Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire[1]

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Abstract

How to write about the many, diverse places that constituted the British Empire in the same text; how to conceive of both the differences and the connections between Britain and its various colonies? These have been perennial problems for imperial historians. This article begins by examining the concept of 'core' and 'periphery', and the various ways that it has been employed within the tradition of British imperial history. It then turns to concepts such as networks, webs and circuits, which are characteristic of the 'new' imperial history. It suggests that these newer concepts are useful in allowing the social and cultural, as well as the economic, histories of Britain and its colonies to be conceived as more fluidly and reciprocally interrelated. The article concludes by suggesting that these spatial concepts could usefully be taken further, through an explicit recognition of the multiple trajectories that define any space and place.

From the beginnings of British imperial history writing at the end of the nineteenth century, the differences between spaces and places, particularly 'metropolitan' or 'core' ones, and 'colonial' or 'peripheral' ones, have been absolutely fundamental to our imagination of the British Empire. And yet these spatial concepts have rarely been examined explicitly. Rather, the spatial imagination of imperial historians has generally been an implicit, taken-for-granted one. This article begins by reviewing a genre of 'traditional' imperial history that is often criticized by postcolonial scholars for being top-down, focused solely on economic and political issues, and not only masculinist but also ignorant of the significance of gender in its approaches. Seldom, however, has that tradition been interrogated specifically for its spatial imagination. At the risk of re-centring a tradition that many postcolonial scholars of empire have been seeking to displace, this article begins by performing such an interrogation. It does so, however, as a stepping stone to newer ways of conceptualizing the British Empire's spatialities – ways that postcolonial scholars themselves have developed.

For over thirty years, between the 1950s and 1980s, the most influential model for understanding Britain's nineteenth-century imperial expansion was that of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher. Robinson and Gallagher argued that the kind of overseas influence favoured by the mid-Victorian

British government was a low cost 'imperialism of free trade'.[2] The problem that they faced was that of explaining why, despite this metropolitan preference for informal economic dominance, a formal empire of direct administration nevertheless developed during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The answer, they suggested, was that 'circumstances overseas, rather than central policy, had governed the timing and decided the forms of imperial intervention in different regions'.[3] Robinson and Gallagher gave the example of contemporaneous, but very different British approaches to India and Latin America, to make their point. In both these cases, the objectives of British involvement were the same: to generate Britain's economic expansion. But in India, where indigenous competition in British fields of manufacture was strong, the restrictive, 'mercantilist' techniques of formal empire were most appropriate, while in Latin America, 'informal techniques of free trade', including the cultivation of a dependence on British investment and loans, were sufficient. Thus, the imperial policies of British officials 'were adapted to conditions found in each periphery'.[4] The crucial intermediaries between these peripheral conditions and ultimate decision-makers in Britain were the cadre of officials who represented Britain overseas. These men (and they were all men) shared a common educational background and world view which Robinson and Gallagher described as the 'official mind'. They were the ones who had to decide how best to represent local conditions, and periodic local crises, to the metropolitan government, and what actions to recommend. In a further twist to their argument, Robinson and Gallagher suggested that many of their decisions were taken with the potential for indigenous collaboration in mind.[5] Robinson and Gallagher's model was thus premised on the notion that 'the chances of local cooperation and crises of local resistance played as large a role as the agents of expansion in deciding different forms of imperialism in different regions . . . there was no unified imperial state, but as many different kinds of empire with as many different connections with Britain as there were countries under her sway'.[6] In spatial terms, theirs was a centripetal, or, as they called it, 'Ex-centric', analysis, since expansionary initiative moved from the colonial 'edge' of the empire to the British 'centre'.[7]

In linking economic and political motivations, and explaining their intersection within the culture of the 'official mind', Robinson and Gallagher's theory provided successive imperial historians with a well-demarcated field of study. At the same time, it inscribed an implicit geographical imagination on their discipline. Imperial historians' role was to study a world of 'core' British metropolitan interests interacting with 'local/peripheral' crises that were generated through the actions of indigenous peoples and rival imperial powers, and to reconstruct the ways in which the 'official mind' would have understood this world. However, both indigenous peoples (other than the crucial 'collaborators') and rival Europeans played bit parts in the central drama of this 'official mind' and its geographically dispersed calculations.[8]

It was the very fact that colonized subjects were unwilling to rest content with playing this bit part in the making of their own histories that ultimately disturbed imperial historians' integrated terrain of investigation. Decolonization, ongoing during the period of Robinson and Gallagher's historiographic dominance, fundamentally changed the ways that imperial historians were able to conceive of their subject. As David Fieldhouse explained, 'The intellectual unity of imperial history had been built on the assumption that the imperial impact was irreversible, so that colonial self-government would lead, not to fragmentation of empire, but to strong post-independence associations.' But this 'proved largely false: empire led, at least in the British case, rather to overt declarations of total separation tempered by the rhetoric of Commonwealth'. Given this, 'Clearly the proper unit of research and analysis was the individual society in the process of becoming a nation . . . This was the starting point for regional studies as a substitute for imperial history.'[9] Effectively, the fragmentation of the empire itself resulted in the fragmentation of imperial history writing. Fieldhouse noted the effects: 'European historians . . . turned inwards . . . and studied their own countries as individual nation states', while,

