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Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 297 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4247-2.

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Opening with quotes from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and Toni Morrison and promising to shed light on the life and work of Mary Edmonia Lewis through an attentiveness to her period, sculptural practice, and intentions, Kirsten Pai Buick's *Child of Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (2010) is one of the first scholarly, single-authored books devoted in its entirety to the life and work of this artist. However, the author's persistent interrogation of other scholars' writings threatens to cast a shadow over an otherwise interesting and, for the most part, very well-researched and important book.

Buick's text is a significant piece of scholarship and a most welcome addition to the growing body of literature on Lewis. It will appeal to undergraduates, graduate students, academics, and some lay readers interested in nineteenth-century art, culture, and politics; American racial and sexual politics as they intersected with slavery, abolitionism, and emancipation. Incredibly, Lewis (of black and Native ancestry) became a professional and internationally renowned neoclassical sculptor in the mid-nineteenth century. It is in part the absence of knowledge about the central details of her life (the places and dates of her birth and, until very recently, death; her childhood; her romantic interests; her life after Rome, etc.) and the seeming impossibility of Lewis'

achievements that have piqued the interest of (mostly feminist) art historians over the last thirty plus years, despite the dominance of modernism. Buick aims to move away from what she reads as a tendency to see Lewis' production as a form of self-portraiture, consciously engaged with questions of an outsider identity. Her thesis focuses on Lewis' ideal works, arguing for a reading of these sculptures "as materializations, not illustrations, of a sensibility that was shaped by the ideals of womanhood just as much as by her 'identity,' and the accumulation of her experiences was determined by her status at various times as a woman, as Native, African Roman, American, Catholic, and artist" (34).

Buick's book makes new contributions to the study of Lewis. But it is not without problems, not the least of which is the overall tone of scholarly superiority that the sub-title of the book prophesizes by the calling out of the discipline of art history. While it is true that the field does not yet adequately address issues of race, sex, gender, class, and sexuality, it is *the way* in which Buick goes about pointing out and attempting to rectify the problems that makes for difficult reading. Buick's critique of others' scholarship often takes the form of literal (art) historiographies. To that extent, her book is both a critical biography and a book about methodology. Although she also has many laudable insights about earlier work, she often fails to give credit to others for the ways that their scholarship has shaped the art historical terrain that made her own work possible. For example, Buick sometimes lumps previous scholarship together under the banner of "most scholars" (2) and seems not to give full credit to Joy S. Kasson's early white feminist scholarship on the so-called Flock, does not mention Vivien

Green Fryd's early work on race and ethnicity in sculpture, and barely mentions Kirk Savage's (190-91) breakthrough critical readings of neoclassical sculpture and race. In one case, she engages other scholarship on Lewis' *Forever Free (Morning of Liberty)*, recounting the works of Albert Boime, Jacqueline Fonviele-Bontemps, Jean Fagin Yellin, Francis K. Pohl, and Marilyn Richardson. (53-4) The absence from this list, and from the publication as a whole of my own book, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007), which similarly discusses Lewis within a postcolonial feminist framework, compromises her critique of other Lewis scholars for a lack of critical dialogue with one another (210).

Buick devotes a considerable number of pages to critiquing the work of Albert Boime and, especially, Judith Wilson. However, she seems to extract Wilson's exhibition catalogue essay from its institutional publication context and divorce it from its original intent (165-81). But the sharpest of Buick's critiques are arguably reserved for Joseph D. Ketner and David Lubin (35-48). While the author rightfully acknowledges that these scholars are unable to fully transcend their white male privilege as producers of knowledge and takes them to task for their objectification of Duncanson, she does not give them credit as two of the first, if not *the* first, white male art historians to embrace the tenets of Critical Whiteness Studies and Postcolonial art history and to apply conscious and thoughtful self-reflexivity and self-critique in their readings of racially marginalized artists.

