Doc Chat Episode 1 Transcript

Ian Fowler: Welcome everyone. I am Ian Fowler. I'm the Curator and Geospatial Librarian for the Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division at New York public library. And this is the inaugural episode of Doc Chat, Doc Chat is a new program series that digs deep in the stories behind the libraries most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Julie Golia, Curator of History, Social Sciences, and Government Information, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building at the New York Public Library is joined by Dan Bouk, associate professor of history at Colgate University and a fellow at History and Society. You can find his writing at census stories dot us. They will be discussing a curious map and unusual connection to the red scare in the 1920s. A little programming note. The guests will speak for about 10 to 15 minutes, then I will open up the conversation. Please use the question-and-answer function rather than the chat function so that we can see and respond to your questions. And just to make sure if you want to ask anonymously, please check that anonymous box. We will be using people's first names in the question-and-answer period. And we will be launching a pull. I will launch the first one now if you could please fill that out and we will launch another one toward the end of the program during the Q&A and if you could fill that out it will help us do future programming in the doc chat series. Please take it away Julie.

Julie Golia: Thanks Ian, thanks for joining us folks to have you here at our inaugural doc chat.

Dan Bouk: Thank you I'm excited.

Julie Golia: Dan and I are going to be talking about a really fascinating map in the NYPL map division and we are going to go ahead and here is who we are if you want to tweet as we are both active tweeters. But let's look at this map. So just some very minor basics about it. So this is a map from 1920. And the title is, Map of the Borough of Brooklyn Showing Location and Extent of Racial Colonies. So Dan and I wanted to just hear what you all notice about this map, just on first blush, what stands out to the audience today about this map you can write into the chat about what you think. So we have got some responses. The color is pink. A lot of Italians. [Laughter] many unpopulated neighborhoods. That's actually a really interesting observation that we should talk about. Jews are prominent, the number of ethnicities. Someone notices the term racial colonies. So I think that's actually really fascinating, something that we are definitely going to come back to. So, I'm going to tell you a little bit about the background of this map... Weeks ago, someone notices [Weeksville] ... As a Brooklynite I love that. Everybody should check out the comments here in the chat and people are making wonderful observations. So this map was created in 1920. It's a commercial version of what was originally a political map.

So the map was created with data gathered by a New York State committee called the Lusk committee. That was charged with investigating supposedly seditious activity, and sort of radical activity in the wake of the years after the first world war, when we see really what many historians call the first red scare, a real crackdown against what people saw as radical activity that was often associated with immigrants and people of some of the ethnicities we see represented on the map.

So the Lusk committee was a very zealous committee. They did a lot of investigating, a lot of data gathering and even to the number of crackdowns in a number of New York City institutions. And they produced maps that look like this but interestingly this is not the political map. This is actually a commercial map that was made after a year after the committee finished their work that was disseminated and sold to people and we are going to talk about who it might have been sold to and who those audiences are. So Dan, I'm going to pose back to you the very question that we posed to our audience. What are the first things that jump out to you about this map?

Dan Bouk: All right, thank you and thank you all so many of you for showing up today. When I look at a map like this, when I look at any kind of data visualization with tables of numbers I follow advice that I got from a colleague who is another historian [indiscernible] Caitlin Rosenthal and she says what we do is we read the frame, not the data to begin with. So when you think of a table of numbers, the idea is that you read the column heads, and you figure out where the columns are first. You do not look too much at what the actual numbers or figures are. So here, when people are noting like lots of Italians, that's reading the data, which is a perfectly legitimate way to read something like this. A historian of quantification holds off on that because I'm first trying to figure out like what are the assumptions built into this. What is the rhetorical strategy? what is the genre? The constraints that are shaping the way this information is first being offered. So I am reading the frame and that means I'm more going along the lines of folks who are saying racial colonies, right, so that would be to categories here. These Germans, Russian and Polish and other Jews, Italians all called racial colonies or similarly I'm interested in the kind of units. So what do the columns look like, these large chunks that I'm seeing here.
 And I'm going to read those with, in the back of my head the kind of genre constraints, or the possibilities from other kinds of [relations] around this period so I will take you now around a few visualizations I have. Here is the first one. This is from 1895. And it is relevant to me because it was produced by the tenement house committee, and it was produced at least in part in response to a book published by a guy named Jacob Riis called how the other half lives.
 And in the book, Riis, I thought he used the word racial colonies and I looked up today and he didn't but instead what he does is talks about in a chapter called the mixed crowd, colonies of, and then a list of different nationalities. So he is using the language of colonization and it is explicitly in a kind of context of native-born, white elite New Yorkers who are concerned about what is happening, and in a way that they will be talking about [in the century], in terms of race, talking about people who would now often be classified as white, but were understood at that point to be a complicated mix of sometimes used racialized language, sometimes national

