
H-France Review Vol. 21 (June 2021), No. 96

Virginie Chaillou-Atrous and Françoise Le Jeune, eds., *Les circulations européennes à l'âge des empires coloniaux au XIXe siècle. Une identité genrée?* Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020. 180 pp. €22.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2753580107.

Review by Margaret Andersen, University of Tennessee.

This volume brings together essays presented at a 2014 conference exploring how a gender analysis enlarges our understanding of migration within European empires. In the past, scholars treated empires as masculine spaces to which few European women ventured or contributed in noteworthy ways. The organization of archival collections seemed to support this vision and did not always lend themselves to an exploration of female colonial migration. In recent decades, however, scholars have challenged this view, demonstrating that gender and sexuality are essential to understanding the ordering of colonial societies and hierarchies within them.^[1] Scholars have shown how the migration of women to European empires was vital to establishing a permanent presence in the colonies. Beyond matters of marriage and domesticity, historians have highlighted how women contributed to ideas of a civilizing mission, through labor such as teaching, charitable work, and providing medical care. The first two sections of this volume engage with the figure of the female migrant moving within the British, French, and Portuguese empires to work, evangelize, and marry. The articles in the third section of the volume focus on women's travel writing within a larger imperial framework that both served colonial interests and challenged the gender and racial ordering of empires.

One theme that emerges from these articles is that nineteenth-century reformers lauded women's colonial emigration as a solution to social and demographic problems in metropole and colony alike. In the case of Marie Ruiz's article, British emigration societies focused on "surplus women," refined women of the middle classes who were unmarried and as such seemingly lacked a place in British society (p. 24). As Australia and New Zealand both had more eligible bachelors than women, reformers anticipated that women arriving from Britain would easily find husbands and fulfill a procreative role. This would also have the effect of domesticating the men and establishing British civilization more firmly in these colonies. Françoise Le Jeune explores similar ideas about the demographic benefits of migration in her article on Urania Cottage. Wealthy baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts collaborated with the writer Charles Dickens to rescue prostitutes, reform them through a process of religious and domestic training at Urania Cottage, and then send some of them on to the colonies.

The topic of women's colonial migration raises important questions about women's agency, whether in the reasons for migrating (voluntary or not) or women's willingness to cooperate

with the larger goals of governments and colonial organizations. Le Jeune notes that when Dickens recruited prostitutes, he pitched the project as an opportunity to leave the trade and be redeemed, making no mention of emigration to Australia (something that these women would have likely understood to be tantamount to deportation to a penal colony). Le Jeune finds that many of the women resisted the strict discipline of Urania Cottage and, once in Australia, tried to escape continued supervision. Carolyn Eichner's article on France's forced deportation of *Communard* women to New Caledonia also shows reformers struggling to mold women into the idealized vision of colonial settler and mother. Eichner notes that the women of the Commune represented visible symbols of gender disorder in the metropole, having demonstrated their savagery as *pétroleuses*. As in the case of the Urania Cottage experiment, *Communard* women could in theory be reformed once removed from that milieu, placed in a pure environment under religious supervision, and finally transformed into colonial wives and mothers who would establish a more permanent French presence in the colony. However, Eichner finds that many of the women convicts resisted the Catholic teaching of the local clergy. Louise Michel, for one, converted to anarchism on the voyage out to the colony and had her own ideas, not in line with official thinking, on how France could civilize the colony.

While many of these projects did not quite realize their original objectives, some of the authors show that women could find opportunities in the colonies unavailable to them in their home countries. For example, Ruiz's reading of letters exchanged between these women and emigration agencies reveals that some women found a type of liberation in emigrating, allowing them to break out of the prescribed gender roles seen both in British society and emigration propaganda. Other women saw in colonial emigration opportunities to escape poverty or find work that may have been unavailable to them in the metropole. Susana Serpa Silva's article challenges the image of colonial emigration as being driven primarily by men fleeing military service or seeking job opportunities. Though the Portuguese women she studies are sometimes invisible in the archival record (clerks did not always include them when noting the departure of families), she finds that many more women emigrated than previously recognized. Her research centers on passport applications for Portuguese migrants heading from the Azores islands to destinations such as Hawaii and Brazil. In addition to familial migration, many women migrated alone, at times to join established family members but also to find marital or employment opportunities. This could be a semi-organized process, one responding to concerns of gender imbalance that generated interest in women's emigration in the Portuguese context, as in the British and French colonies. Ruiz finds that some ships offered free transportation for young women meeting certain physical criteria. This speaks both to the desirability of women migrants and the risk of sex trafficking.

In the second section of the book, Virginie Chaillou-Atrous's article considers how abject poverty brought French women to Réunion (Île Bourbon) as indentured labor. Archival records reveal the desperate circumstances that drove some of these women to emigrate, only to find working and living conditions to be unacceptably low. Court records provide interesting insights into what the women, as well as the judges evaluating their cases, understood to be acceptable conditions of poverty for a white woman in the colony. While some women returned to France, others became permanent residents and fulfilled the procreative role that colonial organizations considered vital. If for some women, escaping poverty was the main motivation to migrate within empires, others were driven by their vocation. Chaillou-Atrous also looks at midwives who could be both implicated in the process of empire building and a hindrance to it. Colonial authorities welcomed the arrival of midwives who could serve twin goals of encouraging a higher European

birthrate in the colony and making childbirth safer for the colonized population (whose demographic growth was deemed inadequate). Some of these midwives demonstrated a rebellious spirit conflicting with the pronatalist goals of the state, such as the midwife who was implicated in the death of a woman on whom she performed an abortion.

