

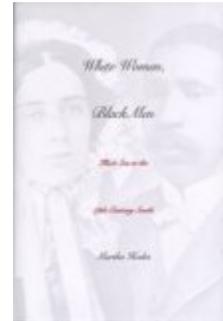
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Martha Hodes. *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. xii + 338 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06970-9.

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The Last Taboo

In 1800, a minister of the Gloria Dei Church in Philadelphia refused to marry an interracial couple. “A negro came with a white woman,” he wrote. “I referred him to the negro minister, not willing to have blame from public opinion, having never yet joined black and white. Nevertheless these frequent mixtures will soon force matrimonial sanction.”[1] What should we make of this comment, which suggests that marriages across the color line were not unimaginable during the early nineteenth century, despite virulent racial prejudice and legal prohibitions?

It is hard to believe that it was only a generation ago that the Supreme Court invalidated state laws prohibiting racial intermarriage. At the time the Court issued its 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* decision, 16 states barred marriages across racial classification (altogether, 41 states, at some point, enacted anti-miscegenation laws).[2] Legal change, however, has not unleashed dramatic transformations in marital patterns. The 1990 census showed 1.1 million non-Hispanic black-white couples, up from not quite one million in 1980 and 321,000 in 1970.[3] In many cases, these interracial unions are second marriages and do not produce children, and many interracial marriages involve African or Afro-Caribbean partners, not native-born black Americans.

In a provocative, deeply-researched study which won the Allan Nevins Prize, Martha Hodes tackles one of the most explosive and potentially sensationalistic subjects a historian can address: interracial sex between southern black men and white women. Drawing on a remark-

able range of legal testimony, personal diaries, and private correspondence, she persuasively argues that the late nineteenth century witnessed an abrupt shift in the South’s treatment of such relationships. While antebellum white southern society did not condone such liaisons, it did exhibit a limited degree of toleration—a toleration that vanished following the Civil War, as southern white men saw their monopoly of political power challenged and the cotton economy collapse.

Although concentrating on the nineteenth century, Hodes wisely begins her book earlier in time by describing the marriage in 1681 between an Irish servant named Eleanor Butler and a black slave named Charles. This ceremony—presided over by a Catholic priest and attended by a number of prominent planters—was conducted with an openness unimaginable in the eighteenth century, when the lines between white servants and black slaves had hardened.

The marriage between Irish Nell and Charles was not a wholly isolated event. Kathleen Mary Brown, J. Douglas Deal, Philip J. Schwarz, and Lorena S. Walsh have demonstrated that the “taboo” against interracial sex was not nearly as universal in early America as scholars like Winthrop Jordan assumed.[4] On seventeenth-century Virginia’s Eastern Shore, two marriages took place between free black men and free white women in the 1650s and three more in the 1660s. In addition, one slave married a white woman, and at least half a dozen slaves fathered mulatto children by white maidservants during the 1680s and 1690s. Walsh concludes that unions of

black men and white servant women were usually consensual, unlike many of the women's relationships with white men. She notes, for example, that only a handful of white women presented in court for bearing illegitimate children accused black fathers of rape and that a number accepted their punishment and resumed relationships with a black mate.[5]

After 1700, sexual relations between southern black men and white women occurred less frequently or at least much less publicly. Nevertheless, such liaisons continued to exist. In a remarkable job of detective work, Hodes mines bastardy and divorce cases for information about interracial sex—and finds a surprising number (including four divorces in Virginia and two in North Carolina granted to white husbands whose wives bore mulatto children). In one 1824 case in Virginia, an elderly man named Lewis Bourne unsuccessfully sued for divorce claiming that his much younger wife was involved in a seven-year relationship with a local slave. The court apparently concluded that Bourne had failed to adequately control his wife's behavior and denied his petition. The next year, a poor North Carolina white woman named Polly Lane accused a slave named Jim of rape. Although Jim was quickly found guilty of the charge, the discovery that Polly was pregnant prior to the alleged rape led the court to reopen the case and ultimately acquit Jim. A slave was simply too valuable a capital asset to execute under such circumstances.

After the Civil War, Hodes argues, consensual sex between a black man and a white woman became unimaginable in the white southern mind. White Southerners conflated black male autonomy with sexual transgressions across the color line and justified terrorism and lynching on the grounds that they were necessary to protect the purity of white womanhood—even though less than a third of all lynchings even involved accusations of sexual assault. Interracial sex became transgressive in a way it had never been under slavery.

Hodes's overarching argument is that sexual liaisons between white women and black men were not always met with violent outrage in the South. Before the Civil War, southern law could tolerate a liaison between a white woman and a black man. Indeed, communities showed little concern about such liaisons until they resulted in pregnancy and childbirth. Only when southern white patriarchs began to fear the potential political and economic power of newly autonomous black men after the Civil War did the issue of white women's sexual purity enter the realm of politics. Only then did violent in-

tolerance replace an uneasy toleration.

