













ARTICLE

# Rethinking Transnational Activism through Regional Perspectives: Reflections, Literatures and Cases

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## Abstract

This collectively authored article argues for a regional turn in the historical study of transnational activism. By considering not only pan-regional movements but also examples of borderland contexts, transregional connections and diasporic understandings of ‘region’, our discussion identifies fresh possibilities for investigating the evolution and functioning of transnational activism. Based on a Royal Historical Society-funded workshop held at and supported by Northumbria University, the article brings together insights from diverse locations and arenas of contestation. The first part considers literatures on three macro-regional settings – South Asia, Western Europe and Latin America – to illustrate the importance of distinctive regional contexts and constructs in shaping transnational activism and its goals. The second part turns to case studies of transnational activism in and beyond Eastern Europe, West Africa, the Caribbean and East Asia. In doing so, it explores very different notions of the regional to identify how transnational activism has both shaped and been shaped by these ideas. Taken together, the two parts highlight the role of regional identities and projects in challenging inequalities and external domination. Our analysis and examples indicate the possibilities of a regionally rooted approach for writing histories of transnational activism.

**Keywords:** Transnational history; global history; activism; social movements; regions

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Transnational activism – the cross-border mobilisation of individuals, groups and movements advocating for social and political change – has become one of the richest areas of historical enquiry. Research on anti-colonial, environmentalist, feminist, humanitarian, pacifist, socialist and many other mobilisations has generated a diverse historical literature, stimulated by developments in the field of global history as well as approaches from sociology and political science.<sup>1</sup> Many of these activist movements portrayed themselves in ‘global’ terms – both by proclaiming the universality of their cause and by pointing to supporters in different countries and continents. Given the context-specific nature of purportedly ‘global’ causes and campaigns, it is evident that we cannot take such self-representations at face value.<sup>2</sup> The inherent tensions between global claims and more limited practices underscore the challenges of writing history in genuinely global terms and, as such, raise broader methodological questions.<sup>3</sup>

As Su Lin Lewis has recently argued, the study of transnational activism offers opportunities to decolonise our research perspective, namely by tracing the concepts, connections and campaigns of actors from the Global South.<sup>4</sup> Like Lewis, we are interested in bonds that shift attention away from European and North American thinkers, movements or institutions. At the same time, we propose a different approach to this subject by treating ‘region’ as a central unit of analysis. As we suggest, an emphasis on regional dimensions allows us to rethink the concepts employed by activists themselves. Many movements linked their endeavours to categories or conditions that they deemed global – be it class for socialists, sex or gender for feminists, or ‘race’ for Pan-Africanists. Yet while such phenomena were certainly transnational, their manifestation was far from uniform across the globe – and a regional focus acknowledges this variability. Rather than testing the ‘global’ scope of activists’ efforts or discussing local adaptations (which are sometimes described as ‘glocal’), our article shows that region mattered in multiple ways. Thus, we are also able to revisit questions of ‘scale’, which have been a key concern in transnational history.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on this subject is vast and it is impossible to list examples from every one of these sub-fields here. For books that explore different cases, see Stefan Berger and Sean Scallmer (eds.), *The Transnational Activist: Transformations and Comparisons from the Anglo-World since the Nineteenth Century* (Cham, 2018); and Daniel Laqua, *Activism across Borders since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflict in and beyond Europe* (2023). For further reflections on transnational activism, see Kiran Klaus Patel and Sonja Levens, ‘The Spatial Contours of Transnational Activism: Conceptual Implications and the Road Forward’, *European Review of History*, 29 (2022), 548–61; Fiona Paisley and Pamela Scully, *Writing Transnational History* (2019), 153–88.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Pliley, Robert Kramm and Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds.), *Global Anti-Vice Activism: Fighting Drinks, Drugs and ‘Immorality’* (Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> For reflections on these issues, see Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmeier, *Global History*, Globally (2018); and Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, ‘Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa’, *Radical History Review*, 131 (2018), 176–82.

<sup>4</sup> Su Lin Lewis, ‘Decolonising the History of Internationalism: Transnational Activism across the South’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (FirstView access, 18 Oct. 2023), 1–25.

<sup>5</sup> Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris and Jacques Revel, ‘Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History’, *International History Review*, 33 (2011), 573–84.

Our article originated in a Royal Historical Society workshop held in March 2023.<sup>6</sup> Convened by two historians of transnational movements and international organisations (Thomas Davies and Daniel Laqua), the event featured contributions from scholars with different regional specialisms and with expertise on diverse forms of activism, including humanitarianism (Maria Framke), regional cooperation and decolonisation (Anne-Isabelle Richard), Indigenous rights (Patricia Oliart), Esperanto (Pilar Requejo de Lamo), anti-colonialism (Kate Skinner), the Tolstoyan movement (Charlotte Alston), anarchism (Robert Kramm) and civil society efforts in Hong Kong (Matthew Hurst). Instead of choosing a traditional format of historical writing, we have produced a piece that integrates the voices of ten different scholars. By embracing co-authorship on a scale that is fairly uncommon in our discipline, we take up Lynn Hunt's argument that '[h]istory writing in the global era can only be a collaborative form of inquiry'.<sup>7</sup> There are evident limitations to our approach – most obviously the fact that we are all based at European institutions, even if our research spans five continents.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, we hope that our article indicates new possibilities for integrating the work of authors with different scholarly backgrounds.

Compared to other formats, our approach offers distinct rewards. While articles in themed journal issues may address an overarching theme, they tend to be written and read as stand-alone pieces. By contrast, our piece contains sections that have been written, edited and redrafted for thematic coherence and overall consistency, while still offering the breadth that one might otherwise find in larger collections of texts. In adopting an integrated approach, our article also differs from published 'roundtables'. The combination of our perspectives allows us to combine reflections on specific historiographies with examples drawn from primary research. To this end, our article comprises two principal parts. Part A is largely historiographical, with Framke, Richard and Oliart's expertise underpinning a discussion of research on three particular regions – South Asia, Western Europe and Latin America. Through this selection, we illustrate how transnational activism was shaped by particular regional contexts, but also how activists contributed to the understanding of such regions. Part B broadens the perspective both geographically and empirically. Primarily drawing on the work of de Lamo, Alston, Skinner, Kramm and Hurst, it deploys several case studies that nuance our understanding of transnational activism and its *modi operandi*. These cases elucidate different ways in which a regional focus can be opened up in writing histories of transnational activism.

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<sup>6</sup> We thank the Royal Historical Society and Northumbria University for funding our workshop. As convenors and lead authors, Davies and Laqua took responsibility for putting together the article and drafted the overarching sections. The order in which co-authors are listed largely reflects the sequence of their most prominent contribution. Individual footnotes further credit their work; however, all sections are based on dialogue and collaboration. In addition to the co-authors, we are grateful for Vikram Visana's comments prior to the drafting of this article.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York, 2015), 151.

<sup>8</sup> For important points on collaborative modes of working and ways of involving scholars from the Global South, see Lewis, 'Decolonising the History of Internationalism', 20–4.

Before moving to these main parts, however, it is necessary to clarify the concepts that underpin our analysis. The term ‘activism’ encompasses a variety of efforts to effect social and political change. These may include voluntary action, social movement campaigns, the formation of non-governmental organisations as well as diverse methods of protest and advocacy. *Transnational* activism is a form of activism in which individuals, groups and movements forge ties across national borders.<sup>9</sup> The term emphasises the cross-border nature of relationships; at the same time, it draws attention to non-state – or even anti-state – actors and organisations. While broad in nature, ‘transnational activism’ can be distinguished from ‘global activism’: the latter term emphasises the perspective of activists who stress the universality of their concerns – which, as we have already noted, is potentially misleading.

The other central term for our discussion is ‘region’. Regions may be considered as entities that rarely map onto state borders and can be very extensive, potentially stretching across a continent or further. Although regions are often perceived as being geographically conditioned, they are cultural, social and political constructs that manifest in diverse forms. For our enquiry, this aspect is crucial, as activists could imagine themselves as parts of regions in very different ways.<sup>10</sup> The approach taken forward in this article reflects this diversity: Part A focuses on regions that, at least partially, tend to be associated with geographical categorisations, notwithstanding the role of cultural visions and political realities in shaping such understandings. Part B extends the discussion: by considering borderland contexts and diasporas with a regional identification among our case studies, we shed light on features that both ‘glocal’ and global perspectives on transnational activism tend to obscure.

Why, however, choose such a wide-ranging conception of region? We argue that the ambiguity can be deployed constructively: it offers the opportunity to ‘play with scales’ when it comes to examining transnational activism.<sup>11</sup> Regions are fluid and, at the same time, distinct from both the national and the global; by thinking about ‘region’, we can thus explore a much wider array of scales. This is not a purely theoretical matter, as activists worked with different scales to further their cause: they addressed audiences on local, national, global and highly diverse regional levels – alternatively, successively or simultaneously,

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of these concepts, see Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, 3–9. For different manifestations of this phenomenon, see Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring (eds.), *The History of Social Movements in a Global Perspective* (Cham, 2017); and Thomas Davies, *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society* (2013).

