

## Doc Chat Episode Fifteen Transcript

### Exploitative Depictions of the Americas (February 11, 2021)

REBECCA FEDERMAN: Hey, everyone. Welcome. We'll get started in a few minutes. We'll get started in about a minute. Welcome. Thanks, everybody, for coming. All right. Welcome to Doc Chat, everyone. Thank you for coming. My name is Rebecca Federman. I'm one of the managing research librarians here at the Stephen A Schwarzman Building at 42nd Street. For those of you who have been to Doc Chat before, thanks for coming back. For those of you who are new to Doc Chat, Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the New York Public Library's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate those items into their classrooms. So today, on February 11, we will welcome Ian Fowler, who is my colleague at the library. He's the map curator and geospatial librarian. And he will be in conversation with Dr. Camilla Townsend, who is the distinguished professor of history at Rutgers University and the author of numerous books, including most recently, *Fifth Sun: a New History of the Aztecs*, by Oxford University Press that was published in 2019. We have copies in the branch library system if you want to borrow it. We also have an e-copy as well and put the link in. Ian and Camilla will be discussing a 17th century Atlas of the Americas that depicted indigenous peoples and lands along with fantastic elements like fictional [inaudible]. They will consider how works like these aim to sell British consumers, investors and future colonizers on a racist and Eurocentric vision of the New World. So the way this works is our guests will speak for about 10 to 15 minutes. And then we'll open it up to conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function on the bottom of your screen to share general comments. Make sure to click on the panelists and attendees options so that everyone can see your comments. And then once we begin the Q&A, we just ask that you use the Q&A function in zoom. And if you don't want your name to appear next to your question, feel free to click on the anonymous option. And we'll keep it that way. Before I move it over to Ian and Camilla, I just want to learn a little bit more about those of you who are attending today. So if you don't mind, if you -- oops. I'm going to [inaudible]. If you don't mind filling out this poll, just so we can get a sense of those of you who are visiting us today. And I will -- we can always put this up later. So I'm going to push -- pull it -- push it over to Ian and Dr. Townsend.

IAN FOWLER: Thank you so much, Rebecca. So happy to be joined by Dr. Townsend here today and by all of you. So as Rebecca said, we're going to be discussing primarily images from this work, which is by a man named John Ogilby. The entire title is on the right. And you can read up there on wonderful letterpress on the left. And we're going to talk about the history of this for a little bit. And then Dr. Townsend is going to speak and converse with me about the plates that are in this book. But first, I'm just going to give a very brief overview of the publishing history of this work and why it exists. As you can see in the bottom, in 1671, John Ogilby

publishes this work. But this work is not an original work. This work is a English translation with some additions, notably maps of English colonies in what is now the United States, especially John Smith's maps of Virginia and Carolina, as well as one of the second view of New York ever published by the English. And the original work or the second work that this copies is known from this work, which is Montanus. And you can read the title there on the right-hand side. This is issued at the same time. So there's no copyright at this point in time, obviously. This is the 17th century. And one of the reasons that Ogilby copies this is because he had been in a lot of other fields before getting into the publishing of geography and cartography. He worked in theatre. He was the publisher of the King for translations of things such as Virgil. But he lost his entire stock in the Great Fire in London and saw that there was a huge market for travel writing and for geographic works. And so he immediately copies this in the English and publishes it. And it's wildly successful. But there's a further first issue of this, which is that Montanus covers all of his plates, which Dr. Townsend and I will talk about, from a work from 1594 by Theodore de Bry, the America in parts, in four parts, a multi-part series known widely in English as de Bry's Grand Voyages. This is an explanation in 14 parts, [inaudible] 11 parts. There's many parts talking about the explorations to the new world by the European powers. This does bring up a kind of important sub thread, which is that de Bry was a Lutheran. And de Bry was very savvy. So he publishes a German and Dutch text of this work that's intended for Lutheran audiences. And then he publishes a Latin text that's completely different, but with the same place for Catholic audiences, especially the Spanish. And so there's a lot of anti-Spanish sentiment and a lot of anti-Catholic sentiment that's in the Dutch German version. And then that's completely excised to appeal to a more Catholic audience. When Montanus and Ogilby are copying from de Bry, they're largely copying from the Dutch German text. And so there's a lot of what ends up being anti especially Brazilian, indigenous Brazilian narrative that's actually leftover from anti -- I mean, there's definitely also anti indigenous language de Bry. But then you add on this further layer of anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish sentiment. Montanus is a Jesuit. Ogilby is a Protestant. And so there's this interesting vintage that comes through just on the European side. So the first plate we will look at is this place. So Dr. Townsend, what do you see when you look at this plate?

