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Pablo Mitchell. *West of Sex: Making Mexican America, 1900-1930.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. xi + 151 pages. $67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-53268-4; $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-53269-1.

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Sexual and Ethnic Identity on Trial

Pablo Mitchell's latest book, *West of Sex*, combines the fields of ethnic history and sexuality and gender studies. He examines the efforts of Mexican Americans in the West to negotiate their in-between status as colonial subjects who were not members of the races regarded as inferior (African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans), yet were not seen as fully "white," either. Mitchell focuses on one area of this colonial identity: sexual identity and practice. He notes that the early twentieth century was a time when attitudes about both racial and sexual norms and boundaries were hardening. Using court cases, he argues that Mexican Americans took advantage of their access to U.S. citizenship and the legal system to assert both their legal rights and the legitimacy and respectability of their families and sexual practices. Mitchell also points out that such legal activism suggests that scholars need to rethink their conceptualization of the Mexican American civil rights movement. Before the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the G. I. Forum, Mexican Americans were insisting on their equal treatment under the law, and Mitchell correctly argues that these early twentieth-century court cases should be seen as precursors to the post-World War II surge of activism.

Mitchell's introductory chapter clearly lays out his thesis. It provides an excellent summary of the changes taking place in the West, and the broader U.S. society, in the early decades of the twentieth century, and situates the experiences of Mexican Americans within this context. His endnotes reveal a deep familiarity with, and reliance upon, recent scholarship in the fields of both immigration and ethnic history and sexuality and gender studies. Subsequent chapters use court transcripts and census and other records (when available) to explore topics such as colonial status, family construction and protection, incest, prostitution, and homosexuality. A brief concluding chapter restates the themes that run through the book, and calls for further research into nontraditional sexual activity and identities in Mexican American communities, tying into the work of feminist Chicana writers.

Pablo Mitchell's *West of Sex* is a well-researched and well-written book. Its central arguments are clearly stated and logical. It is difficult to assess, however, the extent to which the court cases he uses as evidence support his thesis. Given the scarcity of the records, his conclusions are suggestive rather than conclusive. His reading of the trial transcripts is certainly plausible, and the reader is inclined to agree with Mitchell's interpretations. Yet, as Mitchell himself notes, there are "clear limitations of court records" which necessitate that they be "interpreted cautiously" (p. 7). First, there is the nature of all court cases, which capture moments of crisis in communities when standards have been violated. Though that makes trials obliquely reflect communal norms, it also makes them nonrepresentative of the community; therefore, the conclusions drawn from them must be limited. Second, the lack (in most cases) of much evidence about the Mexican American trial participants apart from the court records themselves makes it difficult to gain perspective on these men and women. It is difficult to know how typical the words and attitudes portrayed in the trial transcripts are of these people, not to mention how representative these people are of their communities. Third, it is impossible to know to what extent their testimony reflects their own opinions, as opposed to those of the interpreter (in some cases) or the legal strategy employed by the usually Anglo attorneys. No doubt trial testimony offers rare and valuable examples of public speaking by Mexican Americans, as Mitchell states, and their very willingness to assert their rights and identities in legal proceedings is important evidence of Mexican American activism. But too much weight ought not be placed on words used (or not used) in court cases.

Mitchell's argument that Mexican Americans are best

understood as colonial subjects is also problematic. Certainly the majority of Mexican Americans prior to the 1920s were native to the West, a region that had belonged to Mexico prior to U.S. conquest in 1846-47. Despite the promises of citizenship and equal rights in the 1848 Treaty of Guadelupe Hidalgo ending the Mexican-American War, those Mexicans who remained in the conquered territory were not afforded the equal protection of the laws at all times. But there seems to be a considerable difference between the status of Mexican Americans in the United States and the status of Filipinos, native Hawaiians, and other colonial peoples overseas. Many Mexican Americans were U.S. citizens and enjoyed legal rights, as their presence in the courtroom indicates. Mitchell documents the ways in which Mexican Americans were singled out by their color and language in the trial transcripts, as well as the slights they endured, such as not being afforded the dignity of honorific titles like "Mrs." But though insults indicate second-class status in the eyes of Anglos, they are still nothing compared to the often horrific treatment of colonial peoples, let alone African Americans.

Despite these limitations, *West of Sex* represents a valuable contribution to the fields of immigration and ethnic history and sexuality and gender studies. It would be an appropriate book for undergraduate or graduate courses in those subjects, and will certainly be of interest to scholars.

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