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Rudyard Kipling and the Networks of Empire: Writing Imperial Infrastructure in *The Light that Failed* (1891) and *Captains Courageous* (1896)

## Introduction: The Infrastructures of Empire

Month by month the Earth shrinks actually, and, what is more important, in imagination. We know it by the slide and crash of unstable material all around us. For the moment, but only for the moment, the new machines are outstripping mankind. We have cut down enormously—we shall cut down inconceivably—the world-conception of time and space, which is the big flywheel of the world's progress. What wonder that the great world-engine, which we call Civilisation, should race and heat a little; or that the onlookers who see it take charge should be a little excited, and, therefore, inclined to scold. [...] For the moment the machines are developing more power than has been required for their duties. But just as soon as humanity can get its breath, the machines' load will be increased and they will settle smoothly to their load and most marvellous output. (Kipling, 2010: 241)

Speaking at the Royal Geographical Society in 1914, Rudyard Kipling described the British Empire as a network of imperial lines materialised in physical infrastructural technologies, those 'great world-engine[s]' that were, for him, both literal and symbolic manifestations of 'Civilisation'. The 'bard of empire', who travelled imperialism's extensive networks of 'railways and sea-lanes' (Bubb, 2013: 391-394), stressed both the economic and cultural capital invested in these infrastructures, which were as important 'in imagination' as they were in their physical and economic actuality (2010: 241). Writing some years earlier, Kipling reflected that the 'fifty thousand miles of railways laid down and ten thousand under survey' had transformed India into a landscape not only 'fit for permanent habitation' by its British rulers; these infrastructural circuitries enabled him to 'dream' of a networked world functioning on the principle of 'free trade' (Kipling, 1913: 233-5). His resulting fantasy—'one great iron band girdling the earth' (235)—is indicative of the way in which physical infrastructural systems gave imaginative shape to the imperial networks in which he was invested. They provided a metaphoric language with which to describe the empire, a trope common to British colonial administrative writings to 'explain the ideal of colonial government' (Mitchell, 1988: 157-8; see also Davies, 2017). However, if by 1914 Kipling had consolidated this networked conceptual and physical map of the economic, social and cultural relations that gave shape to the British imperial project, and had been able to translate this into the infrastructure of his literary writing, it was a hard won project. In this chapter, I want to focus on Kipling's failed attempts to write a *worlded* novel in the 1890s, as he conflated the *form* of the novel with a the construction of a newly *global* and notably *infrastructural* imagination.

In the decade preceding the publication of *Kim* (1901), the novel widely regarded as Kipling's masterpiece, he wrote two other novels: *The Light that Failed* (1891) and *Captains Courageous* (1896). Kipling's first attempts at novel writing, unlike the short stories and

poems which already published to critical acclaim, have widely been regarded by literary critics as failures, and their publication and sales history suggests as much. I argue that Kipling, at a historical moment in which communication and transport networks were drastically expanding across the face of the globe, was struggling to write a novel that represented these imperial infrastructures and global networks in the *worldly* reach they were beginning to attain. In so doing, he was trying to write a new kind of networked literature, one both formally and geographically expansive in scope, often with an eye on the U.S., but always with an eye on the world. The fact that these efforts failed in this regard is revealing—by counterintuitively looking at the moments when his novels fail, this chapter asks what they might be able to tell us about imperial identity, global consciousness and the rise of an imperial network of physical infrastructures and highways of communication and exchange that still, at least in some part, shape the world in the twenty-first century.

The chapter will therefore use Kipling's first two novelistic attempts to address the following questions: how does literature, but in particular the novel itself as historically a relatively recent literary form, correspond to cross-national networks of imperialism and contemporary ideas of globalisation, which were in many ways direct outgrowths of those imperial networks? How did a writer like Kipling help readers to imagine a new globalised world connected by the kinds of transport and communication infrastructures that the British Empire played such an important role in expanding on a planetary scale? How does Kipling configure the relationship between literary writing—the lines on the page—and the physical, infrastructural networks of empire—the lines of the railways and the telegraphs that Britain built? And finally, how does writing about these imperial lines reveal the way in which Empire shaped the social and geographic inequalities that are still indexed by contemporary planetary dynamics?

