

### Illicit Love: Interracial Sex and Love in the United States and Australia

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## Review

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**McGrath, Ann** *Illicit Love: Interracial Sex and Love in the United States and Australia*. University of Nebraska Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780803238251

### Using Marriage to Assert and Contest White Settler Sovereignty

In this ambitious work, Ann McGrath examines how Indigenous peoples and white settlers employed marriage in their struggles for sovereignty. She employs case studies focusing on the Cherokees in the early national United States and aboriginal peoples in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Queensland. Anticipating fellow historians' objections to this juxtaposition, she presents these cases as "eye-opening exemplars" that reveal intersections and multiplicities of Indigenous and colonizer sovereignties (5). Marriage, she persuasively contends, was central not only to native social organization through kinship but also to settlers' vision of the modern, civilized nation.

McGrath's narrative is organized in four parts, framed by an introduction and an epilogue. In Part I, "Secrets of New Nations," she focuses first on the controversial 1825 marriage of Harriet Gold to Cherokee student Elias Boudinot and the illicit relationship between missionary Ernest Gribble and his Indigenous employee Jeannie Brown. Harriet and Elias' union revealed "colonialism's hidden fault line" in Connecticut, pitting residents' assertions of the spiritual equality of men against established narratives of whites' moral justifications for colonialism based on Indian inferiority (82). McGrath strategically employs present tense as she spins evocative descriptions, offering pleasant novelistic interludes that further her aim of cultivating empathy for her subjects. Her task is far easier for Elias and Harriet, many of whose letters survive, than for Gribble, whose diary documents his obsessive intervention into the marital lives of the aboriginal residents of his Yarrabah mission.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Gribble sought to "save" Indigenous women from exploitation by white colonists through total racial segregation and the imposition of Western models of marriage and kinship, which also served the

interests of the white settler state intent on dispossessing native residents of their land. Yet Ernest, who banished his sister for marrying an aboriginal man, was ultimately unable to practice what he preached. While few details are available, after his estranged wife left the mission Ernest fell in love with Jeannie, who had been raised in and worked for white families before being sent to the mission. When he impregnated Jeannie, Ernest arranged her marriage to an Indigenous man to preserve his respectability and the credibility of the mission, but to no avail; he himself was ultimately banished from Yarrabah by the Australian Board of Missions.

The second part of the book explores “Marriage and Modernity Among the Cherokees.” Chapter three weaves together writings in the *Cherokee Phoenix* under the pseudonym “Socrates” with the Cherokee nation’s evolving statutes on marriage. The laws reflected Socrates’ concerns that white colonists were using marriage to appropriate Cherokee lands, while failing to care for their Cherokee families. The Council simultaneously took steps to broaden the definition of national belonging while protecting Cherokee land. They granted citizenship on the basis of fathers and well as mother, departing from previous matrilineal norms, but restricted land ownership to Cherokee citizens, denying white men who married Cherokee women the access to property that Anglo-American law granted them. While marriage with white men was discouraged, it was still legal – unlike marriage to people of African descent. While McGrath correctly points to their Southern context and elite Cherokee men’s ownership of slaves as causes, she appears to mistakenly believe that the possibility that free women could bear enslaved children was a factor, while American colonists resolved the issue early on by declaring that children inherited their enslaved status from their mothers. Despite this slip, her conclusion that Cherokee leaders exercised and defended their sovereignty by regulating marriage and placing limitations on white men is convincing.

Having reviewed the evolving landscape of marriage law, McGrath turns to another marriage of a Cherokee man and a white woman – this one more surprising than the first because it involved Chief John Ross. Ross was a vocal opponent of the removal treaty signed by Elias Boudinot and others, and had actively discouraged marriage with white women with no clear place in Cherokee social organization. After his first wife died on the Trail of Tears, however, Ross “planned to... find a wife from New England,” drawing on his political and business ties. McGrath is unable to provide a clear answer – and there may not be one – but argues that “his marital choice was more than

likely... governed by his political instinct" (202, 203). The remainder of the chapter is a close analysis of the correspondence of Ross and his second wife, Mary Bryan Stapler. While the argumentative thread regarding sovereignty runs much thinner in this chapter, the Ross-Stapler story fills McGrath's promise to explore how transnational marriages were personal entanglements that unfolded across the invisible lines on nations.