> at the other end of the imperial relationship, historians of and in the one-time overseas colonies rejected the imperialists' assertion that alien rule had totally reconstructed these dependent societies, or was even the most important formative influence on their character. In place of imperial history they rediscovered (and in many cases virtually created) autochthonous local histories, relegating the imperial factor to the margins of causation. Thus European and 'Third World' historians combined to break the tablets on which traditional imperial history had been written.[10]

Not long after Fieldhouse began to wonder how imperial history could be recreated as a unified field of enquiry, however, a new integrative model of imperial expansion and decline was being formulated. In place of Robinson and Gallagher's centripetal framework, the work of P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins was based upon a more explicitly centrifugal sense of imperial space. For them, 'gentlemanly capitalism', with its logic structured above all in the City of London, was the driving force of interaction between Britain and its colonies. Cain and Hopkins asserted that 'Putting the metropolitan economy back at the centre of the analysis . . . makes it possible to establish a new framework for interpreting Britain's historic role as a world power.'[11] This metropolitan focus was a deliberate challenge to the 'excentric' theory of imperialism associated with Robinson and Gallagher.[12] Rather than the product of the deliberations of an 'official mind' on peripheral crises, it was the work performed by 'gentlemen' operating in the financial and service sectors of the City of London, but maintaining close connections with government, that drove Britain's imperial expansion. Imperialism was 'one of the methods by which that elite can prosper and continually renew itself', and examples of that elite's involvement in crises ranging from Canadian unity to the occupation of Egypt and the Boer War,

and in parts of both the informal (Latin America, Persia and China) and formal empire, were enlisted to make the case.[13] After surveying such an enormous terrain of imperial activity, Cain and Hopkins were confident that 'geographical considerations, like the "peripheral thesis" have their place in the story, but only within the context of impulses emanating from the centre'.[14]

'Geographical considerations', however, continued to trouble imperial historians after Cain and Hopkins had sought to lay them to rest. Unsurprisingly, Cain and Hopkins's metropolitan focus provided one of the most common grounds for criticism of their thesis as a whole. As Ballantyne points out, '[v]iewing the empire and its history from London . . . returns indigenous people to the margins of history while foregrounding "gentlemanly capitalists"'.[15] In the same article in which he noted the historiographic effects of decolonisation, Fieldhouse had already indicated the longstanding problem of 'the imperial historian': how to write about such vastly different places, processes and people as those contained within the nineteenth-century British Empire at the same time – how to link the local and particular (both metropolitan and colonial) with the general and universal (imperialism). In other words, how to connect phenomena and people analytically in the ways that colonial relations had connected them historically. Fieldhouse's question was, 'Can the fragments of the old imperial history be put together again into new patterns which are intellectually respectable?'[16] Fieldhouse's own answer was 'yes', as long as the imperial British 'core' could continue to be linked reciprocally with its colonial 'peripheries'.

In searching for a way to reconstruct this core-periphery link, Fieldhouse began by turning to the roots of imperial history in the writings of J. R. Seeley. Within his original delineation of the field, Fieldhouse noted,

> It was unhistorical . . . to think or write of 'England' in isolation from its empire: it had become part of 'Greater Britain' and its whole history had to be reinterpreted, teleologically, in relation to that fact . . . Thus the function of the imperial historian was, first, to explain how and why the metropolitan states had grown from small European societies into world powers; then to analyse what significance this expansion had for metropolis and dependencies alike.[17]

With its focus on integration between metropole and colony, Seeley's original approach seems, at first glance, to have much in common with the 'new' imperial history that I will discuss below, at least in terms of its geographical imagination. As Catherine Hall notes, 'Seeley's focus on the name, England, the race, Englishmen, and the nation, which is also an empire, provides a rich starting point . . . For rethinking imperial history in postcolonial times requires reconnecting race, nation and empire: Seeley knew they were intimately connected.'[18] However, within Seeley's approach, as Fieldhouse recognized, 'the dependencies also lost their historical autonomy. India, for example, had been incorporated into British imperial

history. Her [*sic*] past had obviously been tending in that direction, her present and future would be moulded by the imperial factor.'[19]

When Fieldhouse came to consider how imperial historians in the 1980s could use what was best in Seeley's account to move on from its teleological assumptions, he proposed that the imperial historian adopt a specific spatial vantage point. He advocated an imperial history specialism in the 'interactions' between the British 'core' and its 'peripheries'. These 'interactions' affected, for Britain, 'the nature of the economy, the patterns of foreign policy, even the character of the armed forces'. For its former colonies, they influenced political culture and administrative systems, commodity structures, and state boundaries among other characteristics.[20] Other kinds of historian would be left to look more closely at temporal changes within each of these regions, but the imperial historian would be located 'in the interstices of his [*sic*] subject, poised above the "area of interaction" like some satellite placed in space, looking, Janus-like in two or more ways at the same time' and giving 'equal weight to what happens in a colony and in its metropolis . . . intellectually at home in both'.[21] Even though he refused to recognize the inescapable subjectivity of the scholar, Fieldhouse did admit that 'no one person can satisfy all these requirements', simply because of the amount of historical material that would have to be processed. But he concluded nevertheless, on a relatively optimistic note: while current historians did tend to specialize in either metropolitan-focused history, the regional history of colonized zones or the thematic history of trans-imperial phenomena such as investment, trade or migration, all at least shared 'a common vocabulary which enables them to compare and understand developments within different parts of the broader field'.[22]

