

Interracial
Intimacy

The Regulation of Race
& Romance

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago & London

Antimiscegenation Laws and Norms of Sexual and Marital Propriety

ALTHOUGH ANTIMISCEGENATION laws have been analyzed almost entirely as racial legislation, they also played an important role in defining the boundaries of sexual and marital propriety. Antimiscegenation laws established the norm that interracial attraction was pathological and deviant, not natural and loving. Practices that preserved racial separation and stratification were equated with moral rectitude, while sex and love across the color line were criminalized. Statutes characterized interracial sex as "forbidden fruit" and interracial marriage as a match so inappropriate that it jeopardized the social order. These messages were powerful enough to reach even those—like dance hall hostesses and prostitutes—on the margins of sexual respectability. The message was clear: Those who succumbed to interracial lust must pay serious consequences.

Less obviously but just as significantly, antimiscegenation laws created a norm of "separate but equal" marriages and families that made it possible to regulate nonwhite sexual and marital practices. By characterizing nonwhites as not only different but inferior, reformers could insist that their sexual and marital practices conform to those of white, middle-class Americans. As a result, racial separation did not lead to autonomy for nonwhites to marry and raise children as they saw fit. Instead, the assimilation of sexual mores and family values became integral to the racial rehabilitation of nonwhites and was offered as proof of their capacity to be equal.

Sex and Marriage across the Color Line: Disorderly and Deviant

Antimiscegenation laws became critical to the preservation of a sense of decency when sexual mores were in flux. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, industrialization and urbanization created newfound means of social mobility. In the turbulent, transient cities, people could experiment with a range of identities, including their sexual personae. Affluent white men dabbled in novel sources of erotic pleasure, as prostitution became increasingly commercialized and entrenched in red-light districts.¹ The enhanced sexual liberties of white men provoked fear and anxiety among middle-class, often female, reformers. The purity movement attributed sexual excess to unconstrained male urges. As one man who sought the comforts of a prostitute explained: "Perhaps I was wrong to go but 'a stiff prick has no conscience' as the proverb says, & I believe I would have gone crazy almost if I had not gone to her or to some other similar lady."² Crusades for purity required women not only to exercise self-control but to aid men in curbing their "animal instincts."³ Middle-class, white men might seek an outlet for their sexual impulses by "raid[ing] the amusement parks or the evening streets in search of girls that could be frankly pursued for their physical charms," but these actions merely made them impure and in need of a "nice girl" to cleanse them and make them truly manly. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the salience of prostitution led to a growing gap between sex on the one hand and love and marriage on the other. "Amorous ardors" were associated with "the vulgar, or worse, with the commonplace," rather than romance. While passion was important, marriage had to be based on a love rooted in "mutuality and companionship."⁴ This ideology made sexual attraction an irrational impulse and marriage an act of mature deliberation and reflection.

During this period, social hygienists feared that the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe was threatening the social order, including popular mores about sex and marriage. Researchers and reformers were shocked by the crowded conditions in urban tenements. To earn extra income, immigrant families often took in male boarders. These unmarried men lived in close proximity to young wives and daughters, and social hygienists were certain that widespread extramarital liaisons would result from such close, seemingly unsupervised, contact.⁵ Moreover, immigrant women often went to work in factories, offices, or stores. Unchaperoned in their travels around the city and newly em-

boldened by the receipt of wages, the women seemed like easy targets for predatory men.⁶

The movement of women from Europe to America, from farm to city, and from home to work helped to explain the rise of white female prostitution, despite women's role as safeguards of moral purity. Prostitution grew rapidly in the late nineteenth century, and most prostitutes were young, foreign-born white women. Reformers typically assumed that unsuspecting girls were lured into the sex trade by false promises of love, marriage, or a glamorous and independent life. Alcoholism and economic need kept them in brothels or on the streets. Seldom did reformers attribute a life in prostitution to female sexual urges.⁷ Crusaders for purity published lurid tracts about "white slavery" that detailed how naive girls left their small towns and villages to find romance and excitement in the big city but instead wound up as whores. Popular novels, plays, and movies in the early 1900s trumpeted the same theme.⁸ The message was clear: The newfound freedom and mobility of urban life were a man's preserve but a woman's peril. Far from empowering women, industrialization and urbanization stripped vulnerable females of their dignity and self-respect, making them little better than slaves.