Part 3 returns us to "Queensland's Marital Middle Ground" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a non-Australianist, I found that these chapters offered helpful context for the earlier narrative about Ernest Gribble and Yarrabah, and that it was only in chapter six that I finally found a sufficiently thorough explanation of the complex aboriginal system of marriage and kinship. Fellow Americanists may be better served by reading chapter six as the first chapter focusing on Australia. These chapters look at the overlapping and sometimes conflicting dual systems of marriage operating in Queensland in the early decades of the twentieth century, where white and Indigenous women and men struggled to impose, resist, and often combine Western and aboriginal ideas about marriage and kinship.

Chapter 5 focuses on the state's aboriginal protectors' attempts to regulate or destroy mix-race marriages, based on the Aboriginal Protection Act. The Act justified its intervention in Indigenous people's lives as measures to ensure that aboriginal people did not disappear by insisting that they marry other aboriginals; this was part of the larger "White Australia" campaign that sought to deport Asian and Pacific Islander labor and to regulate and segregate aboriginal people. McGrath shows, however, that white and Asian men married to aboriginal women opposed these infringements. White frontiersmen in particular resented what they perceived as elitist meddling and the denial of their manly rights and needs, launching sustained newspaper campaigns against the chief protectors. Despite the hostility directed their way, McGrath finds that the protectors frequently granted exceptions to men who fit the image of a "good husband."

The sixth chapter focuses on how the overlap of Australian and tribal law created both confusion for everyone and potential opportunities for women. Each set of marriage laws had advantages, and McGrath argues that many women effectively combined them by entering with their tribal husband's consent into marriages with frontiersmen. Tribal law, with marriage at its core, dictated an individual's social position and obligations; intermarriage could draw

non-aboriginal men into these kinship networks and increase access to resources. As McGrath demonstrates in the second chapter, aboriginal people frequently overlaid their kinship system on the Western model of marriage and family. Yet if the interracial marriage was perceived as the “real” marriage by the state, women risked being cut off from the landscape and social system that defined them.

The final two chapters address the erosion of marital middle grounds. Cherokee and aboriginal people deliberately adapted their marriage systems in response to colonization. The Cherokee sought to demonstrate their social advancement by outlawing polygamy, while Indigenous Australians deployed flexible kinship classifications to include non-aboriginal men. Yet the nascent nation states frequently denied the legitimacy of relationships between the races, just as they denied their sovereignty over land; by refusing to recognize what were to Indigenous people legitimate relationships with reciprocal obligations, the young nations – and their white citizens – could deny the Indigenous wives’ and children’s claims to property and to citizenship, willfully forgetting the entanglements that blurred sharp delineations between peoples. In the epilogue McGrath offers brief conclusions to the stories of the featured couples, satisfyingly tying up her multiple narratives.

The argument can be difficult to discern as she dissects how “human idiosyncrasy and contradiction” played out in the early national American and Australian contexts, and love doesn’t emerge as a consistent subject, but her ultimate conclusion demonstrates the potential of transnational research. As nations pursued “perfect sovereignty,” McGrath concludes, “the same pattern appeared in two hemispheres eighty years apart:” nation-states sought to exert power through the “control of land and love,” deciding which marriages and families were legitimate and illegitimate in order to define national belonging (349, 368).

*Lindsay Keiter recently earned her doctorate in early American history from the College of William & Mary, writing her dissertation on the economic functions of marriage in America from the mid-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. She is a historian for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation where, in addition to research, she works on developing historical programming for the public and on training museum interpreters.*