



**Jacob Blanc, Frederico Freitas, eds.** *Big Water: The Making of the Borderlands between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018. Maps. 344 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-3714-3.

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## The Shape of Water: Spatial History in a Riverine Borderland

Set along the mighty upper Paraná River, the edited collection *Big Water* explores a “Triple Frontier” region of South America where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay come together, a place that is home to centuries-old Jesuit missions, the world’s second largest hydroelectric dam, an iconic binational park, and a booming free-trade zone. *Big Water* also sits at the turbulent but productive meeting of several key subfields. Borderlands, environmental, and indigenous perspectives loom large in this work as do critical approaches to modernization (especially mega-infrastructure projects), late capitalism, and cultural patrimony. Contributors to *Big Water* attend to the myriad ways in which transborder actors attempt to mark, manipulate, and move through space, in what editors Jacob Blanc and Frederico Freitas rightly characterize as an enduring, but understudied, “hydraulic borderland” (p. 4).

Eschewing a purely chronological approach, the book is structured around the four core themes of adaptation, environment, belonging, and development. The borderland is continuously reenvisioned through mission networks, settler colonies, parklands, bridges, military posts, duty-free zones, and dams. This “additive” approach—to borrow one contributor’s term—is a particular strength of *Big Water* (p. 181). Readers have an opportunity, for instance, to follow the region’s famed missions from a site of interaction between Guarani, Spanish, and Portuguese people in the colonial era to a contest over “heritage” in

the present. Fittingly for a volume focused on spatial history, the entire collection benefits from excellent maps produced by Freitas.

The Guarani, whose ancestral homeland radiates out from the Big Water region, are central actors in this book and exert a claim to space that troubles imperial and national fantasies of control. In part 1, Shawn Michael Austin provides a detailed reconstruction of the overlapping interests of Spanish *encomenderos*, the Guarani, Jesuit priests, and *Paulista* slavers. In line with North American borderlands scholarship and Barbara Ganson’s 2005 work, *The Guarani under Spanish Rule in the Rio de la Plata*, Austin makes clear that the construction of the iconic Jesuit reductions “must be understood as a mutual project directed not solely by priests but also by Guarani caciques” (p. 36). Taking a broader chronological sweep, Guillermo Wilde comes to similar conclusions, finding a remarkable heterogeneity in mission life despite Jesuit attempts to impose a homogenous order.

In part 2, we leave the colonial period behind (somewhat abruptly) to explore environmental themes of “predation” and preservation along the newly incorporated national frontiers of Brazil and Argentina with origins in the late nineteenth century (p. 87). Eunice Nodari documents the simultaneous settlement of Germans in Santa Catarina, Brazil, and Misiones, Argentina. Historians of migration will recognize this as part of a widespread practice of national regimes employing foreign proxies in

frontier incorporation, but Nodari makes a welcome contribution to the environmental history of migration. Her multi-decade study carries us from initial land clearing and market creation to the challenges faced due to destructive land use and the survival strategies adapted by small farmers (from soy to timber). At the outset, the contemporary creation of Argentina's Iguazú National Park, discussed by Freitas, appears to represent an opposing strategy of spatial incorporation. Yet, as he makes clear, "preservation" of a "pristine" environment in the minds of Argentine park proponents—who anxiously watched the development of a competing park across the river in Brazil—was often seen as harmonizing, rather than in conflict, with more aggressive strategies of settler colonialism and border militarization.

The diverse chapters of part 3 turn to questions of belonging. Michael Kenneth Huner's lively prose introduces us to "distant places and forgotten ruffians in the wild northern reaches of mid-nineteenth-century Paraguay" (p. 132). In this micro-history of Villa de Salvador, we come to see how state power (even under an absolute dictator like Carlos Antonio López) is brokered in the maneuverings of a local commandant, priest, cacique, and civil magistrate. Leapfrogging the Triple Alliance War, a somewhat puzzling omission in this collection, the following two chapters attend to the present-day legacy of colonialism in the region. Daryle Williams returns us to the Jesuit missions discussed in part 1, tracing the successive claims by local actors making active use of the "ruins," national and regional authorities vying to cast them as markers of a particularistic identity, and a new regime of global cultural patrimony represented by UNESCO. Examining simultaneous developments in Brazil and Argentina, Williams nimbly moves from official cultural policy to "micro-politicking" and concludes with an examination of the role of the World Heritage designation in Mercosur in which "the missions offered a ready-made model for cultural integration that transcended the boundaries of nation-states" (p. 178).