Although affluent white men were exhorted to exercise self-control over their base impulses, marginal and untrustworthy men were subject to criminal prosecution and deportation. To protect vulnerable young women from predatory pimps, the federal government passed legislation to deport sexually debauched immigrants, including the "large number of Jews scattered throughout the United States . . . [who] seduce and keep girls."⁹ In addition, Congress passed the Mann Act, also known as the White Slave Traffic Act, in 1910. The Act made it a federal crime to transport women across state lines for immoral purposes.¹⁰ Local law enforcement agencies also cracked down on prostitution.¹¹ These government efforts were supplemented by those of social hygienists, who sought to educate immigrants about sex and prevent the spread of venereal disease. Reflecting the view that men's unbridled sexual impulses were to blame for the growth of prostitution, reformers advocated male chastity before marriage. In *Ten Sex Talks for Boys*, a member of the Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis admonished his readers that sex should only take place as part of marriage. Otherwise, "THE SEXUAL RELATION IS ABSOLUTELY UNNECESSARY TO YOU OR TO ANY OTHER MAN."¹² In short, manliness did not require the exercise of one's "sexual muscle."¹³

The anxieties surrounding prostitution became complicated when

blacks began their great migration from the rural South to northern cities in the second decade of the twentieth century. With their arrival, a new kind of sexual titillation was for sale: White men could enter segregated urban slums to sample the exotic pleasures of interracial dancing and sex in nightclubs. One white New Yorker described his experience with Harlem's nightlife in the 1920s as "an emotional holiday. Then, when the last ambiguously worded [and sexually suggestive] song is done, one puts on one's hat, coat, and niceties, and once again is staid, proper, and a community pillar."¹⁴ In addition, with the rise in white prostitution, black men could buy the sexual favors of white women in red-light districts. For black male migrants, the white woman who had been taboo in the South could now be had for as little as five or six dollars.¹⁵

Despite the casual portrayal of interracial sex as "an emotional holiday," it presented new challenges in the early twentieth century. Extramarital sex across the color line was nothing new. White landowners had kept black and mulatto women as mistresses in the South, but these relationships were rooted in the power structures of slavery. Even when a New Orleans planter supported a free mulatto woman under a contract of placage, the transaction seemed only a slight remove from the white man who used his black female slaves for sexual pleasure. Interracial sex remained worlds apart from same-race relationships with white wives. With the spread of white prostitution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, interracial sex in red-light districts increasingly resembled the same-race sex trade. The clear line between morally respectable, intraracial relationships and degraded, interracial ones began to blur. After all, thriving businesses were being built on the taste for sex across the color line, even though antimiscegenation laws clearly marked these relationships as inferior and antisocial. To preserve sexual proprieties in the face of cross-racial liaisons, law enforcement authorities and sex trade workers alike had to establish that interracial sex remained inferior to same-race sex, that white men retained greater sexual liberty than nonwhite men, and that nonwhite women remained less appealing than white women.

To maintain the moral superiority of same-race sex, authorities condemned interracial sex as particularly vile and debauched. In Chicago, commissions to stamp out vice could not even bring themselves to describe the depredations of interracial Black and Tan clubs: "[N]o printable account could come within a mile of telling the depravity to which performers and patrons sank."¹⁶ A prominent judge was outraged that "orgies of the jungle could have been permitted in a public café in

Chicago month after month."¹⁷ A front-page headline in the *Pittsburgh Courier* trumpeted that "CHICAGO IS WORSE CITY THAN PARIS" because of the levels of interracial mixing in dance halls and clubs.¹⁸ To avoid harsh scrutiny by local law enforcement, a club could establish its relative respectability by prohibiting black-white dancing altogether.¹⁹

Respectable blacks also disdained racial mixing, but for reasons that differed from those of Whites. Rather than emphasize sexual perils, black leaders cited the threat to racial peace. One black newspaper asserted that "dance halls wherein races mix are certainly the worst nuisances" because they "brought bad elements of the white and colored people together under inflammatory conditions and eventually that was certain to bring about a race collision, which might easily have the most terrible consequences."²⁰ Another black paper warned that the clubs were "a continuing menace of the most serious character, especially to our reputable colored residents who might be the chief sufferers from an outbreak of race passion."²¹ Prominent blacks sometimes called for interracial cooperation to close down the clubs and dance halls where race mingling took place.²² For blacks, interracial sex threatened their fragile hold on respectability and their freedom to build communities of color without fear of racial violence.

