

Review Essay

Space, Equality, and Expression: African Americas in Los Angeles

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BLACK LOS ANGELES: American Dreams and Racial Realities. Edited By Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón. New York: New York University Press. 2010.

BLACK ARTS WEST CULTURE AND STRUGGLE IN POSTWAR LOS ANGELES. By Daniel Widener. Durham: Duke University Press. 2010.

Often thought of as a very liberal, free-spirited, and open-minded urban center, the “City of Angels” is a multicultural metropolis with a complex history, much of it influenced by racism and segregation that has shaped the experiences, culture, and environment of its black residents. The Los Angeles area is a beautiful region of Southern California, offering rich soil, mountain ranges, and wide plains, all adjacent to the Pacific Ocean. From its very early history, Los Angeles has attracted people worldwide in search of adventure, riches, or a new start in life, the American dream renewed. These aspirations have held true for many of African descent since the late 1700s. Their history in Los Angeles stems back to the Spanish settlement of the area by the original Los Angeles Pobladores (townspeople), forty-four settlers of African, Native American and Spanish heritage from Mexico. These pioneers played an important role in the establishment of the Los Angeles area. Since that time, Los Angeles has held a familiar yet unique story for blacks who have made the area their home over the last three centuries. As with other large urban areas, African Americans in

the region have faced issues involving discrimination and segregation. Many of these experiences for African Americans in Los Angeles have been unique to the area, due to its geographic location, multicultural mix, entertainment industry, and the pioneering character and creative spirit of the people that live here. The issues involved with these experiences and more are discussed very candidly in the pages of *Black Los Angeles* and *Black Arts West*. Both books discuss the social, historical, cultural, and political experience of blacks in Los Angeles. These expositions present an integral and necessary knowledge toward a full understanding of American history. As a native Angelena, I learned a great deal more about the city of my birth through these books. They helped me understand the historical foundations of the geographic, demographic, economic, and cultural past of black Los Angeles and how it has impacted society today.

In the last fifteen years there has been a significant shift in the racial population ratio: a decrease in African Americans and an increase of Latinos in neighborhoods that were once majority black; an explosion of signs labeling every neighborhood in the city; and a change of name was found to be in order for South Central Los Angeles, now referred to as South Los Angeles. To my great disappointment, there is a charge for parking in a number of major shopping centers, including a parking lot full of meters in Leimert Park Village. The two books provide insight into the dynamics of African American life in Los Angeles, grounded in historical analysis with a close examination of changes that have taken place over the last sixty years. The books contextualize the issues involved in these changes and give thought to the impacts of these changes in the future as the city continues to transition.

Black Los Angeles is a compilation of sixteen essays by a number of academicians and other professionals in the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, education, labor organization, social psychology, psychiatry, and biobehavioral science. In the words of one of its editors, Darnell Hunt, the book is “. . . an attempt to connect the dots between the past, present, and future of a space that was seeded centuries ago with a profound black presence, that has attracted hundreds of thousands of black migrants in the intervening years, but that oddly enough, is only marginally understood as a black place.”¹ Hunt sets the tone for this undertaking by examining Baldwin Hills, a predominantly African American, upper-middle-class neighborhood, using it as an entry point for issues discussed in the book: 1) the location of this affluent neighborhood within South Los Angeles, once known as “South Central” a moniker associated with the Los Angeles uprising in 1992, drugs, gangs and violence; 2) issues of white flight, which accelerated in the neighborhood after the 1965 Watts “Riots”; 3) its association with celebrity; and 4) its representation of the migration of blacks moving westward in the city, inadvertently abandoning the earlier established black neighborhoods which lacked many of the amenities found westward of Central Avenue.

Black Los Angeles not only gives context to the changes that have taken place in the city over the last sixty years, but it gives a comprehensive picture of

the rich and varied African American experience since the establishment of the area. The first three chapters of Part 1 of the book discuss the idea of “Space,” the geographic areas that African Americans occupied in Los Angeles and their mobility within and outside of those spaces over time. I found a great deal of my own family’s African American history reflected in this section of the book. Two generations before me, my great uncle moved his family to Los Angeles from the state of Oklahoma in the 1940s. Their numbers are reflected in Paul Robinson’s compiled table of the “Birthplace of Los Angeles Blacks, 1920, 1940, 1950.”² Like many during that particular time period, my family moved to the “Westside” of Los Angeles but enjoyed attending jazz clubs located on Central Avenue, “the center of the historic Jazz Era in Los Angeles from the 1930s to the 1950s.”³ My grandmother worked on P-38 fighter planes for Lockheed Aircraft during the Second World War. She, like hundreds of thousands of other blacks, were able to take advantage of Executive Order 8802 which made it illegal for defense industry government contractors to discriminate during World War II.⁴ In 1968, my parents purchased a house in a Westside neighborhood, “Mid-City,” an area that was a legally restricted white community two decades earlier. In 1952, just two blocks away, the newly purchased home of African American resident William Bailey was bombed.⁵ Mr. Bailey had received threatening messages prior to the bombing, and the Los Angeles Police Department was notified. The crime was never solved. This incident is one example of the anti-black activity that threatened the survival of upwardly mobile black communities in Los Angeles.