language and you see in this map for instance it shows nationalities is the way in which people organized. Interestingly enough, you will note that these, Reese talked about big... [amorphous]colonies or coherent colonies.

This was a lot of variation actually within each of these areas although stripes show different nationalities of people. And so that's the first map that I have. The second map is here. This is from 1895, produced by Florence Kelly at Hull House and this is one of a series of maps. This one again shows nationality but you can see here they are going street by street apartment by apartment, and it is a much finer grained analysis. Like we are seeing different nationalities of individuals in each place. Hull was in a settlement house. She's working in a context where she's doing very sophisticated social science, but for the benefit of the community in which she works. And there are maps that are tied to this one that are doing a similarly fine-grained analysis of income in these households to try to show correlations and relationships between like how much people make based on nationality thinking about amongst other things, forms of discrimination, work, particular ways in which people's lives could be improved. So it's a different purpose than a prior map, which is basically about trying to get rid of folks. I'm going to go really quickly through the next couple. Here's the next map I'm picking up from 1899, this is from W.E.B. Du Bois' the Philadelphia Negro and here, again what strikes me as he's mapping in color only African-American households and what different colors here pointing to are different kinds of class, ways he is breaking the community into different classes and mapping them here and so all the apparently unpopulated areas are whitish, but if not they are not African-American but again a much finer grain. Here is Madison Grant. This is a very different kind of map of race, very explicitly of race and you can see Grant writes this very popular article in a book in the 1910s where he is starting to think about broad sweeps of white races, breaking them up into the hierarchies of Nordics over the Alpines over the Mediterraneans. And the final map I will show you is from the New York City Census Committee. This is after the 1920 census and you can see here it is again broken up in this case by census tract leve]. But the concern is, and what the areas are colored in is whether the area has more than 30% foreign born. You can see there is a powerful rhetorical move here. It's not about, not about understanding variation in the community and more about framing a problem, in this case one in which people are making it seem as if there are too many immigrants in New York.

Julie Golia: I want to go back to the first map I'm struck by really... First of all we want to let you know we are going to link to all of these maps in the series so the maps that are not at we are going to send these to you, the use of color and shading and actually getting across the message as you say Dan is not about the specific data but the frame and a larger message. One sort of recurring observation I saw among our attendees is the use of pink, this kind of bright pink on the map and the kind of immediate message that you get as a result of that. How purposeful do you think that was in sort of the design of this map?

Dan Bouk: I know I have seen in the comments some folks make the argument that red for the Red Scare and that hot pink. And that seems very possible. Certainly it is very eye-catching, and as far as we know that folks were trying to push for immigration control are optically concerned about Jews, particularly concerned about Italians, but interestingly Italians are not

nearly so obvious to see. We might say maybe, it is red because of Communist Russia, Red Scare. The only reason I hesitate for that is in the Hull House map in 1885 well before the revolution, Russians were also red, so there might be other color conventions that led to Russians being read before the communist revolution.

