Fernandes terms "new market conditions of production" and the commercialization of art on the island. In this new context, "exotic" Cuban art and even the artists themselves are increasingly seen as marketable commodities. Fernandes argues that Cuban artists have responded to these conditions by promoting public art and the establishment of art collectives. Like filmmakers and hip hop artists, visual artists increasingly have access to expansive transnational networks of production and exhibition as they simultaneously negotiate state institutional censorship and support. Artists like Tania Bruguera, Alexis Esquivel, Elio Rodríguez, Carlos Garacoia, and the art collective DIP (Department of Public Performances), expose the contradictions of socialist ideology and new market conditions. Fernandes argues that transnational networks in art allow for critiques of power that are not exclusive to the Cuban case, but look beyond the island to condemn global systems of inequality. Fernandes' methodology provides a fresh way of understanding the impact of critical art of Cuba's Special Period. Following Orlando Hernández, her combination of ethnographic method and art criticism seeks to interpret not only the works of art themselves, but also how art publics interact with them and the state. The book provides the example of a 2002 art opening where works by the visual artists were censored by government officials. Fernandes documents how the audience responded to the removal of pieces from the exhibition by discussing the episode during the art show opening. Thus, unofficial public discourse – rumor (or as it is known in Cuba, *Radio Bemba*)—filled the space left by the censored art pieces. Fernandes demonstrates how censorship does not necessarily succeed in ending public debate and discussion.

Beyond state rhetoric of “Patria o Muerte” or imprudent celebrations of the demise of the Cuban Revolution, the voices of the Cuban people shine through in Fernandes’ book. Throughout the book her rigorous attention to how the Cuban public engages artistic production succeeds in providing a more comprehensive view of the role of critical art in this moment of profound transformations. The book demonstrates a careful attention to the role of race, gender, and sexuality in socialist ideology, new market relations and cultural production. *Cuba Represent!* is a must-read for scholars in Cuban Studies, ethnography, and those interested in socialist and post-socialist societies. Fernandes demonstrates that the Cuban case, despite its exceptional character, speaks to larger debates about hegemony, globalization, and the politics of culture. As a result, students and scholars in the fields of cultural studies, social theory, film studies, and visual arts will also find this study valuable.