



systemic and accretive—and formative for ‘modern’ history, not to mention 21<sup>st</sup> century crises. As such, these histories offer powerful means for the re-integration of capitalist, postcolonial, and cultural analyses. Building on this work, this essay responds to Dirlik’s call to ‘historicize colonialism’ more fully (Dirlik 2002:13), and it offers one theoretical framework—of ‘inter-imperiality’—for doing so. The term names a political and historical set of conditions created by the violent histories of plural, interacting empires and by interacting persons moving between and against empires. This reoriented political imaginary—which is in effect an enlarged postcolonial imaginary—habitually registers the full 360 degree global horizon of political maneuvers among contemporaneous empires and all kinds of other states, and of these with a range of subordinated and dissident populations.

Yet why *inter-imperial*? Scholars of international relations (IR) have long analyzed multi-lateral global contests and alliances; and scholars of the transnational or transperipheral now give close attention to movements across state boundaries in all dimensions and strata, from migrant laborers to financial systems. Do we need another term of analysis? I believe so. We need an inter-imperial method that supplements these nation-engaged studies for two reasons: first as a context for understanding the national and international; and second so as to highlight the multi-laterality of imperial as well as national geopolitics. That is, a *longue durée* study of empires first of all helps to explain the genesis and functioning of nation-states by revealing the ways that interacting empires have undergirded nation-formation and shaped national political discourses. As should become clear in what follows, all nations, including European nations, have emerged in relation to past and contemporaneous empires, although they have typically traced their origins to one empire and erased their borrowings from others. To grasp the conflicts of the international or transnational, we therefore need to study the legacies of this multiply inter-imperial history.

Secondly, and more to the point here, attention to this history adds missing dimensions to current discussions of empire across the spectrum. An inter-imperial analysis based on the most recent world-historical scholarship first of all gives the lie to revisionist histories of empire that merely celebrate imperial achievements and brush aside postcolonial studies, for this history instead reveals the fuller applicability of an anti-imperial critique and the fuller story of laborers’ creation of many imperial achievements. A reading of this history likewise throws into relief the incomplete research and the distortions in publications by such authors as Niall Ferguson who

purport to tell a world history but instead proffer fantasies about western inventions of science and law. Regarding the present, an inter-imperial account can enhance our analysis of the anxieties currently circulating, implicitly or explicitly, in discussions of ‘Asian empire’.

At the same time, in opening our eyes to a political-economic field of several empires operating simultaneously in every period since ancient eras, and in relation to capitalist formations, this framework widens and transforms the postcolonial critique. The last several decades of postcolonial scholarship have dislodged many eurocentric habits of perception, drawing into view the inter-production of colony and empire, highlighting translocal and transnational connections, and theorizing multiple modernities. For good historical reasons, most of this work has focused on the single cluster of Anglo-European empire. But that initial focus now threatens to constrain or distort our thinking, especially when combined with the concept of core and peripheries—another essential formulation which, however, when understood in singular terms, gravely oversimplifies global dynamics. Recent world historiography makes it clearer than ever that the world has likely never had one ‘core’ as the single axis of a circle of peripheries and semi-peripheries, including in the last few centuries.

Yet we continue to make the oddly eurocentric assumption that western European imperialism accounts for all recent imperialism, with the concomitant misperception that all territory is either a European (post)colony or uncolonized. Such is the case for instance in a recent volume called *Europe Observed* (Chatterjee and Hawes 2008), which gathers many excellent essays dismantling Eurocentric angles of vision; but these are nonetheless framed within an introductory narrative of Anglo-European imperial torch-passing: ‘Just as Amsterdam had surpassed Seville by the late sixteenth century, so London began to supplant Amsterdam as the center of world commerce. As the power of the United Provinces receded, Britain became—over the course of the titanic eighteenth-century struggle with France—the leading imperial power. The theaters of eighteenth-century colonial conflict shifted to North America and then to India’ (Chatterjee and Hawes 2008: 9).

In fact, however, the eighteenth-century world included many theaters of colonial conflict, provoked by a range of empires from the Chinese to the Ethiopian to the Swedish and Russian. Thus it is misleading to conclude that ‘while different areas of the world fell under European domination, . . . some entirely escaped the blight of colonization (Japan, Ethiopia, and Turkey)’ (Chatterjee and Hawes 2008: 10-11). Ethiopia and Turkey (or rather, the Ottoman

state) were themselves empires; inhabitants of these and neighboring states did suffer the problems of colonization, but as created first of all by these empires. Japan meanwhile faced and resisted empire-driven pressures from both the Chinese and the Russians, pressures which it would begin to reverse in its own imperializing invasions at the end of the nineteenth. Before that turning point, the vast eighteenth-century empire of China and in the nineteenth century of Russia both allied with and battled with the British in inter-imperial contests ranging from the Napoleonic Wars and the Opium Wars to a significant number of expansionist wars involving all of them.

While many of us know these facts, in our thinking and our publications we often still efface them. With few exceptions, even recent postcolonially-oriented histories that take notice of older or non-Anglo-European empires tend to give them limited coverage without looking closely at their formative, even foundational interactions with Anglo-European empires.<sup>3</sup> It therefore seems time to look more directly at the force-field of multiple empires, with their interactive co-formations over the *longue durée*, including empires that pre-date, prepare, and interact as contemporaries with Anglo-European empires. When we consider the ‘connected history’ of states in all hemispheres (to use Sanjay Subahmanyam’s phrase, 2005), we begin to see more clearly the complex, multi-directional maneuvers launched from above, from below, and from beside, by imperialists, merchants, capitalists, laborers, wives, and revolutionaries. We can thus more readily study, for instance, not only the pitched contest between Britain and India on the eve of independence but also new affiliations in that period between Indian and Japanese political leaders in the context of an expanding Japanese empire. We can also better account for the special importance—and suffering—of regions such as the Balkans, the Caribbean, and the Maghreb, understanding them not only as peripheries but also as strategic inter-imperial zones, again and again vied over for their resources and their geopolitical location.

That is, when we begin to think inter-imperially, we think more truly globally. We can then more effectively trace the maneuvers, pressures, and stakes of anti-colonial and decolonization struggles, and we glimpse the ways in which literary and artistic forms have long mediated these struggles within a larger circuit of several empires, sounding intertextual notes to which we have been deaf. In short, we can analyze inter-imperial politics as *a long-standing world structure, an event-generating structure that has fostered combined and ever more uneven development and has provoked intensifying political resistance, which in its turn has reshaped*

*this foundational yet human-made structure.* This is not to say that empires alone create history but only that the dynamics of empires, plural, deserve better description and fresh theorization. Doing so enables us to carry the rich insights of postcolonial and world-systems studies back into earlier periods to study underlying foundational systems—*again, not so as to take critical pressure off of more recent empires and exploitations, but rather in order to see how all sorts of imperial and economic formations have accrued over two millenia and thereby to fashion sharper vocabularies of critique and clearer visions of change.* It will undoubtedly be necessary to make this point repeatedly—that is, to reiterate in each conversation that the thrust of this analysis is *anti-colonial and ethical*, insofar as it aims for a *wider* exposure of collusions and exploitations of empires and of those states’ whose aspiring elites or dictators join in that collusion. And after all, sole attention to European empires (and in particular facile equations between these and modernity) can sometimes serve implicitly to justify European hegemony.

This broader mapping of imperial coordinates may likewise recast Marxist accounts of the relation between empire, or ‘the state’, and capitalism. Lenin explicitly identified ‘rivalry between a number of great powers in the striving for hegemony’ as a feature of imperialist capitalism; but he understood this rivalry as a late *result of* capitalism, a manifestation of its later nineteenth and early twentieth-century monopoly stage, in which banks and industry merged in a global control of resources and territories (1920 [1917]: 91). Fredric Jameson (1990: 47) later suggested that, in the early twentieth century, empires began to focus less attention on relations with other empires and more on relations with their ‘own’ colonial states, which Lenin might have understood as a reflection of their increasingly monopolistic relations with those colonies. Both observations name essential elements of late capitalism, and certainly it is also true that imperialist capitalism has monopolized the world economy with increasing intensity. Yet it is also true that what Lenin calls an ‘international network of dependence’ beholden to the labor and market systems of large, competing states is in evidence a millennium earlier, although these states were not called nations (Lenin 1920: 61, 88). The new histories show us how this is so. I propose that they clarify the ways that an inter-imperial political field, which includes anti-imperial actors and imperially managed laborers, has generated the combative, competitive growth of modernities and of capitalist formations for a millennium or more; and I further argue that full attention to this field reveals interlaced layers of empire-allusive cultural histories.

Beyond the specific suggestions of this essay, my broad purpose here is to encourage an interdisciplinary dialogue. As yet there has been limited conversation or data-sharing across disciplines about these world-historical studies, including between scholars of culture and scholars of sociology, economy, history, and anthropology. The prospects for cross-fertilization are many. Combining the critical mass of research that has accrued over the last few decades of postcolonial and minority studies and putting it in dialogue with world-historical research, we have the ability to pursue a collaborative project of paradigm-revision, one with rich promise for classrooms, for scholarship, and for timely public-sphere interventions. It's true that extending the scope of our research and teaching back to ancient and medieval periods, as well as to multiple hemispheres, can appear daunting or unrealistic. Yet it is possible to do so in piecemeal ways, as each scholar makes tentative forays and provisional suggestions, while overall we take on the task together, in a generous spirit, as a collective work-in-progress.

The first half of this essay synthesizes historical studies showing how capitalist instruments and the modernization of material life predate western European states' entry into an Afro-Eurasian world-system. It mainly summarizes recent scholarship, referring readers to historical sources and laying the ground for the next three sections. These focus, respectively, on the material, the political, and the cultural fields, arguing that they are inter-imperially and dialectically shaped over centuries, by elite and non-elite actors. These three sections also highlight a geographic movement of material, political, and cultural forms *from* Afro-Eurasia *to* western Europe and the Americas (contrary to still-reigning narratives), in ways that link old world and new world as well as the 'ecumenes' of the Pacific, the Atlantic, and the continents. The section on politics introduces the notion of an 'inter-imperial position' for historical agents, which names the ways that communities negotiate both within and across empires. Like those 'interstitial' spaces within the colony (and indeed in tandem with those spaces) discussed by Homi Bhabha (1996: 204) this position 'between' imperial states entails uncertain, strategic, yet often creative maneuvering. With this point in mind, the essay's final section considers this fraught position as a formative condition of aesthetic culture, shaping both the modes of its production and the stakes of its reception.

