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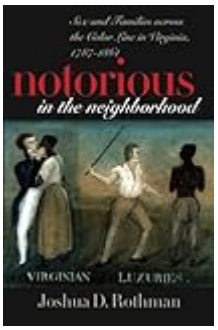
Joshua D. Rothman,. *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 360 pp.



Joshua D. Rothman. *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 341 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-5440-2; ISBN 978-0-8078-2768-0.

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In the last two decades, perhaps no development has transformed writing history more than the effort to combine race, class, and gender (what we often refer to sarcastically as the historian's "holy trinity") into a unified analysis and narrative. No field has produced more important works with this intent–or won more awards–than southern history. Drawing on the region's complex multiracial history, students of both Old and New South have perceptively seen the advantages of using race, class, and gender together to examine a great variety of social and cultural issues. Into this tradition falls *Notorious in the Neighborhood* by Joshua Rothman. Rothman considers interracial sex and families in Virginia, roughly from the Constitution to the Civil War, through a series of case studies. His broadest goal seems to be to explain changing white attitudes toward race, and how race and "rules [about interracial sex] in turn fit into larger regional frameworks of authority and dominance" (p. 6). From the outset, of course, one must ask if this is the best approach to find answers to these questions, particularly considering the small number of people addressed in the book and the relatively limited base of evidence. Without the connection to these larger themes the book would be simply a series of stories about fairly unusual, often marginal people. Happily, Rothman makes a strong case for the importance of his subject(s) without greatly exceeding the reach of his evidence.

Even so, given the elusive nature of the book's subject and largely indirect evidence, many of the book's most important conclusions require some intuitive psychoanalysis. Readers unwilling to embrace that approach naturally will find the arguments more speculative than demonstrated. The number of people involved, of course, is also small. In the chapter on interracial adultery and divorce, for instance, Rothman bases his discussion on the "over forty" petitions that mentioned black men or women between 1786 and 1851; only twenty-seven divorces were granted that involved interracial sex. Furthermore, the author limits his analysis even further with some of his choices of evidence. The chapter on sexual violence begins by summarizing the thousands of unreported rapes that occurred, affecting black and white men and women in untold physical, emotional, and psychological ways. At times Rothman offers a percep-

tive critique of these commonplace encounters. Instead of making them the heart of the discussion, however, Rothman focuses on two cases of blacks who responded to sexual assaults by murdering their white tormentors. One could argue that any analysis of sex across the color line ought to focus on these violent encounters, when instead most of the book deals with consensual relationships (nearly one-half of the narrative covers two particularly long-term relationships).

Another overarching theme that pervades the book is that attitudes toward interracial sex, and race generally, began to change in the 1850s. Rather than after emancipation, as many historians have argued, Rothman traces white male paranoia about black male sexuality, for instance, to the turbulent 1850s. As Virginia's whites felt threatened by a growing free population of color and the northern abolition movement, they moved to tighten laws that governed free black men and women. They also tried to define "whiteness" more rigidly and considered adopting the "one-drop" rule that came to dominate after the war. In short, Rothman argues that Virginia whites held a series of flexible attitudes about race and interracial relationships until the 1850s, but in that decade whites worked to clarify and harden the prevailing racial hierarchy. Following the work of numerous other historians, Rothman demonstrates that whites in Richmond experienced heightened racial anxieties in the 1850s. What is less convincing is the author's claim that these white fears "generally reflected growing fears of black *sexuality*" (p. 122, emphasis added). He does not really explore, for instance, the more popular conclusion that whites simply feared for their *lives* amid a growing hysteria that involved abolitionists, free blacks, and Republicans in a wave of rumored plots and slave rebellions.

The book opens with an extended discussion of Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and their family. Much of the material is familiar, of course, but Rothman skillfully uses the chapter to introduce some recurring themes: the difficulty of establishing racial classifications based on "visual cues," but also other factors; the importance of wealth and deportment for a white man having a relationship with a woman of color, but who wanted to maintain honor and "respectability"; and the countless ambiguities within the "system" of slavery, plantations, and the law that offered opportunities for some people of color, but which normally spelled uncertainty and threatened the freedom and status of all non-whites.

These topics are hardly new for historians of the Old South, but Rothman's evidence allows him to approach them from a new perspective that offers some valuable insights. Jefferson's story, the author concludes, is a textbook case for how an elite white man could carry on a long-term relationship with a woman of color–a relationship quite widely known about and recognized by contemporaries in Virginia–without jeopardizing his career or personal reputation. The key was Jefferson's deportment. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the President never acknowledged his association with Hemings or their children, not even in his will. "When it came to interracial sexual relationships in antebellum Virginia," Rothman writes, "pretenses protected reputations, and Jefferson smartly wore the mask of propriety" (p. 46). When the story of his affair was published by newspaper editor James Callender, in an attempt to ruin Jefferson, white Virginians barely reacted. Because of his discretion, "Jefferson's sexual behavior [remained] largely outside the bounds of public scrutiny, even to those who may have believed it possible that Jefferson and Hemings had children together" (p. 51). Once again, none of these conclusions will be surprising to southern historians familiar with the literature on planters, slavery, and honor that has been written during the last thirty years.

The rest of the book, however, does break new ground, in large part because most of it deals with men and women of significantly less wealth and status than Thomas Jefferson. In fact, one of the book's great strengths is its vivid depiction of southern life on the margins of "respectability" and "whiteness" or "blackness." In chapter 2 Rothman details the lives of David Isaacs and Nancy West, a Charlottesville couple who prospered over several decades. Isaacs was a local businessman who manipulated the couple's ambiguous legal status to acquire and protect their property, and ultimately he had wealth, power, and friends to protect his unusual relationship. Again Rothman demonstrates that white Virginians approached sex across the color line on a case-by-case basis, and there was no guarantee how the community or the legal system would react. "It seems that so long as the couple kept their relationship a strictly illicit one and at least maintained the illusion that it did not exist, Charlottesville's white community let it go unchallenged" (p. 64). Only when Isaacs and West "officially" moved in together and kept one residence did local whites object. By declaring their love openly, Rothman concludes, the couple challenged the accepted fictions regarding interracial relationships. As people of some wealth they also represented a potentially greater threat (greater than most interracial couples, who tended to be very poor) to the social and racial hierarchy.

In short, they became more than the subject of whispers and jokes; they were suddenly subversive. Rothman also uses this case to reveal the complex possibilities–good and bad–that existed for interracial couples within the state's legal code.

In subsequent chapters Rothman discusses black on white and sexual violence, divorce involving interracial adultery, and people of "mixed blood." He details a world of poorer men and women who ate, lived, and slept together more frequently than we often acknowledge. These sections are filled with some provocative nuggets. In several instances Rothman argues that gender trumped race–in the legal system black men were often afforded more "honor" and certainly more "value" than white women deemed promiscuous or "common." White men whose wives had adulterous relationships with black men did not automatically seek divorce; those who did were not always granted them. Perhaps most of all, Rothman ably demonstrates the subtle combination of factors that helped "determine" a person's race, and the many channels and currents that existed in the antebellum southern legal system and racial hierarchy. Thus, in many ways the book contributes to that growing body of literature that treats race, gender, and class as interdependent qualities, enhancing our understanding of each and the connections between them. Through his engaging prose and carefully reconstructed case studies, Rothman has crafted a fascinating look at southern life on the racial and cultural margins. It is a book interesting for its own subjects but also for its greater insights into southern racial attitudes and identity.

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