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Composing Metropolis: New Approaches to African American Urbanization in the Late 20th Century

Marne Campbell
Loyola Marymount University, marne.campbell@lmu.edu

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Review Essay

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Composing Metropolis

New Approaches to African American Urbanization in the Late Twentieth Century

Isoardi, S. L. (2006). *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. xxi, 356, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, audio CD, $34.95 cloth.

Sides, J. (2004). *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present.* Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. xiv, 288, illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index, $39.95 cloth.

Wiese, A. (2004). *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. xiv, 288, illustrations, maps, notes, index, $37.50 cloth.

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The second half of the twentieth century brought many changes and challenges to African American communities, both locally and nationally. Just prior to World War II, many migrated out of rural spaces to urban settings, seeking better opportunities for themselves and their families. The civil rights movement generated for African Americans accessibility to property, jobs, educational institutions, and public spaces. While they met stiff resistance, African Americans gained a strong foothold in these areas, making themselves a large part of the American urban scene. This essay contextualizes the experiences of African Americans in the late twentieth century and considers the important history of African American community formation.

In their investigations of the African American experience, Andrew Wiese, Steven L. Isoardi, and Josh Sides illustrate the challenges of community formation and cooperation. Each believe that by overcoming racism and other hardships, African Americans, as Wiese titles his book, managed to carve out "places of their own." Each considers post–World War II migration, an experience shaped by the modern fight for civil rights, a time when thousands of African Americans fled the racism and danger of the South for destinations both North and West. While Isoardi and Sides closely examine Los Angeles's inner-city neighborhoods, Wiese's work contextualizes the suburban experience for African Americans, not only in the South but in the North and West as well. Still, all three scholars consider migration, labor, and politics as important factors in shaping the urban landscape for blacks.

The World War II brought increased opportunity for black Americans. While the country recovered from the Depression and New Deal programs promised increased opportunity and stability, the American economy stabilized. Jobs creation enabled more people of color to enter the urban workforce (Wiese, p. 168). The war itself created new avenues for black labor; men joined the armed forces, while black women moved out of the domestic realm

into both the public and private sectors (Wiese, p. 52). These opportunities provided the means for black workers to seek employment and housing in various cities across the country. Many found themselves in large cities such as Detroit, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Chicago. For some, working in the automobile industry contributed to financial stability, while others took advantage of shipping and building opportunities (Sides, pp. 78-81). Regardless of where people worked in the country or the kinds of labor they did, urban blacks craved many of the comforts of the city and everything it promised.

As many scholars point out, migration to the North or West did not ensure equality for blacks. Often, the "good jobs" were set aside for whites, and blacks typically were confined to menial tasks, or lower-paying, unskilled positions. Wiese, Isoardi, and Sides agree that urban blacks, especially in the West, resisted being placed at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy and worked within their communities to overturn their menial status. Wiese and Sides contend that blacks challenged the status quo by moving into and purchasing property in traditionally white suburban neighborhoods, while Isoardi considers cultural factors as a challenge to white supremacist attitudes. As blacks became more marginalized socially and economically, they utilized the political arena as a tool for fighting their condition.[1]

Just as black migration and labor were met with resistance from the larger white community, urban blacks in the North and West faced similar political setbacks as their southern counterparts. While they were not restricted from voting as in the South, they faced other hardships that reduced their political patronage. As more blacks migrated into certain neighborhoods and opted to exercise their political rights, whites redrew voting boundaries to nullify and neutralize their vote (Sides, pp. 152-53; Wiese, pp. 172-73). Rather than overt racism and discrimination at polling places, urban blacks attempted to cast votes that simply did not count, which in turn affected all aspects of their lives.[2]

Blacks were denied social programs that assisted them in acquiring property, ensured a good education for their children, and protected them from crime or, more important, racial violence. White neighbors aimed to keep them out of their communities. The police launched an aggressive assault against blacks rather than protecting them during the 1960s. This tension manifested itself most prominently in the 1965 Watts riots. While similar conflicts broke out in the majority of the major American cities between 1964 and 1968, upheavals in many major urban centers had such an enormous effect, not only locally but also nationally; they provided a way for urban politics to become a priority rather than something to be ignored.

