

REVIEWS

Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 192 pp.

At a time when Russia has become internationally infamous for aggressive hostility towards people with “non-traditional” sexuality, Francesca Stella’s engaging study of the lives of lesbians in two Russian cities is a timely reminder that for people in places where homosexuality remains strongly stigmatized, negotiating the “paradoxes of queer visibility” (142) has long been an everyday reality.

Stella adroitly demonstrates that these paradoxes challenge mainstream western narratives about the gay experience and indeed conceptualizations of sexual identity more widely. Basing her findings on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Moscow and the provincial city of Ul’ianovsk, she argues that contrary to received wisdom, “coming out” may be experienced as oppressive rather than empowering, and the closet may be as much a source of liberation as restriction.

The primary focus of the book is the “experiences, practices and identities of non-heterosexual women in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia” (1), building on discussion of her respondents’ management of their sexual identity in different settings to launch a cogent and necessary intervention into debates in gender and sexuality studies. Her critique problematizes “the Orientalist trap of taking the ‘west’ as a paradigm for sexual liberation and progress”, as well as the resultant essentialism and ethnocentricity of much of the field’s theorizing. Stella calls attention to how Russia—in Soviet and post-Soviet incarnations—is problematically constructed as the West’s backward “Other” that has not fully modernized. She argues persuasively that in post-socialist countries “the present needs to be brought into conversation with the socialist past in order to be understood in its own terms” rather than “measuring the present against the yardstick of a globalised ‘western’ modernity” (139).

Chapter 1 lays out the rationale for this conclusion clearly via the presentation of a critical geotemporal framework that examines “different geographical scales (the nation, urban localities, the body)” and the intersections of sexuality and time “to fracture essentialist notions of Russian sexualities as the ‘other’” (10). Central to this framework is comparison of the experiences of two generations of women, one that came of age in the late Soviet period and the other that reached adulthood in the (relatively) more sexually liberalized environment of 1990s post-Soviet Russia. She skillfully explores their experiences in the two fieldwork locations, adhering to her stated aim of “making visible the multilayered complexities of lived experiences” while rejecting abstract methodological discussion (11). This comparative process is facilitated by use of Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of identity as a “meeting point” between discourse and practices through which subjectivities are created, as well as Erving Goffman’s notions of stigma and performance as presentation of self, in order to emphasize individuals’ agency. Different facets of this ambitious analytical framework serve as the lens for discussion in each chapter, collectively providing an impressively deep exploration of non-heterosexual women’s lives.

Chapter 2 charts “shifting discourses on sex and sexualities across Soviet and post-Soviet Russia” (26), setting the scene for the entire study and exploring normative gender orders and their impact on non-heterosexual individuals. Along with Chapter 3, this chapter provides contextualization and engages with the experiences of respondents belonging to the “last Soviet generation” (20). It is also essential reading for anyone seeking to grasp the current predicament of LGBTQ people in Russia. Poignantly, the discussion reveals how Soviet conceptualizations of public and private spheres and their heterosexist regulation continue to influence political and societal understandings and practices of intimacy and same-sex desire in contemporary Russia.

The generational lens of Chapter 3 is replaced in Chapters 4-6 with an analytical focus on space rather than time. Each chapter interrogates a different space: home, the workplace, and the street, to examine “the way in which women negotiated their sexuality

across different places and locations” (67). Chapter 4 interrogates non-heterosexual women’s experiences of “home,” and the ambivalence of it being perceived both as “an intimate, comfortable space and as a place where everyday homophobia is most commonly experienced” (67). The analysis of women’s decisions about disclosure of their sexuality is nuanced and sensitive; far from being an individual choice, Stella clearly demonstrates that “within the parental home sexuality was experienced as a family matter” due to potential negative reactions from parents and/or relatives and “because the whole family could be subjected to homophobic prejudice by the wider community” (86).