Born in India in 1865, in what was then known as 'the jewel in the Crown of the British Empire', Kipling's life straddles the turn of the twentieth-century almost exactly (he died in 1936), a period that also saw the British Empire reach its height, roughly around 1914, but also begin its decline—Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru would lead India to independence little more than a decade after Kipling's death in 1947. The contrasting locations of Kipling's birth (he spent the first six years of his life in the multicultural and vibrantly bustling colonial city of Bombay) and his death (he spent the final years of his life in the rolling green hills of the quintessentially 'British' Sussex countryside) epitomise the paradoxical nature of Kipling, the literary man. Where so many of his writings set in India exhibit a zest and enthusiasm for Eastern culture, landscape and peoples, an equally large number of his poems are filled with a pro-imperial, jingoistic rhetoric and an unquestioning belief in the white man's right to global rule. Just as his life-span straddled the century, Kipling straddled geographical boundaries and ideological positions, and these inconsistencies come through most prominently, and productively, in his literature.

Kipling alluded directly to this paradoxical duality when he prefaced a chapter in *Kim* with two short excerpts from a poem he had written entitled 'The Two-Sided Man', in which he celebrates the two 'separate sides' of his 'head'. Though we should be careful when reading Kipling's literature through a biographical lens, certain decisions Kipling made during his

lifetime suggest an ambivalence that gestures towards the schizophrenic nature of his British imperial identity. Despite his adamant patriotism and obvious talent for popular poetic composition, Kipling declined an unofficial offer to become, after the death of Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1892, Queen Victoria's Poet Laureate. If a jingoistic nationalism emerged in his poetry towards the end of the nineteenth century, and if he still wrote poems to mark large public occasions (his poem 'Recessional' marked Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897), Kipling's refusal of the Laureateship suggests a reluctance to fully assume the role of the 'British' poet.

In 1907, Kipling became the first English writer to receive the Nobel prize for literature. But, in fact, Kipling was not an 'English' writer as such—indeed, like the Laureateship, he at first refused the prize because of his reluctance to be associated with any specifically *national* identity. Kipling was instead a global writer. His extensive travels, his time spent in different geographical and colonial settings, his constant feeling of being an outsider (one side of his head was always 'out of place'), make him one of the first truly global writers. We should not disregard Kipling for his racism and jingoism, but instead interrogate his literature with the critical lens that theories such as postcolonial and world literary studies offer us, and in this way try to understand that rather than producing 'English writing', Kipling in fact authored some of the earliest *world* writing in English.

In an article written for the *Civil and Military Gazette*, a prominent Anglo-Indian newspaper with a wide circulation, on 14th November 1885, the young Kipling described and reflected on a meeting he had on a train journey to Lahore with 'an Urdu-speaking Pathan magistrate from Peshawar.' The Pathan had explained to Kipling that their 'two peoples would always think and act differently' because they followed 'different ethical codes.' 'You come and judge us by your own standard of morality,' said the Pathan, rebuking the colonial Kipling. Your 'morality [...] is the outcome of your climate and your education and your tradition.' Clearly affected by the accusations levelled in this face to face encounter, Kipling concluded in his article that, '[l]iterally and metaphorically, we were standing upon different platforms; and parallel straight lines as everybody does *not* know, are lines in the same plane which being continued to eternity will never meet' (Allen, 2009: 208).

A year earlier, in 1884, 'a brass strip' had been 'set in the pavement' outside 'the Old Royal Observatory' in Greenwich, London. This line, literal in its physicality but nevertheless powerfully symbolic, marked 'the division of the newly homogenised temporal world into East and West', with imperial Britain at its centre (Young, 2006: 1). Then, five years later, in 1889, Kipling would turn both his personal encounter and this global paradigm shift into what are now some of his most well-remembered lines:

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!* (Kipling, 2006: 187).

