

1 Introduction

This book explores fragments from the lives of socially marginal men and women who were associated with Indian Ocean penal settlements and colonies in the nineteenth century. It interrogates colonialism from a subaltern history perspective, and places penal transportation in a broad global context. It takes a life-writing approach, weaving together biographical snapshots of convicts – ordinary Indians and Eurasians; African slaves, apprentices and ex-slaves; indentured labourers; soldiers and rebels – with the lives of sailors, indigenous peoples and the ‘poor whites’ of Empire. *Subaltern Lives* brings into focus convict experiences of transportation and penal settlements and colonies, as well as the relationship between convictism, punishment and colonial labour regimes. It also cuts a slice into society and social transformation in the nineteenth century, analysing the making of colonial identities, the nature of social capital in the colonial context, and networks of Empire across the Indian Ocean and beyond.

There was an intricate web of British penal settlements and colonies in the nineteenth century, which together received at least 300,000 convicts.¹ It is well known that during the period 1788 to 1868 convicts were shipped from Britain and Ireland to New South Wales, Van Diemen’s Land and Western Australia, and to Gibraltar and Bermuda. But, significantly, there were also substantial convict flows *between* British colonies at this time. For instance, from 1815 to 1825 the colonial authorities in Mauritius, the Cape Colony and the Seychelles transported convicts to Robben Island. Subsequently, they shipped them to the Australian colonies, which also became the destination for convicts from the Caribbean. From the 1790s the British transported Indian convicts from mainland South Asia to penal settlements across the Bay of Bengal

¹ This calculation is based on unpublished statistical work by the author and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart. Note the distinction between penal settlements and colonies. The former were East India Company settlements that later received convicts; the latter were colonised through penal transportation.

in Burma and Southeast Asia, and also further afield to Mauritius and Aden. Felons convicted in Southeast Asia and Ceylon were transported to these destinations too, as well as to mainland South Asian jails. After the great Indian revolt of 1857, the British largely replaced these settlements with a single penal colony in the Andaman Islands, and this remained in service until the Second World War. There was, then, a pan-imperial traffic in convicts, which stretched from Britain, Ireland and Gibraltar to India, Aden, Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal, southward to Australia, around the Cape Colony to Robben Island, and across the Atlantic to Bermuda and the Caribbean islands.² It is intra-colonial transportation – the shipment of convicts across and between British colonies and penal settlements – that is the main concern of this book.

As historians of colonial Australia have long since established, convict men and women are among the best-documented non-elites of the colonial period. They left a rich trail of official records in the wake of their conviction and transportation, and personal letters, diaries, drawings and even material artefacts augment these. Consequently, there is now a substantial literature on Australian convict lives.³ During the first half of the nineteenth century, about a hundred British and Irish convicts even wrote memoirs of their experiences of transportation to Australian penal colonies. They include eleven of the hundred or so Yankee rebels sent from Upper Canada to Van Diemen's Land in the late 1830s and 1840s. Some of these convict memoirs were published, and others remain buried in libraries and archives. Their accounts mark them out as being far from ordinary, and many of these convicts have been subject to close historical scrutiny.⁴

For the first half of the nineteenth century, there are no equivalent narratives for convicts transported to Australia from the Caribbean, Cape Colony, Mauritius and other British colonies, or for Indian convicts shipped to Southeast Asia. Consequently there has been very little work on convict lives for the Indian Ocean, and we know remarkably little about individuals transported within the region. There is a handful of notable exceptions, but mainly for the later 1800s. It is well known,

² Clare Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: Convict Transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787–1945', in Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown (eds.), *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Christopher Hurst, 2007), pp. 185–220.

³ Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (eds.), *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives* (Melbourne University Press, 2001).

⁴ Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, 'Introduction', in Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (eds.), *Chain Letters*, p. 3; Cassandra Pybus and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *American Citizens, British Slaves: Yankee Political Prisoners in an Australian Penal Colony, 1839–1850* (Melbourne University Press, 2002).

for instance, that the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar was sent into exile in Rangoon in the aftermath of the 1857 Indian revolt.⁵ The political prisoners, or ‘freedom fighters’, shipped by the British to the Andaman Islands in the later nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century are familiar historiographically too.⁶ Three Andaman convicts wrote about their experiences of transportation during the second half of the nineteenth century. They were Fazl-i-Haq Khairabadi, Maulana Muhammad Ja‘far Thanasari and Sayyid Ismail Husain (‘Munir’) Shikohabadi. But just like their Australian counterparts’ accounts, theirs are by no means ‘typical’ representations of convict life. These individuals were drawn from a literate class of male elites, and perhaps most significantly the purpose of their texts was to create particular forms of anti-colonial solidarity with their readership on the Indian mainland.⁷ In this respect, and in many other ways, the narrative accounts of Khairabadi, Thanasari and Shikohabadi anticipated the well-known writings of the Indian freedom fighters who were transported to the Andamans at the beginning of the twentieth century. The focus of these later memoirs – perhaps most famously that by V.D. Savarkar – is squarely on colonial brutality. The indignities of manual labour, common messing and communal bathing loom large, for these were men of privilege reduced to degrading circumstances. They represented the penal colony as an arena of political struggle, as well as their fetters as a metaphor for India as a nation in chains.⁸ Such men stand in stark contrast to other

⁵ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

⁶ Qeyamuddin Ahmad, *The Wahabi Movement in India* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966), ch. 8; Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion* (London: Anthem, 2007), pp. 17–18, 69–70, 164–6; Jamal Malik, ‘Letters, Prison Sketches and Autobiographical Literature: The Case of Fadl-e Haq Khairabadi in the Andaman Penal Colony’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, 1 (2006), 77–100; L.P. Mathur, *Kala Pani: History of Andaman and Nicobar Islands with a Study of India’s Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi: Eastern Book Company, 1992); Satadru Sen, ‘Contexts, Representation and the Colonized Convict: Maulana Thanasari in the Andaman Islands’, *Crime, History and Societies* 8, 2 (2004), 117–39.