It is Buick's ongoing critique of several scholars throughout her book that stages her readers' expectation that she will be exhaustive in her own research methodology. Yet she often does not provide sources for her contentions. In the first chapter, "Inventing the Artist: Locating the Black and Catholic Subject," when Buick discusses Lewis' early years and mixed racial lineage, Ojibwa parentage, and relationship to the Credit River Reserve and the Canadian city of Mississauga, she does not cite any sources for this information. [1] Similarly, Buick provides no sources when writing that Lewis had lost both parents by the age of nine, of her adoption by her aunt, her life selling tourist souvenirs, and her placement with one Captain S.R. Mills by her brother (4). Later in that same chapter, Buick claims that Lewis retained the support of the Keeps, a white family with whom she boarded while attending Oberlin College, and obtained a letter of introduction to William Lloyd Garrison, despite being strategically barred from graduating after she was cleared on all charges in a poisoning scandal at the college (11). Buick also comments on the number of the Virgins that Lewis sculpted as well as on commissions for two tomb monuments (26). But again no sources are given. And it is not that her assertions are necessarily wrong, but that for Lewis, more than for artists for whom proper and thorough records and archives are known, there is an urgency in recuperating any primary sources about her life.

For a book with obvious biographical leanings, although critical New Art History ones, Buick arguably does not pay enough attention to Lewis' early training, merely mentioning Edward A. Brackett as an instructor (12). Unlike her

mainly upper-class white male contemporaries who had access to life drawing classes in art schools and cadavers in medical ones, and unlike her mainly upper-class white female contemporaries, who often obtained private tutelage from family friends, Lewis did not have the benefit of an extended, traditional, professional artistic training. This was due in part to the widespread racial and sexual segregation at this historical moment, as well as to Lewis' recognition that instruction increased the likelihood that she might be accused of fraud. Such artistic tutelage, however, was essential to the practice of neoclassical sculpture, which centered upon the representation of human subjects, often unclothed.

Buick poses the major questions of the book as 1) a search for Lewis' contributions to a national art, and 2) a search for her artistic intentions (xx), both of which I found limiting. The national art question, although critical to the internal dialogue of a tumultuous nineteenth-century America, fails to address the clearly international range, commitments, contributions, patronage, and indeed, location, of so-called American art at this time. Sculptors like Lewis relocated to Florence and later to Rome (at times for years or decades), establishing studios that doubled as showrooms and regularly engaging with an international group of artists, patrons, writer, politicians, royalty, and celebrities. Secondly, the problem of intentionality, posed as a guiding question of the book, again erases the function of power (racial, sexual, etc.), which is specifically required to produce privilege and marginalization. An artist's intention is not necessarily the measure of what he or she produced in the end, nor how his or her work was received. And the racist and sexist marginalization of Lewis as woman, Native, and black

further interfered with the ability of her audience to *see and read* her as a sculptor and her works in the ways in which they were perhaps intended.

Although Buick recuperates much of the nineteenth-century context in which Lewis worked, and although contemporaries Harriet Hosmer, Anne Whitney, and Emma Stebbins are briefly mentioned, she pays scarce attention to the influential so-called White Marmorean Flock, of which Lewis was a part. Another lapse is the scant attention paid to the role of the materiality of the sculptures—particularly the use of white marble to sculpt black and Native bodies (51).

There are other strands that Buick does not follow through on, or for which her interpretation can be called into question. While the author argues that the partial nudity of Lewis' black male subject in *Forever Free* "emphasizes the physicality of the black male," on a much simpler level, as one of Lewis' first ideal works after establishing her Roman studio, this nudity gave her a chance to strategically display her hard-won knowledge of human anatomy, a must for any neoclassical sculptor (64). Later in her discussion of Lewis and Hosmer, she notes that the two sculptors' friendship "never seemed to develop beyond that first early acquaintance" (64). [2] What we know as Lewis scholars is that we do not know the half of it, since there is no archival or published record of her correspondence, as we have for Hosmer, William Wetmore Story, Anne Whitney, Charlotte Cushman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James. We must be very cautious in our speculation about Lewis' life and work post-1875, since there is still much primary research to be done regarding what we now know to be the

thirty-two years between her last known major works produced in Rome (*Hagar* and *Death of Cleopatra*) and her death in London.