In Chapter One, “Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles,” Paul Robinson gives a survey of the history of African Americans in Los Angeles, where they came from, their experiences, and the spaces they occupied in the city. This chapter is successful in providing a comprehensive demographic history of blacks in Los Angeles. He builds a case for the importance of the early Pobladores, who in creating a thriving community were the largest Spanish settlement in Alta California in 1807 and an asset to Spain. These details have been downplayed by earlier historians who have not credited these pioneers with their role in the expansion of Spanish colonial territory and, according to Robinson, the “modern development of Los Angeles.”⁶

The writer traces the movement of blacks into the city after the initial settlement of Los Angeles. The new influx of blacks arrived, trickling in by ship around the tip of South America, by land through the Isthmus of Panama, or as enslaved “property” of white Southerners.⁷ Robinson elaborates on the significance of in-migration of blacks from the South in the 1940s and provides statistical data based on census numbers, public use data, and earlier analyses from J. Max Bond’s “The Negro in Los Angeles.” The reader is given a geographical picture through Bond’s research of states that blacks migrated from and the areas in Los Angeles in which they moved.

A particular highlight of this chapter is the author’s discussion of the movement of some African Americans west of the Central Avenue segregation line after the *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision of 1948 in which the U.S. Supreme Court

ruled that courts could not legally enforce racial covenants on real estate. Many families moved westward into previously all-white neighborhoods which offered better housing and living conditions. A schism developed between those living on the “Eastside,” that suffered in the transition, versus those living on the “Westside,” a distinction that strongly still exists today. Noteworthy too is the author’s data on the influx of immigrants of African descent from the Caribbean, Africa, and the Americas during the first decade of the new century.

A number of cities in the U.S. experienced a recentralizing of their African American business corridors and communities as a result of *Shelley v. Kraemer*. In Chapter 2, “From Central Avenue to Leimert Park: The Shifting Center of Black Los Angeles,” Reginald Chapple takes a closer look at the once-thriving community along Central Avenue with a number of examples of specific businesses, buildings, churches, and social organizations established there. He elaborates on the westward population shift discussed in the previous chapter by Robinson, as blacks moved into other established neighborhoods, including the West Adams District and the Crenshaw District/Leimert Park area in the 1950s. Though the Crenshaw District/Leimert Park area was already established as a black cultural center since the late 1960s, Chapple states that Leimert Park Village became the black center after the 1992 uprisings, a place for blacks “to celebrate and reassert their social, cultural, and political identities.”⁸ Notable is Chapple’s description of the interplay between Leimert Park Village Merchants Association and Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas over the issue of parking meters within a large parking lot in the village, as well as the conflicts which arose between merchants and land owners within the Leimert Park Village. These events are indications of challenges the community faces in navigating the future of this African American landmark of Los Angeles.

In Chapter 3, “The Decline of a Black Community by the Sea,” Andrew Deener unwinds the socio-economic complexities of Oakwood, a historically African American beach neighborhood located in Venice, California. Dating back to the early 1900s, Oakwood is one of the few historically black neighborhoods in West Los Angeles. According to Deener, the neighborhood developed as a close-knit, multi-generational community in a racial environment that restricted African Americans from interacting in other areas of Venice beyond the boundaries of Oakwood. Over the impending decades, the population of blacks within Oakwood increased in the years surrounding World War II due to the increase of defense-related jobs and again in the late 1950s when the construction of the Santa Monica Freeway displaced black residents. Through a well-grounded ethnographic study, Deener examines the shift of population and political-economic changes that have impacted residents of Oakwood and their sense of community over the last forty years. Like many neighborhoods in the U.S., Oakwood has faced issues regarding gentrification since the 1980s. As wealthier white property owners have moved into the neighborhood, a perception of non-integration into the community has been noted by long term residents, as many newcomers have reconstructed existing houses and built tall walls or fences around their property.

He discusses the influx of new populations into the existing neighborhood over the last forty years, including Latino immigrants from Latin America, and the lack of integration of the populations within the existing Oakwood community. In addition, Oakwood has also been challenged with issues surrounding low-income housing projects within the neighborhood, generational conflict, and an increase in gang activity, all of which have negatively impacted the community sense of unity. In a clear examination of all of the issues based on quantitative data, qualitative information (including interviews with long term African American residents, new white residents, younger generation of African Americans, influx of Latino immigrants police, real estate developers, public agencies, and community leaders), the author provides an intimate look at the social intricacies of the Oakwood neighborhood, a once close-knit community that has, for now, settled for co-existence.

