Europeanismisation of the World

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Europe shaped the world in its own image since at least the fifteenth century. The birth of European empires and their colonial occupations, slavery, and settlement left indelible marks on the world. As generations of scholars studying histories of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery illustrated, European empires managed the ‘Europeanisation of the world’ through various technologies.
[The] worse was the tale of the eighteenth century and the seventeenth century and the sixteenth century, and this whole dark crime against a human race began in 1442 when the historic thirty Negroes landed in Lisbon. … Thus, from 1442 to 1860, nearly half a millennium, the Christian world fattened on the stealing of human souls. … And during all this time Martin Luther had lived and died, Calvin had preached, Raphael had painted and Shakespeare and Milton sung; and yet for four hundred years the coasts of Africa and America were strewn with the dying and the dead, four hundred years the sharks followed the scurrying ships, four hundred years Ethiopia stretched forth her hands unto God. All this you know, all this you have read many a time. I tell it again, lest you forget.

Amongst these technologies perhaps most insidious yet most visualising one has been cartography – a way of representing the world. I want to raise and discuss some questions about understanding how Europe represented itself as both the centre of the world and at the same time as a contained continent.
The *centrality* and *containment* became dominant aspects of Europe’s image of itself and in the eyes of the other. Can the performative force of cartography perhaps explain how Europeans came to think of and present ‘themselves’ as *wanderers* and ‘others’ as *migrants*?
Where is Europe?

Walter Mignolo retells a story of Mateo Ricci, a Jesuit priest ‘travelling’ in China for establishing a mission.

Around 1584, the Chinese Mandarins visited the first Jesuit mission established in Shaoxing.

The Chinese saw on the wall what was for them an astonishing depiction of the earth.

It was likely that this was Abraham Ortelius map of *Tipus orbis terrarum* (1570).

What was astonishing was that not only the Chinese had thought the Chinese empire covered almost all of the earth but it was also at the centre.
The official history of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), written while Ricci was still in China, does not follow Ricci’s map and provides a critique of it. (Mignolo, p. 224).
‘Lately, Mateo Ricci utilized some false teachings to fool people, and scholars unanimously believed him. … The map of the world which he made contains elements of the fabulous and mysterious, and it is a downright attempt to deceive people on things which they personally can not go to verify for themselves. It is really like the trick of a painter who draws ghosts in his pictures.’
‘We need not discuss other points, but just take for example the position of China on the map. He puts it not in the centre but slightly to the west and inclined to the north. This is altogether far from truth, for **China should be in the centre of the world, which we can prove by the single fact that we can see the North Star resting at the zenith of the heaven at midnight.** How can China be treated like a small unimportant country, and placed slightly to the north as in this map?'}
‘This really shows how dogmatic his ideas are. Those who trust him say that the people in his country are fond of *travelling* afar, but such an error would certainly not be by a widely-travelled man.'
Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) produced an alternative map *mappamondo* (1602)
Mignolo says ‘Ricci was able to concede and change the geographical centre, although he may never have doubted that the ethnic centre remained in Rome.’ [p. 222]
Matteo Ricci (1552-1610)
Empires, metropolitan and colonial populations, 1913

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Sources and readings:


