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Published on H-Slavery (February, 2024)

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Linda Lewin's introduction to Ina von Binzer's *The Joys and Disappointments of a German Governess in Imperial Brazil* presents an insightful and multifaceted perspective of life in the second half of nineteenth-century Brazil, as experienced and chronicled by a German governess. Lewin's analytical and interpretative work significantly elevates our understanding of Brazil's societal, cultural, and political nuances during the years before the official abolition of slavery in 1888. Von Binzer's narrative, as presented by Lewin, is a collection of forty-one letters, starting on May 27, 1881, and ending on January 1883, offering a unique literary format that stands out amidst the travel literature of that time. In her letters to her friend Grete, Ina von Binzer provides a unique female perspective in an area primarily dominated by male writers, making her work especially notable in the context of Brazil's travel literature. Her account is one of only seven published works by women in the nineteenth century. This rarity makes her contribution invaluable in understanding women's perspectives during this era.

Lewin emphasizes how von Binzer's role as a governess, living within Brazilian families, granted her an intimate vantage point, allowing her to observe and record Brazilian high society from the inside. This positioning is particularly significant, as it diverges from the traditional perspectives of male authors who focused more on public spaces and constitutional issues rather than the domestic and personal realms that von Binzer illuminates. Her experiences on a coffee plantation in Vassouras and her subsequent relocation to São Paulo to work for the family of Martinico and Albertina da Silva Prado reflect her adaptability and determination. She had to navigate the contrasting parenting styles and social dynamics of upper-class Brazilian families, often finding herself in conflict due to her "German" upbringing and the permissive practices of Brazilian parents.

Lewin's introduction delves into von Binzer's journey, navigating her roles as a foreigner, a woman, and an educator. Her experiences reflect the complexities of her social status—simultaneously privileged yet marginalized. Lewin also brings to light von Binzer's humor and resilience. These qualities helped her adapt to and critique the various facets of Brazilian society, including its approach to parenting, education, and social customs. In her letter dated June 9, 1881, from Fazenda São Francisco, Ina von Binzer shares a revealing incident. She describes meeting a young girl named Leonila, who gleefully introduces her new birthday present—a young slave boy named Jacob. This moment, seen through the eyes of an
innocent child yet underscored by the disturbing normalcy of slavery, sharply contrasts with contemporary values and sensitivities. Von Binzer's portrayal, balancing humor with discomfort, illuminates the stark realities of Brazilian society in the late nineteenth century, offering a touching reflection on the moral complexities of the era.

As highlighted often by Lewin, a pivotal aspect of von Binzer's letters is the portrayal of slavery. A mix of fear, unfamiliarity, and a gradual realization of the absurdity and injustice of the institution of slavery marked her initial encounters with Afro-Brazilians and enslaved people in Vassouras. She expressed her views through her letters, which sometimes included disparaging remarks about the enslaved people's physical features, reflecting the prevalent racial attitudes of the time. However, her writings also show an intellectual evolution, as she started to recognize the fundamental wrongness of slavery and the inherent dignity of every individual, regardless of their status. Thus, Lewin underscores von Binzer's evolving perspective on slavery, capturing her growing awareness and criticism of the institution. This evolution in thought provides a critical insight into the attitudes and mentalities surrounding slavery in Brazil at the time.

