

2008

## Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles

Jennifer R. Phillips

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Phillips, Jennifer R. (2008) "Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles," *Vulcan Historical Review*: Vol. 12, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol12/iss2008/14>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

**ERIC AVILA.** *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Baseball, film noir, interstates, Disneyland, and science fiction all influenced what Eric Avila calls, "chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs" in post-World War II Los Angeles. California progressives, among other citizens of the state, regarded Los Angeles suburbs as a "whiter solution" to typical cities (23). *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* explores each of these contributing factors to white flight. Avila explains how the portrayal of non-white people in popular culture played a role in white flight and urban sprawl in Los Angeles.

As unlikely as it may seem, film, especially film noir, played a role in how people viewed Los Angeles in real life. Avila studies the image of the city and its inhabitants in film. His chapter entitled "The Spectacle of Urban Blight" examines several films made during the post war period. Avila believes film noir made clear distinctions between "blackness" and "whiteness." For instance, he states, "Black servants, custodians, garage attendants, shoe-shine boys, Pullman porters, and jazz musicians often share the same urban space as morally corrupt white

men and women who occupy the noir city" (80). Film noir suggested white people who associated themselves with the urban setting shared "black" characteristics. These characteristics of blackness relayed to the actual portrayal of communities such as Bunker Hill, which gained the reputation of a blighted neighborhood. White people feared the subversive elements depicted in urban areas and fled to the Los Angeles suburbs.

Walt Disney created a source of entertainment for suburb dwellers—Disneyland. Avila gives an excellent, albeit short, biography of Walt Disney to help the reader understand how and why Disneyland came about. Walt Disney did not care for intellectuals, Coney Island, empowerment of women, or Communism. Disney wanted Americans to return to the small town ideology of his own youth. He held family values in high regard and created a theme park that upper and middle class families could enjoy together.

Other families during the era bonded over baseball. Urban renewal, backward politics, and under-the-table dealings pushed the relocation of the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles. Originally intended for lower income housing, Chavez Ravine's redevelopment instead came in the form of a baseball stadium and a seven-thousand-car parking lot. Avila credits the Los Angeles Dodgers with the destruction of Chicano communities, while paradoxically uniting the city.

Both Dodger Stadium and Disneyland depended on the interstate highway systems to augment their profits. According to Avila, entrepreneurs in both industries "oriented their respective institutions toward the new freeway system...both marketed a 'wholesome' brand of entertainment that catered to an ideal of the white middle-class-nuclear family" (175). As they did in Miami, the interstates destroyed non-white communities throughout Los Angeles. City officials, who thought that freeways and personal automobiles heralded the future of transportation, shut down mass transit that many different ethnic groups relied upon for their livelihood.

Avila, perhaps over simplistically, categorizes people into two groups: white and non-white. Although in his section of film noir, he focuses on the portrayal of African-Americans, the rest of the book concentrates on the plight of Chicanos, even though Los Angeles is home

to many other non-white ethnicities. He did not mention which, if any, ethnic communities the interstates, attractions, and suburbs destroyed as they targeted blighted areas.

In the epilogue, Avila reevaluates many of the book's themes and enlightens the reader to the successes and failures of Post-War Los Angeles. The author provides a well-researched monograph that related many aspects of popular culture to racial tensions

JENNIFER R. PHILLIPS