

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

by Ann McGrath

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In the opening pages of her engaging comparative history of interracial marriage in the Australian and American settler-colonial contexts, Ann McGrath makes a pivotal qualification: 'colonizing nations were hardly conducive to happy marriages' (p. 8). Indeed, the accustomed historical treatment of the frontier foregrounds Indigenous women's sexual vulnerability and the violence ensuing from the failure of settler men to fulfil kinship obligations committed to through their sexual relations with Aboriginal women. In earlier colonial print 'primitive' sexuality has been embellished with prostitution, polygamy, child bestowal and bride capture. McGrath notes in settler fantasies of the frontier Aboriginal women 'appear only as an antidote to sodomy and as a dirty joke' (p. 23). McGrath does not discount sexual violence on the frontier and in its aftermath, but decisively repudiates that this was the only expression of sexual contact. In her eye-opening telling of enduring romances and marriages across the racial divide, McGrath interrogates these reductive tropes and reinstates the agency of Indigenous women some of whom have spoken 'candidly' with her, even 'joyfully' (p. xxiv), of engaging in relationships of varying length and commitment depending on their preference.

Throughout *Illicit Love* the tenderness, desire and love of Indigenous and settler men and women for each other confounds a stockpile of tropes associated with racialised sexuality, from captivity narratives with their sexual enslavement of seized white women to the subjection of 'Squaws' and 'Lubras' by their 'brutal overlords'. McGrath dubs these 'narratives of mismatch', deployed to guard the 'borders of gender and frontier' (p. 81). Through her telling of the intriguing

connections created by intermarriage, McGrath lays bare 'unseen networks' more repressed than forgotten because of the ways they entwined Indigenous and settler sovereignties. McGrath's focus on sovereignty refrains throughout. Racial regimes were thereby perforated at the inception of nation-making, or federation in the United States and Australia respectively. She wryly observes (since a lot of us live in them and those of us who are debarred may know this better) 'all marriage choices have a certain political element' (p. 203). But far more than the private means to enforce gendered proscriptions and monogamous heteronormativity McGrath assigns 'Marriage, the flag of empire' (p. 114).

The function of marriage in European diplomacy and trade is commonly understood. We're informed the word sovereignty has its provenance in the King James Bible's Genesis where it refers to man's sovereignty over his wife and slaves (p. 181). The revelatory outlook of *Illicit Love* is its foregrounding of the other side of settler desire. For Aboriginal Australians intimate relationships were integral to the storied landscapes that forged the topography of their dreaming, 'In this personal landscape, configured out of human relationships over millennia, mortality tales remind people of the drastic results of infringing marriage laws' (p. 102). McGrath details the ways Aboriginal marriages were already formalised. They cemented complex kinship relations and granted access to outlying nations, incorporating distant people within law and embedding trade routes. All of which were robust forms of strictly observed marital diplomacy. She adds, for Indigenous communities marriage was a 'means of asserting and extending [their] land-based sovereignty' (p. 294). All of which, as McGrath reasons, was indubitably *civil*.

Perhaps her most bravura assertion is that marriage is 'a performance of sovereignty' (p. 2) as well as of kinship and diplomacy. Through the stories of interracial couples she returns us to her newly conceived domain, 'the marital middleground' and convincingly argues 'these were grounds where dual and duelling sovereignties were enacted' (p. 3).

The affair of missionary Ernest Gribble and Jeannie Forbes was a remarkable breach of the sexual strictures he enforced in his mission, with often gratuitous humiliation. Gribble characterised 'native' marriage as inherently debasing and exploitative. Yarrabah Mission was designed to end any observance of custom characterised as polygamy and child bestowal. The missions ostensibly protected native women and girls from the sexual depredations of white men. All the more mortifying then when Gribble's own brother was accused of raping a 15-year-old Aboriginal girl who then carried his child. His sister conceived a child with an Aboriginal man and eventually clandestinely married him, becoming Mrs Wondunna. The pervasive frontier vulnerability of Aboriginal women was a central rationale for protection-era state administrations and the removal of Aboriginal peoples to missions. Perhaps Gribble was incapable

of imagining the reciprocated desire and sexual agency of Aboriginal women until he was literally drawn into the open arms of Jeannie Forbes. McGrath observes, 'any consent she exercised was much qualified' (p. 144). Yet *Illicit Love* advances the prospect for mutually fostered, returned love which defied the racial homogeneity these nation-states pursued.

