

◆ Chapter 3

Empire of the Unknown: Beyond Portuguese Dominion in Colonial Brazil

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Colonial dreams, like the misrepresentations that sustained them and the calamitous certainties they engendered, are not so colonial. In the colonized space of the internet, we find that they are our dreams too.

“I have traveled far and wide in search of riches, but I have never seen anything like the land I recently discovered deep in the interior of Brazil. The earth there seems to glitter with hidden treasures, and I can feel it in my bones that there are vast deposits of gold and diamonds just waiting to be uncovered,” ChatGPT tells us, artificially, metahistorically, generating the requested testimony of an old prospector. “But the journey there is treacherous and fraught with danger. The dense forests and steep mountains make it nearly impossible to navigate, and the Indigenous people who live there are fiercely protective of their land.” This narrative thread comes without further prompting. The program implicates Indians, construing them as natural hazards, lamenting their hostility. “They will stop at nothing to defend their home and their way of life, and many a man has lost his life trying to gain access to their riches.”¹ We are enticed, agitated, perhaps even indignant, like early modern colonizers.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, Portugal intensified efforts to assert dominion over great swaths of the South American interior. This attempted transatlantic projection of power foundered on an unanticipated and understudied obstacle: the challenge of imperial information-gathering, which took shape as a confusion of rumors, distortions, conflicting reports, and disputed facts. The result was the subversion of Lisbon’s late-colonial campaign to establish unchallenged dominion over immense inland territories. While our contemporary preoccupations understandably narrow our attention on the manipulation of information by the powerful, we should remember that the colonized, too, exploited the technologies of empire-building. ChatGPT’s trite

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fiction masquerading as fact obscures much of what was at stake in the Brazilian interior. The present chapter underscores the counterhegemonic potential of information and misinformation originating from or attributed to peoples of Indigenous and African descent.²

Indigenous Information Networks

After 1750, Portuguese imperial administrators moved to secure Brazil's southeastern Atlantic Forest, the first of the two regions under examination in this essay. Bypassed a half-century earlier by a gold and diamond rush, strategically located between the mining heartland of Minas Gerais and the colonial capital of Rio de Janeiro, this internal frontier was the site of an official drive to counter the perceived threat of Coroado and Coropó Indians conspiring with colonists to smuggle untaxed gold and gemstones through the coastal mountains to seafaring contrabandists. Concern was fueled by a belief that these non-sedentary peoples guarded knowledge of undiscovered mineral deposits in lands they still controlled after more than two centuries of Portuguese colonization. In pursuit of its objectives, Lisbon had to rely on Indigenous informants to understand events deep in the tropical forest. Although many of the motivations shaping Native accounts and their silences remain difficult to ascertain, royal officials drew their own conclusions, susceptible to hearsay that fed fantasies of untapped riches and disdainful of evidence that did not accord with imperial purposes.

After decades of frustrated efforts to impede illegal conduct in the area, the crown acted decisively in the mid-1780s, deploying military expeditions from both the interior and the coast to arrest a particularly infamous accused smuggler, Manuel Henriques, known by the sobriquet Mão de Luva (the Gloved Hand). Lisbon intended to lay hold of the area once and for all, only to find itself mired in contested backcountry geographic and strategic information. Native informants provided vital intelligence, while navigating the fraught terrain between concealment and cooperation. The Portuguese crown found its effort to exert sovereign rule undermined by the gaps between what was knowable, what was indecipherable, and what was achievable when its agents relied on aboriginal forest dwellers who had long evaded submission to colonial rule.³

When authorities on the far side of the coastal mountains in landlocked Minas Gerais sought information about smuggling, they turned to Indigenous intelligence networks. From the 1760s, efforts to convert the Coroado and Coropó and gather them in mission villages helped open large stretches of the captaincy's southeastern backlands, or *sertões*, to colonization. Both conflict and collaboration ensued. The crown had long before prohibited settlement

in these expanses, but the reality on the ground differed. Colonists flouted the restrictions in their search for economic alternatives, displaced by the gradual exhaustion of major alluvial mining operations. Attracted by uncolonized land, they migrated toward the coast, clearing the forest for subsistence and then commercial farming. They also opened new smuggling routes, exploiting Native trails. In the mid-1780s, with rumors rife about the accused smuggler Henriques and his criminal associates, officials moved to extend the crown's authority to this sector of the backlands, which lay along the internal border separating the captaincies of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro.

