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A Review Essay on *Sanctioning Matrimony: Western Expansion and Interethnic Marriage in the Arizona Borderlands*

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The southern portion of the modern-day state of Arizona, more particularly the Tucson area, was acquired by the United States in the Gadsden Purchase of 1854. Americans made their way into the area over the next few generations, many of them arriving as single men, in a region overwhelmingly Mexican in terms of both demography and culture. Many of these American men married local women. *Sanctioning Matrimony* is an innovative reconstruction, mostly of the story of such "white" men and such "Mexican" women. The book's title is a deliberate pun, so the ambiguity is intentional, with its two meanings, both acceptance and rejection, "endorsement and castigation" (p. 16).

The writing is often felicitous, the insights striking, and the methods and sources together are illuminating. Author Sal Acosta discerns a vast gulf that often separated the dominant narrative, a set of racist and nationalist abstractions promoted by distant writers or ambitious politicians with their conceits of cultural superiority, and the many human stories that unfolded on the ground—where non-Mexican men formed families and joined communities across lines of language, culture, and, in most cases, religion. Most of those migrant men were white Americans from east of the Mississippi, but others were black southerners or immigrants from Europe or China. Migrant men melted into the dominant

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Sanctioning Matrimony: Western Expansion and Interethnic Marriage in the Arizona Borderlands. By Sal Acosta. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. xii + 239 pp. Halftones, tables, maps, notes, bibliography, index. $55.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-81653-237-7.) Peter Wallenstein is a professor of history at Virginia Tech.

Mexican culture and married in the local Catholic church. Their children carried (and they themselves often acquiring) Spanish names. The singer Linda Ronstadt of the second half of the twentieth century embodies, through her "eclectic genealogy," the interethnic history of the Arizona Borderlands during the second half of the nineteenth century (p. 11).

One burden of the book is to show how all people involved in these families navigated a world in which the legal system in Arizona, beginning very early on and extending throughout (and well beyond) the years of this study, banned some interethnic marriages, especially between whites and African Americans, but also between whites and both Native Americans and ethnic Chinese. Where did "Mexicans" fit into this framework? And in what ways and to what degree did the law of miscegenation—or a commitment to Anglo cultural superiority—contort the options of people in any or all of these categories?

Under the terms of treaties in 1848 and 1854 that brought northern Mexico into the U.S. orbit, Mexicans were white—regardless of the new category, "Mexican," introduced into the U.S. census in 1930, and regardless of twenty-first century language regarding "majority minority," which understands Hispanics as nonwhite. Yet, as Acosta explains, "Mexicans" embodied a "racial in-betweenness" given "their official classification as white" yet "their social construction as nonwhite," so the two dimensions could scarcely be assumed to be in alignment (p. 102).

Most couples had no problem with the law, as it permitted "white" men and "Mexican" women to marry. Some other couples—Mexican and black, Mexican and Chinese—made their way to New Mexico to get married, where, beginning in 1866, the law expressed no such concerns or restrictions. Once married, they generally could bring their new marriages with them back into Arizona and have their legal status at least appear to escape challenge.

In some cases, even legally prohibited couples managed to obtain marriage licenses and hold wedding ceremonies inside Arizona. However, as in other territories or states with laws against interracial marriage, couples who went against the statute could find that a huge penalty eventually attached to their marriage, when a rival claimant to family property attacked the legitimacy of the marriage under which, in the absence of a will, property could be claimed by a surviving member of the immediate family.

Acosta has systematically processed a combination of sources—court cases, census materials, church records, newspaper accounts—that together permit the reconstruction of the many "interethnic" families, which provide the basis of his project. Doing so leads him to make fundamental renovations in the traditional historiography of interethnic families in the region.

True, for example, elite white men forged alliances with elite Mexican families, especially in the early years, but these comprised a small fraction of all

interethnic families. Also true, by late in the period he analyzes, the proportion of interethnic families had declined a great deal, but that had nothing to do with white men redirecting their attention and affections elsewhere once "white" women became more readily available for family formation. Those later newcomers to the region typically arrived already married and accompanied by their families. Single men, however, continued to marry at high rates across the ethnic line, especially in ethnically heterogeneous working-class neighborhoods.

Yet there is room for an unintentional ambiguity in that Acosta almost never uses the term "Anglo" (or "Euro-American") as a counterpart to "Mexican." He clearly prefers the term "white." Precisely the divergence, however, between so many people's experiences of legal whiteness coupled with social nonwhiteness makes the "white"–"Mexican" wording a bit unwieldy, bringing the empirical, the conceptual, and the rhetorical into a somewhat uneasy dance. Two queries that arise from the rich materials in this book, and might bear further exploration. First, the age of the "interethnic" brides, typically teenagers a decade younger than their Anglo husbands. Second is the matter of the Mexican men among whom so many Mexican women chose not to find a marital partner.

How representative is the Tucson area of the larger region? Acosta leans both ways on this important matter, and understandably so. Tucson's location near the post-1854 border with Mexico shaped the choices Mexican women had. For example, if a marriage went sour, Mexican women could take their children beyond the reach of local authorities over the Mexican border. Additionally, a good number of the Mexican women who entered into marriages with non-Mexican men in southern Arizona were themselves fairly recent arrivals.

Within Arizona, the Tucson area is sometimes contrasted with other parts of the territory or state. In central and northern Arizona, relations between whites and Mexicans were often far less accommodating, as were mining towns, and whites beyond the Tucson area even expressed exasperation with the voting power of "Mexicans" in the south. As for the wider West, Acosta ponders whether interethnic and interracial relations, and more specifically the experiences of Chinese men in areas, such as Idaho and South Dakota, might have been more accommodating had there been a bigger "Mexican" population, especially of Mexican women. Acosta therefore refers at one point to "the cultural uniqueness of the Arizona borderlands" (p. 147).

Acosta's interventions emphasize two dimensions. One is the tremendous significance of the demographic and cultural dominance of the Mexican population in the Tucson area as Anglo newcomers arrived. Another is the matter of choice, how people across those years chose among the options available and what those options were. He especially emphasizes the crucial roles played by Mexican women—their values, agency, choices, as well as their attitudes and

their behavior. *Sanctioning Matrimony* is, as much as anything, their story. The Mexican women, through the choices that so many made, "rescued white, black, and Chinese men from long or permanent bachelorhood in the West" (p. 160). At the same time, against the swirling racism and manifest ethnocentrism throughout the years of this study, "the actions of westering white men conveyed their approval of [Mexican women] as spouses" (p. 16).

Acosta's findings fit into various broad patterns in U.S. history. Most states enacted and long maintained anti-miscegenation laws. Thirty out of the forty-eight states during the 1920s, for example—and more than half of all other states previously—had and repealed anti-miscegenation laws. Therefore, couples in many times and places found themselves navigating such restrictions. The disjunction between official policy and actual social relations was widespread, as evidenced in the many illegal banned relationships. "White" men who married "black" women sometimes melted into the local black community. Banned marriages often ran afoul of the law retroactively, in property disputes after the death of one spouse rather than in criminal prosecutions. Finally, the in-betweeness of other groups—Irish early on, Italians later, and Jews perhaps throughout those years—resembled that of "Mexicans" in Tuscon.

In sum, this is an excellent book. Well researched, well conceived, and well written. *Sanctioning Matrimony* contributes a great deal to the literatures of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Southwest and, more generally, the American West. The book is a fine addition to the growing literature on the social and legal history of interracial and interethnic marriage.