

# JUDGING FROM THE EYE: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ALEXANDER CALDCLEUGH'S TRAVELOGUE

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The colonized other doesn't count, becomes invisible to the eyes of the colonizer, who not only takes the fruits of colonized labor but takes credit for those fruits as well. (Tyson 406)

Curiosity and the need to map an unknown territory motivates the travel accounts from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the broadening of knowledge is added the expansion of the world capitalist system, and undisguised mercantile interests prevail. The struggles for European hegemony and the treaties imposed on the weaker nations become, in travel literature, reasons to describe the natural riches and mercantile possibilities of South America. Not only Brazil and its neighbors appear as sources of goods, but also their populations are described as commodities. Such a transformation of "a culturally subordinate group" into the others of "a culturally privileged group" allows "the culturally privileged [to] distance themselves emotionally from populations over whom they want to gain or maintain

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control" (Tyson 403). That emotional estrangement has ontological and epistemological consequences for the representation of the New World and its inhabitants. Brazilians, like other populations, cease to be seen as individuals and take on the characteristics of a type, which makes it easier for international investors to know them and regard them as merchandise.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Napoleon's campaign reached its climax. Marching toward Great Britain, the main obstacle to his plans, the French emperor allied with the Spaniards and summoned the Portuguese to join him. Charles V, king of Spain, declared war on John, the Portuguese regent prince, who then agreed to close the ports to the British. Caught between two fighting powers, John moved the court and its treasures to Brazil, protected by the British navy. The European conflicts arrived at the Americas: the Spanish colonies rebelled against the metropolis and the United States declared war on England. In 1815, Brazil became a kingdom united to Portugal, which ended the colonial system and the monopoly of the metropolis. The British protection against the French and the Spaniards, however, demanded compensation. King John discharged the Francophile ministers and opened the Brazilian ports. Portugal lost, besides the monopoly, the precedence and advantage in Brazilian business and our goods now went directly from Rio to London. England obtained powers of treasurer and suzerain, and Brazil put itself under its influence.

Such was the political scenario when Alexander Caldcleugh followed the English minister to the Brazilian court and traveled around South America. When he returned home, he collected his notes and published them under the title of *Travels in South America, During the Years of 1819-20-21, containing an Account of the Present State of Brazil, Buenos Ayres, and Chile*. Caldcleugh depicts the landscape and the climate, the races with their mores and classes, the flora and fauna, and, of course, commerce and its possibilities. His gaze obliterates differences and makes Brazil, like the rest of the New World, appear as the Other, that which is different from the British and European I, in a metropolis-colony, center-periphery relationship.

Gradually, in travel diaries, the trope of paradise regained gives way to the trope of unexplored market. In the case of Brazil, this change was possible thanks to the opening of ports, which metaphorically and literally created a new world to the European initiative. The Brazilian land, Caldcleugh writes, which until then had been "beyond the reach of foreign commercial adventure," was "thrown open to British enterprize [sic] by revolutionary changes and the adoption of a liberal and enlightened policy" (v-vi). He reserves a large part of his narrative to the country's economic and financial conditions and claims the right of England to exploit Brazil, in gratitude for the protection given the Portuguese royal family in its escape to the colony.

To attract English investors, Caldcleugh makes a catalogue in which Brazil and its inhabitants appear as commodities. Commercial catalogues dissolve differences, reducing specimens into types to provide consumers a generalization that will allow them to easily evaluate the goods being offered. So does Caldcleugh; he writes a report that he pretends to be scientific, without ever questioning his condition of a narrator privileged by political conditions. "The Author," he says, "has endeavoured to collect every fact which relates to the government, the resources and the prospects of the countries which he visited, and he trusts he has drawn an impartial sketch of every thing which came under his notice" (vi). For most of his text, he hides himself behind the information he provides, but he cannot refrain himself and makes comments about the Brazilians, mainly the women.

As a strategy to represent the inhabitants of Brazil, Caldcleugh compares them to the Portuguese; then he distinguishes the inhabitants of the provinces of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, but always transforming individuals into types. At first he takes the natives from Rio for Brazilians in general, whose habits and looks he describes: "Taking little exercise and a great proportion of food, they become, at that period of life when the passions moderate, much stouter and more corpulent than is generally the case in Europe: this remark more particularly applies to women" (63-64). From the appearance of the

population in general, he moves on to the family and their mores, such as church going: "It is on Sundays and on feast days that all the wealth and magnificence of a Brazilian family is exhibited. At an early hour the household prepares for church, and marches, almost without exception, in the following order: first, the master ...; next follows the mistress ...; then follow the sons and daughters; afterwards a favourite mulatto girl of the lady; next, a black mordomo, or steward ...; next, blacks of both sexes" (64). I left out the description of clothes, which, according to Caldcleugh, of course, all Brazilians wear the same. The phrase "almost without exception" plays the same role that "particularly" did in the previous example. It seems to open a space for difference, when, in fact, it allows him to make Brazilian families uniform.

Even when Caldcleugh sets Brazilians apart among themselves, he places them in classes, as for example, the inhabitants of Minas Gerais – the mineiros: "There is scarcely any race of men with features more clearly marked than these; independently of their dress, they can be at once recognized in the streets of Rio de Janeiro from the coast Brazilian or from the inhabitant of St. Paul's" (224). In one paragraph, the population of three provinces is homogenized and catalogued so that English investors can better decode them.