The accelerating exchange of information about contraband flowing through these lands was both a precursor to and byproduct of the move to exercise tighter control. Contacts with the Coroado and Coropó confirmed the existence of a network of trails linking southeastern Minas Gerais to the lands across the captaincy border, a jurisdictional divide that mattered little to these mobile peoples. Their trails provided access from Minas Gerais to the zone where Henriques's illegal gold washings were located. From there, transport routes extended to the coast. Smugglers and their enslaved workers, officials learned, were likely using the same routes and opening their own. With concerns about smuggling intensifying, the crown came to view its own lack of dominion over the region as no longer tolerable.⁴

Pressured to do something about Henriques, the Minas governor ordered the deployment of a reconnaissance mission to the area in 1784. Soldiers questioned an intrepid priest, Padre Manoel de Jesus Maria, who had been missionizing Indians in the area for two decades. His testimony concerning Native movement across the captaincy border validated Lisbon's worst fears about the ease with which malefactors might smuggle gold and diamonds to the seaboard. Bolstered with details gathered by other military and backcountry sources, this intelligence convinced the empire's ranking authorities to intervene.⁵ The time had come to punish the accused smugglers and territorialize royal sovereignty by deploying military expeditions from both the coast and the inland captaincy. In its mobilization orders, Lisbon made repeated reference to information acquired from Indians. This information convinced the crown to order soldiers from Minas Gerais to take the lead in mounting a surprise cross-border raid, even though the illicit mining camp lay outside the Minas governor's jurisdiction.⁶

Native backcountry knowledge, evasion, and cooperation both catalyzed and vexed attempts to consolidate territorial control. This becomes evident when we take royal officials at their word. They premised the ensuing operation not merely on capturing Henriques and his fellow miners but on establishing the transatlantic state's permanent presence in this internal frontier zone. For decades reports from and about Indians had pointed to the area's untapped wealth. The potential for a royal windfall had been inflated by those who consulted with Indians or

coerced their testimony, and by officials who took this intelligence to heart. In the early 1760s, for instance, a prospector—not to be confused with the one invented by ChatGPT—had spoken with various “indomitable Indians” belonging to the “barbarous nations” that inhabited the mountainous zone, individuals who periodically made visits to the coastal plain. Particularly helpful had been an Indian “captain” who used the Christian name Joaquim. Despite the “rusticity of his behavior,” this headman exhibited “some signs of humanity.” When questioned about the lands where he lived, his responses were “so meaningful and congruent” that the prospector “came to understand that in his savage condition” the informant had “developed a greater intelligence” than that possessed by other Indians. This opinion was further enhanced when Joaquim told the prospector he “knew of places where there was much gold” and twice turned over samples.⁷ Had the ranking authorities in both the colony and the metropolis been less credulous, less subject to the colonial conviction that Indians and undiscovered riches went hand in hand, the troop deployments that followed, ultimately including hundreds of soldiers, auxiliaries, and enslaved porters dispatched from the coast, would likely have been much more limited and practicable. The mission’s origins and outcome rested on dreams founded on rumors. Both could be traced to Indians whose purposes officials took for granted but could rarely comprehend (see Fig. 1).

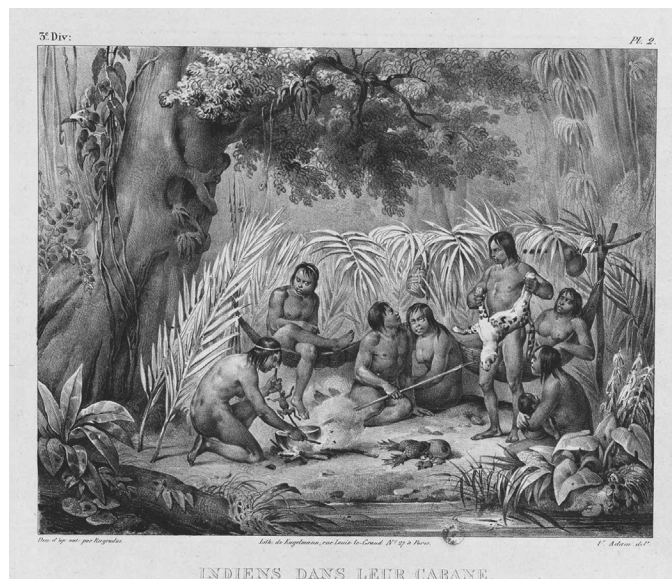


Figure 1. Inhabitants of Brazil’s coastal forest. Source: Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Voyage pittoresque dans le Brésil* (Paris: Engelmann, 1835). Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.

