

Catherine Larochelle

Marie-Louise et les petits Chinois d'Afrique

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In this small (only 6.5 X 4 inches), but important book, Catherine Larochelle explores her engagement with an archival collection of 200 letters written by young Québécois between 1920 and 1960. The book reproduces some of these letters interspersed with Larochelle's own letters discussing her analysis. The results are a thoughtfully constructed meditation on the historian's craft

This book began as a follow up to her award-winning *L'école du racisme. La construction de l'altérité à l'école québécois*. For generations, young Catholics in Québec (and elsewhere) were encouraged to save their pennies and contribute to the Church's missionary efforts by buying "des petits Chinois" or "petits Chinois d'Afrique," in effect to pay for the baptism in extremis of a pagan orphan (21). Tracing the letters that these young people sent to the Paris-based directors of the Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood led Larochelle to the Rome headquarters for Catholic missionary work where she found the letters in the midst of dozens of uncatalogued boxes on the Church's activities in Canada including in residential schools. The letters she found on the second day of her search were mainly from young women and girls from the outlying regions of Québec.

Larochelle's analysis is informed by the theories of the Québécois sociologist Paolo Verto, which led her to challenge the all-encompassing narrative of *le peuple* as a single homogenous entity in favour of seeking out the histories of *la multitude* and the unique trajectory of each human being. This results in an anti-essentialist understanding of identity categories including those of gender and nation. Interestingly, none of Larochelle's theoretical engagements came from her own professors when she was a graduate student. Rather, her interest in analysing the photographs in textbooks led her to the work of Susan Sontag, while a cafeteria conversation with a PhD student in philosophy led her to Sara Ahmed.

These theories allow her to look beyond the letters as products of the racism of the time (something that she fully recognizes). She also notes that they were not simply the product of *La Grande Noirceur*, [*The Great Dakness*], the era in which the Roman Catholic Church dominated Québec society, but were also the result of the efforts of these young people themselves to reach out across difference to the wider world. In doing so, she shows how the letter writers often involved efforts to gain greater control over their lives. For example, many of the letter-writers ask the Church for help, not only in the form of prayers on their behalf, but for getting a job, finding a husband, having a child, as well as in one instance for a pearl rosary. One young woman even asked for a breadbasket. As Larochelle notes, this request either indicates an extreme level of poverty or the sense that these young people were asking for a *quid pro quo* from what they knew to be the very rich Church in exchange for their donations.

Larochelle also shows how the system of buying "a little Chinese" silenced larger abuses including genocide. For example, one gift that letter-writers requested was

a brochure published by the Church that contained supposedly true stories about the souls their purchases were saving. One such story was about an orphaned First Nations girl from Fort Chipewyan. The story was that this orphaned girl was baptized before she died. What was left out, as Larochelle found through her explorations of the other boxes in the Rome archive, was that the story originally came from a priest who described how the family of this two-year old girl starved to death in 1914 because the outbreak of World War I prevented them from buying the bullets they needed to obtain food. But the Church suppressed this part of the story, providing no explanation for why the family of this starving girl had disappeared.

Historians not only document the past, we make meaning of it; how we make meaning depends not only on what we have discovered or the questions we ask, but on who we ourselves are in the world. Thus, history is as much about historians as it is about the past. However, while we can usually hide who we are behind our narratives, in this brave book Catherine Larochelle lifts the veil on our human engagements. The results are well worth reading for professional and apprentice historians alike.

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