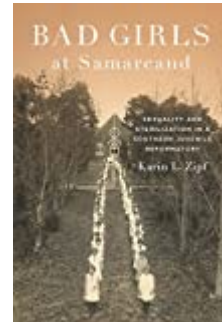




**Karin L. Zipf.** *Bad Girls at Samarcand: Sexuality and Sterilization in a Southern Juvenile Reformatory.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. 242 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-6249-1.



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## The Sexual Politics of Eugenics, Southern Style

One of the grimmest episodes in the history of eugenics in the United States took place in North Carolina. Between 1920 and 1950, the state forced hundreds of young girls and women to undergo compulsory and sometimes nonconsensual sterilization. In *Bad Girls at Samarcand*, Louisiana State University historian Karin L. Zipf explores how the American eugenics movement, which had given rise to sterilization programs as early as the 1890s, became intertwined with public policy debates in the 1930s regarding regulation of North Carolina juvenile detention centers for girls.

Zipf centers her study on the social, political and juridical events involved in the history of Samarcand, a reformatory for girls. She begins the story in 1917 and focuses on the controversy that raged between reformers and social workers over how to deal with juvenile delinquents. Social Gospel-influenced reformers like Hope Summerell Chamberlain and social workers like Kate Burr Johnson and Martha P. Falconer (who called themselves mental hygienists, p. 3) operated on the racist assumption that such a reformatory should be for

whites only. While none among them questioned that the care of young female delinquents resided with the state, one lone critic, a registered nurse named Birdie Dunn, did contend that juvenile detention centers should come under local rather than state control.

The reformers ultimately won this debate. But in a twist of historical irony, the money used to fund construction of Samarcand came from federal sources that criminalized prostitution. In response to a US government campaign to protect WWI soldiers from venereal disease, North Carolina passed laws that criminalized prostitution. The North Carolina State Board of Health then enforced those laws by sending convicted prostitutes to Samarcand. So from the very start of its problematic existence, Samarcand became home to young girls and women who became further tainted by forced association with prostitutes.

Zipf argues that this forced marriage of ideals and political expedience transformed Samarcand into a space riven by competing ideologies of womanhood. On the

one hand, Southern reformers held that female redemption and the recuperation of lost ladyhood was possible due to the natural superiority of the white race. On the other hand, US military officials who tended to view women according to the Victorian virgin/whore dichotomy believed that convicted prostitutes were bearers of disease and not worth redemption. If southern white girls could be raised up again by virtue of their race, to make them live with adult streetwalkers deemed beyond help defeated the purpose of reform.

Most of the girls who came to Samarcand had records that included everything from simple misdemeanors to hard-core felonies. Some also came with pre-existing social and/or mental disorders and diseases. What connected them was the fact that they had witnessed, suffered from or participated in nearly every social transgression possible (p. 45). This made living up to the goals set for the reformatory to transform every girl into a properly submissive and genteel southern lady difficult. Zipf shows how Samarcand administrators responded to this challenge by creating complex systems of reward and punishment. Girls who obeyed the rules gained privileges denied to their more incorrigible sisters, who became subject to staff-sanctioned acts of cruelty like confinement and whippings.

While these events were occurring at Samarcand, increasingly favorable attitudes toward eugenics began reshaping public policy toward juvenile and especially white female delinquents. At the same time, attitudes toward women became more complex. The 1920s saw the rise of what Zipf describes as two major models of womanhood: the independent Progressive Era new woman and the sexually liberated Jazz Age flapper. In the South, these models came to reside alongside that of the southern lady, which continued to serve as a symbol of white racial purity. Zipf contends that these models of womanhood forced young girls, including the delinquents at Samarcand, to navigate numerous contradictions as they forged their own identities. Middle- and upper-class women were far more successful at combining these identities. This was largely because they treated independence or sexiness as fashionable poses which were monitored by husbands, fathers, or families so as not to exceed the bounds of social acceptability.

By contrast, lower-class girls and women had far less leeway with regard to their behavior largely because they lacked the resources to safely and successfully pose. Zipf offers the example of girls who often decided to exercise their independence and/or sexual freedom by run-

ning away or by choosing to live a life on the streets. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, however, delinquent girls' behavior was often pathologized, even if that behavior had roots in rape, incest or other crimes that took advantage of their social and economic vulnerability. Considered emotionally unstable, these girls were deemed to require psychiatric intervention and/or institutionalization. Whiteness did not help them: their class and the stereotypes that went with it guaranteed that they would not be treated like southern ladies.