Julie Golia: sure that make sense but I'm struck particularly in thinking about this as being a commercial map, a commercial version of a map that was created with political data there's a real message in this that hits you right in the eyes, if you will, the minute that you see this and it actually does make me think a little bit about how a map like this would have been used. And for a little context for the attendees, Dan and I did a little digging to try to find some real evidence of how something like this would have been used at the time, and did not find anything concrete. So we are going to do a little expert speculation about how something like this might have been, how some of this might have been used in the 1920s. The first thing that came to my mind was things like banks and real estate companies. And the way the kind of data that was gathered for this different purpose might be deployed in the management of neighborhoods that are rapidly changing Brooklyn borough.

Dan Bouk: Yeah I think that at the very least which shows the kind of attitudes that the homeowners immigration maps that are going to be form related after this, which reflected at very least the attitudes of the people making home loans. How you look at this, and I feel like it is very strongly an anti-immigration map. And so I know that in 1920 and 1921, in 1924 Congress is going to be passing very strict immigration laws. And so for me the hot pink is really meant to be scary and the fact that they have chosen these big blocks as opposed to fine-grained levels strikes me that that is about the rhetoric of scary invasion, rather than the kind of interesting, we are working on community trying to really understand what's going on here work that we see in the other maps.

Julie Golia: I will throw out also one other potential audience that I think has contemporary resonance, which is law enforcement. This is a kind of map in particular with those connections to sort of political entities of the time, the kind of map that might have been employed by anything from your local police to sort of more high up organizations with surveillance capacity. And it is to me a fascinating way that the kind of data that is gathered in a state Senate committee can be potentially deployed in lots of different ways.

Well, Dan, I wonder you know, as a teacher, talk about how you might incorporate this into your classroom. I'm curious, is there something that you think that your students would respond to?

Dan Bouk: Yes. Yes. I mean, I think I would kind of show it to students the way we just did like this. I'm a fan of the start with a cold read, start together questions and I can see from the chat already people are digging into this and starting to ask all kinds of interesting questions and build out from there a sense of, with some context and from there get research questions. I am seeing new questions being pointed out here you can readily see how the comments are pointing not unusually to say what about redlining maps. And if we go we could find redlining

maps of Brooklyn and start putting that on top of this and see what kind of comparisons we can find there.

Julie Golia: I think that is such a good point. I think that whenever we as instructors can model for students that many documents contain many more questions than answers, we have a positive teaching experience and the teaching experience that I think best models the historical method and the way that people do research. So even within the context of this map where we have Dan and me and Ian who know so much about it pooling our knowledge we did come away with as many questions as we did answers about it. I'm also interested in the question of when and how we provide context because I'm fascinated by the kind of naïve read, if you will. But I'm also cognizant of the fact that sometimes students and especially for those of us in in the audience that are teaching high school might find that kind of too much of a heavy lift for students who do not have the context and I think one interesting question that I've been kind of mulling over in my head is what does it mean to give students different context around this? What does it mean to pair this with a secondary source about the Red Scare or a secondary source about the history of race, and the way it was deployed in the 20th century? Or what would it mean to instead pair it with actual experts from the Lusk committee, and another primary source from the period. And I think perhaps the most interesting might be to pair it with something very contemporary. So all kinds of mechanisms of data visualization are going on today in this pandemic moment that we are living in and when I looked at the map, it brought to mind the different ways that states and the federal government are deploying the data that they are gathering about the way that COVID is impacting different communities. So I think that gives it sort of a real contemporary resonance if you will.

This seems like a great time to open things up, I can already see, wonderful attendees who are in a fantastic conversation. So I am going to close out my screen share so that we can all see each other. And for those of you who have those questions and comments about how to incorporate this into your work we would love to see both of those.

Ian Fowler: Please put those in the Q&A so we can have them. There's a different function for the chat and the Q&A. I would just like to add two things. Wonderful conversation. About the consumption of this map, one thing for our audience members to think about, there are only maybe, there is a Manhattan map that is the same thing. It's Racial Colonies in Manhattan and the Bronx. There are only three known sets of these maps, one at NYPL, one at Brooklyn Historical, and one at the University in Israel so also to think of that as what is the purpose of this maps production and I would also like to point out the term racial colonies is really associated with Robert Park, 20th century's preeminent sociologist who with Booker T. Washington at the University of Chicago and he uses the term and I think he coins it in his article from 1915, the city, suggestions for the study of human nature and the urban environment, which is really about using urban design and development to improve race relations. So there is also different ways to look at this map depending on how you do the research and there's a lot of unknowns. So it makes the discussion very interesting. And now we will see.

