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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Mark Wild.** *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xi + 298 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24083-4.

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**Published on** H-Urban (September, 2005)

## Peering into Forgotten Places: Exposing the History of Ethnoracial Mixing in Los Angeles

The primary appeal of this book is that it tells a story that is long overdue–the story of working-class Los Angeles, and the nature of relationships among people of different ethnoracial groups in the mixed neighborhoods of the central city during the early twentieth century. (Wild uses "ethnoracial" as an umbrella term for ethnic and racial groups.) Wild argues that cities in the U.S. West during this period (more so than American cities elsewhere) were marked by mixed religious, ethnic, racial, and linguistic residential communities in which people challenged, enforced, and occasionally transcended the categories meant to contain them. What is unique about this book is not so much that Wild gives voice to working-class Angelenos, many of them of color (though he does this well), but that he convincingly demonstrates that these diverse and multilingual groups were talking to each other in ways that could be transformative for urban social relations in the city. This book will certainly join the ranks and, even better, push the boundaries of the emerging "canon" of texts concerned with the history and unique spatial form of Los Angeles, loosely known as the "Los Angeles school of urban theory." This book should be read alongside other recent studies of early-twentieth-century Los Angeles that take as their topic white people's attempts to dominate the spatial and social organization of the city during this critical period.[1] Exceptional in its clear organization and concise writing (without footnotes and appendices, the text is just over two hundred pages), *Street Meeting* would be an excellent choice as an assigned text for undergraduate courses concerned with Los Angeles or Western history, and urban or ethnic studies, especially those that focus on interracial relationships and coalitions rather than single ethnic or racial groups.

A major strength of this work is its explicit attempt to de-center whiteness in the telling of Los Angeles history. In his choice of language, kinds of arguments, and use of sources, Wild is committed to privileging the voices of his working-class, multiracial subjects above those of the elite whites who have dominated most prior histories of the city. For example, Wild explains that he terms the neighborhoods under study "central" neighborhoods rather than "foreign districts," as they would have been called at the time, not only because they are geographically central but because labeling these neighborhoods and their residents as foreign would be often incorrect (ignoring African Americans and all non-whites born in the country) and unnecessarily estrange his subjects from the mainstream of the city's history. Further, Wild is always careful to point out the diversity of opinion and experience within the neighborhoods he is studying, painting a complex portrait of working-class life and political leanings. Finally, and perhaps most convincingly, Wild's rich and creative use of sources–autobiographies, church records, legal and administrative documents, and nearly forty interviews conducted by the author himself–soundly refutes the suggestion that a relative lack of historical sources for working-class poor and non-white populations forces us to rely disproportionately on the voices of the city's white elites.

Wild begins his story with two useful chapters concerning the larger social, political, and economic context of Los Angeles during the first few decades of the twentieth century. In chapter 1, he concisely outlines the key demographic and political shifts that produced Los Angeles's ethnically- and racially-mixed residential neighborhoods during this period. Narrating the migrations of ethnic Mexicans, Japanese and Chinese immigrants, Jews from eastern Europe, and African Americans primarily from the U.S. South, Wild gives us an excellent sense of the social make-up of the neighborhoods that constitute his focus: the central city neighborhoods of Sonoratown, Chavez Ravine, Chinatown, "Five Points," Little Tokyo, Boyle Heights, Belvedere, City Terrace, and Watts. (The latter, admittedly, is not geographically central, but is similarly characterized by a highly mixed ethnoracial population). Wild's second chapter situates his study within larger transformations then taking place in Los Angeles, namely massive industrialization, the rise of corporate capitalism and the substitution of interest group politics for the valorization of the independent (typically white male) producer. Here Wild introduces a key contradiction of Los Angeles: though imagined as a "white spot" of America, in fact the white population of the city fundamentally depended on non-white labor for its survival and success. Accordingly, the nonwhite population needed to be contained or assimilated, a process the author refers to as the "corporate reconstruction" of ethnoracial communities and which grounds the text theoretically (pp. 4-5).

