Entangled Spaces - Global Connections and Local Articulations: Portals of Early Modern Globalization and Creolization During the Era of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

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Background

The eighteenth century Atlantic world can be understood as a world of entangled spaces.\(^1\) It constituted a web of places where different cultural geographies overlapped, of entrance points for cultural transfers and interconnected networks for information and the flow of commodities. Different ethnic and religious communities and material cultures were simultaneously present in the same localities, in part independent from and in part interacting with each other. Inhabited by merchants, planters, servants and slaves, such places can be perceived as colonial or global spaces, where groups of people of various ethnic origins and classes engaged in trade, agriculture and consumption but also in acts of repression, rebellion and violence. Consequently, the Atlantic world was a space of inclusions and exclusions (Benjamin 2009).

A focus on slave plantations, port towns, merchant and slave ships, slave forts, missions and metropoles as ”entangled spaces” highlights the complexity of the early modern Atlantic world. The slave trade and the slave plantations were the foundation and core of the Atlantic world-economy, but they also marked the beginning of a new global era, namely the era of early modern or proto globalization.\(^2\) This new age was marked by various articulations of force and violence over nature as well as human beings, bodies and sexualities. It was also shaped by the constant production and re-building of space. This means shifts in the perception of space, from African or European to creole, from free to slave and slave to free (Landers 2010), from one harvest to another, from one hurricane ravaging the land to another, from one famine to another.

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\(^1\) ‘Entangled spaces’ correlates with entangled history, which in itself is an inexact translation of *histoire croisée* (Werner and Zimmermann 2006).

\(^2\) The concept of proto-globalization, introduced by A.G. Hopkins and Christopher Bayly, is a period spanning the years between 1600 and 1800 characterized by trade links and cultural exchange. See Bayly 2004.
A particular challenge for researchers and historians studying the impact of Atlantic interactions and the production of individual and collective space(s) during the age of the Atlantic slave trade is to break free from the straitjacket of national narratives. In light of the critique of the narrow narrative of the nation-state, this challenge can be articulated as a matter of how to include all the voices and experiences which hitherto have been left out when the official narratives of colonial powers such as Britain and France – but also Nordic nation states such as Denmark, Sweden and even Finland – have been constructed. Whose narrative is retold when a national paradigm is applied to US American, Jamaican, Brazilian, Angolan or Ghanaian history? Today’s challenge is to find a new way to integrate all those experiences in a new meta-narrative, one that is an inclusive and not an exclusive one.

For a long time, the perspective on the Atlantic world in the eighteenth century has been an European one. The triangular trade integrated and transformed societies on all sides of the Atlantic: European, African and American, yet their history has largely been written as the story of the rise of the British Empire (Bailyn 2005). Such a position has been challenged by research stemming both from a macro- and a micro-level perspective, arguing that the Atlantic was as much a Catholic and a Jewish world – even after the successful charge of the Dutch and British against the Iberian domination in the area (Kagan and Morgan 2009; Greene and Morgan 2009; Bailyn and Denault 2009). Almost invisible, on the other hand, were the various religious networks established by Africans that formed across the Atlantic around African traditional religions sometimes blending with Christian faith as well as Muslim traditions (Manning 2009). Today, the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and French presence in the Atlantic world is noted. The same applies to the Brazilians (Naro, Sansi-Rocca, Treece 2007) as well as actors from the Baltic region, notably the Danish (Holsoe & McCollum 1993).

It can be argued that the eighteenth century Atlantic world was an African era as much as it was an era dominated by Europeans. African rulers, merchants, slave hunters and local coastal populations were actively engaged in the slave trade by supplying the European slave traders with not only slaves but also provisions for the Middle Passage. African slaves worked in hundreds of thousands on the Caribbean and American plantations, but also as seamen onboard ships, as harbour workers and domestic servants, as well as in the mining industry in Iberian America. The staple goods produced by African forced workers were both markers of proto globalization and early signs of modern consumerism (Mintz 1985; McCusker & Morgan 2001; Burnard 2002; Burnard 2004; Müller 2004; Styles & Vickery 2006; Rönnbäck 2009).
The proposed research project, ‘Entangled Spaces - Global Connections and Local Articulations (EGL), links up with these new research approaches, outlined above, in analyzing the consequences, articulations and impact of proto globalization in the Atlantic world. The project builds on the accumulated expertise and insights of our previous Academy of Finland financed research project, ‘Consumption, Identity and Networks During the Age of the Slave Trade’ (CINDAST), which focused on the interconnectedness between individuals and communities in the eighteenth century Atlantic world. In the previous project, an actor-oriented framework was used to study how networks and connections created conditions for material and immaterial flows of goods and ideas. Our key focus was to study the links between these various interconnections, consumption patterns and formations of identifications. Another central aspect was to challenge narrow perceptions of the Atlantic by integrating a Nordic and Baltic perspective.

