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Hal Langfur’s *Adrift on an Inland Sea: Misinformation and the Limits of Empire in the Brazilian Backlands* sheds valuable light on spaces and processes in the history of colonial Brazil that have been overlooked and understudied, namely those taking place in internal frontier zones—the *sertões*, or backlands, between and beyond the enclaves governed by Portuguese rule, unstable and unincorporated spaces that were socially and culturally discontiguous. Langfur argues that, in contrast to prevailing scholarly assumption that the absence of the state in such areas was the result of disinterest or oversight, Lisbon made increasingly assertive efforts to survey and establish control over isolated zones after 1750 but that these failed such that the Portuguese imperial state found itself “adrift on an inland sea.” The book ends with a provocative and speculative suggestion that such failure may even count as a “partial explanation for Portugal’s failure to mount a defense of its territorial dominion beyond the Atlantic seaboard” (in contrast to the intense struggle over internal territories in the wars of independence in both British and Spanish America) (p. 292).

As the subtitle suggest, the axis on which this enterprise fails is information. People made up the infrastructures of communication and data transmission that the Portuguese Empire endeavored to construct and deploy in order to render its domains governable and ever more profitable, but these people had purposes of their own. The probing tentacles of imperial intelligence gathering met instead with the confusion of rumors, distortions, inflated claims, conflicting reports, disputed facts, and fantasies.

While the book positions itself therefore amongst scholarship giving emphasis to the role of information and communication in colonial governance, its more immediate goal is to bring into the conversation sources that have not yet received much historiographical attention, namely accounts of several forays between 1750 and 1820 into the backlands of Minas Gerais areas such as the wooded grasslands bordering Goiás and the
mountainous tropical forest separating it from Rio de Janeiro. These took place against the exhaustion of the mineral deposits that had fueled the gold rush decades earlier in Minas Gerais and the crown’s relentless pursuit of new deposits that could keep up the flow of alluvial wealth. While these projects foundered, ultimately, new forms of extraction in the form of slave-based export agriculture (coffee) would take their place.

The book is largely organized by a meticulous and close reading of these accounts. There are four main ventures under study, each of which is accompanied by a rich contextualization such that each of the book’s four parts comprises two or three chapters: the first expedition was led by an ambitious merchant named Inácio Correia Pamplona in the late 1760s who commissioned a scribe to record a diary and compose poems praising his attempts to find gold and subdue Indians and thus extend the empire’s territorial dominion. While Pamplona’s actual accomplishments fell short of the Herculean feats described (because they found almost no gold and the indigenous peoples in the area successfully eluded him), he was able to cash in his narrative for favors and privileges that made him one of the largest landholders in the captaincy. The second foray, led by Lieutenant Colonel Manoel Soares Coimbra, was part of a series of military expeditions organized in the mid-1780s into the mountains separating Minas Gerais from Rio de Janeiro intended to crack down on illegal miners and smugglers amid concern that the wealth of the region was being secreted away. The expeditions marked a shift from the barring of access to the Atlantic Forest to attempts to territorialize it, with plans to encourage regular, legal mining and agriculture. The third involved José Vieira Couto, a crown-appointed mineralogist, who was appointed to use his scientific expertise to investigate reports of diamond strikes in Western Minas Gerais, particularly of a famed free Black prospector known as Isidoro de Amorim Pereira (subject of many local myths). The hoped-for diamonds never materialized but Couto collected samples of metal (iron he mistook for copper) and deployed a discourse of scientific rigor in an attempt to recast his mission and produce knowledge that would allow the crown to absorb and exploit the territory. The last foray consisted of an ethnographic expedition led by Prince Maximilian Alexander Phillip von Wied-Neuwied in 1815 up the Jequitinhonha River valley. Taking place after the relocation of the seat of the Portuguese Empire to Brazil, it was symptomatic of a moment when the crown no longer sought to keep access to and knowledge of the continental interior under Portuguese monopoly but welcomed scientific expeditions of various kinds to explore the Atlantic Forest. As a result of the expedition, Wied established himself as an authority with unrivaled knowledge of Botocudo peoples for an international reading public; his accounts, which presented the Botocuda as exotic primitives, incommensurable with “civilized society,” erased the preceding decades of Portuguese and indigenous interactions in the area.

If these expeditions—particularly the first three—did not accomplish what the colonial state intended, this was, Langfur argues, a result of the capacity of diverse inland actors to divert, co-opt, and deceive authorities. The book turns on an emphasis of the unacknowledged agency of a variety of marginalized peoples who acted as knowledge brokers: indigenous communities, both enslaved and free Afro-Brazilians, itinerant poor, and others deemed vagabonds and criminals: “the Indigenous inhabitants separating the colony’s burgeoning capital from its mining heartland retained considerable say over the crown’s ability to impose its sovereign dominion. They largely determined what could be known, what remained a mystery, what could be accomplished, and what was beyond reach in this strategic mountainous expanse” (p. 150). These frontier informants generated an “informational alchemy,” a mix of fantasy, fabrication, concealment, and contradictory reports that included hints and whispers of
buried treasure. “At their least compliant, they slowed imperial expansion to a crawl” (p. 291).

Langfur makes an eminently persuasive argument that the unstable spaces nominally within the borders of Portuguese America but effectively outside the reach of state authority “did far more than is generally recognized to define colonial Brazil” given the long-standing emphasis on export-oriented coastal plantations and inland mining complexes (p. 11). Particularly interesting is the attention Langfur pays to the interactions with the various indigenous groups occupying the Atlantic Forest, a story that cannot be told either as one of assimilation or immiscibility and that took place in a space that was not at the farthest reaches of the empire but ringing two of its most powerful enclaves.

For someone based in literary and cultural studies like me, Langur’s focus on misinformation as an organizing principle opened up a series of interesting theoretical questions about the category of information, which I want to lay out in the spirit of friendly dialogue. How much information does an empire really require to run? Aren’t fantasies and lies always part of its infrastructures? Is all misinformation of a kind, or what specific misinformation carries with it not only the limits but also failures of empire? Put differently: How to judge the value and distribution of information versus that of representation in the running of an empire? What does the category of information itself conceal? What to do with a continuum that includes the correct identification of minerals and their location and the ways of life of the Botocudo? And even though these expeditions are judged failures in terms of a specific desire for data and knowledge, the informationalization of the world itself has ruthlessly advanced. In a related sense, the book is marked by a tension between the purported agency of the backland dwellers and a horizon of intelligibility that is ultimately given by the Portuguese colonial state, so that the work of the information brokers is both possibly overstated and yet curiously limited, measured always in the terms set out by colonizing projects. Such limits are there in the sources themselves, of course, but I wonder in what way, as the late Ranajit Guha pointed out in “The Prose of Counterinsurgency,” such limits continue to bleed through once absorbed into the fabric of writing, determining the very grid of intelligibility.

Note

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