Britain/Empire/Commonwealth

Preliminary Field Exam

Fall 2016

You must do a total of three (3) questions.

Be sure each essay has a clear line of argument, addresses as many dimensions of the question as possible, and offers relevant, persuasive evidence from specific secondary sources wherever appropriate. Good luck!

Section A. PICK ONE

1. Historians are preoccupied with periodization. British historians tend to divide the history of the British empire into two distinct phases: the first empire and the modern (second) empire. Is this a useful and accurate categorization of the British empire? To what extent could or should the 18th century be seen as a pivot, looking both backward to early modern imperial histories and foretelling much of the empire story of the Victorian period? What do the chronologies of these histories emphasize and/or obscure? How would you write a history that reconfigures this divide?

2. To what extent do rise-and-fall arcs of imperial power shape contemporary accounts of modern British history? Make a case for both the power of such narratives and for counter-histories that foreground dissent and disruption. To what extent is empire history a linear story of extension and consolidation? How do frictions and contentions interrupt traditional notions of the global imperial project? What would a story driven by trouble and turbulence look like?

Section B. PICK ONE

1. You've been asked to design a modern Britain course at the 200 level at a midwestern public university but the curriculum committee is skeptical about the role of empire in an ostensibly "national" history course. Develop a syllabus rationale for your method; break the course into 3 or 4 composite parts, each with its own synopsis; and offer a briefly annotated reading list that reflects your goals for engaging students with primary sources and secondary readings. In other words, make your case for empire as an indispensable category of historical analysis.

2. The cultural life of race is linked in British imperial history to the defense and continual remaking of whiteness. Taking a long view, from the 18th century to the 20th, choose 5 specific examples of how race was made in response to challenges to imperial power, whether perceived or real. These might involve practices of law,
spatial segregation, labor struggle, gendered power or colonial settler formation. Be sure to define what you mean by “race” and “whiteness” and follow your definitions through each example you choose.

Section C. PICK ONE

1. In *The Island Race*, Kathleen Wilson argues that "empire as a unit was a phantom of the metropole; all empire is local." How can we reconcile this statement with the legal codes, technologies, and institutions imposed on Britain's imperial subjects? What was the place of law within the story of empire?

2. Write a genealogy of labor history in eighteenth-century Britain beginning with its revolution as marked by E.P. Thompson's work in the 1960s. How has labor come to engage (or not) with newer historiographical trends and categories of analysis such as gender, race, slavery, and empire.