<sup>10</sup> Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (1991); Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (2005); Anne-Isabelle Richard and Stella Krepp, ‘Regional Rights Projects and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century’, in *The Cambridge History of Rights*, vol. v: *The Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Meredith Terretta (Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> The notion of (and the phrase) ‘playing with scales’ featured in Struck *et al.*, ‘Introduction’, 574. It has subsequently constituted an overarching theme in Jan de Vries, ‘Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano’, *Past & Present*, 242, suppl. 14 (2019), 23–36.

depending on the circumstances. Our regional perspective not only provides an alternative to accounts that privilege activism within state boundaries or that take national identities as a given, but draws attention to diverse challenges to state sovereignty, whether by advancing ‘regionalisation’ or by articulating alternative visions of global order.<sup>12</sup> For instance, many African feminists have used a regional ‘African’ perspective to highlight that the world order they knew was rooted in inequality, exploitation and injustice. By inserting their own voices and experiences, they have questioned the universal framings often used by Western feminists and, in doing so, have shifted understandings of ‘the global’.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, our article considers how transnational connections among activists emerged from diverse regional contexts and reflected regionally rooted ideas, identities and practices – even when they cast their concerns and visions as global. We will demonstrate that regional perspectives can illuminate complex and sometimes overlapping sets of ideas, spaces and identities, including ones that were not always tied to precisely demarcated geographical boundaries. We explore how the concept of transnational activism informs scholarly research on different regions, outline the features of regionally sensitive approaches and show how ‘the regional’ as a scale of analysis enriches our understanding of the dynamics by which transnational activism functioned.

### Part A: Reassessing the literature on transnational activism

Notwithstanding earlier work on its different manifestations, it was from the late 1990s onwards that the concepts of transnational and global activism came to the forefront on scholarly agendas, especially in sociology, political science and international relations (IR). Growing interest in this subject coincided with diverse social and political mobilisations at a time when ‘globalisation’ became a master-narrative for ongoing developments. By 2005, sociologists Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow described the ‘relational mechanisms that are bringing together national actors in transnational coalitions’ as generating ‘[t]he most striking developments of the last decade’.<sup>14</sup> Such alliances manifested in large-scale protests – famously during the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle in 1999 – and in new activist ventures, for example the sessions of the World Social Forum from 2001 onwards. These developments stimulated further research on campaigns for

<sup>12</sup> On regionalisation, see for instance Luk Van Langenhove, *Building Regions: The Regionalization of the World Order* (Farnham, 2011). For this concept’s application in research on activism, see Jackie Smith, ‘Building Bridges or Building Walls? Explaining Regionalization among Transnational Social Movement Organizations’, *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 10 (2005), 251–69. For a non-Western perspective, see Burleigh Hendrickson, ‘March 1968: Practising Transnational Activism from Tunis to Paris’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44 (2012), 755–74.

<sup>13</sup> Balghis Badri and Aili Mari Tripp, ‘African Influences on Global Women’s Rights: An Overview’, in *Women’s Activism in Africa: Struggles for Rights and Representation*, ed. Balghis Badri and Aili Mari Tripp (2017), 1–32.

<sup>14</sup> Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, ‘Transnational Protest and Social Activism: An Introduction’, in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, ed. Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (Lanham, MD, 2005), 9.

global justice and transnational causes, with the ambition to trace forms of 'globalisation from below'.<sup>15</sup>

Even when contemporary phenomena were their primary concern, social scientists acknowledged the deeper history of their subject. In 1998, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink drew attention to the workings of 'transnational advocacy networks', with examples ranging back to abolitionist movements.<sup>16</sup> Five years later, Tarrow acknowledged historical antecedents of 'the new transnational activism'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he and della Porta noted that 'contentious politics at the turn of the millennium' had elements that 'were familiar from the history of collective action'.<sup>18</sup> Their comments emphasised similarities with the protests against the US-led attack on Iraq (2003), but an awareness of such links was not confined to anti-war activism. For example, in 2004 Peggy Antrobus traced the emergence of a 'global women's movement' but argued this had 'formed out of many movements shaped in local struggles and brought together in the context of global opportunities and challenges'.<sup>19</sup>

The specific historical circumstances that sparked social scientists' growing concern with transnational and global activism are also relevant when bearing in mind historiographical developments in the same period: the early 2000s constituted a peak for arguments for the adoption of transnational or global perspectives in history.<sup>20</sup> Research on histories of transnational activism emerged as one significant line of enquiry, exemplifying transnational history's interest in 'human-made connections'.<sup>21</sup> This literature is certainly alert to potential boundaries and tensions. For instance, some studies have noted the specific national contexts in which some forms of transnational activism unfolded.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Donatella della Porta *et al.*, *Globalization from Below: Transnational Activists and Protest Networks* (Minneapolis, 2006). See also Ruth Reitan, *Global Activism* (2007).

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Lanham, MD, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Sidney Tarrow and Donatella della Porta, 'Conclusion: "Globalization", Complex Internationalism, and Transnational Contention', in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, ed. della Porta and Tarrow, 228.

<sup>19</sup> Peggy Antrobus, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies* (2004), 1. For other examples from this period, see Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp (eds.), *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights* (New York, 2006); Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai (eds.), *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics* (New York, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> For a few examples from this period, see Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Transnationale Gesellschaftsgeschichte: Erweiterung oder Alternative?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 27 (2001), 464–79; Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002); Patrick O'Brien, 'Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History', *Journal of Global History*, 1 (2006), 3–39; Sebastian Conrad, Andreas Eckert and Ulrike Freitag (eds.), *Globalgeschichte: Debatten, Ansätze, Themen* (Frankfurt/Main, 2007); Patricia Clavin, 'Defining Transnationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 14 (2005), 421–39.

<sup>21</sup> On 'human-made connections' and the role of different kinds of 'connectors', see Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke, 2013), 35–6.

<sup>22</sup> David Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State* (Stanford, 2019); Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester, 2013).

Other work has noted how experiences of gender or ‘race’ shaped particular forms of cross-border activism.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, various historians have shown how cross-border cooperation was not a prerogative of the Left.<sup>24</sup> To some extent the latter work resonates with contemporary observations: media discourses and studies on the question of a global ‘populist’ wave since the mid-2010s illustrate that transnational activism can have different ideological underpinnings.<sup>25</sup>

With more than a quarter-century of research on the nature, workings and history of transnational activism, we are in a position to take stock of this literature, building on exercises that have explored the state of global and transnational history more generally.<sup>26</sup> Rather than pursuing the impossible quest of a purportedly ‘comprehensive’ survey, the following three subsections show how transnational activism can be traced in the literatures on South Asia, Europe and Latin America, drawing especially on the regional expertise of co-authors Maria Framke, Anne-Isabelle Richard and Patricia Oliart. These studies focus on the ‘regional’ as a scale of analysis. By acknowledging the regional specificities of transnational activism, they also set up the lineaments for the discussion in Part B.

### *Transnational activism and histories of South Asia*<sup>27</sup>

Transnational activism has long featured in the scholarly literature on colonial South Asia – initially without being explicitly named as such. Earlier works

<sup>23</sup> Elora Shehabuddin, ‘Between Orientalism and Anti-Muslim Racism: Pakistan, the United States, and Women’s Transnational Activism in the Early Cold War Interlude’, *Meridians*, 20 (2021), 340–69; and the special issue (S20; ed. Celia Donert) on ‘Women’s Rights and Global Socialism: Gendering Socialist Internationalism during the Cold War’, *International Review of Social History*, 67 (2022).

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Mammone, *Transnational Neo-Fascism in France and Italy* (Cambridge, 2015); Madeleine Herren, ‘Fascist Internationalism’, in *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (Cambridge, 2017), 191–212; Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (eds.), *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (New York, 2017); Agnieszka Pasięka, ‘Introduction to the Special Section: National, European, Transnational: Far-Right Activism in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 35 (2022), 863–75.

<sup>25</sup> Such narratives are increasingly prevalent in politics and the media: see e.g. the report by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, ‘High Tide? Populists in Power around the World, 1990–2020’, 7 Feb. 2020, <https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/high-tide-populism-power-1990-2020> (last accessed 13 Apr. 2023); John Harris, ‘“A Politics of Nostalgia and Score-Settling”: How Populism Dominated the 2010s’, *The Guardian* (online version), 26 Nov. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/nov/26/politics-of-nostalgia-score-settling-populism-dominated-2010s-john-harris> (last accessed 13 Apr. 2023). For academic perspectives, see Daniel Wajner, ‘The Populist Way Out: Why Contemporary Populist Leaders Seek Transnational Legitimation’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24 (2022), 416–36; Daniel Wajner, ‘Global Populism’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, ed. Michael Oswald (Cham, 2021), 351–67.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Thomas Chamberlin *et al.*, ‘On Transnational and International History’, *American Historical Review*, 128 (2023), 255–332; Richard Drayton and David Motadel, ‘Discussion: The Futures of Global History’, *Journal of Global History*, 13 (2018), 1–21.

