

BOOK REVIEWS

Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). 248 pp. \$24.95
Paperback.

In *The Folklore of the Freeway*, Eric Avila explores the rather invisible cultural history of federal highway programs and its impact on cities during the mid-to-late twentieth century. Centering race in his examination, Avila argues that communities of colour, who were disproportionately affected by the construction of freeways during the 1950s through the 1970s, waged their own “freeway revolts” against the “modern city” through creative expression. Lacking the political and economic resources of their largely white and more affluent counterparts whose well documented battles against highway planners and elected officials stopped many freeway projects from coming into fruition, urban Latino and African Americans, Avila suggests, used art, literature, music, festivals, and other cultural forms to voice their opposition to freeways and preserve the history of the neighbourhoods that lay beneath or within the slabs of heavy concrete. By elevating culture, or “folklore,” as a primary lens of analysis, Avila convincingly demonstrates that many people of colour in cities throughout the United States were well cognizant and resistant to the modernist (and racist) logics of “progress” laced in urban planning policy of the time despite the lack of “success” in stopping freeway projects.

Throughout *The Folklore of the Freeway*, Avila uses traditional archival materials as well as visual and discourse analysis, weaving together histories, anecdotes, and artistic works into a narrative of racial disparity and resistance. After a brief historical and cultural contextual overview of freeway construction in the United States beginning with the 1956 Federal Highway Act, subsequent chapters explore the dichotomous points of view on freeways between whites and non-whites based on various themes: gender, historical memory, and visual art. Avila juxtaposes white communities’ reactions, strategies, and viewpoints with the less documented and somewhat different approaches of people of colour whose neighbourhoods were the main targets of freeway construction. Artwork and critiqued freeways, particularly by artists and organisers such as the muralist Judith Baca and writer Helena Maria Viramontes, were vivid demonstrations of the communities’ frustration with the new infrastructure imposed on their neighbourhoods. Likewise, Avila conveys that whites’ employment of “nostalgia” to save certain historic neighbourhoods from freeways had very different receptions and outcomes than black and brown places of historical significance. Whitewashed depictions of certain “historic” neighborhoods such as New Orleans’ French Quarter, for example, inevitably saved those places from the

wrecking ball as opposed to African American and Latino neighbourhoods like St. Paul's Rondo-St. Anthony neighborhood or Miami's Overtown. Nevertheless, the inevitable reality of freeways in many minority neighbourhoods led many cultural workers and activists to creatively adapt to their obstructive environs. Avila points to Chicano Park in San Diego and the jazz parades of Treme in New Orleans as inspiring examples of urban communities of colour "taking back" the freeway.

Overall, *The Folklore of the Freeway* is a quick read, particularly for those astute in urban history and urban planning scholarship as well as to scholars of ethnic studies. Avila's strength and greatest contribution with this work is complicating the often-told story of the "freeway revolt" led by the largely white middle class through his reading of cultural resistance from the communities that were most affected by modern infrastructure. In many of his chapters, Avila bifurcates each community's treatment of the freeways, emphasising the deep chasm between those who were successful at evading the coming of the freeway and those who were not. For example, his chapter on white and Latino artists' divergent perspectives on freeways in their art richly demonstrates the dissimilarity and inequality between the two communities in Los Angeles.

Yet, as a whole, activist and "artist" voices of opposition from disenfranchised communities in this work are fairly few. Moreover, many artists whom Avila demonstrates as exemplars of community resistance, such as Carlos Almaraz, come from a particular politicized generation of the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps the paucity of these voices is largely due to the lack of archival sources, but one would be curious of the viewpoints of those who one East L.A. activist deemed as "apathetic" because they "accepted it [freeways] because the government ordered it" (85). Perhaps some who were displaced viewed the construction of the modern city as an ironic opportunity to "suburbanize" through the desegregation of whiter, more affluent neighbourhoods. The large numbers of Latinos moving to the Southeast cities of the LA County and African Americans to the Crenshaw area and Inglewood during this same period can perhaps serve as possible examples of a different mindset of those communities targeted for freeway expansion.¹ In my own research on Filipinos in Los Angeles, some residents hoped for city and state officials to seize their homes during the age of urban renewal for it meant opportunity to obtain relocation fees and move to a better, more suburban, neighbourhood.² Paying more attention to perspective, of course, is not aimed to justify or diminish the heinous destruction neighbourhoods of colour from urban infrastructure projects. On the contrary, capturing these voices would further highlight the complex and nuanced power of racial capitalism and white supremacy ingrained in urban place.

On another note, with the exception of the concluding chapter, which discussed Hawaii's struggles with their interstate freeway, and a short mention of Boston's Chinatown, *The Folklore of the Freeway* lacks much attention towards