

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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¹ This calculation is based on unpublished statistical work by the author and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart.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.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Subaltern Lives

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).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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 Haqq 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).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Subaltern Lives

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.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Subaltern Lives

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).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Subaltern Lives

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 Careerings 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).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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, polities 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).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01509-8 - Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920

Clare Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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’.