Culture, Diaspora, and Identity: Stuart Hall and Salman Rushdie

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Interculturality & Transculturality

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The Slave Trade & Abolition

- The Plymouth privateer Sir John Hawkins (1532-1595), of Plymouth – an Elizabethan seafarer – is generally considered the pioneer of the English slave trade. In 1554, he formed a slave-trading syndicate of merchants. By 1568, he transported some **1,500** slaves across the Atlantic until losing a number of his ships in a battle with the Spanish in **1568.**

- Britain's involvement in the European slave trade resumed only in the 1640s with the capture of an American colony (Virginia). Britain was relatively late to the trade, and only in the wake of the relative decline of Spain and Portugal in C17: Britain had seized Jamaica as a result of war with Spain in the 1650s, in the midst of jostling between European states: the French, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, and the North German states.

- When King Charles II came to the throne (with the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660), he quickly recognized the trade's huge profitability in providing English colonists of the West Indies & America with African captives. Official royal approval in **1663** was followed by establishment of the Royal African Company in **1672:** a trading company which, within a decade of its formation, had increased the English share in the European Atlantic trade to **74%.**

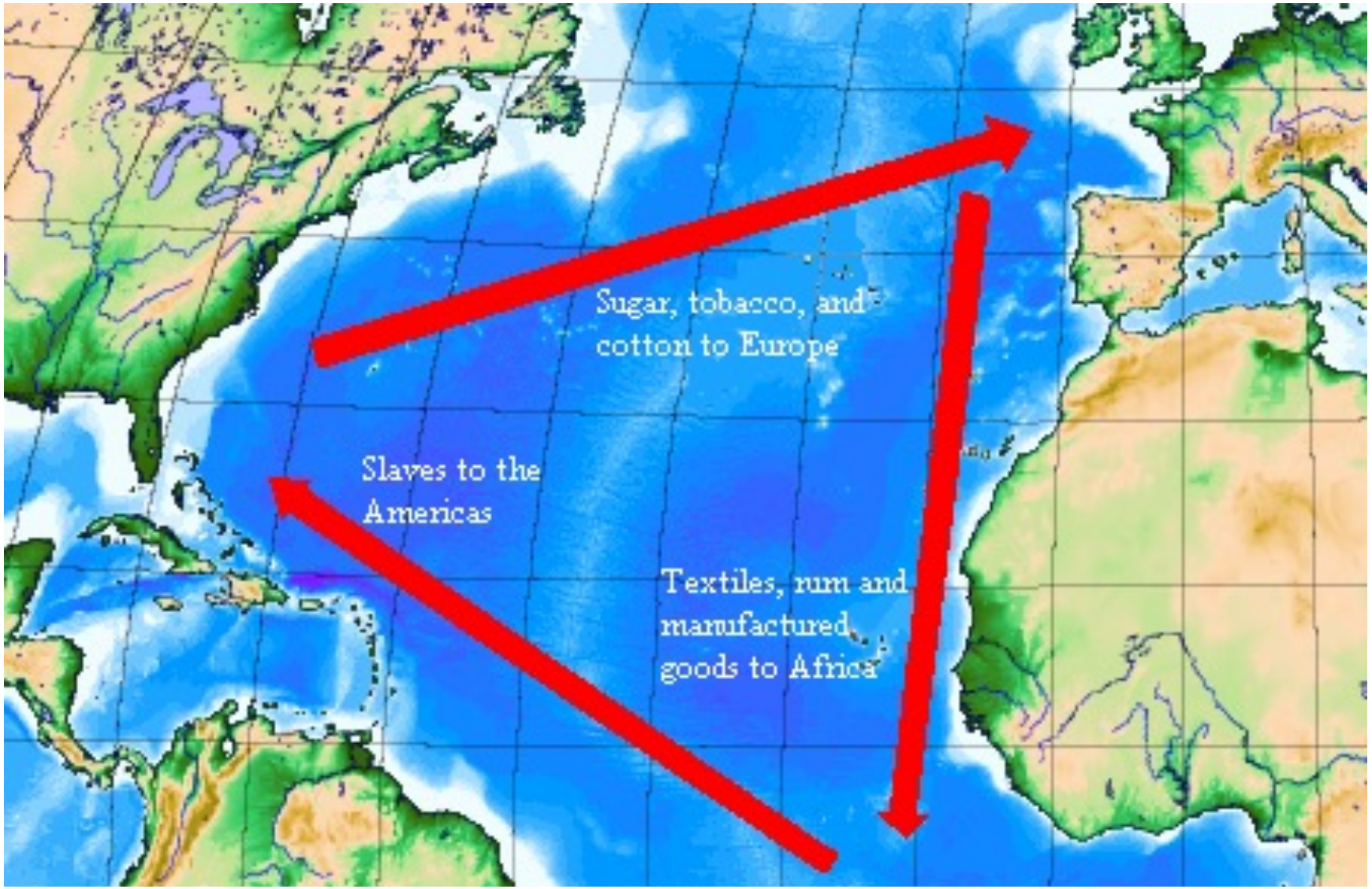
The Slave Trade & Abolition

- The increasingly inefficient monopoly of the Royal African Company came under ever fiercer criticism from independent traders, until finally being abolished in **1752.**