The proposed research project is more than a continuation of the CINDAST-project. It will make use of our collected insights, understandings and international networks, but the specific thematic and regional approach will be a novel one.

Objectives

Whereas the CINDAST-project operated mainly on a macro- and meso-level, the new project’s ambition is to highlight local articulations of proto globalization. The three key concepts in the new project are place, space and simultaneity. Processes of identification and consumption, flows of material and immaterial goods, information networks and structures of violence are studied by operating these three concepts. Our aim will be not only to bring forth a new understanding of the multiplicity and complexity of the eighteenth century Atlantic world, but also to participate in the writing of a new global history.

The general objective and ambition of the research project is to study and analyze the interconnected or entangled histories of the Atlantic world during the era of the slave trade. How did the places and communities in which control and flows were negotiated change over time? Who were the influential actors in these processes? Ira Berlin (1996) uses the term 'Atlantic creoles' to designate those who by experience or choice, as well as by birth, became part of a new culture that emerged along the Atlantic littoral-in Africa, Europe, or the Americas-beginning in the 16th century, Paul Lovejoy (2000) for the persistence of African identities in the shadow of slavery, while Paul Gilroy (1993) has argued for the emergence of an African Diasporic space since the nineteenth century: Can such a spatial organization of social exclusion and inclusion be identified in the protoglobal Atlantic world? In what way
did the temporal factor correlate with the territorial and spatial factor, in terms of flows and diffusion of material and immaterial goods, ideas and innovations? Last, but not least, Avtar Brah’s (1996) writings on diasporic space, transnational identities and the fluidity of borders raises the question of intersectionality as articulated both in space and location as well as through individuals in the 18th century Atlantic world.

As a point of departure, the research project will use Naumann’s and Middell’s concept of “portals of globalization” (Middell and Naumann 2010). Portals of globalization can be identified, for example, as a port town in Northern Europe, a slave plantation in the Caribbean or a church settlement in the Angolan hinterland. These were localities that served as entrance points for cultural transfers and sites for the development of institutions and practices dealing with global connectedness. At the same time, these portals of globalization were products of a new spatial order, the Atlantic world economy during the age of proto globalization, as well as physical sites of a range of both produced and overlapping spaces. On an abstract level, these portals signify overlapping or entangled spaces. The simultaneity and multiplicity of physical, virtual and imagined spaces can be studied by focusing on a particular location and, by extension, pursuing an asymmetrical comparison between different locations in the Atlantic world. Colonized space, entangled space and global space are the key concepts that serve as underlying guidelines and analytical categories for the research project.

The general framework can further be divided into different levels of spatial and temporal interactions, which enable an analysis of the multidimensionality of the eighteenth century Atlantic world. While the macro-level represents the abstract, constructed and imagined Atlantic and global space, the portals of globalization are by definition meso-level organizations of space and territory that exist simultaneously side by side. In their turn, they consist of a multitude of micro-level spaces inhabited by individuals and communities living and interacting in certain localities. At the micro-level, human agency is relational and simultaneous. It is the instable sphere of everyday life of consumers and producers, who constantly reorganize, redefine and relate themselves in time and space both to their own experienced and imagined past, their presence and their possible future. While each portal of globalization serves as a specific location for each individual, the location itself is as much a constructed and imagined entity when seen from the micro-level of the individual.

The ambition of the research project is to apply a microhistorical approach when analyzing the portals of globalization and entangled spaces in the Atlantic world. This will enable us to focus on the simultaneity of places and spaces. How were spaces of creolization constructed and articulated? What was the position of cosmopolitan brokers and other
intermediaries? How were taste, personal preferences and consumer choices shaped and expressed? What were the societal consequences of environmental and ecological stress?

