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One Nation, One Blood: Interracial Marriage in American Fiction Scandal and Law 1820-1870

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It wasn't until the year 2000 that Alabama voters repealed, by a narrow margin, the section of their state constitution that banned "any marriage between a white person and a Negro or a descendant of a Negro."

Although Alabama was the last state to have a miscegenation law on the books, the author points out that even today the issue of interracial marriage remains a controversial topic. The issue manifests itself in "current controversies over affirmative action, interracial adoption, census categories, voting districts and Indian sovereignty," writes Weierman, an assistant professor of English at Worcester (Massachusetts) State College.

The 1820—1870 time frame was a formative era, and it is this fifty-year period on which the author concentrates. She addresses fictional accounts of interracial marriages in novels, government policies, and marital scandals of the day. Because so many legal ramifications hinged on a marriage contract between two consenting adults at the time, the author focuses only on the institution of marriage, not interracial affairs.

Indian-White marriages were the most prevalent during this time. In one example, a nineteenth-century missionary school in Connecticut is the site of a romance between a fourteen-year-old white girl and a nineteen-year-old Cherokee student. Neither set of parents is particularly enthusiastic about their desire to marry, but eventually they approve. The outraged townspeople, however, riot.

Novelists of the period, including James Fenimore Cooper, used fiction to discuss racial identity and property rights. "Cooper denies the possibility of intermarriage," the author writes, "because it would ultimately threaten White claims of the land." Interracial marriages between Blacks and Whites prior to the Civil War created even dicier situations that tested some opponents of slavery. "Some abolitionists, for instance, tried to reassure nervous supporters with

a ‘live and let live’ position, arguing that if there was in fact a ‘natural antipathy’ between the races, they need not worry that emancipation would lead to widespread amalgamation.” The difference between a discussion of this issue during the mid-nineteenth century and today, according to the author, is one of candor.

“Resistance to interracial marriage has been internalized; it remains strong even though such opposition is no longer acceptable in public discourse,” she writes. This exhaustive study is thought-provoking on many levels. With her thirty-plus pages of footnotes, the author creates a palatable stew of history, religion, politics, culture, and racial identity. The result is a question for Americans today in the face of growing multi-culturism: whether historical knowledge and cultural critique can help to reverse centuries of fear and prejudice so that we may see ourselves as one nation made “of one blood.”