In this well-written and concisely argued book, Kirsten Fischer adds colonial North Carolina to the growing literature examining the intersection of race, class, and gender in early America. While others have concentrated on the fairly readily available ideology espoused by the elite members of society, Fischer takes on the more difficult task of explaining the contribution of non-elites to the construction of the social order. Since poor whites, Indians, and African Americans left few documents expressing their views about such topics, historians turn largely to court records to find their contribution. Cases about illicit sex provide the richest evidence for non-elite behavior and ideology, Fischer argues, since they provide a window into both public and private expressions of power. Focusing on northeastern North Carolina from the late seventeenth century to the eve of the American Revolution, Fischer finds that over the course of the eighteenth century, unlawful sex became linked to notions of racial difference, making race seem as corporeal as sex even as individuals contested the implications of such a linkage in their own lives.

Colonial North Carolina, Fischer notes, was not exactly a typical example of the English social order in the seventeenth century. With a reputation as a bit of an outlaw society, the colony seemed to attract disorderly settlers, including debtors from other colonies and religious dissidents such as Quakers. The presence of a significant Native American population with their own notions of gender practices only exacerbated the sense of a society free from the fetters of traditional power hierarchies. Colonial authorities, determined to assert control even in the absence of political and economic stability, gave heightened attention to perceived gender transgressions. Their first target was intercultural sex between English men and Native American women.

In the early years of settlement, the colonists imagined that Native American women would willingly embrace the patriarchal order of English households. Sexual relationships, then, would mirror and reinforce the larger conquest of territory that was taking place simultaneously. Intermarriage would confer benefits upon English men, who would gain insider status for trade relations, and Indian women, who would abandon their allegedly disordered sexual behavior and embrace the more "natural" role as passive recipients under male control.

By 1700, there were two formalized types of relationships between Indian women and European traders: long-term marriages, or the more common short-term liaisons with women the English called "Trading Girls." In each case, Fischer shows, Native American women resisted European attempts to dominate them, usually accepting such relationships only so long as they were mutually beneficial. Demographic changes brought about by the Tuscarora War (1710-1713), alcohol, and disease did more to alter Native American gender relations than any European ideology, however, prompting significant changes in the eighteenth century. In 1715, the colony adopted new laws prohibiting interracial marriages, codifying a growing intolerance for officially sanctioned cross-cultural sexual relationships.

The marriage laws "naturalized the idea that race inhered in the body as something substantive that was passed on to others" (p. 86) rather than the ephemeral notions of race that characterized seventeenth-century thinking.

While colonial authorities found a great deal to be anxious about in interracial sexual relations, they also faced challenges to their power in the illicit sexual activities of lower-class white women. Servant women were
vulnerable to sexual exploitation and suffered greater consequences than men for their behavior. Yet they and other lower-class men and women created a subculture in which they expanded the definition of acceptable sexual behavior to include relationships that challenged the elite norms. Fischer provides numerous examples of defiant women who refused to view out-of-wedlock births, extramarital sex, or even prostitution as deviant; instead, they seemed to flaunt their behavior before the authorities who dragged them into court. Interracial relationships between white women and black men were particularly troubling for colonial leaders, who sought to discourage them by placing special restrictions on the children of such unions. Although children took the status of the mother, allowing white masters to exploit their female slaves sexually with little consequence, interracial children born to white mothers faced a thirty-one year indenture period rather than the twenty-one year limit established for white children. In practice, this led to an intergenerational servitude of nominally free blacks, since the law stipulated that the children of any illicit union would also be bound out for thirty-one years. Marriage and the control over one’s children, Fischer shows, became another privilege of race and class in the eighteenth century.

As notions of racial difference became increasingly entrenched in colonial laws and in less formalized structures of social hierarchy, ideas about white men’s and women’s “honor” took on an increasingly racial tone. In what is perhaps the best chapter of the book, Fischer uses slander cases to explain how ordinary whites participated in the construction of race. Insults acquired power when they threatened to undermine the reputation of the victim, particularly in a society in which economic standing was closely associated with public image. White plaintiffs in defamation cases rigorously defended themselves from charges of illicit interracial sex by the mid-eighteenth century, reinforcing the idea that race was inherent and that any co-mingling would debase white men and women. Fischer begins the chapter with a discussion of the situational nature of insults, whose impact differed significantly depending on the gender and class, and as the eighteenth-century progressed, race, of the parties involved. White men sued almost exclusively for sexual slanders that implied an “unnatural” relationship: sex with other men, bestiality, and sex with black women. White women defended themselves against radicalized slurs that implied they had voluntarily lowered themselves to the status of black women. In their courtroom testimony, white men and women gave public notice of their “whiteness,” further hardening the racial divide.

Fischer’s final chapter focuses on the role of sexualized violence in the formulation of racial difference. Rape was an obvious form of sexual violence, but Fischer includes a much longer list of transgressions that should be considered as sexualized, including whippings of naked slaves, the tarring of white women, and the castration of black men. Even as reformers increasingly frowned upon the use of corporal punishments for white defendants, the North Carolina courts doled out sentences of brandings and amputations for blacks found guilty of a whole host of charges. Castration briefly replaced the death penalty for black men convicted of crimes other than rape or murder, as masters protested that executions caused them undue economic hardship. While other scholars have interpreted the castration laws as evidence that white courts viewed black men as akin to beasts, Fischer argues that the punishment was done “not because the perpetrators believed slaves were animals, but precisely because they knew of their victims’ humanity” (p. 181). By purposefully taking away black men’s sexual agency, white men asserted their authority over what they believed to be a key component of manhood. Likewise, rape charges against white men rarely made it to criminal court and often did not result in a conviction, while every black man accused of raping a white woman was executed. The court system gave legal sanction to the racial distinctions that had developed over the course of the eighteenth century.

Fischer’s arguments are generally well supported and convincing, and the book maintains a clear focus throughout. The chapters occasionally read as separate entities, however. For example, one wonders what happens to Native American women after chapter 2. Fischer also occasionally seems to stretch her evidence to the limit. The discussion of rape cases, for example, relies on a total of fourteen complaints of rape or attempted rape during the entire colonial period. Moreover, Fischer’s suggestion that in the context of slavery, “allegations of sex with animals may have resonated with racial meanings,” (p. 149) while couched in terms of conjecture, seems unsupportable given the severe consequences for bestiality in New England and in Europe. Still, Suspect Relations makes the most of the limited evidence available to historians interested in non-elite contributions to social construction. Fischer’s nuanced study demonstrates the complexity of race, class, and gender as created and contested categories during the colonial period.