While student activists continued promoting voter registration in southern, predominantly African American areas, urban blacks demanded that their voice be heard, that they be considered active members of their communities, and that they be treated as such. They resisted being "ghettoized" by their white counterparts and lobbied for police protection, fire departments, parks and recreation services, as well as safe schools equipped with qualified teachers. Contrary to what whites believed blacks wanted or deserved, urban blacks had the same goals as whites, socially, economically, and politically (Wiese, pp. 284-85).

Regardless of whether blacks wanted to live in the suburban white areas or predominantly black neighborhoods, none welcomed crime, drugs, and violence into their social fabric. As Wiese points out, black suburbanites reported similar desires as whites, fleeing crime and drugs, but most important they wanted to protect their children and provide a

better quality of life for them. They accomplished this by moving out of the poorer neighborhoods and into those with a larger income tax base, ensuring cleaner parks, safer schools, and nicer homes (Wiese, 230). On the other hand, some blacks stayed in predominantly black neighborhoods, such as Crenshaw and Watts in Los Angeles, and demanded similar opportunities (Sides, pp. 191-92). Isoardi clearly illustrates this point by examining the Watts community arts movement as resistance to white supremacy. More important, Isoardi notes that the people involved with the Watts arts movement elected to support their community, creating social programs for its youth and young adults (Isoardi, pp. 61, 163, 187). Conversely, Sides argues that blacks in Los Angeles increasingly moved into the fold of ghetto living, depending on whites, especially those in politics, to help lift them out of poverty and destruction. Some, however, moved into black suburbs around the city that whites fled in an effort to relieve themselves from living in such close proximity. Regardless of whether urban blacks wanted to live in white suburbs, or stay within their communities in inner-cities, they agreed that they should not be subjected to substandard living conditions (Sides, pp. 98, 105, 126, 130).

While attempting to fit into the larger society, urban blacks defined and redefined themselves as a community, regardless of region of origin of residence. Migrants leaving the South, as well as southern suburbanites, shaped their communities around issues involving labor and occupation, politics, and opportunities for a better life for themselves as well as their families (Sides, pp. 36, 57-60). More important, they created new communities, mostly made up of people from various parts of the country and even the world, as urban blacks were often confined to spaces that included European, Latin American, and Asian immigrants, which created new experiences that differed immensely from those in the South. These experiences also shaped ideas about equality and race.

Each of these studies places African Americans within a racial hierarchy with other groups of people of color. These texts challenge notions of a black–white binary by including relations with immigrants and other groups of people of color (Wiese, p. 22; Sides, pp. 96, 98, 106). Wiese clearly defines African American suburban migrants as the trailblazers for other groups of people of color to enter these spaces. Initially, black interaction in the suburbs centered on European working-class immigrants who also were lured to the areas by the promise of employment in the industrial workforce. African Americans, like their immigrant counterparts, established enclaves, which allowed them to retain their ethnic and racial identities. By the end of the twentieth century, the black middle class enjoyed relatively better living conditions, though not as well as their white counterparts.

In Watts, more groups of people of color moved into the neighborhood. Isoardi notes the cultural contributions and intermingling of these groups with the African American community. The artists often held "jam sessions" with their Latino counterparts. They also influenced the Pan Asian Arkestra, who did not have the opportunity to collaborate with the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra (Isoardi, p. 231).[3] The artists welcomed everyone from the community, including those of other racial backgrounds. The group also resurged after the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, in which blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans (primarily Korean) participated. This interracial protest sparked the group to once again politicize their music as many young African Americans were doing with rap at the time (Isoardi, pp. 224-26).

Sides also notes that the racial division of labor created a hierarchy that extended beyond the black–white opposition as in many other regions of the country. Latinos competed with

blacks not only for jobs but for housing as well. White employers favored Mexican workers to blacks (Sides, p. 24). Mexicans, as well as Chinese and Japanese residents, adopted similar attitudes about blacks as whites (Sides, p. 112). More important, some who could pass as white did, rejecting any person of color (Sides, p. 111). Black women, however, worked alongside Mexican and Jewish women in the garment industry, and with substantially less tension then the men (Sides, p. 89). Sides also emphasizes shifts within the hierarchy. Depending on the current sociopolitical and economic culture, there was room to move up or down the ladder (Sides, p. 87).

