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Whither the Empire in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries? Taking Stock of a Vibrant Field in English and American Studies

Ladan Niayesh and Marie-Jeanne Rossignol

- 1 With the advent of globalisation at the end of the twentieth century, and a rising consciousness of the long-lasting consequences of European imperial colonizations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the “Empires” of earlier periods have come to be seen as appropriate objects of investigation and reflection in a new “world history” (Cooper and Burbank, Martinez-Gros). While a generation earlier Eric Hobsbawm still referred to “the Age of Empire” as encompassing the turn of the nineteenth century (Hobsbawm 1989), a new historiographical focus on the “Empires of the Atlantic World” (Elliott 2006) from 1492 to (roughly) 1830 has revealed a renewed interest in a first “Atlantic” globalization in which Spain, then Britain and France, played a major role.
- 2 “Empire” thus proves a useful and vibrant point of entry for studying the historical processes leading to the formation of the modern English-speaking world. The title chosen by Jeremy Black for his recent *The British Empire: A History and a Debate* (2015) underlines the current historiographical discussion accompanying any reading of the history of the British Empire in our time. The considerable intellectual and historiographical interest in the issue, as it has evinced itself over the past thirty years and is typified in *The Oxford History of the British Empire* launched in 1998 (Canny), remains very much the order of the day with such large-scale projects as those of the specially dedicated “Centre for Imperial and Global History” at the University of Exeter. For early Americanists, the renewed interest in the Empire over the last decades has coincided with a spate of publications on the “British Atlantic” which reconfigured the field of American history and by the same token made it more meaningful to European scholars. Meanwhile

the global turn cutting across disciplines in cultural studies and a fresh interest in material and micro-histories – small objects telling big stories, as in Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello's *The Global Lives of Things* (2016) – have led to a general call for revisiting the narrative of the British Empire through a vast range of more individually and locally rooted perspectives.

- 3 Too much of this ongoing work on the empire still primarily focuses on the last two hundred years. This is a gap we wished to partly fill when we launched our call for papers for the 20-21 January 2017 Paris conference on “Empire in the English-speaking World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.” The goal of our conference was to take stock of current research on “empire” in history, as well as in literature and art, and to highlight new avenues for research by adopting an interdisciplinary perspective. The present volume includes a selection of the debates and reflections from that conference. We have tried to address in it not the full extent of the history and outlines of the Empire, but more modestly the history and outlines of some of the present-day conversations about it.

- 4 When looking at the complex narrative of origins of the British Empire as sketched by Nicholas Canny in his introduction to the first volume of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, what perhaps most strikes the reader is the share of what Canny calls the “trial-and-error” (32) efforts and experimentations with competing ideologies of empire and uncertain material conditions. Right from the start – if sixteenth-century post-Reformation England is even to be considered the start – it seems that the course of the Empire like “the course of true love / Never did run smooth” (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.134). In the preamble of the 1533 *Act in the Restraint of Appeals*, the ambiguity of the phrase “this realm of England is an empire,” cited by David Armitage as an assertion of ecclesiastical and national independence vis-à-vis Rome rather than the expression of an expansionist project (*Greater Britain* 35), is shared by most dictionary definitions of “empire” in English throughout the century. Thus Thomas Cooper's 1578 Latin to English dictionary translates “imperium” as “A solemne commaundment: a preeminence in gouernance: authoritie royall: power: dominion: empire” (Sig. Ooo6r), while Florio's 1598 Italian to English dictionary defines “imperio” as “an empire, an empirie, a monarchie, a dominion, a maiestie, a rule, a solemne charge, a supreme proheminece, a royall powre, a gouernment, a chief command, an authoritie royall, a princely iurisdiction, an imperous swaie” (169). Anachronistic definitions and backward readings of the concept must not make us forget that in its emergent form, the expansionist model of empire, as theorised by John Dee in the 1570s and elaborated on by Richard Hakluyt and others in the 1580s and 90s, was far from being a majority view (Parker). It was at best “a proposal rather than a description” (Andrea 10). And that proposal itself much hesitated between Dee's dream of reaching China through northern and eastern routes for building an empire of trade, and Hakluyt's call in his *Discourse of Western Planting* (1584) for a westward turn to America in order to implement a colonial project in the New World. This hesitation was later to result in two different imperial projects materialising in America and the East as the First and the Second British Empires.

- 5 What remains common to both scenarios, though, is the primarily maritime dimension of English endeavours in its formative period. And it is this point of entry into the narrative of Empire that our keynote speaker at the conference, Claire Jowitt, chose to revisit in her opening contribution to the present volume. Putting into perspective the figure of the heroic sea captain as later reconstructed by nineteenth-century triumphalist narratives

of empire, she provides a far less glorious subtext of mutinies, executions, and desertions marking Canny's "trial-and-error" period of the long 1590s. In the corrective she provides, the hesitations on the scope of power and command at sea mirror the period's hesitations in defining a national consciousness and an imperial ambition.

