Surekha Davies


In her well-researched and thorough book, Surekha Davies sheds new light on the way European-produced images of American Indians, particularly the images on maps, were shaped by emerging conversations about humanity. She also shows that these images were essential in the ethnographic negotiation between human and monster. Davies examined a truly impressive number of maps and other similar visual sources from the late fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. *Renaissance Ethnography* also demonstrates the changes over time in the representation of Native peoples and monstrosity, as well as the specific features of regional European maps. Davies intends to establish an interdisciplinary methodology for interpreting maps and understanding the methods that mapmakers used to convey their authority and reliability, or their “ethnographic authority” (11).

Davies analyzes a wide-array of maps alongside the textual sources that accompanied and inspired them. While she maintains that the textual sources were important, her analysis centers on the maps themselves as “key artefacts in the fluctuating shape of the human in the European imaginary” (2). Furthermore, she argues that maps can be interpreted as “contact zones between cultures and as ‘representational machines’ in the sense that they were analytical tools through which Europeans made sense of human diversity” (4). In other words, knowledge about Indians was as likely to come through maps and ethnographic texts in European intellectual circuits as through contact with Indians themselves.

Davies writes: “A history of representations of Amerindians on maps is therefore also a history of European conceptions of what it meant to be human, and of the ways in which scholars and artisans constructed and policed the boundaries between human and monstrous peoples” (297). Thus, her goal in this book is much larger than to simply investigate the meaning and interpretative power of European maps and images; rather, it is to explore how these images shaped the conversation about the boundaries of human behavior and the human species. She argues that maps did more than represent Native peoples or even visually display the descriptions of the Americas from written texts; rather, these maps helped to create “distinctive cultural stereotypes” while actively “encourage[ing] the viewer to compare and classify peoples” (301).

Divided into eight chapters (including an introduction and epilogue), Davies’s book moves from more general discussions of early modern ideas about
the human and the monstrous to particular examples of the visual rhetoric of individual groups, both as creators and subjects.

Chapter 1 focuses on the relationship between climate and humoral theory and the conception of human diversity. Chapter 2 provides an overview of European cartographic practices and traditions in the early modern period. Chapters 3 and 4 both focus on the development of representational ethnography of Brazil and Brazilians. The former elucidates cartographic traditions of cannibals, arguing that Caribbean representations in text and image provided the foundation upon which the more fully realized trope of the Brazilian cannibal rested. Chapter 4 looks explicitly at written documents about Brazil alongside maps created in Normandy, arguing that together these played a key role in European trade with the Americas and trading disputes between European nations. The next two chapters, 5 and 6, look more closely at the visual and textual rhetoric of monstrosity informing maps. Chapter 5 examines giants in Patagonia while the chapter 6 looks at headless men and Amazons in Guiana through the lens of Sir Walter Raleigh. The penultimate chapter moves to a discussion of the representation of cities, especially Tenochtitlan and Cuzco. Davies argues that these representations served to emphasize the civility of these regions, rather than focusing on monstrosity or acts like human sacrifice to distinguish the Aztec and Incan empires from the “savage, cannibalistic” regions of Brazil. Finally, chapter 8 argues that as the early modern period continued, maps, and particularly those made by the leading Dutch houses, began to privilege aesthetic concerns and considered maps more as decorative objects rather than ethnographic texts.

The sheer volume of Davies’s research, along with her grasp of languages and the nuances that molded each European nation into a unique empire, is truly staggering. Her prose, however, tends towards being unnecessarily turgid, which occasionally obscures her conclusions. A stronger editorial hand would have helped create a smoother, less opaque narrative. Additionally, throughout Renaissance Ethnography, Davies consistently refers to certain ethnographic traditions as “intrinsically credible” (21). For example, she writes: “I argue that headless beings and Amazons were intrinsically credible, and that it was an extrinsic quality—the ethical relationship between the witness of such beings and the reader or viewer—that determined plausibility.” I find this phrase and line of argumentation a bit unclear. It seems to me that what Davies means is that certain tropes, like that of the Brazilian cannibals, became so well-known and integrated into the pool of knowledge about the Americas, that the idea of the Brazilian cannibal was an unquestioned piece of information. Thus, an accusation of cannibalism among the Tupínamba required no proof, and the
accusation itself gained further credibility through unquestioned repetition. If my understanding is correct, I found Davies’s repeated and inconsistent deployment of intrinsic and extrinsic credibility to be puzzling.

Davies’s focus on maps and ethnography means that religious writings and ideas are not central to her thesis. It is in chapter one where she devotes the most space to the role that religion played in shaping the early modern discourse of monstrosity and humanity. However, the centrality of cultural and intellectual histories in her book does not leave much room for a substantive engagement with many of the issues that might interest the readers of the *Journal of Jesuit Studies*. For example, Davies does not examine how missionaries contributed to the visual discourse with any depth. This elision is understandable, however, given the specific scope of the book.

The laudable and lofty goals of *Renaissance Ethnography* not only demand a great deal of Davies and her book, but of the reader herself. This book is not for the uninitiated. Undergraduate audiences, and indeed graduate and post-grad audiences who are not intimately familiar with early modern ethnographic strategies may struggle with the density of Davies’s work. But overall Davies’s book is an invaluable contribution to early modern studies, intellectual history, cartographic history, and other related fields of inquiry.

*Kelly Watson*
Avila University

*kelly.watson@avila.edu*

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00501008-15