

Los Angeles Imaginaries
By Sharon Pittman

Los Angeles is situated within both a country and a state that have historically been associated with fantastical narratives. Myths about the beautiful, black Amazon warriors who supposedly inhabited the “island” were among the imaginaries that attracted Spanish explorers to California.¹ After Europeans conquered indigenous peoples throughout the continent, they claimed large areas of the lands that actually belonged to the natives. California, which was part of Mexico, became increasingly more attractive to outsiders when, in 1849, gold was discovered to be in abundance. It was not until a year later that California officially was recognized as one of the American states.² The California Gold Rush contributed to an already well-established imaginary of the United States of America being “the land of milk and honey.”

Often referred to as a world cultural center, Los Angeles is ostensibly the focal point within the golden state of the land of milk and honey. Like movies created in Hollywood and the performances that characterize Disneyland, the actual Los Angeles metropolitan area keeps the human imagination entertained by rags to riches narratives and the like. The American media, which strongly affects not only national views and culture but international ideals, is, for the most part, located in Los Angeles. “Welcome to Hollywood!” Randy Jackson shouts as a way of announcing that a contestant on the television show *American Idol* has made a giant step forward in achieving his or her dream of stardom. Prospective contestants from diverse areas of the world withstand rain, sleet, and snow as they wait in lines with hopes of being chosen to audition when the judges for *American Idol* travel to selected cities. A successful audition means that the contestant will be traveling to Hollywood to participate in a competition that culminates in a new “American idol.”

Similar to the disappointments that were experienced by explorers who found no black Amazon warriors, and later gold-diggers who remained empty-handed, many who journeyed to Los Angeles in search of glamour found the opposite. The imagined Los Angeles is not as easily transformed into reality as the pictures and other objects that fill galleries and museums. Behind the facades of such places as Universal Studios and the “small world” of Disneyland are individuals and groups whose toil built the actual city but remain on the margins of star-studded Hollywood and other prosperous areas. Freeways are often built to pass over downtrodden communities as opposed to providing the residents means of navigating Los Angeles.³

Artist and native of South Central Los Angeles Sha’Lena Tyler’s works, *Who’s in Your Neighborhood* (fig.1) and *Watts Towers* (fig.2) acknowledge the presence of the “Other” communities that exist in the shadows of the mythical Los Angeles. These are the darkest of shadows, the ones that tend to be criminalized by the media in spite of the many residents within these communities who work hard each day, fill the churches on Sundays, and socialize amicably with their friends and family from day to day.

The primary color scheme of *Who’s in Your Neighborhood?* serves to visually unify the images that symbolize the Bloods and the Crips, two street gangs who otherwise represent contention. Caps from each gang are in the foreground of the metropolis, which is presented as

¹ “Spanish Exploration”: <http://www.kindredtrails.com/California-History-1.html>

² <http://www.learncalifornia.org/doc.asp?id=299>

³ Klein, Norman. *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*. NY: Verso, 2008.

their backdrop. Their presence, however threatening, is an urban reality that the regular, hard-working residents of the inner-city face daily, as they strive to keep their lives in order and to raise their children in a safe environment. Also, it is the image that recurs in the media, essentializing South Central Los Angeles as a place where everyone and his mother gang-bangs

Tyler's works give voice to the subaltern, those whose voices have been overshadowed by media-constructed mythologies. In the shadows of the Watts Towers lives a community that has a rich artistic legacy. By the late 1960s, Watts had established a reputation much like that of Harlem, i.e., it became known as a black cultural center⁴. The image *Watts Towers* has a celebratory quality. Color specs in the sky resemble helium balloons being released as symbols of triumph. The towers glisten amidst the speckled sky, presenting the city of Watts as the type of place that is worthy of worldwide tourism. Watts becomes associated with the brighter side of the continuum of Los Angeles imaginaries.

Navigating Los Angeles tends to be an experience of contrasting images of bright lights versus the dark shadows that pose a threat to what we want to imagine the city to be. Borders of various suburbs overlap; bodies representing the full range of the color spectrum interact and sometimes collide while attempting to resist the exchanges and changes that are embedded in migration. Nonetheless, the landscape continues to change and the narrative is re-written in each era in an effort to define a dynamic and ambiguous metropolis. In its enormity, Los Angeles has perhaps surpassed its potential to be defined or confined to a specific center. Considering that residents of LA suburbs "live in LA" while, at the same time, "do not live in LA," the identity of Los Angeles is essentially undefined and a topic for in depth discourse.

Fig.1: *Who's in Your Neighborhood?*



Fig.2: *Watts Towers*



⁴ Widener, Daniel. *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010.