Once Lisbon concluded the zone must be occupied, mounting delays in effecting royal orders left the viceroy in Rio de Janeiro suspicious that the Minas governor might be abetting Henriques and his criminal operation. Some historians find these suspicions credible; others find the supporting evidence insufficient.⁸ More relevant to the concerns of this essay, scholars have all but ignored what happened after the surprise raid from Minas Gerais succeeded in capturing many of the accused smugglers. Almost as soon as the raid concluded, Joaquim, the baptized headman, who two decades earlier had informed coastal officials of the region's wealth, presented himself to plead with the operation's commanding officer "not to hurt him or Sir Manuel," that is, Manuel Henriques. The gloved leader of the mining camp, Joaquim insisted, was a good man and had "taught his people to pray." One of Henriques's co-conspirators, moreover, was described as not living among the illegal miners at the site, but rather as someone who "wanders with the Indians." He could not be located after the raid.⁹ Another Indian informant revealed the hiding place of a "free mulatto" who had fled the mining camp during the confusion of the nighttime raid, leading to his capture. The same individual pledged that the Indians would track down five enslaved Blacks who had similarly escaped.¹⁰ Presenting themselves as friends of Henriques and his fellow miners and, at the same time, allies of the troops who arrested the smugglers, the Indigenous inhabitants of this zone proved, as they had from the onset of Lisbon's planning, to be central if mercurial actors in the affairs of imperial territorial consolidation.

Before leaving the mineral washings, the commanding officer ordered the miners' residences, their slave quarters, and other structures to be razed.¹¹ He also recommended severe punishment for the soldiers manning the nearest crossing point along the river separating the captaincies. He did so noting the intensive commerce the soldiers had carried on with the miners, which came to light during the collection of evidence following the operation.¹² Like the viceroy, the commander was uncomfortable with what the governor claimed was merely a scheme to use these soldiers to fool Henriques and his accomplices.

Conspicuously absent in subsequent communications was any mention of Indians among the accused. Indeed, they received modest material rewards from the plunder seized during the raid. The viceroy wished to punish not only Henriques and his free associates at the mining camp, but also collaborating soldiers and slaves and anyone else on either side of the border who transported supplies and captive laborers to the mineral washings, secreted away its gold, or contributed to concealing the operation. Yet he did not target Indians, declining to bring the force of colonial legal institutions to bear on the area's forest dwellers, despite accumulating evidence of their interaction with

Henriques and his co-conspirators. The fact that such interaction may have been compelled did not dissuade the governor from jailing, and the viceroy from seeking to interrogate, bring to trial, and punish the enslaved workers of African descent captured at the site. Why did authorities not insist on the same consequences for the Indians?¹³

The most plausible explanation is that, as imperial officials, they functioned in a milieu that treated Indians recently brought under the authority of the state as children and rustics. They were considered a subordinate laboring class, otherwise ill-prepared for full participation in colonial society as vassals.¹⁴ Given these circumstances, they were unlikely to face legal action of the kind the viceroy demanded for whites and Blacks caught up in the raid. As the empire's institutions extended over newly incorporated territories, Native peoples suffered grave consequences, but the perils of formal legal proceedings were not foremost among them.

To the degree that their perspectives can be gleaned from these events and the skewed official sources that document them, the Indians must have considered the state most deserving of the inconstancy label that authorities applied to them. If Lisbon, the viceroy, and the governor had difficulty agreeing on what was unfolding in Indigenous lands just beyond the state's effective reach, if they debated what its response should be, the Indians surely found their own way forward fraught, requiring the utmost caution, flexibility, and pragmatism. From their vantage point, it was not themselves but a strange assemblage of miners, farmers, merchants, priests, soldiers, and far-off officials who acted unreliably and incomprehensibly in pursuit of conflicting and changing objectives, which varied from banning settlement in the zone to occupying it militarily. Given such a milieu, Joaquim and his Native community could praise Henriques for his kindness, while promising fidelity to those who came to arrest him. The transactional nature of colonial rule, especially as it arrived in the forests with greater force, meant that the smartest option was often to play to multiple sides. Observers decried this behavior as Indigenous inconstancy but the sources suggest it was the inconsistent nature of official policies that encouraged Indians sometimes to placate, sometimes to evade, sometimes to confide in, and sometimes to withhold information from both illegal prospectors and the state authorities who came to arrest them.¹⁵ Such relations and the fraught intelligence gathering it produced would impede Lisbon's attempts to assert its sovereignty in this forested zone for the remainder of its colonial rule.

Despite ongoing expenditures, it would take decades to bring the kind of commercial development and administrative consolidation to this area that the crown aimed to achieve with its ambitious mobilization. The most obvious alluvial deposits already had been mined out by the clandestine miners.

