

Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002; 265 pages; ISBN: 0801486793 paperback; \$19.95.

Kirsten Fischer's *Suspect Relations* emphasizes the importance of thoughtful dialogue between the study of race and the study of gender for a historically accurate reconstruction of eighteenth-century racial formations in North America. Fischer focuses on the disenfranchised of colonial North Carolina – a settlement characterized by contemporaries and later historians alike, as she sarcastically puts it, as “an embarrassingly unsophisticated link in the chain of otherwise thriving and orderly British colonies along the Atlantic coast” (7). Exploring the social repercussions of pre- and extramarital sexual relationships for individuals and communities in this historical context, she reconstructs the intimate and yet so public lives of the colony's Native Americans, African Americans, and white indentured servants from the records of colonial North Carolina's lower courts. In the process, she includes the factor of class in her analysis, thereby rendering her discussion of race and gender all the more nuanced.

Fischer focuses on sexual liaisons which were at the time viewed as illegitimate or improper because they crossed the boundaries established by law or custom along the dividing lines of race and class. Suggesting that analysis of such forbidden or “suspect” liaisons and their social ramifications offers important insights into eighteenth-century constructions of race, she sets out to explore “the continual contestation, reassertion, and reconfiguration of racial categories within the context of sexual relations” (5). She argues that “ordinary people participated in the development of a new racial order” as they engaged in unlawful sexual behavior or reacted to the legally unauthorized sexual conduct of others (1). Ultimately, she seeks to show “how assumptions of gender, race, and class difference propped each other up in the developing social hierarchy” (5).

Chapter 1 introduces a technique that Fischer uses throughout the book: each chapter begins with the reconstruction of a dramatic – more often than not, tragic – event in the life of an individual whom Fischer has encountered while going through the court records that constitute her primary sources. In addressing the strengths and weaknesses of colonial court records as source material, she convincingly concludes that, despite their gaps, the records “provide unique glimpses of otherwise undocumented social relationships” (8). Chapter 1 opens with the story of the adventurous Dorothy Steel, a white woman who in 1697 deserted her husband, stole some of his property, hired two men as her traveling companions, and established a sexual relationship with at least one of them before eventually being captured and prosecuted. The story not only renders Fischer's portrayal of “Disorderly Women and the Struggle for Authority” vivid but also sets the stage for her subsequent, insightful discussion of how the presence of alternative gender roles among North Carolina's Native Americans and Quakers “made the imposition of patriarchal English norms seem all the more imperative” to North Carolina's leading men, who believed that social order required patriarchal rules and patriarchal control, and who felt threatened by the existence of alternative models (54).

While Chapter 1 has little to do with race, it paves the way for Fischer's discussion, in Chapter 2, of Anglo-Indian sexual liaisons in eighteenth-century North Carolina as a forum for white men's colonial fantasies. Here, Fischer mainly draws on white travel literature rather than on the court records on which she relies for the rest of the book. The chapter is a carefully researched piece that sheds important light on both the historical reality and the representational dynamics of Anglo-Indian sexual relations. Fischer observes that at the early stages of colonization many European-American male writers of travelogues "initially presented Indian women as the eager subjects of cultural assimilation" (56). She convincingly shows that the unfortunate white male fantasy of Indian women desiring to be sexually conquered by the white newcomers both reflected and actively contributed to the ideology of colonization, conflating white male "fantasies of territorial and sexual domination" (57). Fischer also maps out a change in the roles of those Native American women who engaged in cross-cultural sex: initially they were "cultural brokers, whose sexual relations with outsiders served a traditional role in diplomacy and trade" (9). Gradually, however, they became the Indian wives of European men, living within the patriarchal colonial culture on that culture's terms.