A microhistorical approach will be sufficient to study the simultaneity of the micro-, meso- and macro-level at a certain location or portal of globalization. However, such an approach alone is not sufficient to analyze macro-level structures of imagined and perceived spaces or the question of intra-, inter- and translocality. For this reason, the research project has the ambition to combine a microhistorical approach with an analysis of meso- and macro-level structures and flows that affected the Atlantic world. In other words, while the former approach focuses on the localities of protoglobalization, the latter approach is needed for an analysis of the multidimensionality and complexity of the eighteenth century Atlantic world.

The combination of a macro- and meso-levels with a micro-level analysis is necessary for a comparative approach, which is crucial when applying a global historical framework. The Atlantic space, therefore, is the total sum of meso- and micro-level interactions, flows, networks and webs. While it is impossible for one research project to integrate and study the totality of simultaneous micro-, meso- and macro-level spaces, the EGL-project will focus on two macro-level aspects and their articulation on the meso- and micro level, namely Baltic trade networks and the effects of climate anomalies in the Caribbean.

**Hypothesis**

Inspired by the ‘spatial turn’ that also has started to affect historical research (Schlögel 2003; Cronqvist 2009), the research project’s key hypothesis is that the effects and consequences of protoglobalization and its local articulations in the Atlantic world can best be studied by focusing on various localities as portals of globalization. A portal of globalization is equivalent with the meso-space, which is to be conceived as the territorial expression of an entangled space. Recent studies on the eighteenth century Atlantic world have increasingly made use of this concept as a useful approach to overcome the “national framework” of earlier research. In comparison to comparative history, which studies societies that are geographically or temporally remote, entangled history, by contrast, examines interconnected societies. It highlights questions such as mutual influencing and reciprocal or asymmetric perceptions (Gould 2007).

In analogy to entangled history, the concept of entangled spaces challenges the singularity of a specific location or place. Instead, it highlights the simultaneous complexity
of overlapping processes and structures that are manifested in a specific location and articulated, imagined and constructed by specific individuals. Furthermore, an analysis of the impact, effect, extensity and intensity of global or intercontinental connections in a locality can offer valuable insights concerning the implications for production, consumption, demography, and sociopolitical configurations. Finally, an investigation into the correlation between the temporal and spatial factors of Atlantic transfers allows a closer study of the time lag in learning about and implementing political decisions, technical innovations and cultural expressions, as these moved from one continent to another.

Entanglement in space and history will be studied by analyzing how cultural worlds were reconstructed through dress, architecture, the manipulation of space, and the consumption of new objects. Moreover, the concept of entangled space enables a fruitful analysis of cosmopolitan brokers, processes of creolization and hybridization and the impact and consequences of external material and immaterial goods and ideas, actors and agents. These questions link the meso-level analysis with both a micro-level analysis of the reordering and (re-)construction of spaces and places and a macro-level analysis of webs and networks.

Inspired by David Featherstone’s research on ”geographies of resistance,” our focus on entangled spaces will also bring forward the question of how the spatial relations of Atlantic networks were brought into contestation through subaltern struggles and how multiple political identities were crafted through transnational political connections. According to our hypothesis, our focus on entangled spaces can further highlight the plural and mobile character of antagonisms between and within subaltern groups. Moreover, it will clarify how subaltern agency and identities were formed in relation to the materialities of Atlantic connections (Featherstone 2005 and 2007).

In practice, the research project will study the eighteenth century Atlantic world via eight thematic case studies, namely

- Spaces of Creolization in Eighteenth Century West Central Africa (Kalle Kananoja)
- Weather Extremes and Climatic Anomalies and their Societal Impact in the Danish West Indies (Stefan Norrgård)
- The Place of Animals in the Early Modern Atlantic World: (Laura Hollsten)
- Gendered and Affective Colonial Spaces in Oldendorp’s Accounts of the Danish West Indies (Anders Ahlbäck)
- Taste, Personal Preferences and Consumer Choices in the Atlantic World during the Eighteenth Century (Anna Sundelin)
- Scandinavian Free Ports in the Caribbean: A Comparative Analysis of Spaces for Transatlantic and Intracaribbean Exchanges (Victor Wilson)
- Entangled Spaces of the Early Modern Atlantic: Europeans, Africans and Afro-Europeans on the Danish Guinea Coast ca 1750-1850 (Holger Weiss)

**Research methods and material**

Common to all the individual projects is that they aim at identifying portals of globalization and through them address questions of spatiality in Atlantic and global history. In addition to the key concepts of place, space and simultaneity, used as analytical tools, each study employs methods specific for its respective approach.