Gribble had gone to enormous lengths to enforce monogamy, building gender segregated dormitories, imposing curfews, and prohibiting extended families from staying in matrimonial homes. His elaborately public white weddings brokered new geopolitical relations. McGrath writes,

On what was classed as "Crown land," the British sovereign, the public spectacle of a Christian wedding ceremony had a double meaning. It implied a new form of governance that was premised upon imperial and colonizing hierarchies. It was embodied in, and underwritten by, new forms of gender and marital relations (p. 118).

Yet with his imposition of Christian monogamous marriage Gribble contravened Aboriginal laws that were so stringently observed some indiscretions carried the death penalty. Gribble was blundering blind into Indigenous marriage laws, disrupting the intergenerational obligations and compensations of kinship landowning contracts. To disguise his own unborn child he rushed Jeannie into a union with a man already tribally married. The ensuing strife was descriptive of the inadvertent destabilising of families and communities wrought by myopic missionaries.

McGrath takes a novel approach to marriage restriction enforced through Queensland's 1897 *Aboriginal's Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*. She draws attention to state surveillance of white supplicants for the hands of Aboriginal women in marriage. The protectors Meston and Roth effectively appointed themselves 'fathers of the bride to all Indigenous women' (p. 270), in a regulation that, as it transpires, could not actually be enforced. Nevertheless, this affront to white masculine sexual liberty was bitterly resented. It infringed, men argued, on their democratic entitlements. For the Djabugandji, Yidinjdji and Gunggandji people removed to Yarrabah, the contractual and kinship obligations of inclusive marriage law incorporated outsiders and newcomers into Indigenous authority and into the relations governing lands and its life-giving resources. These protocols of intimacy were transgressed and hybridised when Indigenous and settler people comingled. When 'that uncategorizable concept – love' exerted its exquisite pleasure and pain across the cleave of race, 'ever-expanding constellations of people open into the future of humanity'. As they do they 'reproduce the polygamous sovereignties that are settler-colonialism today' (p. 392).

The relation of marriage to statecraft is the focus of McGrath's account of the marriage between Cherokee leader John Ross and 16-year-old Quaker Mary Stapler just after his intense negotiations of the Treaty of New Echota in 1835 and as he frantically struggled to contest the Indian Removal Act. When Cherokee land was given to Georgians in lotteries, Ross's first wife died on the 'Trail of Tears', along with 4,000 of her people either en route or soon after. Dexterously interweaving Ross's treaty negotiations with his playful love letters, McGrath divulges 'the parallel between the gendered politics of marriage and the transnational politics of negotiating his nation's future' (p. 229).

As a defence of Cherokee sovereignty against white 'intruder' men who used intermarriage to gain access to Cherokee women's matrilineal land inheritance, Ross and his council imposed intermarriage and citizenship restrictions that were overtly pro-segregation. But by adopting representative 'modern' models of governance the political authority and economic autonomy of Cherokee women was eroded. Being allotted the status of the white wife was hardly an advancement for Cherokee women. Indeed, the white women who moved into their community by marrying Cherokee men faced often terrifying ostracism by their own white families. When Harriett Gold's betrothal to Ellias Boudinot was announced, her brother led a mob which burnt her effigy on the village green. McGrath notes, white women who married Indigenous men were being unfaithful to their race. The implications for colonial sovereignty by intermarriage is that it could only ever be incomplete, 'imperfect' indeed 'polygamous' in its very constitution and complexion.

By implication these arguments confer a certain intelligibility on women's sexual consent. When colonisers defined European Christian monogamous marriage as an indice of civilisation, they did so by characterising 'primitive' marriage as inherently debasing of women. Arguably, anthropologists' origin theories of marriage, along with companionate marriage instated women's consent as a central demarker of civilisation. In McGrath's enthralling telling of entwined sovereignties in the formative decades of Australia and the United States becoming modern nation-states, we trace lost ancestries, hidden in 'worlds wedded and unwedded' (p. xxvii). We realise that interracial love was 'inherently transnational', and that 'Indigenous sovereignties live on in love' (p. 32). Through creating families across the frontier, these entwined sovereignties are carried by descendants 'in their bodies'.

Illicit Love is superbly written. At time of writing McGrath won the prestigious New South Wales Premier's General History Prize. From the opening line, 'We are waiting on a file' every historian will be hooked. But the moving stories she tells of the radical valency of unguarded love will touch many readers' hearts, all with an entirely new appreciation of the shattering potential of the adage, love conquers all.

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