Chapter 5 interrogates non-heterosexual women’s identity management strategies in public spaces, where concerns about safety and personal reputation and the need to observe institutional rules govern interpersonal interactions. The first setting is the workplace, conceptualized as an “an institutionalised ‘stage’” requiring the performance of an appropriate identity that includes presumed heterosexuality (90). Discussion then moves to “the street” and how the heteronormativity of public spaces renders recognizably non-heterosexual women as “out of place” and thus vulnerable to hostile reactions and sexual victimization. Stella finds that “visibility and authenticity in themselves are seldom prized by Russian non-heterosexual women” (106), who rather emphasize appropriate self-management of their sexual identity—not necessarily out of internalized homophobia, but rather arguably reflecting a post-Soviet understanding of privacy as providing shelter for intimate lives from public scrutiny. The final section of the chapter interrogates understandings of “coming out”, observing keenly that “uncritical celebrations of coming out as empowering fail to acknowledge that visibility is not equally available to all queer subjects, and that its subversive potential is contingent and conditional on place and time” (110).

Further expanding the monograph’s scope, the penultimate chapter charts “how ‘lesbian/queer’ space is carved out in the two different urban contexts of Moscow and Ul’ianovsk”. While Ul’ianovsk is the main empirical focus (an important choice given the “metropolitan bias” of literature on queer space), Stella makes

effective use of Moscow as a point of comparison to challenge simplistically dichotomous and idealized portrayals of queer spaces in metropolitan and provincial locations. Her use of the concept of *tusovka*, “a Russian term which refers to an informal and loose social network whose boundaries are relatively fluid and open, and where social interaction is based on shared interest and on the practice of socializing in specific city centre locations” is notable because of its post-socialist specificity and its capacity to capture of the interplay of space and social relations (114). The second section explores the potentially subversive and political nature of appropriation via an examination of queer spaces occupied by Ul’ianovsk’s *tusovka*. As in previous chapters, Stella’s conclusions contradict the logic of western strategies that rely on making the intimate public through events held in public spaces such as Pride parades. Instead, “the *tusovka*’s occupation of public space was based on the understanding of invisibility as in enabling” and the use of this invisibility to preserve “the boundaries between queer and non-queer space” (129).

Stella returns to conceptual debates in the final chapter, deftly demonstrating the theoretical and empirical contributions of the study. In addition, this chapter presents a proto-manifesto of sorts for post-socialist studies as a critically engaged location from which to theorize and reexamine epistemological and methodological assumptions. Such an approach, she argues, can “shed light on historical continuities and changes in former socialist countries, in terms of institutions, everyday practices and the meaning attached to deep sociopolitical transformation by the very people who have lived through them [and permit] a productive engagement with different geographical scales, ranging from the body, the local, the regional/provincial, to the national, the regional/supranational and the global” (133). This claim is ambitious, but her study provides persuasive evidence of critical post-socialism’s potential to be “a tool to imagine ways to integrate the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution” beyond current neoliberal identity politics (151).

The simplicity of the monograph’s title belies the fact that there is much to recommend *Lesbian Lives* to readers beyond the

fields of gender and sexuality studies and Russian/post-Soviet studies. Certainly lesbian lives are the central empirical focus, but Stella's theoretical critique is far deeper and of relevance to debates in disciplines including Political Science, International Relations, and Anthropology. In this respect, the complexity that is so effectively foregrounded is both a strength and a weakness. For those already broadly familiar with the relevant theoretical debates, it will be a rewarding and thought-provoking read, but the complexity may also leave a more novice reader feeling somewhat overwhelmed at times. Perseverance is nonetheless recommended, since the issues and questions that Stella raises are of universal relevance as the limitations of current LGBT identity politics become increasing apparent.

Cai Wilkinson

Deakin University

Jenny Kaminer, *Women with a Thirst for Destruction: The Bad Mother in Russian Culture*. Studies in Russian Literature and Theory. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014. viii + 199 pp.

The Russian mother is often an idealized figure, but Jenny Kaminer's *Women with a Thirst for Destruction: the Bad Mother in Russian Culture* focuses on the "bad mother," a figure who "shuns, subverts, or manipulates the maternal myth" (4). This presents a valuable negative counterpoint to works that study in large part the idealized mother figure, such as Joanna Hubbs's classic *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1993). Hubbs does include some literary texts in her analysis of the maternal myth broadly in Russian culture, but overall her study tends toward the historical. In contrast, Kaminer's close analysis of the image of the bad mother during three distinct historical periods—the aftermath of the Great Reforms, the upheaval caused by the 1917 Revolution and Civil War, and the Soviet Union's collapse—presents a reading of literary texts that illuminates deep cultural connections across 150 years. Kaminer demonstrates that the bad mother comes to the fore in Russia in such periods, and