Throughout, I aim mainly to provide a speculative sketch of the possibilities, just enough to indicate the ways that recent world histories beckon us to adjust our time lines and think more interactively about the infrastructures of empire, capitalism, culture, and resistance. This

analysis focuses on empire, again, not because I consider empires the only or even necessarily the main engine of history but rather in order to tell a different story of their dynamics and importance, and thus to make an intervention into political and postcolonial scholarship.

### *Modernization and Capitalism in World History*

The banishment of the medieval period to a historical backwater has served eurocentrism well, for it has enabled the false equation between the rise of Europe and the rise of modernity and, in turn, the hemispheric segregation of west from east in world history. As Kathleen Davis points out in *Periodization and Sovereignty* (2008), a sharp divide has long been instituted between feudal and modern, in studies of capitalism as well as culture, and perpetuated by thinkers as diverse as J.G.A. Pocock and Antonio Negri. The binary between ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’ then ramifies into corollary divisions not only between sacred and secular, hierarchy and democracy, static and dynamic culture, but also between east and west, so that west equals modern, dynamic, secular, and democratic, and east equals the medieval opposites, the latter lurking within a shadowy past before systems and capitalism.

We can extend Davis’s insights to notice that, among other useful effects for Anglo-European self-fashioning, these divisions have obscured the Asian and Arab-Islamic foundations of the West’s financial, material, cultural, and political history. The fact of western Europe’s late arrival on a world scene of sophisticated finance, advanced transport and agricultural technology, and highly literate metropole culture has been replaced by the mythical narrative of northwestern Europe’s creation of these elements, of what Europeans typically call enlightenment modernity.<sup>4</sup>

This narrative dissolves before one’s eyes, however, when one reads those scholars who have explored archives and archeological evidence of the ancient and medieval periods in eastern and southern hemispheres, revealing not only the depth of cultural influence moving from southeast to northwest but also the reach and complexity of the world-system (if not wholly capitalist) structures that existed ‘before European hegemony’, as Janet Abu-Lughod puts it in her seminal book by that title.<sup>5</sup> For many such scholars, the main sign of a world-*system* is the integration of different regions that thus ‘evolve in tandem’, including through cores, peripheries, and systems of exploitative extraction (Beaujard 2005: 420). They have therefore tracked the growing systemic interdependence among states as indicated by systemic ‘pulsations’ or synchronous periods of economic growth and decline (Frank and Thompson 2006: 149).

In a wide range of publications, including the edited volumes *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (Frank and Gills 1993), *Globalization and Global History* (Gills and Thompson 2006), and *Empires: Perspectives from Archeology and History* (Alcock et.al 2001), some scholars have gone further back in history than Abu-Lughod and have suggested that a south-eastern world-system economy was in formation by the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, centralized in Mesopotamia and reaching from Egypt to western Asia. Christopher Chase-Dunn and others (Chase-Dunn et al 2006) focus on ancient periods in this way while also considering sociological dimensions and arguing, for example, that interactions between nomadic or semi-peripheral peoples and sedentary peoples were in these early millennia ‘the catalysts of systemic change’ (Chase-Dunn et al 2006: 114; on the latter point, also see Chaudhuri 1990: 89). Other scholars, however, embrace a later dating for the emergence of a truly interlocking system with a fuller capitalist character. Philippe Beaujard (2005) on the one hand agrees that key elements of modernization appear very early (such as the coordinated irrigation systems developed by Egyptian engineers in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC), and that in some regions there is increasing interaction among states and economic formations in the second and first millennia, BC. Yet on the other hand, he ultimately concludes that ‘it is only on entering the first century C.E. that there emerged a Eurasian and African world-system in which different regions evolved in tandem, a world-system that would endure without major changes until the modern era’ (Beaujard 2005: 420-21).

More important for our purposes than debates over the exact dates of origin, however, is the evidence of a world-system formation by the end of the first millennium CE (i.e., by 1000 C.E., or AD) and of continuity between these and ‘modern’ world systems. In my discussion here I will focus on this period. Whereas Immanuel Wallerstein and others have generally assumed a radical shift in the world economy in approximately 1500 CE when Europeans successfully entered the system —and supposedly prompted the birth of capitalism with its ‘axial division of labor’ and ‘*ceaseless* accumulation of capital’ (Wallerstein 1993: 293-94, emphasis in original)--recent work instead highlights the systemic presence and continuity of these elements across this chronological divide, even as they also note ongoing shifts, transformations, and intensifications of the system.

Thus R.J. Barendse (2000: 183 -202) offers a detailed account of economic formations in the zone of the Arabian seas that extended across both this supposed turning point and the

supposed divide between east and west, while Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) notes the evidence of continuity in order better to analyze what he calls ‘the great divergence’--whereby European powers gain a decisive edge in commerce, imperial wealth, and industrial development within this system, yet only after the eighteenth century. Others working within a framework of continuity have studied the effects of pivotal events in the system’s workings, such as widespread plague (Abu-Lughod 1989: 94-96; Bentley 1998: 246, 249-50), the cascading global effects of the shift to silver coinage among large states (Flynn and Giráldez 1997; Barendse 2000: 195-199), European appropriation of American lands and resources (Beaujard 2005: 446; Pomeranz 2000: 13), or the invention of the steam engine (Goldstone 2002). As Beaujard suggests, what seems to have occurred over two millennia is a tightening and intensification of world systems; and, as I argue in later sections, these have been dialectically generated in significant part through cumulative, inter-imperial, and anti-imperial engagements. But to appreciate those dynamics it’s necessary first to summarize more of the evidence of early capitalist mechanisms and systemic formations to which Anglo-Europeans became apprentices circa 1500. Within the scope of this essay, I can give only a brief overview of the scholarship on the later first and early second millenium, or the global ‘medieval’ period. (‘Medieval’ is a problematic term, however, given its conventional eurocentric orientation.)<sup>6</sup>

The elements of economic and capitalist continuity encompass both relations and modes of production, supported by expansionist, centralizing ideologies. They include: financial instruments; the interlocking relations of the state and the private merchant; the fact of a systematic trade in staples as well as luxury goods; extractive, unequal core/periphery or ‘axial’ arrangements in capital and labor; the rationalization of states and the ‘biopower’ or bureaucratic regimentation of their subjects partly in the service of profitable trade; purposefully developed technologies for trade and expansion (from the compass and the cannon to the dam); and an imperial orientation, or what Robertson and Inglis (2006: 33, 37) call the ‘global animus’ that imagines a universal world history and ‘never-ending empire’ (notions which they date to Alexander the Great and which appear as well in Chinese, Islamic, and Christian empires). All of these practices and notions had been established long before western Europeans traveled to Asia and before Afro- Eurasian states and traders paid any mind to Europe.

It increasingly appears that in the eighth century, Islamic empire began to play a pivotal role in consolidating many such elements, perhaps especially financial mechanisms (Burke 2009;

Shatzmiller 2011). Under the Abbasid caliphs in particular, Islam codified precise practices that accommodated both the market and Islamic religious values, a coupling authorized by Mohammed's own work as a small trader. The presence of regularized instruments in the Abbasid empire has been noted at least since 1964, when Solomon Goitein argued that a long developing capitalism 'flowered' with the rise of the Abbasids (Goitein 1964: 101-3). Recent scholarship also establishes that the Abbasids tapped the skills and practices of converted Persian families via, for instance, the Barmakids who had once held power in the Sasanian empire, and then later supported the Abbasid overthrow of the Umayyads, after which, according to Amira Bennison, they brought their 'financial expertise' and 'their experience of Sasanian government' into the Abbasid administration (Bennison 2009: 102, 28). Goitein argues that under the Abbasids these rich businessmen mounted a 'bourgeois revolution' insofar as they fostered a state-formation serving their economic interests, including laws regulating partnership contracts and money-holding bankers (Abu-Lughod 1989: 217-224). As Udovitch (1970: 80, 78) began to establish and Shatzmiller has more fully substantiated (2011), 'buying and selling on credit were . . . widespread' and the 'legal instruments necessary for . . . mercantile credit were available in the earliest Islamic period'. Among these were the *suftâja* (similar to modern cheques) and the *commenda* agreements, later emulated by Italians, a form of investment-capital contract that arranged for promissory transfer of capital from one party to another for both purchase of raw materials and production of goods, with profits to be shared by both parties (Udovitch 1970: 170; Abu-Lughod 1989: 220-21). Hugh Kennedy and Maya Shatzmiller have recently shown that military men and others were paid in wages—another element that scholars have considered a distinctive feature of capitalism--and they indicate that this money circulation within the Abbasid empire positioned Baghdad as a financial core for a transhemispheric system (Kennedy 2002: Shatzmiller 2011).

Paper money also appeared very early in this Afro-Eurasian world, with its important qualities for the growth of financial systems--of portability, print reproducibility, and reduced dependence on mining and minting labor regimes. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century under the Sung Dynasty in imperial China, print money was in wide circulation--not surprising in the state that had developed paper by the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (if not earlier), had long privileged literacy and writing, and apparently created the first books (Bloom 2001: 32, 139). Accordingly, there also arose champions and theorists of print money, for example the 11<sup>th</sup> century prime minister, Wang An-

shih (appointed in 1069 under the Sung empire) who wrote shrewdly and approvingly of money's capacity to multiply its value as it changed hands through trade (Chaudhuri 1990: 82). This monetary miracle complemented the circulation of copper, silver and gold coins, which, as archeologists and historians have established, traveled from one end of this Afro-Eurasian system to the other (Abu-Lughod 1989: 15).

By 1000 CE, trade entrepôts had become well-established throughout a vast land-and-sea network that included the Silk Road, the Indian Ocean, and several seas, from the Caspian and the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Sea of Japan. Abu-Lughod concludes that in the twelfth century in this Afro-Eurasian system, 'all the legal and institutional prerequisites for financing and administering 'capitalist' production and exchange were in place', and that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic Cairo (replacing Baghdad as the imperial center) had become a 'vanguard for the world system' (Abu-Lughod 1989: 224, 242). It is worth asking whether the emergence of banking and the concentration of capital in the hands of wealthy merchant elites in this expanding imperial network amounts to an early form of the 'capitalist imperialism' that Lenin analyzed at the turn into the twentieth century (Lenin 1920: 31).

