

Black-White Interracial Marriage as Post Racial Nexus

This paper considers the evolution of black-white interracial couples and interracial marriage in American culture. I propose an application of the conference themes of dispossession and transformation, of an ethics of inclusion and the circulation of black experiences, past and present. My paper interrogates the social and cultural foundations that make possible the love-based unions of black white interracial marriage in the midst of the pressures against it. Fay Botham describes the similarities between the current place of recognition of same sex marriage with this late twentieth century racial question¹ Then the impasse was overcome. My interest in the topic is to present what lessons there are regarding difference and tolerance for our time. In part my presentation includes an analysis of the journey of my own African American father and white American stepmother, as they were influenced in their personal lives by their status in marriage in the wake of the landmark civil rights case *Loving v. Virginia* of 1967, which overturned the race-based legal prohibition on marriage in America. I have also noted the interracial in the media, in the advertisements of American companies Gap and Banana Republic among others. A current Apple iPhone advertisement shows a young black male and a young white female saying goodnight from their respective pillows, in different locations, using the new video chat feature Facetime. I wish to suggest the evolution of the interracial as a sign of a reconciliation of difference and an emerging post-racial consciousness.

¹ Fay Botham. *Almighty God Created the Races: Christianity, Interracial Marriage, and American Law*. 2009. See the epilogue.

What I present today are portions of a larger project with the three themes of pre-twentieth century dispossession, late twentieth century transformation and contemporary reconciliation.

The Social and Legal

Since the beginning of the American Republic there have been legal bans against racially mixed marriage. Most of the original colonies had antimiscegenation laws beginning with Maryland in 1664. “Negroes” and “slaves” were designated in the law’s language pointing to a race and class reference. A 1691 Virginia law called for the banishment for three months of any free white English man or woman who intermarried. Any white woman with child by from such a union was fined fifteen pounds sterling.² A white woman who married a black man was designated a “slave” for the duration of the life of her spouse and any children would also be slaves. White male authority was upheld by such legislation and the ability of slaveholders to have relations with enslaved women.³ In total, forty-one American states have at one time prohibited intermarriage. It is chilling to consider such a ban lasting over three hundred years.

In part I am interested in the formation of whiteness and its influence on white women involved in relationships with African American men. I wish to advance the notion that for white American women the act of having an interest in, of wanting to be with, African American males was itself a subversive act that challenged the norm. That symbol is the core empowering idea that fueled social and legal notions that were racially divisive. The notion calls to mind literary examples of this threat of cross race partners. Famously, the specter of Caliban and Miranda, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, earlier still Anthony and Cleopatra.

² Phyl Newbeck. *Virginia Hasn't Always Been for Lovers: Interracial Marriage Bans*. 2008. pp. 37-43.

³ Jessica Millward 2010, ""The Relics of Slavery": Interracial Sex and Manumission in the American South", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 22-30.

The theme of transformation as response to dispossession is a current within the writings of thinkers on race a century ago and before. An example is the approach that abolitionist Lydia Maria Child offered in An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans of 1833. Robert Fanuzzi writes regarding her contribution.

As an abolitionist and fiction writer, she consistently experimented with domestic scenarios of interracial sexual unions and trans-racial families as a way of opening national boundaries to the history of foreign countries and inserting a correspondingly larger range of social configurations into our national identity. Her advocacy of the cause of the mulattoes was in many ways our future in American literary studies, a first step toward imagining a transnational United States.⁴

Later in the nineteenth century, and after the Civil War, in North Carolina, because interracial marriages were outlawed African American women who were in relations with white men in a common law sense of marriage began to call on the federal Civil Rights Act of 1866. They sought status as free women and protection, as in the case of Eliza Cook, who requested support for her seven children who were fathered by her white master beginning when she was the age of sixteen. Because she had made no previous claim to paternity, within a three year statute of limitations after the naming of each child, she did not prevail with the U.S. District Court where she made her case, and was put out by James Cook, her master, at the insistence of his new white wife.⁵

⁴ How Mixed-Race Politics Entered the United States: Lydia Maria Child's Appeal. Robert Fanuzzi. ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance, Volume 56, Number 1, 2010 (Nos. 218 O.S.), pp. 71-104.

⁵ Zipf, K.L., 1968- 2000, "Reconstructing "Free Woman": African-American Women, Apprenticeship, and Custody Rights during Reconstruction", Journal of Women's History, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 8-31.