Dance hall operators and hostesses keenly appreciated the relevance of race to sexual respectability. They understood that sexual segregation was integral to racial identity and that racial privilege required special treatment of white male customers. Clubs that catered to white men's sexual appetites enjoyed a higher standing than those that indulged nonwhite customers' tastes. Dance halls could appease white authorities and patrons alike by allowing white men to choose black women as partners, but prohibiting black men from selecting white women. Other establishments excluded blacks, Asians, and Mexicans altogether for fear that they would drive away white customers. As one Chicago dance hall owner explained: "[Y]ou've got to look out for . . . the Chinks. The West-side guys [white ethnics] out there won't come. Once a girl goes with these Chinks they're too low down for any decent American guy to want to dance with."²³ Another successful operator remarked: "No really white guy is willing to go in and dance with these Chinks or Japs or whatnot. He's got to have a little nigger in him to be willing to do that."²⁴

Black men who patronized clubs that catered to a taste for white women ran the risk of prosecution in states that criminalized extramarital sexual activities. For instance, in the 1920s, a black man was charged with pandering when he frequented a club where "white girls meet up

with colored fellows." In his defense, he insisted that the prostitute was "passing as a colored girl. She was supposed to be colored when she was at 34th and State." Showing his respect for racial boundaries, he added: "If I knew she was white when I met her I never would have had anything to do with her." Despite his protestations, he was convicted and given the maximum penalty of one year in jail and a fine of one thousand dollars as well as court costs.²⁵ To preserve racial hierarchy in the face of changing mores, black men had to pay a penalty even for commodified interracial sex, a price that was not exacted from white men.

Precisely because interracial sex challenged the color line, it had to be carefully managed to avoid devaluing whiteness. White dance hall hostesses treated nonwhite patrons as inferior, although they were the source of lucrative tips and favors. White women referred to Asian men as "fish"—overly generous customers who could easily be reeled in because of their lonely lives in bachelor communities.²⁶ The women equated whiteness with respectability. A woman might trade on her racial desirability at a dance hall, but she could still salvage some sexual decency by refusing to act as though the interracial contact were pleasurable. To preserve their reputations, hostesses sometimes drew the line between dancing with nonwhite men for money and dating them outside of work: "The Flips [Filipinos] are all right for anybody that wants them. But they're not white, that's all. Of course, I'll dance with them at the hall. But I won't go out with them. I'm white, and I intend to stay white."²⁷

Hostesses and prostitutes were well aware that their white allure could be lost through excessive familiarity with nonwhite patrons. Once a white woman's racial advantage was squandered, she would be little better than a nonwhite prostitute. Whiteness conferred a concrete market value. Compared to black prostitutes, white women were able to charge higher prices, limit more strictly the sexual services offered, and avoid arrest to a greater degree by working in brothels rather than on the streets. Even among black prostitutes, race privilege was commodified: Dark-skinned women generally earned less than light-skinned ones.²⁸ In the sex trade, race shaped perceptions not only of sexual desirability but also of femininity and moral worth. White prostitutes often were portrayed as victims of their own poor judgment and male lust, while black prostitutes were characterized as flagrant, aggressive, immoral, and wholly degraded.²⁹ As historian Hazel Carby has concluded, there were throughout this period "fears of a rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality; fears of miscegenation; and fears of an independent black female desire that ha[d] been unleashed through migration."³⁰

A white woman who was too free with her favors could lose her market and moral advantage. The story of a Polish woman, Florence Klepka, is illustrative. She began as a burlesque performer at age nineteen but, after becoming pregnant, had to leave the shows to work in dance halls. There she served Greek and Italian men but lost her clientele when she developed a reputation for being promiscuous. She then began accepting dates from Filipino men but soon became too "common" for them. So she left dancing and turned to prostitution in Filipino rooming houses. Another woman followed much the same path but wound up as an independent prostitute who primarily served blacks and Chinese. Attempting to return to the Filipino dance halls, she was shunned for having "gone African."³¹