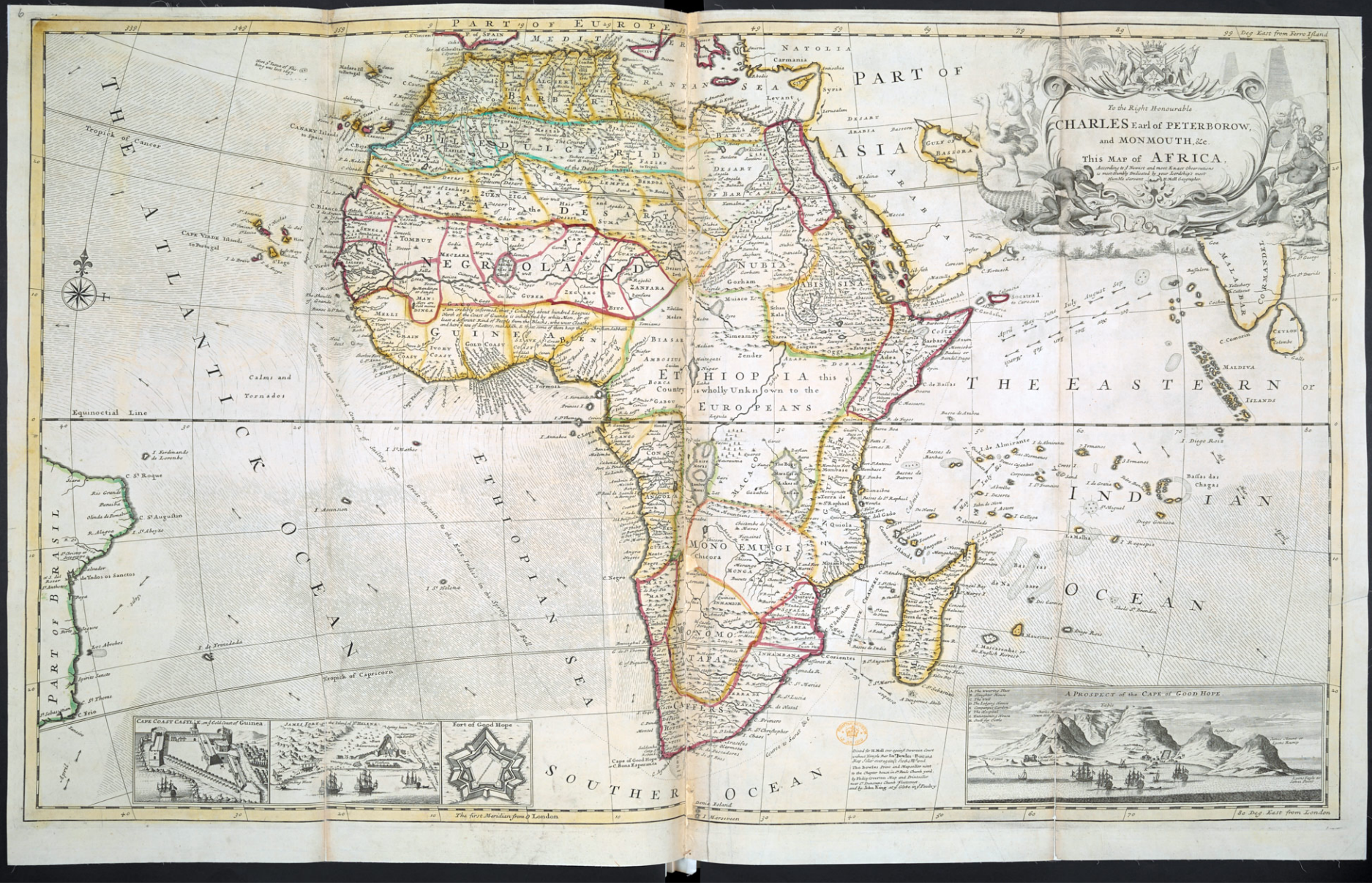
- In the wake of this, independent traders, operating in a privatized and deregulated economy, enormously increased British share in the Atlantic trade. It was the decline of the Company which opened up the era of the Atlantic slave trade: the so-called **'respectable trade'**, through which the merchants of Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow (e.g., the Bristolian merchant Edward Colston, 1636-1731) enriched both themselves and their cities.