Buick does an exceptional job at narrating the political disorder of nineteenth-century America, and there is much that is interesting and insightful about her readings of Lewis' sculpture. The book deals mainly with three of Lewis' key works: *Forever Free (The Morning of Liberty)*, 1867, her Longfellow-inspired works (mainly *The Wooing of Hiawatha*, 1866, and *Marriage of Hiawatha*, 1866), and *Death of Cleopatra*, 1875. But additional sculptures by Lewis and other artists and other types of work are also ably referenced and integrated. Perhaps Buick's most profound contribution is her admirable attentiveness to the historical contexts in which the works were produced. For instance, she sheds light on the nature and understandings of blackness in Italy at the time of Lewis' presence in the expatriate cultural colony (18-19).

However, a problem throughout the book is Buick's desire to instill Lewis with agency. This begins early in the volume when she takes up the work of American historian Barbara J. Fields, who disputes the notion that ideology can be internalized, inherited, and, most of all, imposed from the top down (xv). Buick then distinguishes between the handing down of attitudes and the repetition of "appropriate social behavior." But what is social behavior but actions that are embodied, demonstrated, and seek to re-inscribe attitudes? Behavior and attitude are not separate.

In dismissing the power of ideology as it pertains to agency, Buick also dismisses the important postcolonial work of scholars and theoreticians like W. E.

B. Dubois, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Stuart Hall, who sought to understand the complexity of colonial power and authority. What all these authors expressed in various ways is that there is an unconscious level at which racially marginalized peoples may begin to internalize the racial hatred of the colonizer. Buick herself seems to acknowledge the power and unconscious work of colonial discourse, when she relates the tale of Lewis distinguishing herself from the “dirty Indians” during a trip to the “far west” (112).

Even with its faults, Buick’s book is deeply valuable and worth reading, both for what it adds to the study of Lewis and historical black American artists, and for its call for a much-needed overhaul of the discipline of art history in general. However, while some of her readings are accurate and astute, the author’s scolding tone might suggest that she is the only one (or one of few) with the “authentic” vision to provide “accurate” readings of Lewis’ sculptures. At times her focus leads her to lose Lewis, as in her extended discussion of Longfellow’s contribution to national poetry (77-88). At other times she seems unaware of the scholarly shoulders upon which she stands.

I can attest to the fact that Lewis’ story, her life, her incredible accomplishments, and the gaps yet to be filled, create a deep fascination for people. Lewis, arguably more so than her white male or female contemporaries, accomplished almost impossible achievements given the historical moment in which she worked; one in which the race-based slavery that sought to dehumanize people of African descent was just coming to an end and the racism against Natives embodied in the ideology of Manifest Destiny was sweeping

across America. That a woman of both of these disdained, pathologized, and vilified races could achieve what she did in that era is nothing short of extraordinary. But this is why the literature and interest in Lewis will only grow, especially as such details as her recently discovered burial place and date of death are uncovered.

The conclusion of the book reiterates what Buick sees as the failure of other art historians, but what goes missing in the end, as throughout most of the text, is Lewis. Buick does not comment on future directions for analysis of Lewis' sculpture, on parts of her oeuvre that are still missing, nor even critical parts of her biography that are still unknown. It might have been better had Buick written this text as two separate books, one on the life and work of Lewis and a second on the need to critically rethink and overhaul the practice and discipline of art history. As two books, Buick's eloquent, detailed, and often insightful analysis of Lewis and her sculpture could have taken center stage and been given the time and space that it clearly deserved.

[1] Buick could have cited Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (Pantheon, 1993).

[2] Longtime Lewis scholar Marilyn Richardson recently discovered Lewis' obituary, date of death, and burial site. Lewis died at the Hammersmith Borough Infirmary in London on 17 September 1907, leaving behind a modest financial estate (www.edmonialewis.com/death_of_mary_edmonia_lewis.htm).