According to the viceroy, this problem accounted for the quick disillusionment of those whose expectations had been inflated by “vague rumor” that circulated concerning “great riches” easily accumulated.¹⁶ Oblivious of the irony of his own conduct, he ridiculed rumors of easy riches, yet continued to fuel them by insisting more buried wealth would soon be unearthed. Such rumors had spurred official action from the earliest days. State support for occupying the once-forbidden zone, he seemed to forget, had begun in over-optimistic exchanges between hopeful prospectors, officials determined to pursue buried treasure, and the Native peoples attempting to navigate territorial incursions, coercive questioning, and material rewards. Years later, when the British naturalist John Mawe visited the area, he described a feeble settlement, “destitute of inhabitants,” still the province of “half-civilized aborigines . . . but one remove from the anthropophagi.”¹⁷ The flow of backcountry information and misinformation had led the empire astray.

An Informant’s Informants

A second inland foray, this one to Minas Gerais’s western grasslands, adopted scientific reconnaissance as its favored method. During the final decades of colonial rule, science played an increasing role in Portugal’s efforts to exploit untapped backcountry resources. Dispatched in 1800, this crown-sponsored expedition pursued new diamond discoveries announced by impoverished prospectors of African descent, their unrivaled knowledge of the remote region making them indispensable informants. A highly skewed overland investigation resulted. Unequal power dynamics compromised the transparency and sober evaluation of mineral resources that state-led scientific exploration was supposed to ensure. Even when acquired by highly trained experts and subjected to rigorous verification, the geographic knowledge transmitted from the backlands to Lisbon continued to mislead as much as clarify. As Lisbon pressed to consolidate control deeper in the interior, scientific reconnaissance epitomized the empire’s reformist, modernizing campaign to assert its territorial sovereignty. However, this more rationalist approach did not signal a radical break with the past. It absorbed rather than dispensed with older understandings and ways of being in the *sertão*. Scientific inquiry exemplified the state’s evolving capacities, but it also reinscribed its tenacious limitations.

The reconnaissance expedition united in temporary common cause a Coimbra-trained savant, José Vieira Couto, and a charismatic backcountry leader, Isidoro de Amorim Pereira. Their interactions exposed the vulnerabilities of a transatlantic colonizing project dependent on marginalized intermediaries. Ordinarily denigrated and criminalized by authorities who wished to

ensure their subservience, small-stakes prospectors, known as *garimpeiros*, seized the opportunity circumstances afforded them to reap rewards for their service as guides and laborers. When the mineralogist communicated improbable findings about the potential of the region's diamond deposits, he left royal councilors on uncertain footing, subject to wishful thinking, implementing impracticable plans to turn unincorporated lands into wealth-producing royal property.¹⁸

Accepting orders from the captaincy governor to explore the "wild sertões" of the captaincy's far west, Couto offered his expertise to the crown as a trained mineralogist. These orders followed the presentation to the governor of a massive diamond by Isidoro, who promised to lead officials to the site of newly discovered deposits. Governor Bernardo José de Lorena's decision to deploy the expedition demonstrated the evolving official view: the first step toward asserting sovereignty over this distant expanse must be to subject it to scientific examination.¹⁹

From Vila Rica, the captaincy capital, the party set out in April 1800 to rendezvous with Isidoro and his associates along the west bank of the São Francisco River. Hardened by the prejudice pervasive among the region's leading families, Couto was not disposed to a favorable view of the *garimpeiros*. They consisted of "a multitude of 60 to 70 individuals," he wrote, "a very motley blend of different colors, including whites, mulattos, cabras [half-breeds], and blacks, all of the lowermost sort, and with such customs as required by their wretched and unhappy way of life."²⁰ Isidoro's adult son Bento was at his father's side, and the pair was not the only family unit. Mining Intendant Francisco Beltrão, the crown's fiscal representative, recoiled at what he described as an assemblage of "all colors and both sexes."²¹

Almost immediately Couto came to suspect that Isidoro and his fellow prospectors were leading the official party astray, exposing the explorers to unnecessary hardships and hazards. It was not uncommon for them to cover more distance circumventing natural barriers than advancing in the desired direction. "Our discoverers," Couto scoffed, "wanting to astonish us with the roughness of the trails, and at the same time to lend an air of novelty to their so-called *discoveries*, took us on an unnecessary detour where, moreover, no roads existed, which greatly increased our fatigue and worries." He underlined the word *discoveries* in his manuscript to emphasize his contempt.²² Even so, Couto did his best to keep his eye on the composition, topography, and fertility of the land. He never lost hope that the journey would result in a find that would garner the crown's attention. The expedition occurred at a time when metropolitan demands to increase mining revenues clashed with the common sense of colonists who believed that the mining sector's boom years, now a generation or more in the past, would not return. Couto reconciled

this tension in his own thinking by seeking a middle ground. He was eager to please the crown and thereby cultivate its support. Yet he was more aware than most, precisely because of his training and direct experience, of the failure of mining in its diminished state to undergird the regional and imperial economies as it once had (see Fig. 2).²³