Other imperial historians, too, have recognized the need to analyse metropole and colony in the same frame, even if they have resisted prescribing such panoptic vision.[23] John Darwin, for instance, built upon Fieldhouse's rather vague notion of 'interaction' by arguing that imperial historians should connect Britain and its colonies using the concept of multiple 'bridgeheads' between the two. Pointing out that '[a]ny reappraisal ought to be informed by the pluralism of British society' as well as 'the diversity of British interests at work on the periphery', Darwin defined the 'bridgehead' as the

> hinge or 'interface' between the metropole and a local periphery . . . It might be a commercial, settler, missionary or proconsular presence or a combination of all four. It might be a decaying factory on a torrid coast or, at its grandest, the 'Company Bahadur'. Whether British influence grew, or was transformed into formal or informal empire, largely depended upon the circumstances and performance of the bridgehead. How skilfully did it exploit the political, economic or ecological characteristics of its host environment? How efficiently could it transmit the power of the metropole into its periphery . . . How quickly could it build a local political 'infrastructure' as a vehicle for further injections of force or influence from the metropole?[24]

Darwin concluded that 'only by reconstructing more fully the functioning and interaction of these bridgeheads at home and abroad will we be able to explain properly the erratic, unpredictable, tentative, opportunistic but ultimately insatiable progress of Victorian imperialism'.[25]

In some ways, Darwin's intervention narrowed a gap that had been emerging, since the early 1990s, between accounts of British colonialism influenced by postcolonial theory, often described as the 'new' imperial history, and the more 'traditional', positivist school out of which his own trajectory had developed. I do not propose here to enter into the significant theoretical differences between 'traditional' imperial history and postcolonial theory, or to do full justice to the ways that the 'new' imperial history seeks to blend the attention to empirical detail and historical context of the former, with the post-structuralist understanding of race, class, nationality, sexuality and especially gender, of the latter. Here, I will stay more narrowly with the spatial imagination associated with each tendency.[26]

In recognizing the co-existence of different British interests, each with their own ways of connecting metropole and colony (or their own 'bridgeheads'), Darwin's article touched on Nicholas Thomas's insistence that we identify multiple, and often contestatory 'projects' of colonialism. In noting that different bridgeheads might not be oriented towards compatible aims, it chimes with Ann Laura Stoler and Fred Cooper's call for greater analysis of the significant 'tensions of empire' among colonists, as well as between them and colonized peoples.[27] And in conceiving of several 'bridgeheads' connecting any one colony with Britain, Darwin was close to elaborating a networked or webbed conception of imperial space, also characteristic of the 'new' imperial history.[28]

A spatial imagination premised on the idea of multiple, co-existent connections between Britain and each of its colonies is also characteristic of two recent departures in imperial history. First, there is A. G. Hopkins's drive to make the discipline more politically relevant as a foundation for understanding contemporary globalization, and secondly there is the series of conferences and publications around the theme of the 'British World'.

Hopkins now sees in nineteenth-century imperialism a way of encompassing the past and considering 'the alignment of future loyalties in a world in which the nation-state may no longer be either the dominant political institution or the basis for economic development'.[29] Given the ways in which some prominent commentators have brought assumptions about the British imperial past to bear on present geopolitical projects, one can only applaud Hopkins's endeavours to highlight both the complexity of empire as a transnational phenomenon, and the history of globalized relations which are all too often seen as dependent on very recent communications technology.[30] Perhaps the greatest limitation of Hopkins's attention to the imperial antecedents of contemporary globalization, though, is his rather narrow, 'top-down', economic approach. Hopkins finds the greatest promise in work on military fiscalism which identifies 'connections

between war, finance and overseas expansion in order to explain the huge extension of trade and empire after 1750'.[31]

If the construction of colonial culture and identity does not loom large in Hopkins's own work, it is central to another recent imperial history venture, with a similarly transnational geographical imagination. In recent years a series of international conferences under the general heading 'The British World', has been held in some of the former white settler colonies and Britain. The central themes of this work are also those that lay at the heart of many postcolonial accounts of empire: diaspora, culture and identity (rather than the high politics or economics of much of the pre-existing imperial historiography). The British World conferences and resulting publications focus on the multiple transactions across the empire in which British emigrant communities, missionaries, officials, traders, newspaper editors and others engaged, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[32]