Dan Bouk: I see a few people in the chat. Philip and Tim are talking about using the 1920 census alongside this and one of the really interesting things about doing that, one of the primary kind of critiques I have of the map is the way that it does appear to create giant homogenous blocks. And all of that apparently, it normalizes the non-raced group of nativeborn Americans, and it would be very interesting to allow students to get into this data to go find out that's actually a much more mixed bag, that there's a great deal more they would find a lot of segregation but a lot less segregation in the map then there does appear to be.

Julie Golia: Yeah, and I also think there's been some really wonderful observations about what the absence of color means in this, the implication of who lives in the places that are not marked with color, which to me also seems like a really fascinating way with students to engage in contemporary discussions about the meaning of whiteness. You know, Dan made the great suggestion and again we will put this in the blog post with this episode that we will circulate to you after of using this with Nell Painter's The History of White People and I think this is a way to interrogate what the meaning of whiteness, what the meaning of race and ethnicity is in the 20th century through this map. It would be a wonderful way to make the deabtes that are going on with today historically rooted for students.

Dan Bouk: Yeah I think I do teach this thing usually with chapters from Nell Painter's book and I would definitely do that again for another reason that some folks have been here there's a long history of thinking about a relationship between race and nationality and... It can be again, we can feel like it is all settled now that we know what a race is and what a nationality and ethnicity is in this very productively helps to unsettle categories that feel natural like white, and show that they are equally historically constructed.

Ian Fowler: there were some questions earlier about the use of colors and the races like Germans and Italians and Jews being races. A lot of that goes back to the 1880s and 1890s with Prussia. They launched a number of hugely successful atlases that were very popular in the US. So this is a commercial enterprise. You want your buyers to be able to associate with something they already know. So the colors and the terms that he is using are reflective of something that the Prussians and the French were doing late in the 19th century, So there is a historical thread here that is not just coming up out of nowhere for this map. For the committee maps, yes there is a very specific and those are very different.

Julie Golia: that's actually a really fascinating point, Ian and one that makes me go back again to the idea of a current comparison with a historical comparison because I think there is a way, somebody asked in the chat can kids read maps today and the answer is that they read them every day. Right, I mean there are maps everywhere. And especially when we take an appropriate expansive definition of what exactly a map is, and so, I think that students are interacting with data and internalizing the messages of data everywhere they go and any opportunity that we can get to pull them back and question the values behind that I think that is an enormous exercise and critical thinking.

Ian Fowler: I would say in my teaching with maps with all levels one thing I have to reinforce is people use maps because they are usually geographically true to what they display which is obviously not the case. We have an anonymous Q&A question that I will answer. Are the records of how many of these maps were sold overall and who bought them? There is no records for these. Ohman took over the Colton Corporation those records do not survive. From what we can tell there are possibly six known pairs of the Brooklyn and the Manhattan map.

Nora says I wonder if we could discuss this with students in relation to the many Covid related heat maps of the US. We are all used to seeing them all over social media and it's often very difficult for the average person to interpret them, but they are clearly intended to produce some sort of emotional effect on the viewer, more than strictly informing them of stats.

Dan Bouk: I think that's a great point. There's a scholar I love, Jackie Wernimont at Dartmouth who has written sort of a long history of measuring and quantifying death. And she writes about bills of mortality in London in the 17th century... Or 16th century. And one of her points is that 17th century, when John Graunt is producing these tables one of the point of the table of deaths from plague is that it provides a feeling of order and control over a system about which there is very little order and control. And it does it through erasing all of the uncertainty in all of the work of potentially many women who were off doing the actual counting of dead bodies. Only certain people get to count as free men and show up in the bill. So it erases all sorts of different diversity in doing it and there's a very interesting way in which knowing that that is, that there is an affective quality of data is really useful to then think about what maps are trying to do. Like I say I think the map we are looking at is meant to scare people. And I think Covid maps are often meant to do a similar scare but often you get a feeling of order and control.