<sup>27</sup> This section particularly draws on Maria Framke’s expertise.



explored examples in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for instance, British women advocating for more rights and better conditions for their Indian ‘sisters’) or traced the lives of transnational activists (such as Gandhi), yet they did so mostly as part of writing (new) imperial history or the history of the Indian national movement.<sup>28</sup> More recently, there has been growing interest in understanding transnational activism as part of the wider history of colonial South Asia and postcolonial India. Research in this vein has covered women’s rights, humanitarianism and various social reform causes.<sup>29</sup> Several historians have examined transnational networks and advocacy campaigns from beyond South Asia, with a growing understanding of South Asian participation in such initiatives.<sup>30</sup> Transnational perspectives can also show how the category of ‘caste’ – generally construed in ‘local’ Indian terms – became globalised through its resonance with the activism of other marginalised groups.<sup>31</sup>

If we turn to a specific area, namely the history of humanitarianism, we can see that a regional lens requires us to reassess assumptions that have informed some of the earlier work on transnational activism. The ideas, practices and campaigns to help others in distress have often been understood in universalistic terms, as something featuring commonalities across world regions. Nonetheless, the majority of historical work has focused on humanitarian approaches from Europe and North America, even when it has problematised the way in which ‘Western’ perspectives were deployed in other regions. Broader surveys have often marginalised the forms of humanitarianism that originated independently of and existed alongside those developed in the ‘West’.<sup>32</sup> Recent research on Chinese, Egyptian, South Asian and Southeast Asian aid initiatives in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth

<sup>28</sup> For some examples from the 1990s, see Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Barbara Ramusack, ‘Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865–1945’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 13 (1990), 309–21; Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism, 1920–1952* (Cambridge, 2021); Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (New Delhi, 2018); Zoë Laidlaw, ‘“Justice to India – Prosperity to England – Freedom to the Slave!” Humanitarian and Moral Reform Campaigns on India, Aborigines and American Slavery’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22 (2012), 299–324; Heather Goodall and Ghosh Devleena, ‘Reimagining Asia: Indian and Australian Women Crossing Borders’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 53 (2019), 1183–221; Harald Fischer-Tiné, ‘Eradicating the “Scourge of Drink” and the “Unpardonable Sin of Illegitimate Sexual Enjoyment”’: M. K. Gandhi as Anti-Vice Crusader’, *Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Südasiensforschung*, 2 (2017), 113–30.

<sup>30</sup> Adrian Ruprecht, ‘The Great Eastern Crisis (1875–1878) as a Global Humanitarian Moment’, *Journal of Global History*, 16 (2021), 159–84; Shehabuddin, ‘Between Orientalism and Anti-Muslim Racism’; Elisabeth Armstrong, ‘Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women’s Movement in Asia and the Women’s International Democratic Federation’, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41 (2016), 305–31.

<sup>31</sup> Suraj Yengde, *Caste: A New History of the World* (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011); Silvia Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism, 1755–1989: In the Name of Others* (Manchester, 2019).



century shows that the ‘Western’ periodisation of humanitarianism and related transnational activities cannot be applied easily to other contexts.<sup>33</sup> With regard to the Indian case, the conceptual label ‘imperial humanitarianism’ – as proposed by Michael Barnett for the period up to 1945<sup>34</sup> – would ignore influential humanitarian practices and ideas driven by nationalist, internationalist or communal actors and agendas.<sup>35</sup>

Researching the ideas, agendas and initiatives of transnational activism in their regional contexts adds nuance to narratives that might otherwise over-emphasise universal concerns. For instance, Indian independence activists who participated in transnational left-wing solidarity networks organised humanitarian work and contributed to humanitarian discourses not only out of a universal concern for helping others. Their activism was also motivated by strong anti-colonial and anti-imperial sentiments. Transnational aid activities were coupled with political campaigns in support of democracy and freedom; they thus enhanced the status of the Indian National Congress on the international stage and bestowed legitimacy upon it. Seen in this way, Indian humanitarianism was closely entwined with visions of, and strategies for, emancipation from colonialism.<sup>36</sup>

While this selection of research perspectives has focused on the early twentieth century, an emerging literature goes one step further by highlighting transregional cooperation during decolonisation. The ‘Bandung Moment’ of 1955 involved the leaders of newly independent states from Africa and Asia, yet recent work has identified a wider history of South–South activism in this era.<sup>37</sup> In this respect, the transnational links of South Asian activists highlight the significance of transregional connections, a theme we shall explore further in the next two sections.

<sup>33</sup> For examples that do not deal specifically with South Asia but exemplify this concern for non-Western humanitarianism, see Mark Frost, ‘Humanitarianism and the Overseas Aid Craze in Britain’s Colonial Straits Settlements, 1870–1920’, *Past & Present*, 236 (2017), 169–205; Alexandra Pfeiff, ‘The Red Swastika Society’s Humanitarian Work: A Re-interpretation of the Red Cross in China’, *New Global Studies*, 10 (2016), 373–92; Shaimaa Esmail El-Neklawy and Esther Möller, ‘Between Traditions of Aid and Political Ambitions: Endowments and Humanitarian Associations in Egypt, Late 19th–Mid 20th Century’, *Endowment Studies*, 6 (2022), 192–220.

<sup>34</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, pt 1.

<sup>35</sup> Eleonor Marcussen, *Acts of Aid: Politics of Relief and Reconstruction in the 1934 Bihar–Nepal Earthquake* (Cambridge 2022); Joanna Simonow, *Ending Famine in India: A Transnational History of Food Aid and Development, c. 1890–1950* (Leiden, 2023); Maria Framke, ‘Indian Humanitarianism under Colonial Rule: Imperial Loyalty, National Self-Assertion and Anticolonial Emancipation’, in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Colonialism in South Asia*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné and Maria Framke (2021), 486–96.

<sup>36</sup> Maria Framke, ‘“We Must Send a Gift Worthy of India and the Congress!” War and Political Humanitarianism in Late Colonial South Asia’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 51, 1969–98; Joanna Simonow, ‘The Great Bengal Famine in Britain: Metropolitan Campaigning for Food Relief and the End of Empire, 1943–44’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48 (2020), 168–97.

<sup>37</sup> Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, ‘Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War’, *Journal of World History*, 30 (2019), 1–19, which introduces a themed journal issue featuring various examples on this subject. See also Lewis, ‘Decolonising the History of Internationalism’.

*Rethinking Europe and Europeanism*<sup>38</sup>

For obvious reasons, Europe has featured prominently in the historiography on transnational actors advocating regional cooperation. After acknowledging the literature on this particular form of activism, we turn attention to Europe's relationship with other regions, in a way that contrasts with traditional approaches that extrapolate from the European experience to other parts of the world.

The literature on activism and regional integration in Europe contains four major strands. One prominent strand is biographical, looking at figures that promoted European integration, covering individuals such as Paneuropa founder Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi.<sup>39</sup> A second approach considers European integrationist groups and campaigns within national contexts,<sup>40</sup> while a third perspective traces the development of Europeanist ideas.<sup>41</sup> A fourth strand explores European integration from the perspective of transnational actors, from political parties to technical experts.<sup>42</sup> Somewhat counter-intuitively, the national perspective has often emphasised transnational connections, whereas transnational approaches have tended to highlight national specificities amongst the regional actors working for a common regional goal.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to these well-established fields, global perspectives on European cooperation and integration are still emerging.<sup>44</sup> A perspective that acknowledges the links between the regional and the global is highly significant. In historiographical terms, it further 'provincialises' Europe by showing how categories that are often seen as intrinsically European have been shaped by wider relationships and flows.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, such an approach draws attention to the way in which transnational actors both within and beyond Europe thought about world regions and their relationships. Traditionally, when the literature on European integration has looked beyond Europe itself, it has focused on the role of the United States.<sup>46</sup> More recently, however, the impact

<sup>38</sup> This section particularly draws on Anne-Isabelle Richard's expertise.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Anita Ziegenhofer, *Botschafter Europas: Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi und die Paneuropa-Bewegung in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren* (Vienna, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. Geneviève Duchenne, *Esquisses d'une Europe nouvelle: L'Européisme dans la Belgique de l'entre-deux-guerres (1919-1939)* (Brussels, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Mark Hewitson and Matthew D'Auria (eds.), *Europe in Crisis: Intellectuals and the European Idea, 1917-1957* (New York, 2015); Patrick Pasture, *Imagining European Unity since 1000 AD* (Basingstoke, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (Cambridge, 2007); Vincent Lagendijk, *Electrifying Europe: The Power of Europe in the Construction of Electricity Networks* (Amsterdam, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'Les boutiquiers idéalistes: Federalism in the Netherlands in the Interwar Period', in *Généralisations de fédéralistes européens depuis le XIXe siècle: Individus, groupes, espaces et réseaux*, ed. Geneviève Duchenne and Michel Dumoulin (Brussels, 2012), 93-108.

<sup>44</sup> Kiran Klaus Patel, *Project Europe: A History* (Cambridge, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> For this concept, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Geir Lundestad, 'Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952', *Journal of Peace Research*, 23 (1986), 263-77.

of colonial relations has become a significant research area.<sup>47</sup> Ties between Europe and Africa have attracted particular interest in this context.<sup>48</sup> Further emphasis on these connections is necessary, given that Western European integration was taking shape in the 1950s and 1960s – at a point when this region was transitioning from its formerly dominant (colonial) position.

