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Mae West and the Limits of Radio Censorship in the 1930s
by MATTHEW MURRAY

ON DECEMBER 12, 1937, Mae West appeared on network radio and the patterns of broadcast censorship were never the same again. In the space of thirty minutes, during what was West’s only major radio performance, inviolable taboos concerning sacred texts were breached and heterosexual female desire was accorded unprecedented license over the airwaves. The program produced a vitriolic reaction from religious and reformist organizations, which criticized the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) for failing to apply appropriate editorial oversight. By orchestrating an organized campaign to rid radio of similar moral improprieties in the future, these groups managed to extend their social influence into the realm of broadcasting regulation.

However, this campaign provoked a backlash in the popular press and from members of the general public, who advocated a more relaxed policy regarding the aural representation of sex, sexuality, and gendered display. The fierce discursive exchanges that took place in the aftermath of West’s appearance attested to a wider divergence over what constituted normative gendered sexuality and the limits of acceptable female public deportment in the U.S. at that time. West’s performance brought to the surface latent moral and institutional tensions relating to radio that had been developing throughout the 1930s. The controversy that developed centrally involved a dispute over the permissible representational limits of network broadcasting. Indeed, the panic incited by the West broadcast makes it a particularly illuminating and highly specific instance for the examination of the interrelation between social, cultural, textual, industrial, and regulatory issues of the time.

Like most significant events involving popular mediated culture, the Mae West broadcast reveals countervailing pressures within and between the sites of production, reception and social context. Nevertheless, in this instance at least, a definite historical development is discernible: following West’s appearance, her detractors succeeded in strengthening their cultural hegemony by persuading a sympathetic and apologetic broadcasting industry to implement more stringent procedures for editing and censoring radio program content. The popular backlash, while constituting a loose coalition that...
opposed these developments, was unable to mobilize any significant political or institutional support.

After describing the program and providing examples of statements and opinions from the subsequent fallout, this paper situates the controversy as one centrally involving competing constructions of gendered sexuality that existed in American society at this time. Considering them as competing moral figures of embodied femininity, it contrasts Mae West with the reform-minded women who campaigned to clean up radio. Then it analyzes radio’s technological and institutional apparatus, since this structure largely determined the parameters of the medium’s encoding procedures and its modes of regulation. The paper concludes by outlining the more stringent self-censorship practices that the controversy engendered.

The Chase & Sanborn Hour—a weekly variety show featuring ventriloquist Edgar Bergen, his dummy Charlie McCarthy, and celebrity guests from the entertainment world—was a Sunday evening favorite of radio audiences in the late 1930s. The episode two weeks prior to Christmas, 1937, promised to be a highlight of broadcast entertainment since it brought McCarthy together with the notorious Mae West in what one fan magazine dubbed “The Sex-Appeal Battle of the Century.” But the “mistress of fire and the wooden lover” generated more heat than expected, sparking a level of protest over the program for which NBC, program sponsor Standard Brands, and advertising agency J. Walter Thompson were totally unprepared. In the broadcast’s aftermath, radio faced “the most aroused public criticism it had yet encountered.” While West admitted only that her voice had “smoldered a bit,” editorial across the country condemned the moral contagion that the show represented, complaining that radio had been “prostituting” its services by permitting “impurity [to] invade the air.” Catholic leaders reprimanded the series’ sponsors for presenting the “disgusting broadcast” and chastised the network for defying “even the most elementary sense of decency.” Outraged educators, captains of industry, and congressmen demanded that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) investigate the matter, advocating direct regulatory intervention should the industry fail to take steps to ensure the prohibition of similar transgressions from future broadcasts.

The expressions of revulsion were directed primarily at an Adam and Eve sketch performed by Ms. West and master of ceremonies Don Ameche, as well as a suggestive dialogue between the actress and McCarthy. During the Garden of Eden routine, Eve/West declared her listlessness in God’s paradise and invited Adam/Ameche to “leave this dump” and “go places and do