Linda Lewin includes five touching photographs that tie together the book and significantly contribute to the historical field-related epistolary culture at the time. These photographs, initially taken by Marc Ferrez at the end of the nineteenth century under a contractual obligation, were intended to document the production of coffee beans in Brazil's Atlantic ports of Rio de Janeiro and Santos. However, as Lewin notes, the most striking aspect is the absence of any documentary notice of the human subjects in these photographs. These individuals, who formed the enslaved workforce in Brazil's Paraíba Valley, were captured in their daily toil. Yet their identities and stories were left unrecorded, a silence that speaks volumes about the disregard for the personhood of enslaved people at that time. The photos, preserved at the Getty Research Institute, provide a rare glimpse into the lives of these individuals but leave much to the curiosity and interpretation of historians and researchers. The anonymity and lack of archival notes about these individuals underscore a cultural predisposition of that era to overlook the existence and identities of enslaved people, a trend that Lewin critically engages with in her book. Lewis writes that it's essential to address this issue, "on a more fundamental level, these five photographs omitted any reference at all to their human subjects for yet a different reason. Beyond quite matter-of-factly erasing the identity of those human beings, the encoded silence accompanying these photographs altogether blotted out the existence of slavery" (p. 14).

Lewin's approach to these photographs is not just archival but also interpretative and restorative. She consciously chooses to employ the vocabulary of radical abolitionists, using terms like "slaves" (escravos) and "slavery" (escravidão) to title and caption these images. This choice is a deliberate counter to the archival silence and euphemisms that historically surrounded these subjects. By doing so, Lewin acknowledges the harsh reality of their existence and challenges the national discourse of the time, which often resorted to softer terms like "captives" and "captivity." This recontextualization of the photographs serves as an act of reclamation, giving voice and acknowledgment to the individuals who had been reduced to mere labor units in the historical records. Lewin's effort to reverse the silence in the archives is a significant contribution to understanding Brazil's history of slavery, offering a more truthful and confrontational narrative of the past.

Lewin further contextualizes von Binzer's experiences within the broader political landscape of Brazil, particularly in terms of slavery and its eventual abolition. She points out von Binzer's unique position to record observations about
slavery from an internal perspective, differentiating her from other observers of the time. Von Binzer’s letters contrast different regions and their attitudes toward slavery and abolition, providing invaluable historical insights. Lewin aptly recognizes these contributions, highlighting von Binzer as a critical observer of Brazilian slavery par excellence. On April 21, 1882, von Binzer recounted an episode that profoundly illustrates this intricate sociopolitical landscape of Brazil just six years before the abolition of slavery. The story of Tibério, an enslaved person in Mr. Costa’s household, seeking freedom through the Society for the Abolition of Slavery, encapsulates the tensions and complexities of this period. Tibério’s journey, marked by Mr. Costa’s resistance and a cunning maneuver involving a laxative to diminish his value, not only underscores the harsh realities of slavery but also highlights the resourcefulness, agency, and resilience of those like Tibério navigating this oppressive system. This letter offers a compelling insight into the nuanced and often turbulent path to freedom in nineteenth-century Brazil.

The use of sources and methodology is commendable, with the governess’s ability to contextualize her experiences within the broader historical landscape adding depth and credibility to the narrative. The book’s organization ensures a seamless flow of information, permitting readers to engage effortlessly with the narrative. Lewin personally added the missing pieces that hold the book together and give life to such a remarkable life story. Lewin’s all-encompassing research on the governess’s life, the plantations she lived at, her family members, original letters, and photographs make this book indispensable to such a broad audience, and it is enlightening to discover such a fresh perspective on Brazilian history.

*The Joys and Disappointments of a German Governess in Brazil* holds immense potential for enhancing the educational experience of undergraduate and graduate classes across various disciplines, including world history, the history of slavery, Latin American history, gender studies, and literature. Lewin’s comprehensive and well-researched content is a valuable resource and an excellent addition to Ina von Binzer’s letters. The book’s accessible language and engaging style make it suitable for learners at different levels of expertise, ensuring that it can serve as a fundamental textbook for undergraduates while offering advanced insights for graduate students. Its interdisciplinary approach promotes a holistic understanding of complex themes, encouraging students to connect ideas across different fields of study. Finally, the book’s significance lies in its capacity to offer fresh insights into a relatively underexplored facet of history. It not only offers a portrayal of the life of a foreign governess but also provides a window into the lives of women who played pivotal roles in educating the children of the elite during a transformative period in Brazilian history.
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