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Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Undesirable: Passionate Mobility and Women's Defiance of French Colonial Policing, 1919-1952*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2022. 272 pp. Acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, and index. \$105.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226822235; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780226822259; \$34.99 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9780226822242.

Review by Hannah Frydman, University of Washington.

This is a book that is both about telling stories and that itself tells many stories. It seems as if an accurate review should, itself, engage in an act of storytelling to fully convey the essence of Jennifer Anne Boittin's remarkable and, in many ways, unsummarizable *Undesirable*. Doing so, however, would require too many stories and more space than even *H-France Review* allows. Moving among and between French West Africa, French Indochina, and (less centrally) metropolitan France, Boittin painstakingly draws together, in a dazzling feat of archival recovery, an astonishing number of stories of the "independently mobile women" who "remain understudied as a group" in the historiography on women in empires (p. 8). These women, who are "generally among the least visible figures in histories of migration" (p. 8) but to whom Boittin gives a collective star billing by mobilizing archives of colonial surveillance, each "defied" (p. 32) or made use of, in their own way, interwar French colonial policing and its goals of protecting "white prestige" and retaining power over indigenous populations (p. 34).

Across an introduction, an epilogue, and five chapters, the stories overflow with a cacophony of voices and individual, unique lives. The author charts how women's immobility was caught up in undesirability, how these historical figures physically moved through the empire, how they made use of the unstable positionality of being what Boittin calls "'French' 'women'" (p. 89), how narratives of intimate violence both discouraged mobility and contributed to an "empire-wide, systemic violence," and how desire drove mobility as well as fueled the gossip that undergirded colonial policing (p. 117). Each chapter (including the epilogue, which uses snapshots of other moments in which "independently mobile women" refused some aspect of the colonial status quo from the postwar period forward toward the present) is kaleidoscopic, bursting at the seams with stories that go off in a multitude of directions (p. 5). We start with a story and end with a story and in the middle there are stories.

These stories Boittin tells are *women's* stories, seen on the ground, rather than from above, except in the case of the several aviatrixes who move independently through empire. Boittin writes that *Undesirable* decenters "the imperial story from the metropole and from the colonial administration, law, and related concepts such as citizenship" (p. 7). She is not recounting a history about the French state or from the point of view of imperial bureaucrats (who nonetheless

remain important to this story, as they weigh and evaluate pleas for help or defiance on the part of mobile women in empire). Instead, Boittin uses the archives of colonial policing to “center women’s voices,” especially those telling their own stories (often to these bureaucrats), even when those voices left only minor, often mediated and sometimes formulaic, traces in the archive (p. 7).

On their own, none of these stories says much. Together, these small traces, which “reveal individuals who rejected patriarchal, gendered, or racialized evaluations of them as ‘bad women’ or refused to be controlled” (p. 7), give us a composite picture that helps us understand how these refusals, this defiance, the “incongruity between what women were supposed to be...and what they actually did” (p. 91), can be seen to have “revealed the fractures in colonialism” (p. 179). For Boittin, “undesirable women” must be understood as structurally similar to anti-imperialists, who likewise, if more consciously and with more guided purpose, revealed “the fundamental injustices of colonialism” (p. 179). These are not the politically engaged actors of the “colonial metropolis,” and yet “like dissidents in their politics, in their passionate mobility undesirable women destabilized colonial governance” (p. 30) in a moment of rising anti-imperialism and nationalism across the empire. [1] The method Boittin uses to show this is unusual and plays with scale in novel ways. While she had enough data to give us aggregates and statistics about independently mobile women in empire, and while the sheer number of archival traces is clearly important, she never reduces lives to data points. The multitude of stories Boittin tells does not swirl into an aggregate. She does not give into our (or at least my) irrepressible desire to see like the bureaucrat (or like the historian?), imposing order on the disorder she uncovers. She requires that we stay with these unruly women, moving along rivers, or in the bowels of ships, or immobile, locked in servants’ quarters. She requires that we hold onto women’s names, or at least try to, refusing to give us a single story. Instead she gives us many, attending carefully to each individual life and seeing significance in the details of individual experience, in what she at several moments describes as the “messiness” of everyday life (p. 177).

Boittin writes that “women’s individual stories of sex and love add messy detail to valuable histories of states’ investments in regulating sex” (p. 176) and reveal that “colonial states were both less panoptic and more arbitrary than studies of sex have often suggested” (p. 175). The messiness of everyday life on the ground comes through very clearly throughout the book. It almost feels as if the many women, more than I might have imagined existed, moving through the French empire (or unable to move through it as they wish) could not in fact be contained by Boittin’s efforts—required by the conventions of academic book writing that she does not entirely eschew, nor does she entirely follow—to impose order. The detail and complexity and uniqueness of each story rejects categorization, defies the form of chapter and subsection and argumentative development that would corral and control them just as these problematically mobile women refuse colonial administrators attempts to enforce their mobility and/or immobility, revealing “the limits of the state’s capacity to exert control over individuals” in French West Africa and French Indochina (p. 3).

