

Book Review

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Mary C. Karasch. 2016. *Before Brasilia: Frontier Life in Central Brazil*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Historians of frontier studies in Latin America have always had to confront the United States expansion narrative popularized by Fredrick Jackson Turner and his “frontier thesis.” Unfortunately, Latin Americanists often find the Turner thesis lacking in explanatory power for the regions they study. The South American Chaco, Southern Chile, and Northern Mexico are all regions where historians have doubted the helpfulness of Turner. As Mary C. Karasch’s shows in her magnum opus on central Brazil, that region is no exception. Karasch’s meticulously researched and richly detailed masterpiece demonstrates that the frontier of central Brazil from the middle of the 1500s through the early 1700s was a contested space that was never fully conquered by Luso-Brazilians. It was a place where indigenous people, African slaves and their descendants, and European explorers and profiteers all grappled for control of natural resources and land in a brutal struggle for basic survival. It was a region where rivers allowed for travel from all directions while mountains and vast tropical foliage simultaneously restricted such access. In other words, European conquest of central Brazil was not a linear process.

Karasch’s behemoth book – 456 pages — is, as she states in the introduction, encyclopedic. Sources for this work include, but are not limited to: missionary accounts, census records, church records, anthropological sources, travel diaries, slave registries, and genealogical records. Her research led her to archives in Brazil, Europe, and the United States. Her extensive examination of archives allows for a broad overview of the lives of indigenous people, African slaves and free people, missionaries, white elites, poor whites, and women. It is a comprehensive study of those who inhabited the region in the colonial era.

Significantly, *Before Brasilia* makes use of various methodologies to understand this tumultuous colonial frontier. Karasch begins with a detailed environmental history of the region. She expertly weaves early travelers’ descriptions of the region and narrates how regular climatic shifts – drought and floods – forced people to move to find shelter and food. This section, entitled “Into the Heart of Brazil” enriches the narrative as she deftly describes how rivers, mountain ranges, and thick savanna form the backdrop for the rest of the text. Her personal familiarity with the region helps to underline the complicated and challenging terrain faced by both indigenous peoples and European explorers

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during the colonial area. This early section, a meticulous survey with descriptions of rivers, waterfalls, and dense vegetation, welcomes a reader unfamiliar with the region and is the stepping off point for the next few sections concerning various ethnic, racial, gender, and class divisions which made up life in this region. Consequently, this larger narrative intersects with the fields of gender, economic, and ethnohistory.

Karasch's strength is in detailing the lives of non-elite known men and women who inhabited the region. She deftly recreates how women were often vital to the process of colonization and conquest. Of particular interest is the life of Dona Damiana, a Kayapó, who helped her Portuguese *bandeirante* husband – and later the Portuguese state - in the conquest of her people; and although “Dona Damiana may be the only indigenous woman to have the distinction of having led four state-funded expeditions” of conquest, her role as a powerful women highlights the complex gender and social relations in colonial Brazil (p.88). Karasch also includes the leadership of various African *quilombos* (runaway slave communities) including Ambrósio who, along with his wife, led a community – that shared his name – of over one thousand men and women. It is in this attention to documenting the lives of lesser-known – but significant – colonial Brazilians where Karasch's extensive research and knowledge shine.

One of the major flaws of this text, however, is that each chapter presents its own small narrative. More like separate journal or encyclopedia article than chapters within a larger text, the material does not easily flow from one to the next. For example, a chapter on “Christians and Their Sacred Spaces” does not flow well into the following chapter on “Women and Gender Relations.” It is, instead, a sharp transition in topic. As a result, it is hard for the reader to follow a smooth narrative with an overarching structure; what ties the narrative together is simply geographic: central Brazil. While the author does attempt to connect the region by suggesting that there is an “Atlantic World” and thus a larger geographic and economic component to the text, it is hard to tease out. It is difficult to see how well the region fits into larger imperial plans or how the commodities extracted from the region shaped larger colonial policy and economics. A more explicit explication of how the region shaped larger Portuguese trade and empire would have improved *Before Brasilia*.

Even with these flaws, there should be no doubt that this text is the one that future scholars will use to understand the people, society, and basic economic structure of the region. Ethno-historians will find much to appreciate in the author's reconstruction of native life in the colonial era. Historians of slavery will certainly applaud the author's detailed study of African-Brazilian labor and contribution to building of a frontier society. In the end, the text is undoubtedly a strong foundation for understanding the challenges of frontier life in one of Latin America's least known frontiers.