- **By C18, the Triangular Trade had become an enormously profitable enterprise for these cities.** Ships loaded with manufactured goods which were exchanged on the West African shores for slaves who were captured by local rulers from the African inland; the slaves were transported through the deadly **Middle Passage** across the Atlantic and sold at enormous profit for plantation labour. The ships were then loaded with export crops and commodities – the products of slave labour – **e.g., cotton, tobacco, sugar, and rum**, and returned to Britain. **The items were sold there, transforming the British consumer market & consumer tastes.**

‘The Triangular Trade’



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangular_trade#/media/File:Triangle_trade2.png



A map of the African continent, in H. Moll, *The World Described: A New and Correct Set of Maps* (1708-20). Source: https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/abolition-of-the-slave-trade-and-slavery-in-britain

The Slave Trade & Abolition

- The four nations most heavily involved in the Triangular Trade were Portugal, Great Britain, France, and Spain. Research by Emory University has found that (according to records) between **1501 and 1875**, some **12,521,339 slaves** were transported from Africa to colonies in N. and S. America – of whom **1,818,686** never arrived (due to disease, murder/manslaughter, or shipwreck in the Middle Passage). The 'peak period' was between **1750 and 1850.**

- Towards the close of C18, there emerged an abolitionist movement in Great Britain, calling for the abolition first of the slave trade and – later – slavery itself. The first cohering impulse came in the years after the American Revolution (1776-1783): the **Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade** was founded in 1787, taking its inspiration from events in America, where the Revolution had triggered the first tentative steps to abolish slavery.

- **But the slave trade was still seen as essential to Britain's domestic wealth and improving standards of living, as well as for its imperial consolidation in the Americas, and as a training grade for British seamen.**

The Slave Trade & Abolition

- The first task for SEAST was to turn the growing moral objections to slavery into a social movement to mobilize thousands of Britons. This was facilitated, e.g., through the information & education campaigns of one of its founding members, Thomas Clarkson, who – both through speaking tours and in his authorship of the seminal ***An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*** **(1786)** – provided a powerful set of arguments against slavery.

- The abolitionist movement was extremely diverse. Many women – from all social backgrounds – subscribed to anti-slavery committees and boycotted slave-produced goods (such as sugar): at its peak in 1791-92, the abstention campaign is said to have involved some **300,000 people (of a population of between 8 and 9 million).**

- Many former enslaved Africans – e.g. **Olaudah Equiano** and **Ottobah Cugoana** – were part of the movement. Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) offered a powerfully eloquent and Christian-inflected autobiographical narrative **and** intellectual argument against slavery and its evils. It went through 9 British editions in only 5 years and formed the basis of extremely successful lecture tours in both GB and Ireland in 1791-92.

The Slave Trade & Abolition

- These pioneering efforts helped launch two extremely successful petititon campaigns, which gave the independent MP, Yorkshire philanthropist, and evangelical Christian, **William Wilberforce (1759-1833)**, the material he needed to fight the slave trade in the House of Commons.

- Britain was **not** the first European nation to abolish slavery: Denmark did so in 1792, France briefly at the height of the French Revolution in 1794. Beginning in 1791, 1000s of enslaved people in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) rose up against an extremely violent slave regime: **a revolutionary struggle that brought about the abolition of slavery *and* Haitian independence.** These events provided vital inspiration for the abolition movement.

- **The emergence of Haiti as an independent Black republic (in 1804)** helped convince many MPs that it could be worth sacrificing the slave trade *if* it meant lessening the probability of future rebellions, and so **maintaining** Britain's slave colonies! As war broke out in Europe (1804-15), others – both inside and outside of Parliament – queried whether it was really a good idea to supply enslaved Africans to Britain's enemies, particularly France and Spain.

