

Masthead Logo

Western Washington University
Western CEDAR

History Faculty and Staff Publications

History

8-2006

Review of: Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles

Kevin Allen Leonard

Western Washington University, kevin.leonard@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs

Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Leonard, Kevin Allen, "Review of: Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles" (2006). *History Faculty and Staff Publications*. 10. https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

reinterpretation of cultural pluralism and the liberal narrative of immigration history. By exploring the process by which some people were remade as (illegal) aliens, while others gained legal status, Ngai reveals the constructed nature of nation and citizenship that continues to shape the discourse of borders and immigration today. This book is at the forefront of important new scholarship about politics, law, and the formation of modern U.S. national and cultural identity and is most highly recommended.

Arizona State University

KAREN J. LEONG

Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles. By Mark Wild. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005. xi + 298 pp. \$39.95)

A number of geographers and historians have observed that an unusually diverse mix of people populated many Los Angeles neighborhoods prior to World War II. Few scholars, however, have explored how the diversity of these neighborhoods affected the history of Los Angeles and the experiences of its residents. Mark Wild's *Street Meeting* departs from earlier studies that have focused on a single ethnic group. Wild explores how African American, immigrant, and working-class Anglo residents negotiated the multiethnic environments in which they lived. He also explains how local elected officials and middle-class social reformers responded to the growing diversity of these neighborhoods.

Street Meeting is a collection of seven thoughtful chapters about race and ethnic relations in Los Angeles. The first describes the multi-ethnic population of the central neighborhoods. The next two chapters deal with the efforts of business leaders, elected officials, and social reformers to "reconstruct" Los Angeles. Chapter 4 examines the experiences of children in the central districts, and chapter 5 focuses on "love, sex, and marriage across ethnoracial lines." The final two chapters discuss street speech and radical politics. Although each chapter's argument is persuasive, the book does not make clear why it examines some topics and ignores others, such as the experiences of employees in factories with diverse work forces.

Wild's conclusions rest upon meticulous research. He perused records in more than twenty archival collections, and his study draws upon numerous oral histories and secondary sources. Although Wild's research is impressive, he could have examined other primary sources or at least explained why he chose not to do so. The

first chapter, for example, relies heavily on the reports of social workers and other reformers to describe the city's diverse central neighborhoods. The use of the manuscript census may have led Wild to question the ways in which reformers described these districts and their residents. In later chapters, he could have used ethnic community newspapers to explore how African Americans and immigrants perceived themselves, their neighbors, and their neighborhoods.

Many readers may struggle, as I did, with Wild's terminology. Throughout the book, he employs the terms "ethnic," "racial," and "ethnoracial," but he never clearly and explicitly defines them. The term "ethnoracial" seems to conflate the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity" and to obscure the development, maintenance, and operation of racial ideologies. Some scholars have used the term "ethnoracial group" to avoid using the troublesome term "race," but, by doing so, they have sidestepped critical questions about the process of racialization. Too often, *Street Meeting* seems to describe "ethnoracial" communities and boundaries without exploring how identities and boundaries were established and maintained.

Although readers may have to wrestle with these issues, *Street Meeting's* contribution to our understanding of multi-ethnic cities far outweighs any potential flaws. The book will prove especially valuable for students of urban history, the history of Los Angeles, and the history of race and ethnicity. Each chapter is fascinating and compelling, and the book raises a number of questions for future scholars to pursue.

Western Washington University

KEVIN ALLEN LEONARD

Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures: A Special Issue of American Quarterly. Edited by Raúl Homero Villa and George J. Sánchez. (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2005. viii + 357 pp. \$19.95 paper)

Published as a special issue of *American Quarterly* to celebrate its relocation to the West Coast, *Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures* presents a superb collection of cutting-edge scholarship on the Southern California megalopolis. Illustrating the tension between the particularistic and generally applicable qualities of Los Angeles, the essays collectively aim to examine, in the words of editors Raúl Homero Villa and George Sánchez, "the forms and meanings of