Crucially, we can see the importance of such a relational approach even in earlier forms of Europeanist activism. The Paneuropa movement emerged in the early 1920s, at a point when ideas about Europe were entwined with a profound sense of crisis – not only because of the devastation caused by the Great War, but also because of challenges to Europe's global role. This period saw many questions about the nature of Europe, its relationship with other regions and its rapport with supposedly global institutions, notably the League of Nations.<sup>49</sup> Coudenhove-Kalergi is one example of a transnational activist who sought to address these questions: his emphasis on European regional integration was informed by a global vision of Europe's position in the world and the assumption that other regions would build their own federations. His visions mirrored the concepts of other activists – for instance his conceptualisation of Europe and Africa as part of the same region, Eurafrica. After the Second World War, these trends were reinforced, and actors from different colonies employed the concept of a Eurafrican region for their own purposes. Senegalese politician Léopold Senghor, for example, used it in discussions on the European Convention on Human Rights to argue for greater rights and self-government in areas then still under French rule.<sup>50</sup>

A transregional approach to European integration must link it to the history of decolonisation. In recent years, research on decolonisation has highlighted alternatives to the nation state, for example federation projects in decolonising or postcolonial regions.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, a vibrant literature on anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism directs attention to the role of transnational actors.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Giuliano Garavini, *After Empires: European Integration, Decolonization and the Challenge from the Global South, 1957–1986* (Oxford, 2012); Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'The Limits of Solidarity: Europeanism, Anti-Colonialism and Socialism at the Congress of the Peoples of Europe, Asia and Africa in Puteaux, 1948', *European Review of History*, 21 (2014), 519–37; Véronique Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire* (Basingstoke, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Marie-Thérèse Bitsch and Gérard Bossuat (eds.), *L'Europe unie et l'Afrique: De l'idée d'Eurafricque à la Convention de Lomé* (Brussels, 2005); Guia Migani, *La France et l'Afrique sub-saharienne, 1957–1963: Histoire d'une décolonisation entre idéaux eurafricains et politique de puissance* (Brussels, 2008); Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (2014).

<sup>49</sup> Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'A Global Perspective on European Cooperation and Integration since 1918', in *The Cambridge History of European Union*, vol. 2: *European Integration Inside-out*, ed. Mathieu Segers and Steven van Hecke (Cambridge, 2023), 459–80.

<sup>50</sup> Richard and Krepp, 'Regional Rights Projects'.

<sup>51</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa 1945–1960* (Princeton, 2014); Michael Collins, 'Decolonisation and the "Federal Moment"', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 24 (2013), 21–40; Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC, 2015); Richard Drayton, 'Federal Utopias and the Realities of Imperial Power', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 37 (2017), 401–6.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918–1939* (2008); Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World*

By taking the regional and the transregional seriously and by examining other venues besides the colonial, metropolitan or global, we can draw out how anti-colonial actors operated with different scales to bring their causes before the world. Integrating Europe within studies of decolonisation through transnational actors can help us move away from Eurocentric perspectives.

### *Conceptualising rights from a Latin American perspective*<sup>53</sup>

Our third region-specific section shifts attention to Latin America, with one evident link to the preceding discussion: in the early twentieth century, some advocates of European integration viewed Pan-Americanism as a potential model.<sup>54</sup> Such visions were based on selective perceptions: while Pan-Americanism fostered continental cooperation and emphasised respect for national sovereignty, it was also used to justify the United States' political and military interference in Central American and Caribbean nations. These conflicting approaches to hemispheric relations generated vigorous regional debate and transnational political activity that included cultural elites and social movements, establishing anti-imperialism as a central feature of twentieth-century Latin American political life. Historical research has shown how political debates and ideas circulated in cultural journals that, while based in countries such as Peru or Argentina, gathered authors from across the Americas. The protagonists of these debates constituted a plural political and cultural avant-garde, influencing local social and political movements.<sup>55</sup>

For decades, the United States combined direct interventions in Central America and the Caribbean with anti-subversive training to control insurgencies and oppositional movements across Latin America, particularly in the so-called 'military era' (1960s–80s).<sup>56</sup> With their widespread use of torture, assassinations and forced disappearances, dictatorial regimes in Latin America sparked a wave of transnational human rights activism that involved enquiry missions and pressure campaigns. These efforts exemplified the so-called 'boomerang pattern' which, according to Keck and Sikkink, sees activists inveigle foreign governments to apply pressure upon a rights-violating government, either directly or via intergovernmental bodies.<sup>57</sup> As Patrick Kelly has shown, activist interventions made Latin America a central site 'in the construction of global human rights norms since the 1970s'.<sup>58</sup> A regional

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*Nationalism* (Cambridge, 2015); Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below* (2015); Ronald Jemal Stephens and Adam Ewing (eds.), *Global Garveyism* (Gainesville, FL, 2019); Carolien Stolte *et al.* (eds.), *The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> This section is based on Patricia Oliart's expertise.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Alfred Hermann Fried, *Pan-Amerika: Entwicklung, Umfang und Bedeutung der panamerikanischen Bewegung* (Berlin, 1910).

<sup>55</sup> Martín Bergel, 'El anti-antinorteamericanismo en América Latina (1898–1930): Apuntes para una historia intelectual', *Nueva sociedad*, 236 (2011), 152–67.

<sup>56</sup> Herbert Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna, *Brazil, 1964–1985: The Military Regimes of Latin America in the Cold War* (New Haven, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, 12–13.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (Cambridge, 2018).

focus thus offers insights into a decade that many historians associate with the rise of human rights on international agendas.<sup>59</sup> The role of regional developments in the transnational construction of particular causes was also evident in the 1980s, as shown in research on international responses to the civil wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua.<sup>60</sup> In this era, rights-based campaigns operated alongside solidarity-based activism in which anti-imperialist criticisms of US intervention figured prominently.<sup>61</sup>

Some of the literature has seen the growth of transnational solidarity and human rights campaigns in connection with the rise of transnational activism on Indigenous rights in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>62</sup> Such activism initially focused on tackling violence and threats against Indigenous peoples in remote areas, yet it increasingly moved to support resistance struggles and organisational activities to protect their territories from exploitation. Indigenous rights campaigning had important regional dimensions, both because of Latin America's colonial history and because of the demographic and political prominence of Indigenous peoples in several Latin American countries. Indigenous groups were located in regions that cut across the territory of more than one state, making their situation a transnational one. Accordingly, Indigenous rights groups connected different levels of campaigning: local, regional, national and international.

Given its political relevance, there is an abundant academic literature on transnational activism around Indigenous peoples' rights in the 1990s. Kay Warren and Jean Jackson have highlighted the establishment of regional networks to promote contact, debates and cooperation between Indigenous political actors across Latin America.<sup>63</sup> Such activism has involved tensions around issues of representation, the relationship between leaders and the grassroots, and the implementation of transnational agendas that were not always sensitive to local circumstances.<sup>64</sup> Some research has emphasised how Indigenous activists have influenced international agreements, which subsequently provided a basis to defend rights and resist dispossession both locally and

<sup>59</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Jan Eckel, *The Ambivalence of Good: Human Rights in International Politics since the 1940s* (Oxford, 2019); Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Civil War in El Salvador and the Origins of Rights-Based Humanitarianism', *Journal of Global History*, 16 (2021), 246–65; Kim Christiaens, 'Between Diplomacy and Solidarity: Western European Support Networks for Sandinista Nicaragua', *European Review of History*, 21 (2014), 617–34.

<sup>61</sup> Jan Hansen, Christian Helm and Frank Reichherzer (eds), *Making Sense of the Americas: How Protest Related to America in the 1980s and Beyond* (Frankfurt/Main, 2015); and the special issue 'Internationalizing Revolution: The Nicaraguan Revolution and the World, 1977–1990', ed. Tanya Harmer and Eline van Ommen, of *The Americas*, 78 (2021).

<sup>62</sup> Jochen Kemner, 'Fourth World Activism in the First World: The Rise and Consolidation of European Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples', *Journal of Modern European History*, 12 (2014), 262–79.

<sup>63</sup> Kay B. Warren and Jean E. Jackson, 'Introduction: Studying Indigenous Activism in Latin America', in *Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation, and the State in Latin America*, ed. Kay B. Warren and Jean E. Jackson (Austin, 2003), 10.

<sup>64</sup> Patricia Oliart, 'Indigenous Women's Organisations and the Political Discourses of Indigenous Rights and Gender Equity in Peru', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 3 (2008), 291–308.

internationally. Such issues are important, especially given the extractive activities and ecological impacts that Indigenous populations are faced with – subjects that have generated substantial scholarship in recent years.<sup>65</sup>

The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994 inspired the formation of new transnational networks, linking opposition to neoliberal policies with the historical demands of Indigenous movements, thus intertwining regional, transnational and global forms of contestation. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) voiced concerns of Indigenous people in a particular region within the Mexican state, but it did so by targeting the launch of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Several scholars have emphasised that this regionally rooted activism was construed in universal terms – the struggle against ‘neo-liberal’ globalisation.<sup>66</sup>

The case of Indigenous activism in Latin America is but one example of a theme that runs through the literatures that have been discussed thus far: namely how regional identities and networks could be deployed to challenge injustices and rectify inequalities in particular locales. Regional framings enabled activists to develop alternative visions of world affairs. As several of our examples from both South Asia and Latin America have shown, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism animated diverse forms of regional activism, and regional identities nourished resistance to external domination. Meanwhile, activists in Europe responded and engaged with these developments in different ways, whether by forging alliances based on solidarity or by developing new projects to reposition their own region in the world. Across the historiographies we have considered so far, the need for a fresh perspective on the cross-border bonds of activists is evident. It is this challenge that we take further in Part B, as we turn to cases that map out diverse ways of adopting a regional perspective in writing about transnational activism.