Wiese illustrates the urban experience through forms of migration and suburbanization. He notes the major problems blacks faced in the twentieth century, both leaving their former environments and arriving in new, unprecedented frontiers. The suburbs offered stability for the black family as well as economic opportunity. Wiese challenges earlier studies of suburbia by including blacks and their long history in these communities. He interprets these areas as important spaces for battles over class, color, and power, in which blacks gained much strength in throughout the twentieth century. Wiese determines that these spaces represented the core of black achievement, securing property, economic and political ties, and space without having to sacrifice cultural identity (Wiese, 284). Wiese shows that while early black suburbanites laid the foundation, they created a sense of community for new migrants by midcentury.

As the American landscape changed after the World War II, more people sought to live in suburban communities. Prior to that time, as cities grew, those who moved to the outer boarders created new spaces, away from the bustling, noisy streets of the cities. Often, whites brought with them or hired blacks to serve as domestics. These blacks, in turn, inserted themselves into suburban life, often saving enough money to purchase property in nearby unincorporated areas (Wiese, pp. 26-30). They, in turn, created black suburban neighborhoods where they nurtured their culture and their community. Using major urban centers such as Detroit, Chicago, Pasadena, and Cleveland, among others, Wiese illustrates the development of black suburban life, not only in response to the Great Migration but also throughout the remaining half of the twentieth century.

Rather than focusing on black dependence on whites, *Places of Their Own* identifies racial problems, such as violence and resistance to black migration. Blacks responded with an aggressive attack on racial segregation, which ultimately provoked the federal government to become involved in the struggle, resulting in some significant gains for blacks. In contrast to their northern and western counterparts, black southerners who were already established along the margins were easily accommodated in their quest to secure property and reestablish communities near the suburbs. As these communities grew, so did black suburbia's economic position, creating class divisions. Yet African American suburbanites still maintained lower status than their middle-class white counterparts.

Isoardi considers the Watts community arts movement as a way for urban blacks, specifically in Los Angeles, to nurture their cultural identity and create their own spaces. Rather than abandoning the community, artists including musicians, visual artists, actors, singers, and poets committed themselves to Watts. Often, they became victims of the problems that plagued most major urban centers—poverty, homelessness, drugs, and crime. Rather than allowing these issues to overtake the community, the Watts artists offered an alternative way of dealing with them.

By creating programs for the youth to get involved with music and poetry and working within the local school system, the Watts artists created a safe space for blacks to interact with one another in spite of the brewing disenfranchisement, police brutality, and creation of housing projects. Together, these served as an incubator for crime and drug abuse. They pooled their resources, held concerts, taught music lessons, and even opened a few small businesses and a school to provide an alternative to the ills of urban life (Isoardi, pp. 185-86). Isoardi shows that blacks in Watts simply did not succumb to the pressure of poverty, but found ways to celebrate their lives and accomplishments (p. 88).

The artists of the Watts community did not attempt to abandon their problems but stayed to fight. Isoardi notes that many of them were mildly involved with drug use yet maintained a safe distance from the arrival of gang violence and other forms of illegal activity (pp. 204-6). The Watts community artists found their voices of protest to ghettoization through these mediums. Like many of their Black Nationalist friends, these artists aimed to help inner-city blacks by working within their community. They constantly allowed politics to influence their music, especially after the Watts Riots. Isoardi's work illustrates an important component in this history by showing how people resisted white racism from within the community.

Sides has a much less optimistic outlook for urban blacks. Using South Central Los Angeles as a focal point, Sides shows that race is inextricably linked to the history of urban America. He points out that blacks in Los Angeles had a profound impact on local politics and economics and that they forged new ground in the struggle for civil rights, which in many ways affected the struggle in other regions of the country.