The new conditions of urban life intensified the line between sex and marriage in white, middle-class relationships, so that commercial prostitution could be treated as wholly distinct from romantic love and traditional matrimonial arrangements. No such distinction, however, kept the degradation of interracial sex from infecting images of intermarriage. With cross-racial sexual liaisons characterized as deviant and dirty, marriage across the color line seemed incomprehensible and indecent. In the early 1900s, for example, the black heavyweight champion boxer, Jack Johnson, became notorious for his affairs with white women. In 1912, he met a young white woman, Lucille Cameron, promised her employment at his interracial Chicago nightclub, and began having sex with her. Cameron's mother filed abduction charges against Johnson, but the prosecution collapsed when Cameron refused to testify. Although Johnson and Cameron later married, the law was not through with a flamboyant black man who openly flouted norms of sexual and marital propriety. Within a year of his marriage, authorities prosecuted Johnson under the Mann Act based on the testimony of a white prostitute with whom he had once had an affair. She alleged that Johnson had paid her to travel from Pittsburgh to Chicago for immoral purposes. Based on her evidence, an all-white jury convicted Johnson, and he was sentenced to one year in prison.³²

Although Johnson was the most prominent black to be prosecuted under the Mann Act, he was not the only one. When black men attempted to travel with their white fiancées to states that permitted interracial marriage, they were sometimes charged with abduction or white slavery. White women who chose to marry black men were considered sexually immoral or incompetent.³³ Rife with illicit sexual connotations, interracial relationships seemed to offer no basis for a marriage predi-

cated on ideals of tempered passion, mutual respect, and shared interests. The white woman seduced into marrying a black man clearly was not upholding middle-class standards of purity, and so she had to be adjudged a "white slave" to her misguided libido.

"Separate but Equal" Sex and Marriage: Assimilation to White Norms

By reinforcing views of interracial sex and marriage as pathological behaviors, antimiscegenation laws created a norm of "separate but equal" families. Segregated households did not guarantee autonomy for non-whites, however. Instead, reformers found it necessary to assimilate non-whites to white, middle-class mores as a way to cultivate the good character essential for healthy families and meaningful equality. Some groups escaped this reformist zeal either because they had already been saved or because they were not ripe for redemption. Mexicans in the Southwest had undergone a religious transformation when Spanish colonists converted the native population to Catholicism. As a result of this conversion, Mexicans had adopted the principle of lifelong, monogamous marriage and condemned adultery and fornication. Consequently, although there were some concerns about sexually libertine Mexican women, reformers for the most part found the families acceptably Christian in their beliefs and practices.³⁴ Chinese bachelor communities, on the other hand, did not provide an opportune site for reform because gender imbalances impeded the formation of same-race families. Missionaries could not urge Asian men to marry and have children when the immigrants were sojourners who were supposed to remain unattached until they returned home. In anticipation of that day, though, proselytizing reformers did try to convince Chinese men to abandon what they perceived to be a heathen polygamy in favor of a Christian, nuclear family structure. Yet these calls for change were largely abstractions and lacked the cachet of saving real-life families.³⁵

Rather than focus on the moot question of family reform, white crusaders decried the sexual perversions of Chinatown and called for crackdowns on prostitution. In segregated immigrant enclaves, the sex trade flourished, in part because—as in red-light districts—the traffic in female bodies was discreetly hidden from the view of respectable whites. The plethora of Chinese men without women made prostitution highly lucrative. Asian men went abroad to find Chinese women who could

be tricked, forced, or sold into prostitution. Once in the United States, these women were unable to escape their plight. Linguistically and culturally isolated in a foreign country, they were kept in cribs, small locked rooms that lined the alleyways of Chinatown. The women served large numbers of men, both Chinese and white, for a small fee and often with no other promise than their release from servitude.³⁶ Alarmed by the fate of these women, Presbyterian missionaries ran a home in California for escaped Chinese prostitutes from 1874 to 1939. Workers at the home rescued the women from cribs, gave them a safe place to live, and assisted them in court when owners attempted to enforce labor contracts for sexual services.³⁷ Yet these rescue attempts were not linked to any vision of family reformation as a cure for the ills of prostitution. Instead, the efforts reinforced the image of Asian male immigrants as immoral, depraved, and unfit for citizenship.