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: Well, I think that we will all agree that we see a fantasy, that we see something that might make us think of Disney's Fantasia in a work that purported to be a work of exploration and a work of sharing knowledge about the New World. It is striking the extent to which wild imaginings occur. It is perhaps not unexpected, given all that you have just explained. And I will only add that this was an era in which works that were largely there, often translations of other European works about the Americas were prevalent. They had recently translated by Ptolemy de las Casas into English in an effort to prove, you know, how dastardly those Spaniards were. And the Indians weren't any better than they ought to be either. So it was a moment when the English were really coming into their own, I guess I could say as colonizers, were truly fascinated by all that they could learn from other Europeans about other parts of the New World. And they were not too particular the greater the fantasy element, the better. I don't think they were conscious of it. But it was definitely part of the appeal, the wildness and the unexpectedness and the strangeness of the world out there. So the fact that they're talking

about or trying to portray and wishing to believe in a dragon should not surprise us as much as it otherwise would. Needless to say, there are no such species anywhere in the new world. Some explorer must have seen one of the more fearsome reptiles that do exist in the tropics. One description led to another description led to one engraving led to an even wilder engraving, and you end up with something like this.

IAN FOWLER: Yeah. And it's very telling for de Bry especially and then Montanus and Ogilby. I think that there's also from the history of print and cartography perspective, sea monsters had been wildly popular on maps and geographic works for so long. And so then adding that in -- I mean, these are, these are capitalist enterprises. de Bry made his first copy to make a lot of money. And so you have that coming in as well. This is one of the more vicious scenes, I think, that's in the Ogilby Atlas. And so you can read the caption on the bottom. This is dogs from the Spanish attacking what are suspected to be homosexuals, which obviously has a lot of unpacking to do with the policies in Spain and colonialism and also indigenous culture. What do you see when you look at this?

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: I found this image particularly interesting because the idea that the indigenous people were going to turn out to be a culture that castrator, that created eunuchs, had been very popular at first. That is because of both European knowledge of the Middle East and because of European exaggerations about the Middle East, both. They had associated the practice of the creation of eunuchs with the other, with the strange and the mysterious other for a long time. And they expected to find it. They almost, I think, wanted to find it. And in early explorations of the Caribbean, Columbus insisted on it and in Brazil as well. Now that is not the case. That is there turned out not to be any cultures in the Americas that practice castration of young boys to create eunuchs. It was purely in the minds of the Europeans. But clearly, this is something that in this capitalist enterprise, to quote Ian's very apt words, it was clearly something that they thought would sell to their audience. Whether they were conscious of it or not, we'll never know. But they're throwing in something that simply was not the case but that they expected, on some level, their readers to want to find in the book. Interestingly, the question of mastiffs, of dogs being used by the Spaniards was based in fact. They did use dogs as part of the conquest of indigenous. And again, this is a trope, an idea that was very popular in England, those that the dastardly Spaniards had used dogs to rip people limb from limb. It did happen, but much more rarely than the English wished to believe. Certainly, it was prevalent in a Las Casas book, because those are some of the most horrific images that were out there. And he, Las Casas, talked about it. So it should not surprise us that it's in the 1671 world. One thing that Ian and I found interesting when we talked about this before is how much the engraver almost seemed to be working to make the indigenous look like they were of African descent. Whether that's because that's what he knew how to draw best, or whether, again, he thought that's what his readers wanted, it's hard to say.

IAN FOWLER: Yeah. That's a very interesting point. And that brings us to our next slide. So the next slide is from the original de Bry copy, which is hand colored. That's here on the rare book division of New York Public Library. And you can see a very distinct difference both in the

presentation here of a lot of aspects. The Spaniards pretty much stay the same, but everything else kind of changes. And so I'll just go back real quick to the previous slide, so you can -- so everyone can kind of see the difference that we're talking about here. And so I think this really reinforces a lot of what you were just talking about. And I think it's a great example of that.

