

Trans-coloniality in the study of the British empire A historiographical note

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In the late 1990s, Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler seminally argued that historians of empire should treat metropolises and colonies within a single framework of analysis — an approach which has since been put into practice by some scholars of the British empire, contributing to the formation of what is now known as ‘New Imperial History’⁽¹⁾. In this historiographical trend, scholars have done a great deal in analyzing the movements of people, institutions, and ideas which cut across Britain and its overseas territories⁽²⁾. While this scholarship has usefully interrogated the relationship between the metropole and colonies, it has largely fallen short of foregrounding the movements *between colonies*. How did people (both individuals and groups), ideas (cultural norms and political ideologies), and institutions (legal, political, and social systems) travel across different colonial territories of the British empire, such as India, Ireland, Egypt, Canada, Australia and New Zealand?

One of the most important efforts to address the question of ‘trans-coloniality’ comes from Thomas R. Metcalf. In his book published in 2007, *Imperial Connections*, Metcalf traces and analyses how the subjects of the British Raj traversed the Indian Ocean arena, extensively moving between India and Britain’s other colonial possessions. Indians from all walks of life travelled to, and settled in, places as diverse as Malaya, East Africa, Uganda, and Australia, to serve as soldiers, police officers, laborers, and so forth⁽³⁾. India, however, was not simply a place of departure: for colonial subjects elsewhere, it was also a destination. In his book, *Irish Imperial Networks* (2012), Barry Crosbie shows how people moved *to India* from another colonial territory of Britain — Ireland. Crosbie argues that Irish people played a significant role in building and maintaining the British Raj as merchants, scientists, priests, doctors, and civil servants⁽⁴⁾.

(1) Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp.238-262.

(2) For an overview of New Imperial History as has been conducted within the field of British imperial history, see (ed.) Kathleen Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also (ed.) Stephen Howe, *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010) for a more general picture not confined to the British imperial context.

(3) Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

(4) Barry Crosbie, *Irish Imperial Networks: Migration, Social Communication and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The case of the Irish helps us further extend our investigations into trans-coloniality. For, the Irish were as much opponents of British colonialism as they were its agents, with the influence of their anti-colonial thoughts and practices found in other colonial contexts within the empire. For example, Michael Silvestri and Kate O'Malley have demonstrated in their respective monographs that, precisely because of their prolonged experience as a colonized people, the relationship of the Irish to the Indians was as often one of trans-colonial solidarity, united in their common struggle against British imperialism⁽⁵⁾. Such solidarity was not confined to the Indo-Irish relationship. In his book, *Transatlantic Solidarities*, Michael Malouf argues that through the works of Eamon de Valera, George Bernard Shaw, and James Joyce, the ideas of Irish nationalism travelled abroad, influencing such important Caribbean figures as Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican proponent of black nationalism and pan-Africanism⁽⁶⁾.

These works show how the idea of trans-coloniality can help us see the dynamics of both colonialism and anti-colonialism in shaping the diverse and yet connected histories of different parts of the British empire. Historians today are urged to look not just vertically but also sideways with a view to finding points of imperial interaction and networking that did not necessarily involve the metropolitan center of empire. As Elleke Boehmer argues, the points of interaction 'conventionally located between the European colonial centre and its periphery' should also 'be positioned *between* peripheries'⁽⁷⁾. With its focus on people who moved around the Caribbean and northern North America, Adele Perry's essay in this special section can be seen as an exemplary piece of work that addresses the trans-colonial as a viable field of research for the study of the British empire. By discussing how colonized peoples moved across different territories of the Japanese empire, Hiroko Matsuda's essay in the same section offers to scholars of the British empire a valuable frame of reference: by comparing two different imperial contexts, we would be able to deepen our understanding of trans-colonial phenomena as they globally unfolded across different imperial terrains.

(5) Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: Nationalism, empire, and memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1914-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). See also, Julia M. Wright, *Ireland, India and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

(6) Michael G. Malouf, *Transatlantic Solidarities: Irish Nationalism and Caribbean Poetics* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

(7) Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.2.