Part 2 of the book discusses the “People” of Los Angeles, those who have encountered specific challenges. In Chapter 4, “‘Blowing Up’ at Project Blowed: Dreams and Young Black Men,” author Jooyoung Lee gives insight into the popular world of hip-hop by focusing on “Project Blowed,” a community organization in Leimert Park dedicated to helping young black men interested in rapping through mentoring and encouragement. The reader is given a nonpublic look and a lesson in rap vocabulary, as Lee describes this youthful culture of music. The author plants himself into the scene of the organization, becoming a link between the reader and the hip-hop scene in South Los Angeles. He discovers how Project Blowed has successfully worked to influence the lives of the participants in a positive way during the early 2000s. Throughout the essay, he emphasizes how this constructive organization has created a means for a creative outlet over violence, during a period when many after-school programs and municipal arts funding had been eliminated from program budgets. Lee counters conventional thought that associates hip-hop music with deviant attitudes and violent behavior. As stated by Lee, “While these studies argue that consumption of hip-hop may lead to negative outcomes in a person’s life, they don’t explore how production of culture may have positive outcomes on the lives of those engaged in the pursuit of hip-hop dreams.”⁹ He finds that Project Blowed provides the means to build self-confidence and hope through the process of being involved with the production of rap music.

Though Lee acknowledges that hip-hop media often carries negative images, he argues that these images do not necessarily lead to the “life-altering” decisions that black youth make. “Although it is difficult to isolate an increased interest in a rap career as *the* cause that kept some young black men away from gangs and other violence, it is equally difficult to pinpoint consuming hip-hop music as the cause for why other young men decided to join gangs, commit acts of violence, or lower their academic aspirations.”¹⁰ More strongly, he finds that the young men involved in the study have avoided involvement in gangs and negative activities through their involvement in the production of their own

rap music. Lee concludes, "Rap dreams, in the end, provide hope where little otherwise exists."¹¹

In Chapter 5, "Out of the Void: Street Gangs in Black Los Angeles," Alex Alonso gives a detailed and enlightening examination of the formation and development of street gangs in Los Angeles starting in the 1930s to the first decade of the 2000s. Unlike previous studies on gang research, Alonso analyzes the influence of how "race, segregation and discrimination worked together to create communities that have spawned street gangs."¹² He describes how in the late 1940s, black clubs developed as a defense mechanism to combat violent racial discrimination by whites as blacks began to move westward, out of the Central Avenue neighborhood and into predominantly white neighborhoods. White hate groups formed by white teenagers, such as the "Spook Hunters," showed animosity toward black residents. As more blacks moved westward, black residents began to outnumber whites in the community. As whites moved out of the area, a shift took place and black clubs began to focus on each other. The author builds on the Westside-Eastside schism between African Americans discussed earlier in Chapter 1, and notes how many of the clashes between black clubs stemmed from the socioeconomic disparities between groups. In the early 1960s, as the neighborhood regions merged, the violence took on the characteristics of "street gang warfare."¹³ Alonso recounts the 1965 uprising and the impact on street gangs in the aftermath, most notably the system of police brutality. The author gives a detailed account of the growth of the Black Power movement in Los Angeles and the overpowering response by the federal and local government to dismantle organizations affiliated with the movement. He notes that activity between gangs was almost non-existent, as an interest in social issues became the focal concern after the 1965 Watts "Riots." As stated by Alonso, "As young black men from the streets grew more politically aware, they began to have a greater concern for the social problems that plagued their streets, helping to transform many into agents for social change during what became known as the Black Power movement."¹⁴

In a narrative that was long hidden from the public for the better part of the 1980s and 1990s, Alonso breaks down the details regarding the infiltration of crack cocaine in the Los Angeles community and its ties to Nicaragua. The author concludes, "Examining the Black Los Angeles gang phenomenon from a historical perspective provides insights into the forces that contributed to the initial formation of black street gangs, as well as necessary conditions for reducing gang-related violence. At the core of early black gang formation was the desire of marginalized, low-income, young men to protect their neighborhoods and communities from the effects of racial oppression, disenfranchisement and police brutality."¹⁵ A particularly revealing chapter of the book, this narrative provides an excellent historiography and detailed secondary resource on the topic.

