

Modos de ser, modos de ver: Viajantes europeus e escravos africanos no Rio de Janeiro (1808–1850). By ENEIDA MARIA MERCADANTE SELA. Campinas, Brazil: Editora UNICAMP, 2008. Illustrations. Figures. Notes. Bibliography. 422 pp. Paper, R\$40.00.

When in 1808 the Portuguese court, aided by the British navy, fled Napoleon's armies and escaped to Rio de Janeiro, the city went from being a colonial capital to being the seat of a far-flung empire. Brazilian ports, previously allowed to trade only through Portugal, were opened to direct trade with other countries. The first press was established, initially to publish government paperwork but soon to publish works of all kinds. Foreigners came from Britain, France, Germany, and North America to see this tropical place, to be dazzled and shocked by its exoticism. They described in words, paint, and drawings what they saw, and they published their accounts for readers at home. Rio de Janeiro became a favorite stopping place, with travelers sometimes passing through, while others who came as part of artistic or scientific missions might stay for several years. Those who went to Rio de Janeiro in the first half of the nineteenth century are the subject of Eneida Maria Mercadante Sela's book. Having read widely and deeply in the prolific and multi-lingual literature generated by these visitors, she begins with the idea that their work, taken collectively, comprises a literary genre, which she investigates in order to discover its patterns, its elements, its ethnocentricities. She narrows her focus, though, to what these writers and artists said about slaves and slavery, about the ever-increasing numbers of imported Africans in the city.

But she goes further. Her declared purpose is to make a contribution to the historiography of slavery by evaluating this literature as evidence for the practices of slavery and for slave life in early nineteenth-century Rio (pp. 34, 404). The words and images, she warns, do not always say or portray what they seem to, and they come heavily freighted with assumptions, judgments, prejudices, premises, and experiences that filter what is seen and commented on. Take, for example, the pipe-smoking market woman with her wide-brimmed hat and her bare shoulder, who appears in various accounts, her image borrowed and reproduced, until she ceases to be a particular slave woman and becomes a type. Despite the authors' differences in profession, nationality, or length of stay, there is among them a convergence of views, Sela argues. The originality, and hence the reliability, of their description is compromised or at least made questionable.

To set the stage, she traces the trajectory through scientific and aesthetic writing in eighteenth-century France, in which notions of race and color hardened into categories of inferiority. This is a task worth doing, she tells us, because most of the European visitors whose accounts she examines, born in the last 20 years of the eighteenth century, would have been exposed to and absorbed these ideas. It is a tricky argument to make stick in the best of cases. Do we know that particular people actually read and accepted certain ideas, especially when many of the visitors she examines came not from France, but from England, Germany, and North America? Intellectual formation is difficult to discover and was likely not as homogeneous as she suggests. But still, she introduces some of the ideas that were in the air at the time.

In an age that believed in the classification of information, the writers and illustrators of travel accounts sought to distinguish races, tribes, and nations by their defining characteristics, a task some managed with greater nuance than others. They worked with what was readily visible to them—body type, facial features, hair texture, labor, and dress—and some observers even distinguished the facial scarifications that identified cultural and regional differences among Africans. But classification seldom remained neutral and travelers also recorded their prejudices or revealed their distaste for particular facial features or black skin. Their distance from actual Africans is obvious here: they do not describe food preferences or child-rearing practices among slaves or African notions of beauty or honor, but they instead are content with what can be neatly fitted into their taxonomies.

Sela stops exactly when I wanted more. If this vast, dense literature is dangerous because of its borrowings and unexamined assumptions, then can we not use it at all? Do these authors and illustrators, who as outsiders noticed and commented on details of daily life that locals took for granted or thought trivial and unworthy of mention, not provide irreplaceable sources? And don't historians typically question the premises of their sources? Are letters, notary records, ministerial reports, and postmortem inventories any less suspect in their own ways? A single extended example through which Sela might demonstrate not only the traps but also the possibilities of these accounts as sources for historians would have been instructive. Perhaps this is what she intends to do with her announced next project on one of the best-known and most cited travel writers, Maria Graham.

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