things.” Following her mate’s unenthusiastic response, Eve seduced the serpent (played by McCarthy) in order to procure the forbidden fruit, which she then served to Adam “like women are gonna feed men for the rest of time.” Laden with innuendoes, the skit emphasized woman’s desire for carnal experience and Eve’s active enthusiasm in relinquishing her virginity for pleasurable purposes. This combination of religious revisionism and female sexual aggression provided the catalyst for the public denunciations that immediately began to appear. Under the headline “Mae West Pollutes Homes,” the Monitor (official newspaper of the Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco) described how the actress had, “with bawdy vulgarity[,] burlesqued the biblical story of the fall from grace of Adam and Eve, and combined a travesty of the doctrine of original sin with an indecent suggestion of sexuality.” The National Council of Catholic Women threatened to boycott Standard Brands’ products, proclaiming that it was “almost unthinkable that a firm catering to the women of this country and seeking their patronage should so affront them.” “I deeply resent these rats invading my home to destroy spiritual life and harmony,” an irate Illinois mother wrote to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC): “My daughter now scoffs at all religion. The damage is done beyond repair.”

After a commercial and musical interlude in the program, the actress applied her seductress skills on McCarthy, a popular personality to young and old alike, iconographically figured in 1930s America as a somewhat suave but impudent adolescent. Hamming it up in her sultry siren role, West asked McCarthy if he’d like to “come on home with me, honey. I’ll let you play in my woodpile.” “Oh, Mae, don’t be so rough. To me, love is peace and quiet,” pleaded McCarthy at one stage, to which West replied, “That ain’t love—that’s sleep.” Judging from the inflammatory reaction, serious social taboos of intergenerational intimacy had been breached. Even NBC censors were to admit retrospectively that “Charley [sic] McCarthy has done a good job as a pert, sophisticated youngster. When a woman of the Mae West type and age goes to work on a boy, we are getting on dangerous ground indeed.”

To absolve themselves from charges of moral laxity, NBC and Chase & Sanborn pointed accusing fingers at West. NBC banned mention of her name over its stations and forbade other comedians from referring to the incident. A network decree declared her an “unfit radio personality” and, as a result, West did not reappear over the airwaves for another fifteen years. Significantly, once this strategy of ostracism had become clear, a sizable section of public opinion shifted to support West against this corporate mentality and the manner in which the actress had been demonized by the clergy. Opposition mounted to the way the actress had been treated and “left holding the

8. J.D. Foster to FCC, Jan. 21, 1938, Box 52, E-100B, RG 173 (Office of the Executive Director, General Correspondence, FCC Files), National Archives II, College Park, Md.
full bag of dirt” by the network and sponsors.11 Editorials appeared in metropolitan newspapers criticizing the entire episode as “much ado about nothing.”12 NBC memos from early 1938 remarked that audience correspondence now typically referred to West as “a fine woman” [and] “a fine actress.”13 Under the heading “The Woman Always Pays,” the Chicago Daily News spearheaded a campaign on her behalf:

NBC and the commercial sponsors of the program knew Mae West. They knew her technique. They’d heard her and seen her. They coached her in rehearsals. But when the public protests swamped them they pretended they had Mae all mixed up with Mary Pickford or Shirley Temple...14

Letters to the FCC also demonstrated a popular resentment of corporate policy and a recognition of an ethical double standard in operation. Hundreds of letter writers, male and female, urged the FCC not to introduce regulations that might sanitize radio programming by expurgating adult content. A telephone survey of randomly selected members of the public undertaken by the fan magazine Radio Guide produced the following results: fifty-nine per cent of interviewees who had heard the December 12 episode approved of West’s performance, while sixty per cent responded that they would like to hear more sophisticated programming over the radio than currently existed.15 A recurrent theme stressed by many of West’s defenders was that her material had been no worse than that of comedians like Fred Allen, Eddie Cantor and George Jessel. Clearly, therefore, West’s femaleness made all the difference: the consternation aroused among the reform-minded had as much to do with the sex of the speaker as the ribald content of her words. Some members of the public, therefore, explicitly reacted against the mobilized protest of the cultural conservatives and defended the program as, to quote one female letter writer, “by far the most entertaining of the week.”16

During a period in this nation’s history when many “traditional” public institutions (such as the middle-class family and organized religion) were threatened by socioeconomic developments, active interventions by their defenders into popular cultural forums were an essential strategy in the maintenance of their discursive legitimacy.17 Such maneuvers generated back-
lashes from those Americans who resented the pressure to become moral subjects according to the standards of middle-class reformers. The West-McCarthy broadcast consequently became an event around which thinly veiled ideological resentments and cultural tensions moved from the margins of social discourse to the center of public debate. A serious struggle over the definition of national cultural identity was considered to be at stake since the repercussions of the dispute involved fixing the limits to popular cultural productions.