In Chapter 6, "Imprisoning the Family: Incarceration in Black Los Angeles" by M. Belinda Tucker, Neva Pemberton, Mary Weaver, Gwendelyn Rivera and Carrie Petrucci, the authors investigate the impact of incarceration on families in

black Los Angeles. In a well-constructed study based on a number of interviews with relatives and partners of the incarcerated and an examination of the national and local context in the soaring trends of imprisonment of African Americans, the authors take a look at the consequences of imprisonment on the family and the community at large. They argue that “a unique, complex set of variables made blacks in Los Angeles especially vulnerable to arrest, conviction and long term punishments.”¹⁶ These variables include the impact of the crack cocaine epidemic, the “Three Strikes” law, increased incarceration rate among blacks fueled by “war on drugs,” and the Anti Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which sets harsher penalties on sellers of crack (who tend to be black) than sellers of powder cocaine (who tend to be white). The authors provide a number of potential strategies to address the incarceration crisis confronting black Los Angeles worthy of further elaboration of the process of the strategies and what it would set out to achieve.

Mignon R. Moore presents a timely discussion on the connections that Los Angeles black lesbians and gay men have to the African American community in Chapter 7, “Black and Gay in L.A.: The Relationships Black Lesbians and Gay Men Have to Their Racial and Religious Communities.” Based on the controversy of Proposition 8, a California state initiative to eliminate the legality of same-sex marriage, debates regarding the rights of gay and lesbian individuals have been brought to the forefront in black communities. The discussions in this essay are enlightening as Moore presents the conflicts involved in being both black and gay in the black community. Moore uses ethnographic data to consider the experiences of black lesbians and gay men in Los Angeles as openly gay people living, worshiping, and socializing in African American communities. Moore believes that underlying the acceptance of an open homosexual lifestyle in the black community are issues regarding: 1) the primary importance of African Americans being perceived as the disadvantage minority for the “advancement of the race”; 2) generational conflict; 3) lack of understanding of gays and lesbians by the larger community; 4) conflict with cultural black norms; 5) fear of violence; and 6) religious teachings. Moore found that despite the conflicts involved in negotiating homosexuality identity and affiliation in the black community, most black gay men and lesbian women choose to remain within “the support of and membership in the larger black community.” In conjunction with this alignment, they had “less confidence that they would ever be fully accepted as members of other identity groups such as those based solely on sexuality.”¹⁷

Part 3 of *Black Los Angeles* examines the “Image” of black Los Angeles in the media and the lack of authenticity in these depictions. “Looking for the ‘Hood and Finding Community: South Central, Race, and Media,” Chapter 8, Dionne Bennett dissects the representations of South Central Los Angeles in television shows and movies, and how these images have promoted overblown stereotypes of a real community of a diverse culture, history, and people with genuine concerns. Bennett brings out the point that because of the easy accessibility of this community to the L.A.-based entertainment industry, it has often been used as a setting for a “black urban community” and, through misrepresentation, has had

the burden of representing all of “Black America.”¹⁸ She concludes that within the media, the real stories of black Los Angeles have yet to be told.¹⁹

As would follow, stereotypical depictions of life in black Los Angeles are often filled with stereotypical characters, playing “ghetto,” as discussed in Chapter 9—“Playing ‘Ghetto’: Black Actors, Stereotypes, and Authenticity” by Nancy Wang Yuen. Yuen takes a look at how stereotypical images of blacks in South Central Los Angeles (gangbanger, drug user, no-nonsense black woman) have become the standard persona of images of African Americans in the media through interviews with thirty black actors. She examines the lack of black writers in the television and film industry and finds that the white writers writing about black Los Angeles have had limited experience and exposure to the reality of the community and fall back on stereotypical notions of the place and the people. The author also notes the way that black actors have coped with playing these limited, racialized roles if they wanted to work in the industry and the efforts made by actors to stretch the depth of the portrayals to present a character that is more realistic. Equally interesting to the information in this essay would be a look at the stereotypical roles of African American characters prior to the early 1960s, contrasted to the stereotypical African Americans portrayals on screen today.²⁰ Also worth examining would be a look at coping mechanisms by today’s black actors playing stereotypical roles in contrast to those used by black actors in the past.²¹

Paul Von Blum discusses “Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles” in Chapter 10. Blum gives a historical overview of the black visual arts movement through the exhibition of African American art in Los Angeles, with emphasis on the development of the movement after the 1965 Watts “Riots.” Blum discusses the role of art galleries in giving presence to African American work in the art scene during a time when white art critics in Los Angeles gave little legitimacy to the African American art form. He names the few galleries, both African American and mainstream white-owned, that displayed African American art in the years leading up to the 1965 “Riots.” Blum calls attention to the number of changes that took place after the uprisings, including the acceptance of African American artwork into mainstream venues, the pressure placed on mainstream art institutions to exhibit work by black artists of Los Angeles, and the incitement of the political consciousness of black artists themselves.²² He details how these new energies fueled the proliferation of black art and exhibits in Los Angeles through a culture of discrimination. The black visual arts movement is also elaborated in Chapter 5, “Studios in the Street: Creative Community and Visual Arts,” in Widener’s *Black Arts West*.