Zipf's detailed discussions of the expectations and attitudes towards and pressures on young white female delinquents suggest that a major crisis at Samarcand was inevitable. That crisis took the form of an act of arson that destroyed two buildings in March of 1931. In the legal proceedings that followed, Zipf speculates that the sixteen girls held accountable for the fire likely felt immune from severe punishment because of their whiteness. But because officials and institutions viewed them as disorderly women (p. 105) with tarnished reputations and criminal proclivities, that protection was denied them. North Carolina had not executed women between 1910 and 1930, and the death penalty had rarely been used on females. Yet Zipf suggests that the outcome of this trial which included imprisonment for most of the girls was never entirely certain.

At the same time, she also shows how the girls' defense lawyer, Nell Battle Lewis, chose to present her clients as victims of an unforgiving system that neglected their individual needs. Near the end and after several girls tried to set fire to the prisons where they were housed during the trial she turned to expert testimony and psychological test results to prove the girls were mental defectives rather than rational, self-determining individuals. Though likely motivated by compassion, Zipf suggests that Lewis' arguments ultimately fed into a current of thinking about reform that called for eugenics-based reform solutions at juvenile detention centers.

After the 1931 trial, fierce public debate concerning how to best reform delinquent white girls ensued. Some North Carolinians believed that the girls' (racially) inherent redeemable qualities merited a thorough investigation of Samarcand and its methods of discipline. But others believed that the girls were mental defectives who could not be reformed and who needed to be kept apart from other whites to avoid contaminating the gene pool. While the controversy raged outside of Samarcand, its superintendent, Agnes MacNaughton, fought a losing battle to keep her system of discipline in place. By 1933,

she was replaced by a mental hygienist, Grace M. Robson, who favored practices that included inmate sterilization.

By the time these changes occurred at Samarcand, the North Carolina legislature had not only dispensed with the need for a governor's signature but had also transferred the decision-making process to the Eugenics Board, itself part of the State Board of Welfare. A 1935 law went into place granting more power to institutional committees that classified inmates according to mental abilities and degree of sexual activity. The result was a significant increase in the number of individuals—and especially white females—who were sterilized in North Carolina. Between 1929 and 1950, of the more than 2,500 total sterilizations performed statewide (half of which were on girls between ten and nineteen years old) 293 were done on Samarcand inmates (p. 154).

Zipf suggests that for all their powerlessness, delinquent girls were still able to manipulate a reform system that not only mistreated them but also imposed far stricter behavioral standards on females than on males. She observes that harsh as jail conditions were, delinquent girls brought to court often argued for jail sentences rather than life in a reformatory. As detention center inmates, they would remain virtual prisoners for indefinite—rather than specified—periods of time and avoid the possibility of later transfer to a women's reformatory. Zipf further speculates that the girls used rumors of masturbation, sodomy and lesbianism—all of which reinforced the connection between non-heteronormativity with delinquency—to convince sen-

tencing judges that prison was the better alternative. Indeed, they may have even argued that places like Samarcand transformed them into the opposite of the chaste, upstanding southern ladies the reform system intended they become.

This cultural history of the inner workings of a female juvenile reformatory in the early to mid-twentieth century South is as readable as it is well researched. Zipf renders the players in the Samarcand story—from major figures to the girls themselves—in thoughtful, at times even novelistic detail. Zipf's work is also praiseworthy for the way it carefully pieces together an informative and engrossing narrative using only public sources of information such as court documents and state records, which Zipf verifies throughout against newspaper accounts and manuscript collections from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Scholars from a broad range of disciplines, including history, sociology, criminal justice, public policy and women's studies, are sure to find this book an excellent addition to the body of work that not only addresses eugenics and how it was practiced in the United States but also the degree to which state institutions in the South were impacted by conflicting—and conflicted—ideologies about race, class, and gender. Because the text concerns youths in the prison system, researchers interested in addressing current debates on the funding of rehabilitation programs for young offenders will also find the book as useful as it is enlightening.

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