In their introduction to this body of work, Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich note that Fieldhouse had 'failed to comprehend adequately the dynamic that there was a multiplicity of metropoles and peripheries in the British world. Think of the emerging importance of cities such as Melbourne, Auckland and Toronto, which barely rate a mention in his work'.[33] Developing a rather different spatial imagery, they argued that 'the cultural glue which held together this British world consisted not only of sentiment and shared institutional values but also of a plethora of networks'.[34] 'New' imperial historians and postcolonial scholars have advocated this networked notion as well. Its deployment within the 'British World' context marks a further narrowing of the gulf that has separated the positivist tradition of imperial history from the postcolonially attuned 'new' imperial history.[35] However, one criticism that can be levelled at the output from the 'British World' project, so far at least, is that in restoring British settlers to a central role in empire building, some contributors have overlooked their virulently racist contribution to the shaping of colonial discourses and practices. The range of networked connectivities that Bridge and Fedorowich mentioned, ranging from 'the obvious family and community connections to business, religious, educational, scientific and professional associations, to trades unions, and to itinerant workers of all kinds', did not simply connect settler Britons with their metropolitan and colonial counterparts. They also facilitated the production, reproduction and circulation of notions of 'race' that played a significant role in the material dispossession, exploitation and partial eradication of indigenous peoples within each settler colony.[36]

Before we explore the utility of networked notions of empire more thoroughly, it is worth pausing at this point to review what it is about the implicit geographies of 'traditional' imperial history (largely pre-dating the recent work of Hopkins and Bridge and Fedorowich) that is most problematic. The empiricist approach of this tradition tends, with some recent exceptions, to translate into a notion of the empire as a space for the

movement of material things – of capital and commodities especially. These things are propelled (usually by white, male Britons) between discrete, pre-constituted, bounded places. The internal identity of each of these places is self-evident and unassailable. Sometimes that identity is captured by a specific national or regional designation ('Canada', or 'southern Africa'), but often it is captured by the more reductionist designation of 'core' or 'periphery'. These designations have a specific analytical function. From Seeley through Robinson and Gallagher and Fieldhouse, to Cain and Hopkins, this function is to explain and locate either the motivations for, or the causes of, British imperial expansion. This is a pursuit, which seems, implicitly, to be conducted for an audience interested in Britain's national origins and its 'progress' to Great Power status, rather than one interested in the nature of colonial relations in any one or more places, and how those relations shape those places. The main point of difference between authors within the imperial history 'tradition', in terms of their geographical imagination, is whether the 'causes' of Britain imperial expansion were located in the 'core' itself, or in its 'periphery'. But what they share is this grand narrative of historical causation, accompanied by some version of a 'core-periphery' mapping.[37]

The places mentioned in this tradition of imperial history, then, are significant as locales only in the Cartesian sense of points on a grid or map, set out in relation to an imperial core which may be Britain as a whole or London in particular. The purpose of this map is to allow the driving forces of Britain's expansion to be plotted. The imperial historian can look down from on high, as Fieldhouse dreamed, and locate the determinants of imperial interaction on this map.[38] In such an imperial history, neither colonial nor British places are of interest as configurations of peoples, experiences, things and practices in their own right.

Scholars who propose a networked conception of empire generally consider it more useful to try to examine multiple meanings, projects, material practices, performances and experiences of colonial relations rather than locate their putative root causes, whether they are 'economic', 'political' or indeed 'cultural'. These relations were always stretched in contingent and non-deterministic ways, across space, and they did not *necessarily* privilege either metropolitan or colonial spaces. They remade both metropolitan and colonial places in the act of connecting them.[39] A colonial history which, as Kirsten McKenzie puts it, 'recasts the relationship between metropolitan centre and colonial periphery into a more contested, unstable and mutually constitutive frame' may have more limited ambition in one sense than a history that seeks definitively to name, locate or model the causes of imperial expansion.[40] But it is not only a history that can perhaps fulfil its own aims more effectively, but also one that does a little more to challenge the contemporary acceptance of a European colonial conception of the world.[41]

In the discussion of John Darwin's work above, I touched upon two aspects of the 'new' imperial history that inform its geographical

imagination. The first concerns the notion of multiple colonial 'projects', and the second, the networks through which these projects were pursued. In partial critique of 'traditional' imperial history, the 'new' imperial history recognizes that there was never a single European colonial project, whether it be the pursuit of industrial or 'gentlemanly' capitalism, or governmental geo-strategizing. Neither, accordingly, was there a single colonial discourse, or set of representations and practices of colonialism. Rather, the agendas of colonial interests, their representations of colonized places and peoples and their practices in relation to them, were not only differentiated, but also often constructed in opposition to one another. Moreover, these projects and discourses always took shape through connections between colonial and metropolitan places. Catherine Hall, for instance, has written extensively about the contested notions of race, class and gender difference which connected Jamaica and Britain, especially Birmingham, within the reformist evangelical project of the nineteenth century, and Mrinalini Sinha and Antoinette Burton have focused on similar circuits of discussion over the definition of manliness and of feminism that connected India and Britain within what Sinha calls an 'imperial social formation'.[42]