By contrast, black and Native American families offered ample opportunities for racial rehabilitation. For blacks, the process of uplifting families began in earnest with Reconstruction. During slavery, couples had not been able to marry. Black women regularly bore children out of wedlock, raised them without the father in residence, and turned to their parents or other relatives for help. These practices clearly deviated from white norms, which required couples to marry before bearing children and put men in charge of the household. To correct these unconventional practices, the Freedmen's Bureau required all former slaves to register their marriages or be prosecuted for adultery. In addition, the bureau empowered black men to act as heads of the household. Under sharecropping arrangements, men could sign contracts for the labor of the entire family. Black women were compensated at a lower rate than black men under the bureau's wage scales, and families without a male head of household sometimes received smaller land allotments than those with a man in charge.³⁸ The reconfiguration of black families was considered essential to full emancipation:

All women were expected to defer to men, but for black women deference was a racial imperative. Slavery and racism sought the emasculation of black men. . . . Part of the responsibility of black men was to "act like a man," and part of the responsibility of black women was to encourage and support the manhood of our men. A woman should never intimidate him with her knowledge or common sense, let him feel stable and dominant.³⁹

Although elite blacks readily conformed to this model of the family, the less affluent chafed at its confines. An informal system of separation

and remarriage persisted among low-income blacks because they could not pay for a formal divorce. Authorities largely ignored the practice "[s]o long as [it] affects no one but Negroes."⁴⁰ Moreover, poor black women often found the new version of family imposed by the Freedmen's Bureau a bad bargain. Officially stripped of power and authority in the family, these women did not gain the privileges of domesticity accorded to middle-class wives. Low-income black women continued to work in the fields while managing the home. In addition, men often wanted their wives to bear more children to maximize the profitability of sharecropping agreements. Applying white, middle-class norms to the lives of low-income black families hardly proved a prescription for marital bliss. The Freedmen's Bureau received hundreds of complaints about wife-beating, adultery, and failure to pay child support. Angry women demanded that their husbands not be allowed to sign labor contracts on their behalf.⁴¹ In the end, rather than reconfigure low-income black families, Reconstruction reformers did little more than stigmatize alternative strategies for coping with poverty and instability.

Concerns about blacks' sexual and marital practices reemerged with their migration from the rural South to urban centers in the North and West. An influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe already had prompted fears of casual sex, which in turn gave rise to the social hygiene movement. Crowded into tenements, black migrants sparked new anxieties about sexual and marital anarchy. Elite blacks created societies to educate poor, black migrant women about the hardships of raising children without the benefit of marriage.⁴² These societies tried to wean black migrants from beliefs about sex and marriage that they brought with them from the rural South. Despite the efforts of Reconstruction reformers and the exhortations of affluent blacks, low-income blacks never fully conformed to images of white, middle-class respectability. One turn-of-the-century poem popular among black miners and railroad workers in Alabama made the point:

White folks on the sofa
Niggers on the grass
White man is talking low
Nigger is getting ass.⁴³

Regardless of their personal beliefs about marriage, poverty often left blacks in low-income, urban ghettos with few choices. In a study of Philadelphia Blacks in 1899, W. E. B. Du Bois found that many young adults lacked the financial resources to marry. Instead, they relied on

cohabitation and serial monogamy.⁴⁴ Poor blacks in the city could not conform to the white, middle-class image of the ideal family. Black women worked long hours in domestic employment and had little time to supervise their own children. In the rural South, friends and relatives kept a watchful eye on the youth. But in impersonal urban neighborhoods, children often wound up as truants from school and were arrested for "improper guardianship."⁴⁵ Black men, perhaps humiliated by their inability to fulfill the role of breadwinner, deserted their families at a much higher rate than white men. As a result, black women often found themselves heading households and raising children alone, just as they had during slavery.⁴⁶

During the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement once again focused the nation's attention on questions of racial equality. At the same time, the sexual revolution was creating a new sense of personal freedom to experiment with sex outside of marriage, and the women's liberation movement was forcing America to reconsider the subordinated status of women in marriage and family life.⁴⁷ This newfound spirit of openness and experimentation did not extend to the black family, however. Instead, government authorities continued to apply deeply traditional norms of sexual and marital propriety. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a report for President Lyndon Johnson that attributed problems of welfare dependency, drug addiction, delinquency, and crime to the matriarchal structure of black families.⁴⁸ Echoing the approach taken by the Freedmen's Bureau, Moynihan urged officials to break through the "tangle of pathology" by making an effort to ensure that black males were fully employed. In this way, black men could assume their roles as breadwinners and approximate the norm that "presumes male leadership in private and public affairs."⁴⁹ The Moynihan report was engulfed in controversy for blaming blacks' problems on family inadequacies rather than racism. Even so, few questioned whether applying a traditional model of white, middle-class nuclear families to low-income blacks was appropriate.⁵⁰