Julie Golia: Dan, will you recite the book. A couple people are asking what book…

Dan Bouk: Yes it is a book called Numbered Lives, by Jacqueline Wernimont

Julie Golia: To Nora's suggestion about maps on social media I think that would make an amazing exercise, a nice scaffolded exercise to ask your students to locate three maps that they have seen over and over in this sort of current moment and do an analysis on that based on the kind of data they have pulled or the new observations they've made based on the historical maps, so Nora, I think you have created a nice exercise there.

Ian Fowler: I think we have time for one last question. This is from Susan. Could you relate the focus on groups who are not welcome perhaps in the backlash against African-Americans at the end of World War I?

Dan Bouk: Yeah. Yes. I mean I think that is that's why I think it's interesting to put this I think, to take DuBois's work and you can see in the work is done there in the Philadelphia Negro in the settlement house trying to do a close look at a city, but that in the end is not nearly so well

remembered as the other maps that are produced, that are much more intended to scare people you can see a difference there. Du Bois, something else I will throughout their that is interesting and useful the Souls of Black Folk - Kwame Anthony Appiah has made a strong and interesting argument that you think of that is kind of folk - volk, the tradition that DuBois is writing and when he writes the souls of black folk is the tradition of the studies of peoples, German peoples that is associating race and national, that nationalities are meant to have races. So the Brothers Grimm going around and gathering folktales are doing the same work that Du Bois is doing in the African community and they are both a project of assuming that a race, a nation should have its own race and each race should have its own nation and those are the same kind of constructs, which was very important at the end of the 19th century.

Julie Golia: I think I would just add to that that there actually, there's been some really interesting scholarship on the way that anti-radicalism has also been used as a case for why African-Americans are much more American. So I think the big takeaway is there's a really kind of complex matrix of race and ethnicity in the 19th century in the 20th century and in the 21st century. It is, sometimes it can be boiled down to whites and other. Sometimes it is often deployed in much more complicated ways. There is a great book called How New York Became American, which actually references this map in it that talks a little bit about the complicated ways that anti-radicalism mixed with African-American sort of demands for civil rights. In kind of unexpected ways that I would point people to and I will also cite in the blog post after this episode.

Ian Fowler: Speaking of citing in the blog post, Julie, can you tell our guests what's going to happen after this is over in one minute and what the next steps are

Julie Golia: Absolutely. Let me see if I can quickly share my screen one more time. We have, if you don't know, an absolutely amazing repository, our digital collections. We have digital collections dot NYPL dot org. Almost 1 million digitized artifacts on here and it's a really wonderful resource for researchers, and teachers but can also be a little bit difficult to navigate because there is so much stuff which is why we are doing events like this. You should go to digital collections doc NYPL doc org and type in Ohman Map of the Borough of Brooklyn and this map will come up and you can also explore other maps --- including a similar one of Manhattan is also in the digital collection.

Ian Fowler: Wonderful. Thanks you very much and thanks everyone for coming. We had a great turnout today and we hope you enjoyed it. Before everyone leaves, I would like to launch the last poll... Which I should have done a little while ago but hopefully you are all still here and while that is up I would like to say we have the second Doc Chat coming up on August 18th. This will be on the centenary of the 19th Amendment, when some women in this country getting the right to vote. So that will be in collaboration with our Her Vote, Her Voice exhibit, which will be opening in 2021 and the 19th amendment, ERA and women's activism up to the present day. So please join us on August 18. That one will be at 12:30 in the afternoon. Not at 3:30 as today's and of course it will be on social media and emails going around to let you know all

about that. Thank you very much.

https://www.nypl.org/blog/2020/08/13/attention-primary-source-lovers-introducing-doc-chat