In my own book, *Imperial Networks*, I focused on three competing projects of colonialism in the eastern Cape region of South Africa during the early nineteenth century, and the ways that the protagonists of each project sought to utilize connections in Britain to achieve their goals.[43] Missionaries, most notably those of the London Missionary Society under the leadership of Dr John Philip, sought to deploy contacts with the humanitarian reformist movement in Britain (especially in the form of the reformist MP Thomas Fowell Buxton) to further their project, which was the conversion and 'redemption' of indigenous (Khoi and Xhosa) subjects. At the same time, officials tried to govern the region at minimal expense and create docile, well-ordered subjects, both white and black, by sharing in a general discourse of colonial governmentality – one that was fostered through the circulation of texts on 'how to govern' between colonies, the career mobility of governors themselves,[44] and the maintenance of influential personal contacts in Britain. As Zoë Laidlaw has argued more recently, the governance of Britain's colonies relied for its existence and functioning to a great extent on informal contacts, patronage, nepotism and politicking in London.[45] Finally, British settlers in the region felt obliged to construct their own networks of communication with settlers in other colonies, most notably through the mutual extraction of articles and editorials in the settler press, in order to defend themselves against humanitarian critique, and agitate for greater metropolitan government support. I argued that, in utilizing metropolitan contacts to wage their struggles over colonialism in the Cape, each of these interests was also shaping discussion of the morality and purpose of the empire in Britain.

While the focus of Hall, Sinha, Burton and of my own *Imperial Networks*, has been on links between a specific colony and its metropole, all have

demonstrated an awareness that the colony-metropole interactions in which they are interested were components of much more extensive networks connecting multiple colonial and metropolitan sites, and that these networks were built and reformulated by colonial interests in tension with one another as well as with indigenous peoples. In a more recent paper, for instance, I argued that the contests that the Cape's British settlers waged with local humanitarian missionaries were by no means restricted to the Cape itself. Through the circulation of their newspapers, settlers in the Cape, New South Wales and New Zealand made common cause against the 'interfering' humanitarians, whose condemnations of settlers' 'unchristian' behaviour threatened their racial privilege in each place, and above all, their legitimacy in the eyes of the metropolitan government and public. Given the convergence of these newspapers on Britain, and the promiscuous ways in which they were extracted for colonial news by both the London and provincial British press, settler representations of 'native irreclaimability' must have carried considerable weight with British readers by the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps helping effect a broad shift from cultural to biological notions of 'racial' difference.[46]

Tony Ballantyne, too, has focused recently on circuits of discussion that connected different colonies, rather than just an individual colony with Britain. He has tracked ideas about Aryanism and racial difference that circulated between India and New Zealand as well as much further afield. Ballantyne's project has been dependent upon an unusually explicit discussion of the British Empire's web-like spatiality. He argues that

> The web metaphor has several advantages for the conceptualization of the imperial past. At a general level, it underscores that the empire was a *structure*, a complex fabrication fashioned out of a great number of disparate parts that were brought together into a variety of new relationships . . . The web captures the integrative nature of . . . cultural traffic, the ways imperial institutions and structures connected disparate points in space into a complex mesh of networks. Moreover, the image of the web also conveys something of the double nature of the imperial system. Empires, like webs, were fragile (prone to crises where important threads are broken or structural nodes destroyed), yet also dynamic, being constantly remade and reconfigured through concerted thought and effort: the image of the web reminds us that empires were not just structures, but processes as well.[47]

As Ballantyne proceeds to note, the utility of a networked or 'webbed' conceptualization goes further: it enables us to think about the inherent relationality of nodal points or 'centres' within an empire. Undercutting simple metropole-binary divides, places and people, as Bridge and Fedorowich also note, can be 'nodal' in some of their relations with immediate hinterlands or subordinates (Calcutta in relation to Bengal, for instance), and yet simultaneously 'peripheral' in some of their relations with other centres of calculation (Calcutta in relation to London).

This networked conception of imperial interconnectedness is very fruitful if one wants to consider metropole and colony, or colony and colony, within

the same analytical frame, and without necessarily privileging either one of these places. However, there are still traps into which one might fall. First, there is a tendency in some sociological discussions of contemporary, much faster, networked flows across the globe, to emphasize their progressive nature and their cosmopolitan effects – the ways that they bring together previously discrete populations and allow for the mutually enlightening mobility of knowledge. But, as imperial historians should be aware, newly instituted networks have destructive as well as creative effects. If imperial networks allowed previously unconnected activities, lives and practices to be brought together, they also allowed previously connected ones to be wrenched apart. It is all too easy to imagine the networks instantiated by Britons of various kinds (settlers, officials, missionaries, natural scientists etc) as 'originary', as the first means by which distanced places were ever connected. Not only would such a move unrealistically inflate the innovativeness and ingenuity of Britons, but it would also elide the significantly interconnected nature of the pre-colonized societies that were later 'assimilated' into the empire. The networks instituted by British imperial interests were introduced into contexts that were always already themselves networked. As Eric Wolf has argued with reference to a symbolic date preceding the European Age of Exploration, 'Everywhere in this world of 1400, populations existed in interconnections . . . If there were any isolated societies these were but temporary phenomena – a group pushed to the edge of a zone of interaction and left to itself for a brief moment in time.'[48] Spatially extensive trading, tribute, diplomatic, intellectual, migration and travelling networks were by no means a British invention. In most cases, the webs structured by British colonial interests were either layered on top of pre-colonial networks, adding new levels of complexity, or those pre-colonial networks were fundamentally disrupted and restructured as a result of British interventions.[49]