⁷ Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8*, pp. 17–18; Malik, ‘Letters, Prison Sketches and Autobiographical Literature’; Sen, ‘Contexts, Representation and the Colonized Convict’.

⁸ David Arnold, ‘The Self and the Cell: Indian Prison Narratives as Life Histories’, in David Arnold and Stuart H. Blackburn (eds.), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 29–53; Ujjwal Kumar Singh, *Political Prisoners in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). Contemporary writing in English includes: Barendra Kumar Ghosh, *The Tale of My Exile* (Pondicherry: Arya Office, 1922); Bhai Parmanand, *The Story of My Life* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1982); V.D. Savarkar, *The Story of My Transportation for Life* (Bombay: Sadbhakti Publications, 1950); Bejoy Kumar Sinha, *In Andamans, the Indian Bastille* (Kanpur: Profulla, C. Mitra, 1939).

convicts, who on the whole are referred to only collectively, and rarely by name.⁹

Subaltern Lives is centred on those convicts who did not write memoirs of their experiences, but whose archival trace is substantial enough to manoeuvre them into the heart of histories of colonialism in the Indian Ocean. It investigates a series of overlapping concerns centred on penal settlements and colonies, and also explores society and social transformation, and networks of Empire in the nineteenth century. The book is engaged also with broader issues concerning colonialism, particularly with respect to other historical approaches foregrounded in what is called 'new imperial history', and more generally still with critical approaches to biography, methodology and the archives. At the heart of the book lies a productive engagement with some of the 'tensions of Empire' identified by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler in a seminal essay, published over ten years ago. *Subaltern Lives* keeps a keen eye on the 'grammars of difference' that produced categories of colonial rule, described by Cooper and Stoler, and on the everyday instabilities and contingencies of governance that at once both reinforced and undermined them. It also works closely with their ideas about the lack of clear distinction between 'colonizers' and 'colonized', across a range of contexts. Foregrounded in the book is one of the most important historiographical challenges of Cooper and Stoler's essay: the call for a critical interrogation of the colonial legacies that still mark the organisation of institutional archives and their separation across national borders. Its close attention to what Cooper and Stoler call the 'circuits of ideas and people, colonizers and colonized' aims to facilitate an entirely fresh engagement with the dynamics of Empire.¹⁰

The first broad theme of the book is the nature and meaning of transportation, and lived experiences of it. It is concerned with convicts, to

⁹ The most important exceptions are 'saint-soldier' Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple Khurruck Singh, who were transported to Singapore in the late 1840s after the Anglo-Sikh Wars. Today, they are both celebrated in Sikh popular memory – if not in postcolonial history. I will explore their lives in more depth in Chapter 4. See also Anoma Pieris, *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore's Plural Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 138–42; Anoma Pieris' important forthcoming article 'The "Other" Side of Labor Reform: Accounts of Incarceration and Resistance in the Straits Settlements Penal System, 1825–73', *Journal of Social History*; and Anand A. Yang, 'Bandits and Kings: Moral Authority and Resistance in Early Colonial India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66 (2007), 881–96.

¹⁰ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1–56, p. 34.

be sure, but also with men and women who were imbricated in the circumstances leading to criminal conviction, the indigenous peoples and local communities who lived alongside penal settlements and colonies, convict guards and overseers, and the families and social networks left behind. The pages that follow explore the process of conviction and transportation; the organisation of convicts; social, economic and cultural life within and across the penal borders of settlements and colonies; the production and management of hierarchies of punishment, race, gender and status; and convict agency and resistance. They are centrally concerned with bringing together an understanding of transportation as a global practice with an understanding of the everyday in penal settlements and colonies – or, to put it another way, with both macro and micro history.

Second, the book considers aspects of society and social transformation in the nineteenth century. Historians interested in discourses and practices of colonialism commonly invoke categories like race, gender, religion and, in the Indian context, caste as a means of understanding and interpreting the nature of colonial governance through the construction, maintenance and performance of a complex set of social hierarchies. However porous, fluid, shifting or slippery, it is generally agreed that such categories hardened during the course of the nineteenth century and came to render intelligible colonial societies as political, cultural, social and gendered spaces.¹¹ *Subaltern Lives* speaks to this process, in particular the ways in which race was constituted as a cultural category, and the ways in which it came together with ideas about gender, masculinity, education, conduct and status in forming particular identity constellations that varied across time and space.

The third theme of the book centres on transportation as a geographically networked social process, and as part of a larger colonial repertoire of discipline, punishment and work. In this, it considers the overlaps between the governance of supposedly distinct penal spaces, as well as their relationship to other forms of colonial punishment and to other colonial labour regimes. This approach opens up new ways of thinking about the Indian Ocean apart from penal settlements and colonies. It was a significant site of penal transportation, to be sure, but acknowledging the extent of convict movement across the region also brings into focus something of the connectivity of governance between the East India Company's settlements in South and Southeast Asia and British Crown

¹¹ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

colonies in Australia and the western Indian Ocean. As we will see, beyond the British Empire, it also opens up to view the extent of North American presence and influence in the region, particularly culturally. In each of these areas, *Subaltern Lives* brings the very margins of society to the fore in a discussion of some of the large issues of imperial history: exploitation and enslavement; the political economy of labour; war, rebellion and revolt; resistance and anti-colonialism. In these respects it shows that the reach and impact of penal transportation in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean were remarkably deep and wide.