Scot Brown brings the history of SOLAR (Sound of Los Angeles Records) out of the shadows in Chapter 11, “SOLAR: The History of the Sounds of Los Angeles Records,” and recounts the success story of this Los Angeles black-owned record company from the late 1970s to the 1980s “that would define a decade of popular black music.”²³ The list of popular artists that launched their careers under the leadership of SOLAR owner Dick Griffey includes The

Whispers, Shalamar, Lakeside, Midnight Star and Babyface (who later purchased SOLAR Towers building). The author discusses the development of SOLAR from its inception with the TV dance show, Soul Train, and the advancement of the “SOLAR sound” throughout the 1980s. Brown noted that Griffey’s business vision was influenced by his aspiration for economic empowerment within the African American community and on a Pan-African front and notes Griffey’s prolific involvement in Pan-African cultural, political, and economic enterprises. In addition, Brown adds that the location of SOLAR in Los Angeles provided a wealth of multicultural talent of “black artists, cultural workers, political activists, and entrepreneurs from all over the United States and beyond.” A new standard was set for other black-owned labels in Los Angeles by the legacy of SOLAR.

Chapter 12 is entitled “Killing ‘Killer King’: The *Los Angeles Times* and a ‘Troubled’ Hospital in the ‘Hood.’” In another illuminating chapter of the book, Hunt and Ramón provide an excellent analysis of the printed decimation of the Martin Luther King Jr./Charles Drew Medical Center (King/Drew) through a series of articles published in the *Los Angeles Times*. In a strongly written, “no-holds” account, the authors research newspaper articles and historical documents and conduct interviews to uncover the truth in the demise of the hospital. The work contextualizes the attack on King/Drew Hospital within the context of black Los Angeles, though an activity not just common to the city alone. As stated by the authors, “The case of King/Drew, we argue, is emblematic of both the promise and the pitfalls facing African Americans who seek to control their own institutions in a society structured to undermine black control.” From the narrative of the hospital’s inception as a model hospital in the black community to the demise of the center, Hunt and Ramón build a well-documented case for the less-than-noble motives for the “framing” of the hospital by the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper, diverting the public’s attention from the hospital’s significant financial constraints, issues of overcrowding, and lack of power given to hospital administrators to properly manage Los Angeles County hospital staff. While the *Los Angeles Times* won a Pulitzer Prize for its “courageous” exposé, South Central Los Angeles lost a much-needed medical facility to service the community.

In Part 4 of *Black Los Angeles*, “Action,” the last four essays discuss positive activities in the community that effected a change. Chapter 13 “Bass to Bass: Relative Freedom and Womanist Leadership in Black Los Angeles,” Melina Abdullah and Regina Freer compare and contrast the political endeavors of Charlotta Bass and Karen Bass, two women who have provided a legacy of “womanist leadership” nurtured within the political environment of their community. Abdullah and Freer uncover the leadership style of both women, their unfathomable drive for the full freedom of those they serve, and a willingness to use innovative methods in garnering outside support to make changes while inside government office. Both also engaged in the “process of incorporating non-black supporters as a part of both electoral and governing coalitions.”²⁴ Abdullah and Freer bring to light two lives of exceptional leadership in the representation and progression of black Los Angeles.

In Chapter 14, “Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)justice in Black Los Angeles,” Sonya Winton shares the inspiring story of Robin Cannon and Charlotte Bullock and their grassroots-based fight to stop a large city project, the construction of a thirteen-acre municipal solid waste incinerator plant in their neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles. The Los Angeles City Energy Recovery (LANCER) Municipal Waste Incinerator was a \$535 million plant that would have discharged millions of tons of ash into the surrounding neighborhoods. These two African American residents pooled their resources together and created Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles (CCSCLA) to campaign against the potential environmental health threat to the community. Without support from mainstream environmental groups or coverage from the media, CCSCLA exposed that indeed the LANCER project would pose a potential health risk to the residents of the Central Avenue Corridor. As stated by Winton, “. . . CCSCLA overcame the challenges confronting it and became a model to be emulated by other community groups committed to social justice.”²⁵

In Chapter 15, “A Common Project for a Just Society: Black Labor in Los Angeles,” Edna Bonacich, Lola Smallwood Cuevas, Lanita Morris, Steven Pitts, and Joshua Bloom examine the relationship between the African American community and the labor movement in Los Angeles, through the experience of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Security Officers United in Los Angeles (SOULA). The authors take us through the plight of private security officers of commercial real estate, most of which are African American, their relationship with the labor movement in Los Angeles, and their banded efforts over a six-year period to form a labor union. The writers of this chapter also include an innovative list of ideas at the end of the chapter to improve black labor movement struggles in Los Angeles.

