

A FADING

RENEE ROMANO SPENT MORE THAN TEN YEARS RESEARCHING BLACK-WHITE MARRIAGES IN THE UNITED STATES. SHE'S ALSO IN ONE. HER FINDINGS? OLD PERCEPTIONS MAY HAVE LESS TO DO WITH CURRENT REALITIES.

BY DAVID LOW '76

TABOO?

Since her early years growing up in suburbs of Cleveland, Associate Professor of History and African American Studies Renee Romano has been a keen observer of racial relations in this country—and in her own daily life. This lifelong interest led her both to a teaching career and to her new book, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Harvard University Press), the culmination of 10 years of research. It explores the taboo against black-white interracial marriages in American culture from World War II to the present, how such marriages have gained acceptance over the decades, and what this tells us about American race relations now.

In 1980, when Romano was 12 years old, her family moved from the all-white Cleveland suburb of Bay Village to the racially integrated community of Shaker Heights, only 45 minutes away, but worlds apart. Her parents couldn't have foreseen how much this change would affect their daughter's life and outlook.

"It was probably the most formative social and political event in shaping who I was, who I became, and what I am interested in," she says.

When she was seven and still living in Bay Village, a black family moved in about five houses down, and a cross was burned on their lawn. "I didn't quite understand what was going on at the time," Romano says, "but I knew that something awful was happening and that these people were being treated poorly just because they looked different. They moved away very quickly. It was not a welcoming atmosphere to anybody of color."

Romano's parents decided to move, in part because they wanted a better school system, but even more important, they didn't like the racial politics of Bay Village, a close-minded, homogenous area that they believed was not a healthy environment for raising children.

"Moving to a racially integrated suburb—and one where education was highly valued, which didn't seem

to be the case in my elementary school—was very important to them," she says.

"So I was in this middle school that was about 40 percent African American, 55 percent white, and 5 percent other people. There were kids from India and various parts of Asia—all kinds of people. I had never met an Asian American before. I had known no Jewish kids. And now this town was one-third Jewish. It was incredibly more diverse."

Romano is quick to point out that Shaker Heights was far from perfect. "For example, although the schools were racially mixed, black kids tended not to be tracked into the AP classes. So if you were in these classes, you were around mostly white kids. There were racial tensions in the schools as well."

In high school, Romano joined the Student Group on Race Relations, which she describes as an earnest group dedicated to talking to sixth graders about prejudice and discrimination in hopes that, at this malleable age, they might be helped to create a better community. She also made nonwhite friends. In her senior year, she began dating Sean Decatur, an African American whom she later married.

"He and I were friends before we began dating. We didn't go to the same school. He went to a private school in the area, and we knew each other through the debate team. And race was simply not an issue. I would bring him to all the parties. None of my friends had any trouble at all with any of this. We hung out in big groups or had parties that were racially mixed."

Romano admits that she was lucky because her parents and Decatur's parents were totally supportive. (Her father is Italian American, and her mother is German Scottish, with a socialist background.) Even before they started dating, her politically progressive mother encouraged her to go out with her husband-to-be.

Romano cites another formative event in her family. "When I was 16, my parents adopted my sister from India, so we had a mix in the family. In this way, they made it very clear that the way one looked had nothing to do with who was family, nothing to do with whom you can love. People can be brought into family networks and become family. They didn't say any of those things, but that was so implicit in this act of becoming a family with a transcultural adoption."

Romano went to Yale already knowing that she "wanted to find out about African-American history, about race relations, about politics and race, because I just couldn't possibly understand how you could have these two towns—Bay Village and Shaker Heights—so close to each other and be so different."

One political science class, Racial Prejudice and Political Intolerance, addressed race relations in America, an issue she would later investigate in graduate school and in her book. Her class examined poll data that looked at how white people answered questions about race. The data revealed that in 1950 most white people said they would not have dinner with black persons, invite black persons to their homes, or live next door to black persons.

But by 1988, the vast majority of whites answered yes to the same questions. Yet one question—"Would you be willing to let your daughter date a black man?"—still elicited "no" from most respondents.

"That really got me thinking," Romano says. "Why did this one area of social relations raise so much more concern for people than other kinds of less intimate relations? People still felt that it was okay to say, 'No, I don't want my daughter to date a black man.'"

While pursuing a doctorate in history at Stanford, Romano met Estelle Freedman, a specialist in women's history and the history of sexuality. She pushed Romano to go beyond traditional sources and

to think broadly about the ways in which sexuality, for instance, might be part of political history. For her dissertation, Romano decided to write about the history of black-white interracial marriages in America from the 1940s onward, which would allow her to explore political, cultural, gender, and social issues and which would trace the gradual erosion of the taboo against such marriages over the decades.

One of her advisers told her she would never find any sources on the topic.

“What he really meant, I think,” she says, “is that you’ll never find anything in archives. For historians, archives are the gold mine of sources—as a one-of-a-kind thing, more legitimate than newspaper stories or sources you might find anywhere, such as published books.”