Mae West was integrally figured in the controversy. Her exaggerated screen and stage persona—a “tough girl” with a penchant for the finer things in life and a questionable ethical history—constituted a central icon of sexual deviance. Biographer Ramona Curry attributes West’s cultural significance to “the way her image systematically contradicted the period’s middle-class social ideals of female chastity and feminine modesty.” West symbolized the immoral reputation of Hollywood to many Americans, a distinction that garnered both admiration and vilification. The actress’ identification with the character of the 1890s bordello madam, her renown for transgressive heterosexuality (in the form of actively seeking, discussing and enjoying copulation), and her personification as a gold-digging hussy remained undiminished by the time of her radio performance. To the Legion of Decency, the Catholic body that functioned to guide laypersons in their choice of motion pictures, West’s public appearances in the late 1930s still constituted “a matter of grave worry and concern.”

As Ramona Curry, Pamela Robertson and Marybeth Hamilton have recently described, West’s fame for moral impropriety involved multiple contraventions of normative gender, class, sexual, and racial taboos. Her theatrical productions had frequently incorporated gay characters and West herself had quickly become an icon of homosexual admiration. As a blond fetish, West apparently disavowed any identifiable ethnicity; yet she had become associated with black culture and exotic sexuality by singing “dirty blues” numbers in her early movies and personally and professionally liaising with African-American, Asian, and Native American men. Her own visible “absence” of ethnicity made her sexual “deviance” all the more disrupting and disturbing in relation to dominant racist discourses. In fact, the same Adam and Eve sketch had been performed over network radio just three months prior to the Chase & Sanborn episode, without any ensuing controversy. On that occasion, the all-black cast had provoked no consternation.

within white America, apparently due to their racial stereotyping as “naturally” oversexualized. 22

West challenged certain established social boundaries, but her contribution to American cultural politics was markedly ambiguous. She simultaneously mocked and invited heterosexual male desire, she exploited gay male irony even as she more broadly circulated its discursive reach, and she enjoyed a clearly privileged position while drawing upon African-American cultural forms. But while our own estimation of West’s cultural impact might remain ambivalent, there is no doubt that in the dichotomizing discursive practices of 1930s reformist culture she clearly belonged in the “other” category. Although visual signifiers were obviously absent from the radio show, the “spectacle” of West had become firmly established within the popular consciousness through her cinematic notoriety. Her association with clandestine public spaces and forbidden realms of female and sexual pleasure coded her as troublesome and threatening to the social and moral order. Uncontained and openly paraded, West’s star figure signified an alternative moral logic to the reformers’.

During the 1930s, moralists correlated the female sexual license of the “Roaring Twenties” with the nation’s subsequent economic decline. 23 Since the family was the emotional foundation of the nation, they reasoned, and women were invested with ensuring the welfare of the family, inconsiderate female behavior would inevitably bankrupt society. To them, the severe conditions of the Depression represented retribution for earlier moral liberties as much as perdition for economic self-gratification. Female identity was dichotomized in mainstream discourses into the licentious, fallen woman and her opposite, the morally virtuous embodiment of decorum. Mae West’s ostentatious fin-de-siécle exhibitionism stood in contrast to the prim, Victorian piety of female reformers. The polarization between the perpetrators of sin and the upholders of virtue served symbolically to binarize female conduct into simplified categories of social acceptability and inappropriateness based on the appearance of sexual proclivity.

Generically referred to by the broadcast networks as “women’s groups,” reform-minded organizations were infused with a heavy sense of middle-class morality and an ethical correctness founded upon discipline and temperance. In the mid-1930s, an umbrella organization, the Women’s National Radio Committee (WNRC), was established to promote the scheduling of

22. This earlier presentation, on the Maxwell House Showboat, differed from the Chase & Sanborn version by following the biblical delineation of the serpent leading Eve astray, rather than vice versa (“Postscript,” Variety Jan. 26, 1938: 28). Also, the program lacked the prepublicity and public notoriety of the West-Ameche-McCarthy effort, as well as the suggestive vocal inflections which became so central to the Chase & Sanborn Hour controversy (Evans Plummer, “Hollywood Showdown,” Radio Guide Jan. 15, 1938: 12). My estimation that black performers were deemed “naturally” oversexualized is based upon an interpretation of dominant racist discourses of the time and not empirical evidence.

