



BOOK REVIEW

Brazil Through French Eyes: A Nineteenth Century Artist in the Tropics, by Ana Lúcia Araújo, by Pedro Lopes de Almeida

Análise Social, 223, LII (2.º), 2017

ISSN ONLINE 2182-2999

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ARAÚJO, Ana Lúcia
*Brazil Through French Eyes:
 A Nineteenth Century Artist in the Tropics*,
 Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2015, 238 pp.
 ISBN 0826337457

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With *Brazil Through French Eyes: A Nineteenth Century Artist in the Tropics* Ana Lúcia Araújo (Howard University, Washington, DC, US) makes a major contribution to a field that remains largely underexplored: the accounts produced by foreign travelers in Brazil throughout the imperial period (1822-1889). Araújo's book focuses on the expedition taken by the French painter François-Auguste Biard (1799-1882) to Brazil in 1858-1859, providing the reader with a meticulous and well informed analysis of the resulting travelogue, *Deux années au Brésil*, published in Paris in 1862 and accompanied by a large number of engravings. The neglect of this primary source by most scholars in Brazil and abroad can be explained by the problems associated with the satirical approach favored by the author. The account is generally dismissed as a caricature, which seems to echo the reaction of the first Brazilian readers, who devalued Biard's book on the basis on the obvious prejudice and plain stereotypes used in catering to a very large audience.

This is a revised and expanded version of a book first published in French under the title *Romantisme tropical: l'aventure illustrée d'un peintre français au Brésil* (Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009). Ana Lúcia Araújo, whose previous works dealt with issues of memory, slavery, and the South Atlantic,¹ proposes to compare the travelogue and the woodcuts with other illustrations and 19th-century European travel writings, and to show that it is actually part of a long tradition in the genre. Her argument rests heavily on the concept of "tropical romanticism", a specific mode of constructing visual and written narratives about Brazil that dialogues with other paradigms of construction of an exotic reality thorough such as Orientalism (and, one could add, Indianism), aiming at building a markedly hierarchized depiction of the local society.

One of the main themes of Araújo's book is Biard's stance in the face of slavery. Araújo tests several hypotheses throughout her book, exploring the nuance in the painter's behavior, and how his attitude toward the practice of slavery tends to change throughout his period in Brazil. If, in the early stages of his biography, one might feel tempted to label him an abolitionist, in the end Araújo manages to persuade us of the

1 *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Cambria Press, 2010); *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (Routledge, 2014).

opposite, by perceptively pointing out his quick adoption of the dominant values of the Brazilian elites.

In Chapter 1 the reader is offered a detailed account of Biard's career prior to travelling to Brazil. Emphasis here is placed on the formative years and on his later experience as a renowned traveler. Using Biard's studio in Paris as the cornerstone for her exposition, Araújo is able to demonstrate the importance of this space in the cosmopolitan Paris of the 19th century, while at the same time stressing the connections between the studio and the scientific and scholarly ambitions of the cultured elite, who decorated the walls and the shelves with artifacts regarded as "foreign curiosities" (8). An expedition to the Arctic in 1839-1840 by Biard and Léonie d'Aunet, his partner at the time, and who would later develop an affair with the writer Victor Hugo, is one of the core subjects of this chapter. Further on, the author delves into Biard's arrival in Brazil in 1858, and maps out what she labels as his "contemplative euphoria", a key-element in the portrayal of tropical societies by 19th-century travelers, defined by the fascination inspired by the exotic, the "newness" of the landscape (19). During his stay in Rio, Biard develops a close relationship with the Imperial court of D. Pedro II, establishing his studio in the Imperial Palace, and painting several portraits of members of the highest ranks of Brazilian aristocracy.

The concept of "tropical romanticism" is the main subject of Chapter 2. Here, the author explores how this tradition of representation contributed to the dissemination of ambiguous images of Brazil in Europe, while at the same time configuring "a form of reaction against the scientific organization of nature and rationalism" (35). The author's approach to this concept is particularly enriching, as is the association of tropical romanticism with the three forms of enunciation devised by Araújo in most travel writing, *description*, *narrative*, and *commentary*. By analyzing how these three categories intervene differently in the production of the narrative at the discursive level, Araújo is able to ground her interpretation of tropical romanticism on solid bases. However, the relationship between tropical romanticism, travel narrative, and scientific designs is insufficiently analyzed. The author moves too quickly to the reconstruction of a genealogy of representation of slavery in Brazilian travelogues and how they went from idealized representations to ethnographic approaches, focusing on the accounts of Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768 — 1848) and Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802 — 1858), and comparing those with Von Martius' (1794-1868) theories on Brazilian history. In the face of this, Biard would represent a different attitude, drawing from both the previous models of representation, whose main feature is the naturalization of the enslaved, and the depiction of the natives as part of the local fauna (55).

