

Idea for 'maker' session: Visualising multiple and contradictory iterations of single space(s)

Summary

The aim of this session would be to engage in a thought experiment regarding varying approaches by varying historical actors (including nation-states) to the same 'fixed' or physically-bound geographical space. It is based on observations from my research into the circulation of knowledge in late seventeenth century Caribbean. The session would aim to visualise examples of multiple perspectives and uses of a determined space, preferably transnational or global examples. It elaborates on the idea I proposed in my abstract.

Background

My thoughts on this session come from my thinking about the Caribbean region in the late seventeenth century. The Caribbean region spanned from the Lesser Antilles in the east including Barbados, to the western islands of Jamaica and Cuba, and including the northern coast of New Spain, and the centre of the Spanish American empire in Cartagena. It was a highly contested region by European imperial powers. It would be difficult to identify the space as belonging to a particular European nation during this period, for a variety of reasons, which include: the rapidly shifting geo-politics of 'ownership' or claims to sovereignty over islands or territories; interactions between non-state actors such as privateers or rogue state actors, and state actors such as governors, settlers, mariners; and finally, the challenges posed to European imperial centres of knowing what was happening in the distant space and controlling it. There was a high volume of various types activity in the region with a number of different actors operating within the same space, for example: British/French/Spanish/Dutch/Portuguese merchants, settlers, mariners; various European merchant, slaving and naval ships, both State-Company led and private (Royal African Company, South Sea Company); privateers both licensed and unlicensed. Each had different objectives and spent different lengths of time in the Caribbean, and they reacted to the same space in a variety of ways.

Examples:

- English settler in Jamaica, John Taylor, on voyages from Port Royal to nearby islands, including Hispaniola, making manuscript drawings of coastlines and harbours as he saw them, and tables of observations of the declination of the sun.
- Royal African Company ships arriving in Caribbean ports with slaves and cargoes, travelling to different ports depending on market conditions and health of the slaves, and performing legal and illegal transactions.
- Pirates or privateers moving between islands, either to live or to raid. There are also reports of raiding ships. Governor of Jamaica and pirate Henry Morgan raiding Panama in 1675.
- English, French and Dutch mariners and pilots on quotidian merchant voyages sailing through the Caribbean, recording routes in diaries (for example, Edward Barlow) or ship logs.
- Printed or manuscript maps representing the space in European capitals, or official records of the geography of the Caribbean in the Spanish Casa de la Contratacion.

- Settlers and Governors development or ‘neglect’ of territories building or not building plantations, fortresses, and towns.
- Exchanges of information between Captains of different nationalities with local information. Reports by Captains to home country.
- Some instances of natural philosophers making observations on islands (for example Hans Sloane).
- Company factors, for example South Sea Company factors in Jamaica, Cartagena collecting information and managing local sales.
- Spanish admiralty trials of English mariners discovered north of Cartagena.

Possible outcomes of session

In other work I have tried to make a historiographical argument regarding this analysis of the Caribbean, suggesting that exchanges of information and the fluidity of interactions between numerous nominally state actors challenges the idea of mercantilism functioning as the dominant framework governing early modern imperial activity.

However, I am interested in how this type of multiplicity of engagement with space can be represented visually (if at all?). I am interested in how this can apply to other historical periods, regions, or processes, and indeed if it is in any way useful. Most of all, I am interested in whether this can produce different types of results or analysis for historians – ie whether it would illuminate areas of transnational history that have usually been obscured.

Method

The first step of the session would be to identify other examples of this type. In some senses, it is not difficult to think of examples, for instance, modern London has numerous competing versions and uses of the same place. I think it would be more interesting to consider examples that allow what have traditionally been national histories to become transnational or global, by altering the organizing principle of analysis.

The second and more significant step would be to experiment with ideas on how to visualize these examples. Crucially, what type of evidence would be appropriate?

Problems

Is it methodologically or conceptually coherent to argue that there can be a single geographical space, defined by physical boundaries? Do numerous interpretations, iterations or uses actually suggest there are many spaces, not singular space?