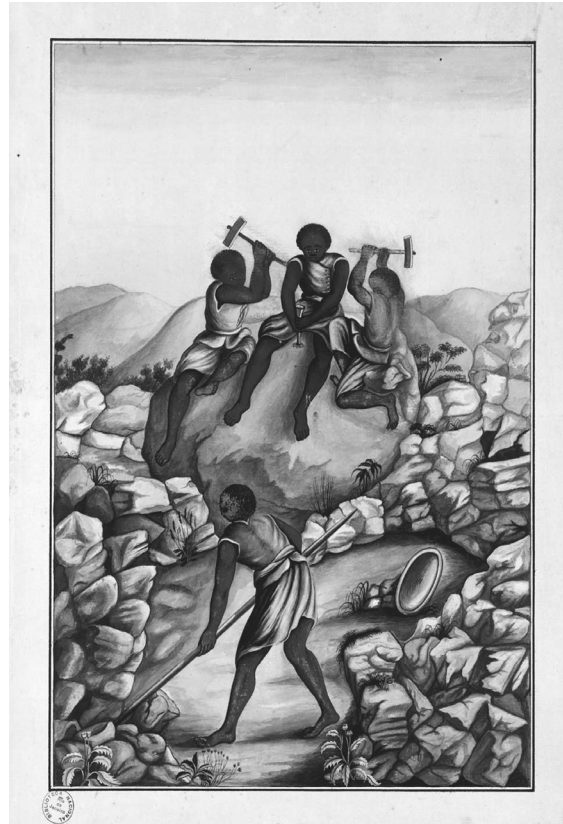


Figure 2. Prospecting for diamonds. Source: Carlos Julião, [Escravos britadores de pedra para a extração de diamantes], late 18th century, BNRJ, SI, C.I,2,8. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.

Concentrating on crafting as balanced an account as he could muster, Couto proceeded under the now wholly unwelcome tutelage of the *garimpeiros*, an imperial investigator at the mercy of his guides. Isidoro delegated leadership of the final stage of the voyage to his son Bento. Like his father, Bento insisted that a valuable discovery lay ahead. But he warned that the lands they would now cross were the most rugged yet encountered. The party would enter areas

“infested” by “wild Indians” and “runaway slaves,” he cautioned. The explorers’ “hunger would be cruel.” Couto was unmoved. His growing experience of his informants had taught him to pay little heed.

A much-reduced party ultimately arrived at a spot where Bento urged them to begin their excavations. They uncovered nothing noteworthy. What was most striking at this pivotal point in the voyage, however, was the young guide’s behavior. At precisely the moment Bento might have been expected to sink a shovel into the ground and reveal glimmering gems or gold-laced gravel, he threw himself down and “remained,” wrote Couto, “for the entire time that we were working, stretched out on the ground beneath a leafy thicket without paying the least attention to whether the riches he had promised were verified or not.” While the crew labored, he lay about bellowing love songs, “completely out of tune, gullet opened wide.” His melodies, Couto marveled, “concerned him more than tending to the fulfillment of his promises.” Eventually Bento tired of his diversions. At this point he was the first to conclude that the effort was in vain, that food was running low, and that they should return to their basecamp as quickly as possible.²⁴

Like his father, albeit with a bluster Isidoro did not share, Bento had maintained until the moment of ultimate resignation that he possessed exclusive and specific knowledge concerning the whereabouts of abundant mineral wealth. Also like his father, he led the crown’s representatives on what can only be judged a fool’s errand, leaving us to speculate about his motivation. His behavior suggested he was not at all surprised by the final failure to unearth buried treasure. He had lied, we might reasonably conclude, or at least counted on luck to make him honest. In the end he realized the game was up. The temptation of providing the backcountry intelligence that officials most wished to hear proved irresistible, even if doing so meant deceiving those he guided as long as possible in hopes of discovering something, anything. After all, the right story embraced by the right person, bearing fruit at the right time, promised to alter his life, rescuing him from the margins of respectability because such discoveries could bring ample rewards from the crown. Bento’s social position may have differentiated him from the patronage-seeking savant who scorned him, but similar motives and strategies shaped their itinerant tales.

Another possibility is that, rather than lie, Isidoro, Bento, and their fellow *garimpeiros* told the truth to the extent that it did not undermine their proprietary interests. For decades reports of diamond strikes in the western *sertões* had attracted official interest. Having originally presented his impressive diamond to the governor, Isidoro provided the rock-hard evidence necessary to justify organizing what was but the latest in a series of expeditions to set out in search of the supposed deposits from which it came. As the explorers advanced, they

had noticed the upturned earth that further substantiated rumors of profitable, if unsupervised, mining throughout the countryside. As the expedition entered lands the *garimpeiros* knew better than anyone, perhaps they sought to mete out the truth in such a way that would garner rewards without revealing the primary sources of their earnings from illicit mining. As long and as convincingly as possible, perhaps they prolonged the theatrics of doing the state's bidding, even leading officials to sites they knew to contain only the insignificant deposits ultimately identified by the expedition. But they had no intention of revealing the locations of their most productive diggings, the lands most desired by the crown. If this was their strategy, they calculated that they could make more from their clandestine prospecting than from any recompense they might reap from their monarch.

