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Fabien Deshayes and Axel Pohn-Weidinger, eds., *L'Amour en guerre: sur les traces d'une correspondance pendant la guerre d'Algérie*. Montrouge: Bayard, 2017. 328pp. Illustrations. €21.90. (pb). ISBN 978-2227489486.

Review by Arthur Asseraf, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

Jacques Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) is one of the few mainstream French films of the 1960s to discuss the Algerian War. The war is central to the film's plot: the two young lovers, Geneviève and Guy, are separated when Guy is sent off for military service. Yet Algeria is barely mentioned. Guy gets on his train wearing a brown suit to tearful goodbyes from Geneviève, who then gets on with her life. Guy returns two years later wearing the same suit. What he may have done during his military service is never mentioned. Algeria hovers as a distant specter, only there to interrupt the real story of the post-war years, which is one of youth, emancipation, and getting rich.

Fabien Deshayes and Axel Pohn-Weidinger's *L'Amour en guerre* fills in the blanks of Demy's film by giving us an intimate look into the life of a real couple separated by the Algerian War. At the heart of the book is the correspondence exchanged by two lovers (Aimée and Bernard), which the two authors acquired at a *brocante* near the Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris in May 2009. The discovery is not exactly an accident: the two authors are sociologists who are interested in how "ordinary people" write about their lives and who regularly acquire such discarded items. Yet this is still an unusual find: a stash of nearly eighty letters, rich with emotional honesty, between two people who otherwise would not have made it into any history book. As the two sociologists attempt to reconstitute the lives of this couple, they produce a book which is not readily classifiable: part microhistory, part sociological investigation, and part real historical romance. While the letters exchanged between Bernard and Aimée form the starting-point and the core of the investigation, on their own they offer more questions than they can answer. To contextualize them, the authors manage to track down some of the family members and comb through several archival sources. The final product is a narration of the relationship between Aimée and Bernard, interspersed with the story of the sociologists' investigations and the various dead-ends they encounter.

The book opens with a description of Aimée and Bernard's upbringings and their respective backgrounds. Bernard came from a relatively prosperous middle-class family originally from the north of France that had been living in Paris since the end of the Second World War. Aimée's family, on the surface, is very different; she was born in Guadeloupe, which until very recently was a colony. But both share a relatively similar middle-class *fonctionnaire* background: Aimée's family are dedicated civil servants to the colonial state; her mother was a school director. They also share similar ambitions characteristic of their period and milieu: a heterosexual love marriage, home ownership, domestic bliss with children. They meet as schoolteachers in 1959 at the École Binet in the 18th district of Paris. By the summer of 1960 they are writing passionate love-letters to each other, and by the spring of 1961 they move in to the same apartment in the 15th district. In the summer of 1961, Bernard finds out that he is being conscripted for military service, and they rush to get married before he is sent off to Algeria.

Even though they have only been married for a few weeks by the time he leaves, Aimée is pregnant, while her husband adjusts with difficulty to life on the snowy, foggy peaks of Kabylie.

The letters between Bernard and Aimée offer an interesting angle through which to examine the experience of the *appelés*, and especially, how their relatives lived through this absence, which is something about which scholars know little. This was a war with a peculiar emotional geography, which for most metropolitan French people was experienced primarily via the media.<sup>[1]</sup> While mass conscription and the ongoing political crisis made the war inescapable, it was also a distant event that rarely interrupted everyday life. Bernard's relatives ask him for descriptions of this exotic and sunny land which they have trouble imagining. Aimée purchases a map of Algeria to try and keep track of where Bernard is being posted and to compare this information to the accounts of the latest violence she hears on the radio.

Perhaps most significant are Bernard's silences. In their previous correspondence before the war, Bernard was usually voluble, often using the florid language that befits the literary style of an educated man in love. Once in Algeria however, as Aimée begs him for more information, he is uncharacteristically silent. Occasionally, he apologizes for this, and reveals tidbits: the stunning landscape, the loud Kabyle music played at night by the *harkis* in the camp that prevents him from sleeping. But overall, he exerts a remarkable amount of self-censorship in order not to trouble his young wife. At one point, he was close to being deployed to Algiers during the massacre of the rue d'Isly in March 1962, in which the French army fired at pro-OAS pied-noir demonstrators, killing at least fifty civilians. But his letters leave it oddly unclear whether or not he actually participated in these events. Bernard and Aimée's war-time correspondence therefore illustrates a key mechanism discussed by Benjamin Stora in *La Gangrène et l'oubli*: that silence about the Algerian War began during the war itself.<sup>[2]</sup> In part, this was due to government censorship, but it was also due to the extensive self-censorship of the soldiers themselves, who did not know how to convey this brutal violence back to their untroubled metropolitan relatives. Those who returned, like Guy in Demy's *Parapluies de Cherbourg*, found themselves separated from everyone else by an invisible wall: no one was interested in what they had seen or done on the other side of the sea, and they kept their experiences to themselves.