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: It does seem to me, given their level of expertise, that it must have been purposeful, that they somehow could not help but reproduce the image to look as though they were chasing down an African person. That doesn't ring true to me. That doesn't feel right. My guess would be that, again, they were giving their audience what they expected these people to look like and what they thought their readers would want them to look like. That is like Africans.

IAN FOWLER: Yeah. It's a very good point. And I think you're completely right about that. Our next slide here is Vetus Mexico. And I know that this is right in your wheelhouse. So take it away.

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: Well, this one was the only one that I absolutely insisted we include, because my favorite thing to do is study Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. And this, of course, is their version of that. I found it a really striking image because, of course, Tenochtitlan was a densely populated city. And it was on an island in the middle of a great lake. And there were mountains surrounding it in a great ring. So the creators of this engraving had not taken leave of their senses by any means. On the other hand, it could not look more like a European town. The towers, the way the buildings are structured with the peaked roofs, the way they've shown causeway, the way they're showing it having been structured -- everything about it is profoundly familiar as if this were an island say somewhere in Switzerland perhaps when, in fact, Tenochtitlan, as wildly impressive a place as it was to all who viewed it for the first time, none would have described it this way. There is -- even in the most exaggerated descriptions, they're quite honestly about what it looked like. You saw the Great Pyramid towers. You saw flags made of geometric shapes waving in the wind. You saw cause waves that stretched from the center of the island out like clock hands out towards the edge. Not one thing in these original descriptions matches this picture. So they have created it as they wish to. And yet, on another level, it is Tenochtitlan.

IAN FOWLER: I think that's a wonderful point because looking at this from my background history of cartography, if I didn't know what this was from, I would think this was from Brown and Hogan [inaudible] on the first city Atlas from the early 16th century. It looks exactly like a European city view, even with the, you know, the people in the foreground and the angle, the oblique angle that is used. That's a very wonderful point and kind of ties in this whole, what is history, what is narrative, what's meant for consumption, and what's the purpose of these words, especially when we're talking about [inaudible]? So we get to a nice volcano here. So what's going on in this image that you see?

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: Well, here again, we've come back to the world of fantasy, although at

the same time, you can see where the seed of the fantasy started. There are two -- or there were two active volcanoes quite near Mexico City, quite near Tenochtitlan, what is today Mexico City. But by active, what the indigenous meant was that every once in a while, they'd be a little sparker sputter. They didn't mean they were constantly erupting. So the sight of these flames reaching to the sky, what looks like -- to me like a wave of lava coming down and terrifying the people and huge boulders being thrown out, spit out by the guys. It's not at all reflective of reality. In fact, the Spaniards, in their progress from the coast to the city, were able to climb up to the edge and send somebody down to collect some of the elements that were there that they needed or could use to make gunpowder. So that's how we quiescent that sort of somewhat partially active volcano was. It's a bit, a little bit, every once in a while. That's all. But again, one description leads to another, leads to one engraving, leads to another. And we end up with a movie set at a moment of crisis instead of the actual volcanoes in the background in Mexico City. Again, I noticed here after our recent discussion, I'm more attuned to it. The indigenous Americans have been portrayed as though they were of African descent. Once again, it would be interesting -- I think you and I were not looking for that when we first looked for the images. But somebody should go through and count and do a study. I wonder in this Atlas and in others how often -- what percentage of the time that happened in this century.

IAN FOWLER: Yeah. And that's a very interesting point. And if you look at the original source material, the de Bry, he is also collating and borrowing from [inaudible], from a number of other people. And because, you know, none of these people, Ogilby, Montanus or de Bry ever left Europe, they're relying and they're bringing this fantasy element. And history -- historians of cartography have analyzed, especially the North American images, and have found that there is borrowing from known African cultures of the time. And so they'll insert that into especially the depictions of indigenous people from what is now Virginia. And so it's a very interesting point. I also -- like looking at this just as an image, it's very interesting how in the foreground, you know, the Spanish are stoic and courageous. But in the background, the Spanish are -- I don't know. They're dancing or fearful.

