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Black arts west: culture and struggle in postwar Los Angeles

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match for the cut-and-thrust of political horse-trading involving officials at all levels as well as ever-present lobby groups.

While the Toronto region has been the primary site of settlement for postwar immigrants to Canada, Sewell's account neglects their role as consumers of, and investors in, suburban lifestyles and landscapes. These suburbs have long since yielded their status as preserves of white English-Canadians, but you would not know it here. Moreover, the region is rarely put into a wider North-American context and, for that reason, can be difficult to follow for those who are not *au fait* with Toronto's street and district geography. Elsewhere, a quotation used on page 109 is repeated on page 135, and the reference to 'Brits' on page 42 is awkward.

Overall, and despite a rather pessimistic conclusion, there is much to be learned from Sewell's perspective. His book is a smooth read and revealing enough about how efforts to plan the development of Toronto's urban-rural fringe intelligently were consistently compromised over time. No doubt, future scholars will reveal more about how political, economic and cultural forces combined to shape this particular sprawl-ridden corner of North America.

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Black arts west: culture and struggle in postwar Los Angeles by Daniel Widener, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, 368 pp., US\$24.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8223-4679-1

In this consummate book, Daniel Widener 'presents both a cultural history of a social movement and a social history of a cultural movement' by 'exploring the postwar freedom struggle through the lens of expressive culture' (p. 2). By detailing distinctive, self-consciously black art forms – including instrumental music, dance, theatre, poetry, painting and assemblage sculpture – Widener succeeds in 'restoring the complexity and variety of black politics and culture' (p. 5). Framed by an introduction and an epilogue, the book is divided into three parts. Part I covers Hollywood racism and wartime politics of representation; desegregation efforts, including the amalgamation of musicians' union locals; and reformist cultural liberalism vis-à-vis the Watts Writers Workshop. Part II focuses on free jazz, self-determination and black power; creative community and visual arts; and black nationalist radicalism in the revolutionary cultural politics of urban insurgency. Part III examines African American socio-economic polarization amid official celebrations of diversity; and black film as a class critique featuring dystopian cinematic images of postindustrial South Los Angeles.

Within this cultural framework, Widener sheds new light on many points of interest to scholars of urban planning, urban history and urban studies. For example, he chronicles the transformation of postwar urban America, addressing the decline of the Los Angeles streetcar system and the rise of freeway construction; the demographic pressure on inner-city housing and the federally funded suburban building boom; urban blight and poverty; downtown renovation and economic development; 'cultural infrastructure' monuments such as Disneyland

and Dodger Stadium; the militarization, brutality and institutionalized racism of the Los Angeles Police Department; and the Watts riots and Rodney King riots. From post-World War II reconversion to post-Vietnam War deindustrialization, the book traces a bitter timeline of 'black exclusion', contextualized within the city's social geography and 'the infamous Southern California sprawl'. In this regard, Los Angeles redefined itself as a bastion of white West Coast jazz, 'a surfside paradise', a carceral city and, ultimately, a global metropolis.

Widener recovers hidden histories of African American cultural institutions such as the Ebony Showcase Theater, the Compton Communicative Arts Academy, the Inner City Cultural Center and the Watts Towers Art Center. He highlights Bohemian Leimert Park, home to the oldest black-owned art gallery west of the Mississippi and to one of the largest black-owned bookstores in the USA. He revisits the Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra, which performed free concerts in churches, community centres and public parks, and the vibrant network of neighbourhood conservatories, music teachers, art studios and cultural centres, which also flourished for decades. He argues that because the city refused to subsidize public transportation, many black Angelenos faced an insidious 'combination of underemployment and transit dependence', which, along with unfair bus transfer policies, expensive fares, limited routes and unreliable schedules, remained 'a major civil rights issue' well into the 1990s (p. 101). Along the way, there were the attempted secession and incorporation of Watts as an independent municipality called 'Freedom City' and the devastating passage of Proposition 13, which caused the defunding of arts programmes and music education in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

A central theme of the text is cultural policy, such as the postwar annual outdoor citywide arts festival and the Municipal Arts Department's Music Bureau. The most complete explication of the interplay between urban planning, public policy and city politics unfolds in the book's penultimate chapter on the first African American Mayor of Los Angeles, Thomas Bradley. Between 1973 and 1993, the city created a Cultural Affairs Department and published a 'cultural master plan' as part of a cultural policy that funded ethnically based museums and annual ethnic arts festivals and that seemingly considered the needs of a mobilized black community. But the public symbols of inclusion offered by Bradley's 'municipal multiculturalism' obscured a 'trickle up' shift in resources towards the interests of corporate redevelopment, thereby facilitating a regime of capitalist accumulation that utilized eminent domain seizures to spark a downtown skyscraper building spree, as the city became a centre of international finance.

As the bibliography indicates, this ambitious monograph is informed by meticulously researched sources, including archival materials, oral history and manuscript collections, newspapers and periodicals, musical recordings and 48 photographs. By drawing on dense primary and rich secondary sources, the author makes a compelling case for 'expressive culture as a modality of black politics' while striving to comprehend 'the how and why of popular struggle along the axes of class, gender, and race' across 'successive historical moments'. In the final two pages of his intricately woven narrative, he leaves the reader with five 'lessons that the cultural field may hold for black social movements as a whole' (p. 287). These historical lessons suggest that cultural politics are (1) material, (2) collective, (3) holistic, (4) democratic and (5) imaginative. Indeed, Daniel Widener's book is as imaginative, innovative and creative as the radical artists and activists whose biographies, ideologies and cultural productions that he so expertly

analyses. Accordingly, *Black Arts West* represents an engaging, inspiring, powerful contribution to knowledge production, in general, and an original, incisive, significant intervention in the urban historiography of Los Angeles, in particular.

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