Chapter 3 explores connections between the control of fertility and that of the workforce by examining "how sex and fertility shaped the working experiences of servant women" (100). Here, the crucial parameters of Fischer's analysis are the prohibition of marriage for indentured servants and the penalties for having an illegitimate child during the term of indenture, on the one hand, and the existence of voluntary unauthorized sexual unions as a sign of working-class agency and political resistance, on the other. Fischer investigates, among other things, how the focus of North Carolina courts' responses to nonmarital sex and illegitimate children gradually shifted from religion-derived moral condemnation to the secular economics of child support. As a result, prosecution for "inconsequential" fornication decreased, whereas courts continued to punish unmarried mothers. Fischer's linkage of this historical trajectory with her consideration of race constitutes a particularly captivating section of Chapter 3. She mentions, for example, the (initially surprising) fact that once the religious and moral condemnation ceased to be the paramount issue, courts showed little interest in punishing free black women for interracial sex but continued to prosecute white women for similar conduct. The underlying rationale was, explains Fischer, primarily economic: since free black women's illegitimate offspring were not eligible for child support from public funds, the courts were not interested in tracking down these children's fathers to force them to assume financial responsibility. While mapping out the predicament of white female servants, Fischer, in other words, also reveals how heavily black women and black families were affected by the law of 1715 which banned interracial marriages in North Carolina. The reconstruction of the extremely negative long-term impact of the prohibition of intermarriage on the free black community and on the mixed-race children of both white and black mothers is one of the key contributions of Fischer's book to the study of the mutually consequential dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Chapter 4 argues that the prevalent conceptions of race were given powerful expression in the sexual slander that whites spread about one another in colonial North Carolina. Investigating defamation cases, Fischer shows that “[s]landerers who spread tales of interracial sex, and plaintiffs who heatedly denied such allegations, negotiated their reputations in racial terms,” representing blackness as something evil and inferior while defending white honor (132). Although this result of Fischer’s research is hardly surprising, her decision to study cases of sexual defamation in order to examine racial slurs is a methodologically innovative move, enabling her to illuminate her argument in a particularly captivating manner. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses gendered and sexualized violence, addressing the violation of both black and white female bodies. While disclosing the horrors that white female servants often experienced at their site of labor, Fischer stresses that North Carolina’s colonial legislation eventually defined “the limits of acceptable violence against [white] servants,” whereas black slaves remained outside the sphere of such legal protection (175).

Even if the book’s chapters are slightly uneven in that some of them contain more analysis than others, *Suspect Relations* is a very fine study. One of the few criticisms that I have has to do with a detail in the Introduction, which offers background for one of Fischer’s pivotal questions, “By what means did racial prejudice become attached to ideas of permanent bodily difference, and what role did sexual relations play in this development?” (1) Fischer here provides brief overviews of the eighteenth-century shifts towards a biological view of race and towards the sedimentation of the idea of gender difference. Although her Introduction is, in many ways, compelling and persuasive, she accepts and advocates the hypothesis concerning the predominance of the “one sex model” (which saw gender difference as fluid) in early modern England (which was an important intellectual dialogue partner for British colonizers) without giving actual historical reasons for adopting this position. The “one sex model” does provide Fischer’s discussion of race and gender with a strategically appealing symmetry, that is, a framework within which, it seems, *both* categories – gender too, not just race – were initially considered mutable and only gradually came to be viewed as fixed. However, the author skips the task of carefully convincing the reader of the model’s historical veracity. A more extensive discussion would have been helpful, because the hypothesis is controversial: as Fischer herself mentions in passing in an endnote, several historians “question the extent to which the medical and scientific espousal of a ‘one sex model’ gained credence in popular culture” (n6, 196). Here the issue of “popular culture” is vitally important, because Fischer’s focus is so heavily on ordinary people’s thought and action.

On the whole, however, Fischer’s book is a fascinating study of a very high academic standard. *Suspect Relations* is a significant contribution to the kind of research which, rather than just *stating* the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality, aspires to show exactly *how* the ever-present issues of class, gender, and sexuality have been intertwined with racial formation in the colonial period and beyond.