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: I think they're panicking, but I'm not sure.

IAN FOWLER: So I think unless you have anything else to add, that we're at the time for questions and answers. And there's Rebecca to remind us. So what should we do? Let's go on.

REBECCA FEDERMAN: There are a couple of questions that have come in. One is, which is a great way to start, is who would have been the presumed reader of this? And how would it have been consumed?

IAN FOWLER: These kinds of travel books had a massive audience. As I said in the beginning, Ogilby is coming back from having his entire stocking trade destroyed in the Great Fire of London. He's looking for something that he can get some partners with and publish these accounts. Interest in what was going on and what is now North and South America and also what was going on in what is now [inaudible] in China was extremely popular. And so there was

a massive audience. There's multiple languages, multiple editions. It goes on for a while.

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: I suppose now that we're living in quarantine, we can understand a little better what a market there was for nonfiction books. That is when you can't -- when there are no movies to go to, when there's nothing to do in the evening, people would sit around and read to each other. And the most exciting thing to read about were these new worlds that were being discovered. Pictures and maps made it better.

REBECCA FEDERMAN: And what was the reception of these atlases, if there's a way of knowing that information?

IAN FOWLER: The de Bry was incredibly popular. There is a carto-bibliography out there of all the different editions in different language. Montanus was popular. But the Ogilby was more popular I think primarily because it was in English and his relationship to the king, which has exclusive kind of like rights for distribution and publishing at that point in time. But they were very, very popular. And there's a whole corpus of literature that surrounds us that's also lifting it up and carrying.

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: Some people have argued that right up to the war of Jenkins Ear in the 18th century, English people continue to fantasize that they were going to rescue all of the Americas from Spain and all the indigenous and African people in the Americas would be thrilled to be freed from the Spanish Catholics. So certainly, in 1671, that was still a very active element of fantasy in England.

IAN FOWLER: And if you attended the collections open house earlier this week, you could hear me talk about a broadside from the war of Jenkins Ear by Emanuel Bowen in 1740.

REBECCA FEDERMAN: Coming full circle. Here's a question we have about using these in the classroom. I regularly share early illustrated books and maps with young struck students and struggle with explaining Europeans perspective and their perspective and depiction of the New World. Yes, the images' producers were racist by our contemporary definition, but not by theirs. Are we diluting the term and taking away its current [inaudible]?

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: One thing that I have found is in de Bry's version of -- are you going to help me, Ian, to get this right? But in Thomas Harriet's original text that de Bry publishers, what? Is it 1591? There is a fascinating image showing -- two, I think, images showing the ancient Celts as savages. So when you're talking to students about that part of the problem is just that people didn't know how to envision the others. They had never been there. They didn't understand. You can also point out that they -- the English were perfectly willing to say that their own ancestors had been savages until they came in contact first with Roman culture and then with Christianity. You know, there's an element of condescension embedded there. I do see that. But in terms of the point that this teacher I -- that you, I think, are getting at, you, the teacher, it helps, I find, at least with college students -- and they're not that much older than the

high school students -- to show that it wasn't as though all Englishmen were inherently brutally racist. They were struggling to understand these others. And they were perfectly willing to say that our own ancestors had once been profoundly different, too. So that can sometimes be effective. With your greater knowledge than I of the visual text, Ian, you may have better advice.

IAN FOWLER: No, I think what you've said is absolutely perfect. I would say that it's always problematic to me to say that, like, Europeans had -- that this was a European idea that was acceptable. I think that's rather simplistic, I mean, especially if we're talking about this time period. Calvinists, Lutherans, Catholics had different ideas, as well as, you know, different nationalities. And I think that you can see kind of an interesting way to look at that is, what's the conversation that's going on today in the Netherlands about black pica? And how can that be tied into historical documents and attitudes about that sort of thing? Maybe too far afield, but I think it's -- I think it plays a role.

REBECCA FEDERMAN: Here's a question I don't know if either of you will be able to answer, but we'll try. Do we have any idea about how indigenous people made art in the same way? Did they see Asians as different?