If we think only about imperial networks that were constructed and maintained by colonial interests, it is also easy to overlook the fact that colonized subjects themselves could and did forge new, anti-colonial networks of resistance, which similarly spanned imperial space. Fewer colonized subjects were themselves as mobile as, for instance were colonial governors (Fanon and Gandhi being well-researched exceptions),[50] at least not voluntarily so, but as Elizabeth Elbourne has shown for the early nineteenth century, and Elleke Boehmer for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, counter-imperial networks of communication and agitation could be created by Khoisan, Maori and Aboriginal groups as well as Irish and Indian nationalists and anti-British Boers.[51]

Finally, even though scholars such as Ballantyne stress the contingent dynamism of imperial webs or networks – the fact that they are processes as well as systems – there is always the danger that we construct them in our minds as reified and ossified infrastructures, rather like a road or rail network at any given point in time. It may be more productive not to use 'systems'

language at all to conceptualize imperial networks, since across any kind of space 'there are always connections *yet to be* made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction, or not, potential links which may never be established. Loose ends and ongoing stories'.[52] The colonial networks that we envisage then, must be seen not only as provisional and contingent, but sometimes as ephemeral and even fleeting. Rather like the patterns in a kaleidoscope, the precise constitution of the interconnections is momentary, although the networked nature of interconnectedness itself is constant.

The point about networks, of course, is that they connect different places. And what emerges implicitly from the networked conception of imperial *space* that 'new' imperial historians employ, is a conception of *place* that shares many features with recent theoretical approaches within the discipline of geography. In this conception, places are not so much bounded entities, but rather specific juxtapositions of multiple trajectories. These trajectories may be those of people, objects, texts, ideas and even of rock, sediment, water, ice and air (constituting the physical geography of place at any given time). The differences between places are the result of these trajectories – of these mobilities which proceed at very different rates – intersecting, being thrown together, in different ways across the surface of the Earth. In their ever-changing coming together, they produce combinations that are unique, and thus give 'character' to each place.

Doreen Massey is the most eloquent exponent of this view of place. She notes how, in most humanities and social science literature, more bounded notions of place limit our ability to analyse both historical and contemporary interconnectedness. In this literature, and here I would include 'traditional' imperial history writing, 'First the differences between places exist, and then those different places come into contact. The differences are the consequence of internal characteristics. It is an essentialist, billiard-ball view of place. It is also a tabular conceptualisation of space.'[53] Following their insight about the networked nature of imperial space, imperial historians (and, as we have seen, not necessarily just the 'new' imperial historians) are now beginning to conceive of this 'first' (and subsequent) meeting of metropolitan and colonial places, rather, as the throwing together of a set of incredibly diverse and complex trajectories that were already spatially extensive, even if in other directions. In such a conceptualization, imperial space is 'the sphere of a multiplicity of trajectories', many of them shaped by specific colonial or anticolonial projects, such as proselytization, humanitarianism, settler capitalism, commercial enterprise, scientific enquiry, governmentality, or resistance to white supremacy. Some of these trajectories (most notably those originating from within Britain) may be 'stronger' than others for a while, and some of them may become formalized as networks such as those constructed by the missionary societies, by the East India Company or by the Pan-Africanist Congress.[54] Both metropolitan and colonial places are specific meeting points of such trajectories, a coming together of them in specific ways at a specific time. Adopting such a conceptualization allows

us to continue insisting on the unique 'character' of different places within the empire, and thus also to emphasize the obvious differences between metropolitan and colonial places. As Massey notes, the 'open, relational construction of place in no way works against specificity and uniqueness, it just understands its derivation in a different way'.[55]

Notes

[1] Parts of this article are included in the 'Introduction' to D. Lambert and A. Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). I would like to thank David Lambert for his considerable input into the material presented here.

[2] J. Gallagher and R. E. Robinson, 'The imperialism of free trade', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 6 (1), 1953, pp. 1–15.

[3] R. Robinson and J. Gallagher with A. Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* 2nd edn (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981), p. xvii.

[4] Robinson and Gallagher with Denny, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. xviii.

[5] A notion elaborated in R. Robinson, 'Non-European foundations of European imperialism' in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. E. R. Owen and B. Sutcliffe (London, Longman, 1972), pp. 117–42. A similar explanation is adopted by J. S. Galbraith in 'The "turbulent frontier" as a factor in British expansion', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2 (2), 1960, p. 151. An updated, more materialist version of the same thesis can be found, for example in T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (London, Leicester University Press, 1996). Here the argument is that 'rogue governors' could use the distance from London to take local decisions about imperial expansion. But the extra element is that they often did so in response to political pressure from a key constituency that does not feature in either Robinson and Gallagher's or Galbraith's original arguments: namely, settler capitalists, intent on acquiring the territorial and human resources that belonged to indigenous groups.

[6] Robinson and Gallagher with Denny, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. xxi.

[7] Ibid., p. xxii.

