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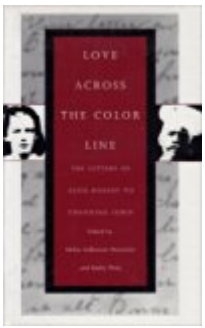

Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Kathy Peiss, eds.. *Love across the Color Line: The Letters of Alice Hanley to Channing Lewis.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996. xii + 144 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-023-9.

Reviewed by Robert Elliot Fox

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The letters with which *Love across the Color Line* is concerned were written in 1907 and 1908 by Alice Hanley, a white working-class woman, to Channing Lewis, her African American lover. Stuffed in a black lace stocking, the letters were hidden under the floorboards of a house in Northampton, Massachusetts, where they were discovered in 1992 during a renovation project.

As a nonhistorian, what is remarkable to me about this book is the extent to which the history of the individuals connected with these letters has been recovered by the principal investigators. In literary studies, which is my area of expertise, much of one's work has to do with the appreciation and interpretation of established texts. Context may or may not be crucial, but in the discipline of history, documents do demand contextualization, and the more private those documents are, the more obscure their circumstances, the more facts there are which require detection. Especially because it survives as a one-sided correspondence and the author of the letters is understandably circumspect with regard to the most intimate matters, the story that these letters tell--upon a first reading, and without benefit of the researchers' discoveries and clarifications--is suggestive but limited, seemingly trivial. But unraveling the "mystery" of these brief epistles opens a door on an aspect of our collective past that has not been sufficiently explored and certainly has not been adequately addressed in terms of our overall understanding of the American experience in its fullness, particularly with regard to the subject of "race" and its various negotiations.

In most respects, these were ordinary people. What perhaps makes them extraordinary is their willingness to transgress the color line which only a few years previously (1903), in his famous and enduring work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois had designated "the problem of the Twentieth Century."

Channing Lewis was employed as a cook, then a frequent occupation for a "Negro" man. He had been married twice. His first wife was African American, but after her untimely death, he married a young Irish immigrant. This was at a time when interracial marriages were still extremely rare. Lewis was separated from his second wife

when he had his affair with Alice Hanley, the unemployed daughter of Irish immigrants.

At the time Hanley and Lewis had their relationship, a majority of Americans were either foreign-born or the children of immigrants, and 90 percent of the black population of the country still lived in the South. This was also the period known in black history as the Nadir, when racial violence against African Americans was at its most virulent. Racism, segregation both de facto and de jure, distrust of "foreigners," lack of women's rights (we need to remind ourselves that women at this time still did not even have the right to vote), and a puritanical moral code are among the obstacles Hanley and Lewis had to contend with individually, and that can only have exacerbated the difficulties confronting them in having, let alone maintaining, a relationship "across the color line." As Kathy Peiss puts it in one of the book's several illuminating essays, so-called mainstream opinion of the day viewed "intimacy between black men and white women as a perversion of the moral and social order" (p. 106).

There is an adage that states, "When one group encounters another, they may fight, but they will certainly fuck." This is a bluntly succinct reminder that desire trumps centricities, taboos, and all the other codes and caveats designed to keep people(s) apart. Interracial sex and interracial marriages were obviously taking place before society's "moral guardians" decided to sanction them. If "difference" is so absolute, as essentialists insist, then why has it been necessary to resort to law to maintain the borders that purport to separate one group from another? And if fear and loathing of "the other" is so pervasive, why have these same laws not been effective in preventing people from literally embracing the other?

As Louis Wilson notes in the final essay in the book, "The white and black working classes found themselves intermingling socially and building communities side by side; but they also found themselves inevitably forced into brutal competition for their narrowing share of the American pie" (p. 134). It should be clear by now that invidious notions of "difference" have been used by those committed to the reigning economic ideology in this country in such a way as to make "race" a factor of entitlement or disentitlement to employment, the effect of which has been to heighten the schisms within the working class. Solidarity around a common cause and the idea of a greater community is thus betrayed by appeals to individualism (as opposed to "union") and loyalty to one's "color." One of the important lessons of ***Love across the Color Line***, it seems to me, is the extent to which many of the problems faced by people in the first decade of the twentieth century are still with us in the final decade. If Du Bois were alive today, for example, he could very plausibly argue that the color line, which he posited as this century's problem, is going to be the problem of the twenty-first century as well. But as a more positive corollary, we also learn from the example of Alice Hanley and Channing Lewis that ordinary people often make their own way against the tide, that not everyone shares the prevailing prejudices of the time. Whether it is through love, or through understanding (based on education or personal experience) of the common humanity that underlies all particularisms, the possibility of transcending--not just transgressing--the color line has always been there, and this possibility needs to be furthered as the millennium approaches. In its recuperation of a fuller American history than most of us have a grasp of, this book is one small but useful weapon in the struggle.

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