Nor was this lively financial world at odds with the state. Long-standing, western stereotypes have characterized these eastern empires as despotic or stagnant, and addicted to luxury goods with little relation to merchants and little investment in innovation and sustainable systems. Recent historical research puts these clichés to rest. Like those of the Abbasid empire, the trade policies and successes of the Mamluk empire [1250-1517] were strongly driven and defined by the Karimi merchants (Abu-Lughod 1989: 227-230); and several Chinese dynasties supported, protected, and encouraged trade, such as the Sung [960-1279 CE], the Mongol [1271-1368 CE], and the Qing [1644-1911 CE], although others severely curtailed it (e.g. the Ming [1368-1644 CE]). As Beaujard notes (2005: 457-58), in many empires private tradesmen 'furnished merchandise as well as services to elites', for instance in the form of tax collection or conversion of goods into their money equivalents for state operations. In turn, as Beaujard also highlights (2005: 459), 'capitalist networks could hardly do without the state because they require[d] a stable world to develop their operations and/or a military force to defend their access to vital resources'. In sum, empires have often supported trade, whether indirectly through transport systems and a military presence, or directly through charters and other official arrangements, and simply as highly active procurers.

Such evidence amends Annales school and world-system analyses, which have typically given short shrift to the pre-1500 role of states in the spread of capitalist practices and formations. Ferdinand Braudel remarks, for instance, that trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ‘ignored the frontiers of empires’, pointing to the fact that when ‘merchant vessels sailed across [the Mediterranean ] everyday’ they also crossed the ‘north-south divide between the Levant and the western Mediterranean’ and the border between ‘Islam and Christendom’; and so, he concludes, ‘such activity ignored the frontiers of empires’ (Braudel 1984: 22). Merchants did indeed do business across the borders of empire, but this trade was not extra-imperial. It was *inter*-imperial.

That is, trade was typically dominated by merchants with close financial, religious, and bureaucratic ties to the states within which they were located or for whom they were agents, and these states calibrated their relations with each other in part through such agents. The merchants operated within organized structures often codified or decreed by empires (if not always strictly enforceable by them), and whose rules the merchants violated at their own risk, including rules about place of habitation and trade within the port city, length of stay, unloading procedures, bills of sale or lending, and tax or tribute for the imperial host. Providing special protection or controlling trade contracts was often a prerogative of empire, as western Europeans and others learned again and again in their baffled attempts to gain trading leverage within Chinese empire. In the Mediterranean world discussed by Braudel, the Ottoman Empire exercised its dominance exactly through such financial and port rules and in the service of its territorial empire, officially exacting tribute from other empires, states, and agents doing business within their empire. As Giancarlo Casale has demonstrated in *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (2010), the Ottomans became avid shipbuilders of both merchant and military vessels, importing and transporting lumber across great distances to the shipbuilding ports, and actively defending and expanding its territory along the coast of the Red Sea and into Africa. No one could ‘ignore the frontiers’ of the Ottoman empire.

Braudel’s work has of course been immensely important in opening up the many interconnected ways that trans-hemispheric economies have emerged in fits, starts, and swerves to create the material conditions of human lives; and Wallerstein has usefully built on this work to conceptualize a model of world-system economies moving along axial lines from trade and capital centers to semi-peripheries and peripheries mined for resources and labor. Yet their

thought is enriched by further direct attention to the structuring force of interacting empires and of resistance to empires within these economies. Such attention does indeed bring into clearer view what Braudel calls the ‘different conjunctural rhythms affecting the economy, political life, demography and indeed collective attitudes’ of a society, including ‘the different schools of art or literature’, as I have explored elsewhere (2010) and will discuss further below (Braudel 1984: 71).

The complex history of this interactive formation of trade and imperial states is instructively exemplified by the case of the Mongols, whose practices compare, as Jerry Bentley argues, with the other ‘transregional nomadic empires’ that arose between 1000 and 1500 C.E., such as, the Turks, the Mughals, the Safavids, and the Saljuqs (Bentley 1998; also see Barfield 2001, and Dunn et.al 2006). To counter the Mongol raids on the highways and borders of Sung territories, the Sung had strategically hired them to serve, instead, as border guards, silk-roads police, and eventually a supplementary military force. Yet the well-armed Mongols in their turn shrewdly took advantage of a weakened Sung state to overthrow the Sung and become the new imperial dynasty. Despite their warring orientation and continuing invasions and depredations, Bentley argues that they had, at the least, a ‘mixed legacy’ for the growth of trade, noting that they ‘placed a high value on trade and diplomacy, and their states offered special protection to merchants and other travelers’ (Bentley 1998: 241). He concludes that they contributed to the fact that ‘maritime trade in the China Seas and the Indian ocean burgeoned’ in this period (helped by Chinese nautical innovations), and ‘the volume of overland trade probably increased’ so that the entire area stretching from sub-Saharan Africa to northern China underwent unprecedented ‘hemispheric integration’ (Bentley 1998: 241). Although the ‘Pax Mongolica’ of the 13<sup>th</sup> century was no more peaceful than the later Pax Britannica, the Silk Roads were strengthened and extended under the Mongols, as Abu-Lughod also remarks, bringing Marco Polo safely to the center of their empire (Abu-Lughod 1989: 320).

The image of the decadent, luxury-obsessed eastern emperor has likewise obscured other realities of the Afro-Eurasian trade, and has perhaps implicitly encouraged the argument (made by Wallerstein and echoed by others) that ‘modern’ European world trade diverged from this older system because it involved staples and not merely luxury goods for elites. On the contrary, however, Beaujard points out that ‘Agricultural products—and raw materials in general—were part of trade networks from the very beginnings of the system’, and scholars have tracked the

movements of grains, oils, tar, wood, dairy products, and herbal medicines (Beaujard 2005: 449; also see Bentley 1998: 241-45; and Shatzmiller 2011: 166). This robust land and sea trade undoubtedly affected the movement and regimes of labor insofar as it required many hundreds of porters and other laborers, and likely encouraged the growth of bondage and slavery. It would have relocated or drawn laborers to hinterlands for the production of ship timber and to ports and other entrepôts for the work of shipbuilding, loading, sailing, and private and public servant-work. Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997: 13-14) have noted (following Schneider and disagreeing with Wallerstein) that trade of any kind is likely to influence hierarchical labor and class formations in the hinterlands.

Certainly the mining of metals and infrastructure projects such as land-clearing, irrigation, and road-building undertaken by imperial states in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa required large-scale, coordinated labor systems. Whether by carrot or stick, this process carried peasants or captives away from kin and communities who needed their labor, clustering them instead in strategic and labor-intensive imperial territories. The hundreds of slaves captured in war and sold in markets throughout Afro- Eurasia performed a range of functions (see Shatzmiller 2011:150-53 for numbers), and these tasks sometimes included hard labor on agricultural and construction projects, as in the case of the teams who performed the body-bruising work of scraping salt from the flood plains of the Euphrates in preparation for the planting of sugar cane under the Abbasids (Bennison 2009: 27, 146). In 8th-century China, 7000 mine workers living far from the cities contributed to the mining and forging industries, producing a capacity equivalent to 70% of what the British produced in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Abu-Lughod 1989: 324). In turn, metal industries employed large labor forces to mint coins and to forge agricultural tools and weaponry—including, by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, guns and cannons—for the empire's financial, military, and sustenance bases. Thousands of enslaved women meanwhile crucially helped to reproduce many empires, both by performing menial labor and by ensuring male offspring via marriage and concubinage—not to mention their representational use-value for rich men and imperial courts needing material and sexual symbols of prowess (Campbell 2007).

It's worth noting that these and many other elements of the Afro-Eurasian economy cast doubt on Abu-Lughod's suggestion that the arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean transformed a fairly peaceful, stable, poly-centric world system into a warring one that would

become mono-centric (1989: 361-62). Early systems were polycentric, and later systems remained so; early systems were shaped by aggressive war and exploitation of women and labor as were later system formations. In his review of modernization phases in the first and second millennia C.E., Beaujard surveys the metropole-serving labor arrangements of a number of states (2005: 436-46). He concludes first of all that ‘the pattern of a core producing manufactured goods and extracting raw materials from a periphery is well in evidence before the sixteenth century’ and secondly that ‘the ‘international division of labor’ becomes sharper with each succeeding cycle in the system’ (2005: 439, 441). If we adopt Beaujard’s model of sharpening and intensification, it’s no surprise that by the nineteenth century this international division between core and periphery had deepened and become fully instrumentalized as labor and enforcing soldiers could be more easily transported by ship across oceans and on trains across continents, all with the coordinating support of telegraph, radio, radar, photography and newspaper.<sup>7</sup>

In tandem with trade networks and extractive labor systems, empires also created regularized forms of bureaucratic centralization and fostered system-wide coordination. Again here we discover earlier forms of the rationalization of the state and the economy so often considered distinctive of Anglo-European ‘systems’, and sometimes implicitly contrasted with the supposed a-rationality of eastern and earlier states. Tightly organized relay mail networks were institutionalized in the Islamic and Mongol empires, serving trade as well as state bureaucracy—and in this sense harnessing for the state the horsemanship skills long cultivated in the nomadic lifestyle (Bennison 2009: 28). Almost by definition, empires built physical infrastructure, as I will discuss more fully below, such as the impressive canals and roads developed by the Chinese empires of the Han (first century), the Tang (sixth century), and the Sung (tenth century). Integrated bodily regimes were required for these, including highly organized labor regimes. At the same time, elites in the ancient and medieval world were also schooled in bodily regimes, such as the elaborate training in bodily sparring and discipline required of select young boys in the metropolises of the Aztec empire in the 14th century (Brumfiel 2000: 293), and the precise, hierarchically delineated hygiene practices developed in ancient India, some of which were later emulated by Europeans.

These rational states created institutional and ideological infrastructures as well, most especially through literacy, schools, and examinations, some of which might be compared to the

later Anglo-European disciplinary regimes analyzed by Michel Foucault. In the third century CE, the Han dynasty of Chinese empire expanded the importance of the imperial examinations (originally instituted by Confucius in the second century BC, as a form of meritocracy) to create a large, loyal cadre of government servants who served mainly a secular function in the state. This system also developed an influential intelligentsia who shaped and sometimes dissented from state ideologies (Dull 1984: 15-24; Lee 1984: 117-143). Likewise, the madrasas, scholarly communities, and libraries (modeled by Persian, Byzantine, and Indian empires yet more widely developed in Muslim empires from the 8th century forward) instilled mental disciplines of memorization and writing, creating a literary intelligentsia that served secular and religious functions. As Edmund Burke III puts it (2009: 182), the Abbasid empire encouraged schools and literacy for young men, first of all so that they might read the Qur'an yet also, 'for the production of standardized and reliable clerics and future state servants'. Meanwhile of course, empires depended on these educated classes to pursue their infrastructure projects, including the engineers, mathematicians, and scientists who invented the cargo ships, compasses, gunpowder, guns, cannons, and irrigation and energy technologies that enabled imperial expansion and domination—well before European states had any presence in the East.