“cultural” programming. By 1936 the Committee claimed to represent twenty million members and was devoted to preserving “Christian values” and ridding the airwaves of liquor commercials. The WNRC was one of several watchdog organizations informally monitoring radio programming. The Legion of Decency expressed itself as “profoundly distressed by the low moral character” exhibited in the West broadcast. A Catholic dignitary reported that “a large number of interested parties of all faiths have suggested the desirability of the Legion of Decency extending its activities into the broadcasting field.”

Mae West’s performance was doubly offensive to the reformers since it constituted an invasion of the home and a public declaration of female wantonness. As one editorial exhorted: “The home is our last bulwark against the modern over-emphasis on sensuality, and we cannot see why Miss West and others of her ilk should be permitted to pollute its precincts with shady stories, foul obscenity, smutty suggestiveness, and horrible blasphemy.”

However, even before the infamous West transmission, signs had become “increasingly plentiful” of an impending “campaign” by religious and reform organizations to bring about the “betterment of loudspeaker entertainment.” An organization calling itself the National League of Decency in Radio was founded in 1935, professing a commitment to “protect[ing] ... the home against indecency and propaganda” by organizing listener complaints against radio’s “contribut[ions] to sex delinquency and moral perversion.” These groups were generally satisfied with the self-regulation machinery in place for motion pictures and turned their attention increasingly towards radio. The technological architecture of the medium—its “invisible” and pervasive messages—challenged the listener to recreate an imaginary mental picture, suggested by the aural signals transmitted. Consequently, radio programming did not simply “invade the home” by bringing the public sphere into the private realm: it also attempted to “dislocate” the listener by transporting her/him into her/his own “word-excited imagination”—a socially constructed conceptual space of alterity, stimulated by the partially determining aural codes of

24. Women’s reform groups were not homogeneous entities. Some advocated temperance, while others concentrated on welfare reform and political campaigning. The WNRC concerned itself purely with those broadcasting matters which its constituent organizations considered universally beneficial. “WCTU: Bad Programs Join Rum and Cigarettes on the Blacklist,” News-Week Sept. 21, 1935: 24. The WNRC published a periodical, Radio Review, selected volumes of which are located at the Broadcast Pioneers Library, College Park, Md.


the radio program. Many radio shows relied upon a propagation of the fantastic for their appeal and required creative expenditure from the listener, thereby inviting a mutual collaboration between performer and audience member. The potential within this semiotic system for arousing what NBC censors phrased “base trends of the imagination” remained a constant source of trepidation to the networks.

Verbal punning was targeted by industry censors as a primary source of antagonism with reformers and religious groups. As John Fiske has described, puns refuse to submit to “linguistic discipline” and, at a discursive level, are “vulgar” and “scandalous” in their inherent contradictoriness. By the time of the West broadcast, vocabular juggling had become the crucial problem around which self-regulation, and the industry’s smooth operation, revolved. A confrontational, “verbal slapstick” style was particularly popular with radio comedians, who delighted in the “outrageous distortion” permitted by the medium. In effect, these comedians practiced their humor by reorienting aspects of everyday life in order to achieve a momentary mental confusion that upset audiences’ common-sense assumptions and expectations regarding the conventions of language, standard behavior, and the organization of social relations.

Featuring double-entendres assumed a dual-level audience: innocents who wouldn’t “get it,” but who would be no worse off from having been exposed to it, and the more sophisticated members of the community who could find amusement in the inferences and allusions. Reformers and religious notables found this stratification troublesome since this method of aural suggestion aroused dormant salacious thoughts. To their minds, the vaudeville tradition evoked sordid urban spaces attended by men and women of dubious character. It cultivated a forbidden alternative for the vivid imagination of children and promised to transport them metaphysically—as collaborators to the shenanigans—out of their domestic tranquillity.