Much as urban segregation and antimiscegenation laws meant that black families would be racially separate, the removal of Native American tribes to reservations ensured that their families would be racially identifiable. Once again, reformers took steps to rehabilitate these tribal families so that they would become "equal" through assimilation to white norms. Some reformers doubted that isolated Indian families could progress without civilizing contact with whites, including intermarriage. In 1854, anthropologist J. C. Nott wrote:

It has been falsely asserted that the *Choctaw* and *Cherokee* Indians have made great progress in civilization. I assert positively, after the most ample investigation of the facts, that the pure-blooded Indians are everywhere unchanged in their habits. Many white persons, settling among the above tribes, have intermarried with them; and all such trumpeted progress exists among these whites and their mixed breeds alone.⁵¹

In the 1870s, influential anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan advocated intermarriage as a way to solve the Indian problem. He believed that through several generations of intermarrying with whites, children would become respectable and attractive. He concluded: "This is to be the end of the Indian absorption of a small portion, which will improve and toughen our race, and the residue run out or forced into the regions of the mountains."⁵² Morgan did worry that, in some instances, the admixture of Indians and whites could prove unpredictable and dangerous.⁵³

Rather than undertake the seemingly risky experiment of widespread intermarriage, reformers turned their attention to assimilating Indians on isolated reservations by altering their patterns of kinship, family, and community life. Many tribes operated on communal principles. Instead of a system of individual property ownership and nuclear families, members held land and resources collectively and shared responsibility for raising children. Some tribes also practiced polygyny to make up for a shortage of men or to divide work in efficient ways.⁵⁴ White reformers considered these alternative ways of life antithetical to the Indian's progress. Polygynous arrangements led white Christian missionaries to conclude that Native American men were *lazy*, while Native American women were *industrious* but *degraded*. Missionaries believed that a woman was "robbed of [her] proper dignity and tolerated only as she was able to minister to the desires of the man called her husband. In our own land, as in the Orient, the heaviest curse of heathenism falls on women."⁵⁵ Others blamed the sexual degradation on the women themselves: They "were all courtesans; a set of handsome tempting women. . . . The curse of the Mandanes is an almost total want of chastity."⁵⁶

The federal government set about reforming such sexual and marital lawlessness. An 1885 report to the Board of Indian Commissioners explained why reconstructing family life was essential:

More than any other idea, consideration of the family and its proper sphere in the civilizing of races and in the development of the individual, serves to unlock the difficulties which surround legislation for the Indian.

The family is God's unit of society. On the integrity of the family depends that of the State. There is no civilization deserving of the name where the family is not the unit of civil government. . . .

But the tribal system paralyzes at once the desire for property and the family life that ennoble that desire.⁵⁷

In 1883, the Secretary of the Interior reported that Indian agents must prevent Indian men from using casual divorces to abandon their wives and children. The secretary insisted that "[s]ome system of marriage should be adopted, and the Indian compelled to conform to it."⁵⁸ During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the U.S. Supreme Court and two state courts made clear that states had no jurisdiction to punish adultery, polygamy, or other violations of marriage laws on tribal reservations.⁵⁹ To fill the moral and legal vacuum and ensure the rehabilitation of Indian families, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs outlawed polygamy and authorized harsh penalties for adultery, cohabitation, licentiousness, bastardy, and fornication.⁶⁰

By parceling out reservation land to Indian families and making Native American men the owners, Congress hoped that the Dawes Act⁶¹ would inculcate an appreciation of property ownership and patriarchal nuclear families. As Merrill Gates, an Indian reformer, explained in 1896:

We have . . . the absolute need of awakening in the savage Indian broader desires and ampler wants. To bring him out of savagery into citizenship we must make the Indian more intelligently selfish before we can make him unselfishly intelligent. . . . The desire for property of his own may become an intense educating force. The wish for a home of his own awakens him to new efforts. Discontent with the teepee and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers,—and trousers with a pocket in them, and with a *pocket that aches to be filled with dollars!*⁶²

When property was distributed, only single members of the tribe over age eighteen, orphans under eighteen, and married Native American men were eligible to receive an allotment. Married Native American women were completely excluded from receiving property in deference to their husbands' status as heads of the household.

