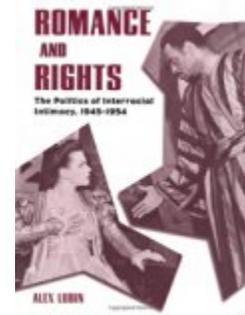


# H-Net Reviews

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Alex Lubin. *Romance and Rights: The Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945-1954*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. viii + 183 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57806-705-3.

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## Love in the Time of Color Barriers

In 1956, Eugene Cook, the Attorney General of Georgia, developed a creative plan to impede the nascent civil rights movement in his state. Inventing the fictional character of a Howard University professor named Roosevelt Williams, Cook alleged that the imaginary instructor had delivered a speech advocating interracial marriage. “We demand the right for every Negro man or woman,” Cook claimed Williams had said, “to marry the white of his or her choice, if he can find one fit to marry” (p. 66). Alex Lubin, the author of *Romance and Rights: The Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945-1954*, claims that Cook understood what historians have overlooked: that sexuality played a central role in the civil rights movement because “in the minds of most segregationists, all civil rights gains were conflated with fears of racial intermarriage and sex” (p. 67).

*Romance and Rights* explores the politics of interracial intimacy, but in ways different from many of the other recent works on the subject. While other historians have focused on the years around the 1967 Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia* that overturned the last state anti-miscegenation law, Lubin reaches back, situating his study in the immediate years after World War II and arguing that the war itself, with its unique possibilities and opportunities, reshaped the playing field. It is interracial intimacy, Lubin contends, that operated at the center of an important debate about the relationship of private matters to the public sphere of civil rights activism. White American culture regarded interracial sexuality as a private matter rather than a public sphere right. In doing so, it constrained the degree to which interracial re-

lationships could play a part in transforming the political and social realities of America. At the same time, however, civil rights activists attempted to shatter this divide by moving the supposedly private matter of interracial intimacy into the public sphere, primarily through the means of popular culture, but also via court cases. In doing so, civil rights leaders hoped to make interracial relationships a subject of the public conversation on civil rights and thereby to expose the racism rampant in the legal system of a country busy trumpeting its democratic ethos to the rest of the world.

Lubin’s book contains five chapters, bracketed by an introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 traces the history of state anti-miscegenation laws from the colonial period to 1967. Southern states had long sought to resolve interracial intimacy cases at the local level, rather than in state or national courts, claiming these were private matters germane to regional values. Yet World War II, with its rhetoric of spreading democratic values and defeating racist totalitarianism, created a new context in which lawyers and appeal court judges could attack anti-miscegenation laws as un-American. New understandings of race as culturally determined rather than biologically fixed highlighted the absurdity of the anti-miscegenation cases where the race of those involved was ambiguous. However, despite these challenges, a string of anti-miscegenation cases in the decade following World War II reaffirmed the state anti-miscegenation laws and bolstered the argument that interracial intimacy was a private act best overseen at the local and state level and outside of the jurisdiction of new civil rights laws.

In chapter 2, Lubin documents the cultural representations of interracial intimacy in postwar popular culture through an analysis of comic books and films. In the comics, interracial intimacy was portrayed not as a challenge to the social order but rather as a reaffirmation of it because the interracial romances were meant to provide lessons about the dangers of flaunting the color line and to serve as a “cautionary trope, intended to shuttle young readers’ desires toward ‘appropriate’ sexuality” and family structures (p. 48). The films often presented a different message than the comics by showing successful interracial relationships. Yet these rosy pictures worked against civil rights objectives as well, Lubin argues, because they rendered the color line insignificant by showing harmonious homes that denied any sign of the problems such interracial relationships would surely experience in the real world. “The films,” Lubin contends, “used interracial intimacy as a tool to erase racial difference and in so doing undermined minority claims to group rights” (p. 59). Films and comic books, most importantly, portrayed interracial intimacy as a private concern—a matter contained within notions of the nuclear family and the domestic home—rather than a public issue subject to and having an effect on the changing civil rights atmosphere.

