

Brazil through the Eyes of William James: Letters, Diaries, and Drawings, 1865-1866. Ed. Maria Helena P.T. Machado. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Maria Helena P.T. Machado's bilingual edition *Brazil through Eyes of William James* expertly gathers and examines James' sketches, written correspondence and diaries produced during the Thayer Expedition to the Amazon basin in 1865 and 1866, offering a fascinating glimpse into the formative voyage of one of North America's preeminent thinkers. While adding to an important body of travel literature set in Brazil that spans from the early colonial era (Hans Staden) to the 20th century (Claude Lévi-Strauss), Harvard UP's handsomely illustrated volume offers a comprehensive cultural and historical critique of the expedition and its participants, contributing to a greater understanding of U.S.-Brazilian relations amid the contentious political climate of the U.S. Civil War Era.

James' letters and journal entries are both typical of the era in which they were written and, as Machado's argues in her lengthy introduction (comprising half the volume), highly idiosyncratic documents to the point of being mildly subversive. Consisting primarily of correspondence to his parents, brother Henry and sister Alice, James' missives raise considerable doubts about the expedition's defining goals—namely, to find evidence supporting the creationist agenda of leader and Harvard luminary Louis Agassiz. As Machado points out, Agassiz was one of Charles Darwin's most formidable and charismatic critics as well as one of the foremost U.S. public intellectuals of the period. As such, the Swiss-born scientist received a great deal of financial backing and accolades from both the U.S. South and imperial Brazilian government.

Although on a number of occasions James in his letters declares admiration for his professor, in his journal entries he reveals the full range of his sentiments: that he abhors the tedious work of collecting species after new species—each new discovery evidence, in Agassiz's mind, of the “stasis” of nature and therefore a repudiation of evolutionary theory. James clearly considers his mentor intellectually impressive and physically tireless yet something of a self-righteous blowhard. “[N]ever,” he writes, “did a man utter a greater amount of humbug.” James' amusing caricatures of Agassiz and fellow voyagers reinforce his irreverent attitude toward their central mission—and provide a clear indication as to why he chose to abort the Thayer Expedition after eight months of travel.

Machado's critical introduction to James' writing brings pointed historical analysis to the collection's informal impressions. Agassiz's questionable ethnographic practices during the trip, Machado suggests, cement James growing antipathy toward him. James witnesses how the Swiss scientist, for example, coerces a number of Amazonian Indians and *mestiças* to pose naked for “scientific” purposes. James' own attitude toward his hosts, as Machado repeatedly underscores, is quite different. The young medical student marvels, for example, at the “urbane” quality of even the most uneducated Brazilians he encounters. “Is it race or is it circumstance that makes these people so refined and well bred?” he wonders in one journal entry. “No gentleman of Europe has better manners and yet these are peasants.”

Although Machado painstakingly frames the first-hand accounts of James' narrative in the cultural and scientific debates of the period, both in Brazil and North America, she also suggests that the Amazonian expedition—which included a layover in Rio de Janeiro in which James apparently contracted smallpox—had a seminal impact on the philosopher's later work. Occasionally, Machado overreaches slightly to make her point. Like James scholar Daniel Bjork, Machado strongly suggests that the Thayer Expedition served as the genesis of James' key concept of “stream of thought” or “stream of consciousness.” In particular, she cites the same passage Bjork uses to make his case, conjecturing that “[t]he

image imprinted on his mind during this solitary stroll at sunset on some small river island on the Solimões may have laid the groundwork for his creative elaboration of the processes involved in the psychological production of thoughts.”

Perhaps. Yet it is arguably as a clear-eyed, forward-looking ethical document written against the grain of Agazziz’s project of exploitative ethnography and misguided creationism that James’ account holds particular interest for the contemporary reader.

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