To interrupt the transfer of Native American values from one generation to the next, the federal government separated children from their families so that they could be resocialized in settings dominated by whites. In 1904, the Superintendent of Indian Schools indicated that Indian children must give up their communal values in order to make

progress against “inherited weaknesses and tendencies” that include “habits of aimless living, unambition, and shiftlessness.”⁶³ White contact was deemed critical to this transformation. Indian children had to be adopted by white families or temporarily placed with them as part of a boarding school education.⁶⁴ Whether or not Indian parents consented, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs considered the removal necessary because Indian children otherwise would grow up “with fathers who are degraded and mothers who are debased.” In such deficient homes, the children’s “ideas of human life will, of necessity, be deformed, their characters warped, and their lives distorted.”⁶⁵ The boarding school system was not dismantled until the late 1920s and 1930s.

Native American children often adopted the norms of white communities while at boarding school. For instance, some students chose to marry in disregard of clan relationships and traditional tribal enmities. Not all of these marriages survived the couples’ return to reservations, but some did endure and demonstrated that Native Americans could choose romantic individualism over collective loyalties.⁶⁶ At times, boarding school pupils reverted to Indian customs when they rejoined their tribes, a practice referred to as “return to the blanket.” Reintegration into the tribe at times was marked by a traditional Indian marriage. Sun Elk of the Taos Pueblo describes the way in which his wedding reaffirmed his connection to his people:

My father brought me a girl to marry. Her name was Roberta. Her Indian name was P’ah-Tah-Zhuli (Little Deer ~~Bean~~). She was about 15 years old and had no father. But she was a good girl and she came to live with me in my new house outside the pueblo.

When we were married I became an Indian again. I let my hair grow, I put on blankets, and I cut the seat out of my pants.⁶⁷

Throughout the decades of federal intervention to reform Indian families, officials used policies about sex, marriage, and childrearing to preserve racial difference as a biological matter while eradicating its social and cultural significance. As a result, Indian weddings often became a symbolic rite of passage, proof of a tribal loyalty based not only on blood but also a common way of life.

In sum, by making families racially identifiable, antimiscegenation laws increased the salience of cultural differences in sex, marriage, and childrearing practices. Far from creating a safe haven for alternative family structures, segregation increased fears of dangerous and destructive differences. Often the urge to transform nonwhite families came as shift-

ing racial boundaries provoked uncertainty and anxiety. When blacks were emancipated, Reconstruction reformers sought to remake black families in the image of white respectability without countenancing race-mixing. As blacks migrated to northern and western cities in the early 1900s, their place in the racial hierarchy once more became unsettled. The color line was challenged when the conditions of black migrants’ lives converged with those of poverty-stricken immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. In response, middle-class reformers—both black and white—attempted to educate black migrants about the perils of interracial sex and the promise of traditional, same-race marriages and families. For Native American families, concerns about sex, marriage, and family arose when tribes were removed to reservations. Officials feared that the tribes would never become fully civilized because of their isolation from whites. To mitigate the danger of unassimilability, federal officials launched campaigns to build traditional nuclear families founded on Christian principles.

Conclusion

Most discussions of antimiscegenation laws have focused on their role in establishing racial hierarchies. What is often ignored, however, is the statutes’ critical importance in building a normative hierarchy of sexual and marital practices. Just as the laws reinforced the racial superiority of whites, they placed their middle-class aspirations for love and marriage at the pinnacle of respectability. Whenever racial and sexual boundaries were contested, antimiscegenation doctrine provided a way to reassert the propriety of same-race sex and marriage. By criminalizing interracial relations, the law signaled the debauched and depraved nature of those who crossed the color line. Race-mingling meant ruin, not romance.

Perhaps even more perniciously, the statutes created a principle of “separate but equal” families that presumed that nonwhite couples should assimilate to white, middle-class norms. Demands for assimilation seldom took account of the limitations imposed by poverty and instability. Moreover, the insistence that nonwhites conform to white standards rejected the cultural worth of their alternative approaches to sex, marriage, and childrearing. Segregated by law, nonwhites could not capitalize on their isolated condition to build a distinct way of life. Instead, the pervasiveness of racial subordination was brought home by the imperative to assimilate, even in areas as deeply personal as sex, marriage, and family.