The next three chapters focus on the social, recreational, and sexual relationships that developed across ethnoracial lines in Los Angeles's central neighborhoods. Chapter 3 is a case study of the Church of All Nations, a non-sectarian church sponsored by Methodist leadership in 1918 and founded by political radical G. Bromley Oxnam. All Nations was unique for its time, particularly given the context of postwar repression of organizations deemed subversive or radical. It emphasized bridging cultural distance (church surveys showed membership among forty-two ethnoracial groups) and political empowerment, as well as provided more traditional social services. Wild points to All Nations as an example of an institution that created the potential for substantial interethnic communication and coalition building, but argues that the church ultimately declined because of paternalistic attitudes towards members, failure to incorporate nonwhites into leadership positions, and a lack of mechanisms for recruiting members of its children's programs as adults. Chapter 4 is a study of children's relationships in central city neighborhoods, with a focus on schools, playgrounds, gangs, and ethnic-specific language schools and cultural institutions. Wild analyzes the ways in which children were typically more open to friendships with members of other ethnoracial groups, but were often pressured to conform to their own group by parents, teachers, and program administrators. Through tactics such as course tracking and guidance counseling, adults socialized children into narrow conceptions of their identities and opportunities. Chapter 5 focuses on love, sex, and marriage with a particularly insightful analysis of the prostitution business in central Los Angeles. Wild effectively demonstrates how both female prostitutes and their male pimps manipulated ethnoracial distinctions for profit. For example, white women charged more for their services than women of color, and African-American women frequently charged white men more than men of color. Still, he argues that the deliberate constriction of prostitution to the ethnically-mixed central neighborhoods created perceptions that the nonwhite women who lived in these areas were promiscuous, therefore reinforcing ethnic stereotypes.

Wild's final two chapters turn from a focus on residential and social history to an examination of the political mobilization and incorporation of working-class central city residents by such diverse groups as the Socialist Party, the Partido Liberal Mexicano, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Communist Party. He argues that in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the political culture of "street speaking" created the opportunities for interracial coalition building, opportunities that were only sometimes fulfilled, but which provided a rare form of political engagement for people who were overwhelmingly excluded from traditional electoral politics because of language, citizenship status or lack of knowledge about the American political process. These two chapters also stand out as the most tightly connected to Wild's overarching thesis about the corporate reconstruction of ethnoracial categories. Chapter 6 begins with a detailed analysis of the Socialist Party's attempts to mobilize the diverse communities living in or around the central city through frequent outdoor political speeches, typically in the Plaza area or in major intersections around the downtown core. Here, Wild powerfully shows how a combination of repressive measures by the city's white elite, such as the establishment of a "no speech" zone, infiltration by spies, sponsorship of opposition speeches, and finally passage of California's Criminal Syndicalism Act in 1919 effectively banished street speaking from the city's political culture throughout the

1920s. In Wild's seventh and final empirical chapter, he illustrates how the Communist Party, taking advantage of the bleak conditions created by the Depression in California, revived street speaking in the 1930s but through a series of strategies that were far more inclusive and radical than those used by any previous organization. These strategies included the deliberate incorporation of nonwhites and women into leadership positions, the distribution of flyers in multiple languages, encouragement of violence in order to make class conflict visceral, and a genuine willingness to work with existing radical ethnic "satellite" organizations led by activists of color. Wild quite rightly argues that because of these strategies, the Communist Party constituted one of the largest threats to the idea of Los Angeles as a "white spot," and therefore was constantly confronted with police and administrative repression.

I am truly challenged to identify a significant weakness of this book. Occasionally there is a disjuncture between Wild's theoretical linchpin, the idea of corporate liberal reconstruction as a process which solidified ethnoracial categories, and his empirical evidence. Theory and history are woven together more effectively in the specifically political chapters, particularly his analysis of the repression of street speaking, than in his chapters on residential and social history. Still, the text as a whole provides a clear portrait of the negotiation of ethnoracial categories and the possibilities for interracial interactions between groups of people with very different levels of power and resources. Without a doubt, this is an important story, and one that has remained relatively hidden until now.

Note

[1]. See, for example, William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Phoebe Kropp, "Citizens of the Past? Olvera Street and the Construction of Race and Memory in 1930s Los Angeles," *Radical History Review* 81 (2001): pp. 35-60; and much of Kevin Starr's series on California history, particularly *Inventing the Dream: California Through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).