

Book Reviews

Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity. By LISA DUGGAN. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. Pp. 280. \$17.95 (paper).

Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity is Lisa Duggan's eagerly awaited, book-length study of the trials of Alice Mitchell. First introduced to historians in Jonathan Ned Katz's *Gay American History* (1976), Alice Mitchell achieved infamy in her own day following her January 1892 murder of her romantic female companion, Freda Ward. There was never any question whether Mitchell was guilty of the crime, but in the ensuing trial and extensive newspaper coverage a series of competing perspectives emerged that debated Mitchell's mental state and considered whether she should be imprisoned or placed in an insane asylum. By the end of 1892, Mitchell was interned in a state mental institution in Tennessee, where she remained until her death in 1898.

Lisa Duggan, a professor of American studies at New York University, began her research on the Mitchell trial while a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. Her initial findings appeared in her dissertation, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America" (1992), and were published, in abbreviated form, in the journal *Signs* in 1993. *Sapphic Slashers*, however, differs greatly from her previously published work on the trials. While Duggan's article in *Signs* demonstrates how evidence from the trial revealed the processes by which lesbian identity was constructed in the late nineteenth century, the book focuses on the construction of whiteness, the representation of racial violence, and the configuration of American modernity. In the introduction, Duggan writes that the book is "a study of the emergence and circulation of the cultural narrative of lesbian love murder at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States" (p. 2). Moreover, by recounting the multiple narratives about a shocking crime committed over a century ago, Duggan seeks to demonstrate "(1) in general terms, how narrative technologies of sex and violence have been deployed to privatize and marginalize populations, political projects, and cultural concerns in the United States, promoting the substitution of moral pedagogy for public debate and (2) in specific terms, how the lesbian love murder was racialized at the turn of the century in relation to other narratives animating social and political conflict" (p. 3).

Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 10, Nos. 3/4, July/October 2001
© 2001 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

The book is organized into two sections, each of which analyzes narratives constructed about the trial and their articulation of or influence on American modernity. The first section, "Murder in Memphis," examines the immediate social, cultural, and geographic context for the committing of the crime and the criminal and lunacy trials that followed. Looking at the site of the crime, the first chapter argues that the rise of racial violence and the antilynching campaign led by Ida B. Wells in Memphis provide the most useful context for interpreting why the murder of Freda Ward by Alice Mitchell became such a sensation. Duggan writes, "for all [Wells's and Mitchell's] differences, their separation in historical accounts obscures our vision of the history that shapes twentieth-century U.S. modernity" (p. 13). In other words, Duggan claims that the narratives surrounding the actions of both Wells and Mitchell highlight the degree to which access to power was contingent upon the established hierarchies of the day: white over black, male over female, gender normative over gender transgressive, wealthy over poor, and heterosexual over homosexual. According to Duggan, the simultaneous construction of the "black beast rapist and the homicidal lesbian" served to reinforce these social inequalities by loudly articulating the need to protect the white home (p. 30). Having established the main themes of the book, Duggan eases into a consideration of the multiple narratives of sex, violence, race, and gender that emerged from Mitchell's trials. Chapter 2 begins with an enlightening discussion of the mass circulation press and then examines how that institution told Mitchell's tale. Chapter 3 provides a spatial analysis of the actual courtroom where the trials were held and comes up with an interesting reading of ways in which the performance of respectable gender roles both contested and reaffirmed women's place in a male-dominated society. Chapter 4 examines Mitchell's lunacy trial and provides a compelling analysis of why romantic desire between women was constructed as pathological in the 1890s.

The second section, "Making Meanings," demonstrates that the story of Alice Mitchell did not die with her in 1898; rather, it continued to play an important role in the formation of several consequential discourses about gender and sexuality until at least the 1920s. Chapter 5 recounts a series of newspaper articles published both prior to and following the Mitchell trial about similar instances in which female friendship leaped beyond socially acceptable boundaries—and sometimes resulted in murder. In analyzing these stories, Duggan explains how they cast lesbianism as violent as well as how they provided opportunities for identification with female independence. Chapter 6 builds on the work of scholars like Jennifer Terry and Vernon Rosario and demonstrates that the legacy of the trials can be found in important sexological texts. Finally, chapter 7 looks for memory of the Mitchell trial in literature, concluding that after

the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 the lesbian love murder story was no longer the defining narrative of lesbianism in the United States.