The chapters that follow centre on individuals who are unusual because, although they did not write or record their own biographies, and despite their apparently marginal or marginalised status, they left fragmentary traces in the archives. They can be found in and through penal inventories and convict musters, petitions, letters and diaries, as well as court records, convict registers, official correspondence and photographs. The book seeks to go beyond the framework of what micro-historian Carlo Ginzburg famously described as the ‘normal exceptional’, where individuals emerge out of the archive because of the recording of a dramatic moment, only to disappear into obscurity once the drama has passed.¹² Rather, it hopes to present readings of extended moments from individual lives that reach beyond the extraordinary. In some instances, the chapters unpick the meaning of what some readers might consider as mundane, to explore individual pathways through transportation and networks of Indian Ocean governance. Others take moments of crisis as a starting point for writing longer histories of individuals, social difference and colonial societies. It is important to note that the life-writing that lies at the core of each chapter often lacks a narrative beginning or ending. This incompleteness is important, and the chapters make no attempt to gloss over it. Despite strong evidence of subaltern agency and resistance in colonial record sets, it reminds us of the disciplinary intent and partiality of the archive, and ultimately of the unequal distribution of power in colonial societies.

The main focus of the book is on the men and women who, because of extraordinary circumstances, came to the attention of the colonial authorities, and left more substantial traces in the archives than are usually discernible. These traces can be assembled and then collated to construct snapshots of at least part of their lives and social worlds. The book shows how ensembles of multiple fragments – an approach that it

¹² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

refers to as subaltern prosopography – can be put to work in the construction of life histories that are not usually available to us and can take on larger meanings in reference to each other.¹³ The aim of *Subaltern Lives* is not to excavate what we might call a ‘subaltern authentic’ in or of the Indian Ocean, but rather to make an intervention on how the writing of life history might shed new light on some of the practices and processes associated with imperial expansion in the Indian Ocean, the ways in which individuals lived them, and the broader geographical and social connections that they underpinned. In some cases it may be possible to generalise about elements of these multiple, or collective, biographies. But the biographies in the book are most centrally concerned with the articulations between individuals, identities and the contingencies of colonial power across a range of contexts, rather than with a search for typicality or representativeness.¹⁴

Before turning to the potential value of a specifically biographical approach to writing colonial history, it must be noted that the very presence of non-elite subjects in the archives opens up complex questions about what constitutes ‘true’ marginality – or ‘subalternity’. Once we ascribe subaltern status to a particular individual or community, unless those in question are archived in particular ways – as defendants, prisoners, petitioners, rebels or tenants – it becomes almost impossible to reconstruct more than a few days, weeks or months of their lives at some especial historical moment. As a number of critics have shown, it is doubtful that we can retrieve subaltern consciousness at all – or, to put it another way, disaggregate the subaltern self from colonial subject.¹⁵

In writing about subaltern lives, the book proposes that it is far more fruitful to view subalternity as a socially contingent process rather than as a category of identity. Such a manoeuvre recognises the historical reality of multiple and changing social identities and the significance of context in shaping status and liminality. Perhaps also it acknowledges something of the significance of people who hover at the margins of, or fall somewhere between, historians’ binaries of ‘elite’ and ‘marginal’. It also enables us to incorporate into the same historical framework a range of individuals. This might include men and women of relative privilege

¹³ On prosopographical approaches to history, see Lawrence Stone, ‘Prosopography’, *Dædalus* 100, 1 (1971), 46–79.

¹⁴ Saurabh Dube takes a similar approach to questions of narrative, power and history, from the perspective of historical anthropology, in *Stitches on Time: Colonial Textures and Postcolonial Tangles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Readers unfamiliar with subaltern studies will find useful David Ludden, ‘Introduction: A Brief History of Subalternity’, in David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical Meaning, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp. 1–42.

placed in a position of subalternity – for instance, after a criminal conviction. But in the Indian Ocean context it also holds out the possibility of a more inclusive framework that envelops *inter alia* African sailors, Indian peasants and *adivasis* (tribal peoples), the ‘poor whites’ of Empire, convicts transported between colonies and Eurasian women. That is not to suggest that their life histories can necessarily be compared, though of course there might be some interesting parallels of experience. Rather, it is to argue for the fluidity of status within particular historical contexts at particular moments in time. As we will see, colonial distinctions were by no means self-evident, but were reproduced in contexts that, as Frederick Cooper writes in an important theoretical survey of the field, were ‘all laden with power relationships’.¹⁶ The variegated intersectionality that constituted the making of colonial difference is an important reminder that relations of power constituted empires, with profound impacts on social, economic and cultural life. Crucially, centring on the biographies of men and women who moved across imperial space enables us to explore what Cooper has called ‘the *politics* of difference’, or the way in which the lines of inclusion and exclusion shifted across time and place.¹⁷ In this respect, if *Subaltern Lives* draws attention to subalternity as a process, it is also engaged with the idea of subalternity as a critical perspective, or social vantage point, on the practices and processes, as well as experience, of colonial rule.

Subaltern Lives also aims to circumvent the often taken-as-given importance of relationships between British metropole and colonial periphery (or peripheries) to focus on the nature of Empire *within* the Indian Ocean. The book hopes to capture something of the recent historical focus on colonial ‘webs’ or ‘networks’, so contributing to broader efforts to ‘decentre’ Empire.¹⁸ It also speaks to Markus Vink’s recent stress on the importance of ‘process geographies’ of the Indian Ocean that historicise and

¹⁶ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 48.

¹⁷ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy (eds.), *Decentering Empire: Britain, India, and the Transcolonial World* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006); Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester University Press, 2005); David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds.), *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Himanshu Prabha Ray and Edward A. Alpers (eds.), *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

localise ‘porousness, permeability, connectedness, flexibility, and openness of spatial and temporal boundaries and borders’.¹⁹ Vink suggests that one way forward for a ‘new thalassology’ that respects the flexibility of the Indian Ocean as a geographical and virtual space is a focus on the movement of individuals, communities and cultural practices. Echoing Indian Ocean historian Michael Pearson, he argues that this renders possible histories *in* rather than *of* the region.²⁰ *Subaltern Lives* follows in Vink and Pearson’s oceanic wake, and in so doing it moves beyond the national (or for that matter trans-national) to focus on the Indian Ocean as constituted through overlapping spaces of governance, mobility and experience. Whilst historians already view the Indian Ocean as a space of geographical integrity and connectedness, there is still much work to be done on colonial interrelationships, the nature and significance of mobility in the region, and the relationship between the British Empire and indigenous and neighbouring cultures, politics and empires.²¹ The long reach of penal transportation appears to offer a potentially fruitful way into each of these discussions.