While Chaillou-Atrous's article presents a mixed picture of midwives' roles in the process of empire building, Marion Robinaud's article on nuns traveling to remote outposts of Canada shows how their vocation to convert colonized people to Catholicism served the larger goal of empire-building. In Robinaud's article, we see the importance of women's travel writing in building a narrative of empire. The nuns wrote about their experiences, not just for personal reasons, but also to attract donors and encourage new recruits. This formed part of a larger narrative of self-sacrifice and European civilization triumphing over the harsh landscapes and the "savage" populations the nuns encountered along the way. While Robinaud notes that the sisters converted relatively few people as they traveled, their writing helped build a racialized narrative of the beneficial role the Church and settlers could perform in the untamed wilderness of the empire.

In the final section of the book, Valérie Boulain's analysis of Carla Serena's travel writing also shows how women's writing contributed to larger ideas of civilization and progress. While Serena transgressed gender norms by traveling for five years without her husband in Central Asia, she was well connected and received *lettres amicales* from ambassadors giving her a degree of safety making possible her forays into remote regions of these empires. These letters also attested to her morality, allowing her to engage in a type of activity normally considered unsuitable for a woman. Serena wrote about her travels in four books and articles appearing in major venues like the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Like the nuns traveling across Canada, Serena repeatedly emphasized the dangers and discomforts of the voyage. Her writings evoke a sense of superiority when surveying the rugged conditions and her interactions with local peoples, noting their childlike astonishment at the comforts of European civilization.

In some ways, Serena's writing intersects with imperialist rhetoric positioning refined European women as civilizers. Yet she also positioned herself outside of empire-building projects. Born in Belgium, married to an Italian, and residing in London, she understood herself to be observing cultures through a cosmopolitan lens, without nationalist or imperialist influences. In this respect, she resembles Isabelle Eberhardt, the subject of the last article by Michèle Sellès Lefranc. Eberhardt, Lefranc argues, was a cosmopolitan figure combining imperialist tropes with a desire to distance herself from imperialism in her writing. Born in Geneva to a Russian family, Eberhardt traveled to Algeria and became French through her marriage to a naturalized Algerian. Less conventional than Carla Serena, Eberhardt converted to Islam and dressed as a man, inventing a "hybrid identity" (p. 162). This allowed her to go further than any other European woman in observing and writing about North African culture. One of the questions Lefranc considers is how colonial authorities, like Lyautey, responded to this hybridity and what it represented in a colonial order otherwise structured by hierarchies of race and gender. While Eberhardt's transgression of gender and racial norms made her a controversial figure for colonial authorities, this hybridity also provided them with useful insights.

Like many edited volumes, this collection of articles is not set up to present a centralized, coherent thesis. What it instead achieves is an exploration of the varied ways that scholars engage with common themes in different historical contexts. Collectively the articles in the

volume raise important questions about how we can study the migration and movement of women within European empires, broadly conceived. By bringing together a variety of colonial contexts and circumstances driving migration, this volume raises the question of where women fit in terms of colonial projects. For example, do they further the goals of colonial regimes or complicate them in their refusal to conform? Moreover, these essays ask to what extent and in what ways was it possible for women to separate themselves from the colonial project when they were performing such roles as working as a midwife, sharing their faith, or sailing on a “bride ship” (p. 41) to become a settler wife.

NOTES

[1] For an important early work in this area see Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999). More recent works include Jennifer Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: the Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Margaret Cook Andersen, *Regeneration through Empire: French Pronatalists and Colonial Settlement in the Third Republic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); and Jennifer Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

LIST OF ESSAYS

Virginie Chaillou-Atrous et Françoise Le Jeune, “Introduction”

Part One, Émigration organisée ou circulations forcées : comment répondre à la pénurie de femmes dans l’espace colonial ?

Marie Ruiz, “Sociétés d’émigration de femmes et impérialisme au féminin (1860-1914)”

Françoise Le Jeune, “Charity, social control and female emigration in the ‘white empire’, Angela Burdett-Coutts’ and Charles Dickens’ *Urania Cottage* : reforming prostitutes for the colonial market”

Susana Serpa Silva, “Women in the Azorean emigration in the 19th century. A gendered overview”

Carolyn J. Eichner, “La colonie pénale genrée : prisonnières politiques en Nouvelle-Calédonie”

Part Two, Évangéliser, soigner, peupler, se défendre : une répartition genrée des tâches dans l’espace colonial

Virginie Chaillou-Atrous, “Le départ des femmes françaises à destination de la colonie de la Réunion au XIX^e siècle : logique coloniale ou acte d’émancipation? ”

Marion Robinaud, “Écrits de voyages de religieuses missionnaires dans l’Ouest canadien (1859-1900) : pour une mise à distance géographique et culturelle”

Part Three, Le voyage comme forme de circulation genrée dans l’espace colonial

Valérie Boulain, “Les excursions de Carla Serena en Asie centrale à la fin du XIXe siècle”

Michèle Sellès Lefranc, “Isabelle Eberhardt en Algérie (1897-1904) : l’invention de soi au prisme du caractère genré des explorations des marges de l’Empire colonial français et de ses descriptions ethnographiques”

Margaret Andersen
University of Tennessee
mcookand@utk.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172