The editors end this book by tracing the organized effort to increase African American access to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in “Reclaiming UCLA: The Education Crisis in Black Los Angeles” in Chapter 16. The Alliance for Equal Opportunity in Education (AEOE) formed in 2006 to address the staggering decrease of enrollment of African American students into UCLA’s freshman class. Hunt and Ramón construct a case study detailing the formation of the organization, how it operated, problems faced, and goals achieved. The chapter finishes with a suggested guide for black organizations seeking positive changes for the future.

An elucidative collaboration, *Black Los Angeles* provides a clearer understanding of historical, social, and contemporary issues that have shaped the black community of Los Angeles. Through the process, each work illuminates the unique experiences of African Americans in Los Angeles, while placing these experiences in the context of being black in America. The text will be appealing to enthusiasts of Los Angeles and African American history and culture at every level. A fascinating study, *Black Los Angeles* will be used as a standard reference in academia in the examination of the history and experience of African

Americans in Los Angeles and a paradigm for similar studies of other black communities.

In another groundbreaking examination of Los Angeles history, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* is a study of the African American Art movement in Los Angeles and its development through political and social structures in the city. Expanding on the black visual arts movement discussion in Chapter 10 of *Black Los Angeles*, author Daniel Widener covers a fifty-year period of 1942 to 1992 of black cultural arts in Los Angeles encompassing genres of music, visual art, theatrical art, film, and literature. The writing captures a fading and elusive history that has previously not been documented at this level of detail. It is well researched and constructs a framework of critical analysis in discussion of the history and its implications. In the process, Widener has recorded the oral history of the activists and participants of the period, with descriptions archived only in the memories of those who were there.

Like the phenomenon of the black experience in Los Angeles discussed in *Black Los Angeles*, the history and direction of the more microcosmic black cultural arts movement has also been influenced by a number of dynamics including the entertainment industry; local, regional, and national politics; the economy; labor unions; class structure; community engagement; collective organization; womanist leadership; diverse ethnicities; the civil rights movement; the Los Angeles uprisings; and the Black Power movement. In *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*, Daniel Widener gives an in-depth analysis of the complex yet fascinating world of art post World War II in black Los Angeles as he reframes the discussion about its development and motivation. As stated by the author, “Thus, *Black Arts West* takes up themes raised by scholars who go beyond considering the Black Arts moment as a purely literary phenomenon to show the centrality of jazz and visual art in the development of art about and for liberation.”²⁶ He contends that the effort toward black liberation was a conscious motivation in the creative, community-oriented, and age-inclusive production of art forms in Los Angeles. Widener particularizes the Southern California regional connection with “entertainment, information, and propaganda ensured that creative personalities would occupy a strategic space in the broader search for racial equality unleashed in the course of the Second World War.”²⁷ He also examines the unique occurrence of the region’s development as a setting for anti-racist politics post World War II.

Part I of the book, “Cultural Democracy in the Racial Metropolis,” discusses efforts toward recognition of black cultural arts and its access to the public front. Widener examines the push for representation in cultural arts on par with the rest of America’s struggles during the Second World War. As stated by the author, “During the Second World War, Los Angeles became a key site for the articulation of a new African American cultural politics as activists and artists sought to use the unsettled landscape of life during wartime as a means for wringing rhetorical and material concessions from American society.”²⁸ Widener makes an interesting comparison between the motivations of artists and activists dur-

ing this time, in particular the musical productions of Duke Ellington and the writings of Chester Himes, both prolific during this time period. Each creative artist viewed the improvement of African Americans' stance on equality as being connected to their representation in the culture of arts. Inclusion of blacks in creating art was a necessity to changing demeaning stereotypical depictions of blacks, the importance of recognition of the humanity of blacks. These changes were thought to be a necessity in order to make changes in the struggle for access to employment and improvement or increase of civil rights. Los Angeles was fertile for these types of changes due to "leftward shift in local politics" during this period of time, and Southern California became a place of anti-racist politics.²⁹ In this fight for better representation were black actors and actresses with existing ties with the entertainment industry, such as Hattie McDaniel and those seeking "better roles" for blacks in film.

Widener recounts in Chapter 2 that as the fight for equality shifted in political effort from representation to access between 1950 and 1955, America experienced tremendous economic growth and expansion. In response to the continued exclusion of blacks in the larger cultural arts world, a community-based movement emerged in the field of art. People joined together to find collective solutions to self-expression in cultural arts. The fight for increased access to the cultural art world continues through the 1960s but takes a different form through cultural liberalism after the 1965 "Riot" as described in Widener's detailed account of the Watts Writers Workshop in Chapter 3.

