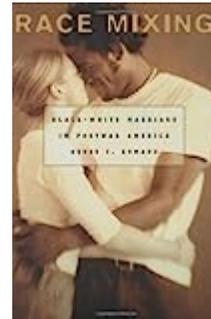




Renee C. Romano. *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. xiii + 368 pp. 35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01033-8.



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Love Stories in Black and White

On May 18, 1954, the day after the epochal Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the *Jackson Daily News* lambasted the decision. “White and Negro children in the same schools will lead to miscegenation. Miscegenation leads to mixed marriages and mixed marriages lead to mongrelization of the human race” (p. 148). President Eisenhower, while not as retrograde as the editors of the *Daily News*, but upon hearing of the decision the President tried helpfully to explain southern sentiment to Chief Justice Earl Warren, author of the *Brown* decision. “These [white southerners] are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in schools alongside some big black bucks” (p. 168).

It is this fear of “miscegenation,” “mongrelization,” and the threat posed by allegedly hyper-sexualized “big black bucks” that makes up the central conflict in Renee Romano’s wonderful book, *Race Mixing*. Romano explores the post-World War II history of interracial marriage, focusing on unions between blacks and whites in the United States. Romano has probed this most vilified

of social phenomena in clear, well-written prose and her book is a welcome addition to postwar American social history, and to the burgeoning literature on race, civil rights, ethnicity, gender, and sex (the act as well as the chromosomal configuration).

Romano skillfully takes a different focus in each chapter, covering a range of thematic issues while at the same time maintaining a chronological drive that gives the book momentum. *Race Mixing* begins with a useful prologue in which she introduces her approach and lays out the main issues of emphasis. She makes clear that her interests lie in black-white marriage across the color line, and not in other mixed marriages, an understandable but nonetheless lamentable restriction. It would have been useful to have a comparative framework for other ethnics who crossed the color line to marry. Nonetheless, it is always easy to criticize books for what they do not do. Fortunately, there is so much that Romano does accomplish that these abeyances disappear quickly.

Chapter 1 addresses the “unintended consequences” of World War II. Most of the best recent historiography on civil rights has taken into account the decade or so

before *Brown v. Board*, and this chapter fits soundly into this welcome trend. Romano shows how the Second World War “set forces in motion that would set the stage for a direct reckoning with the taboo on interracial sex” during a time in which “wartime developments began the process of separating concerns about ‘miscegenation’ from discussions of racial equality, ultimately laying the groundwork for a more effective black struggle for racial inclusion” (p. 13). Interracial marriage continued to be rare during and in the immediate aftermath of the war, but times were changing and Americans had to decide how or whether to adjust. Notorious racist Senator Theodore Bilbo suggested that America’s annihilation by atomic catastrophe was better than its “slow destruction ‘in the maelstrom of miscegenation, interbreeding, intermarriage and mongrelization’ ” (p. 42). A few brave, contrarian folks got hitched. Most Americans simply remained wary of the practice, believing it to be unnatural and wrong.

Chapter 2 reveals “the dangers of ‘race mixing’ ” as most Americans seemed to perceive them in the 1940s and 1950s. Respondents to a 1958 Gallup poll indicated that only one percent of white southerners and five percent of whites elsewhere in the country approved of interracial marriage (p. 45). And while slowly things were beginning to change in American race relations, many whites chose not to relent to the transformation happening around them, but rather they chose to fight.[1] When one father read a story in *Life* magazine about an interracial marriage between a black jazz musician and a white woman, he was so incensed that he wrote a letter to the editor promising: “If my daughter ever entertains such an idea [as intermarrying], I will personally kill her and then myself, saving the state the expense of hanging. This plan of action has the entire approval of my wife and whole family.” Romano points out that the magazine published no letters in response to this “horrific threat” and posits that such views were not isolated ones (p. 49). This is perhaps the best chapter in the book, as Romano deftly weaves a story of the responses to those who broke the taboo of interracial marriage. Some of these responses ranged from attempts to have children, especially white daughters, arrested or committed to mental institutions, to taking custody of children from previous (white) marriages when a divorcee remarried a black man. Some of the stories she tells are heartbreaking and reveal the extent to which families and friends too often did little to ameliorate and much to exacerbate societal alienation of interracial couples.

