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Romance and Race: Intersections of Love, Prejudice, and Identity

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Introduction

This book begins with a simple but unsettling observation: people do not fall in love in a vacuum. Desire is shaped by stories we inherit, laws we obey or resist, markets we navigate, and communities to which we yearn to belong. When we examine how race has ordered these stories, statutes, markets, and communities, we discover a history of romantic possibility narrowed or expanded by racial ideologies. *Romance and Race* traces that history across regions and eras, showing how intimate life has been legally regulated, socially policed, and personally negotiated, and how mixed-race couples have inhabited these contested spaces.

Across the Atlantic world, colonial projects forged early templates for controlling intimacy—through slavery, concubinage, and caste-like systems that folded love into labor, property, and sovereignty. In places as different as British North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America, authorities crafted rules that made certain unions advantageous, suspect, or forbidden. Later, nation-states refined those systems with anti-miscegenation laws and racial classification schemes that placed families at the center of political order. This book follows those trajectories, not to rehearse a singular narrative, but to illuminate a pattern: wherever racial hierarchy hardened, intimate boundaries rarely lagged far behind.

Yet law is only part of the story. Social taboos—enforced by schools, churches, mosques, temples, newspapers, and neighbors—often outlasted or preceded formal statutes. They traveled through rumors, jokes, moral panics, and cautionary tales. They shaped who appeared as a plausible partner, whose families could be imagined together, and which children would be welcomed or marked as problems to be solved. In some eras, medical and scientific discourses—especially eugenics and racial hygiene—lent these taboos a veneer of expertise, naturalizing exclusion as prudence. In others, religious interpretation or national myth provided the moral rationale. Throughout, mass media and popular culture amplified both stigma and possibility, elevating some couples as symbols of progress and casting others as scandal.

At the center of this volume are the lived experiences of mixed-race couples and their kin. Archival records, court cases, personal letters, oral histories, and contemporary interviews reveal how people carved out spaces for affection within regimes of racial control. Some fought in courtrooms; others negotiated quietly at kitchen tables, at immigration counters, or in the offices of pastors and civil registrars. Their strategies, compromises, and small acts of defiance expose the gap between what authorities prescribed and what lovers practiced. They also show how families labored to claim social belonging—seeking neighborhoods, schools, congregations, and friendship networks where their unions and children could flourish.

Our approach is comparative and intersectional. By moving between the United States, Latin America, southern Africa, Europe's empires, and parts of Asia and the Pacific, we trace convergences and divergences in how racial ideologies traveled and took root. We attend to how race entangles with gender, class, religion, and sexuality, shaping who is considered desirable, respectable, or marriageable. We analyze not only prohibitions but also permissions—moments when states, markets, or communities made room for certain kinds of “mixed” families because they served economic needs, military aims, or national self-images. And we examine how migration and digital technologies have altered the terrain, creating transnational partner markets and algorithmic filters that both widen and narrow the field of choice.

Terminology in this book follows historical usage when necessary and critical scholarship when possible. Racial categories are inconsistent across time and place; we therefore treat them as artifacts of power rather than biological truths. When we quote period language that is now offensive, we do so to reveal the logics that governed intimate life, not to reproduce harm. Our analysis aims to hold two truths at once: that racial ideology has constrained love in devastating ways, and that people have continually reimagined kinship beyond those constraints.

The chapters proceed roughly chronologically while weaving thematic threads. We begin with colonial foundations and early statutes, then examine how science, religion, and media sustained taboos. We turn to moments of rupture—war, occupation, migration, and landmark legal decisions—that unsettled intimate boundaries. We end by considering the present and near future: how digital platforms encode racial preferences, how families negotiate belonging, how mixed-race children navigate identity and colorism, and what policy and cultural change might look like if we took intimate justice seriously. Throughout, the goal is not to rank societies by tolerance, but to understand how power works through the most personal of choices.

Finally, this is a book about possibility. Even within systems built to separate, people have found ways to connect, care, and build families. By studying how racial ideologies have shaped partner choice, family forms, and cultural acceptance, we can better see the levers of change—legal, institutional, and cultural—that expand the horizon of who can love whom without penalty. If love is never free of history, then making love more free requires that we reckon with that history openly. This volume is offered in that spirit.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Terrain: Why Love and Race Intersect

To suggest that love and race intersect might, at first blush, strike some as incongruous. Love, in its idealized form, is often portrayed as transcendent, boundless, and blind to superficial differences. Race, on the other hand, is a social construct steeped in history, power, and often, conflict. Yet, to truly understand the intricate tapestry of human relationships, we must confront the uncomfortable truth that these two seemingly disparate forces are inextricably linked. Romantic relationships, while intensely personal, are never formed in a vacuum; they are profoundly shaped by the societal structures and cultural narratives that surround us.

The inclination to choose a partner of a similar background, known as homogamy, is a common phenomenon. This often extends to racial lines, where individuals may unconsciously or consciously prefer partners of their own race due to perceived similarities or familiarity. This preference, however, is not simply a matter of individual taste. It is deeply influenced by historical contexts, geographical locations, and the prevailing cultural norms of a society. From childhood, our understanding of what a relationship looks like is often formed by the families and communities we grow up in, perpetuating existing social groupings.

