

## Book Review

*An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies and New Granada's Transimperial Greater Caribbean World*, by Ernesto Bassi, The London: Duke University Press, 2018

In *An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies and New Granada's Transimperial Greater Caribbean World*, Ernesto Bassi offers a powerful reframing of geographic and sociocultural space in colonial and early national Colombia. At issue are New Granada's connections to and formation by a Greater Caribbean sphere of influence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Bassi's work analyses shipping records, maps, official correspondence, and the writings of Simón Bolívar and other nineteenth-century revolutionaries to recover a human geography experienced by historical actors and later obscured by nascent nationalist histories.

*An Aqueous Territory* begins with a discussion of eighteenth-century commerce and voyaging between New Granada and the transimperial Greater Caribbean. Bassi demonstrates that frequent, small transactions between Spanish subjects and traders of other empires (specifically the British) were the most reliable means of provisioning for most of coastal New Granada. The peddlers who conducted this illegal trade in small, fast schooners to spread around risk also facilitated exchanges of information and trust. Bassi argues that contraband trade warped perspectives on geography. While the maps and correspondence of Spanish authorities barely noted "hidden ports" like Chagres or Sabanilla, which received minimal legal trade, these harbours were central to British illicit interactions with the Spanish American mainland.

The second and third chapters discuss how two traditionally subaltern groups of the early modern world, sailors and indigenous people, took advantage of the mobility of the transimperial Greater Caribbean. Common sailors were masterless, itinerant, and accustomed to shipboard diversity. Thus, Bassi contends that "instead of feeling subjects of a particular European crown and firmly attached to a specific town, island, colony, or nation, sailors' experiences point to the existence of an unarticulated but nonetheless strong feeling of being part of a transimperial Greater Caribbean." (65) Maritime workers used the labour mobility of this fluid spatial configuration to broker better oc-

cupational arrangements for themselves. The technological acumen, multilingualism, and diplomacy of New Granada's coastal indigenous populations thrived in these same conditions of pluralism and mobility. In particular, Bassi focuses on how the Wayuu and Cuna Indians confounded Spanish attempts to subjugate them by negotiating with Spain's rivals. This chapter reinforces how European cartographic designations of dominion overseas could be equally as ephemeral as the geographic conceptualization the monograph is advocating.

Chapter four segues from social history to the political imagination of Spain's principal rival in New Granada, Great Britain. British plans to establish legitimate territorial or commercial footholds in New Granada's Greater Caribbean represented more than a passing fancy for policymakers and adventurers. Some British imperialists saw New Granada as a trade replacement for lost commerce with the United States. Others considered potential invasion of the Spanish American mainland as a key component in British imperial retrenchment in the Americas. In sum, Bassi uses interactions in the transimperial Greater Caribbean to question the assumption that the British Empire's "swing to the east" to India was inevitable following the loss of its North American colonies.

The final two chapters of Bassi's work discuss how circum-Caribbean experiences informed meanings of nationhood in revolutionary and newly independent Colombia. Chapter five tackles Simón Bolívar's struggles to form Caribbean alliances during the war with Spain. The Latin American liberator sought aid from British Jamaica and independent Haiti in 1815 and 1816 after Spanish troops under Pablo Morillo crushed his first insurgency. Bolívar preferred British help for his next fight against Spain, but authorities in Jamaica rebuffed his overtures after Spanish officials convinced them that supporting Spanish American independence would only lead to revolutions or race wars in the British Caribbean colonies. Alexandre Pétion's government in Haiti worried that the perception that it was fomenting slave rebellions would lead European powers to renew warfare against it. However, Pétion was willing to support Bolívar's expedition covertly as it was in Haiti's interest to create more republics in the Americas. Bassi emphasizes that though Bolívar's perceptions of race caused him to favour overt support from a "civilized" power that looked to Europe, he ultimately received furtive aid from a black republic firmly planted in the Caribbean. Chapter six investigates how Colombian nation makers perceived Caribbeaness in the newly independent nation. Influenced by climatic determinism, a group of enlightened creoles sought to define Colombia as a nation of civilized people whose identity originated in the temperate Andes. Political geographers of the period replaced map references to the Caribbean with those of the Atlantic in an attempt to move away from connotations of blackness and barbarism and emphasize links to Europe. According to Bassi, ideas of race came to explain how a country with considerable coastline in and influence from the Caribbean came to self-identify nationally with its Andeaness.

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*An Aqueous Territory* opens up revelatory ways of thinking about historical space. It asks the reader to consider that “lived geographies foster the development of mental maps, maps in which proximity and belonging are not the direct measure of physical distance and imposed loyalties determined by birth-place.” (208) On this basis, the historian must question whether the way we orient geographic space today actually proves ahistorical to how early modern people did. Bassi’s extensively-researched book is also an ambitious addition to the historiography of Colombia, arguing persuasively for the centrality of the Caribbean experience in that nation’s formation. The scope of *An Aqueous Territory* makes it a bit disjointed at times. Several of its chapters feel more like stand-alone articles than pieces that build on one another. As the author argues for the uniqueness and validity of the transimperial Greater Caribbean as a demarcation, repetitive discussions of terminology sometimes occlude more important concerns. For example, chapter three on the Wayuu and the Cuna is dominated by the reductive question of whether or not these groups were “cosmopolitans.” These small shortcomings aside, Bassi’s book is an essential contribution to an emerging scholarship that envisions the Caribbean basin as not simply a depot of sugar and slaves, but also a region whose counter-imperial character influenced early modern global commerce, politics, and revolutions.

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