L.A. City Limits considers the ways in which African Americans in Los Angeles survived strained social circumstances, marred by depression, war, and racism. Sides is at his best when dealing with race and labor issues. Rather than noting the ways in which the African American community maintained itself throughout these times, Sides highlights the negative effects of such events on the community. Blacks in South Central Los Angeles became enveloped into their community of poverty, crime, and drugs rather than resisting these problems, as opposed to Isoardi. Sides notes the shortcomings of local and national political leaders as a major contributing factor to these problems, and to some extent those African American who fled the inner city to live in more affluent, previously white communities. In very similar ways as Mike Davis, Sides paints a gloomy picture of the future for African Americans.[4]

In his introduction, Sides notes the shortcomings of his research. He does not present a community study of institutions or families (pp. 9-10). Although the African American experience is no monolith, Sides places black Los Angeles in the context of a modern struggle for civil rights and conducts his study accordingly. More important, his work contributes to the historiography of race in Los Angeles.[5] As Sides parallels the struggle for African Americans in Los Angeles with those in other major urban centers, he implies that indeed their experience is quite similar. Sides demonstrates that the struggle over labor in Los Angeles exemplifies patterns of oppression that manifest in social and political areas and ultimately spill into private lives.

All three texts explore the extent to gender plays a very important role in the African American urban community. As Wiese notes, many women laid the foundation for suburban migration, securing jobs as domestics. Black women served as pioneers of the migration and created networks for women to care and provide for their families (Wiese,

pp. 57-58). Isoardi underscores the role women played in the Watts community, not only as nurturers but also as contributors to the movement. Female musicians, poets, and vocalists actively participated in the long career of the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension (UGMAA) as power politics never seemed to burden the group. Members considered themselves brothers and sisters and as equals. Talent was taken at face value, regardless of the curator (Isoardi, pp. 168-69). Sides also notes the importance of women who joined the workforce in the postwar years. They gained strong ground in the public sector, working as clerical assistance in government agencies (Sides, p. 91).

Black women, to a large extent, secured positions that were more white-collar than their male counterparts. Although black women were paid lower wages than whites, their positions elevated them to a higher status, financially and socially. These women, along with their families, often joined the exodus out of the inner city and into the suburbs. Each author contributes to the emerging field of gender studies regardless of their implicit or explicit analyses of women's roles.[6]

Wiese, Isoardi, and Sides also make strong contributions to African American historiography. Each offers new ways of looking at the African American experience, beyond the context of the southern civil rights movement. Together, these texts show that African Americans in every region of the country, regardless of class, occupation, or gender, fought a similar struggle. No region was exempt from racial violence and white resistance to African American migration and community formation. Wherever blacks went, they were met, oftentimes with violent, physical, economic, social, and political resistance. As race transformed space, African Americans constantly fought desperately to lift themselves out of the horrific history of southern race relations.

Yet as socially similar their experience was, African Americans in areas outside of the South also joined the civil rights movement. They felt the effects of racial hostility and extended the struggle to the suburbs and cities. They fought the same battles, over school and housing segregation, employment, police brutality, and politics. Wiese, Isoardi, and Sides note the different ways equality was achieved, or attempted. Wiese finds that the suburbs, though a battleground, provided the space for African Americans to maintain their cultural heritage and elevate their status as citizens within the larger community. Isoardi emphasizes the importance of black community ties and shows the ways in which inner-city blacks relied heavily on the black middle class to help create more avenues out of the ghetto. Sides, conversely, explores the dependant relationship of inner-city blacks on whites, who controlled the political and economic sectors of the larger community.

All three texts make strong contributions to the way we think about the urban landscape. In considering black migration to the suburbs, Wiese not only challenges historians of suburban life in America, who focus primarily on the white middle-class, but also reminds readers that race, class, and space were not mutually exclusive (p. 4). Wiese utilizes a rich primary source base, consisting of court cases, newspaper articles and advertisements, census records, deed records, and personal accounts, to demonstrate the significance of black suburban life. He also uses a variety of secondary sources from fields such as history, sociology, anthropology, and political science, which makes his analysis of blacks in the twentieth century much more enriching. This work shows an alternate depiction of black urban life in the twentieth century.

