

“Here, There, and Everywhere: The Cosmopolitan Citizen in Contemporary African American Poetry”

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Abstract:

This paper examines four poetry collections of four important contemporary American poets—Marilyn Nelson, Rita Dove, Elizabeth Alexander, and Michael Afaa Weaver. It examines the intermingling of culture, language and histories on a global scale in their work and highlights points of contact with “other” spaces as transformative events. The paper considers how these poets challenge us to see identity as an intersectional phenomenon that is dynamic in its fluctuation across time, space, race and place. It offers the terms “cosmopolitanism” and “transnationalism” as literary phenomena and considers the notion of an evolving American citizenship through the lens of literary transnationalism. Cosmopolitanism in black poetry challenges violent demarcations of borders and offers transformative, empathetic encounters across borders as an alternative modus operandi of global citizenship. These contemporary black poets engage a cosmopolitan poetics that promotes global interconnectivity and shared history. In doing so, their work emphasizes fluidity and flux in the private and public space of American poets and their poetry. The administration’s current political harkening back to nation-state identity paradigms and nationalistic constructions of American identity only highlights the importance of literary works that remind us of more pluralistic and dynamic iterations of American citizenship.