The changes brought about by the civil rights move-

ment, a general loosening of mores around the issue of sex, and demographic transitions led to an era which Romano calls “ambivalent acceptance” of black-white coupling. Here, in chapter 3, Romano turns the tables of the discussion, focusing not on white responses, but rather on the ambivalence within much of the black community to interracial marriages. Although the antipathy to such relationships was never comparable to sentiments within the white community, there was hostility from blacks in some quarters, hostility that would grow in the Black Power community. While many of the bastions of mainstream black America—magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony*, for example—continued to endorse interracial relations as a way to promote unity between whites and blacks, not all African Americans shared these sentiments. Some even went so far as to parrot what recalcitrant whites told their offspring—that marrying someone white was “an insult to their race” (see, for example, p. 103). The black community, if such a thing existed, would still be coming to terms with interracial marriage as that most tumultuous decade, the 1960s, kicked into gear.

It should come as no surprise to students of postwar American history that the issue of interracial marriage became a whipping boy for some on the anti-Communist right in the 1950s. Recent literature on the civil rights movement has clearly showed the links between what Jeff Woods has called the Black Struggle and the Red Scare.[2] Interracial marriage inspired the red hunters to unleash the dogs, but as Romano shows in chapter 4, “Not Just Commies and Beatniks,” even as interracial marriage slowly grew in scope and in social acceptance, many whites, even (especially?) liberal ones, continued to try to separate social equality in areas such as schools and bus stations from the eternally vexing issue of “miscegenation.”

Chapter 5, “Culture Wars and Schoolhouse Doors,” shows that, as America’s views of race changed, “traditional southern practices would not easily withstand the scrutiny of national attention” (p. 147). Even as the *Jackson Daily News* raged against the evils of mongrelization, other American institutions showed a willingness to adapt to more tolerant conceptions of racial interaction. When the White Citizens’ Council raged against black-influenced rock and roll music (“Help save the Youth of America—DON’T BUY NEGRO RECORDS,” read one flyer [p. 164]), it did not have any effect on the music’s popularity. Movies such as Darryl Zanuck’s 1957 *Island in the Sun* tentatively but undeniably depicted interracial relationships, leading to other explorations on stage and screen of what would once have been verboten across the

United States.[3] The shifting sands of the 1950s allowed Americans to develop an understanding that affairs of the heart “should be discussed and negotiated between individuals rather than in the formal political sphere,” even if relatively few challenges to prevailing norms as yet existed (p. 174).

The 1960s marked the apogee of the civil rights movement and restrictions against interracial liaisons did not escape scrutiny. In 1959, the statutes of twenty-nine states criminalized interracial marriages. That number was down to sixteen in 1967, including every state in the South (p. 186). The Supreme Court’s decision in *Loving v. Virginia* struck down such laws, making interracial marriage prohibitions the last Jim Crow bastion to fall. In chapter 6, “The Rights Revolutions,” Romano explores the toppling of this once impenetrable barrier and connects it with larger social forces at work.

In 1958 in Washington, D.C., Virginia native Richard Loving, a 24-year-old white man, married his childhood sweetheart, Mildred Jeter, an 18-year-old black woman. The couple lived in Virginia, and just five weeks after their wedding, police in Caroline County burst in on them while they were asleep in their bedroom. They were convicted of violating Virginia’s miscegenation law and the judge ordered them either to leave the state or to spend a year in prison. The couple moved to Washington, but wanted to return to Virginia, and they decided to pursue the case through the courts after contacting the Kennedy Justice Department, which directed the young couple to the ACLU (pp. 188-189). Once the court rendered its decision in 1967, miscegenation laws were null and void, though many states continued to have them on their books in symbolic defiance. The court’s decision did not, of course, mean that southerners had come to accept interracial marriages, but they no longer had the legal capacity to use the force of the state to prevent them.