The Mae West broadcast presented a productive opportunity to address the troublesome nature of euphemisms in this specific historic situation and to invoke a deviant subject against which sexual normativity could be defined. West’s persona was so pervasively embedded and prefabricated that her visual presence was necessarily invoked through her voice. During her theatrical past West’s performances had included what were critically labeled

32. Joseph Julian, *This Was Radio: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Viking P, 1975), 232. Rudolf Arnheim alternatively theorized that “the essence of broadcasting consists just in the fact that it alone offers unity by aural means.” Arnheim’s aesthetic preference was that “a wireless broadcast must not be envisaged.” Rudolf Arnheim, “In Praise of Blindness,” partially reprinted in *Radiotext(e)*, ed. Neil Strauss (New York: Semiotext[e], 1993), 20. Nevertheless, I don’t feel that this view is incompatible with the collaborative listener principle since mental imagery need not involve directly correspondent visualization.
33. Janet MacRorie to Lenox Lohr, Aug. 8, 1938, NBC Files, Box 93, Folder 40.
"single entendre" sketches: comedies where the sexual allusions of the dialogue and body postures were so thinly veiled as to make transparent their true insinuations. After the radio broadcast, it was West’s intonations that similarly became the focus of complaint. The argument of the moral plaintiffs was that the secondary meanings of the innuendoes were unmistakable in her delivery—they were so powerfully suggested that anybody without a mature and iron resolve would be aroused and indelibly affected. In defiance of broadcast convention, Mae West’s signal was too clear in its carnal lust and sexual allure.

Given their responsibilities to affiliates and owned and operated stations, the networks resolved early on to make advertisers and agencies more conscientious about the standards of program production. Additionally, the networks sought to forestall outside intervention and legitimate their own dominance within the industry by diverting public and political attention away from their oligopolistic economic power and towards issues of program quality. As the 1930s progressed, the networks increasingly implemented self-regulatory mechanisms and procedures to satisfy these interests.

Hollywood performers were notorious for ad-libbing material, a tendency that, because of radio’s reliance on live transmissions, could easily result in the unanticipated generation of controversial subject matter. To arrest this area of indiscretion, NBC censors insisted on the right to preview scripts and approve or reject alterations prior to performance. An internal inquisition conducted by NBC after the West-McCarthy affair revealed that the network’s house rules in instances of improvisation consisted of “cautioning the artist during rehearsal that we cannot tolerate it and won’t tolerate it up to and including taking the portion that is ad-libbed off the air [by cutting the microphone connection]. It has been done on several occasions in Hollywood.”

The networks hoped to eliminate spontaneous digressions by performers by requiring that agencies submit a script in advance. But even with extemporaneous deviations and the most blatant allusions and euphemisms of radio performers supposedly prohibited, the networks were powerless to ensure that “something will sound the way it looks.” NBC censors attempted to excise “anything that may offend any portion of the listening audience” through the tests of “accuracy, ethical business practice, common sense, and good taste.” But they admitted that “it is not always possible to foresee in reading the script the exact shade of meaning that the actor will give the line when it is read.”

39. John Swallow, NBC Internal Report, NBC Files, Box 58, Folder 1.
40. See Alan Havig, “Fred Allen and Radio Censorship,” in Fred Allen’s Radio Comedy, 99-123. Havig shows that the NBC censors were never able to enforce their provisions completely.
43. Janet MacRorie to Bertha Brainard, Aug. 18, 1937, NBC Files, Box 92, Folder 43.
This procedural crisis arose out of the intrinsic multiaccentuality of language and the multiplicity of interpretations resulting both from the performers’ histrionic inflection and the audience’s socially determined “reading” of the program. It was a matter of concern to reformers and the networks, since it implied a failure to contain the stimulation of the imaginary that was achieved in radio broadcasting. However, it also provided the networks with a safety valve recourse in circumstances of extreme error since they could disavow any direct authority over performative inferences and the mental projections of individual listeners. This was precisely NBC’s strategy following the Chase & Sanborn broadcast—an approach that generated popular disdain for the network but enabled it to emerge from the incident comparatively unscathed.

Mae West had failed to report for the first rehearsal of The Chase & Sanborn Hour on the Friday evening of December 10. A copy of the show’s script was delivered to her apartment; she found it boring and made revisions. At the studio on Saturday afternoon a conference was held between the performers, J. Walter Thompson representatives, and NBC executives culminating in a final script that was acceptable to West, Chase & Sanborn, and Andrew Love. During the final rehearsal, West recited her lines “straight” and in “snappy fashion”—without the insinuations of the broadcast rendition.

