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INTERVIEW: *An Interview with Elizabeth Kuznesof*

Elizabeth Kuznesof is a pioneering figure in the field of colonial Latin American history, in particular, the history of women, children, and families. She has been a scholar of colonial Brazil for more than half a century. Born into a working-class family in the Pacific Northwest, she was an undergraduate at the University of Washington in the 1960s, where she was mentored by the eminent historian of Brazil, Dauril Alden. After teaching at an international school in Argentina for several years, she returned to the United States and pursued her M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late sixties and early seventies, training in quantitative methods and demographic history. She began her career at a time when there were very few female faculty. She formed part of a cohort of young women who would go on to notable careers in Brazilian history that included Mary Karasch, June Hahner, and Linda Lewin.

Kuznesof spent the early 1970s in Brazil doing archival research before completing her degree and accepting a position at the University of Kansas in 1976. Although originally hired as a non-tenure track faculty member, her position was soon converted to the tenure track: she was promoted to associate professor with tenure in 1981, and to full professor in 1987. She retired from KU in 2022. She served as director of the Center for Latin American Studies from 1992 to 2010, successfully securing Title VI funding for the Center over decades. During nearly half a century at KU she served as principal advisor on seven Ph.D. dissertations and two dozen M.A. theses.

An engaged member of the profession, she has served in positions for the American Historical Association, the Conference on Latin American History, the Brazilian Studies Association, the Social Science History Association, and the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies. She has served on the editorial boards of the *Women's History Review* and *The Americas*. She has had fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Tinker Foundation, Fulbright Scholar Program, and the Social Science Research Council, among others.

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Kuznesof is best known for her work on demography, family, and childhood. *Household Economy and Urban Development: São Paulo 1765 to 1836* (1986) was one of the first rigorous demographic studies of colonial Brazil focusing on family history. In particular, she showed that in late colonial São Paulo a surprisingly high proportion of households were headed by women. In more than fifty articles, chapters, essays, and reviews since the 1980s, she has analyzed family history, households, domestic labor, and children in Brazil, and other regions of Latin America.

Marshall C. Eakin, Distinguished Professor of History (emeritus) at Vanderbilt University, interviewed Elizabeth Kuznesof at her home in Lawrence, Kansas, on Saturday, October 15, 2022.

Tell me about your early years and how you came to your interest in Brazil and Latin America

My family is from Tacoma, Washington. My mother was a small-town children's librarian when I was 5–8 years old. It is important to know that I was the first in my family to go to college. There are no teachers in my family. My mother did love books. I always played that I was a teacher, putting stuffed animals in chairs as students. My first class was a kindergarten class. As I grew, I imagined my class as more advanced. In high school I decided that history was the discipline that most provided understanding of the world. My parents had constantly fought because my father was very working-class (an electrician) and hated unions, but my mother thought unions were the road to a progressive society. My mother left and they divorced, which was the tragedy of my life. We had no money, but fortunately I was a good student and managed to find scholarships to go to the University of Washington. There I met Dauril Alden in a history of world civilizations course. He encouraged me to take classes in Latin American history. My interest in Latin America developed from there, even as Castro pursued his revolution in Cuba. I first became interested in the Mexican Revolution and especially the social reforms that were part of it. From that time, I was always interested in the efforts of the poor and lesser members of society to improve their lives and their education.

How did you decide to go to graduate school in Latin American history?

After I graduated in 1962, I spent several years in Argentina. For a time, I taught at the American School in Buenos Aires. These were students who had parents in

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business and international affairs and had been all over. I was assigned to teach civics, but most of them had very little interest in the subject and some were even very difficult, so I went to the administration and asked them to allow me to have them write about their experiences living in various parts of Latin America. This really changed the atmosphere in the class, as they got very involved writing about their own lives. It certainly helped them get through the course even if we did not study much about civics. By now I had left behind the desire to teach kindergarten. Each time I moved to the next stage of my own education I decided that I wanted to teach at that level. I always wanted to teach.

While in Argentina I was corresponding with Dauril Alden, who wanted me to return to the University of Washington for graduate school. I decided that Berkeley (where Alden had done his doctoral work) was the place to go, and I was right. I went to UC Berkeley, which allowed a wonderful and varied education in history, literature, economics, and demography. I worked with Bill McGreevey, who also favored demographic history and a focus on less studied populations. I also worked with Kingsley Davis (demography), Albert Fishlow (economics), and I brought Dauril Alden onto my committee to have a Brazilianist. His former adviser, Engel Sluiter, was still at Berkeley, but retired. I was interested in social history and ways of analyzing documents to access the general population and the working population. Thus, my interest in demographic history.

Woodrow Borah was there, and I wanted to work with him, but he was very difficult. He taught undergraduate classes, but no graduate seminars. I made some appointments to have the chance to have contact with him, but he showed little interest in my work. He was notoriously difficult to please, asking students to revise their papers over and over again. There were very few women in the graduate program. Karen Spalding was working with Borah and had a very hard time. I was learning to read censuses and found a published late colonial census of São Paulo that I was able to study closely. Through the help of Kingsley Davis I was able to get a grant to input the data into a computer program. I became fascinated with demographic history.

What was your research experience in Brazil?