Yet *L'Amour en guerre* is somewhat mistitled, as the Algerian War itself only occupies a small portion of it and is not necessarily the most interesting aspect to the historian. Deshayes and Pohn-Weindiger are flexible enough to recognize this, and to follow various themes as they emerge throughout the letters. Rather than the conscript Bernard sent away to fight a colonial war, the more compelling character turns out to be Aimée, a black woman who pursued a strategy of assimilation to white metropolitan society with her family. The racial disillusionments of more famous Caribbeans in post-war Paris are well-known, chiefly through the lens of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*. But Aimée offers us a distinctly more ordinary experience. Her letters do not betray any particular line of thought on colonialism or events in Algeria, merely anxiety for her husband's fate and a vague desire for peace and order. Her family's intense involvement within the colonial state, not just in their native Guadeloupe but to the extent that her uncle was a colonial administrator in West Africa, and later a senator representing the colonies, reminds us that black and mixed-race *antillais* have played important roles throughout the colonial empire, from Ismaël Urbain to René Maran, Félix Éboué, and Gaston Monnerville. Here too, the silence of the letters is more revealing than what they say: it was only through interviewing members of Bernard's family that the authors could confirm that Aimée was black.

Aimée's trajectory produced distinctly mixed results. Bernard's mother appears to have opposed their marriage on the grounds of Aimée's race, although this is only referred to allusively in their correspondence. Her superiors in the school system were openly condescending about her abilities in their reports on her performance, and she seems to have suffered from something akin to depression, often complaining of great tiredness and an inability to go to work. On the other hand, her marriage to Bernard and their apartment, bought with Aimée's mother's help, marked a successful assimilation into middle-class metropolitan white society.

An unexpected twist at the end of the book confirms that it is, in fact, Aimée who is the more compelling character, and those who wish to avoid spoilers should skip the following paragraph. As the Algerian War is wrapping up following the Evian Accords in March 1962, a maelstrom of violence erupts leading up to independence in July 1962. In this crucial phase, we begin to worry that Bernard may be killed a few weeks from the end of the war, but it is not he who dies: Aimée dies unexpectedly giving birth in April 1962. A strong suspicion of medical mistreatment hung over her death, strong enough for an autopsy to be ordered, which proved inconclusive. In a fictional account, this would be quite the plot twist, but here reality appears stranger than our historical expectations: it is not the soldier sent away to war that dies, but his wife back home, killed by an uncertain mix of the perils of childbirth and the racism of negligent medical staff.

Bernard and Aimée were both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. Aimée was a black woman from Guadeloupe, and mixed marriages with a white metropolitan man like Bernard were unusual in this period. Bernard was a stubborn man with strong convictions, who was reluctant to be involved in the war and yet does not seem to have been formally politicized in any sense. Both of them had issues with their professional hierarchy that graded them poorly. Yet they are also utterly unexceptional, *petits fonctionnaires* who never thought their correspondence would be one day found by a pair of social scientists. From Menocchio to Martin Guerre, any work that attempts to extrapolate a broader social scientific truth from the experience of individuals must reckon with whether or not its subjects are “ordinary,” and Deshayes and Pohn-Weindiger are no exception. As sociologists, their attempts to assess this quality sometimes rely on quantitative comparisons which, to the historian, might seem unusual but not uninteresting.[3]

*L'Amour en guerre* is a smoothly written, enjoyable little book, that gives personal texture to the lives of two non-exceptional people throughout the post-war period and decolonization. The two authors' flexibility in following this story wherever it leads them is both a strength and a weakness, as in the end it is not entirely clear what we are meant to take away from the story of Aimée and Bernard. Yet historians working on this period will appreciate it for the ways in which it affirms or nuances some of our broader assumptions. For those working on the Algerian War, *L'Amour en guerre* does fill in some of the blanks left by *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, but ultimately affirms the film's pretense: that the Algerian War had some important effects on the lives of young metropolitans but was far from central to their preoccupations. Bernard confirms our existing impressions of the average conscript: reluctant to fight and struggling with the army leadership, but who did as he was told. The 1975 song *L'Algérie* by popular singer Serge Lama, himself a former conscript, summarizes this experience well: “C'était une aventure / Dont on ne voulait pas / L'Algérie (...) Nos fiancées nous écrivaient des lettres / Avec des mots menteurs / Le soir on grillait des cigarettes / Afin d'avoir moins peur / L'Algérie / Même avec un fusil / C'était un beau pays / L'Algérie' [“It was an adventure/that we didn't want/Algeria (...) our fiancées wrote us letters/with lying words/at night we smoke cigarettes/so as to be less scared/Algeria/ even with a gun/it was a beautiful country/Algeria.”] At least now, we can read those letters.

#### NOTES

[1] Raphaëlle Branche and Sylvie Thénault (eds.), *La France en guerre 1954-1962: expériences métropolitaines de la guerre d'indépendance algérienne* (Paris: Autrement, 2008).

[2] Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

[3] For a more imaginative and rewarding attempt by a sociologist to write a microhistory of colonial Algeria, see Fanny Colonna, *Le Meunier, les moines et le bandit. Des vies quotidiennes dans l'Aurès du XXe siècle* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2010).

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