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Review of: Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles, by Daniel Widener

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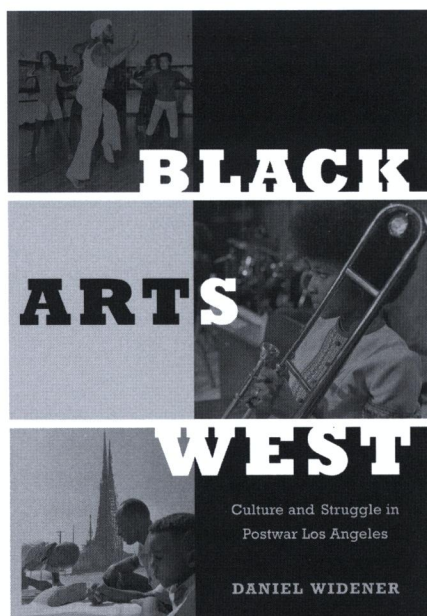
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BLACK ARTS WEST: CULTURE AND STRUGGLE IN POSTWAR LOS ANGELES

By Daniel Widener (Durham, NC:
Duke University Press, 2010,
384 pp., \$24.95 paper)

REVIEWED BY KEVIN ALLEN LEONARD,
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, WESTERN
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, AND AUTHOR
OF *THE BATTLE FOR LOS ANGELES: RACIAL
IDEOLOGY AND WORLD WAR II*

SEVERAL AUTHORS HAVE EXAMINED the “rise and fall” of “West Coast jazz” in the 1940s and 1950s, and a number of scholars have studied black politics in Los Angeles. In this fascinating and important new book, however, historian Daniel Widener draws attention to many lesser-known writers, musicians, visual artists, and filmmakers who constituted the Black Arts Movement in southern California. Widener argues that these artists and their movement occupied a central role in the African American freedom struggle. When African Americans broke down the barriers that had excluded them from many cultural arenas in the 1950s and 1960s, some artists resisted integration into white-dominated institutions. Instead, they concentrated on the production of literary, musical, and visual forms that would speak primarily to other African Americans and that would encourage people to participate in the ongoing struggle against racial oppression.



Three of Widener’s chapters focus specifically on different artistic genres. One examines literature by charting the rise and decline of the Watts Writers Workshop, which was founded by liberal Hollywood writer Budd Schulberg following the rioting in 1965. A second chapter traces the history of the Underground Musicians Association (also known as the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension, the Community Cultural Arkestra, and the Pan Afrikan People’s Arkestra), founded in 1961. A third chapter focuses on visual artists and their work, explaining the history of the Black Artists Alliance (BAA) and Black Arts Council (BAC), both of which emerged in 1968, and the Compton Communitative Arts Academy, which emerged in the 1960s and folded in 1975.

The remaining three chapters further explain and contextualize the Black Arts Movement. One cogently challenges scholars who have too readily accepted the distinction between the “cultural nationalism” of the US Orga-

nization and the “revolutionary nationalism” of the Black Panther Party. Widener notes similarities between the music and poetry produced by artists associated with both organizations. He depicts Tom Bradley—Los Angeles’s first and so far only African American mayor—as an “intimate enemy” of black artists. Bradley’s administration, which governed the city for the twenty years between 1973 and 1993, included African Americans in the municipal arts program by funding the Watts Towers Art Center, but funding for the community arts organizations that had nurtured the Black Arts Movement dried up. Despite this setback, the movement’s radical critique of race and class relations survived in the work of the “Los Angeles school” of independent black filmmakers. In his final chapter, Widener analyzes Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*, Billy Woodberry’s *Bless Their Little Hearts*, and the Hughes brothers’ *Menace II Society*, all of which critiqued the social and economic developments of the Bradley years, when industrial blue-collar jobs disappeared and unemployment among African Americans rose dramatically.

Because it thoughtfully and effectively challenges previous interpretations of the Black Power movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the social, political, and cultural histories of Los Angeles, this book must be read by everyone with an interest in any of these topics.