Kipling's biographers have remarked that this opening stanza of 'The Ballad of East and West' are among 'perhaps the most quoted and misunderstood lines' he ever wrote (Allen, 2009: 208), subject to 'selective quotation and under-reading' (Adams, 2005: 65), and often accompanied by 'the charge of racism' (Gilmour, 2003: 69). At first glance, this stanza seems to imagine Western and Eastern cultures locked in a kind of static, metaphorical limbo, never able to communicate with or understand one another. An important politics haunts more recent terms for these different global geographical categories. The labels of 'First' and 'Third' worlds, as Aijaz Ahmad has shown, contain an explicit hierarchy, defining the latter 'purely in terms of an "experience" of externally inserted phenomena', that being, of course, imperialism (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 78). However, even 'politically correct' geographical categories such as 'developing' and 'developed' worlds also continue to contain an implicit Eurocentric hierarchy, placing all countries on a singular, progressive line, with the 'modern' West at the forefront of 'civilisation', and with the world once again split into a reductive binary division.

Reading the opening lines of Kipling's 'Ballad' more closely, however, it becomes clear that the '*face to face*' encounter occurs in neither '*East nor West*'. Rather, they are rooted in a set of networked lines running across or through a space located between and beneath them: the 'parallel straight lines' may 'never meet' but, as Kipling noted in his article in 1885, they occur within 'the same plane'. Edward Said's landmark discussion in his book *Orientalism* of the 'boundary notion of East and West, the varying degrees of projected inferiority and strength' identifies 'a willed imaginative and geographic division.' However, whilst Said draws on Michel Foucault's 'notion of a discourse' in order to 'understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient,' he maintains that 'it was not the thesis of [*Orientalism*] to suggest that there is a real or true Orient' (2003: 201, 3, 22). Said's account might be accused of being abstracted from material reality and located 'solely in the aesthetic realm of the text', implying 'an ideology-versus-reality' distinction that, in its very attempt to deconstruct Western representations of the Orient, disallows the Orient, or the East, a physical or theoretical dimension in which to exist (Young, 2008: 399).

Following the corrective suggested by postcolonial critic Robert Young, we should think of Kipling's writing, and of colonial discourse more broadly, not as a 'a disembodied imaginative representation prior to any interaction with the real,' but rather a kind of knowledge that is always 'acting in and on the material world' (2008: 400). When we read colonial and imperial literature, we need to remember that we are engaged in an analysis not only of an imagined or metaphorical colonial project, but also of active structures of inequality, exclusion and discrimination physically imposed through infrastructural developments upon the colonial landscape and its peoples. This adds an important socio-political relevance to the discussion of Kipling's fiction: imperialism was and is a historical reality, and any discussion of imperial writing must, I argue, take account of the physical and ideological tools it used to assert and maintain its authoritarian rule. As Said later recognised, such a reading will entail a 'spatial' approach to 'actual spaces, territories, domains and sites' (2001: 239-40). We must trace not only the metaphorical but also the literal, infrastructural grid-work that structured both Kipling's narratives and the networks of the British Empire.

By approaching Kipling from this perspective, we can begin to deconstruct the idea that Kipling's fiction is adamantly jingoistic, fixed in a dualistic hierarchy between coloniser and colonised, or between one global region and another. By looking at his early attempts at novel-writing, which sought to depict an explicitly global, or worldly space, rather than simply a local one, we can identify a repeated recurrence of representational *failure*. This pattern of failure will become the formal hallmark of the Modernist novel, but it can also be found in much postcolonial literature and perhaps, in the twenty-first century, in the formal structures of what we might want to call 'world literatures in English'. I am, then, conducting a 'postcolonial' reading of Kipling's fiction. I don't use that term with a hyphen between 'post' and 'colonial', because the hyphen suggests an historical time frame or period, one that only comes temporally *after* colonialism. The extent to which we might think that colonialism or imperialism is now 'finished', or is somehow 'over', is clearly a debatable one—consider U.S. and UK interference in the Middle East, for example, or indeed, China's various investments in infrastructural projects in Africa, both of which are conveniently oriented around the extraction of various mineral resources. I argue that it is more helpful to think of the 'post' in postcolonialism as a spatial designation. With this conceptual reorientation, we can see how the postcolonial might itself be situated behind or below, rather than temporally after, the oppressive bureaucratic, ideological and physical networks that constituted the British Empire. This not only blurs the apparent dichotomies of colonialism and postcolonialism by revealing how the two are inextricably bound up with one another, but also allows us to identify the early traces of a postcolonial aesthetics and politics that are embedded within the lines of Kipling's imperial writing.