It is a bit surprising that Romano does not spend more time than she does on the *Loving* case. Granted, Peter Wallenstein and others have addressed its significance, but in a book about black-white marriage in postwar America, one would think that the Supreme Court’s decision would warrant greater attention than Romano gives it. Perhaps Romano, who does not give a lot of attention to the political and legal aspects of her topic, sees herself as primarily a social historian, but such limiting labels within the discipline are superfluous when it comes to the way history actually played out, and she should have probed the case, its genesis, and its ramifications in greater depth.[4]

Romano returns to the question of black opposition to interracial marriages in chapter 7, “Talking Black and Sleeping White.” Even as white America was beginning to loosen its opposition to black-white marriages, some within the black community came to oppose such relationships more militantly. Although never making up a majority within black opinion, those advocates of marrying within the race made up a vocal minority during a time when black identity and Black Power were beginning to move away from the integrationist ideal. Black women were particularly vocal opponents of black men marrying white women, believing that such couples reaffirmed racist conceptions of white women as representing the pinnacle of femininity. From a more practical vantage point, many black women wondered who would marry them if eligible black men chose to marry white women. Since black men married white women far more frequently than white men married black women, many black females believed that demographics were stacked against them.

Chapter 8, “Eroded But Not Erased,” effectively brings the story up to the present day, revealing how much things have changed and how interracial marriages, and the children they produce, are often seen as signs of progress for race relations in the United States. And this belief is undoubtedly true. America’s racial climate is immeasurably better than it was in 1945, 1955, or 1965. No serious person could say differently. But Romano wisely argues that while the “taboo against interracial marriage has eroded significantly since World War II” this “does not necessarily mean that structural and institutional racial inequalities no longer exist” (p. 286). This is a bit of a straw man inasmuch as few people would argue such a thing, but it still is a point worth making, and it is one she augments in the book’s epilogue, in which she confronts the irony that in many ways the segregationists were right: integration led to race mixing (p. 295). But in the most important way, they were wrong: race mixing has been a good thing.

Renee Romano has made an invaluable contribution to the literature on post-World War II civil rights, race relations, sexuality and gender, and social history, and it deserves a place on many bookshelves. *Race Mixing* is gracefully written, compellingly argued, and masterfully sourced. It is history at its finest.

Notes

[1]. One can see a hint of Michael Klarman’s backlash thesis in Romano’s arguments about the white response to interracial marriages in the postwar era. See Klarman,

“How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis,” *Journal of American History*, 81:1 (June 1994), pp. 81-118.

[2]. See, for example, Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); and George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunists, and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

[3]. One of the films, 1959’s *Night of the Quarter Moon*, depicted a woman disrobing in court in order to show that her entire body was dark, and that she was not just tan, and thus her husband had to know that she was black (p. 167). It is surprising that Romano does not make mention of the famous 1920s Rhinelander case on which this scene had to have been based. In that case socialite scion Leonard “Kip” Rhinelander sued his new

wife, Alice, for annulment, likely under pressure from his father, alleging that he had been duped under false pretenses into marrying a woman he believed to be white. At one point in the trial, the judge cleared the courtroom of all but the jury, lawyers and court personnel and Alice disrobed, putatively to prove one way or the other what her husband would have seen in their encounters. The case titillated Americans for most of 1925 primarily because of the element of interracial sex at its core. See Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone, *Love On Trial: An American Scandal in Black and White* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[4]. On the *Loving* case, see Peter Wallenstein, *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage and Law—An American History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Phyl Newbeck, *Virginia Hasn’t Always Been For Lovers: Interracial Marriage Bans and the Case of Richard and Mildred Loving* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

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