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Marcus Wood, *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, (£60.00). pp. xxviii +523. ISBN 978-0-10-927457-4

Since the publication of *Blind Memory* (2000), Marcus Wood's work on the visual culture of slavery has made a major contribution to scholarship. His latest book, *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America*, is an equally provocative and passionate polemic on the subject, one which embarks on rich new territory that will continue to open the field to scholars. In particular, his introduction to an Anglophone readership of a vast body of Brazilian material – paintings, satirical prints and photographs – from the eighteenth century to abolition in 1888, is to be welcomed.

In recent years Brazilian publishers have produced a number of lavishly illustrated scholarly volumes devoted to the group of European artists who were lured to cosmopolitan Rio de Janeiro in the early years of the nineteenth century. Among the most outstanding of these was the exiled Bonapartist Jean Baptiste Debret, whose extraordinary body of sketches, preparatory watercolours and lithographs of everyday slave life dominates *Black Milk's* first chapter. Wood's detailed and sustained visual analyses of individual works are insightful here, and he is right to highlight the unparalleled – and often devastating – intimacy of Debret's images of 'ordinary' slave life. At times, however, he elides significant functional distinctions between preparatory sketches for private use by the artist and subsequent imagery designed for public consumption. He describes for example a detailed pencil and watercolour sketch featuring slaves and an array of torture implements as a 'beautifully choreographed dance of horror' (p. 49-50), ignoring the fact that Debret's sketch (and hundreds of others like it) were produced quickly and expediently. Similarly, can the sketch of a squatting slave, the head of a donkey, and a finch, really be read as an 'ironic religious critique of slavery' (p. 47)? Sketches like these were information gathering exercises done 'on the spot' – composition and the juxtaposition of elements were worked through at a later stage in the process.

Wood points out that cross-cultural histories of slavery are rare, and he goes on to question the 'extent to which slavery can ever be seen as a comparative phenomenon' (pp. 20-21). Nevertheless, he argues, it is important that comparative histories are written, with all their attendant incompatibilities. *Black Milk* is an ambitious attempt to compare the visual culture of slavery of two disparate cultures, and Wood refuses to allow the significant methodological challenges of such comparative analyses to deter him. He draws a broad interdisciplinary bow too, borrowing from literature, history, art history, museology, and anthropology to analyse his subject. Yet on occasion Wood's broad brushstrokes are at the expense of historical accuracy. For example in his discussion of the extraordinary rise of the cult of Anastácia, a figure now widely identified in Brazil with the suffering of female slaves, he fails to mention that in fact the image from which

the icon has been variously adapted was in fact originally an enslaved Afro-Brazilian man.¹ This point does not detract from Wood's overall argument about the elusiveness of Anastácia's 'semiotic associations' – indeed it may have strengthened it. Similarly, there is nothing to suggest in Arago's original lithograph that the figure is clothed, as the author maintains (p. 449). Elsewhere, Turner's iconic *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On* is wrongly dated 1842 (it was painted and exhibited in 1840) (p. 383).

At times Wood's frames of reference are dangerously broad, such as in his extended discussion of a Brazilian print by the fascinating Italian-born Angelo Agostini. This deeply disturbing satire shows a bourgeois man subject to a vicious knife attack by members of his own family and their slaves, thus transforming him into an allegory of Saint Sebastian. Wood's discussion begins with a close reading of the image within the socio-political context of Brazil in the years leading to abolition, and moves on to a broader analysis of Sebastian as a late nineteenth-century gay icon. Wood makes reference to a wide range of artists here, from the nineteenth century to now. Yet did this graphic satire, as extraordinary as it is, really manage to turn 'the increasing Sebastianism of the European avant-garde upon its iconographic head' (p. 156)?

Despite such reservations, *Black Milk* is a bold and significant contribution to the study of slavery's visual culture, and tackles its subject in a strikingly original fashion. Wood returns to a series of questions with which he has long been preoccupied: how should the modern museum interpret the history of slavery (and its legacy), and in particular, how might trauma be represented? What is the role of Christian iconography in the representation of the suffering slave? Wood introduces the reader to a wide range of visual material that has never been discussed in the Anglophone literature, and grapples with some of today's most contested museological and representational issues relating to memory and trauma. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the field.

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¹ See Jerome S. Handler and Kelly E. Hayes, 'Escrava Anastácia: The Iconographic History of a Brazilian Popular Saint', *African Diaspora* 2, 2009, pp. 25-51. Handler and Hayes draw this conclusion from a careful reading of the various editions of Jacques Arago's *Promenade Autour du Monde*, in which the original lithograph, *Châtiment des esclaves, Brésil*, first appeared in 1839-40.