Noralee Frankel writes regarding how some white men and African American women “formed long term liasons based on mutual affection.” By 1865 the Black Codes of Mississippi, for example, recognized marriage between African Americans but found interracial marriage a felony subject to life imprisonment in the state penitentiary. In *Scott v. Georgia* of 1869, the court ruled that “the amalgamation of the races is not only unnatural, but is always productive of deplorable results.”⁶ Among other issues, marriages between white men and black women threatened to raise the class position of the former slave. White women who sought marriage with a black male, at the time, would have been considered depraved. Criminal too were relationships, deemed by southern communities, where the status of the African American woman might be seen as equal in status to that of a white woman.⁷

Prior to emancipation, “African Americans had no relations that were accorded positive civil recognition.” Legally they had no ancestors and no prosperity and were in a position of kinlessness and natal alienation that left spouses with no legal obligations to one another or to their children. Into the twentieth century, and by the 1930s, thirty states prohibited interracial marriage, and, further, in Oregon “the marriage of a white person with a person of one fourth or more Negro or mullatto blood.” Challenges to state court statutes failed and in the first challenge to the Supreme Court in 1881 the ruling found that equal protection was not denied by antimiscegenation laws as both blacks and whites were both protected and punishable.⁸ Another white response was in the form of the racial integrity laws forbidding marriage among the races. In 1924 Virginia passed such

⁶ American families past and present: social perspectives on transformations. Susan Ross. 2006. p. 164.

⁷ Freedom's women: Black women and families in Civil War era Mississippi. Noralee Frankel. 1999. p. 113.

⁸ Ross. p. 165.

an act that in effect was a response to growing white female independence and in practice prescribed a social role of white women based on the idea of the protection of a pure genetic stock. The act required individuals to register with the state Bureau of Vital Statistics and saw whites as those with no discernible trace of non-white blood. Virginia led in the early twentieth century in the control of its citizenry. The state enacted forced sterilization of segments of the population between 1924 and 1974. Further, Lisa Dorr suggests that white women abdicated power to the white male as protector in what became a narrative of eugenics. Anglo Saxon Clubs that were formed early in the century included white male members only.⁹

Personal History

I wish to consider power and position by utilizing a real life case study. In 1971 my African American father left his family, a wife and three sons, to marry a white American woman. My step-mother too separated from her family, a husband and two sons, to be with my father. For them, their children were nearly grown, in high school and college, and the times were socially turbulent, yes even in Springfield, Ohio, a name and location parodied in television as synonymous with a stagnant middle America. For my father and step mother, they admit that in addition to love, their marriage was a radical social act. They both left a spouse and high school age children at home. Dina's world was white, her husband a college professor, and the family lived in the fashionable north end of town. Nate's world was black, although a college graduate, receiving his B.A. in 1948, the best employment he could find was as a letter carrier, a mailman, although because it was a civil service job, his position was enviable. We had acquired black middle class status, a two bedroom house with garage a yard and a car.

⁹ Dorr, L.L. 2003, "Arm in Arm: Gender, Eugenics, and Virginia's Racial Integrity Acts of the 1920s", *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 143-166.

They willingly left all of this to be together in a top floor apartment, where they shared a used car in the nearby college town of Yellow Springs, the main campus of Antioch College. For my father and step mother, they admit that in addition to love, their marriage was a radical social act. Nate states that he was complacent in his life. He had no place to go. He was an intellectual who read Gurdjieff, was a fan of symphonic music and taught yoga asanas at the town's arts center. Dina too talks about being locked into the small town trophy wife mold with no freedom to move outside of her world. She considers herself a free thinker.

The interracial narrative that I present in no way links to autobiography. My wife is of African descent. Simply, I have always thought about how difference can empower. Here, two people from different worlds who find each other embark on a new way of being that was a kind of flowering. For the largely working class region of northern Ohio where we lived the interracial was not uncommon. The Irish Catholic, German Lutheran and African American populations were thrown together in labor both agricultural and industrial. Nearby International Harvester made farm machinery, the Wright Patterson Airforce base was a major employer. I had an uncle who was at Pearl Harbor. A friend's father stitched flight suits for jet pilots. My mother owned all of the Betty Crocker cook books, and, until we saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show on February 9th 1964, we thought they were a black group. This picture is a contradiction to perceptions of the late twentieth century midwest as the home of Klan activity or more recently militias and the Tea Party. Not once were Nate and Dina ever threatened during their time in Ohio in the 1970s. In the early '80s they relocated and currently live in retirement in the Catskills. Their story substantiates that all of the fears regarding interracial marriage are true. There is a threat to the status quo. The very idea does destabilize notions of religious continuity. Ethnic heritage and the continuum of culture become challenged, or, possibly end. But, I will say that every aunt, uncle and neighbor I have known envy my stepmother and father for their decision.