This is a fascinating argument, but it is not the only interpretation that can be drawn from the evidence. Hodes tends to link attitudinal shifts to the evolution of the institution of slavery. It is the solidification of chattel slavery in the late seventeenth-century that ends an earlier period of relative flexibility in sexual relations, by making racial lines more salient than class lines. Later, it is the collapse of slavery that creates a newfound urgency in the taboo of sex between black men and white women and brings about a shift from uneasy white toleration toward increasingly violent intolerance.

An alternate interpretation might make two points: that ideologies of racism have changed in dramatic ways over time, and, that specific groups have shaped the definitions of and legal controls over "illicit" sexuality. Since the seventeenth century, efforts to stigmatize, criminalize, and punish miscegenation have reflected the interests of specific groups of people, who formulated new ideologies, enacted legislation, and actively propagated their racist viewpoints. As J. Douglas Deal has convincingly argued, while blacks in the early seventeenth century were treated differently from whites from the very beginning, racial prejudice did not evolve into a coherent ideology of racism until later. Early anti-miscegenation statutes—like the 1664 Maryland law enslaving the children of English women who "intermarry with Negro Slaves"—reflected the attitudes of the most politically active segment of the planter elite—attitudes which were only gradually absorbed by many other whites.[6] Similarly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lynching, supposedly to protect the purity of white womanhood, was in fact inextricably tied to efforts to suppress populism and interracial labor activities. From the anti-abolitionist mobs of the 1830s that raised the specter of racial amalgamation to the Northern Democrats who coined the term "miscegenation" and accused Republicans of favoring racial intermarriage to the post-World War I nativists who enacted the anti-miscegenation statutes that the Supreme Court overturned in 1967, miscegenation was a highly emotional subject that could be exploited and manipulated for a variety of social and political objectives.

For all its breadth, *White Women, Black Men* does not claim to cover all aspects of the topic of miscegenation. For one thing, Hodes explicitly omits Louisiana and South Carolina on the grounds that these states recognized an intermediate class between blacks and whites. In addition, Hodes primarily—though not exclusively—

examines interracial sexual liaisons that made their way into courts. Additional studies need to be conducted on people of mixed racial ancestry.[7]

Even though the United States is a society with rigidly delineated racial categories, in practice racial boundaries tend to be blurrier than these categories presume. A number of recent works underscore this point. In their recent study of free black communities in the North, James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton uncover a working-class culture in which interracial fraternizing, drinking, and sexual relations were not uncommon. In a recent dissertation on nineteenth-century southern miscegenation laws, Charles Robinson III found that appeals courts frequently overturned miscegenation convictions after concluding that it was impossible to classify the defendants' race with precision. He also shows that interracial liaisons might last for years before entering the legal system and that most court cases were precipitated by property and inheritance disputes. Neil Foley shows how Mexican Americans in Texas attempted to emphasize their "whiteness" in order to advance their economic and political interests. While not minimizing the "negrophobia" that accompanied nineteenth-century democratization, these studies do suggest that while Americans are color blind in the sense that they see the world solely in black and white, racial identities have often been more complicated than this dual system of categorization suggests.[8]

Today, the moral issue raised by the Supreme Court's 1967 Loving decision has returned to the nation's political agenda. If marriage is, as the court declared, the single most important expression of a person's right to pursue happiness, should there be any restrictions on who consenting adults can marry? While Hodes's powerful and moving book does not directly address this issue, it does underscore the ways that throughout American history certain groups have manipulated sexual phobias in order to obtain broader political objectives.

Notes:

[1]. Quoted in Stephanie Grauman Wolf, *As Various as Their People: The Everyday Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 266.

[2]. Hodes, 231, n. 1. On the genesis of the term "miscegenation," which replaced the older term "amalgamation," see Hodes 264, n. 49; George M. Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row), 171-74; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Free-*

dom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford, 1988), 789-91, David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 155-56.

Among the works that examine interracial sex in nineteenth-century America are David Henry Fowler, *Northern Attitudes Toward Racial Inter-marriage: Legislation and Public Opinion in the Middle Atlantic States of the Old Northwest, 1780-1830* (New York: Garland, 1987); James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970); Charles F. Robinson, II, *The Antimiscegenation Conversation: Love's Legislated Limits (1868-1967)* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Houston, 1998); Byron Curti Martyn, *Racism in the United States: A History of Anti-Miscegenation Legislation and Litigation* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1979); Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

On the treatment of miscegenation in literature see, James Kinney, *Amalgamation!: Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985); Debra J. Rosenthal, *Imagining Miscegenation: The Anxiety of Race in Ten North and South American Novels* (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1995); Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

[3]. *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 1991, B1. According to the 1990 census, only 0.01 percent of white married men and 0.03 percent of white married women have married non-Hispanic blacks.

[4]. Kathleen Mary Brown, *Gender and the Genesis of a Race and Class System in Virginia, 1630-1750* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990); J. Douglas Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia: Indians, Englishmen, and Africans on the Eastern Shore During the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1993), 180; Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge: LSU, 1988); Lorena Seebach Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 36.

[5]. Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia*, 180; Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove*, 36.

[6]. Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia*, 180, 181,

188; 200, n. 99.

[7]. F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Virginia R. Dominguez, *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, 1986); Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

[8]. Neil Foley, *White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and*

Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford, 1997); Robinson, *Antimiscegenation Conversation*.

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