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: Oh, that's a wonderful question. It's hard to say. But the texts that I study most often are the [inaudible] it's called. They're year counts, it translates. They're texts written by Nawaz or Aztecs in the Nawaz language using old formats and old -- in old genre but sounding out their words and their languages in the Roman letters. And the greatest historian of all among the Nawaz, among the Aztecs, was a late 16th, early 17th century guy named [inaudible]. And he saw quite a few Asians because a mission came from Japan to Acapulco, walked and rode across Mexico and then took off from Vera Cruz to go visit the pope over in Europe. And he also saw some more Asians who had been sold as slaves, who had been bought or kidnapped in the Philippines, in Manila and brought to Mexico and sold as slaves. So he knew Asians. And he commented very explicitly on how much his people, the indigenous people of Mexico, looked exactly like Asians. And at one point, when he was watching the Japanese put on a parade, he gave an almost anthropologist like comment about how they did their hair and how it compared to the way the indigenous people did and how they held their swords and how that compares to the way indigenous people used to. He was interestingly both looking for difference, looking for the other, but also looking for commonality. And, of course, now we know, thanks to the theory of the Bering Strait, the scientists who worked out that idea, that there really was a genetic, common genetic past. He wasn't crazy. But that aside, you're asking a more cultural question. And culturally, he was very interested in the other, less interested than Europeans, though, I think in establishing difference and somewhat more interested in establishing commonality and closeness. But that makes sense when you consider that he was among the disempowered looking at other disempowered. It's very often those who have the most power who want to establish we are different. What a wonderful question.

REBECCA FEDERMAN We have many questions here. I don't know if we'll be able to get to them all. But maybe this is something we can have Dr. Townsend and Ian answer if we don't

have time. And that can be part of the blog post that's after this. Another question we have. We have so many. How many of these images and maps have influenced historiography in the long-term?

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: Have influenced the production of other -- now where is where I wish we were in the real world. I could ask do you mean the production of other maps?

REBECCA FEDERMAN: I believe so. Yes.

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: You think so. Right. Okay. I think that de Bry materials were very influential and probably more so than the Ogilby. He's an example of. But again, Ian, you know better than I in this regard.

IAN FOWLER: You're completely correct. And it's also important to realize that throughout both Ogilby, Montanus and de Bry, this is not map history. So they're taking elements, you know, like that first image, like that -- these fantastical elements and putting them in place where they don't belong. And you see that through hundreds of years of map history. So there's a very famous one. de Bry puts a depiction of one type of indigenous American housing in Virginia on his first map. And then subsequent mapmakers move that around the entire North American continent to cultures where it makes no sense to use that type of housing. And so -- and, you know, one of the most egregious examples is cannibalism in Brazil, supposed cannibalism. And so anything that's related to anything regarding the body and indigenous tradition becomes cannibalism in history. And so there's a long tail there that still persists to this day in a lot of ways.

REBECCA FEDERMAN: Okay. We are almost at time. So unfortunately, we do have to wrap up. And want to get to everybody's questions. But hopefully, we can share these questions and answers in the blog post. This -- so for those of you who are list of collection items and other resources, along with the video and transcript of this episode will be published shortly on our NYPL blogs. And I put the link for the blog channel there. And you can also subscribe. And we do have another episode next week. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30pm. In our next episode, my NYPL colleague, Kia Collier of Schomburg Center, will speak with Dr. Jamar Bonia of Hunter College and of the CUNY Graduate Center as they discuss Schomburg's hashtag syllabi web archive collection and the Puerto Rico syllabus and discuss erasure and underrepresentation in the academy, digital protests and ways of pulling hashtag syllabi in the classroom. You can -- I'm going to put up the link for that episode so that you can register right away without having to go on our website. And you can follow us on social media. And you can subscribe to our newsletter, Research Matters. And you can also just come back and check out our blog post. So we are at time I just want to thank Dr. Camilla Townsend, Ian Fowler, all our attendees for coming. It was a great conversation. I hope you all enjoyed it. Take care.

IAN FOWLER: Thank you all so much. Thanks, everybody.



REBECCA FEDERMAN: Thank you.

CAMILLA TOWNSEND: Thank you. Good to see you. Bye.