Particularly interesting in Chapter 2 of the book is the author's description of the role of Los Angeles politics in subjugating access to the larger art world through "separate but equal"³⁰ venues to display art during citywide Outdoor Art Shows and venues for jazz artists to perform during Bureau of Music community programs. As purported by Widener, this approach along with the increased racist behavior by the Los Angeles Police Department, especially against jazz musicians on Central Avenue, worked toward maintaining the city's image as one for white Americans.

Also in this chapter, Widener describes the role of labor unions in the fight for equality of black jazz musicians in the American Federation of Musicians, established in 1918. Discussed in Chapter 15 of *Black Los Angeles*, its worth noting that the formation of labor unions is still being used as a tool for improved wages and benefits as currently as 2007 in the establishment of the SEIU security officers union, a largely black workforce. In Widener's description of the amalgamation of the all-black Local 767 and the all-white Local 47 with the musicians union, he notes that the musicians were inadvertently given the charge to be early frontrunners in the struggle for integration.³¹

In Part 2, "Message from the Grassroots," Widener takes a closer look at some of the black cultural community groups which formed between the years of 1965-1973. Chapter 4 takes a look at the Underground Musicians Association (UGMA)/Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra (PAPA) and focuses on one of its founding members, Horace Tapscott. Tapscott was a local jazz musician and a

strong proponent of self-determination in the production of music for the benefit of the community and progress toward black liberation. Widener also highlights the work of other community leaders such as Linda Hill, who also co-founded UGMA and PAPA, Jim Woods and Jayne Cortez of the Studio Watts workshop, Ruth Waddy of the Art West Associated project, and Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell of the Watts Towers Art Center. He shows that these groups, founded prior to the “Riot” of 1965, were formed from a grassroots origin parallel to the civil rights and Black Power movement and not in response to. Also pinpointed by the author are the roles of a number of black women who contributed to the evolution of the Black Arts movement in Los Angeles: Cecilia Tapscott, wife of Horace Tapscott, Linda Hill, Jayne Cortez, Ruth Waddy, Marla Gibbs, R’Wanda Lewis, and Ridhiana Saunders. Widener adds additional names of womanist leaders in Los Angeles to those discussed in Chapter 14 of *Black Los Angeles*. Particularly interesting in Chapter is the description of the impact of the amalgamation of the local white and black musician labor unions and how it created a stifling effect on the creative liberty of black musicians in the style of jazz. Many African American jazz artists were informally shut out of white jazz clubs, disrespected or harassed by club owners, or discouraged from playing in the jazz avant-garde. Widener describes how these musicians created other outlets for their creativity which influenced the styles of jazz created. Widener introduces connections between the black cultural arts movement and the Black Power movement as he examines not only their interactions, from Arkestra playing at benefits for Black Power movement organizations or participating in meetings and campaigns, to the shared vocabulary of self-determination. Particularly between community jazz orchestras and those akin to the Black Power movement, they shared the struggle of defining “the nature of black Americans connection to the world beyond.”³² In Chapter 6, Widener gives an intricate analysis of the Black Panther Party and the U.S. Organization in Southern California and their connection to expressive art and political liberation.³³ He challenges current scholarship by showing that black cultural arts and political activism among community groups in Los Angeles are not separate entities, but they are complexly intertwined.

Widener notes that as community musical groups began to develop in Los Angeles, so did local efforts in forming black visual art organizations, cohorts, and galleries run by artists. Widener contends that unlike other genres of art such as literature, music and theater, there was little interest in the visual arts by white constituents. However, the commonality between participants of this movement involved the struggle for “a search for distinct means of expression rooted in the concerns, historical experiences, and pre-existing cultural lexicon of African American audiences.”³⁴ All shared a focus of connecting the local community and using cultural art as a means of “effecting a widespread transformation of South Los Angeles and the world beyond.”³⁵

In Part 3 of *Black Arts West*, “Festivals and Funerals,” Widener discusses the role of local municipal policy and the Black Cultural Arts movement under the Bradley administration from 1973-1993. In Widener’s description of the process

of rehabilitation of the Watts Tower, he observes a shift from a grassroots-driven movement to “a more spatially bound exhibition of black creativity funded by and tied to the city government.”³⁶ With similar sentiments of Mayor Bradley’s management of the city as Paul Robinson’s in *Black Los Angeles*,³⁷ Widener notes a rechanneling of city finances from cultural arts programming citywide to a focus on specific arts projects, most notably the Watts Tower in the black community (a \$1.2 million project) and the downtown redevelopment which included the creation of the Museum of Contemporary Art (a part of a \$150 million project). While Widener credits Bradley with creating new opportunities for African Americans on a variety of levels, particularly those of the middle class (specifically in the new inclusiveness of black American as well as other minorities in the city’s Cultural Affairs Department’s policy), he notes that the outcome was often a partial inclusion and one that effected a “patterns of containment.”³⁸ The chronicle of the Bradley mayoral periods offers another example of contradiction and complexity of black Los Angeles.