The result is almost dizzying at times. The women whose stories come together under the label “undesirable” are anything but monolithic. They had “vastly different origins, civil statuses, races, classes, education levels, linguistic skills, or abilities” (p. 7). They “were West African, European, Southeast Asian, or *métisse* and had very different statuses and stakes: survival, aspiration, reputation, lust, kinship, a home, or security” (p. 177). Through five brief case studies, the first chapter introduces readers to the term “undesirable” as something colonial officials used to describe independent women moving through empire. Interestingly, in the five cases, women are

explicitly labeled “undesirable” in only three of them, in a first, conscious, if not fully explored iteration of the way the diversity of these women exceeds any possible frame, including the titular frame of “undesirability.” Before introducing us to the snapshots of the “undesirable” or “potentially undesirable woman” (p. 50), Boittin first shows us Clotilde Chivas-Baron’s “fictional, composite overseas French woman” who “had to perform an ideal of white and pink, heterosexual, European, bourgeois femininity” in order to uphold white prestige and power (p. 32). In light of this, it becomes clearer how any woman traveling alone could easily be seen as “undesirable,” including a Syrian woman in an interracial relationship in a village in Côte d’Ivoire; a white woman, who identified herself as an explorer, “resting and relaxing in public” on a chaise longue in Dahomey (p. 40); and a sex worker who, after passing herself off as French in Indochina, insisted on showing officials her Polish papers as a way of getting revenge on her ex, who had helped her acquire her forged French ones.

If the term “undesirable” does important work, it also seems to reorient the reader toward the state that names these women and more specifically toward the officials that we are to imagine stamped the title in red ink on the book’s cover. We are left to wonder, however, if such a stamp actually existed, as the bureaucratic work of surveillance is given the marginalized place that “undesirable” women generally occupy. Boittin is clear that she wants this book to be about the women themselves in their own words and how they moved in “defiance of French colonial policing,” so it is an interesting choice to center this state term that was used to marginalize and to control, and to use it as a form of connective tissue for the book.

It is not, however, the only term knitting things together. In addition to the term “undesirable,” whether actually uttered or waiting in the wings for women moving (or not moving) in non-normative ways, Boittin also uses the term “passionate mobility” as a way to draw together African women training to be schoolteachers, anti-imperialist white journalists, white women seeking to reunite with Black men met in France during wartime, and *métisse* women insisting on their Frenchness and refusing to leave metropolitan France. Perhaps the clearest definition given of “passionate mobility” is that it is “both the act of moving and the use of intimate stories so as to assert [...] autonomy or gain support” (p. 179) or that of “conveying, reacting to, and deploying emotions in the course of, or in the cause of, physical or socioeconomic mobility” (p. 5). In the face of a state surveillance apparatus that expected women to be both emotional and undesirable, women told emotional stories in order, at times, to evade state oversight and, at other times, to solicit state aid, often trying to *move* their interlocutor in order to move as they wished.

Throughout the book, “passionate mobility” comes to mean many things and certain chapters focus primarily on passion or mobility in the many possible meanings of both words. Chapters two and three, for example, focus on “the mobility part of passionate mobility” (p. 56), homing in on the material conditions of mobility and the ways that women made use of the instability of the terms “French” and “woman” to argue for their “physical, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical mobility” respectively (p. 89). Chapters four and five then center the passionate side of passionate mobility, exploring the place of women’s anger in their stories about intimate violence and the way sexual desire inspired movement. While, at least for this reader, the word “passion” in a twentieth-century context is hard to disentangle from sexual desire (explored in chapter five), “passion” is used by Boittin as a synonym for emotion, and the emotions range from desire to anger to revenge to despair.

The capaciousness of “passionate mobility” (which is made to include the mobilization of any kind of emotion to achieve any kind of mobility) allows Boittin to include her diverse array of actors under one big tent while also comparing and contrasting women’s experiences, revealing “the inconsistencies, exceptions, and restrictions informing their imperial experiences” (p. 8), or the way that different positionalities led to different outcomes. She shows beyond the shadow of a doubt that surveillance and control were not systematic. Things did not operate the same way for every woman.

Reading the work produced through this kaleidoscopic methodology was often exhilarating. It was exciting to watch as the lives of the marginalized and often forgotten or overlooked women accumulated in all their diversity and humanity, forcing readers to see that these stories exist, that we can tell them, that they can fill the pages of a book. But sometimes it also left me feeling somewhat at sea, or perhaps, to repurpose Boittin’s words, left me, “after the sea faded and land came back into focus and the lover was gone,” with “not just the pain and withdrawal their absence caused but also the messiness” (p. 177).

The introduction does heavy interpretative lifting that gives us the tools to make sense of this messiness, but its scaffolding does not impose itself neatly onto the structure of the chapters that follow. It is the stories, women’s “archivally stored vocalizations” (p. 177), that take center stage and we must learn to integrate them into the introduction’s architecture on our own or simply lose ourselves in the swirl of complex, messy human life. Either way, we cannot help but get a sense of just how uncontrollable imperial mobility really was and of the role women’s actions played in “reveal[ing] the colonial order as a house of cards” (p. 51), which is, at its core, Boittin’s point.

NOTE

[1] Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

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