As I hope even this brief summary of recent scholarship makes clear, much of the modernization of finance, labor regimes, education, administration, and material life attributed to the West long predates its 'rise'. Yet eurocentric assumptions persist in our thinking. We continue to compare 'other' modernities to European forms, failing to recognize that Europe developed *from* these other forms, including via earlier empires. The data strongly suggest that we should instead think in terms of ongoing processes, and indeed at least 'twenty centuries' (in Yeats's phrase) of modernization, capitalization, and imperialism, entailing dynamics, as I'll consider next, that are inter-imperial, antagonistic, and unevenly cumulative—in a word, dialectical. (Here I do not mean dialectical not in any teleological sense but in the sense that these processes entail unstable, contingent yet mutually transforming, accruing, and determining interactions.) A consideration of this interactive movement in the material, the political, and the cultural fields helps to clarify the roles of elite and subordinated players variously positioned within or between empires, even as it also reveals the degree to which the world's 'modernizing' processes have traveled mostly northwest, from Afro-Eurasia *to* western Europe.

### *The Inter-imperial Material Field*

Marshall Hodgson wrote 50 years ago about the ways that modernity had been shaped by the ‘intertwined destinies’ of the Afro-Eurasian regions of the world in the first millennium CE (Hodgson [1963] 1993: 3), and recent scholarship has built in part on his work to explore the ‘interactive emergence’ of modernization projects over 2000 years (Wills 1993). Researchers highlight a technological ‘dialectic’ over centuries that underlies modern infrastructure and systems (Pacey 1990: viii) and helps to create shared ‘efflorescences’ or periods of growth within this integrated system (Pacey 1990; Goldstone 2002). Edmund Burke III uses this kind of interactive model to characterize the pivotal ‘legatee’ role played by Islam in the spread of nine ‘technological complexes’, including a writing/information complex, a water management complex, and a mathematical/cosmological complex, the adoption of which expanded as Islamic empires extended their territory (Burke 2009: 165). David Christian concludes that what we call western modernity is ‘the product of an economic and technological synergy that was generated over several millenniums in different parts of Eurasia’, and he ultimately highlights the ‘underlying unity of Afro-Eurasian history’ (Christian 2000: 25-26).

As recent work helps to establish, empires create many of the conditions of these interactions as they invade and expand, provoking crisis as well as exchange, and extending infrastructures and technologies across ever-larger regions (Burbank and Cooper 2010; Morris and Scheidel 2009; Pomeranz 2007; Alcock et.al. 2001). Sending mercantile agents or colonial settlers in pursuit of trade, empires encounter and learn from the agents or entrepreneurs of other empires, as the Portuguese did among the Mughal princes in India; and the two parties may then bring their two spheres into active engagement, affecting the hinterlands of each. Dispersing engineers and diplomats to address sustenance, social, and agricultural problems in new territories, empires adopt likewise other empires’ techniques of war, diplomacy, and infrastructure-building, which they then deploy—and disseminate--elsewhere (Pacey 1990; Goffman 2007). Ideologically, imperial invasions may provoke a new battling orientation or inspire new solidarities and freedom ideologies in those territories, as the incursions of the Achaemenid Persian empire (c. 550-330 BC) did for the Athenians, prompting the latter’s own imperial phase (Wiesehöfer 2009: 74).

As we focus on technologies and infrastructures, it becomes evident that *these have been among the primary stakes* in anti-imperial and imperial conflicts—these and the laborers,

scientists, engineers, and managers who realize such projects. This has remained the case until now, in the twenty-first century. And it is not only single empires that invade, appropriate knowledge, or claim sovereignty over infrastructure and work forces. Multiple empires do so together, as do their diverse subjects, in alliance and competition. The accompanying inter-imperial borrowings are what Stoler, McGranahan, and Purdue call ‘modular modeling’ (Stoler et.al. 2007: 14), but below I will highlight their dialectical effects, which the term ‘modeling’ doesn’t quite capture. An inter-imperial account of these processes adds a pointedly political dimension to Dirk Hoerder’s sweeping study of ‘world migrations in the second millennium’ (2002). For to a significant degree, it is the politically-shaped engagements among communities at all levels, whether they are serving, fleeing, or sabotaging empires, that direct the migrational and ‘interactive emergence’ of modernizing processes.

When we track this movement of technologies and people via the roads or ships supported, pirated, or taxed by empires, we discover the phenomena of inter-imperial loops, or dialectical formations, at every level from the basic necessities to aesthetic and scientific transformations. As mentioned, Islamic empire learned the secrets of paper technology in its 8<sup>th</sup> century expansion into Chinese territories, when the Abbasid dynasty actively directed Chinese subjects to cultivate these technologies on their behalf. (Bloom 2001: 42-43). Partly by becoming a culture of ‘the book’, Islamic empire then achieved hegemonic expansion from Afghanistan to Spain between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, in its turn bringing paper and other technologies to Europe. Thus the technology that had served to consolidate Chinese empire enabled Islam, in turn, to become world-class imperial competitor, posing a threat to Chinese borders. In the long run, as I’ll discuss below, this distribution of innovative material forms drew Europe’s interest and motivated its entry into the world-system, eventually enabling it to compete with both Islamic and Chinese empires. In this sense, Europe benefited from its *late* entry into the system.

Other technologies have likewise created such historical loops and intensified the globe’s inter-imperial dialectics. In *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World* (1983), Andrew Watson shows that the Abbasid empire inherited, extended, and refined water-management technologies that had developed over centuries. Through organized use of captured and enslaved labor, they resuscitated and extended the ‘major macro-level hydraulic projects’ developed in Mesopotamian empires by 1000 BC (with five major transverse canals that had served to divert

and connect rivers); and they likewise benefited from the Persian filtration and ‘qanat’ system (a gravity flow tunnel used for irrigation of arid lands), which by 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. had been installed across 1000 miles of the Iranian plateau, from Iraq to Afghanistan and was upgraded by the Sasanian empire in the centuries before Islam’s defeat of it (Burke 2009: 169-173). Although Michael Decker (2009) has recently modified Watson’s claim that it was above all the Abbasid renewal and diffusion of these systems that led to a wholesale ‘green revolution’ in this region, their restoration of standing systems nonetheless served as one basis for the increase in food production and populations, and the revival of large cities in the empire (Burke 2009: 174). That is, the Abbasids consolidated their imperial metropolitan power while increasing their agricultural output by building on the technological knowledge of a conquered Persian empire (some of whose scientists worked for them) and the partial ruins of past empires.

Historical ironies arise—and the dialectic of historical materialism is on display--as these interacting imperial practices of invasion, expropriation, expansion, and consolidation reach across centuries as well as continents and seas, as, again, the innovations or practices come full circle to challenge the originating empire. Tracking these movements we discover, for example, the material dynamics linking the Americas to the older world systems. In Burke’s account, elements of ‘the hydraulic package assembled under Islam’ were borrowed in Venice and then in the Low Countries, including in Dutch dykes and Rhineland dams (Burke 2009: 175). The power to create waterways and harness water power in the Lowlands fostered the important medieval Flemish markets and textile trade, which some scholars have considered central to the rise of capitalism. At the same time, it happened that, systems such as the qanat arrived in Andalusian Spain via the Umayyids, and from there were imported into the Americas and used in Mexico and Peru. There these water technologies made it possible to create sustainable crop conditions and in turn (together with engineering clues and infrastructures of the Inca and Aztec empires) enabled the extension of Spanish and Portuguese empires which eventually challenged Islamic strongholds. Thus, as with the Chinese in relation to Islam, the very reach and innovativeness of Islamic empires enabled rival imperial expansions that would unsettle their dominance. In this light we can see that the ‘great divergence’ of western Europe’s success in the system begins with a convergence. Or rather, as with the entry of earlier large states into the Afro-Eurasian system, European participation fed the dialectical motor, with contradictory and

destablilizing results for the hegemonic powers of the global south and east. And so it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut would say.

One last example—in math and accounting—is worth mentioning because of the degree to which it undercuts any simple equation between the spread of capitalism and ‘special’ western European innovations. It might well be argued that shared rules for mathematical calculation are a necessary if not sufficient element for any economic *system* that is organized around the ‘ceaseless accumulation of capital’. The very word ‘calculation’ suggests as much. Yet computational math, too, traveled from the southeast to western Europe, when the Hindu-Arabic numerical system (using the zero and the notion of place value) supplanted the use of the abacus and facilitated computation in business and administration. Abbasid-era scholar and translator, al-Khwarizmi, played a key role in this important shift by way of his Arabic-language book, *Calculation of the Hindu Numerals* (circa 825 CE), which explains computational methods and which was soon translated into Hebrew and Latin (Bloom 2001: 129-132; Burke 2009: 183). Widely deployed and disseminated in Islamic empires through the use of paper and the highly organized employment of copyists (as evident in the Cairo Geniza archive), this new computational practice helped, according to Burke, to create ‘a single market from Spain to India and China, with a single language of administration (Arabic) and a single monetary system (the trimetallic system of gold dinar, silver dirham, and copper fils)’, facilitating the integration of European markets and eventually American markets into an increasingly global world system (Burke 2009: 183-184). If we are looking for turning points in the road to capitalism, the conception and dissemination of the Indian numerical system would seem to be at least as important as any Anglo-European innovation. Certainly this regularization of financial computation became one of the continuities of the system that fostered both the infrastructural centralization and the intensification of its power.

### *The Inter-Imperial Political Field*

When we notice that highly interactive, modernizing dynamics are also contestatory and inter-imperial, we arrive in the realm of politics. Although scholars of international relations have long analyzed multi-lateral global contests and alliances, a long-view focus on jockeying empires clarifies their interdependent unfolding together with an economic world-system and with resistant communities, including elites, tradespeople, and laborers. This analysis may provide

some answers to the incisive questions recently raised by Benno Teschke and Hannes Lacher (2007) about the interacting but separate origins of capitalism and large competing states.<sup>8</sup> It also clarifies another of those dialectical effects so formative for world history: the ways that laboring and subaltern communities—having themselves often done the work of building, guarding, or disseminating the empires' infrastructures—have then taken advantage of these infrastructures (ships, roads, weapons, coin-minting, paper, print, and relay mail-systems) to organize rebellion or revolution.