As she continued her research, which she compares to “detective work,” Romano did indeed find useful, even fascinating archival sources. For example, Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library had the personal correspondence between Walter White, who was the head of the NAACP in the late 1940s, and the white woman he married after divorcing his black wife in 1949. In their letters, they agonized about the consequences of entering a mixed marriage, so unacceptable at the time.

The Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison, home to many radical history sources, alerted her to the papers of a black chemist named George Wiley, a civil rights activist and the head of the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1970s. Wiley dated several white women before marrying a white woman in 1961. Romano found letters Wiley had written to a friend, a white woman, about what it meant to him to date interracially, as well as tapes he made about how he felt after one of his white girlfriends refused to marry him. This girlfriend had also left him a tape about why she felt she couldn’t marry him because of her parents’ opposition.

Yet another fruitful resource was the Murray Research Center at Radcliffe, where she discovered a series of interviews with black women professionals in the late ’60s and early ’70s about their personal and work lives. Nearly all of these women addressed their problems finding black husbands, in part because black men were marrying white women.

The center also had a study that asked mothers

how they coped in stressful situations when their children did something upsetting. Among the topics discussed were: if the child commits murder, joins a satanic cult, becomes a drug user, commits suicide—or marries interracially.

Romano found abundant sources from the 1940s onward in the black and white media. She looked through every issue of *Ebony* magazine, which ran hundreds of articles on interracial marriages, many of them positive. But she also found a large number of articles on the topic in newspapers speaking mostly to a white audience, and in mainstream magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*. The white press tended to be sensationalistic and usually portrayed interracial relationships as difficult to sustain, sometimes even dangerous or pathological.

The media, however, revealed a shift in white attitudes toward interracial marriage through the mostly positive reaction to the 1967 wedding of Peggy Rusk, the white daughter of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Guy Smith, the light-skinned son of a black Washington, D.C., professional family. News publications portrayed the event sympathetically. The marriage became a cover story for *Time*, which called it “a benchmark in the troubled history of race relations in the United States” and declared that whites who attacked the marriage were unreasonable.

Romano consulted several published memoirs, some of which she teaches in her classes, including *The Color of Water* by James McBride, about his white mother, who raised 12 mixed-raced children; *How I Became Hettie Jones*, in which Ms. Jones, a white Jewish woman, describes her marriage to black writer Amiri Baraka, while living in late 1950s Greenwich Village; and Mark and Gail Mathabane’s *Love in Black and White*, about the marriage of a black South African man and a white woman. Romano also looked at memoirs published by religious presses and written by interracial married couples who argued that their strong religious convictions enabled them to challenge society’s norm.

One of Romano’s favorite sources was military records of black soldiers enlisted during World War II, which she found in the Soldier Marriage File in the NAACP Papers. She used these records and others to

describe in her book how black U.S. soldiers stationed overseas were severely deterred by the U.S. military authorities from both dating and marrying white women, at a time in America when interracial marriage was illegal in 31 of the 48 states.

Romano also researched a number of legal cases and gained access to trial transcripts. “The most interesting kind of cases were the ones in which white women, who had been married previously to white men and had children, get divorced and remarry black men. Then there’s a custody suit where the other parent or grandparent sues to get custody of the white children because they don’t want them being raised in an interracial home by a black parent.”

Romano interviewed several couples involved in interracial marriages, which was particularly challenging because she had to ask about very personal issues. One couple she met in California, the McAllesters, a black woman and a white man, had faced discrimination in the 1950s at Earlham, a Quaker college in Indiana, and hadn’t talked publicly about the troubles they faced for 40 years.

In the ’40s and ’50s, interracial relationships were considered to be sick and deviant by most U.S. psychologists and sociologists. Romano was shocked at the vehemence of the professional and scholarly literature published during this time. Psychologists in the ’40s wrote that whites who marry blacks have a death wish or are seeking an outlet for sick sexual urges. They accused anyone in such a relationship as having an Oedipal complex or a poor parent/child relationship.

She also was surprised when her research revealed that in the ’50s and even in the ’60s, white women who dated interracially or intermarried were sometimes put in mental institutions by their parents. Even in states where interracial relationships were legal, white women would be taken before judges as wayward minors and subject to parental and court supervision. Romano discovered that white parents would go to great efforts to prevent interracial relationships, marshaling as many supporters as they could, legally or otherwise, even in states where such relationships were allowed.

Romano’s organization of all this research into a coherent whole changed a lot over the 10-year period in which she worked on her book. She was fortunate to have

her dissertation read by an editor at Harvard University Press, Joyce Seltzer, who signed her to a book contract. Seltzer is well known in the publishing field for hand-picking projects and working closely with historians.

Seltzer would comment on Romano’s chapters with detailed notes in red ink and three-page letters, full of suggestions to take the manuscript to a deeper level. Seltzer urged her to tell a story of change over time, and emphasized the strengths of the stories inherent in the material, which helped make Romano’s provocative research even more compelling to read.