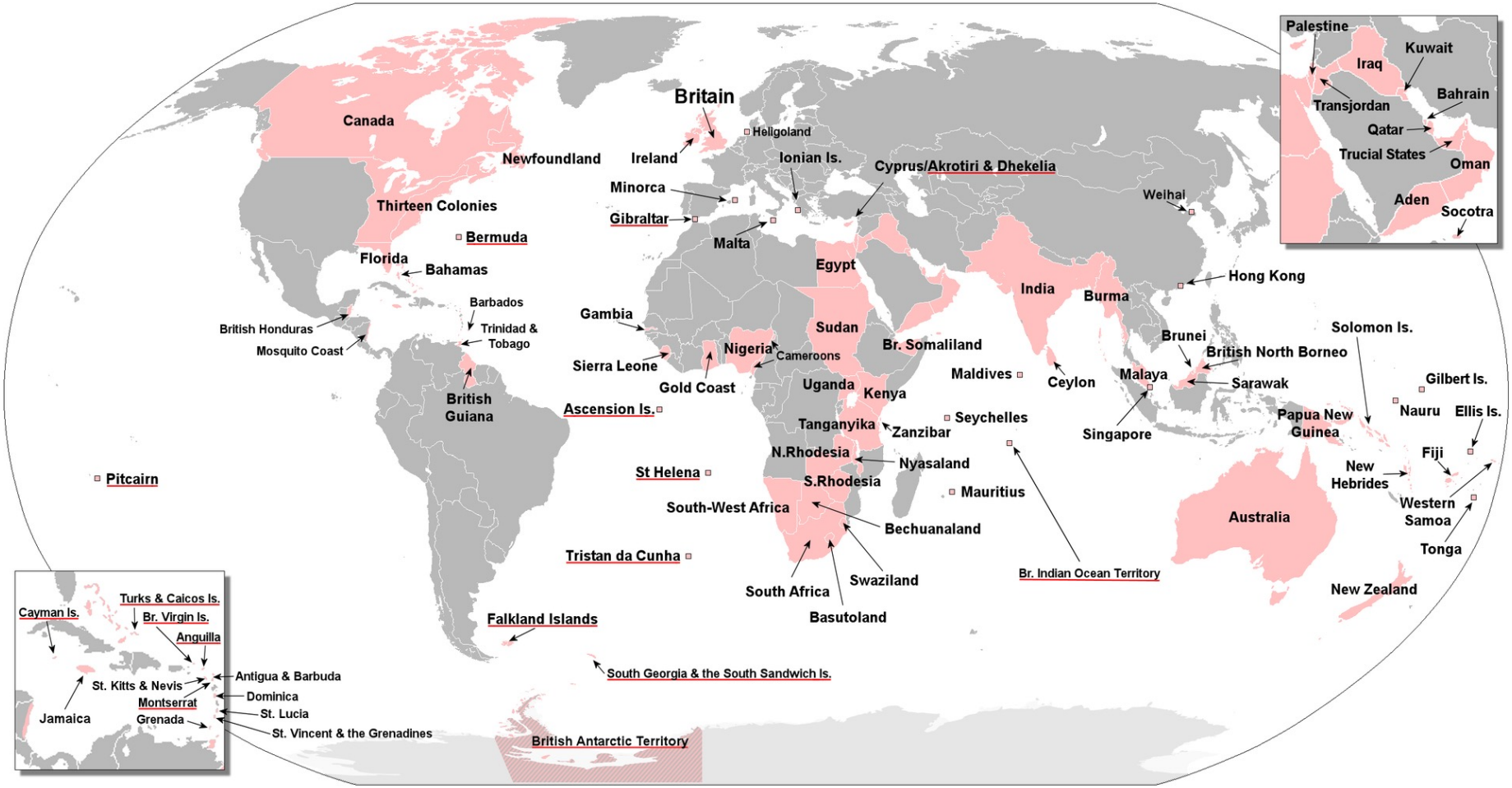
The Slave Trade & Abolition

- Capitalizing on this geopolitical shift, abolitionists started to work to undermine the legal groundwork of the slave trade.

- In the **Foreign Slave Trade Abolition Bill (1806),** British slave traders were prohibited from operating in territories belonging to a foreign power; the **Slave Trade Act (1807)** abolished Britain's involvement in the Transatlantic Trade for good: legislative developments which were personal triumphs for Wilberforce & members of SEAST, but ultimately fuelled by shifting geopolitics – including the US's abolition of its own international slave *trade* in the US Constitution.

- In **1823**, Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson (also SEAST) and others formdd the Anti-Slavery Society, proposing measure to limit the 'worst abuses' of the Trade. In **1833**, the **Emancipation Act** abolished slavery in British territories – even at the cost of the **final award of c. £20 million to slaveholders in compensation, with *nothing* paid out to slaves.** By 1838, slavery in the British Caribbean had essentially been abolished, BUT former slaves were often left to eke out a meagre existence – and Indian and Chinese labourers, in particular, increasingly found themselves in indentured servitude on former colonial slave plantations.