In considering such political maneuvers by non-elite actors within and across imperial lines, it helps first to characterize the maneuvers among rulers and administrators of competing empires. In *Explorations in Connected History*, Sanjay Subrahmanyam gives us an illustration of these dynastic interactions and in the process sketches a model of the *elite level* of the dialectically inter-imperial political field. Drawing on archives in several languages, he tracks the complex, mutual effects of political and military maneuvers among Ottoman, European, Safavid, and Mughal empires in the sixteenth century. Subrahmanyam (2005: 13-14) traces, first of all, how fifteenth-century Portuguese interventions in the political dynasties of northern India partly enabled the inroads of Mughals there, and he shows how these laid the ground for Portugal's territorial and trade agreements with the Mughals as the latter expanded their empire southward. In subsequent years, to the chagrin of Mughal leaders, the Portuguese negotiated for additional trading powers and port privileges in return for the safe haven they could provide for Mughal pilgrimages to Mecca (which were in some cases also trading expeditions); and this in turn sometimes led the Mughals to build alliances with the otherwise-disliked Ottomans so as to safely bypass or undercut the Portuguese.

Not surprisingly then, ripple-effects moved through the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean basin when the Spanish Hapsburgs subdued and annexed Portugal in 1580-81. Often considered a turning point in the European balance of power, this event did more than affect relations within Europe. It re-aligned arrangements between Mughals and Europeans even as it affected relations between the Europeans and the Ottomans, for the annexation drained the Hapsburg Empire's military resources and led to their increased readiness to compromise in treaties with the Ottoman empire (Subrahmanyam 2005: 46-50). The Ottomans themselves had entered a period of consolidation for several reasons, including recently unsuccessful territorial wars with the Iranian Safavid Empire, the assassination of the Grand Vizier, and perhaps also the

entry of new silver and gold from America, which had recalibrated Ottoman monetary systems while enriching Spain and Portugal.

We can draw similar pictures of inter-imperial jockeying and re-orientations among multiple dynasties for most periods, including later centuries. Under Peter I [1672-1725] and in particular Catherine II [1762-1796], for instance, the Russian empire expanded its frontiers, forcing its way into Ottoman territories, and by the end of the eighteenth century extending its reach to the Black Sea. Although the Russian annexing of Ottoman territories was in some periods a boon to western European empires insofar as it gave them easier access to eastern lands, the eighteenth-century European support of Russia's imperial expansion would, as we know, come back to haunt it (see LeDonne 1997). By the later nineteenth century, conflicting imperial interests in central Asia led to war with Russia, most famously the Crimean War (1853-56), in which British and Europeans joined with Ottomans to prevent further Russian incursions westward. Meanwhile, the U.S. increasingly emerged as an imperial force with global ambitions, winning extra-territorial rights in China in the 1840's (Ruskola 2005), supporting Britain in the Second Opium War, and pursuing new alliances with the Japanese. Closer to home, from the 1840's on, the U.S. devoted new military funds to the winning of western and southern territories from Amerindian nations as well as the French and Spanish, and its successes helped to prompt the Civil War--which, however, disrupted cotton production and in turn destabilized both the world economy and the U.S. economy. Even this simplified sketch gives us a sense of the mutually produced, highly contingent, and interactive politics of *contemporaneous* imperial histories, with their unanticipated, sometimes ironic effects.

This world of interactive, dialectical politics operates at all levels, moreover—not just among emperors or dynastic administrators and army generals. As noted, empires attract and repulse. That is, their prosperous, networked economies not only attract populations (from conquered elites to small traders, laborers, and servants), they also alienate and uproot communities. The agents of empires steal land, burn property, destroy homes and villages; they rape, wound, starve, kill, and enslave people. Imperial laws violate the norms and suppress or demote the languages and beliefs of conquered societies. Empires therefore face anger, hatred, dissent, unrest, rebellion, sometimes revolution—and an array of creatively expressed forms of evasion and critique preserved in traditions of art, music and literature. These states are in turn shaped to defend against their detractors, in the form of police or armies, travel and border

restrictions, and elaborate penal and censorship codes. Yet these very institutions indicate that imperial rulers are not the sole engines of history. As Marx spelled out in searingly clear terms, history is fundamentally shaped by the dialectical interaction of rich and poor, powerful and powerless, but recent historiography has documented these dynamics more multi-dimensionally. Empires, plural, deserve study as part of this long history.

When we do so, we quickly find that the reigning models fail to capture the complexity of imperial formations and therefore of anti-colonial movements. To see the ways that disempowered communities often play one empire off against another, we need first to notice the varied formations and internal structures of empires. As publications by Alcock et.al. (2001), Stoler et.al. (2007), and Cooper and Burbank (2010) specify, imperial states have differently organized their relation to merchants and inter-imperial trade; and they have differently managed the multiple cultural, linguistic, and especially religious communities they invade, tax, and put to work. Some have more aggressively enforced homogenization of language, law, and religion, and others have found it more effective to create ‘multi-confessional’ and multi-lingual states, in this way more easily winning the accommodation of the local communities, including the loyalty of those elites who occupy a particularly intense and leverage-able inter-imperial position.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in a range of empires, ‘differentiated governance remained the foundation of imperial rule’ (Burbank 2007: 95). Several Chinese dynasties tolerated and eventually incorporated Buddhist practices; and Islamic empires (including the Abbasid, the Umayyid, and the Ottoman) also favored policies of tolerance of religious and other customs in conquered or incorporated territories. Indeed Milton pointed to the Ottoman empire as a model of the ‘liberal’ form of state (Matar 1998: 87), and Voltaire praised the Chinese empire as a model of multi-confessional as well as rational structures, critiquing European empire-builders for their obsessive commitment to religious conversion (Clarke 1997: 3).

The Russian Empire offers a particularly instructive instance of a state that evolved highly local and particular legal codes for different incorporated regions. As Jane Burbank shows, the Russian ‘imperial social contract’ intentionally enfolded the local customs of conquered and incorporated communities through a ‘series of regulations and decrees that asserted the particular rights and obligations of whole groups of people, defined by territory, confession, ethnicity, or even work’ (Burbank 2007b: 80-4; also see Sunderland 1998 and Hoch 1998). This imperial social contract encompassed a ‘multiplicity of ‘we’s’ and ‘they’s’’, as

Adeeb Khalid notes in following Burbank (Khalid 2007: 115). We should observe, too, that this multiplicity of we's and they's maneuvered not only within the imperial field of Russia but also, indirectly or directly, within the inter-imperial field of which Russia was a part, as Russian authorities were undoubtedly aware—including configurations that both fostered and hampered the Russian Revolution (see Burbank et.al. 2007a). In this light, we might suggest that the 'tolerant' empires such as the Russian, Ethiopian, and Ottoman made these different kinds of political deals not only as 'a cheap way to keep the peace' (Burbank 2007b: 80), but also as part of an effort to maintain their edge in the inter-imperial balance of global power and resources.

This wider portrait of diverse imperial structures and contingent inter-imperial conditions allows us to give a sharper account of dissenting and minority communities as agents of rebellion, revolution, and global transformations. Discussions of revolution among historians and sociologists have taken shape around debates over the cultural and politically radical causes of revolution and the structural, or economic and international, causes. Several scholars have focused attention on the international and structural causes of revolution (see Skocpol 1994; Goldstone 1994; Walt 1996; Foran 1997). An inter-imperial model that is geopolitical as well as economic/materialist can further illuminate these dynamics, although again I can only offer an outline.

The expansionist, incorporative thrust of empires means that they inherently enfold the 'international' and translocal within themselves, often uncomfortably if not violently. In turn, internal differences of culture, economy, religion, and self-interest, and the frictions arising from these, become the cracks in the armor through which other empires send their spears. Indeed, empires have regularly cultivated alliances with dissident communities and ethnic or religious minorities in rival empires. While they have sometimes done so under the pretense or promise of liberating these communities, more often than not the goal has been to destabilize rival empires-- as John LeDonne (1997: 23-37) shows is the case for Russian imperial policy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century regarding the Polish and Swedish empires. Likewise, many an empire has courted the support of revolutionaries in a rival empire in order to seize that empire's territories and resources, afterward jailing revolutionaries and maintaining the subordinate status of laborers and women, as did the U.S. in the Philippines when it supported independence fighters' effort to oust the Spanish empire. In earlier periods, in their Atlantic-world contests the

British and the French empires had likewise each fostered insurgency among Indian tribes, enslaved communities, and American and Caribbean political radicals in the other's empire.

Yet as these examples hint, colonized or disenfranchised communities have in their turn manipulated these inter-imperial rivalries, courting and gaining support or weapons from one empire for their rebellions against another. Such a strategy is always risky, yet it has sometimes worked. Thus did Haitian revolutionaries court British support against France, while the Irish garnered troops and other forms of support from the French for their late eighteenth and early nineteenth century anti-colonial battles against the British. Similarly in the 1940's, some leaders of India's independence movements extracted concessions from the British under the shadow of Japanese imperial ambitions. Meanwhile, in a more radical and risky challenge to the British Raj, other Indian political leaders pursued an Indian-Japanese alliance (and, fleetingly, an Indian-German alliance)—led in part by Indian political exiles and POWs who joined the Japanese against the British and formed the Indian National Army. Such alliances fully exemplify the complexity of inter-imperial maneuvers undertaken by anti-colonial resisters. Intersecting with what we might call the horizontal relations among empires, they reveal the vertical and vectored, criss-crossing pressures, which further complicate, destabilize, and direct that web of power relations.

Disenfranchised or revolutionary groups have also taken advantage of the technologies built by empires. They have spoken to each other not only through the 'oppressor's language' but also through the oppressors' infrastructures. As the recent work of Priya Gopal (2005), Elleke Boehmer (2002), and others has established, members of twentieth-century independence movements in Ireland, Africa, India, and the West Indies formed coalitions, read each other's newspapers, traveled internationally to organizational meetings on what were often empire-subsidized trains and ships, thereby sharing both information and inspiration. Both the crimes of colonialism and the resistance of insurgents became internationally visible, so that, as Frantz Fanon observed (1963: 70), 'In spite of all that colonialism can do, its frontiers remain open to new ideas and echoes from the world outside. It discovers that violence is in the atmosphere, that it here and there bursts out, and here and there sweeps away the colonial regime'.