Chapter 3 is the book’s best chapter. Here Lubin focuses on the debate over the meaning of interracial intimacy in black public culture through a deft analysis of NAACP papers and black newspapers and magazines from the period following World War II. Lubin traces a particularly interesting development within civil rights organizations in regards to their positions on anti-miscegenation laws. Before World War II, the prevailing opinion of civil rights groups was that these laws sanctioned white male sexual violence against black women by relegating these acts to the private sphere. White men were free to terrorize black women, and they were protected by the state from ever having to marry their victims. Yet after the war, civil rights leaders shifted the focus of their attacks on anti-miscegenation laws from arguments about protecting vulnerable black women to those advocating the rights of black men to choose their sexual partners free from the interference of the state. Key to this new conceptualization was the black press which routinely ran real and fictional stories in its newspapers and magazines about interracial relationships. Lubin finds that one in five magazines printed by the Johnson Publishing Company, the leading publisher of African-American magazines at the time, contained an article on interracial relationships during this period. These stories, however, were overwhelmingly focused on

relationships between black men and white women. Lubin smartly recognizes that the black press’s fascination with interracial relationships was a detriment to black women, because it failed to imagine them in such a scenario and it marked a retreat from the pre-World War II emphasis of attacking anti-miscegenation laws on behalf of the black woman as a possible victim to the white male predator. Thus, while these stories of interracial romances seemingly enlarged the national debate about marriage, Lubin shows how they also removed black women, who had once been at the center, from the discussion that now focused on black men’s romantic prerogatives.

Also successful is Lubin’s analysis of the repercussions of black soldiers’ interracial romances, which comprise chapters 4 and 5. The situation of black soldiers and their foreign, non-black brides forced the U.S. military to confront the issue of interracial relationships and to acknowledge the public ramifications of such partnerships. The military was caught in a bind as it wanted to promote its anti-racist motives for fighting the war while limiting the opportunities for the interracial marriages of its black soldiers to challenge racist anti-miscegenation laws back in the States. Meanwhile, the African-American press seized the opportunity to present black GIs “as a new symbol of American citizenship and as a champion of black masculinity” (p. 98). As defenders of American democracy, black GIs provided a particularly unique critique of the undemocratic anti-miscegenation laws and an especially effective symbol in civil rights discourse. Most interesting, Lubin finds that black GIs married to white foreigners had a much easier time in garnering support for their relationships from the military and in the black press than those who were coupled with Asian women. Clouded by the racist undertones of American involvement in the Pacific and constrained by the widespread conception of the black-white binary for understanding interracial relationships, black-Asian marriages demonstrated the “limited possibilities of interracial intimacy as civil rights” in a nation that had only imagined of and legislated against black-white relationships (p. 114).

Lubin’s book is a fine and absorbing read. His provocative argument about the centrality of sexuality to civil rights and his clever thesis regarding the struggle between where intimacy is positioned—the public or private sphere—and the ramifications such a decision has on civil rights broadens our understandings of the post-World War II period and the civil rights movement era that follows. Still, the book has its weaknesses, particularly

the frequency with which Lubin resorts to overly jargon-laced language. Too common are sentences such as this: “The public sphere was a racialized space that privileged whiteness” (p. 98). Also, some may find Lubin’s over-reliance on the public-private spheres paradigm rather dated, particularly given the bevy of works that have discredited, or at least complicated, the public-private dichotomy. Lubin might have thought more about how his thesis challenged rather than reinforced the public-private model. That said, *Romance and Rights* is a must-read for anyone interested in post-World War II American legal and popular culture, the civil rights movement and the history of twentieth-century American sexuality. Demonstrating the relevance and timeliness of his

work, Lubin writes in his thoughtful conclusion that the lessons of *Romance and Rights*, particularly around notions of “privacy” and “family” and the utilization of such discourses, should be cautionary tales to the gay rights movement of today. Even if some of the players have changed, the story is largely still the same.

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