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Anglo Men, Mexican Women, and Family Formation in the Borderlands: A Review Essay on Sanctioning Matrimony

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A Review Essay on *Sanctioning Matrimony*

Peter Wallenstein

The southern portion of today's state of Arizona, more particularly the Tucson area, was acquired by the United States in the Gadsden Purchase of 1854. As Americans made their way into the area over the next few generations, most arrived as single men in a region overwhelmingly Mexican in both demography and culture, and many married local women. *Sanctioning Matrimony* is an innovative reconstruction mostly of the story of such migrant men and 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 methods and sources together are illuminating, the insights are striking, and the writing is often felicitous. Author Sal Acosta discerns a vast gulf that often separated the dominant American narrative, which touted 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

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Peter Wallenstein is an award-winning professor of history at Virginia Tech. His many books include *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law—An American History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), *Cradle of America: A History of Virginia* (University Press of Kansas, 2007 and 2014), and *Race, Sex, and the Freedom to Marry: Loving v. Virginia* (University Press of Kansas, 2014). *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.)

Mississippi River, but others were black southerners or immigrants from Europe or China. These migrant men melted into the dominant Mexican culture and married in the local Catholic church, their children carrying (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 (p. 11).

One main burden of the book is to show how all people involved in these families had to navigate 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 people of Mexican origins fit into this framework? And in what ways and to what degree did the law of miscegenation—or, for that matter, a commitment to Anglo cultural superiority—contort the options of people in any or all of these categories?

Under the terms of the 1848 and 1854 treaties that brought northern Mexico under U.S. rule, Mexicans were white—regardless of whether the U.S. census introduced a new category, "Mexican," in 1930 and regardless of whether, in the twenty-first century, the public constantly hears language regarding an American state or even the entire nation becoming "majority minority," according to which Hispanics are widely understood as nonwhite. Yet, as Acosta explains, "Mexicans" embodied a "racial in-betweenness" given "their official classification as white" yet "their social construction as nonwhite" (p. 102). So the informal usage scarcely coincided with the official classification.

Most couples had no problem with the law, which readily permitted Anglo men and Mexican women to marry. Some other couples—Mexican and black, Mexican and Chinese—traveled a considerable distance to get married in New Mexico, where, beginning in 1866, the law imposed no restrictions on interracial unions. Once married elsewhere in that fashion, these couples generally could bring their new marriages back into Arizona and not find their legal status challenged.

In some cases, even legally prohibited couples managed to obtain marriage licenses and hold wedding ceremonies inside Arizona. But, as in other territories or states with laws against interracial marriage (however defined), couples whose connection went against the statute could find a huge penalty eventually attached to their marriage. Upon the death of a spouse, especially in the absence of a will, the surviving partner might face a legal challenge by a rival claimant to the family property on the grounds of the marriage's illegitimacy under Arizona law.

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 providing 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 marriages always comprised a small fraction of all interethnic families. True, by late in the period he analyzes, the proportion of interethnic families had declined a great deal, but that situation had nothing to do with white men redirecting their attention and affections elsewhere once Anglo women became more readily available for family formation. Those later newcomers to the region typically arrived already married and accompanied by their families. But single men in southern Arizona continued to marry, at high rates, across the ethnic line, especially in ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods of mostly working-class people.

Yet there is room for an unintentional ambiguity. Acosta almost never uses the term *Anglo* (or *Euroamerican*) 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 their social nonwhiteness, makes the labeling of "white" and "Mexican" a bit unwieldy and brings the empirical, the conceptual, and the rhetorical into a somewhat uneasy dance.

Regardless, how representative was the Tucson area—how much a window on a 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 if a marriage went sour and if, for example, they wished to take their children beyond the reach of local authorities. It also relates to how a good number of the Mexican women who entered into marriages with non-Mexican men in southern Arizona were themselves fairly recent arrivals there.

Even 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; friction was the rule in mining towns wherever located. And whites beyond the Tucson area could even express 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 such areas as Idaho and South Dakota, might have been more congenial had a bigger Mexican population, in particular more Mexican women, been present. 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 decided among the options available to them and what those options were. He especially emphasizes the crucial roles played by Mexican women—their attitudes and behavior, their values, agency, and choices. *Sanctioning Matrimony* is, as much as anything, their story. And it was they who, through the choices that so many made, "rescued white, black, and Chinese men from long or [even] 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 long maintained anti-miscegenation laws—thirty out of the forty-eight states during the 1920s did so, for example, and many other states had previously enacted such laws and then repealed them. So couples in a great many times and places found themselves navigating such restrictions. The disjunction between official policy and actual social relations was also widespread, as evidenced in the many illegal black-white and other banned relationships across America. White men who married African American 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-betweenness of other groups—Irish early on, Italians later, and Jews perhaps throughout those years—resembled that of Mexicans in Tucson.

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