Without underestimating the hardships of their lives, it is conceivable that some also preferred the modest freedoms of an existence on the rural fringes of a colonial society in which most poor men and women of color found their geographic and social mobility sharply curtailed. To lead officials to the source of their wealth, to relinquish their existence as prospectors operating beyond the empire's enforcement capabilities, would be to throw their futures into even greater doubt. Some might earn prizes for their aid as discoverers, informants, guides, and laborers, but many others might end up losing the material source of their sustenance and their hard-earned if always constrained autonomy.

For the rest of Couto's expedition chronicle, the *garimpeiros* fade from view. Their absence suggests that the official party became so disenchanted with their prospector guides that they left most or all of them behind. In the end Couto would classify the *garimpeiros* as individuals willing to deceive, cheat, rob, and even kill each other in their desperate pursuit of buried riches.²⁵ Even so, the naturalist held back concerning his evident conviction that the *garimpeiros* had conned the government. His reticence is understandable. To denounce the father, son, and their fellow prospectors as frauds was to expose the captaincy governor as their dupe. To admit that the entire venture had been a waste of time, manpower, and royal funds was to relinquish any hope of having contributed to the knowledge of nature's bounties, which might benefit the empire while distinguishing the mineralogist in the eyes of higher authorities. In the end, he drafted a report that emphasized possibilities over verifiable realities, ratifying imperial yearnings for readily exploitable diamonds, despite all evidence to the contrary.²⁶ Governor Lorena was equally committed to casting the expedition as a success. More than a year later, despite its negligible finds, he was still trying to make the case to Lisbon that the results were more significant than they seemed.²⁷

By contrast, in an unusually candid letter to Lisbon, Intendant Francisco Beltrão described the entire journey as a fiasco and Isidoro as an "impostor."

Government soldiers, the intendant explained, had long pursued the garimpeiros for their “continuous thefts.” Yet all attempts to control them had proven unsuccessful. Isidoro, Beltrão was convinced, had a hand in killing a patrol commander and was doing whatever he could to win the governor’s pardon. The prospector’s promise to reveal the source of more diamonds was nothing but a ruse to “escape the gallows.”²⁸ Beltrão underlined what struck him as the absurdity of setting out for an unknown destination guided by criminal prospectors. For Couto and the governor, the meager results of the expedition’s excavations suggested the need for a more thoroughgoing approach. For Beltrão, the failures spoke for themselves. He viewed the whole “unpleasant and useless journey” as proof not only of Isidoro and Bento’s individual treachery but of a pervasive conspiracy to deceive Lisbon, a conspiracy in which he hinted prominent locals participated. The unscrupulous prospectors’s scheme should be seen as a blatant and outrageous attempt to hoodwink the governor, the royal treasury, and the public. Henceforth, the governor and others should be less gullible, less ready to “believe in only the words and promises of a few black and mulatto garimpeiros.” With this unsparing conclusion, the intendant staged his counter-performance, soliloquizing the troubled history of a white elite’s skewed understanding of free Black prospectors in a mining economy organized around captive labor. Seeking to stifle the naturalist’s more sanguine recommendations, Beltrão warned that others might offer the crown an account of the expedition written “with greater eloquence,” but no one would report on it “with greater truth.”²⁹ The warning called into question the scientific objectivity of Couto’s account and the unvarnished intelligence it was designed to deliver.

Perhaps because of these vying reports, but surely also because of the deepening crisis in Napoleonic Europe that in 1807 would prompt Portugal’s royal family to flee Lisbon for Rio de Janeiro, the crown did not rush to exploit the area’s mineral deposits. Once official operations finally began, the difficulties of mining at the distant location immediately became evident. Authorities transferred several hundred captive workers, as well as overseers and administrators, to the area to initiate placer mining. When the diamonds extracted failed to offset expenditures, their efforts were quickly abandoned.³⁰