Isoardi uses music and cultural production as alternative ways for thinking about the black urban experience. While much has been written on the jazz era, Isoardi focuses primarily on the relationship between political events and music.[7] Isoardi clearly immersed himself in the community, which allowed him a much deeper understanding of its culture. Through newspaper articles, interviews, music, and oral history archives, Isoardi provides a complete community study that places race, class, and gender at its forefront. In addition, Isoardi includes a compact disc for readers to fully understand the musical heritage from the group's early stages through the 1990s. Interestingly, as Isoardi points out, the group had over 300 members in its 40 years of existence (Isoardi, p. 263). His research highlights a vast majority of those members. Isoardi's work is a wonderful example of a closely and well researched community study.

Sides offers one of the few historical studies of the African American community in Los Angeles. His work emphasizes the importance of African Americans to the city's urbanization process. Sides investigates several sources, including newspaper articles, oral histories, and several manuscript collections, to show that the black experience in Los Angeles differed immensely from anywhere else in the country. One reason for this is the racial diversity of the city, which only increased during the second half of the twentieth century. This also has an affect, as Sides notes, on the urban labor movement. Sides is at his best when investigating labor and race politics and offers a new understanding of African Americans in the labor movement.

All three scholars offer new ways of understanding the African American urban experience. Each places race relations at the forefront, highlighting African American political participation, community building, and resistance to white supremacy. Many urban blacks directly confronted racial hostility. They challenged local systems of oppression that attempted to dictate where one could live, work, and socialize. Regardless of where one settled, as these studies show, African Americans played a significant role in shaping urban politics, economics, and social conditions.

—Marne L. Campbell
Kennesaw State University

Notes

1. Carole Marks, *Farewell—We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Marks offers a comprehensive study of African American migration, including an in-depth analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau findings as well as other statistical data. Other studies on African American migration include Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1580–1990* (New York: Norton, 1998); and Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction, The First Major Migration to The North of Ex-Slaves* (New York: Norton, 1976).

2. See, e.g., Hayward Derrick Horton, Beverlyn Lundy Allen, Cedric Herring, and Melvin Thomas, "Lost in the Storm: The Sociology of the Black Working Class, 1850–1900," *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (2000): 128–37. Also see Janis Faye Hutchinson, Nestor Rodriguez, and Jacqueline Hagan, "Community Life: African American in Multiethnic Residential Areas," *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 2 (1996): 201–23; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); and Phillip Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present, Vol. 4, The Black Worker During the Era of the American Federation of Labor and the Railroad Brotherhoods* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).

3. The Pan Asian Arkestra, founded by pianist John Jang, was one of the community-centered groups that pulled musicians together to celebrate their heritage in similar ways as the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. Jang and other Asian American musicians organized their own group between 1988 and 1994. They traveled from San Francisco to Los Angeles with the intention of collaborating with the leader of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, Horace Tapscott. Although this plan was never completely executed, the Pan Asian Arkestra showed tremendous support for the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. Soon after, musicians of other racial and ethnic backgrounds began forming their own Arkestras, celebrating both their community and ethnic heritages.

4. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

5. Other studies of African Americans in Los Angeles include Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Lawrence B. De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, eds., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001). Although their work considers African Americans in California, many of the collection's chapters focus on Los Angeles. For other works on race in Los Angeles, see, e.g., Thomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Matt Garcia, *A World of its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900–1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

6. Also see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present,* (New York: Random House, 1985); Brenda E. Stevenson, "Latasha Harlins, Soon Ja Du, and Joyce Karlin: A Case Study of Multicultural Female Violence and Justice on the Urban Frontier," *Journal of African American History* 89, no. 2 (2004): 152–76.

7. For the history of the jazz era in Los Angeles, see Jaqueline Cogell Dje Dje and Eddie S. Meadows, eds., *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Also see Clora Bryant, William Green, Steven L. Isoardi, Buddy Collete, and Marlin Young, eds., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Marne L. Campbell completed her PhD in History at UCLA. Currently, she is working on her book about race and gender in Los Angeles from 1850–1910. Her research emphasizes issues of labor, politics, and culture through the intersection of this diverse community with other communities of color and integrates her extensive database of black families in the region.