In short, inter-imperiality is a structure of relations among many levels of world residents, stimulating solidarities and conditioning encounters, and generally shaping transhemispheric interactions in ever-tightening circuits of travel and technology. Relations

among soldiers, refugees, intellectuals, revolutionaries, entrepreneurs, sailors, diplomats, enslaved and wage workers, rich merchant families, religious pilgrims or missionaries, and state bureaucrats continually come full circle to shape relations among multiple imperial states. All players may therefore be said to occupy what we could call an inter-imperial positionality. Accordingly, cultures have been permeated and structured by an inter-imperial consciousness, as I discuss next.

### *The Inter-Imperial Cultural Field*

For millennia, aesthetic culture has been an effect and a witnessing voice of imperial dynamics. Regarding both patronized and popular arts, in this last section I'll suggest that here too we find a history of inter-imperial positioning across social strata. Court culture, street culture, and eventually middle-class culture all operate within this field of pressures and accretions. I make three observations about cultural production, which also clarify its stakes:

*First, in their competition with and emulation of each other, empires have long been appropriative builders of culture, including through academic institutions and through concerted practices of translation.*

*Second, because of the transhemispheric travel and translation induced by empires over centuries, deeply creole and sedimented aesthetic forms have developed, leaving traces of imperial histories in both popular and elite styles—with implications for our framing of cultural history, including Anglo-European literary history.*

*Third, artists and scholars of all kinds (popular and elite) labor in the volatile spaces between or among contemporaneous empires, whether inside or outside state-funded institutions, a position reflected in the forms and content of their art.*

This kind of inter-imperial approach to aesthetics diverges significantly from studies of cultural globalization and of intercultural contact. Although it shares some concerns with these, by contrast it lays a certain kind of stress on the imperial conditions and semiotics of art, specifically as these are shaped by contemporaneous, rival empires as well as by past empires. Situating authors and the institutions of literary culture within the political history of empires in competition, an inter-imperial analysis tracks, for instance, the signs of that *political* history in texts (not just the cultural-poetic history); and it is guided in part by the biographies of and legacies of writers as they survived inside or outside these institutions and this political terrain.

Such inter-imperial close readings may also reveal *longue durée* patterns that cut across both the familiar temporal binaries of oral/written or pre-modern/modern and the implicitly evaluative binaries of traditional/experimental, eastern/western, and indigenous/foreign. It points us past these terms which have so long structured discussions of literature and sometimes distorted our understanding of genre and experimentation in postcolonial texts. In this last section, I will elaborate on these inter-imperial elements first at the elite level and then among less entitled communities.

First, cultural institution-building. The history of world cultures has been fundamentally shaped by competing and conquering empires via their institutions of learning. These knowledge-building projects have long included: the building of libraries and academies; the funding of ambitious translation projects; the support of scholarly specialists in foreign cultures and scientific knowledge; and the imperial claim to and exhibition of the artifacts, styles, and traditions of conquered states or communities. In short, there have been widespread global precedents for the institutions of what we call Anglo-European orientalism, and they have likewise functioned as the ethnographic and linguistic arms of empire even while creating other, less controlled kinds of inter-cultural effects. Thus the orientalist distortions and political interests underlying some western Europeans' translation of Middle-eastern and Asian-language texts have parallels in the politically-motivated Chinese translation of Indian Buddhist texts and Islamic empires' translation of Persian, Greek, and Indian texts, as well as in the medieval Roman Catholic translations of the Koran.

Empires have learned these knowledge-appropriating and institutionalizing practices from each other, ever-refining and expanding them. They have not only stolen texts and art from each other's academies, libraries, and monasteries, but they have also in effect 'stolen' the translators and scholars as well. That is, the scholars and artists of conquered empires have sometimes been forced to serve the new or rival emperors. Such was the case for Byzantine scholars captured by the ninth-century Abbasid caliph al-Mamun, who were put to work building his academy and scientific and mathematical archives (Bloom 2001:118), or the sixteenth-century Muslim scholar known to Europe as Leo Africanus, born al-Hasan al-Wazzan, who was captured by Christians and served as translator of Arabic texts for Pope Leo X (Davis 2006).

Here too the culture-building states of Islam have played a particularly important 'hinge' role between empires and eras. At least since the Abbasid reign of Harun al-Rashid [786-809],

Islamic caliphs borrowed knowledge-building models cultivated in China, Iran and India, where rulers had long supported literate court culture and assembled libraries. Harun al-Rashid's son, al-Mamun, founded an imperial 'House of Wisdom', a form of institution dating from the pre-Islamic Iranian academy at Jundishapur and learned in Islam via Persian descendants who had served Islamic caliphs. Mamun's House of Wisdom employed translators of scientific, philosophical, and religious texts, and sent delegations of scholars to other empires in search of manuscripts. In wars with the Byzantine and other empires, victorious officers were encouraged to capture manuscript collections as valuable booty, while metropole librarians developed efficient collection systems and directed translation and copying teams for increasingly vast holdings—thus making effective use of paper technologies for knowledge-building as well as for finance, religion, and bureaucracy (Bloom 2001: 117-119). As Bloom points out, the 'translation of Persian, Greek, and Indian works into Arabic became a regular state activity', serving to garner (in Bloom's polite words) 'what other civilizations could offer' (Bloom 2001:117).

The library collection numbers are worth pausing over so as to appreciate the scale of these cultural projects. By the later 10<sup>th</sup>-century, the Baghdad library of the Persian vizier of Baha al-Dawla contained over 10, 000 scientific volumes, while the collection of the Andalusian Umayyad caliph al-Hakam (r. 961-976) contained 400, 000 books—at least 50 times larger than the largest libraries in Christendom at the time, most of which contained no more than a couple of thousand volumes (Bloom 2001:118-122). In 1121, the library of the Fatimid vizier of caliph al-Amir contained half a million books, which were eventually housed in the caliph's palace, where many volumes were made available for public circulation. In this way, as Edmund Burke III concludes (2009: 180), 'the main elements of the global writing complex (minus printing) came together' under medieval Islam'. This is the cultural house that Islam built and that Europeans entered as apprentices when they encountered Islam in Spain and in their Mediterranean Crusades.

Here we arrive at the second element of inter-imperial cultural production: the accretion of ideas and genres fostered or provoked by inter-imperial conditions of alliance, competition, borrowing, and exploitation. As a range of scholars has shown, many cultures of the Afro-Eurasian system crucially influenced western Europe, beginning with the Persian and Islamic scholarship that stimulated medieval scholasticism (especially via the work of Al-Andalusian 'radical Aristotelians' such as Averroes, who developed rationalist principles and methods),

while also helping to catalyze the Italian humanist Renaissance.<sup>10</sup> Students of the medieval period have long known that Anglo-European scholars learned most of their Aristotle through Arabic philosophers and translators. But recent scholarship has begun to unearth the fuller picture,<sup>11</sup> building on pioneering work by Richard Nykl (1946) in history, Américo Castro (1954), Dorothee Metlitzki (1977), and Maria Menocal (1987) in literature, and George Makdisi (1990) in the modeling of universities and the transfer of knowledge. Noting that Arabic was the intellectual language shared by al-Andalusian Jewish, Arabic, and Christian scholars, cultural historians have tracked the many thinkers who traveled from Italy, England, and France to the renowned libraries and translation centers at Córdoba and Toledo, where they studied secular and religious learning, including original Arabic science--all while being exposed to extant Islamic poetic, visual, architectural, and musical traditions.

All of these scholars consciously operated under suspicious imperial eyes and, accordingly, their texts often include careful ‘defenses’ and implicit nods to caliphal and papal imperial power, as well as quiet handshakes among scholars of different religions. As Nabil Matar has shown (1998), this awareness and emulation continues through the Renaissance period in relation to the Ottoman empire, and sometimes is manifested in what Gerard MacLean (2007: 20-23) considers an ‘imperial envy’ of Ottoman culture expressed in English texts. Barbara Fuchs (2001) similarly highlights a practice of imperial ‘mimesis’ of indigenous American empires (Incan and Aztec) in early imperial Spanish literature, as the Spanish fashioned themselves against old-world and Islamic empires, especially during this period when the state still felt threatened by the possibility of Ottoman invasion. Again, an analysis of these practices is not simply a matter of tracking the global ‘spread’ of ideas or poetics but rather of understanding the (anti)imperial leveraging, evasions, or positioning expressed in intellectual and aesthetic texts.

Meanwhile it’s important to mention some specifics of the literary inheritances, partly as a corrective to Pascale Casanova’s recent portrait, in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004 trans.), of the medieval European origins of a modern ‘world literature’. Again as many scholars have recently studied, western Christians were exposed to Islamic artistic culture in both their crusading travels eastward (where Christian princes were politely hosted at Islamic courts) and in al-Andalusian Spain, during and after the reign of Umayyid caliphs, who developed the cultural infrastructures that Spain inherited when it regained the region. After William IX of Aquitaine’s

long stays in both regions, for instance, Arabic music, language and styles of poetry came to hold a place of honor at his court in southern France. A similar situation obtained in the courts of southern Italy and Sicily after the Christian reconquest in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, such as in the Sicilian court of Frederick II, another aficionado of Islamic arts and poetry. As Metlitzki (1977), Menocal (1987; 1994), Robinson (2002), and Amer (2008) have shown, Islamic literary conventions in turn shaped the texts of Anglo-European writers, from allegorical dialogues between mind, body, soul, and heart in medieval spiritual literature, to the trope of an underworld journey as rendered in Dante, to the pilgrimage genre of linked travelers' tales mastered by Chaucer, to the patterns of lyric poetry. In short, exactly these forms that have been deemed distinctively native and European, and praised as the origins of modern western literature, turn out to have been significantly inspired by and imitative of southeastern Islamic literary traditions (themselves shaped by other cultures).

Perhaps most pointedly for an inter-imperial analysis, Cynthia Robinson (2002) and Sahar Amer (2008) have demonstrated that the 'troubadour' love poetry of Christian French-Mediterranean courts shares several aesthetic and political features with that of the Islamic al-Andalusian courts. Performed to musical accompaniment in both locales, these poetries are typically set in court gardens and they address a cruel or betraying lover, who is sometimes implicitly or explicitly the prince and patron, in tones that mix the political and the homo-erotic. In an era of waning Umayyid power in al-Andalus in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, loyalties were increasingly to local princes rather than to the distant caliph. With an ear tuned to this political context, Robinson suggests that the poetry's increasing intimacy of address and setting, and the themes of betrayal, reflect the court politics of this fractured 'taifa' period in al-Andalus. The poems accordingly register new, yet unstable alliances among Christian, Moslem, and Jewish elites in these court settings (Robinson 2002: 8).