Among the types that Caldcleugh catalogues in his travelogue, he sets off a particular sub-group, the women, who rarely appear under a favorable light. His gaze lingers more over their physical characteristics as commodities and laborers than over their productive capacity. Even when they are productive, they are part of a type and are never named as individuals, unlike what happens to priests, politicians, and proprietors of mines. In general, according to Caldcleugh, "When extremely young, their fine dark eyes and full person make them generally admired, but a few years work a change, which long continued ill health could scarcely effect in Europe. It may be said, that their youth extends from ten to twenty-five" (65). Brazilian women suffer the effect of the climate and of their retired habits, which makes them inferior to European women.

Besides appearance, Caldcleugh uses Greek and Roman mythology to classify Brazilian women. About the dancers in Rio's Opera, he says, "it cannot be denied that some of the Venuses of the ballet were not exactly of an [sic] European tint" and condescends, "but, in this climate, great allowances must be made" (62). Every man carries an amulet, usually to protect him "from the darts of Cupid or the boa constrictor," which equates women to snakes, in a well-known move. More dangerous than the boas, however, are the descendents of Circe: "That witches should exist in Brazil cannot be wondered at, when it is remembered that even in England they have been met with in very modern times" (73). They are capable both of bringing misfortune to men and of acting as doctors in villages.

Among women, the slaves have the duty of satisfying the needs of their ladies and lords, serving them at home and in the streets, in bed and at the table, toiling the earth and digging the mines. Their main role is to produce working hands, as in the house of Dom Alves, where, because of his attention to women, who were not required to work "for five months previous to and after confinement," the slaves doubled in number in fifteen years (245). Caldcleugh says that he does not want to be severe, but he "cannot avoid remarking that the Brazilian padres [priests] in the mines lead very dissolute lives" and their behavior "to their slaves is sensual in the extreme to one sex, and cruel to the other" (275). Because of their indulgent disposition, says Caldcleugh, Brazilians mix more with their slaves than other people do and, "forming connections with women, enfranchise many. This in course of time will improve the race, and finish by filling the country with a free mulatto population, uniting the muscular power of the one race with the intelligence of the other, and fit for every purpose" (89). If female slaves guarantee the generation of labor, they also demoralize ecclesiastic censorship; but, more important, they contribute to miscegenation and abolition of slavery in the end.

Bearing in mind the incipient population of Brazil, Caldcleugh points out the need for women to marry. He mentions the existence of

only two convents for women, with a small number of people in them. Few women have taken the veil, which he considers a good thing, because in no "new country, should such a state of celibacy be in any way encouraged, nor even permitted, except among those who, from age or infirmity, are unlikely to contribute towards the increase of population" (72). Women, free or otherwise, seem to be restricted to the role of breeders, even if that would enfranchise them in a country about to cease being a colony.

As Caldcleugh arrives at the province of Minas Gerais, he busies himself with both the mineral riches and the inhabitants, women included. Joining "a cavalcade of between forty and fifty ladies and gentlemen, all in excellent spirits," he had "an opportunity of observing some of the characteristic features of the inhabitants of the mines" (224). He describes them from a favorable perspective, until he gets to the women, who "were so completely enveloped in thick drab great coats (and this on one of the hottest days I ever felt) that I could scarcely distinguish the old from the young" (225). One night he goes to a ball given by the officers in garrison, in which the men outnumbered the women, "for there were only fourteen ladies" (247). At another ball, he had the "opportunity of observing how generally thin the ladies of the Minas are" (250). So covered with clothes that one cannot tell their age, the women in Vila Rica are too few to attend upon the gentlemen at balls and, presumably, in everyday life.

In opposition to the women from Rio, who are fuller of body, women from Minas Gerais stand out for their slenderness, a physical condition that they probably wanted for themselves and that did not result from caloric deficiency, as Caldcleugh wants his readers to believe. As the fruits that abound in Rio do not thrive in the high lands where the mines are and few European fruits do well there, "the ladies of the Minas are excessively fond of showing their skill in making preserves, to which all classes are so partial, that fruit in a crude state is seldom eaten" (257). The talents of the *mineiras* surprise even the governor of the province. He tells Caldcleugh that, on an inspection trip, he was

offered a party in which "there was an arbour formed entirely of sweetmeats, under which himself and two of his suite could conveniently stand." Such habits deserve a negative comment from Caldcleugh, who notes the precarious health of the inhabitants of Vila Rica, caused in part by the skills of the sweet makers in the mines.

Contrary to what happens to many men, who have their names noted in Caldcleugh's report, women remain anonymous, be they dancers, slaves, or landowners. Although they are singled out within the class of Brazilians, they are represented as a sub-type, a collectivity determined by its gender. Obliterating individuality transforms the ladies of the mines in particular, and the Brazilians in general, into a group that can be more easily submitted to the process of othering. Already subjected to gender prejudice, they now find themselves under cultural subordination as well, which produces multiple othering. Such a rhetorical strategy serves the broadest colonialist purposes, because to other dehumanizes a person, as it allows the one who holds the turn to identify oneself as "the human being" and people different from oneself as something "other," that which is not human. From there to transforming a whole nation in commodity is a short and essential step, a step that assures colonizers that they do not trespass on any ethic precept when they subjugate and exploit a people that is other, similar but different from themselves.

## References

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