Following the transmission, NBC first implied that West had improvised her suggestive dialogue. When this assertion proved untenable, the network declared that the actress had taken “liberties” during the show and that her “mugging added plenty.” Hollywood personnel claimed there was “nothing in the script itself which is offensive” and that “the whole matter reduces itself to the artist and the interpretation of the lines.” During its internal inquisition, the chain’s West Coast head of operations assured New York vice presidents that if the network could establish a convincing case that West had enhanced the sexual overtones “deliberately,” it would help their position considerably. The actress’ self-generated association with recklessness and her reputation for spontaneous locutions allowed NBC and JWT to attribute the indiscretion to her personal style. The network even resorted to making several recordings from the Adam and Eve script, using a variety of actors and actresses, in an effort to lend credibility to its claim that the skit was above reproach as written. These were furnished to the FCC (which had opened an inquiry into the subject), along with the printed version and a transcript of the program, so that the commissioners might “consider the manner of delivery as well as the literal meaning of the text.”

46. Ibid.
47. Don Gilman telegram to Lenox Lohr, Dec. 15, 1937, NBC Files, Box 58, Folder 1.
48. NBC Report, NBC Files, Box 58, Folder 1.
50. UP Report, Dec. 27, 1937, NBC Files, Box 58, Folder 1.
NBC and the FCC ignored the heterogeneity of responses to the program and initiated a series of policies designed to contain radio representations more effectively, particularly those portraying or implying nonnormative gendered sexuality. NBC and the other networks conceded the need to improve self-regulation. This defensive strategy satisfied the reformers, who threw their support behind the networks. In return, NBC executives met with Catholic leaders on a regular basis from then on, and closer allegiances were also built with officially legitimated women’s groups. By mid-1938, the chairwoman of the WNRC determined that “broadcasters have become increasingly willing to cooperate and put on better programs.”\footnote{“Better Programs Now on Air, Says WNRC Chairman,” Broadcasting May 15, 1938: 32.} NBC’s Women’s Activities Division arranged meetings, programs, and joint ventures in association with women’s organizations, especially the highly venerated Committee on Radio recently formed by the General Federation of Women’s Clubs.\footnote{National Broadcasting Company, Broadcasting in the Public Interest (New York: NBC, 1939), 62.}

By positioning its own motivations as “socially responsible,” NBC was able to turn the West-McCarthy fiasco to its advantage. “While we have a notable case on our hands,” declared NBC’s chief censor at the end of 1937, “the opportunity is ours to put [stricter enforcement of censorship duties] into effect and to obtain greater control over material broadcast.”\footnote{Janet Mac Rorie to Lenox Lohr, Dec. 26, 1937, NBC Files, Box 92, Folder 43; Samuel Kaufman, “Scripts the Censors Have Killed,” Radio Stars Sept. 1938: 30-31+.} During the course of 1938, NBC rewrote its standards of practice for radio programming, beefing up its guidelines on appropriate female decorum among other things, a maneuver replicated by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) the following year.\footnote{“Broadcasters’ New Code Curbs Controversial Matter, Restrains Child Programs,” Newsweek July 24, 1939: 27.} Following its inquiry, the FCC took no direct action but produced an official warning that required NBC to formalize the regulation of limits to program representations in order to placate its affiliates around the country. Expecting NBC to “insure against features that are suggestive, vulgar, immoral or of such other character as may be offensive to the great mass of right-thinking, clean-minded American citizens,” the FCC endorsed self-regulation, as well as the networks’ assumption that a universal standard of “good taste” could be determined in program content oversight.\footnote{Frank McNinch to Lenox Lohr, Jan. 14, 1938, NBC Files, Box 64, Folder 36.} This presumption of a cultural consensus operated to validate the ethical demands of the moral reformers and religious organizations and rejected or marginalized those Americans who longed for radio to broaden its discursive horizons. It therefore navigated radio towards reaffirming program standards that supported a more conservative and intolerant social, cultural, and industrial order.
The Mae West incident served momentarily to expose the institutional pressures that operated to limit radio’s fantastic imaginary. By extension, the actress’ aural insinuations threatened to destabilize social constructions of gender, race, age, and sexuality through her exploration of an alternative interpretation of human motivations and biblical creation. The Chase & Sanborn program was considered by many reviewers to have been “no worse than many others which were aired during 1937.” But it aired at a time when the reform-minded were spoiling for a focal point around which to harness their various influences. Mae West metonymically personified transgression in female sexuality and in radio programming, just as she had done for motion picture impropriety. In their concerted efforts, the reformers aimed to resolidify the self-definition of middle-class identity around matrimonial bliss and clearly engendered familial roles. They also succeeded in more firmly cementing the boundaries to meaning-making located in the process of radio production.

57. Curry, “Mae West as Censored Commodity,” 67.