

H-Net Reviews

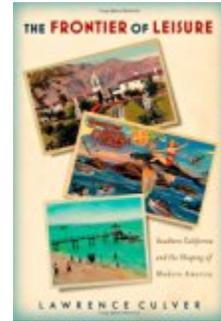
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lawrence Culver. *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. x + 317 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-538263-1.

Reviewed by Sarah Schrank (California State University–Long Beach)

Published on H-Environment (April, 2011)

Commissioned by David T. Benac



From Resort Culture to the Backyard Swimming Pool: The Emergence of the Southern California Lifestyle

In *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*, Lawrence Culver examines why Southern California became a region associated with casual, outdoor leisure pursuits and, more provocatively, asks how these regional practices became a rather mundane part of postwar America's mass-produced suburban landscape. Building upon the foundational work of John Baur, Kevin Starr, and Emily Abel, Culver begins the story with the nineteenth-century health tourism that brought the sickly, infirm, and tubercular in the thousands to Southern California to benefit from the sun and clean air. Many of these visitors died, of course, but others, like the famed booster Charles Fletcher Lummis, survived, stayed and spread word of the health bounty that lay to the far west of the Mississippi. Rolled into the promotional discourses of healthy bodies and a new-found Eden was a thinly veiled racism that promised white middle-class transplants that Los Angeles, and its surrounding environs, would be culturally exclusive and free of the racial and ethnic diversity that plagued other American cities. Nineteenth-century promoters' assumption that Southern California's healthful climate and landscape were for whites only would haunt the production of leisure spaces, creating racially segregated beaches and public parks, and limit black, Latino, and Asian American access to the suburban culture of leisure as it took shape after World War II.

Much of the book focuses on two distinct leisure areas, Catalina and Palm Springs. Catalina, the island found twenty miles off the coast of Los Angeles, be-

gan its resort life after decades of failure as an agricultural venture when the Banning family expanded its transportation interests to include vacation tourism and marine-based recreation. Celebrated in the late nineteenth century for its laid-back social climate and scantily dressed leisure classes, Catalina's sale in 1919 to the chewing-gum magnates, the Wrigleys, signified its new mass accessibility to a middle-class clientele, as well as its slow decline as other southwestern tourist destinations like Las Vegas and Tijuana began to draw visitors away. Culver's discussion of Palm Springs is especially rich as he delves more deeply into the special attraction of the desert, a less obvious tourist destination than an idyllic summer island retreat. Here, Culver describes how a small desert oasis, long a valued resource for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, initially attracted health tourists in the early twentieth century. Eventually, the desert grew appealing for modernists pursuing architectural innovations, new artistic venues, and an exotic back-to-the-land experience. Much of this experimentation was tied to the body and, as the 1920s unfolded, suntanned skin became a prestigious marker of leisure and a signifier of health. In the desert, Southern California's legacy of health tourism met the sensuality of the modern body to produce an unparalleled resort experience highlighting celebrity, new wealth, and sex: "The bohemian sexual and marital mores already apparent in Hollywood intersected with the resort atmosphere of Palm Springs, and this new, more open sexuality would gradually appear elsewhere in national tourist culture" (p. 160).

As he suggests above, ultimately Culver is most interested in how cultural ideas about leisure spread and, especially, how exotic vacation locales became successful and widely imitated models for the mass-produced suburban homes of the American Sunbelt. “Desert modern,” a high-end architectural style featuring open-design plans, wall-to-wall carpet, air-conditioning, swimming pools, and lots of glass became, in a cheaper version, a much sought-after design for suburban families: “While environmentalists might condemn desert modern, the masses would not. Here, it seemed, were houses that fully merged inside and outside, providing spaces for that essential component of Californian—and indeed middle-class American—life: leisure. While not everyone could have a Neutra masterpiece, many families could adopt aspects of Palm Springs modern” (p. 187). And many did, especially once postwar developers in cities like Phoenix

began to build entire subdivisions selling both homes and lifestyles modeled on those of the Southern Californian vacation experience. Culver concludes that the spread of this particular form of commodified leisure did not result in progressive social experimentation but in fact bred intense political conservatism as middle-class families turned inward, away from the street, and focused their attention on their own backyard resorts-in-miniature. This argument is not unique to Culver but is part of the Sunbelt literature that has long suggested an important relationship between the region’s high rates of private homeownership, suburban social organization, and a reactionary racial and class politics. *The Frontier of Leisure* is a most entertaining read and highly recommended to anyone interested in the cultural, urban, and environmental histories of the American Southwest.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Sarah Schrank. Review of Culver, Lawrence, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31417>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.