Within a more inclusive imperial framework, penal transportation is capable of weaving new networks of movement – for instance, between the colonial centres of Mauritius, India and the Andamans: Port Louis, Calcutta and Port Blair. It also enables us to incorporate places not always considered as part of the Indian Ocean, so that Bencoolen (Sumatra) and Cape Town become linked together in important ways, alongside Port Louis, Robben Island, Bombay and Sydney (New South Wales); Sydney, Penang and Calcutta; and Moulmein (Burma), Madras and Hobart (Van Diemen’s Land). Further, it enables us to think about inward connectivity, and the importance of the relationships between outward facing colonial nodes like port cities and their geographical interiors.²² As we will see, a focus on individual lives and geographical trajectories connects ocean to bay, port to littoral, and river and coast to interior. Convict mobility brings the South Asian cities of Allahabad and Lahore into the Indian Ocean world too, alongside the jungles of the Andamans, Van Diemen’s Land’s central highlands and the central plateau of Mauritius.

¹⁹ Markus P.M. Vink, ‘Indian Ocean Studies and the “New Thalassology”’, *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007), 41–62, p. 52.

²⁰ Vink, ‘Indian Ocean Studies and the “New Thalassology”’; Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²¹ Cf. Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

²² Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*. See also: Ray and Alpers (eds.), *Cross Currents and Community Networks*; Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (London: Christopher Hurst, 2010).

If writing about Empire through subaltern life history underlines the significance of connectivity within the Indian Ocean and expands our understanding of its geographical boundaries and relationships with coasts, ports, littorals and interiors, it also turns our heads outwards to Europe and North America. As unproblematised distinctions between, and assumptions about, (European) 'elites' and (colonised) 'subalterns' dissolve through the focus on marginality as a contingent social process, suddenly we see with great clarity something of the presence of non-elite Europeans and Americans in the Indian Ocean region. In turn, an analysis and explanation of the politics of colonial difference brings much to our understanding of the social life of Empire in the nineteenth century.²³ In each of these ways, with respect to geography, mobility and subalternity, this book endeavours to bring the individual and geographical margins into the centre of historical analysis.

This chapter next turns to a consideration of practices of subaltern life history work, with a view to sketching out the methodological approach of the book. Given the wide-ranging geographies of convict departure and arrival, and the spread of penal settlements and colonies, archives on convicts are scattered across repositories and institutions, and over national borders and languages. Chapter 2 will return to the challenges associated with the dispersed nature of documentation in more detail, alongside other important issues including the implications of the partial destruction of convict archives and the colonial tendency to collectivise Indian convicts in particular in those record sets that have survived. For now I would like to note that the colonial archives contain thousands of convict records pertaining to Indian and colonially transported convicts. These include reported speech and hundreds of letters and petitions written by (or more usually on behalf of) men and women. However, despite this voluminous collection, only two convict memoirs and one set of convict poetry have ever come to light – with all three narratives written by elite male Andaman convicts.²⁴ This is a stark contrast to metropolitan and Antipodean archives, which commonly incorporate convict diaries, narratives and accounts of transportation, albeit overwhelmingly written by elite men. But, as for Australia, the criminal conviction and geographical mobility of Indian and other 'colonial' convicts rendered them a crucial site of record keeping. Unlike their fellow villagers and townspeople they were enumerated and indented, and additionally from the

²³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 50.

²⁴ Ahmad, *The Wahabi Movement*, ch. 8; Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8*, pp. 17–18, 69–70, 164–6; Malik, 'Letters, Prison Sketches and Autobiographical Literature'; Sen, 'Contexts, Representation and the Colonized Convict'.

mid-nineteenth century their progress through the penal system was carefully detailed and recorded. Caught up in penal regimes operated by the government, lengthy investigations often followed unusual occurrences or violent outbreaks. There is, then, a substantial convict archive.

It is possible to read against the grain of these records to write about generalised experiences of transportation in some detail. In the South Asian context, for example, I have trawled through thousands of physical descriptions of convicts to analyse variations in tattooing practices across India. I have used other types of records to explore convict marriage patterns, and transformations of religion and caste. I have written also about the relationship between power and resistance in the context of extraordinary events like convict ship mutinies, hunger strikes, escapes and rebellion.²⁵ And yet despite these historiographical possibilities (and there are many more), given the absence of convict diaries or letters written over periods of weeks, months or years, I have detailed information about the life course of perhaps just thirty convicts, and even then in most cases only a partial view of particular periods in time. These I have managed to piece together from archives across the Indian Ocean, and in Britain and Australia.

In writing about convict lives, I am keenly aware of the need to bring what Ann Laura Stoler has described as ethnographic sensibilities to research; and to recognise the way in which colonial archives refract relations of power as much as they inscribe them. This will be a key concern of each and every chapter. Moreover, the book's methodological approach is heavily influenced by Stoler's recent call for historians to read archives *along* as well as *against* the grain. I have been reminded again and again in my work of what Stoler calls 'arrested histories'; those histories which are 'suspended from received historiography'.²⁶ In *Subaltern Lives*, this

²⁵ Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815–53* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Clare Anderson, "'The Feringees Are Flying – The Ship Is Ours!': The Convict Middle Passage in Colonial South and Southeast Asia, 1790–1860", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 41, 3 (2005), 143–86; Clare Anderson, 'The Bel Ombre Rebellion: Indian Convicts in Mauritius, 1815–53', in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 50–65; Clare Anderson, 'Gender, Subalternity and Silence: Recovering Women's Experiences from Histories of Transportation', in Anindita Ghosh (ed.), *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 145–66; Clare Anderson, "'The Wisdom of the Barbarian": Rebellion, Incarceration, and the Santal Body Politic', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, 2 (2008), 223–40. See also Satadru Sen's groundbreaking book *Disciplining Punishment: Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Anand A. Yang's important article 'Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of World History* 14, 2 (2003), 179–208.