## **Part B: Rethinking transnational activism through diverse regional experiences**

As noted in the introduction, transnational activists and movements have often cast themselves in global terms, promoting aims that were purportedly applicable irrespective of location. This approach was evident in eighteenth-century humanitarianism, with groups such as the ambitiously named

<sup>65</sup> Priscilla Claeys and Deborah Delgado Pugley, ‘Peasant and Indigenous Transnational Social Movements Engaging with Climate Justice’, *Revue canadienne d’études du développement*, 38 (2017), 325–40; Linda Etchart, *Global Governance of the Environment, Indigenous Peoples and the Rights of Nature: Extractive Industries in the Ecuadorian Amazon* (Cham, 2022); Kimberly Theidon, *Legacies of War: Violence, Ecologies, and Kin* (Durham, NC, 2022); Charis Kamphuis, ‘The Transnational Mining Justice Movement: Reflecting on Two Decades of Law Reform Activism in the Americas’, *Canadian Yearbook of International Law*, 57 (2020), 286–352.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Olesen, ‘Mixing Scales: Neoliberalism and the Transnational Zapatista Solidarity Network’, *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 29 (2005), 84–126; Abigail Andrews, ‘Constructing Mutuality: The Zapatistas’ Transformation of Transnational Activist Power Dynamics’, *Latin American Politics and Society*, 52 (2010), 89–120.



Society of Universal Good-will claiming to advance ‘the cause of humanity’ irrespective of national borders.<sup>67</sup> In practice, the Society of Universal Good-will served as little more than a provider of assistance to destitute Scots in Norwich and London.<sup>68</sup> The ‘humane societies’ that are often cast among the earliest transnational humanitarian actors drew in both their organisational form and their lifesaving techniques on precursors from beyond Europe,<sup>69</sup> yet the history of transnational humanitarianism has overwhelmingly been presented in terms of purported Western origins.<sup>70</sup>

The universalising language of early European humanitarianism was far from unique to the eighteenth century: it was replicated by later movements, in different contexts and with different political connotations. Into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an array of humanitarian, peace, socialist and women’s associations were labelled ‘international’ but, in effect, had memberships that were largely limited to Europeans and North Americans.<sup>71</sup> In some cases, claims to ‘universality’ involved double standards, especially in the case of supposedly progressive associations imposing the standards of purported ‘civilisation’ to justify differential treatment of those within and beyond Europe.<sup>72</sup> Contemporary observers from beyond Europe drew attention to this asymmetry, as exemplified by the Indian nationalist and women’s rights activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Having attended the Berlin congress of the International Alliance of Women in 1929, she noted her initial ‘shock’ as it ‘was a misnomer to call it “International”’. As Chattopadhyay pointed out, the meeting ‘was composed of national representatives from the East limited only to Egypt and India’, while most areas under colonial rule ‘were represented by their rulers and not the country’s nationals’.<sup>73</sup>

Twentieth-century anti-colonial movements and, ultimately, decolonisation triggered a reconfiguration of causes and organisations. One such example was the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), which had begun in 1929 as an organisation of predominantly ‘Western’ women’s conservative rural associations. Over time, the agendas of rural women’s groups from the Global South became more prominent in the ACWW’s membership and organisation.<sup>74</sup> ACWW’s area vice-president for Asia from 1959 to 1965 and its world president from 1965 to 1971 was the Indian women’s rights and development activist Aroti Dutt. During and after her tenures, the association initiated

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Amanda Bowie Moniz, ‘“Labours in the Cause of Humanity in Every Part of the Globe”: Transatlantic Philanthropic Collaboration and the Cosmopolitan Ideal, 1760–1815’ (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2008), 39.

<sup>68</sup> Society of Universal Good-will, *An Account of the Scots Society in Norwich: From Its Rise in 1775, Until it Received the Additional Name of the Society of Universal Good-will, in 1784* (Norwich, 1784).

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Davies, ‘Rethinking the Origins of Transnational Humanitarian Organizations: The Curious Case of the International Shipwreck Society’, *Global Networks*, 18 (2018), 461–78.

<sup>70</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*; Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>71</sup> For an overview, see F. S. L. Lyons, *Internationalism in Europe, 1815–1914* (Leiden, 1963).

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance, the critique in Uday S. Mehta, ‘Liberal Strategies of Exclusion’, *Politics & Society*, 18 (1990), 427–54.

<sup>73</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces: Memoirs* (New Delhi, 1986), 125.

<sup>74</sup> This example draws on Maria Framke’s research.

development projects for rural women in South Asia, partly financed by the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, which Dutt advised. That this was possible reflects transregional commonalities across the ACWW's diverse membership, including a certain conception of middle-class benevolence that enabled its work to function across regional contexts.

One major form of inter-regional activism explicitly focused on South-South cooperation, with Afro-Asian solidarity constituting a major example. At the opening of the first Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Summit of 1957, Anwar Sadat described 'the World Mission of the Peoples of Africa and Asia' as being rooted in a shared experience of colonial exploitation.<sup>75</sup> For some activists, such an understanding underpinned conceptions of the 'Third World' as a far-reaching, transregional space for activism. The Third World Network established in Penang in 1984, for instance, described the Third World regional space in terms of the shared experience of multi-sectoral domination by wealthy countries, stressing the overlapping 'economic, cultural and political spheres ... throttling the development of the Third World' as well as the prospects of the Third World as an arena in which 'the struggle for genuine development is a joint struggle of all concerned peoples'.<sup>76</sup>

With the demise of the Soviet bloc, the 'Third World' concept became increasingly perceived as obsolete and, moreover, critiqued as a colonial construct, given its origin as a projection of the European 'third estate' concept to the world as a whole.<sup>77</sup> Some activists defined their agenda instead as relating to the Global South. For instance, Focus on the Global South, founded by Kamal Malhotra and Walden Bello in 1995, aimed to make 'the concept of the Global South as a political entity both tangible and practical', supporting grassroots movements and transnational networks as well as promoting alternatives to neoliberal economic globalisation.<sup>78</sup> However, as Cindy Ewing has noted, while the 'Global South' concept may help us trace 'historical self-understandings of a distinct identity among postcolonial peoples that united them across geographic space as a global community', it is limiting in that it reproduces 'the bureaucratic language of the Brandt Report and Cold War developmentalism'.<sup>79</sup>

These contrasting experiences highlight the tensions between different regional contexts and conceptions of transnational activism, including attempts to forge transregional alliances. In recent years, such questions have attracted significant scholarly interest.<sup>80</sup> While the following sections discuss forms of activism that cut across national borders and, in some cases,

<sup>75</sup> *The First Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference, 26 December 1957 to January 1, 1958*, 2nd edn (Cairo, 1958), 7–12.

<sup>76</sup> Third World Network, *Third World: Development or Crisis? Declaration and Conclusions of the Third World Conference, Penang, 9–14 Nov. 1984* (Penang, 1984), 5 and 12.

<sup>77</sup> Alfred Sauvy, 'Trois mondes, une planète', *L'Observateur*, 118 (14 Aug. 1952), 14.

<sup>78</sup> Focus on the Global South, 'Who We Are', <https://focusweb.org/who-we-are/> (last accessed 4 Apr. 2023).

<sup>79</sup> Cindy Ewing, 'Troubling the Global South in Global History', *American Historical Review*, 128 (2023), 274.

<sup>80</sup> On transregional activism, see Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis (eds.), *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden, 2022).

transcended narrowly conceived regions, several case studies focus on smaller units or episodes to highlight the potential of micro-historical approaches.<sup>81</sup> Taken together, these cases reveal multiple forms of regionally sensitive research. We do not aim for an exhaustive overview but instead offer a selection of promising directions for further scholarship on the histories of transnational activism, with each case study reflecting how our contributors are taking regional perspectives forward.

The first pair of cases – based on research by, respectively, Pilar Requejo de Lamo and Charlotte Alston – considers two purportedly universal causes, Esperanto and Tolstoyism, which in practice reflected their regional roots in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, before being applied and adapted in other regional contexts. We then shift to micro-histories, via two very different cases of transnational activism rooted in contrasting African contexts. Drawing on Kate Skinner’s research, the discussion of Holiday Komedja’s activism in the Ghana–Togo borderland highlights both the opportunities and constraints of a regional borderland context and the importance of previously overlooked source materials for a regionally rooted analysis of transnational activism. The subsequent study of early Rastafarianism, based on Robert Kramm’s work, elucidates the importance of uprootedness in transnational activism with regard to the African diaspora and its interactions with the global-scale asymmetries that imperialism had embedded. By considering, respectively, an African regional borderland and ‘Africa’ as constructed among diasporic communities, these two cases highlight distinctive regional features that have tended to be overlooked. The final case study turns attention to yet another aspect of regional contexts: the overlaps between regional and inter-regional features and their implications for some forms of transnational activism. Grounded in Matthew Hurst’s research on Hong Kong, the analysis of campaigns for the rights of local boat dwellers illustrates how multiple regional contexts shaped the dynamics of transnational activism.

### *Reinterpreting the international through the regional: the cases of Esperanto and Tolstoyism*<sup>82</sup>

On the surface, both Esperanto and Tolstoyism seem to constitute phenomena that transcend not only a national but also a regional focus – and this has been reflected in treatments of their historical evolution that emphasise their international characteristics.<sup>83</sup> Here, on the other hand, our comparative analysis of regional features highlights aspects that an emphasis on their international agendas has tended to obscure.

<sup>81</sup> The potential of such approaches has been highlighted in John-Paul Ghobrial (ed.), *Global History and Microhistory*, which is a themed issue of *Past & Present*, 242, suppl. 14 (2019).

<sup>82</sup> The analysis of Esperanto is based on Pilar Requejo de Lamo’s research, including her doctoral thesis ‘Between Internationalism and Nationalism: The Esperanto Movement in the Iberian Peninsula in the Early Twentieth Century’ (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2023). The comments on Tolstoyism draw on Charlotte Alston’s research.