Racial ideologies, in particular, have played a formidable role in defining the boundaries of romantic possibility. These ideologies are not merely abstract concepts; they manifest in concrete ways, influencing everything from individual perceptions of attractiveness to the legal frameworks governing marriage. They shape who is considered a desirable partner, whose families are imagined as belonging together, and which children are welcomed without question or marked as societal "problems." This process of racialization in intimate life is a historical constant, though its specific forms and intensities have varied across time and place.

Consider the notion of "color-blindness" in romantic relationships. While seemingly progressive, the belief that race should not be acknowledged or considered can, ironically, reinforce existing racial hierarchies. Studies have shown that white individuals who adhere to color-blind racial ideology tend to favor same-race partners, while Black individuals with similar views may exhibit a diminished preference for same-race partners. This suggests that even when race is ostensibly ignored, its subtle influence on attraction and partner choice persists. The world, after all, is far from color-blind, and ignoring race often means ignoring the realities of racial privilege and systemic discrimination that impact relationships.

Historically, the control of intimacy has been a cornerstone of maintaining racial hierarchies. In many societies, the prospect of "mixing blood" or racial intermarriage was viewed with profound alarm, seen as a threat to racial purity and family honor. These anxieties were often codified into anti-miscegenation laws, which explicitly prohibited marriage between people of different races. Such laws, which existed in numerous countries and regions, carried severe penalties, including imprisonment and the delegitimization of children born from such unions. These legal restrictions were not arbitrary; they were direct extensions of racial ideologies designed to preserve social order and power structures.

Beyond formal laws, a web of social taboos and unwritten rules governed intimate relations. These informal strictures, enforced by community pressure, religious doctrines, and popular opinion, could be just as potent as legal prohibitions. They dictated acceptable forms of courtship, sanctioned certain pairings, and stigmatized others. A couple might face ostracization from their families, religious communities, or even wider society simply for choosing a partner outside of prescribed racial lines. These social forces contributed to what sociologist Olivia Hu describes as the "social forces that shaped...love and desire more broadly."

The enforcement of these norms often had a gendered dimension. For instance, anxieties surrounding sex between Black men and white women were historically pronounced in some societies, while exploitative relationships between white men and Black women were frequently overlooked or tacitly accepted, a stark reflection of the power imbalances inherent in slavery and colonialism. The idea of a white woman being "tainted" by a Black man's "blood" highlights the deep-seated racial and patriarchal control embedded in these societal expectations.

The impact of racial ideologies on romantic relationships extends to the opportunities individuals have to meet partners, as well as the meanings attached to those relationships. Experiences with racism can influence partner preferences, sometimes leading individuals to prefer same-race partners to mitigate discrimination, or, in some cases, increasing preferences for white partners due to internalized racism. These complex psychological and social dynamics underscore the pervasive influence of race on even the most personal aspects of life.

The concept of "Black love," for instance, has often been distorted or ignored in mainstream representations throughout American history, downplaying the bonds of affection within African American families and communities. Despite systemic barriers and widespread discrimination, African Americans have consistently cultivated life-affirming and community-sustaining bonds, demonstrating a resilience of love in the face of adversity. This resilience itself is a testament to the enduring human desire for connection, even when societal forces conspire to deny it.

The very understanding of love itself is not universal; it is historically and culturally specific. What constitutes "love" in an eighteenth-century Indian colonial context might differ significantly from twenty-first-century America. These cultural variations, often intertwined with racial dynamics, highlight that romantic relationships are products of their time and place. Cultural norms, for example, influence everything from how individuals perceive and evaluate a romantic partner to how they manage conflict within a relationship.

This intersection of love and race is not merely an academic curiosity; it has profound real-world consequences for individuals and families. The landmark case of *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, which legalized interracial marriage across the United States, stands as a powerful example of how legal battles over love can dismantle entrenched racial discrimination. Before this ruling, 24 states still had laws prohibiting marriage between people of different races. The Lovings, a Black woman and a white man, were arrested in their home state of Virginia for the "crime" of being married. Their love story, and their legal fight, exposed the raw reality of how racial ideologies sought to control the most intimate of human connections.

The persistent influence of race on romantic relationships is further evident in contemporary dating patterns. Even with legal prohibitions largely removed in many parts of the world, a strong preference for same-race partners often remains. This phenomenon, known as racial homogamy, is a complex issue influenced by a myriad of factors, including social circles, family expectations, and internalized preferences shaped by societal norms.

The power of racial ideologies to shape personal choices is a central theme throughout this book. It is a power that operates not only through overt discrimination but also through subtle cues, unspoken assumptions, and the very images of romance presented in popular culture. Understanding this intersection means acknowledging that our desires are rarely entirely our own, but are instead sculpted by the broader social landscape, a landscape often deeply etched with the lines of race. This initial exploration sets the stage for a deeper dive into the specific historical and regional manifestations of these dynamics, revealing how love, in all its messy glory, has consistently navigated the complex terrain of race.

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