[8] This was despite Robinson and Gallagher's own efforts to bring indigenous subjects more into the 'picture'.

[9] D. Fieldhouse, 'Can Humpty-Dumpty be put together again? Imperial history in the 1980s', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12 (2), 1984, p. 16.

[10] Ibid., p. 10. See also A. G. Hopkins, 'Back to the future: From national history to imperial history', *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), p. 198.

[11] P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914* (Harlow, Longman, 1993), p. 5.

[12] Ibid., p. 7, citing Gallagher and Robinson, 'Imperialism of free trade'.

[13] Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion*, p. 15.

[14] P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914–1990* (Harlow, Longman, 1993), p. 297.

[15] T. Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002), p. 2. Of course, Cain and Hopkins's work also placed women on the sidelines of its analysis.

[16] Fieldhouse, 'Can Humpty Dumpty be put together again?', p. 10.

[17] Ibid.

[18] C. Hall, 'Introduction: Thinking the postcolonial, thinking the empire' in *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Reader*, ed. C. Hall (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 2.

[19] Fieldhouse, 'Can Humpty Dumpty be put together again?', p. 10.

[20] Ibid., pp. 17–18.

[21] Ibid., pp. 18–19, 22.

[22] Ibid., p. 22.

[23] An argument made in a more post-structuralist rendition by A. L. Stoler and F. Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony: Rethinking a research agenda' in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a*

Bourgeois World, ed. F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (Berkeley/London, University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1–58.

[24] J. Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The dynamics of territorial expansion', *English Historical Review*, June 1997, p. 629.

[25] Ibid., p. 642.

[26] On general differences and points of connection between 'traditional' and 'new' imperial history, see D. Kennedy, 'Imperial history and post-colonial theory', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24 (3), 1996, pp. 345–63; Hall, 'Introduction: Thinking the postcolonial, thinking the empire'; J. Thompson, 'Modern Britain and the new imperial history', *History Compass Journal*, http://history-compass.com/popups/print.asp?items=32527, accessed 20 July 2005. For a recent survey of gendered analyses of empire which depart significantly from traditional imperial history's concerns, see P. Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire*, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004).

[27] N. Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge, Polity, 1994); Stoler and Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony'.

[28] A. Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain* (London/New York, Routledge, 2001); Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*.

[29] Hopkins, 'Back to the future', p. 203.

[30] See A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London, Pimlico, 2002) for some excellent work in this vein. While Niall Ferguson's account of the British imperial past seems well-informed and well-researched, the conclusions that he draws from it, and that he proposes as lessons for the contemporary USA's own imperial project, cannot easily be equated with much of the evidence that he amasses. What is most surprising is his characterization of British colonialism as being a generally benign model for contemporary US intervention, when he has shown some awareness at least of the suffering, and above all, perpetuated resistance that it engendered. See N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, Allen Lane, 2003) and *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London, Allen Lane, 2004).

[31] Hopkins, 'Back to the future', p. 208. It should be noted, though, that in his edited *Globalization in World History*, many contributors do range well beyond economic dimensions of imperial globalization.

[32] C. Bridge and K. Fedorowich (eds), 'The British world: Diaspora, culture and identity', *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*, special issue, 31 (2), 2003, and *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London, Frank Cass, 2003). See also S. Ward, 'The British world', *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, 94, June 2002, pp. 30–3; P. A. Buckner and C. Bridge, 'Reinventing the British world', *Round Table*, 92, 2003, pp. 77–88.

[33] C. Bridge and K. Fedorowich, 'Mapping the British world', *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*, 31 (2), 2003, p. 2, citing D. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire* (London, Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1974).

[34] Ibid., p. 6.

[35] The reasons for this gulf are difficult to ascertain for those who were not educated in a British imperial history tradition. Certainly it is, in part, a product of a deliberate attempt by most (but not all) 'traditional' imperial historians defensively to dismiss, rather than engage with, postcolonial theory. As Douglas Peers writes of the majority of contributions in the *Oxford History of the British Empire* series, 'Criticizing postcolonialism on account of its tendentiousness, the ponderousness not to mention the impenetrability in many cases of its prose, and its privileging of texts over contexts has become an all too depressingly familiar refrain in academic circles. Imperial historians are not as beleaguered as many assume themselves to be, and hence the defensiveness which often marks engagement with new theoretical perspectives . . . is unhelpful.' See D. M. Peers, 'Is Humpty Dumpty back together again?: The revival of imperial history and the *Oxford History of the British Empire*', *Journal of World History*, 13 (2), 2002, p. 466. Catherine Hall notes the same thing in her recent review of Christopher Bayly's magisterial survey, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004). She remarks first how welcome is Bayly's insistence that we need to get to grips with the 'syncretic and hybrid forms produced by the constant traffic in people in things' during and after the imperial age. But, she continues, 'given this interest in cross-currents and hybridity, why is Bayly so anxious to separate himself from, and polemicise against, the body of work discussing these issues that has been produced by scholars influenced by postcolonial theory in the last decades?' See C. Hall, Review of C. A. Bayly, *The*

Birth of the Modern World 1780 – 1914, Institute of Historical Research, *Reviews in History*, http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/hall.html, p. 5, accessed 23 June 2005. To be fair, however, the continuing gulf is also, in part, a product of postcolonially minded theorists often making assumptions that an untheorized, but generally positivist historical methodology necessarily signifies a reactionary politics.