²⁶ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, p. 33.

suspension engages with two levels of exclusion, to span grand historical narratives (or the almost total absence of intra-colonial penal transportation in imperial or global history), as well as the elision of the individual biographies of those who were caught up in these substantial convict webs. Postcolonial Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot has written that silences enter historical production at four critical moments: in the making of sources, in the making of archives, in the making of narratives and in the making of history.²⁷ *Subaltern Lives* pays close attention to Trouillot's important insights, with respect to both its engagement with archives and its biographical approach to writing history. In many ways also, it has much in common with a recent examination of the extraordinary levels of British violence against Indians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historian Elizabeth Kolsky, for instance, recently has raised key questions: not about *how* we write history, but about *what* history we choose to write. After many years of archival research on penal transportation between colonies across the western Indian Ocean, South Asia, the Bay of Bengal, Southeast Asia as well as the Caribbean and Australia, I share Kolsky's historiographical concerns. Just as she wonders why 'so little has been said' about British violence against, and the murder and rape of, Indians, I find it extraordinary that despite its presence in national histories (Australian, Indian) Britain's extensive traffic in the misery of forced convict labour between and across colonies remains almost entirely on the fringes of received literatures of imperial and global history.²⁸

Beyond its engagement with archives, historical production and narrative, *Subaltern Lives* proposes a biographical approach to penal transportation as a means of opening up a different perspective on colonialism, and working through critical questions of power, resistance and identity. It anchors the particular to the general in order to lend an important individual dimension to larger histories – of convict transportation, to be sure, but of colonial expansion and the relationships between colonies more broadly too. In recent years there has been a methodological tendency to assume that the archive does not enable us to tell stories of the marginalised 'with any precision' at all. David Lambert and Alan Lester have argued this most recently in an otherwise extremely rich volume

²⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 26.

²⁸ Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 13.

of papers on elite lives.²⁹ Another historian has suggested recently that their stories can only be told through those of elites: 'Great women and men do not accomplish their good or middling works alone; any solid biography shows the work of its principal subject interwoven with that of other people.'³⁰ As Tony Ballantyne has noted, it is almost as though the theoretical underpinnings of *Orientalism* have induced an historical deafness to archives of the marginal.³¹ This is problematic, for beyond the Australian historiography noted above, there is a growing literature that seeks to narrativise the lives of, among others, African slaves, Indonesian exiles and indentured Indian migrants, from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries.³² My hope is that as well as urging the incorporation of intra-colonial penal transportation into imperial and global history, *Subaltern Lives* will add a further dimension to this rich literature.

The book does not wish to suggest that biography is an unproblematic narrative or historical form. As Lambert and Lester have shown, many historians are somewhat nervous of its value, partly due to the supposed 'death of the subject' and partly due to post-structural challenges to centred historical truth more broadly. For this reason, they prefer to use the terms 'new biography' or 'life-writing' to distinguish their approach from older ones. Their argument that biography is 'a powerful way of narrating the past' is extremely persuasive, for life history *is* a useful tool for attracting and holding interest in large, complex historical processes. Their formulation of biographies as shifting kaleidoscopes through which we can look at society is equally engaging.³³ As they write: 'The narratives of the subjects' lives knit together markedly different places, weaving between distanced cultural configurations.'³⁴ Richard M. Eaton makes a similar point in his narrative of the social history of the Deccan (the

²⁹ David Lambert and Alan Lester, 'Introduction: Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects', in Lambert and Lester (eds.), *Colonial Lives*, pp. 1–31, p. 11. See also the recent roundtable on history and biography in the *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009), and the special issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, 3 (2010): 'Biography and History: Inextricably Interwoven'.

³⁰ Robert I. Rotberg, 'Biography and Historiography: Mutual Evidentiary and Interdisciplinary Considerations', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, 3 (2010), 305–24, p. 323.

³¹ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 10–11.

³² Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996); Frost and Maxwell-Stewart, *Chain Letters*; Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders: The Unknown Story of Australia's First Black Settlers* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006); Ward, *Networks of Empire*.

³³ Lambert and Lester, 'Introduction', pp. 17–21.

³⁴ Lambert and Lester, 'Introduction', p. 3.

contemporary Indian states of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh), 1300–1761. He writes through the lives of eight men and women from a range of social, geographical and temporal locations. ‘[S]imply put, people are profoundly drawn to the personalities and life-stories of others.’³⁵ Judith M. Brown too notes the usefulness of biographies in probing the large questions of history in South Asia; of how individual lives can be brought together with general themes and theory to explore issues around identity, agency and the relationship between the local and the global.³⁶ Stanley Wolpert, who has written extensively on South Asian elites, has been bolder still: ‘Each of my biographies has helped me to understand and portray South Asian history more accurately than would have been possible had I chosen to focus exclusively on economic, ethnic, or cultural data.’³⁷ And, finally, in a fascinating recent biography of the life of the first Asian MP in the British parliament, Michael H. Fisher follows the *Inordinately Strange Life of Dyce Sombre* from India to Southeast Asia, China and ultimately Britain, and the impossibility of categorising him against cultural norms. This, he writes, ‘highlights the constructed and contingent nature of . . . categories which are so deeply embedded in both Asian and European societies’.³⁸ The focus of *Subaltern Lives* is somewhat different from that of this distinguished South Asian literature, but it follows in its wake by presenting lives that are not apart from history, but are fully integrated into, and offer different ways of conceptualising, particular historical contexts.