- 6 Micro- and macro-histories likewise meet to correct the perspective on Empire in Leopold Lippert's study of the closet play *Androboros* written in 1715 by the governor of New York, Robert Hunter. In an original approach combining the tools of literary and political analysis, Lippert interrogates the political significance of the aesthetic concerns of this first, understudied American play. Problematising the presence and importance of references to symbolic and material bodies in the text, Lippert interprets *Androboros* as a reflection of the anxieties over people's political representation in the Atlantic world, a point which was to prove increasingly sensitive in the decades leading to the revolutionary crisis.
- 7 The question of representativity links Lippert's contribution to the next one in the volume, by Florence Petroff. In her article, Petroff probes the work of the little-studied polemicist William Barron, a Scottish Presbyterian minister who used the precedent of the Roman empire to serve a contemporary political project, one in which the opening of the Parliament to American representatives could be a way to bring the War of American Independence to an end and thereby perpetuate the Empire.
- 8 The next two contributions also replace the local within the global by looking west and east at transfers and hybridisations of British models of sociability in the context of the Empire. Valerie Capdeville's contribution ponders over the colonial destiny of the English club, as this urban and elite model of sociability gets exported across the Atlantic in the context of the first British Empire. Simon Deschamps's article puts the hypothesis of exportability to the test in Britain's other, second Empire on the Indian subcontinent, as he traces the spread of Masonic lodges in the wake of trading ventures. Growing to become one of the largest networks of institutionalised trans-imperial sociability, Freemasonry for Deschamps encapsulates the cultural and material dynamics of globalisation and empire.
- 9 Global trade and material culture play a key role in the next two contributions to the volume, by Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding and Ariane Fennetaux. Alayrac-Fielding offers a multi-layered global narrative of the Empire through the material trajectories and the aesthetic treatments of such luxury commodities as tea and sugar, in still life paintings and in texts. Hers is a narrative in which commercial success hides the grim facets of slavery and intensive labour east and west. Fennetaux complements this narrative by stressing the sensory dimension of the experience of luxury products of consumption (cotton and porcelain are her examples) and by analysing some of the complex processes surrounding their technical and cultural hybridisation.
- 10 The last section in the volume is more overtly historiographical, bringing together the contributions of Bertrand Van Ruymbeke and Steve Sarson to the round table entitled "Whither the empire?" organised during the conference to reassess British Atlantic history as a phenomenon that now encompasses former imperial history in a much larger ensemble. What we wished to address at that round table was the extent to which the rise of Atlantic history from the late 1980s onward has brought the British empire back into the history of North America. The considerable theoretical work conducted since the 1990s by David Armitage and others (see Armitage 1998, 2000, 2004 for instance, or Morgan) on the various conceptions of the "Atlantic" has made it possible to go beyond a

simple reintegration of the North American colonies into the history of British political imperial networks. Although that aspect is important and well represented among others in the works of Andrew O’Shaughnessy (or in Leopold Lippert’s contribution to the present volume), the theoretical sophistications of Atlantic history open up further perspectives to analysis. British Atlantic history has now become a frame for exploring the circulations, migrations, and economic exchanges which took place across the Atlantic as Britain forged its first empire in North America. This frame – along with the concomitant surge in publications on slavery in the Caribbean and North America in recent decades – has allowed early Americanists to set out to demonstrate how imported African slaves could shape the British colonial economy in North America, as Peter H. Wood had set out to do in *Black Majority* (1974). Focusing on the cultural contribution of those Africans, Vincent Carretta (*Unchained Voices*, 1996) and others have explored the literature produced by slaves transported from Africa to the distant shores of America on English slave-ships, thereby reshaping the very notion of “English-speaking literature.” Thus the “British Empire” in North America now appears to have been almost from the outset a hybrid one, peopled by native and African-American agents, as well as by white settlers (see Richter 2003, Wood 1974, and Van Ruymbeke 2016). Highlighting Atlantic history allows us to see how the hierarchical distinction between the colonies and the metropole – or “peripheries” and “centres,” as Jack Greene calls them – was questioned by the colonists themselves long before the American Revolution, an event which made it possible for the former members of the “British Empire” to reinvent themselves as “Americans,” since this new identity had long been in the making (Marienstras 1976 and 1989).

- 11 Revisiting “Atlantic history” from their different perspectives, as we had invited them to do, Van Ruymbeke and Sarson both insist in their articles on how transformative the rise of that approach was in their careers as scholars working on North America. Van Ruymbeke’s contribution is more personal: he recalls how he first came to that perspective while working at the College of Charleston and doing research on the migration of French Huguenots to South Carolina. He usefully goes back to the origins of “Atlantic history” as pioneered in the 1950s by historians Robert R. Palmer and Jacques Godechot, and insists on how “new Atlantic history” has since then revolutionised the study of the colonial history of North America. Sarson likewise recalls how in the 1960s and 1970s, early American history, imitating the emphasis on the economic and social analysis pioneered by the French *Annales* school and British social history, stressed micro-economic studies of small New England villages in dense and sometimes opaque technical studies. He, too, praises Atlantic history, which linked the “small worlds we sometimes inhabit” (British colonial outposts) with “larger questions we can all relate to” (liberties, economic changes, race and racism), without imposing “interpretative straightjackets.” Sarson goes further in expressing his support for the new concept of “vast early America,” introduced in 2016 by Karin Wulf, director of the influential Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, as a way to insist on the centrality of the distant connections in the lives of early British colonists.
- 12 The final word belongs to Élise Marienstras’s study of the historical fortunes of the concept of “empire of liberty” in North America. The notion took its root in religious freedom in the context of English Reformation before gradually giving way to the liberal ideology developed by the Puritans in New England. Following the American Revolution, Marienstras reminds us, the new federal authorities made sure the “liberty” Americans

had fought for found release in the establishment of a lasting empire in the West through the gradual territorialisation of Indian lands. By the 1830s, characterised by Jacksonian democracy and the “market revolution,” “liberty” was also interpreted as the opportunity to succeed economically with as few legal restraints as possible, and could be reconciled with the slavery of African-Americans. This liberal ideology, we can conclude with Marienstrás, remains for better or worse at the heart of the American world empire today.

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