[36] See A. Lester, 'British settler discourse and the circuits of empire', *History Workshop Journal*, 54, 2002, pp. 27–50. See also Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, p. 3. The violent, dispossessive encounters on which settler colonization was predicated, are curiously absent from much of the work published so far within the British world project. Thus, Bridge and Fedorowich state that 'The British world was a consensual association that included much of the formal and informal empire. The much more familiar empire of compulsion and subordination had limited relevance in this context.' See Bridge and Fedorowich, 'Mapping the British world', p. 8. This is not to say that every participant in the British World conferences thus far has adopted a similar definition. Also, it should be noted that the latest British World conference, held in New Zealand in 2005, has explicitly turned more attention to indigenous subjects' various engagements with the 'British World'. The programme as a whole still has considerable potential to bring more 'traditional' and 'new' imperial historians, as well as those from other disciplines who have been influenced by postcolonial theory, into a more productive conversation.

[37] See Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, p. 10.

[38] Accompanying this elevated vantage point is the assumption of objectivity on the part of the observer. Thus, in Hopkins's recent call for the study of imperialism as a foundation for globalization, there is the suggestion that such an approach's 'ideological neutrality allows the analysis to be pursued without commitment to a particular view of the morality of empire'. See Hopkins, 'Back to the future', p. 207.

[39] See F. Driver, 'Colony and metropole: Locating the Victorians', unpublished session commentary from Locating the Victorians conference, Imperial College London, July 2001. My thanks to Felix Driver for showing me this paper.

[40] K. McKenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies* (Melbourne, University of Melbourne Press, 2004), p. 3.

[41] The unquestioning use of categories such as 'centre' and 'periphery' in particular serves not so much to describe, as to reify and perpetuate some of the many spatial distinctions enacted through colonial (and other) unequal relations. At its most damaging, when played out in broader public debates, this reproduction of a language of spatial primacy helps to reproduce attitudes and thus practices of social/racial superiority. Of course, any alternative spatial conceptualization of colonial relations has to recognize that power relations were never evenly dispersed and that many of the most powerful institutions and individuals were agglomerated in places like Whitehall and the City in London. But we need to see this uneven spatiality as, in large part, a constructed product of colonial relations rather than simply a static and uncontested precondition for them. As Nicholas Dirks puts it, we need to see colonialism less as 'a process that began in the European metropole and expanded outwards', and more as 'a moment when new encounters within the world facilitated the formation of categories of metropole and colony in the first place'. See N. B. Dirks, 'Introduction: Colonialism and culture' in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. N. B. Dirks (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 6. See also A. Burton, 'Introduction: On the inadequacy and indispensability of the nation' in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation*, ed. A. Burton (Durham/London, Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 1–26.

[42] C. Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge, Polity, 2002); M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly' Englishman and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995); A. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture* (Durham, University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[43] Lester, *Imperial Networks*.

[44] On this, see Lambert and Lester, *Colonial Lives*.

[45] Z. Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005).

[46] Lester, 'Bristish settler discourse'.

[47] Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, p. 39.

[48] E. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (London, University of California Press, 1982), p. 71. Edwim Wilmsen has shown how even southern African 'Bushman' society, often imagined

as one of the most 'primitive' on Earth, was extensively spatially interconnected from more than a millennium ago, with evidence of glass beads having been traded ultimately from Asia. See E. N. Wilmsen, *Land Filled With Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989). See also M. Hall, *The Changing Past: Farmers, Kings and Traders in Southern Africa, 200–1860* (London/Cape Town, James Currey and David Philip, 1987). More generally, on the non-existence of totally localized, discrete precolonial cultures, see A. Gupta and J. Ferguson, 'Beyond "culture": Space, identity, and the politics of difference', *Cultural Anthropology*, 7 (1992), pp. 6–23.

[49] This is something that is emphasized in Hopkins, *Globailization in World History*.

[50] On the mobility of colonized peoples and its effects, see also N. Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the Great White Queen: Victorian Britain Through African Eyes* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998); E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal, Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 2002); A. Burton and I. Ray (eds), *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999).

[51] E. Elbourne, 'The Eastern Cape and International Networks in the Early Nineteenth Century', Fort Hare Institute of Social and Economic Research, Working Paper series, WP 43, August 2003, University of Fort Hare, South Africa; E. Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002).

[52] D. Massey, *For Space* (London, Sage, 2005), p. 107.

[53] Ibid., p. 68, quoting P. Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1991), p. xv.

[54] Ibid., p. 119.

[55] Ibid., p. 169. The best example of an extended study which draws out such connective trajectories and their implications for the making of specific metropolitan and colonial places (even if it does so implicitly) is Catherine Hall's, on Jamaica and Birmingham: *Civilising Subjects*. For a comprehensive contextualization, and discussion, of understandings of the 'region' as a similarly, always-already interconnected bundle of trajectories, see A. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 156–205.

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