Lambert, Lester, Brown, Wolpert and Fisher centre on elites, but there is an important set of literature that focuses on marginal and marginalised men and women. Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart’s groundbreaking collection *Chain Letters* was the first systematic attempt at narrating convict lives, in the Australian context. It remains a brilliant account of the following of archival clues and the piecing together of historical remnants from written words, pictures and objects. *Subaltern Lives* draws heavily on its rich suggestive possibilities.³⁹ Miles Ogborn too has used a biographical approach in writing an historical geography of Empire. ‘*Global Lives*,’ Ogborn writes, ‘offers a variety of lives

³⁵ Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

³⁶ Judith M. Brown, ‘“Life Histories” and the History of Modern South Asia’, *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009), 587–95.

³⁷ Stanley Wolpert, ‘Biography as History: A Personal Reflection’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, 3 (2010), 399–412, p. 411.

³⁸ Michael H. Fisher, *The Inordinately Strange Life of Dyce Sombre: Victorian Anglo-Indian MP and Chancery ‘Lunatic’* (London: Christopher Hurst, 2010), p. 2.

³⁹ Frost and Maxwell-Stewart (eds.), *Chain Letters*.

through which multiple worlds can be told.⁴⁰ Linda Colley and Natalie Zemon Davis have zoomed in more narrowly, putting together extended histories of single individuals as a means of exploring broader historical themes. Zemon Davis searches for 'Leo Africanus' across sixteenth-century Europe and Asia.⁴¹ Colley has used a remarkably rich (and geographically scattered) archive to write the history of the free woman Elizabeth Marsh and her extended family across the West Indies, Europe and South Asia during the eighteenth century. She positions her story to bring the Atlantic and Indian Ocean into dialogue against a background of globalisation.⁴² Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully employ the concept 'heterography' in place of biography to best describe their methodology for writing the life history of Sara Baartman (known in Europe as the Hottentot Venus) in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In their words, heterography refers to 'writing about the lives and interactions of people who had different conceptions of being and who inhabited contingent, provisional worlds undergoing rapid historical change'.⁴³ Finally, and treading the line between anthropology and history, is David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn's edited collection *Telling Lives in India*. It centres more specifically on biography and autobiography as genres (written and oral), and seeks to challenge the idea that non-western societies can only be written about or represented collectively, through ideas about caste, tribe or indigeneity. This chapter will return to a discussion of their comments on representing 'the other' beyond aggregate categories.⁴⁴

This book engages with ideas about life-writing as an historical kaleidoscope, and it is framed within a recognition of the historiographical significance of the interactions between biography and wider society. The piecing together of penal lives in the Indian Ocean presents a real challenge to assumptions that it is methodologically impossible to write marginal life histories. It perhaps also directs us back towards the reinvigoration of subalterns in subaltern history, for their absence has formed the basis of one of the principal critiques against it as a school of thought.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 9.

⁴¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: The Search for Leo Africanus* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008).

⁴² Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002).

⁴³ Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 184 (n. 8).

⁴⁴ David Arnold and Stuart H. Blackburn, 'Introduction: Life Histories in India', in Arnold and Blackburn (eds.), *Telling Lives in India*, pp. 1–28, pp. 2–3.

⁴⁵ Sumit Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*', in Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies*, pp. 400–29.

Further, it presents subalternity as a critical perspective on Empire, with the aim of rethinking important elements of colonialism. The book's concerns in these respects have lain beneath its efforts to track individuals within and across geographical space, languages and archives. It has been a painstaking, sometimes collaborative and often serendipitous process, and in significant ways its focus on subalternity has opened up important questions about the writing of history itself.

I am cognisant (and somewhat perplexed) that I have held academic positions and had the financial resources to undertake this kind of work, which has necessitated working across continents over a period of many years. As Trouillot has so poignantly written, there are significant structural inequalities in access to archives, and these have their roots in colonialism.⁴⁶ There are other sites of privilege and spaces of communication embedded in this book too, for I am convinced that *Subaltern Lives* could not have been written twenty years ago, without access to the Internet. The ever-expanding presence of documentary indexes and digitised records and newspapers on the World Wide Web has facilitated the tracing of individual mobility across Empire. Moreover, in researching a number of biographical subjects (men and women transported from the colonies to Australia, a Franco-Indian woman, an Indian rebel and an American naval brigadesman, more about whom anon), *Subaltern Lives* has relied on genealogical resources, rather than colonial archives *per se*. These include online census data as well as correspondence with individuals located through the websites of local history and volunteer associations. Most significantly of all, in a few cases the Internet has opened up pathways to productive engagement with family historians – the descendants of the men and women who appear in this book. This methodological approach appears to speak to Stoler's call for us to 'refigure what makes up the archival terrain'.⁴⁷ But equally significant is the way in which it unsettles traditional epistemologies of knowledge, in which 'professional' historians gratefully acknowledge 'amateur' resources. Rather, the book has engaged actively with the possibility of collaboration with genealogists. In particular, in its rereading of gendered aspects of the 1857 Indian revolt, *Subaltern Lives* has drawn on biographical details that are simply unavailable to historians who are strait-jacketed in or by 'official', institutionalised archives.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 105. ⁴⁷ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, pp. 33–4.

⁴⁸ For an important recent intervention on academic/genealogical collaboration in the Australian convict context, see Lucy Frost, 'The Politics of Writing Convict Lives: Academic Research, State Archives, and Family History', *Life Writing* 18, 4 (2011), 19–33.