I arrived in Brazil in 1970 with a five-month-old who was nursing. I think this actually helped me. While I was in the customs line waiting for the agent who was meticulously going through my many suitcases my baby was crying. The Brazilian women in line started shouting at him for not seeing that the baby needed to nurse and that he should let me through, which he did. I found a

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young Bahian woman to care for my child. I would go to the state archives in São Paulo in the morning, return home to nurse, and then go back to the archives. I developed a very good relationship with the archive employees, bringing them flowers and chocolates, and sometimes bringing my child. I really believe that my way was eased in Brazil because I spoke Portuguese so well. Portuguese is so wonderful and such a flexible and creative language. I arrived at the height of the dictatorship, and shortly afterward the police arrested lots of foreigners, probably in retaliation for a speech Ted Kennedy had given at the United Nations condemning human rights violations in Brazil. Fortunately, I was not arrested, probably because I had just arrived.

My dissertation was based on a series of censuses I found for the city of São Paulo—1765, 1802, and 1836. I wanted to see how the community developed economically and socially. Some of the results showed a high number of female-headed households with children and caused me to focus on women's history in developing communities. Later, and still, I have worked on the history of childhood. I had seen this pattern in the published census I had analyzed while still at Berkeley. I was surprised that all the censuses showed enormous proportions of female-headed households with children. I had not expected this result. The state had done incredibly rich censuses regularly in the early nineteenth century, with household lists showing family members, slaves, and all sorts of data on production. My findings came before other scholars later also found this type of poor household in Chile and Mexico. At first, I thought that my finding must be wrong until it kept showing up in all the censuses. The percentage actually increased from 27 to 36% from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. My interest in women's history and even history of childhood comes in part from this. Dauril Alden also motivated this focus since he wrote an article exploring the eighteenth-century censuses produced in Brazil. I was mainly interested in seeing how families, women, and children in the lower classes tried to make their lives.

For a while I lived in Campinas and periodically commuted to the archives in São Paulo. I lived in Brazil for most of the time between 1970 and 1976. As I wrote my dissertation, I sent chapters to my committee and revised them gradually. I typed five drafts of my dissertation on a manual typewriter! Near the end I despaired at how I would come up with the funds to type the final version in a format acceptable for submission to the graduate school at Berkeley. I wrote to Woodrow Borah, who was then directing the Latin American Center, and, to my surprise, he agreed to come up with the funds and a typist to finish the dissertation.

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How did you find your way to a position at the University of Kansas?

There were very few jobs as I was finishing. I had interviewed at the American Historical Association (in Chicago, I think [1974]) for a position at the University of Kansas, a search that fell through. William J. Griffith and Robert Gilmore, who did the usual hotel room interview with me sitting on the bed, were impressed enough to try to hire me for another position—in women's history. KU was awarded a National Resource Center grant for 1976–79, shared with Kansas State University and Wichita State University. The grant created a three-year position in Brazilian history, with the holder teaching the first year at both KU and Kansas State. In the second year, the rotation would be between KU and Wichita State. It was the only job in my field that year. Due to the influence of Bill Griffith, I was hired for the position while I was still in Brazil. The first year I taught at Lawrence and commuted to Manhattan, Kansas [about 90 miles]. I taught a weekly seminar in Manhattan, stayed in the home of a faculty member, and spent a lot of time driving. At the end of the year, Griffith retired, and I was hired on the tenure track.

When I looked for a job, I wanted a position that was at a public institution, that included graduate students, and that had significant focus on international education similar to Berkeley. At KU I was very fortunate to have some wonderful graduate students both in history and in Latin American Studies. Many of them were first-generation college students, and all of them have gotten jobs. My favorite form of teaching has been one-on-one mentoring. I used to write long lectures, but I learned not to talk at the students. I long ago moved away from lecturing to lots of discussion and debate in my classes. I think my favorite class has been the economic history of Latin America. I organize the students around issues that they debate. I was very involved in debate when I was in high school.

What was your experience like at KU?

I worked very hard in my early years to get tenure and then promoted to full professor. I came up early—in four years—and was tenured in 1981. I continued to publish articles, publish a book, and attend lots of conferences. I connected with other demographic historians such as Robert McCaa, David Robinson, and Peter Laslett. I was involved with the Center for Latin American Studies, although not in an official position. I wanted to make sure I had become full professor first. That came in 1991, and the next year I was asked to be director of the Center. We wrote a successful NRC grant in 1997, and I made a special point

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in nudging our administration to support an application for Tinker funding. I think these grants are incredibly important because they get students into the field and to Latin America, where than can really experience the places they have been studying. My mission was to make the Latin American Studies community visible on campus as well as regionally and nationally, to create a sense of community among faculty and among students, to procure support to expand programs for the Center and for connections in Latin America. We seeded many positions that became permanent. We were also successful in securing a number of other major grants, especially a number of Fulbright Group Studies Abroad grants. Eventually, I became the longest serving director of the Center (1992–2010).

Looking back, what do you see as some of the major changes in the field?

There were very few women in the field when I started. I especially think of Mary Karasch, whose work on slavery I admired, and June Hahner, whose work was undervalued because it was more cultural, although she also focused on the lower classes. When I was in graduate school the dominant figure was Stuart Schwartz. Over the last few decades, there has been much more work on media, narratives, and cultural history. This makes sense considering how important the media and contending narratives are in our society. It seems to me that the slave trade still needs more attention, especially on the places in Africa where the enslaved were from, on ethnicities, and especially on children. In my work on the early nineteenth century, I saw a record of one slave ship with lots of children on board under the age of eighteen.

Any final thoughts?

Lawrence has been a great place to live, it is a very livable city. Again, I feel grateful that I have been able to work at a public university and with many graduate students. In my work I have always focused on ordinary people and how they have attempted to make their way in the world.

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