Kalle Kananoja’s study approaches spaces of creolization from a microhistorical perspective, with a special focus on a group of intertwined inquisition cases from Angola. These cases clearly show that the spatial dimension of creolization in West Central Africa needs to be addressed in full detail because cultural processes took place differently in many areas within the colony (also Heywood and Thornton 2007). A gender perspective will further highlight the mechanisms of creolization and the mapping of the different spaces of creolization within the colony of Angola.

Gender as an analytical tool will also be employed by Anders Ahlbäck in his study on colonial, gendered and affective spaces in Oldendorp’s Account of the Danish West Indies. The Moravian trans-Atlantic networks entangled European spaces of revivalist, anti-authoritarian religious thinking with colonial spaces of missionary activities among the African slaves in the Caribbean. The Moravians’ egalitarian ideals and emphasis on emotional religious experience entailed contradictory notions of both individual emancipation and humble submission. In relation to both women and African slaves they were at the same time producing radical new forms of consciousness and reproducing social oppression (Sebro 2010). A study of Oldendorp’s account of African slave societies and Moravian mission in the Caribbean opens for questions about intersections of space, race and gender in connection with the rise of bourgeois values in the eighteenth century Western world.

The studies of Stefan Norrgård and Laura Hollsten employ methods of environmental history, with focus on Climate History and Animal Studies, respectively. Norrgård’s project studies the the impact of weather extremes on slave trade and slave labourers in Danish Saint Croix, using seventeenth century logbooks and travel accounts. In this age of sailing – where economic growth, commodities and communication was dependent on slow overseas contact – weather extremes would have had an immediate effect on many of
the entangled societies (Chenoweth 2003, Caviedes, 1991, Johnson 2005). Hollsten focuses on the place of animals in the early modern Atlantic world. She studies, on the one hand, how European and Creole animals contributed to the rise of the wealth creating sugar plantation complex, and on the other hand, how exotic animals became commodities and ended up in Europe. Drawing from travel accounts, sugar planting manuals, and natural histories, Hollsten argues that new cultural and ecological spaces were created by means of domestication and de-domestication of animals in the 17th and 18th century Caribbean islands.

Anna Sundelin’s research topic highlights the articulation and symbolic production of British elite culture through the concepts of taste, politeness and gentility and their articulation in the Caribbean. In line with scholars such as T.H. Breen and Arjun Appadurai, the fundamental assumption of her research is that consumer goods were not merely goods but had meanings on a symbolic level. Her study is based on letters, diaries, wills and probate inventories, all of which are personal sources that can reveal a surprising amount of information on individual choices regarding consumption.

Victor Wilson’s study on Scandinavian free ports in the Caribbean focuses on the two Scandinavian free ports in the Caribbean as examples of the entangled spaces in the region: Charlotte Amalie on Danish St. Thomas and Gustavia on Swedish St. Barthélemy. These cities became cosmopolitan micro-equivalents of societies with their own churches, fortifications, markets and artisan’s shops. The archival sources are to be found in the Danish West India Company Archives, the National Archives in Copenhagen and Stockholm and Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en Provence.

Holger Weiss’ study investigates changes in consumption patterns and habits in the West African coastal societies during the early modern period. To what extent did foreign consumption patterns and habits affect local ones in West Africa, and in particular on the Gold Coast? Is it possible to detect particular groups and individuals in Coastal West Africa that not only lived in ‘entangled spaces’ but can be identified as ‘mediators’ between the local and the foreign? It is argued that the port localities were ‘entangled spaces’ and that not only Africans consumed Eurasian material goods but Europeans also consumed African products. Consequently, the objective is not only to describe and analyze the extent to which some Africans ‘went European’, but also whether and when Europeans ‘went African’. The study draws on archival sources at the National Archives in Copenhagen.

The research material thus consists of a wide array of both printed and archival sources, most of which can be used by all participants: letters, travel accounts, memoirs, log books, customs books and Inquisition protocols. The printed travel accounts and memoirs are available at libraries and archives in London (National Archives, Royal Society, British
Library, Paris (National Archives), Aix-en Provence (Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer), Lisbon (Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo), Copenhagen (National Archives), Stockholm (National Archives) and Kingston (Jamaica Public Archives). In addition, some of the printed works are available as web resources. The printed collections and web resources that can be acquired will be a valuable resource for researchers and graduate students in a long term perspective.

**Key literature**


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