Calculations of the area’s mineral wealth—or lack of wealth—based on government sources must be considered partial, however, because this rural zone remained particularly prone to contraband. Its vastness, remoteness, and the resulting attenuated character of military, judicial, and fiscal oversight meant a great deal occurred that escaped official surveillance. The lackluster results of the expedition and the subsequent abortive crown effort to exploit the region leave open the possibility that its wealth continued to be secreted away by small-stakes prospectors, smugglers of greater means, and even soldiers

and other state officials taking advantage of their positions to cheat the royal treasury and enrich themselves and their protectors and patrons. Since the colonial period, local historians have promoted versions of this narrative.³¹ The trope of criminal elements absconding with the region's resources flourishes to this day. As with so many other aspects of life in the sertão, the garimpeiros probably knew better than anyone how many diamonds had been found along the area's many streams and rivers. Into the twentieth century, prospectors continued on occasion to unearth huge diamonds in the region, some many times larger than the one Isidoro presented to Governor Lorena.³² These gemstones appeared as products of grueling work, luck, desperation, and backcountry knowhow. The garimpeiros' mode of existence ensured that the expertise necessary to locate such diamonds remained among kin and confidants, and their stealthy bosses. The state bureaucracy, the archive, and the historian register only fragments of this knowledge.

Conclusion

Inland peoples coercively engaged by or warily engaging Portugal's late-colonial intrusions largely determined what could be known, what remained a mystery, what could be accomplished, and what was beyond reach in Brazil's sprawling interior. Living on the margins of imperial authority, cautious purveyors of backlands expertise, they could influence the success or failure of state-backed exploration, law enforcement, extraction, taxation, and settlement efforts. Imperial interactions with autonomous Indians exposed both the aspirations and limitations of Portuguese territorializing projects. The events examined in the southeastern forests reveal the state's constrained ability to project power over a mountainous zone just inland from the colonial capital, a dynamic repeated in many other zones much more distant. Orchestrated at the highest levels of the imperial administration, the anti-smuggling operation's inglorious outcome became a measure not only of imperial overreach but of Native proclivities to evade, influence, redirect, and sometimes tame Portuguese territorial ambitions. The enduring resilience of the Coroado, the Coropó, and dozens of other groups in zones undergoing parallel processes of incorporation turned Brazil's internal frontiers into largely unacknowledged testing grounds and, in some cases, dissolution zones for the projects of a territorializing transatlantic state.

Farther west, proponent of a future reformed by Enlightenment rationality, the mineralogist José Vieira Couto was bent on producing knowledge that would allow the crown to absorb, exploit, and transform into wealth-bearing property lands it legally possessed but did not effectively control. His endeavor

hinged, however, on intelligence provided by individuals whose experience departed sharply from the educated elites who grudgingly turned to them for practical guidance. What the crown hoped to learn from its erudite expert depended on what he could glean from backcountry intermediaries. Most were men of African descent, disparaged and dispossessed by royal officials and privileged vassals. These itinerants sought a means of survival in the sertão, stepping outside the law to pursue unsupervised prospecting. Rather than criminals, however, they are best understood as refugees from a repressive mining economy and an administrative edifice founded on the exploitation of enslaved labor. Gaining a daily wage and guaranteed sustenance from the government for a few months to participate in an expedition to the west, they conceded the expertise requested of them only guardedly. As was the case with their Indigenous contemporaries, the gulf between these marginalized inland denizens and those who sought their hard-won knowledge hindered the flow of reliable information from the Brazilian interior to the metropole, undermining the empire's drive to expand its effective domain.

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Notes

1. OpenAI’s ChatGPT AI language model, response to question from author, February 16, 2023.
2. This argument draws on Hal Langfur, *Adrift on an Inland Sea: Misinformation and the Limits of Empire in the Brazilian Backlands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), esp. chaps. 4 and 7.
3. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, chap. 4.
5. Viceroy to Secretary of State, Rio, 28 Aug. 1784, Negócios de Portugal, Correspondência do vice-reinado para a Corte, Original, Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro [hereafter ANRJ], cód. 68, vol. 6, fol. 236.
6. Secretary of State to Viceroy, Palácio de Nossa Senhora da Ajuda, 8 Jan. 1785, Correspondências e documentos relativos às Novas Minas de Macacu, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Seção de Manuscritos [hereafter Correspondências e documentos . . . , BNRJ, SM], cód. 9, 3, 17, doc. 127, esp. par. 14–25.
7. Petition of Mauricio José Portugal, Rio, 21 May 1763, Correspondências e documentos . . . , BNRJ, SM, cód. 9, 3, 17, doc. 129.
8. Carla M. J. Anastasia, “Salteadores, bandoleiros e desbravadores nas Matas Gerais da Mantiqueira (1783–1786),” in *Revisão do paraíso: Os brasileiros e o estado em 500 anos de história*, ed. Mary Del Priore (Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 2000), 133–34, 137; Carla M. J. Anastasia, *A geografia do crime: Violência nas Minas setecentistas* (Belo Horizonte: Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2005), 22–25, 128; José Antônio Soares Souza, “As Minas do Sertão de Macacu,” *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* 326 (1980): 45–47, 61–67.