The Interracial Reference in Film

The ideas of power and position too are played out in the late twentieth century on the film screen. It is not the intension of this essay to consider the entire expanse of black white interracial portrayals in film. Although there are a set of ideas and example that are pertinent. Of course mid-century's "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" (1967) is indicative by way of example, of the potential, since the story is about a couple who want to marry, and the consequences. The African American male lead here, Sidney Poitier, also starred in "The Defiant Ones" (1958) with white male actor Tony Curtis, that too was a kind of racial marker. The male bonding of the film was later parodied in the film "Black Mama, White Mama" (1973) by African American actress Pam Grier where both she and her blond female inmate compatriot, Margaret Markov, are indeed handcuffed but also wear revealing cutoff shorts and tied midriff revealing work shirts. The cross racial is an undercurrent in Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" (1992) where the young Malcolm Little played by Denzel Washington takes on a white girl friend who acts as a lightning rod to frame the social transgressions of the young hipster who deals in petty crime and drugs.

Advertising

Within contemporary American culture there has been an increase in black white interracial imagery in advertising. Just after the presidential elections in early 2009 Banana Republic featured a series of ads with a tall light skinned young man and a similarly light skinned multiracial-but-undefinable woman. I remember passing the huge billboard on the the West Side Highway in Manhattan, driving south. The man was not an Obama look alike but the reference was obvious. Just a bit further north was an even larger dual billboard with a Baby Gap advertisement, a row of diapered babies sitting next to one another in a row, about ten. Sitting near a center position, and not the ends where "the other" is often positioned, was the brownest baby possible. I thought, "America has changed." Late last year I noticed first the Apple Computer iPhone ad with the young black male

and white female. Then there was another, with totally different models. Apple strangely has been pushing black people into advertising. There are too black families showing features of video conferencing and a light brown skinned man on the Apple web site who's deft finger touts the many features of the iPad. Interestingly too, the press and the internet at large has little to say on the subject of the increase in the African American presence in advertising since the presidential election of 2008. It must be said that Apple founder Steve Jobs has an Egyptian father and a white mother. The Christian Science Monitor has one piece on how Microsoft removed a black man from an ad intended for Poland, but forgot to change the hands so there were black hands in an otherwise light skinned environment.¹⁰

The Press

The American press has converged on the idea of difference. Black white interracial marriage is no longer the only race theme as it was during the twentieth century. Inter-race is now mixed race. Most recently, beginning on March 19th, the New York Times presented a story on the shift towards acceptance of interracial marriage in the American south. This was accompanied by a graphic photo timeline of family trees among cross race families, and a brief video showing a young mixed race couple and their children in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The mixed race population here as reported in the census of 2010 is up seventy per cent since the year 2000.¹¹ A June 2010 article in the Christian Science Monitor describes how a Pew Trust report finds that “interethnic and interracial marriages” have become more common in the United States, nearly one in seven marriages in

¹⁰ Hey Microsoft, what happened to the black guy? The Christian Science Monitor. By Matthew Clark, Staff writer / August 26, 2009.

¹¹ Black and White and Married in the Deep South: A Shifting Image. The New York Times. March 19, 2011. By SUSAN SAULNY.

2008, double the figure for 1980.¹² In a Monitor piece from October of 2009 is the coverage of a Louisiana justice of the peace who refuses to marry a white woman and a black man because he is concerned about how their children will cope. The article points to an increase in race consciousness since the election of mixed race Barack Obama. The piece ends with the statement that the Louisiana governor has called for the resignation of the justice of the peace.¹³

Significantly, the Administration has created a path towards the acceptance of same sex marriage. The 1996 Defense of Marriage act that barred recognition of same sex marriage was recently deemed unconstitutional. Attorney General Eric Holder announced in February that the federal government would stop defending the law in court. The Times article states that “For Mr. Obama, who opposes same-sex marriage but has said repeatedly that his views are “evolving,” there are political implications as well.” The point here is that now there is change, and conflict, on the horizon. The history of, and the case studies regarding, black white interracial unions will continue to inform the present.¹⁴

¹² Interracial marriage: more than double the rate in the 1980s. The Christian Science Monitor. By Husna Haq, Correspondent / June 4, 2010.

¹³ Louisiana interracial marriage case revives southern stereotypes. The Christian Science Monitor. By Patrik Jonsson / October 17, 2009.

¹⁴ In Shift, U.S. Says Marriage Act Blocks Gay Rights The New York Times. February 23, 2011. By CHARLIE SAVAGE and SHERYL GAY STOLBERG.