Thinking about Slavery, Knowledge, and Nature in the Early Atlantic World: Working with the Drake Manuscript

Molly A. Warsh[1]

[1] Department of History, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, United States

E-mail: warsh@pitt.edu

The *Histoire Naturelle des Indes*, commonly known as the Drake Manuscript, is held at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City and is available in digital facsimile on their website.[9] The Drake Manuscript is an extraordinarily rich source for teachers and scholars of the sixteenth century Caribbean, both because of its value as a work of natural history and its compelling illustrations and also because of light it sheds on the rivalries and coerced collaborations that characterized this world in transformation. I frequently make use of the manuscript in my courses on Caribbean history, World History, and the Global History of Piracy and students are always drawn to the images and the questions they raise. I focus on three related avenues of inquiry that emerge from the illustrations and their captions: 1) the nature of collaboration in the early post-Columbus Americas; 2) the nature of knowledge production in the early post-Columbus Americas and 3) the critical importance of the natural world as an arena in which Europeans honed ideas about the meaning of the Americas. These are rather abstract concepts and I have found that the Drake Manuscript images are an excellent way of getting students to move from engaging with user-friendly images and text to grappling with complex historical processes.

On point 1, I begin by considering the authorship of the Drake manuscript, which scholars have revealed to have been composed and illustrated by two distinct scribes and two distinct illustrators.[10] The French in which the text is written, combined with references to a strong Protestant faith and the geographic evidence of the authors' travels, suggest that the creators of the manuscript were French protestants (Huguenots) sailing with the English privateer Francis Drake as he explored Atlantic waters and preyed on Spanish settlements. Students invariably love thinking about pirates and piracy. I never have to struggle to get their attention when I say that we're going to be analyzing documents written and drawn by pirates—what takes them by surprise is how "serious" the information contained within the Drake Manuscript is. They are always surprised and intrigued when we explore just how serious a business piracy really was in the early modern world (and a far cry from the Johnny Depp "Pirates of the Caribbean" image that most of them have in their heads.) As we discuss just why and how French sailors might find themselves on pirate voyages in the Caribbean with Francis Drake, I emphasize how this Anglo-French partnership across political lines but within a single faith community reflected how diverse early modern sailing crews often were. My goal is to prompt students to rethink their ideas about monolithic, homogenous early modern empires. I note that sailors went to see for lots of reasons, often with whomever was paying well or promised an adventure at the right time. We also discuss the bloody and deep-rooted religious rivalries that characterized early modern Europe, a point I emphasize in part because it helps to counter students' still-too-common ideas about block "European" "African" and "Indian" (meaning, indigenous to the Americas) identities in this period. We discuss how Europeans frequently

[9] "Histoire Naturelle des Indes," The Morgan Library and Museum, https://www.themorgan.org/collection/Histoire-Naturelle-des-Indes.

[10] Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Introduction to the *Histoire Naturelle des Indes*." The Morgan Library and Museum, https://www.themorgan.org/collection/Histoire-Naturelle-des-Indes/introduction. Accessed June 15, 2020.

slaughtered one another and how Africa and the Americas were similarly characterized by numerous rivalrous and often warring polities. I have found again and again that this is a very new way of thinking about African, Indigenous, and European relations for most students in my classes.

My emphasis on the frequency of collaboration across what students often think were hard political dividing lines provides a convenient segue into discussing the related second point that I emphasize when discussing the Drake Manuscript, which is the collaborative nature of knowledge production in this period. Students stare at me blankly if I pose the question in those terms, so instead I start by asking them to think about what information is contained in the manuscript and who might be interested in it. If we have the time, I divide my class into groups and assign each a section of the Drake Manuscript. Then we reconvene as a class and talk about how many different types of activities, people, and geographic areas are discussed in the manuscript. We note that there may have been only up to 4 four authors and illustrators but that the work and knowledge of many other people are represented within the manuscript. I also explicitly make the point here that the Drake Manuscript is a work of natural history composed not by a trained scholar but rather by keen amateur observers who preserved through their captions and images the skill and knowledge of others who may not have left documents for historians to read but who nonetheless shaped knowledge of, and ideas about, the Americas. In other words, I emphasize that knowledge and expertise were not solely the preserve of the elite. I then focus on the 43 drawings contained within the manuscript that focus on humans performing different tasks. We talk about indigenous and African labor in the early Caribbean and the degree to which European interlopers not only relied on these workers for the profits they produced but for the knowledge they possessed about the lands and seas in which they labored. We focus on three images with which I am particularly familiar, all of which reflect pearl fishing practices.[11] In one, a naked black diver is chased by a sea creature identified as a manta ray. Beneath this image is a conch shell, which the text explains contains hairs that divers use to relieve ear pressure brought on by their frequent dives.[12] In the next, we see a large multi-masted boat manned by five black figures**,** all of whom are engaged in pearl diving activities.[13] We talk about how natural history is an avenue for thinking about how humans have shaped and been shaped by their environments over time. We also discuss how central the exploitation of human and natural resources was to post-Columbus Americas from their very earliest decades of the sixteenth century. I encourage students to think about how the Drake images reflect the changing demography of the region (such as indigenous population decline and the rise of the trade in enslaved Africans) and gendered forms of labor.

In this vein, I also urge students to think about what the images don't show: it is particularly striking in the case of the pearl fishing boat that no white overseer is depicted. We think about the limitations of European authority in the Americas and the ways in which enslaved peoples found avenues for autonomous movement and expression. We also consider the question of expertise: how did Africans know where to go to find pearls? How did African and indigenous geographic, medicinal, and natural knowledge (such as we see in the use of the conch shell to treat earaches) circulate? These discussions underscore the importance of African and indigenous skill and knowledge in shaping European colonial endeavors in the Americas. This is a topic students are particularly keen to discuss; they tend to be very surprised by the absence of a white overseer in the image of the pearl boat and we invariably have excellent discussions about the limits of colonial and imperial control.

We then segue from this discussion to point 3, a broader discussion of how the creation of documents like the Drake Manuscript and natural histories in general was an act of possession and imagination, revealing not solely "the facts" of a new world as Europeans perceived them, but also their fantasies about what these novel places and unfamiliar peoples could mean for them and their place in the world. We spend time reading the translations of different image's captions and considering how they work together with the illustrations to serve as an explanatory and enticing overview of a "new world." This allows us to discuss issues of authorship, audience, and intentionality in art as opposed to in manuscript or printed sources. In this way, the Drake manuscript provides a rich and complex point of entry into the fascinating, brutal world of the Caribbean and Atlantic of the sixteenth century.

[11] I discuss these images in my book, *American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire 1492-1700* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute with the University of North Carolina Press, 2018).
[12] "Drake Manuscript," *Historie Naturelle des Indes*, The Morgan Library & Museum. ff. 46v-47r.
[13] Ibid., ff. 56v-57r.