In some instances the archival terrain that underpins *Subaltern Lives* allows us to glimpse convicts and their associates only fleetingly. And yet, despite the limitations of the material, it presents the idea that life histories are significant in their own right, and that their significance is magnified when they intersect with other lives and are placed within broader social and political contexts. As Lois W. Banner argues in defence of biography within the discipline of history, individual texts and cultural contexts are mutually constituted, and enjoy a dialogic relationship. '[F]rom this perspective,' she states, 'studying the life story of an individual might be seen as akin to studying the history of a city, a region, or a state as a way of understanding broad social and cultural phenomena.'⁴⁹ In this respect, life-writing speaks to the mutual constitution of historical subjects and their social worlds.⁵⁰

In thinking about history and biography more broadly still, *Subaltern Lives* has been greatly influenced by the work of sociologist Liz Stanley, who has provided a critical reminder from a feminist perspective that individual lives can never be wholly represented, that there are always multiple ways of reading and presenting them, that 'any biographer's view is socially located and necessarily partial', and that it is impossible to separate biographers from the biographies that they write. I have been drawn in particular to Stanley's arguments about authorial choice: 'Treating the production of biography in an epistemologically and theoretically more critical fashion requires recognising that the choice of subject is located within political processes in which some people's lives, but not others, are seen as interesting and/or important enough to be committed to biography.'⁵¹ I want to foreground in this chapter that my choice of subject matter and of individual subjects has been grounded in what I find interesting and important. That is, those men and women who dwell between the cracks or at the margins of society, and have to come to terms with extraordinary changes in their circumstances.

Beyond its engagement with methodology, biography and life-writing, *Subaltern Lives* is concerned with important historical processes, centred on the social dislocations of penal transportation and management practices in the penal settlements. Also, it opens up ways of exploring the relationship between the micro and the macro in colonial history; the overlaps within and between oceans and empires, punishment and

⁴⁹ Lois W. Banner, 'Biography as History', *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009), 579–86, p. 582.

⁵⁰ See David Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography: Introduction', *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009), 573–8.

⁵¹ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 3–4, 7, 9.

labour; and lived experiences of colonial categories of rule. I hope that readers will find interesting some of the themes that emerge and weave the chapters together; for instance, the multi-layered connections between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds well after the American Revolution; the importance of voyages for the making (and unmaking) of social relationships; the alliances forged through the shifting significance of particular forms of status; the significance of gentlemanly conduct and codes of honour within colonial societies; and the lure of new identities made possible through the anomie of social mobility or displacement. But there is an almost unbearable poignancy to many of the life histories too, as the violence of colonialism is laid bare. Individuals seek contact with friends and kin, often without success. The nearness of death looms large, as they copy their papers in the hope that these might find their way home to friends and loved ones after their demise. Sometimes they simply vanish from the archive without trace or care. In many cases, individuals bob in and out of the records, only to disappear completely from our purview. The absence of genealogical details about birth, death, motherhood, fatherhood and childhood in many of these biographies reminds us of the multiple silences that penetrate deep into the writing of marginal lives.

As mentioned earlier, David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn have drawn attention to continued representations of the South Asian ‘other’ within collective tropes around race and most especially caste. In their focus on *autobiography* they seek to challenge assumptions that the subcontinent can be socially defined collectively to make individuals emerge through the medium of life history. In sketching out the empirical, methodological and theoretical basis of this book, this introduction will make a few closing observations that develop this point further in the Indian Ocean context. Javed Majeed has recently made a textual analysis of how Indian nationalists viewed the concept of travel, to argue that nationalist voyaging presented a stark challenge to colonial ethnographic representations of Indians as incapable of individual, social or cultural ‘growth through travel’.⁵² Majeed reminds us of Arjun Appadurai’s interpretation of colonial anthropology’s representations of the ‘incarcerated native’, and of Mary Louise Pratt’s discussion of the ‘native’ as ‘travelee’ – always the travelled, never the traveller.⁵³ Bound up with the idea of *geographical* immobility was, of course, in the South Asian context, the sort of *social*

⁵² Javed Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 5.

⁵³ Majeed, *Autobiography*, p. 11; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

immobility outlined by Arnold and Blackburn. In brief, the ‘modernity’ of colonial governance was constituted in part through representations of the ‘pre-modernity’ of Indians who belonged to static, unchanging and timeless religious or caste communities. The possibility of travel across social, cultural or geographic borders was thereby imaginatively erased. As Majeed argues, ‘The travelling “native” would be a contradiction in terms within this discursive framework.’⁵⁴

And yet, as Majeed among others has shown, ‘natives’ travelled extensively, whether as pilgrims, slaves, convicts, indentured labourers or tourists.⁵⁵ Implicitly, *Subaltern Lives* develops this body of work further, to reveal the extent and importance of the geographic and often social mobility of ‘travelling natives’ in constituting Indian Ocean networks. It reveals also something of the significance of female mobility, countering gendered colonial representations of women as unmoving domestic guardians. As for men, however, the women’s mobility with which the book is concerned was largely effected through transportation overseas. Life history work reveals that even the most mobile of networks within and across empires was also constituted through colonial domination and its associated relations of power.

Having sketched out something of the book’s approach and themes, this chapter will close with a brief introduction to the subaltern lives that are explored in subsequent pages. Beyond their methodological possibilities in shifting the focus of history writing, both individually and in aggregate, the book’s principal contention is that they reveal a great deal about lived experiences of penal transportation as well as about colonial forms of punishment and unfree labour. They also open up discussions about colonial connectedness, society and social transformation, and the intersectionality and contingency of race, religion, caste, gender, conduct and status in the formation of colonial identities and social alliances.

Chapter 2 examines the life of Dullah, who was transported from the Bengal presidency to Mauritius in 1816. Dullah was an ordinary man, and we know almost nothing about his origins or his fate on the island, beyond a short record of his later employment as a convict commander, precisely one statement he made to a British soldier overseer in 1842, and the date of his death: 1 May 1847. The chapter uses these tiny fragments as a means of exploring the possibilities, limitations and paradoxes of the colonial archive in writing about convict lives; of bringing out the

⁵⁴ Majeed, *Autobiography*, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Anderson, ‘Sepoys, Servants and Settlers’; Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Carter, *Voices from Indenture*; Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*.

difficulties of record keeping in multi-lingual societies; and of thinking beyond the postcolonial necessity of 'reading against the grain', towards a recognition of the significance of the destruction and survival of records for the writing of particular kinds of histories. The chapter suggests that in this context a prosopographical approach has much to offer subaltern life-writing, and so brings Dullah into the same frame as other Indian convicts transported to Mauritius during the same period. It focuses especially on the lives of a handful of men who were tried in the criminal courts for secondary offences, some of whom were imprisoned or shipped to Robben Island or Australia. Testimonies and witness statements reveal the social and economic coalescence of convictism, enslavement, prison work and indentured labour, bringing together penal transportation and a range of other colonial penal and labour regimes in important ways.