9. Pedro Afonso Galvão de São Martinho, “Relação dos homens brancos e pardos . . .,” 19 June 1786, Vila Rica, Negócios de Portugal, Correspondência do vice-reinado para a Corte, Original, ANRJ, cód. 68, vol. 7, fol. 228; José de Deus Lopes, “Nomes das pessoas libertas que se acham no Descoberto,” n.d., n.p., *ibid.*, fol. 229; São Martinho, “Relação das pessoas que foram presas . . .,” 17 May 1786, Corgo do Cantagalo do Descoberto do Macacu, *ibid.*, fols. 230–31.
10. São Martinho to Governor, Roça Grande, 17 May 1786, Negócios de Portugal, Correspondência do vice-reinado para a Corte, Original, ANRJ, cód. 68, vol. 7, fols. 232–33. See also Anastasia, *A geografia*, 98; Souza, “As Minas,” 37.
11. São Martinho, “Relação das pessoas que foram presas na noite de 13 de Maio de 1786 no Descoberto,” 17 May 1786, Corgo do Cantagalo do Descoberto do Macacu, Negócios de Portugal, Correspondência do vice-reinado para a Corte, Original, ANRJ, cód. 68, vol. 7, fols. 230–31.
12. Romyr C. Garcia, “O Mão de Luva e os sertões de Serra acima: Garimpos clandestinos e conflitos sociais no Brasil Colônia,” *Revista Unifesco - Humanas e Sociais* 4, no. 4 (2018): 256.
13. Viceroy to José Luís de Castro, *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*, Tomo 4 (1842): 24. Records from the court proceedings against Mão de Luva and his co-conspirators have never been found. The viceroy, in a 1789 letter to his successor, stated the men had been sentenced for their crimes.
14. Alcida Rita Ramos, *Indigenism: Ethnic Politics in Brazil* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 15–18.
15. On Native inconstancy, see, for instance, Petition of Manuel de Jesus Maria to Governor Mendonça, [São Manuel do Rio Pomba], n.d., with governor’s reply, Vila Rica, 8 Mar. 1790, appended to sesmaria [land grant] concession of D. Anna Joaquina de Almeida, 1798, Arquivo da Casa Setecentista, Mariana, 1º ofício, cód. 2, auto 87, fols. 11v–12v, 14–15.
16. Viceroy to Secretary of State, Rio, 21 July 1788, in *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* 256 (1963), 337.
17. John Mawe, *Travels in the Interior of Brazil, Particularly in the Gold and Diamond Districts of that Country* (London: Longman, et al., 1812), 122–25.
18. Langfur, *Adrift*, chaps. 6 and 7.
19. José Vieira Couto, *Memoria sobre as minas da capitania de Minas Geraes; suas descrições, ensaios e domicilios próprios, à maneira de itinerário . . .* (Rio de Janeiro: Laemmert, 1842), 10, 36–37.
20. *Ibid.*, 50.

21. Francisco de Paula Beltrão to João Filipe da Fonseca, Sabará, 28 Sept. 1801, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon [hereafter AHU], Minas Gerais, cx. 158, doc. 22.
22. Couto, *Memoria sobre as minas*, 51n26, emphasis in original.
23. Roberta Giannubilo Stumpf, *Filhos das Minas, americanos e portugueses: Identidades coletivas na capitania das Minas Gerais (1763–1792)* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 2010), 144, 150–51. Also see Júnia Furtado, introduction to José Vieira Couto, *Memória sobre a Capitania das Minas Gerais; seu território, clima e produções metálicas* (Belo Horizonte: Fundação João Pinheiro, 1994).
24. Couto, *Memoria sobre as minas*, 61–66.
25. *Ibid.*, 131.
26. *Ibid.*, 100, 103.
27. Governor to Secretary of State, Vila Rica, 6 Feb. 1802, AHU, Minas Gerais, cx. 161, doc. 23.
28. Beltrão to Fonseca, Sabará, 28 Sept. 1801, AHU, Minas Gerais, cx. 158, doc. 22.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Wilhelm Ludwig von Eschwege, *Brasil, Novo Mundo*, trans. Domicio de Figueiredo Murta (Belo Horizonte: Fundação João Pinheiro, 1996), 153.
31. See, for example, Wolney Garcia, “Nas águas do Indaiá uma história de ambição e ódio,” *Centroeste Urgente*, www.centroesteurgente.com.br/centro-oste-mineiro/nas-aguas-do-indaia-uma-historia-de-amibicoes-e-muito-odio/.
32. Mohsen Manutchehr-Danai, *Dictionary of Gems and Gemology* (Berlin: Springer, 2000), 1, 78, 335, 473.9

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