Chapter 3 is set out to prove this point, by showing how Biard described "Black Brazil as a satirical commentary" (this being the title of the chapter). The African slave trade had been abolished in Brazil in 1831, but internal trade persisted thereafter. Araújo tracks Biard's perception of a society that relied entirely on slave trade,

and underscores how quickly he naturalized such a state of things by converting, in his account, the local reality into the more familiar terms of African societies, and thus perceiving Brazilian exoticism as African exoticism. At the same time, Biard's awareness of the paradoxes and contradictions of a young nation deeply immersed in the antinomies of a slavocratic society becomes clear when Araújo invites her reader to take a closer look at Biard's engravings of Santa Cruz Church, "a hut with a European-style façade [that] symbolizes Brazil as a mixed society in which the relatively few members of the white elite emulated a European lifestyle, even though with only modest resources" (75).

The expeditions into the deep rainforest start to be analyzed in Chapter 4. Biard traveled along the Negro and Madeira Rivers, visited Belém, Arapiranga, Onças, Marajó and Manaus, and met members of several nations in the Amazon. In Manaus (the capital of the province of Amazonas) he realizes how famous his works are in Brazil: in fact, Biard's illustrations for French newspapers were well known there (109). This topic could have been addressed at length, for it encapsulates a critical point of travel writing: the moments when the traveler is faced with high cultural standards by a population he is invested in depicting as backwards and primitive. The local literate elites challenge Biard's perspective by demonstrating their knowledge of his culture (and his very own work), in a flip that opens a breach in an otherwise homogeneous narrative in which the place of enunciation corresponds to the cultured observer, in opposition to the archaism of the observed ones.

In this chapter Araújo develops valuable interpretations for some very small-sized illustrations accompanying Biard's book, portraying individual specimens at a close angle, but not entirely isolated from their context. She also suggests that these woodcuts were probably inspired by Biard's experiments with photography for scientific purposes, thus repeating some features of the allegedly numerous close shots he took (112). As Biard further explores the Amazon forest, human figures and horizon gradually disappear from his compositions, hinting at a possible loss of his points of reference as he ventured into the jungle (115), which prompts Araújo to explore an analogy with the abstractionist process of Piet Mondrian, a possibility that, appealing as it might be, seems somewhat off-topic in the context of Araújo's book. One of the most interesting passages of this chapter is Araújo's interpretation of a woodcut in which Biard poses with an ax cutting through the wood - his body, however, evidently not corresponding to Biard's own age at the time but rather young and athletic, suggesting what might be, in fact, the physical type of a young indian (116-117). The author emphasizes the ambiguity of this image, showing how it represents an attempt to erase the barrier between the protagonist and the natives, while, at the same time, reinforcing his role as the explorer.

In the last Chapter, "Evil Natives", Araújo examines some of the values attached to Biard's depictions of Brazilian natives. Araújo observes that a considerable part of

Biard's highly derisive description of the natives derives from the tactics he uses to make them pose for his paintings, which was to offer them *cachaça* and other liquors in exchange for their collaboration (144-145). This incipient trade, however, and as Araújo cogently points out, can be regarded as a way for the natives to obtain goods from the traveler. By dealing with their own collaboration, and imposing it as a form of currency, the natives are, in fact, negotiating the presence of the foreigner, and reclaiming their own agency in the interaction taking place. When it comes to photographic representation, Araújo's remarks on the demonstrations of fear by the natives in front of Biard's camera (148)—an alien body that represents authority and is frequently depicted as a weapon facing the natives—are highly pertinent, as they dovetail with Biard's drawing of a dead body, casting some light on the continuum between the natives' superstitions and the traveller's actions.

The book concludes with insightful observations on the relationship between the travelogue tradition and the concept of tropical romanticism. *Deux années au Brésil* puts before its reader a character with multiple roles: "artist, traveler, adventurer, naturalist, and ethnographer" (186). The author/protagonist incarnates the contradictions of the European interest in South America and all the while "he rarely makes informed statements about the country's sociopolitical realities" (186).

Brazil Through French Eyes achieves the author's purpose of framing a 19th-century travelogue and its engravings within a broad paradigm of representation described by Araújo as *tropical romanticism*. The book is particularly successful at analyzing the contradictions arising from the conflictual identities perceived by the traveler, and how this set of ambiguities affects the portrait of the native and Afro-Brazilian populations.

ALMEIDA, P.L. de (2017), Book Review "Brazil Through French Eyes: A Nineteenth Century Artist in the Tropics, New Mexico, University of New Mexico Press, 2015". *Análise Social*, 223, LII (2.º), pp. 489-492.

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