Chapter 3 begins with the 1834 arrest of an African man known as George Morgan in the port city of Calcutta. Together with his British accomplice, George Lloyd, he was accused of the theft of a musical snuffbox. Apparently well known for his musical performances of the minstrel song 'Jump Jim Crow', Morgan was found guilty and transported to Burma. He escaped, returned to Calcutta and was retransported to Van Diemen's Land. As we will see, snapshots from the life of George Morgan speak to the complex intersectionality between race, religion and education in the making of colonial identities in a range of early nineteenth-century colonial contexts. Further, through evidence of colonial blackface performance, the significance of American cultural forms in the British Empire emerges. The chapter moves on to examine other convicts sentenced in the colonies and transported to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land during the 1820s to 1840s, largely from Mauritius but also from the Caribbean. Australian colonial labour practices drew strong lines of association between such convicts and domestic service. In this, we see the endurance of colonial associations between Africa, India and enslavement and servitude, within a supposedly distinct convict system. A prosopographical approach to their lives also gives important insights into the nature and extent of connections between India, Africa, Australia and Mauritius.

The fourth chapter reconstructs part of the life of Narain Sing, a military general who was sentenced to transportation and shipped to the East India Company's penal settlement in Burma for an act of 'treason' during the Anglo-Sikh Wars of the 1840s. His transportation was adventurous to say the least, for a violent mutiny broke out on the river steamer shipping him up the Ganges to Calcutta. Eventually, Narain Sing arrived at his intended destination, and by the 1870s he had risen to the position of chief jailer in Moulmein. The chapter shows how these

extraordinary changes in status were underpinned by the social alliances he was able to forge with his British jailers, most especially around his high military rank, his 'gentlemanly' and 'honourable' conduct, and his shift in emphasis of his 'religion' – at least discursively. During the late 1840s and early 1850s he described himself as 'high caste Hindu Brahmin'. After the 1857 rebellion, when the British allied with the Panjabi military, he called himself a 'Sikh'. Taken together with evidence of the lives of Sikh political prisoners in Singapore, and Anglo-Indian convicts transported to Southeast Asia, Narain Sing's experiences in Burma reveal a great deal about the socially differentiated expectations – and legacies – of penal labour. It also provides insights into broader developments in British relations with the Panjab – most especially the hitherto uncharted history of continued resistance to British rule in the region – from the end of the Anglo-Sikh Wars into the 1860s.

'Momentary drama' is a starting point for the book's biographically focused intervention into the intertwined histories of a Franco-Indian woman known as Amelia Bennett (or Amy Horne), who was taken captive during the 1857 revolt, and the saint-soldier Liaquat Ali who saved her life (see Chapter 5). After the British defeated the Indian rebels, Liaquat Ali eluded capture for some fourteen years. Extraordinarily, after he was seized and brought to trial, Amelia Bennett appeared in his defence. Her testimony saved him from the gallows and assured the amelioration of the expected capital sentence to life transportation to the Andamans. The case opens up a series of fascinating questions. It reveals that defendant and witness had social connections in their natal city of Allahabad. It gives insights into evidence of sexual violence against Eurasian women during 1857, as well as Wahabism in India and the life of Muslim elites in the early colonial Andamans. Finally, through an analysis of Bennett's changing accounts of her experience, we are able to see the drawing of clear lines of personal and political distinction in the making of colonial identity.

Chapter 6 explores the life of Edwin Forbes, an American naval brigadesman who was stationed as a convict overseer in the Andaman Islands between 1861 and 1864, shortly after its settlement as a penal colony. Forbes was an ordinary sailor, but he wrote a diary and a series of letters that have survived to the present day. His writing provides a window into a series of themes. First is the paradox that despite their appeal for the British as a remote and isolated penal colony, the Andamans were in fact a globalised space from the very first days of settlement. They quickly became part of the information network that linked Indian Ocean port cities, and through which people and news moved from Britain, South and Southeast Asia, and even the Atlantic.

Second, Forbes' manuscript also adds complexity to postcolonial understandings of the 'poor whites' of Empire, of which the naval brigade was a significant part. Third is Forbes' articulation of a specifically American identity, in a British colonial context, geographically far from the civil war at home. His letters also speak to the making of masculinity in a distinctly homosocial environment, and to the nature of love and friendship between men. The discussion closes with an account of the importance of the naval brigade in bringing the indigenous peoples of the Andamans into so-called 'friendly' contact with the penal colony. The concluding chapter brings Forbes' letters into a larger framework, to examine correspondence between convicts and their families, often many years after their transportation, as well as the little evidence we have about ex-convicts' return to India.

And so *Subaltern Lives* comes to a close. It presents life-writing as a means of centring non-elites in histories of penal transportation and colonialism. It uses fragments from marginal lives to explore the nature and significance of a range of social intersections within and beyond penal settlements and colonies. It insists on marginality as a contingent process, and on the importance of context in shaping liminality and hierarchies of dominance – though not, as many of the chapters show, powerlessness. It seeks to bring together regions of the Indian Ocean that are not usually considered within the same historical framework, and to capture something of the networked character and importance of inter-colonial governance within and beyond the region. The book focuses on life histories as a route towards understanding the colonial repertoire of punishment and labour, of centring the experiential dimension of life in penal settlements and colonies, of understanding colonial identity formation, and of bringing to the fore networks of Empire in the Indian Ocean and beyond. In this way, subaltern biographies provide an entrée into some of the big questions of colonial – and global – history.