Evaldo Mendes da Silva provides an intimate ethnographic picture of Guarani life along the Triple Frontier, which centers on the practice of mobility. Ironically, the Guarani find that increasing frontier integration in the form of bridges, tourism, and trade has produced a heightened exclusion for border crossers like themselves that often lack official documentation. Largely eschewing national designations, they recast the trappings of development as forms of bodily contamination, and in the bus stations, storefronts, and public parks of the growing region, the Guarani develop strategies for occupying

space—however temporary—that alternate between the highly visible and the invisible.

Unprecedented growth along the Triple Frontier, including the growing dominance of Brazil, and the consequences for small Paraguay, are the subject of *Big Water's* final section. This unequal relationship comes across clearly in the contentious diplomatic negotiations over the construction of Itaipu Dam—at the time the world's largest hydroelectric dam. As narrated by Blanc, 1966 and 1973 agreements stabilized the frontier but enshrined Paraguay's economic dependency. He effectively contrasts these territorial and spatial resolutions with the protests of farmers displaced by the dam construction. Bridget Chesterton's exploration of the highway and "Friendship Bridge" connecting Foz do Iguacu and Ciudad del Este emphasizes the hope of elite Paraguayans that new transport infrastructure would link their fortunes to a rising Brazil. Christine Folch turns to the perspectives of Ciudad del Este's merchant community. The city's unique free-trade status provided entrepreneurs with a thriving re-export business whereby goods shipped through Brazilian ports to Paraguay were immediately sold back into Brazil at a handsome profit. This "space of exception" was threatened by the homogenizing tendencies of Mercosur, a process she links to the river treaties discussed by Blanc (p. 268). *Big Water* concludes with a reflection on the ambiguous relationship between spatial imagination and national identity in Latin America.

This edited collection makes a strong contribution to the evolving study of Latin American borderlands. The obvious referent is the US-Mexico transborder region, but, given its dominance in the literature, it may have been a deliberate decision on the part of the editors to limit reference to a single mention (and endnote) in the introduction. While a chapter bringing those two landscapes into explicit comparison (along the lines of Cynthia Radding's *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic* [2006]) would have been useful, readers will recognize many common dynamics at play from colonial-era missions to free-trade, asymmetrical negotiations over water and the challenges of heightened border surveillance for transborder indigenous communities in the present. As a result, and because of its interdisciplinary nature bridging history and anthropology, this collection will be a welcome addition to a growing number of offerings in transborder studies, particularly when read alongside a work such as Samuel Truett and Elliott Young's edited collection *Continental*

*Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (2004). It is also certain to complement and stimulate further consideration of neighboring borderland regions of the Gran Chaco (the subject of several recent monographs and edited collections) and Amazonia.

A few themes mentioned in *Big Water* merit further exploration as do some that are not alluded to in the book. A chapter on the origins and evolution of the large Brazilian-descent “brasiguayo” population in eastern Paraguay—as well as the Paraguayan migrant population in Brazil and Argentina—are chief among these. A related issue of transborder soybean production (discussed elsewhere by Kregg Hetherington and Gastón Gordillo[1]) would make a fitting conclusion as the Paraná Basin is part of a broader region that now accounts for the majority of the globe’s soy. A consideration of the role of Japanese migrants in Paraguay and

Brazil along with other nontraditional migrant communities in the region would have complemented Nodari’s chapter while providing a greater understanding of racial dynamics and “belonging” in the region. Similarly, a discussion of flood events on the Paraná would have offered a productive counterpoint to hydroelectric development in line with the growing subfield of disaster studies. However, these opportunities for further research hardly detract from the quality of this excellent, and timely, edited collection.

#### Note

[1]. Kregg Hetherington, “Beans before the Law: Knowledge Practices, Responsibility, and the Paraguayan Soy Boom,” *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2013): 65-85; and Gastón Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

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