The final chapter of the book takes a look at the works of film production in addressing social issues such as economic exclusion, drug trafficking, police brutality, and gang activity in the black working class of South Central Los Angeles in the wake of the 1992 uprising. Widener focuses on three films in particular, *Killer of Sheep*, *Bless Their Little Hearts*, and *Menace II Society*, dissecting scenarios from each film to address the social issues of this period.

As a side note, Chapter 8 of *Black Los Angeles* dismisses *Menace II Society* as another exaggerated and stereotypical depiction of the lives of those living in South Los Angeles within the context of racialized media representations of South Central Los Angeles. Though Widener agrees that the producers, Albert and Allen Hughes, do not cover the lives of “hundreds of thousands of African American Angelenos with jobs, hobbies, and stable families” in South Central Los Angeles, he takes a forensic look at the themes and issues presented in the this form of cinematic art and relates them back to the issues of the day.

Daniel Widener goes beyond providing criticism and biographical information about the contributors and artists involved, but also gives voice or platform to those involved in the movement. He provides biographical history not previously documented or well known of grass roots leaders and innovators in the cultural arts movement such as poet Jayne Cortez providing a place for musicians to gather and innovate. The text is written from a stance of critical theory and will appeal to academicians and those with a specific interest in or involvement with the black cultural arts movement. Primarily, Widener reframes the thought of the discussion of the Black Arts movement into a critical form that illuminates the importance and complexity of this history.

Black Los Angeles and *Black Arts West* not only expound upon the experience of African Americans in the southwest region of the country, but provide hope for a better understanding of American history through a reanalysis of previously accepted stereotypes, assumptions, and scholarship. By applying this level of analysis to the historical constructs of the African American experience,

a platform has been laid to address pervasive issues of racial disenfranchisement, lack of viable jobs, decreasing educational opportunities, police brutality, media misrepresentation, labeling, increasing imprisonment rates, class tensions, and a general lack of understanding of people other than ourselves. Indeed the pioneering and creative spirit that brought many African Americans to Los Angeles and enabled them to survive will be a key factor in claiming a better future for Angelenos of African American descent.

Notes

1. Darnell Hunt, "Introduction" in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 2.
2. Paul Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 38.
3. Reginald Chapple, "From Central Avenue to Leimert Park: The Shifting Center of Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 65.
4. Paul Robinson, 40.
5. Paul Robinson, 42.
6. Paul Robinson, 21.
7. Paul Robinson, 28-29.
8. Reginald Chapple, 75.
9. Jooyoung Lee, "'Blowing Up' at Project Blowed: Rap Dreams and Young Black Men," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 117.
10. Jooyoung Lee, 136.
11. Jooyoung Lee, 137.
12. Alex Alonso, "Out of the Void: Street Gangs in Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 140.
13. Alex Alonso, 143.
14. Alex Alonso, 143.
15. Alex Alonso, 160.
16. M. Belinda Tucker, et. al, "Imprisoning the Family: Incarceration in Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 168.
17. Mignon Moore, "Black and Gay in L.A.: The Relationships Black Lesbians and Gay Men Have to Their Racial and Religious Communities," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 208.
18. Dionne Bennett, "Looking for the 'Hood and Finding Community," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 225.
19. Dionne Bennett, 228.
20. As an example, see partial list of stereotypical roles in Daniel Widener's *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*, 4.
21. See Daniel Widener's *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*, 75-76, for a discussion of Horace Winston Stewart who portrayed Lightnin' on "The Amos and Andy Show."
22. Paul Von Blum, "Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 249.
23. Scot Brown, "SOLAR: The History of the Sounds of Los Angeles Records," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 266.
24. Melina Abdullah, et. al, "Bass to Bass: Relative Freedom and Womanist Leadership in Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 335.
25. Sonya Winton, "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 344.
26. Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.
27. Daniel Widener, 34.
28. Daniel Widener, 28.

184 Linda Cooks

29. Daniel Widener, 35.
30. Daniel Widener, 56
31. Daniel Widener, 66.
32. Daniel Widener, 147.
33. Daniel Widener, 189.
34. Daniel Widener, 186.
35. Daniel Widener, 186.
36. Daniel Widener, 234.
37. Paul Robinson, 48.
38. Daniel Widener, 248.