Yet these alliances and poetics are furthermore shaped, we should also notice, within the larger, ongoing imperial contests between Islam and Christendom, which contributed to this Spanish and Mediterranean instability, as Fuchs notes (2001: 63). Therefore if we look to the troubadour poets as the founders of a vernacular European lyric tradition, we would want to consider the birth of that tradition within these nested inter-imperial force-fields. In this light, as we considered each poet's lyric negotiation of the more local dangers, shifting alliances, and betrayals of this terrain, we would pay a different kind of attention to the politics of writing in

the *vernaculars* rather than in Latin. Insofar as the use of the vernacular led twentieth-century critics and writers to deem troubadour poetry foundational for native, modern European literatures, this emergence of a literary vernacular deserves discussion within a *longue-durée* context of competing yet interpenetrating empires. (And indeed this introjection of the vernacular finds a parallel if not a precedent in the ‘medieval’ Arabic lyric form of the *muwashshahât* [Menocal 1994: 24-29].) In this light we might, for instance, interpret Ezra Pound’s poetic appropriations of Asian aesthetics *together with* his lifelong identification with troubadour poetry, viewing both within the long history of warring, global empires that connects the ‘medieval’ to the ‘modern’, and the poetic to the political.

Such possibilities bring us to the third condition of inter-imperial production--the fraught, in-between position of artists and scholars--and to consideration of the degree to which artists, writers and translators have navigated in these turbulent, contested waters. Natalie Zemon Davis (2006) points in this direction in her reading of al-Wazzan’s signatures and prefaces for the translation he penned at the papal court and of his transculturated histories of the Arab world, which he wrote after his departure from Rome. Translators and scholars such as al-Wazzan may embody one way that empires speak to empires, in the shifting terrain in which imperial subjects become colonized subjects, and vice-versa, with effects for the history of thought and culture.

We might in this context revisit the Greek scholar Longinus’s influential essay *Peri Hypsous* (‘On the Sublime’), which so influenced western European writers of the eighteenth century. Postcolonial critics have understood the Anglo-European attachment to the aesthetic of the sublime as part of their imperialist imaginary, insofar as eighteenth-century Anglo-European theorists defined the sublime in art as the rendering of an awesome and violent surpassing of psychic and geographic boundaries (Suleri 1992; Doyle 1996). Yet when we revisit Longinus’s text, we also discover another dimension. For when he wrote his essay, Longinus was living as a Greek in imperial Rome, and on closer look his essay reflects his political resentment and maneuvering. Longinus may appear simply to compare the sublimity of Greek and Roman orators—until we notice his wry asides, as when he asks, ‘if I, as a Greek may be allowed an opinion’, and parenthetically demurs, ‘But you Romans could better judge these matters’ (12.27). He proceeds quietly to privilege ‘our’ Greek orators, pointing to men such as Demosthenes who speak in the face of foreign invasions; and he highlights their concern with ‘whether we shall be free men or slaves’. Perhaps this founding text of the ongoing aesthetic-critical tradition of the

sublime registers not only an imperialist imagination but also an *inter*-imperial negotiation among elites. This possibility finds further support in the fact that Anglo-Europeans came to consider the capacity for creating sublime art as a measure of imperial superiority, competitively praising the English ‘bards’ as ‘more sublime than the classic fablers’ (Hurd 1762: 54-55), and, in Kant’s *Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, strategically deeming the ‘Oriental’ indifferent to the sublime relative to the powerful sensitivities of Europeans (Kant 1763: 109, 111).

Of course not all aesthetic culture-makers live at court or receive patronage or pay. They live anywhere and everywhere, as minstrels, storytellers, painters, potters, and popular artists of all kinds. Yet these artists, too, have often traveled or been carried on the ships and silk roads of empires—a phenomenon richly depicted in Claude McKay’s novel *Banjo*. Undertaking forced or voluntary migrations which were often prompted by inter-imperial politics, cultural forms have arisen and spread via laborers, tradespeople, exiles, and entire diasporic communities. For one directly coercive kind of instance, we might consider the the skilled artisans of Northern Thailand, studied by Bryce Beemer (2009), who were transported to Burma in the mid-sixteenth century as captives in the latter’s expansionist wars. These artisans carried sophisticated Chinese techniques for engraving lacquerware into Burma where they were forcibly employed to practice them, and thus involuntarily created a Burmese artisan tradition. How might we study this tradition for traces of this history? Is there some sort of artisanal speaking from ‘behind the veil’ about these conditions?

And likewise, what questions might we add to Steven Yao’s inquiries into the texts of those early twentieth-century laborers who had fled China and are known as the ‘Angel Island poets’ after the island off the California coast on which they were detained, sometimes for years, by the U.S. government (2010: 63-94). In flight from China and in search of labor, yet interned by the United States, these diasporic workers carved hundreds of poems into the wooden walls of their cabins, poems in which they reshaped classical Chinese poetic forms—imperial forms--into protest lyrics, addressing them to capitalist exploiters in both Chinese and U.S. empires. Among other questions, we might ask what hostilities, or perhaps agreements, between China and the U.S. created this situation and whether the poems in any way refer to these.

Or we might consider the work of writers who inhabit strategic inter-imperial geographic locations and therefore suffer particularly acute multiple pressures, such as those in the

Caribbean, the Balkans, north Africa, or the Philippines—viewing them on these terms rather than strictly within a binary model of colonizer and colonized.<sup>12</sup> Cuban writers, for instance, expressed their resistance to Spanish empire under the shadow of a U.S. empire standing in the wings—the latter offering to help in Cuban liberation but simultaneously jockeying for an imperial foothold of their own. This artistic position may have generated the dodgy, multi-tonal, and purposefully elusive avant-garde forms described by Gerard Aching (2011) and Vicky Unruh (2011). Here again the purpose is not mainly to track the migrations of literary form but rather to explore their shaping by multiple imperial pressures, past and present. In this case, although the contemporary pressures were exerted by European and U.S. American powers, we might also find that Cuban texts carry sedimented signs of earlier imperial histories, by reference to ‘Moorish,’ Berber, baroque, or arabesque styles. Such an analyses does not offer an account of what some have referred to as ‘world literature’. Rather it highlights the *world production of* literature of any status, specifically its production within imperially-shaped world-systems.

In this light, we might return to a text often deemed an epitome of world literature, *1001 Nights*. But instead of focusing mainly on its millennial travels and transformations, we would first of all reconsider the relation between its frame and its stories, for that relation is an inter-imperial one. That is, the Shah and Scheherazade live in the Sassanid Persian empire—an empire conquered by the same Islamic Abbasid dynasty that appears (anachronistically) in many of its stories, including in the figure of the Abbasid emperor Haroun al-Rashid. Thus in effect, this once-rival Persian empire generates a set of stories absorbed by Islam and richly infused with Arabic oral traditions, often set in Islamic metropole cities such as Abbasid Baghdad and Fatimid Cairo. Although some recent studies have paid attention to the stories’ mercantile and metropole elements, scant attention has been paid to these inter-imperial semiotics and conditions of production.<sup>13</sup> In a larger project, I consider Scheherezade’s storytelling as an epitome of the inter-imperial position of the artist, spoken in fact under threat of death from an emperor. Although she is the vizier’s daughter and an educated woman of the court, her situation implicitly embodies that of many women within the imperial metropole and of the many petty merchants and minstrels who, in the tales within her tale, tell stories about their perilous travels between Islamic, Indian and Chinese empires.

I suggest that the organization of *1001 Nights* around this *inter-imperial political economy* may in turn explain its remarkable attraction to artists on every continent and over

several centuries. In western Europe, the *Nights* was on the one hand taken up by elite writers who (as with the sublime) appropriated this ‘other’ empire’s storytelling tradition to assert ‘eastern’ imperial decadence and ‘western’ imperial superiority (Ali 1981). On the other hand, the tradition has also inspired writers in precarious inter-imperial situations, such as the impoverished nineteenth-century Anglo-Irishman Charles Maturin, or the twentieth-century writers Jorge Luis Borges, as well as by writers in colonized positions, from James Joyce and Amos Tutuola to Naguib Mahfouz, Salman Rushdie, Diana Abu-Jabar, and Nuruddin Farah. Working within an inter-imperial frame, we might, for instance, consider Nuruddin Farah’s representation of long-standing anti-imperial sentiments among Somalians toward the Ethiopian empire, including in relation to gender hierarchies, and analyze these elements together with the legacies of European cultural and economic colonialism. We might find that these writers’ engagement with a literary tradition dating to Persian and Islamic empires both supplements and complicates their critiques of Anglo-European empires and gives their texts a deeper potency than we have yet appreciated. Such writers seem to take us full circle, illuminating the untold returns of a long-accruing, world-shaping, inter-imperial history.

### *Conclusion*

World historians increasingly speak of the ‘underlying unity of Afro-Eurasian history’ and suggest that ‘we must regard modernity itself as an indirect product of the rich synergy created by [this] huge and ancient system’ (Christian 2000: 26). As Jack Goldstone puts it, many technologies have arisen from a ‘path-dependent interweaving with circumstances’ and thus the steam engine and other such inventions ‘were not closed national events; quite the reverse—they were strongly rooted in the mixing of cultures, ideas, people, and skills’ (Goldstone 2002: 375-376). In this light, as John Wills observes, the ‘long drift to European hegemony in Asian waters seems less overdetermined, less a foregone conclusion, much more multi-causal and contingent’ (Wills 1993: 83-4).

Yet this important truth about contingency needs some qualification. When we pay attention to interacting empires, the ‘multi-causal’ turns out to be less random and under-determined than it first seems. Rather it becomes clear that this multi-causality is significantly generated by an inter-imperial set of conditions--which after all have been powerfully determining. Burke points in this direction when he highlights the ‘gravitational pull’ that large

networks, such as those of Islamic empires, exert on ‘intercommunicating zones across Afroeurasia’ (2009: 166-68). Resisting, adjusting to, or capitalizing on this ‘pull’, and sometimes all three at once, the inhabitants and rulers of empires, have to a significant degree together catalyzed the ‘interactive emergence’ of world-historical processes. The ripple effects in these multi-vectored dynamics are not merely what (following Deleuze and Guattari) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call rhizomatic in *Empire*; they do not simply skitter outward (2000: 299). They are labor-intensive, often violently interactive, and institutionally situated as well as strategically pursued.