<sup>83</sup> Roberto Garvía, *Esperanto and Its Rivals: The Struggle for an International Language* (Philadelphia, 2015); Charlotte Alston, *Tolstoy and His Disciples: The History of a Radical International Movement* (2014).

As an international auxiliary language, Esperanto was a globally oriented phenomenon aiming to promote intercultural communication. When Ludwik Zamenhof introduced his constructed language in 1887, he produced a versatile tool for a transnational network of individuals who supported the idea of an official international language. Moreover, Esperantujo, the abstract place where Esperanto is spoken, written and practised, relied on multiple journals, books and other forms of correspondence, and not merely on international congresses.<sup>84</sup> Tolstoyism also emerged as an international movement in the 1880s and 1890s. Inspired by the later writings of Leo Tolstoy, it was a pacifist form of Christian anarchism, built on the rejection of all forms of organisation and coercion, and promoting the principle of individuals following their own conscience. Tolstoyans put their independence of thought into action, happily critiquing key elements of Tolstoy's work.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, while most followers of Tolstoy accepted the label 'Tolstoyan' as a shorthand for their common beliefs, they rejected the idea of a movement.<sup>86</sup>

Despite their respective focus on the universal and the individual, both Esperanto and Tolstoyism were shaped by their regional environments. Esperanto emerged from an Eastern European context: created by the Polish medic Zamenhof, it was launched in the city of Białystok, then under Russian rule. Zamenhof was exposed to the daily challenges for a multilingual and multi-ethnic community. In this case, a problem that was particularly acute in a specific region led to a solution that resonated with a multitude of individuals, creating a global phenomenon.<sup>87</sup> Tolstoyism also originated in the context of the Russian empire, with the Moscow Vegetarian Society as a regular meeting place for Tolstoyans, the publishing house Posrednik ('The Intermediary') as a centre for its communications, and Tolstoyan communities extending to non-Russian parts of the empire.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Russian Tolstoyans were active in the wider international 'movement', both through their publication activities and through émigrés' involvement in Tolstoyan communities elsewhere.

Esperanto's regional roots encompassed not only its founder's background and the limited Eurocentric linguistic basis of the constructed language: they also informed the way in which the concerns of Esperantists were located between the local and global. Many of its supporters saw Esperantism as a less threatening alternative to the international use of particular national

<sup>84</sup> Guilherme Fians, *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks: Language Politics, Digital Media and the Making of an International Community* (Cham, 2021).

<sup>85</sup> E. V. Agarin, 'L. N. Tolstoi i Tolstovstvo v kritike posledovatelei', *Sums'kii istoriko-archivnii zhurnal*, 23 (2014), 18–29.

<sup>86</sup> Vladimir Chertkov, 'If Tolstoy Were Tsar', *Brotherhood*, 5 (Oct. 1897), 63; Lodewijk van Mierop, 'Geen Tolstoyaan maar Christien', *Vrede*, 2 (15 May 1899), 109.

<sup>87</sup> Walter Żelazny, *Ludwik Zamenhof: Life and Work. Reminiscences*, trans. Katarzyna Orzechowska (Białystok, 2020); Jouko Lindstedt, 'Esperanto – an East European Contact Language?', in *Die Europäizität der Slawia oder die Slawizität Europas: Ein Beitrag der kultur- und sprachrelativistischen Linguistik*, ed. Christian Voss and Alicja Nagórko (Munich, 2009), 125–34.

<sup>88</sup> Ronald D. LeBlanc, *Vegetarianism in Russia: The Tolstoy(an) Legacy* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2001); Robert Otto, *Publishing for the People: The Firm Posrednik 1885–1905* (New York, 1988), 135.

languages.<sup>89</sup> Esperanto offered stateless nations a voice in the international arena, without having to rely on existing languages that would leave them disadvantaged vis-à-vis native speakers. Esperanto also enabled them to spread the word about their cultural particularities, whilst eschewing the pervasive influence of the languages spoken by major powers. In 1909, the Irish Esperantist Patrick Parker urged the '[c]hildren of the small nations' to 'establish through Esperanto a global network for the defense and preservation of our endangered languages'.<sup>90</sup> Along such lines, Esperanto helped create both regional and transregional networks. For example, in Spain, Catalan Esperantists supported the construction of an Esperanto community in which mother tongues took preference over citizenship, giving stateless nations an international voice. At the same time, they supported plans for an Iberian Confederation, built upon a peninsula composed of regions and advanced through the use of Esperanto.<sup>91</sup> Seen from this angle, an ostensibly global movement could be a vehicle for different kinds of regional agendas – both sub-state (Catalan) and transnational (Iberian) – while advancing notions of a transregional community of people from smaller nations. Moreover, regional features also mattered in terms of the causes that were being promoted through the medium of Esperanto, with spiritism being especially significant in parts of South America.<sup>92</sup>

For Tolstoyans, contrasting regional contexts affected the ways in which the movement grew transnationally. The Tolstoyan movement is most often remembered for inspiring 'back to the land' settlements in places as diverse as Sochi on the Black Sea, Maldon in Essex, Blaricum in the Netherlands and Georgia in the American South.<sup>93</sup> In China, in the wake of the May Fourth Movement (1919), Tolstoy's case inspired intellectuals who appreciated his determination to put his ideals into practice and to reach out to the peasant masses.<sup>94</sup> In South Africa, Gandhi drew on Tolstoy's ideas in the context of the satyagraha campaign of the 1910s.<sup>95</sup>

In almost all the regional contexts in which Tolstoy's vision found a receptive audience, activists debated how ideas that had been generated within the agriculturally based economy of Eastern Europe could be applied to very different economic, social and political contexts. In Britain, Switzerland and

<sup>89</sup> In the case of Portugal, Esperanto journals often spoke of the 'pretentious use' of foreign languages, which had contributed to the debasement of the Portuguese language: 'O uso preteneioso das línguas estrangeiras', *Portugal-Esperanto*, no. 4 (Apr. 1926), 58.

<sup>90</sup> Patrick Parker, 'La gepatraj lingvoj kaj Esperanto', *Tutmonda Espero*, no. 17 (May 1909), 69–71.

<sup>91</sup> 'Memoria del Primer Congreso de Esperantistas Ibéricos celebrado en Valencia bajo la presidencia honoraria de S. M. el Rey D. Alfonso XIII, del 17 al 20 de mayo de 1923', *La Suno Hispana*, no. 81 (Feb. 1924), 17–25.

<sup>92</sup> David Pardue, 'Spiritism and Esperanto in Brazil', *Esperantologio*, 2 (2001), 11–27.

<sup>93</sup> Boris Mazurin, 'The Life and Labour Commune', in *Memoirs of Peasant Tolstoyans in Soviet Russia*, ed. William Edgerton (Bloomington, 1993), 40; George Gibson to Tolstoy, 21 Apr. 1898, GMT, BL216/78.

<sup>94</sup> Shakhar Rahav, 'Scale of Change: The Small Group in Chinese Politics, 1919–1921', *Asian Studies Review*, 43 (2019), 677–8.

<sup>95</sup> Surendra Bhana, 'The Tolstoy Farm: Gandhi's Experiment in "Cooperative Commonwealth"', *South African Historical Journal*, 7 (1975), 88–100.

the Netherlands, publishing houses set up by home-grown Tolstoyans or by Russian émigrés therefore operated heterogeneous publishing policies, drawing also on local texts, including Dutch vegetarian manuals and British tracts on cooperation.<sup>96</sup> British socialists described the attempt to apply Tolstoy's ideas in industrial Britain as a parody – with one critic stating that what was needed was 'not more potatoes, or more shoes, but a fraternal organization in which the potatoes and the shoes, and everything else, shall be abundantly available for all the workers'.<sup>97</sup> Different political contexts also impacted the experience and status of individuals within the movement: this was clearly the case with conscientious objectors who took the ultimate stand by refusing military service. Tolstoyans in countries without conscription struggled to come up with a similar sacrifice. Seen in this way, Tolstoyism constituted a movement with universal claims but exhibited discernible regional features that shaped its different interpretations and manifestations.

As this comparison has elucidated, both Esperanto and Tolstoyan ideas inspired transnational activism, but with prominent regional features, even beyond the environment from which they emerged. In the case of Tolstoyism, regional differences shaped contrasting practices seeking to implement Tolstoyan ideals, while Esperantists used the constructed language to pursue diverse regional causes, including those operating in borderlands such as Catalonia. It is another borderland context that our next case study turns to, as we shift attention to contrasting experiences of transnational activism in distinctive African regional contexts.

### *Holiday Komedja and print activism in a West African borderland*<sup>98</sup>

With our next two case studies, our attention shifts to individual activists while, at the same time, elucidating diverse regional aspects of African transnational activism. The first case study focuses on Holiday Komedja's print activism in West Africa in order to highlight two specific aspects: the importance of borderland regional contexts and the significance of source materials that can no longer be understood exclusively in narrow ethnonationalist terms.

Komedja was a shoemaker who operated in the borderland between British and French Togoland. He therefore came from a region in which 'borderlands' were shaped and interpreted in the context of formal colonisation. Colonial borders were often seen and described as a means of dividing people who

<sup>96</sup> Antonella Salomoni, 'Emigranty-tolstovtsy mezhdru khristianstvom i anarkhizmom (1898–1905 gg.)', in *Russkaia emigratsiia do 1917 goda – laboritoria liberal'noi i revoliutsionnoi mysli*, ed. Iu. Sherrer and B. Anan'ich (St Petersburg, 1997), 112–27.

