



Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861

Joshua D. Rothman

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Laws and cultural norms militated against interracial sex in Virginia before the Civil War, and yet it was ubiquitous in cities, towns, and plantation communities throughout the state. In *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, Joshua Rothman examines the full spectrum of interracial sexual relationships under slavery—from Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the intertwined interracial families of Monticello and Charlottesville to commercial sex in Richmond, the routinized sexual exploitation of enslaved women, and adultery across the color line. He explores the complex considerations of legal and judicial authorities who handled cases involving illicit sex and describes how the customary toleration of sex across the color line both supported and undermined racism and slavery in the early national and antebellum South.

White Virginians allowed for an astonishing degree of flexibility and fluidity within a seemingly rigid system of race and interracial relations, Rothman argues, and the relationship between law and custom regarding racial intermixture was always shifting. As a consequence, even as whites never questioned their own racial supremacy, the meaning and significance of racial boundaries, racial hierarchy, and ultimately of race itself always stood on unstable ground—a reality that whites understood and about which they demonstrated increasing anxiety as the nation's sectional crisis intensified.

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