This reorientation of postcolonial studies around an inter-imperial account of world history, which also encompasses complex anti-imperial and labor formations, points well beyond binary models of empire vs. colony and the state vs. the economy. In turn, it might help to ease tensions between postcolonial subaltern studies and Marxist or world-system studies and allow for more effective political and intellectual cooperation. If we acknowledge the long historical co-formation of state and economy, specifically of aggressively expansionist states and aggressively profit-seeking capitalists, both of which depend on labor and gender regimes, we understand that capitalism has needed empires and, at least since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, empires have succeeded through capitalist processes. Colonial peripheries and unequal development have been their joint creation. Large-state rulers and capitalist owners may sometimes loudly threaten or contest the claims of each other, yet in the end they often shake hands under the table. An inter-imperial model draws the focus of our political, economic, and cultural critiques toward these multi-lateral elite relations and toward the multi-lateral resistance to them.

At the same time, insofar it as focuses on the determining laws and institutions of large states, this multi-state model may add new dimensions to transnational studies, for it brings into view different kinds of cross-border formations. When a nation is an expanding empire, it is not only the people who travel but also the laws and state practices, often adjusted within or against the laws of the newly subordinated state as well as of those of previously ruling or adjacent dynasties, and often including a range of repressions or accommodations for specific populations (as in some periods of Russian and Chinese empire). Here again, such legal and state institutions are fundamentally shaped by the labor, resistance, and (pragmatic, ambivalent or forced) participation of subaltern or dissident populations. This kind of transnational studies thus gives

attention to *state formation* as shaped by other states and a range of actors exerting pressure from beside and below as well as above.<sup>14</sup>

In the realm of culture, this account allows us to consider how aesthetic forms have arisen in part to negotiate in-between positions, amid the fluctuating contests and economies of large states and within politically, ethnically, or religiously layered traditions. Postcolonial cultural analyses have mostly focused on a single Anglo-European empire in relation to one or a few colonized states and have illuminated many subtle transformations of aesthetic conventions that challenge or support colonizing imaginaries. While building on these insights, an inter-imperial analysis additionally considers communities, artists, genres, and tropes (of labor or sexuality, say) as they emerge in relation to the full surround of empires, noting where texts register the pressures of adjacent empires and the accretions of past empires or states. In giving attention to the ways that empires have inflected aesthetic forms in periods before western European hegemony, this analysis better explains why and how more recent artists have borrowed patterns and genres from those earlier periods. In the end it describes the labors of art-making within a transhemispheric political force-field and economic system, and in turn may allow new insight into some artists' self-consciousness about their positions. In short, it may make more fully visible the material conditions of artistic production and reception.

Finally, it is important to highlight that this kind of inter-imperial analyses is multiply dialectical. It seeks to understand the ways that all formations are mutually contingent co-formations. It tracks all agents as they are caught up in a circuitry of uneven and dynamic interdependence, the electrical charge of which, as Scheherazade well knew, runs through our most intimate relations, even our self-relations. A dialectical method understands this circuit to have issued from a long past of such dynamics, accruing into determining material and ideological currents that, at the same time, continue either to be destabilized by present interactions or to be pressured by the *threat* of such interactions—including, we can imagine, as signaled in a woman's angry foot as it rocks a vexed cradle.

This kind of dialectical political analysis emphatically pauses here, inhabits this crux, where actions register their felt conditions and anticipate each other with a strategic, calibrating force—and thus form each other before they are fully enacted. For there is an ever-present incipience of conflict or alliance shaping all of our actions. These actions may include a nation's policy decisions amid the many other nations and communities that might oppose those

decisions. Or the actions may occur more locally, in an encounter between a single guard and a single traveler at a remote border-crossing, or among farmers organizing a local cooperative yet with conflicting visions of it due to the pressure of hovering large states. Or such action may include the decision of a poet not to publish a risky poem whose rhyme scheme recalls a ‘foreign’ influence, or to remove a certain line from it. Such is the dispersed contingency of events. In this political field, each act becomes what it is nearly simultaneously with the surround of emergent actions, all of which also register a past with strong determining force. Yet insofar as habitual roles and acts must be continually performed and repeated, as Judith Butler reminds us, *and* insofar as the force-field of the present differs from that of the past, these acts cannot be *wholly* predicted.

In short, the spectrum of repressive or circumscribing political formations are shaped in part by the spectrum of acts eschewing or resisting them. The challenge is to stay attuned to the fuller surround of multiple determinations and multiple destabilizations, to hold in the analysis both the force of historical momentum and the dispersed atmospheric effects of a discontented gestalt--the systemic and the seismic, we might say. An inter-imperial method simply aims to take account of this fuller circuit of powers and acts, to sound their full historical depth, and so better to see the ongoing dialectics of history within sedimented infrastructures. In effect, it offers a political phenomenology of the troubled, often violent co-emergence of states, systems and persons, most especially within a historical field of empires; and it likewise takes account of the consternating complexity of that co-emergence, which makes ethical action and analysis demanding.

This dialectical analysis does not assume that there will be a time without conflict and it thus includes no transcendent teleology, neither Hegelian nor Marxist. Yet it is ethically positioned. It seeks a fully postcolonial life, without predicting one. It understands that the movement toward such a life must include acknowledgment of the full range of actors, the full range of legacies, whose part in creating the world is rightly called dialectical.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay originated in part as a series of Fall 2010 Leverhulme lectures in the UK and Ireland. I would like to thank the Leverhulme Foundation and my Leverhulme host at University of Exeter, Professor Regenia Gagnier, as well as the audiences whose questions helped to refine the concept of inter-imperiality.

<sup>2</sup> Although Hopkins emphasized more recent periods, his 1999 remarks in the journal Past and Present undoubtedly helped to catalyze some of the new research on empires in world history. Meanwhile, his call for attention to imperial interactions has still barely been taken up: 'What is needed is a fundamental appraisal of world history to bring out the extent to which, in recent history, it has been shaped by the interactions of several empires . . . Such an approach would capture both the differences between empires and their dynamism' (203).

<sup>3</sup> Burbank and Cooper (2010) do full justice to the crucial interactions among empires from the ancient to the modern period, including as these underlie the rise of European powers. Barbara Bush's thoughtful study Imperialism and Postcolonialism (2006) promises a broad history and also notes that 'empires have been shaped in relation to each other since antiquity' (9); but it includes only three pages on periods and empires 'Before Modern Europe'. Her case studies include one non-western pair of empires, China and Japan, and this is framed as a "long view of their responses to Western culture" insofar as "reactions to modernity, as represented by predatory European and US imperialism, were seminal to the collapse of the Chinese empire and the rise of Japanese imperialism' (100). Certainly the U.S. and Europe played these aggressive roles, but this story of European modernity erases the history of Afro-Eurasian modernity, which in turn allows, for instance, the remark that 'in the sixteenth century the vast Islamic and Chinese empires . . . were equal, if not superior to Europe' (13). Europe could only wish it stood as an equal in this period, for it did not: yet it has indeed succeeded in embedding this myth of Europe as eternal and original standard. In Empire: A Very Short Introduction (2002) Stephen Howe gives fuller attention to earlier periods, but his chapter divisions follow the questionable distinction between land empires and sea empires, allowing him to tread familiar ground in casting the latter as a 'mainly European kind' and to remark that these have been 'the most powerful and dynamic' in the modern world (35). Although in this passage he also notes that land empires are typically 'longer lasting', later in the chapter on land empires he compares the Mongol to the Abbasid empire, commenting that the Mongol empire "too, rapidly proved impossibly overextended and fragile' (46). The Abbasid's four centuries of central Eurasian hegemony hardly involved a 'rapid' decline, and in retrospect the period of European dominance may be roughly equal to the Mongols'.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one of the most tenacious myths has been the notion of a unique Anglo-European adventurousness—the expression of a boundary-breaking will to change and experimentation. It persists in contemporary global scholarship. In his valuable revision of U.S. history, for instance, Thomas Bender on the one hand agrees that 'Europe's emergence was the result of its interaction with the societies of Africa, Asia, and America' (Blaut and Pomeranz, qtd in Bender, 25); but on the other hand, he repeats old assumptions. For instance, he correlates the Atlantic ocean-crossing with new 'cognitive developments,' indeed an 'oceanic revolution' in consciousness (22)—'a vital and creative moment in European history'—eliding, among other things, the fact that earlier empires crossed the Indian Ocean and the Russians crossed the Pacific.

<sup>5</sup> For other early scholarship that helped to catalyze recent scholarship, see Schneider (1977) and Chaudhuri (1990).

<sup>6</sup> For further critical reflection on the term 'medieval' as used in a world context, see Varisco 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See Pomeranz (2007: 92-3) for study of the world-system's increasing dominance over and incorporation of relatively independent nomadic, tribal and semi-peripheral peoples.

<sup>8</sup> Teschke and Lacher (2007) note that we find "geopolitical competition" at each of the decisive junctures of capitalist development' (578), and they call for more varied and close analysis of the interwoven but separate histories of competing states and capitalist formations; but they limit their ability to pursue such an analysis by thinking only in terms of the last 200 years.

<sup>9</sup> European empire builders have typically sought religious homogeneity within their empires and pursued projects of conversion or expulsion, while empires in other regions often developed more variegated rules and laws. Yet there are variations within these patterns: Napoleon diverged from the European pattern when he invaded Egypt, identifying himself with Muslim traditions and claiming he would not tamper with religious practices; some

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Christian empires were multi-confessional, such as the Ethiopian and Russian. These variations suggest that Christian forms of empire are not inherently driven by a proselytizing drive but rather that geography and politics play a role. We might ask whether western christianity's intense proselytizing urge may have been driven partly by an intensive effort to *enter* the old world-system and shift the system's center toward Europe and the Americas.

<sup>10</sup> See Doyle (2010: 201-206) for an overview of scholarship on the Afro-Eurasian influences on western Europe since the twelfth century, including public-sphere and court culture as well as philosophy, science, art and literature. Also see Goody (2010) on the diverse locations and sources of a 'renaissance' in the middle of the second millenium, although his account is in some ways still inflected by eurocentrism.

<sup>11</sup> On the debates over what is sometimes called the 'arabist theory' of this influence on medieval European literature, see Boase (1977) and, more recently, Amer (2008).

<sup>12</sup> See Bahun-Radovic ( 2012) for a discussion of 'interpositionality' in the Balkans, which has shaped my analysis of inter-imperiality.

<sup>13</sup>See al-Musawi (2009) for the fullest treatment of the historical and imperial context of the tales of 1001 Nights. Also see Husain Haddawy's Introduction to his translation of the text (1990) for an overview of its complicated history of oral traditions, manuscript versions, and translations.

<sup>14</sup> See the work of Lauren Benton, for example Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History (2002). Also see Doyle 2009.