<sup>97</sup> John Bruce Wallace, 'Coming out of the Old Order', *Brotherhood* (new series), 4 (Nov. 1896), 79–80.

<sup>98</sup> This example is the subject of Kate Skinner's research, including her book on *The Fruits of Freedom in British Togoland: Literacy, Politics and Nationalism, 1914–2014* (Cambridge, 2015) and her collaborative work with Wilson Yayoh in *Writing the New Nation in a West African Borderland: Ablɔde Safui (The Key to Freedom) by Holiday Komedja*, ed. Kate Skinner and Wilson Yayoh (Oxford, 2019).



considered themselves related. In this sense, borders were an affront as well as a nuisance, and African activists frequently mobilised with the aim of shifting or eliminating a border. But borderlands were also multilingual zones, sites of new economic projects (especially in the form of licit and illicit cross-border trade), and foci for international attention. African activists interpreted borders, and imbued them with meanings, by devising different – sometimes competing – solutions to the problems that they posed. Such activists organised not only within particular locales, but across borders and in multiple languages, targeting the international bodies (first the League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission and then the United Nations Trusteeship Council) that were supposed to oversee the administration of British and French Togoland, following the conquest and division of the former German colony of Togo during the First World War. As our discussion of Komedja will show, borderlands contexts provided logistical challenges for activists, but also opportunities to exploit colonial rivalries in the advancement of their political objectives.

In 1959, Komedja established the newspaper *Ablɔde Safui* (The Key to Freedom), which he published in Ewe, a language that was used on both sides of the colonial border.<sup>99</sup> Like other Ewe-speaking activists, Komedja can be considered within a transnational context: activist networks extended across the British–French Togoland divide and – after independence – across the border between the republics of Ghana and Togo; political pamphlets and newspapers circulated around the entire Ewe-speaking region; and activists crossed borders for rallies, meetings, and to escape various forms of oppression.<sup>100</sup> Komedja and others were also transnational in their frame of reference and their repertoire of political claims. The Ewe-speaking activists who sought the reunification and joint independence of British and French Togoland were ultimately disappointed by the international institutions where they pitched their claims. They were outmanoeuvred at the United Nations by the British government and by Gold Coast nationalists who – for different reasons – wanted British Togoland to be integrated into the Gold Coast / Ghana. But in the meantime, Ewe-speaking activists listened to the radio, followed world affairs, and generated texts to debate differing visions of sovereignty and solidarity.

*Ablɔde Safui* traced the drama of anti-colonial mobilisation, independence negotiations and the rapid shift, post-independence, to authoritarian single-party government. Such publications are essential for understanding transnational activism from a contextually rooted perspective. Komedja was an artisan shoemaker who could not afford to travel outside of West Africa. He did not live in a city that served as a hub of transnational anti-colonialism. But his frame of reference was wide-ranging. He compared the situation of the two Togolands to that of post-war Germany, divided between East and West, and subject to the overbearing influence of global and regional powers. He

<sup>99</sup> For further details and Komedja's writing, see *Writing the New Nation*, ed. Skinner and Yayoh.

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Kate Skinner, 'Brothers in the Bush: Exile, Refuge, and Citizenship on the Ghana–Togo Border, 1958–1966', in *Africans in Exile: Mobility, Law, and Identity*, ed. Nathan Riley Carpenter and Benjamin Lawrance (Indianapolis, 2018).

even approached the West German embassy in Lomé for support for his newspaper. Through *Ablode Safui*, Komedja delivered damning critiques of Kwame Nkrumah. Highlighting Nkrumah's use of preventive detention to control dissent, and the growing number of Ghanaians who were seeking refuge across the border in the Republic of Togo, Komedja questioned Nkrumah's version of Pan-Africanism.<sup>101</sup> He also reflected deeply upon the meaning of the term 'politics', ideals of national unity, and the role of conscience and self-discipline in salvaging an honourable form of postcolonial citizenship as governing parties and presidents became increasingly authoritarian.

Sources such as *Ablode Safui* challenge the presumed association between African-language texts and narrow, exclusivist forms of ethnonationalism. African-language texts could convene readerships that were not straightforwardly defined by ethnicity: they invited readers to see themselves in comparison and connection with others elsewhere in the world, and debated a wide range of national and transnational political projects. This is increasingly recognised in specialist scholarship on African print cultures.<sup>102</sup> But such texts can also counter over-reliance upon English-language sources for histories of transnational activism, and they need to be integrated into a wider range of historiographical fields. In this case, we can see that a regionally rooted perspective requires consideration of source materials that have not only previously been marginalised but that also challenge conventional assumptions with respect to the goals advanced by transnational activists.

### *Leonard Percival Howell, Rastafarianism and African 'uprooting'*<sup>103</sup>

A very different African regional context is evident in the case of the early Rastafari movement and its relation to the uprooted African diaspora which, as this section will highlight, shaped both the transnational life story of its founder and the vision of Africa that the movement put forward. Here, we see the importance of constructions of 'Africa' among diaspora communities as an illustration of the significance of regional imaginations in transnational activism.

As elucidated in a rich literature, the 'First Rasta' Leonard Percival Howell led a life that was transnational from an early age.<sup>104</sup> At the age of twelve,

<sup>101</sup> See also Kate Skinner, 'A Different Kind of Union: An Assassination, Diplomatic Recognition, and Competing Visions of African Unity in Ghana-Togo Relations (1953-63)', in *Visions of African Unity: New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and African Unification Projects*, ed. Mateo Grilli and Frank Gerits (Basingstoke, 2021).

<sup>102</sup> Derek Peterson, Emma Hunter and Stephanie Newell (eds.), *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor, 2016).

<sup>103</sup> This example is based on Robert Kramm's project on 'Radical Utopian Communities: A Global History from the Margins, 1900-1950', which is funded via a Freigeist Fellowship from the Volkswagen Foundation.

<sup>104</sup> Hélène Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism* (Chicago, 2003); Robert Hill, 'Leonard P. Howell and Millennial Visions in Early Rastafari', *Jamaica Journal*, 16 (1983), 24-39; Mark Naison, 'Historical Notes on Blacks and American Communism: The Harlem Experience', *Science and Society*, 42 (1978), 324-43; James Robertson, "'That Vagabond George Stewart of

he journeyed from colonial Jamaica to Panama, where he witnessed the building of the Panama Canal and the exploitation and racist hierarchies on its construction site. He served as a cook in the US Army Transportation Service, which brought him from the Caribbean to Europe, Asia and the United States. Discharged in 1923, Howell made his way to New York, running a tea room in Harlem, which was a hotbed of Black radical political activism. Convicted for sedition in 1931, Howell was deported a year later to Jamaica, where he preached the return of the messiah in the form of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I. In 1940, Howell established the Pinnacle Commune, which became a haven for the Rastafarian community. Pinnacle survived on self-sustaining agriculture and became the island's largest ganja supplier, which gave the colonial police pretexts for repeatedly raiding the commune and ultimately destroying it in 1954. After years of trial, Howell spent the rest of his life under house arrest, and what remains of Pinnacle attracts Rastafarians globally and allows remembrance of Howell as a spiritual leader, founding father and key actor in the early Rastafarian movement.

Besides its transnationality, Howell's life story illustrates the border- and boundary-crossing regional within the global – as well as the global within the regional – in the early Rastafarian movement. Rastafari inherently involves transnational activism, as Rastafarian peoples, activities and ideas were (and still are) closely entwined with the history of slavery, migration and African diasporas, and with a constant struggle against the constraints of empire, capitalism and the colonial divide – in Rastafarian terms summed up as 'Babylon'. Pioneering scholarship on Rastafari has shown this, but research in this field is dominated by approaches from anthropology, cultural studies, musicology, religious studies and the social sciences, which have shaped perceptions of Rastafari as primarily a cultural, social and religious phenomenon.<sup>105</sup> As Monique Bedasse contends, however, it was not popular culture and cultural representations alone, but also repatriation to the African homeland that constituted Rastafari from within the movement and its international growth.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, repatriation is intrinsically linked with the Rastafarian concept of 'trodding', which means 'to move within, between, and beyond the boundaries of any particular nation-state', including Jamaica, Africa and the Western world.<sup>107</sup> In the Rastafarians' case, trodding specifically recognises how they 'understood Africa to be the root of diaspora. But rather than a root waiting to be merely framed, claimed, or rejected, it talks back to diaspora and helps to shape it.' Moreover, 'trodding diaspora insists that we map the

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England": Leonard Howell's Seditious Sermons, 1933–1941', in *Leonard Percival Howell and the Genesis of Rastafari*, ed. Clinton A. Hutton *et al.* (Mona, 2015), 69–106; Daive A. Dunkley, 'The Suppression of Leonard Howell in Late Colonial Jamaica, 1932–1954', *New West Indian Guide*, 87 (2013), 62–93.

<sup>105</sup> See, among many others: Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (New York, 1994); Chris Potash, *Reggae, Rasta, Revolution: Jamaican Music from Ska to Dub* (New York, 1997); Noel Erskine, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL, 2007).