The British Empire



A map of all those territories at one time or another part of the British Empire
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire#/media/File:The_British_Empire.png

The British Empire

- In 1757, Britain became the dominant force in India after conquering Mughal Bengal at the Batlte of Plassey. The American War of Independence (1775-83) led to Britain losing some of its oldest and most populous colonies in North America (acquired in a series of wars in C17 and C18); after this, British attention turned to Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Following the defeat of France in the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), Britain emerged as the principal imperial and naval power of C19.

- The period of (relative) global peace from 1815-1914 – during which Britain becama global hegemon – was later terms 'Pax Britannica', its political & economic influence extending far beyond (merely) is own territories. **Increasing degrees of autonomy were granted to white settler colonies, which were known as Dominions – e.g., Canada, New Zealand, Newfoundland, South Africa, and the Irish Free State.**

- By the start of C20, German and the US began to erode Britain's significant economic primacy. By 1913, the Empire held sway over some **412 million people** – 23% of the then-world population – and by 1920, 24% of its land area. The vast expense of WW I & WW II hastened the disintegration of the Empire at an increasing rate in the late 1940s and 1950s.

‘Diaspora’

- From the Greek word meaning ‘to disperse’: as the **voluntary**, or the **forcible**, movement of peoples to new regions, this was one of the central historical ‘engines’ behind colonization.

- The result of ‘diaspora’ was the development – in the Americas and South Africa – of an economy grounded in **slavery**: the so-called ‘middle passage’ of the ‘triangular’ European slave trade transported slaves from West Africa to the West Indies, where they were put to work on plantations or in agricultural colonies.

- The descendants of these ‘diasporic’ movements generated distinctive cultures which both **preserved** and **further extended** their originary cultures. A process of **creolization** – through which European cultural and linguistic features were shaped by ‘indigenous’ ones -- led to the creation of new, ‘hybrid’ cultural forms: these forms challenge **‘essentialist’** ways of thinking about cultural heritage and background; but they also challenge ways of thinking about colonialism grounded in ideas of **‘the centre’** vs **‘the periphery’: i.e. colonial ‘centres’, vs.the ‘peripheral’ colonial territories.**

Discussion questions

1. Stuart Hall underlines two ways of thinking about 'identity', according to Stuart Hall on pp. 393-96. Please identify and define them.

2. What role do 'difference', and 'différance', play in the construction of both collective and individual identities? And how does Hall identify the difference between 'signification' and 'meaning'?

3. What does Stuart Hall mean when he talks about the different 'presences' in Caribbean culture and identity?

4. Take a look at **both essays**. Can we ever rediscover and recover, our lost 'points' or 'places' of origin'? Or is the very idea of lost points of origin a *fiction* that we all construct for ourselves? Can you think of the *dangers* of this fiction+ in today's world?

Difference and 'Différance' (Jacques Derrida)

- 'Difference' is in some sense the opposite of 'essentialism'; and one central purpose of cultural studies is to value and valorize differences and recognize the **plurality** of identities to which each of us can lay claim; but the problem of **plurality** is that it can create a form of **fragmented identity politics.**

- Jacques Derrida, the French poststructuralist thinker, coined the term **'différance'** (a pun on 'differing' and 'deferring'): this refers to the ways in which the meaning of language depends on the **difference** in meaning between different signs; but also the ways in which we have to 'defer' to **other signs** in order to define the original sign.

- For Hall, the construction of identity is a never-ending process of difference and deferral: a process that can only ever be brought to a 'halt', to a point of completion, **artificially** (see Hall, pp. 397-98).

‘Hybridity’ (Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhaba)

- ‘The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by **essence** or **purity**, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a concept of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.’

  -- Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, pp. 401-2.

- In an interview entitled ‘The Third Space’ (1990), which helps elucidate some of the ideas in his masterpiece *The Location of Culture* (1994), the Indian-British scholar of postcolonialism, Homi K. Bhabha defined ‘hybridity’ in these terms:

‘For me, the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.’

-- Bhabha, ‘The Third Space’, 1990, p. 211.

Centres, peripheries, and ‘third spaces’

- The British Empire has been conceived by many postcolonial scholars in terms of a ‘centre’ and its ‘peripheries’: the centre, figured as the ‘mother country’, deprived its colonized countries of much of their own capacities for historical evolution. The peripheries were subject to political and (on occasion) military oppression; their resources were extracted and exploited.

- Homi K. Bhabha has conceived the idea of ‘third spaces’: spaces which mark out a point of contact and overlap between cultures, and the emergence of something **irreducibly new.**

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