The contributions of the book are many, but I will focus on three here. First, Duggan has obviously read a wide range of literature—on the history of newspapers, on the construction of race, gender, and sexuality, on the relationship between violence and moral order, and on the peculiarities of life when mediated in the courtroom. Rather than allow this knowledge to stand by passively, Duggan incorporates some of the more interesting insights and information directly into her analysis. The result is a book rich in nuance that never allows the reader to forget the real institutional contexts in which these events occurred.

Moreover, I was impressed by Duggan's innovative and exhaustive research into the trial and its legacy. Duggan clearly realized the value of her research because she included much of it within the book itself. Indeed, with the publication of the book, this fascinating cache of evidence—including newspaper articles, psychological case studies, and personal letters—will not be lost again in the archives, awaiting an ambitious historian to rediscover them. I urge readers who may be tempted to skim—or skip over—block quotes instead to read these carefully selected documents and allow them to enrich and augment Duggan's analysis.

Finally, perhaps Duggan's most impressive accomplishment is that in *Sapphic Slashers* she does what many other scholars seek to do yet rarely accomplish. That is, Duggan successfully demonstrates how narratives about race and sexuality participated in the same cultural project of American modernity in the making. In her analysis of the almost simultaneous emergence of the “black beast rapist and the homicidal lesbian,” Duggan reveals that our modern notions of sexuality and race were articulated in a similar historical context in which persistent worries about rapid social change resulted in a Foucaultian incitement to discourse.

Rooted in the central analytic category of the book, however, exists one of its shortcomings. Although the phrase “American modernity” appears on the cover of the book and is referred to regularly throughout the text, Duggan neglects to provide a succinct, useful definition of this simultaneously empty and overflowing category. I think the book would have been much better had Duggan drawn more directly from the vast and fascinating literature on modernity and postmodernity. While one can infer that Duggan's modernity is an amalgamation of technological advances, changes in communication media, and the emergence of new identities, one cannot be entirely sure when reading the book. A more particularized discussion of this concept, moreover, might have allowed Duggan to consider the unique and perhaps quite different ways in which sexuality and race play a role in its construction.

With the use of *big* concepts like “modernity,” moreover, comes a whole series of potential pitfalls. While there seems to be some agreement among scholars that the transition to modernity—which occurred sometime between the 1840s and the 1920s—is important and worthy of attention, there is little agreement about when it happened, why it happened, and what exactly it was. Clearly, Duggan hoped her study would enlighten and enliven the study of modernity by asking scholars to consider the centrality of sexuality and race. However, by placing modernity at the center of her book (in contrast to the construction of lesbian identity in her previously published work), the book might perpetuate the notion that lesbian history and the study of sexuality overall are narrow and provincial subjects of inquiry. My fear is that as historians of sexuality begin to consider social phenomena beyond sexuality, sexuality will become merely a tool to analyze ostensibly more important historical categories, like modernity, and thus be interpreted solely as a construction, a piece of evidence not unlike other artifacts of modernity, like a Hearst newspaper, the automobile, or Coney Island. I cannot help but think we might be losing something in this rush to see how sexuality informs our understanding of modernity, race, or class—rather than vice versa.

In *Sapphic Slashers*, we learn a great deal about power relations in America at the end of the nineteenth century; however, we learn less about lesbianism, about the internal workings of American sexual communities, and about that mysterious woman, Alice Mitchell. I finished the book feeling satisfied that I know better the peculiar configurations of American modernity, but I still hungered for more about the history of women who loved women at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States. With that said, I eagerly awaited the publication of this book, and I was not disappointed upon finally reading it. In addition to providing insights into the relationship between race and sexuality and the role of sensationalism in defining American modernity, Duggan provides her readers with a fascinating narrative of an exceptional event in American history.

MARTIN MEEKER

Department of History
San Francisco State University



Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale. By LAURA ENGELSTEIN. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. Pp. xvii + 281. \$32.50 (cloth).

During the Russian imperial period, many religious groups sought to carve out their own niches in a society legally and structurally linked to the