Although Romano believes that there has been an erosion of the taboo against black-white interracial marriages in American society over the decades, she struggled to find the right tone in the book because she believed it important to point out that we haven’t arrived at a “wonderful utopian multiracial society.”

The most significant obstacle to black-white intermarriage, in her view, is structural and institutionalized racism. Income inequality and school and residential segregation not only are barriers that keep blacks and whites from meeting, but also continue the racial disadvantages that make blacks less attractive as marital partners, she says.

Subsequent to her book’s publication, Romano served as consultant on a BBC radio program that aired this summer, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, a three-part show that dealt with intimate relationships that have taken place during difficult political moments. For the show about interracial relationships during the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, she traveled around Louisiana and Mississippi with two BBC producers to provide some commentary and advice.

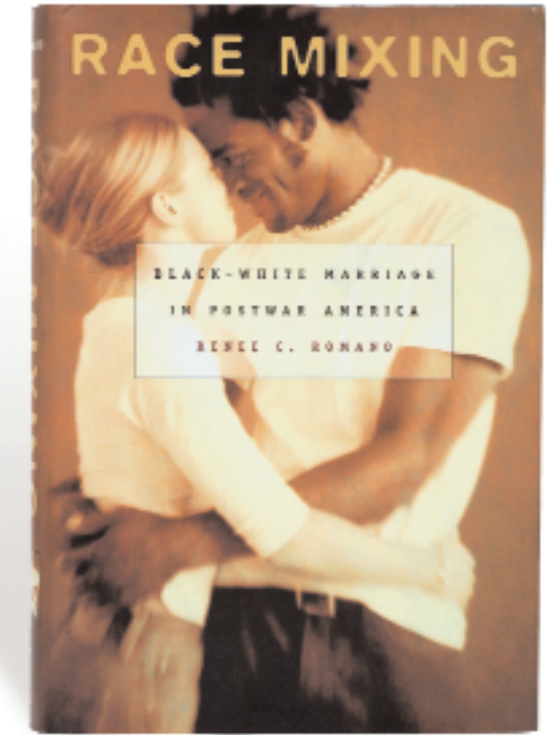
She was thrilled to discover that a British audience would care about this aspect of American society, and that the producers, fascinated by the topic, saw parallels to cross-religious relationships in Northern Ireland.

She also sees a connection between the Supreme Court’s overturning this year of Texas’s sodomy law against homosexuals (*Lawrence v. Texas*) and the groundbreaking decision in 1967 of *Loving v. Virginia*, in which the Supreme Court finally declared all bans on interracial marriage unconstitutional.

“One of the things that the *Loving v. Virginia* said is

that marriage is an individual matter, a private matter,” Romano says. “It should be left up to the two individuals involved, and the state shouldn’t interfere. The same kind of reasoning is being used in the case of these sodomy laws. Whom you sleep with is a very private matter, and the state shouldn’t be involved unless there’s a compelling state interest.

“I see a parallel in recasting what had been considered acts that had great public import as private acts. That was crucial to the decriminalization of interracial



marriage and to a growing acceptance of it—a sense that basically it shouldn’t be considered a major political issue who marries whom. Just in the past few years, you’re beginning to see the same thing with homosexuality and gay rights: a growing tolerance.”

Romano finds that writing the book has made her more aware of the pressures her husband faced while they were dating in college. When he told her back then that he didn’t feel comfortable introducing her to his friends in the black students’ organization because she was white, she was troubled and didn’t fully compre-

hend the political issues at stake for him. Her husband, like other middle-class black men at the time, was questioning whether he could be committed to racial justice and the betterment of his race, yet date a white woman.

Romano has also found that her research on how interracial couples have chosen to raise their children has informed her own decisions in mothering her 7-year-old daughter and her nearly 2-year-old son. Her research made her more aware of the identity and social problems they may face as biracial children in this country and what she needs to do to support them as they grow up.

Romano is grateful to live in Windsor, Conn., a community where there are a lot of interracial couples and where it is common to see interracial families in public places.

“We seem, in this town at least, to be perfectly normal,” she says. “But I know that that’s a very recent historical development—for interracial couples to be accepted as normal—and I know that not all interracial couples today are so lucky.”

Still, she is encouraged that her research revealed how much has changed for the better for many interracial couples living in various parts of the country.

Writing the book also has made her much more aware of the arguments against intermarriage that blacks and whites make, and better able to understand those who oppose the practice. She doesn’t take lightly the problem of black men intermarrying more often than black women, for example. But she also knows that interracial couples have always faced political critiques, that part of being in this kind of relationship is having your personal life politicized.

Romano nonetheless stresses that like most of the interracial couples in her book, she didn’t view her choice of a spouse as a political act; she didn’t marry her husband because she wanted to make a statement or to carry out some political goals. Nor did she choose the subject of her scholarly work because she is married interracially.

“I thought the topic offered an excellent window into race relations in the United States and into what kinds of racial changes have taken place since World War II,” she says. “My ultimate interest in interracial marriages is what they reveal about race and its importance in modern America.” 