<sup>106</sup> Monique A. Bedasse, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization* (Chapel Hill, 2017), 2.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

distance between an imagined Africa and the physical journey to discover complex African realities'.<sup>108</sup>

Acknowledging 'roots' as a pivotal signifier in Rastafarian practice and discourse, one may bring this term into conversation with its apparent oppositional gerund 'uprooting'. First, by considering the difference between 'root' and 'uprooting', we can underscore the omnipresent Rastafarian struggle, and the entailing contradictions between their forceful and traumatic displacement from Africa to the Caribbean plantation system and their longing and claims for repatriation. Second, uprooting encompasses the mobility – the physical 'trodding' – already inherent in the early Rastafarian movement, of which Howell's journeying is a striking example. Third, and related to the Rastafarian lifestyle, such as the insistence on natural and divine living, 'root' indicates Rastafari's radicalism that reverberates with Marx's famous quote: 'To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself.'<sup>109</sup> Hence, the term 'uprooting' conveys a form of empowerment that strengthens the notion of early Rastafari not only as a matter of culture and religion, but also as a transnational political movement against racism and colonialism. In that sense, the terminology of 'uprooting' connects with the Rastafarian vocabulary that consciously resists the Babylonian system, and simultaneously highlights the individual and communal divinity – that is, being upright, righteous and truthful – in one's action. Ultimately, uprooting signals the possibility of change through transnational activism: imagining and overcoming racism and colonialism in global capitalism, drawing in this case on constructions of African roots in the diaspora community. Imaginations of regional rootedness and uprooting constitute a fascinating direction for further enquiry.

### *Rethinking the dynamics of transnational activism: the case of the Yaumatei boat dwellers*<sup>110</sup>

Our final example concerns a very different effort to overcome the challenges of a regional context shaped by cross-border relations and impaired by colonial impositions. The case study focuses on activism in 1970s–80s Hong Kong; it thus deals with a context in which proximity to mainland China as well as British colonial rule provided overlapping regional contexts for a local campaign that deployed transnational means. Ever since the Communists took China in 1949, the Hong Kong colonial government's every decision was attenuated by concern for Beijing's possible reaction. To prevent political expression within the colony, which could have troubled Sino-British

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Karl Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 1 (East Berlin, 1976), 385.

<sup>110</sup> This section is based on Matthew Hurst's ongoing doctoral research at the University of York, which investigates the role of Hong Kong civil society actors and pressure groups during the 1980s–90s Sino-British negotiations and transfer of Hong Kong from British colonial rule to Beijing's administration. Hurst's research is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/R012733/1) through the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities.

relations, the authorities enacted oppressive censorship laws and local surveillance, and delayed self-rule indefinitely.<sup>111</sup> Thus, tensions within the immediate geographical region influenced the shape of acceptable activism within Hong Kong. As our analysis of the Yaumatei boat dwellers case illustrates, activists consequently had to navigate regional politics and, looking beyond the boundaries of the colony and region for support, sought to broaden the appeal of essentially local concerns by reframing their plight in the language of supposedly universal values.

In 1972, plans for a road extension project triggered efforts to rehouse more than 600 families who had been living on boats in the Yaumatei typhoon shelter.<sup>112</sup> Over 100 households, however, became embroiled in a row over their accommodation. In May 1978, a social worker from a community rights group, the Society for Collective Organization, began helping the boat dwellers to formalise, organise and expand their movement. In January 1979, seventy-six boat dwellers and their supporters boarded buses with a petition that they intended to hand to the governor unannounced.<sup>113</sup> They were swiftly arrested under the Public Order Ordinance, a law that stipulated restrictions on public gatherings and which had been introduced following Communist-inspired riots, echoing the influence of the region upon the local. The arrests proved a turning point, propelling rather than containing criticism of the colonial government.

The movement expanded in two dimensions: activists began looking outside the confines of the colony to avoid the constraints of the region and, discursively, they sought support by adopting the language of class struggle and universal human rights. Activists forged connections beyond the immediate region, such as in Britain and the wider Commonwealth. A declassified colonial government report comments that Hong Kong-based groups frequently brought such issues 'to the attention of overseas critics of the HK Government'.<sup>114</sup> For instance, British MPs and peers in the House of Lords were lobbied with letters, and supporters from as far as Canada wrote to newspaper editors. The same government report complained of the resources required in preparing 'briefs and explanations ... for use in local or overseas rebuttal'.<sup>115</sup> The dual inside- and outside-pressure approach succeeded in raising the profile of the boat dwellers' case.

The movement also took a discursive turn. Within the colony, academics, journalists, British expatriates and other middle-class locals viewed the incident as illustrative of widespread victimisation of the working class. Seeing themselves as better resourced to defend their positions, in adding their voices

<sup>111</sup> Michael Ng, *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong: Freedom of Expression and the Law (1842-1997)* (Cambridge, 2022); Florence Mok, *Covert Colonialism, Governance, Surveillance and Political Culture in British Hong Kong, c. 1966-97* (Manchester, 2023).

<sup>112</sup> Unless otherwise cited, this case study is informed by: Standing Committee on Pressure Groups, 15 May 1979, 'The Role Played by Pressure Groups on Public Issue [sic]: The Yaumatei Boat Squatter Affair', The National Archives, London (hereafter: TNA), FCO 40/1264 f13(w).

<sup>113</sup> Po-lin Chan, 'Social Action in Practice: Yaumatei Boat People as a Case Study' (PhD thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1981), 42-52.

<sup>114</sup> Standing Committee on Pressure Groups, 'Role Played by Pressure Groups', 1 and 8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

to the movement they not only condemned the treatment of the boat dwellers but also took up an anti-colonial rhetoric aimed at the heart of government itself. Additionally, when turning outside the region, activists reoriented the arrests from a local issue into a human rights issue. For instance, in 1980, an international group submitted a report titled 'Putting Justice and Human Rights in Focus' to the United Nations, arguing that various articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights had been breached.<sup>116</sup> By using the language of supposed universal values, activists negotiated the highly particular contrivances of the region.

This case highlights the need to refine frameworks for understanding the dynamics of transnational activism such as the 'boomerang pattern' identified by Keck and Sikkink. In this case, the complex regional context constrained the options open to activists but did not prevent them completely. Instead, appreciating the regional context enables a deeper understanding of why this movement evolved as it did. The arrests transformed the Yaumatei case from a local issue into an illustration of suppressive laws, encouraged solidarity between the resource-poor working class and the relatively better-off middle class via shared anti-colonial sentiment, and was reconceived as a human rights issue to facilitate universalisation of the issue. This case study thus exhibits how both practical and discursive choices were heavily dictated by the region. Activists had to bypass one form of imperial authority (the colonial government, whose laws were heavily dictated by regional neighbours) to speak as directly as possible to another (the metropole) or transcend the imperial power system altogether by enlisting allies from beyond the region. The case highlights the need for more fine-grained interpretations of which external actors are the most significant for transnational activism, depending on the particularities of the regional context in which activists are situated.

## Conclusion

This article has argued for the importance of 'region' as a category for understanding different forms of transnational political and social activism. Whereas Part A has illustrated how the history of transnational activism can be written from different regional vantage points, Part B has explored the implications of diverse meanings of 'region', both for activists and for writing about transnational activism. As some of our examples have shown, a turn to life stories can help us understand how individuals navigated the overlapping and sometimes conflicting regional contexts of their transnational endeavours – in this respect, we adopted promising perspectives from global history.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the cases illustrate that a regionally rooted approach involves active engagement with questions of marginalisation, from reappraising marginalised source materials to tracing experiences of 'uprooting'.

<sup>116</sup> No author, Aug. 1980, 'Putting Justice and Human Rights in Focus', TNA, FCO 40/1188 fl.

<sup>117</sup> On life stories as a means to understand global histories, see e.g. Amy Stanley, 'Maid-servants' Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900', *American Historical Review*, 121 (2016), 437–60.



One could push this point even further: namely that the notion of ‘uprooting’ can extend to regions themselves, which were far from static and shifted shape according to particular historical circumstances. The regional is a scale that at first sight seems clearly defined (as geography, cultural space, climatic realm) but that actually bears an openness, enabling us to explore activists’ actions, references, experiences and imaginations of space and scale. Our cases have also highlighted how regionally sensitive approaches require opening up our consideration of regional scales to encompass diverse contexts including borderlands and diasporic communities’ identities.

The power dynamics of empire and colonialism were one important contextual aspect. On the one hand, regions were places where imperial domination manifested itself in various ways. On the other hand, regional and transregional cooperation provided means to challenge inequalities and external domination. In some instances, activists evoked regional federations and unions in attempts to promote an alternative world order.<sup>118</sup> We have further seen in the Hong Kong case how the shared context of colonial rule played a role in overcoming class divisions.

Regions have provided important contexts in which activism emerged – and an acknowledgement of this aspect has the benefit of simultaneously challenging both national and global framings. The fact that ‘region’ could be understood in very different ways is not a problem as such: instead, such ambiguities can help us develop more nuanced understandings of activism which, as we have shown, operated at and across different scales. Our cases have provided a selection of the ways in which regional contexts, conceptualisations and source materials can be opened up in studying the history of transnational activism, and each of these dimensions offers a promising prospective pathway for further investigation.

**Author contributions.** Thomas Davies and Daniel Laqua are joint first authors of this article.

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<sup>118</sup> Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019); Frank Gerits, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa: How the Pursuit of Anticolonial Modernity Shaped a Postcolonial Order, 1945–1966* (Ithaca, 2023).

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