### **Novels and Networks: Building Imperial Lines**

As his speech at the Royal Geographical Society indicated, Kipling had by 1914 come to conceive of the British Empire as a network of lines spanning the face of the globe in a kind of imperial mesh, or grid. Though he set most of the short stories that he wrote in the 1880s in Britain's imperial India, in the 1890s, when he began to try his hand at novel-writing, he was also trying to imagine a more global or worldly kind of literature, and it is the relationship between the length of Kipling's writings—novels rather than short stories—and their geographical scope—how much of the imperial world they sought to depict—that I want to emphasise. Kipling left India in 1889, and would return only once for a brief visit in 1891, spending much of the final decade of the nineteenth century either traveling or living in a variety of different locations, including London, America and South Africa. At this moment in his life, as he set foot into a 'wide open world' he became, to use Jonathan Rutherford's terminology, 'bereft of those spatial and temporal coordinates essential for historicity' (1990: 24). By historicity here, we mean the kinds of continuities, both temporal and geographical, that one needs to build an identity for oneself, to situate oneself in the world, a process that strikingly resembles the process of constructing a narrative.

Perhaps it's unsurprising then, that in 1897, after the two novels I will discuss here had *failed*, Kipling did indeed have a 'minor crisis of national identity' (Lycett, 2000: 359). This didn't go unnoticed at the time, and two contemporary commentators offered two different diagnoses. The journalist and reviewer J.H. Miller argued in 1898 that '[w]hile Mr. Kipling

surveys mankind from China to Peru, he does so not from the dubious point-of-view of the cosmopolitan but from the firm vantage-ground of a Briton' (Green ed., 1971: 200). However, seven years later in 1905, the novelist G.K. Chesterton disagreed, writing that 'Mr. Kipling is naturally a cosmopolitan. He happens to find his examples in the British Empire, but almost any other empire would do' (ibid.: 295). Kipling's problem, then, seems to be that as he travelled the world, moving along networked routes that cut across different colonies, empires, continents and oceans, and stopped to live in a great many of them for varying lengths of time, he was reluctant to identify himself as 'British': as I've mentioned, his refusal of the Poet Laureateship in 1892 suggests a certain ambivalence towards adopting a British identity, and it's perhaps relevant that he also refused a knighthood in 1899 (Adams, 2005: 101, 138). Which part of the world, then, did Kipling identify with most? Where, if you were to ask him during this time, would he have said that he was 'from'? Certainly not Britain itself, and Chesterton, Kipling's contemporary, thought likewise: Rudyard Kipling was not a man of Britain, he wrote, but 'a man of the world', and for Chesterton 'the proof' of this was 'that he [still thought] of England as a place. The moment we are rooted in a place,' Chesterton observed, 'the place vanishes' (Green ed., 1971: 295). Kipling was trying, and mostly failing, to work out a new kind of identity, a global identity, and in so doing, he was also struggling to write a new kind of literature—quite possibly, a world literature.

Reading Kipling's two first published solo novels of the 1890s, it seems that he was actually beginning both to conceive and identify not with 'Britain' as such, but rather with a new vision of 'empire' as a global network of intersecting grids, framing and dividing the earth's surface via the technologies and infrastructures of railways, shipping lines and telegraphs. These physical and imaginary grids that broke up the world map into digestible pieces, that crossed national borders and covered huge areas of the earth, gave Kipling somewhere to 'be from'. When he first left India to explore other countries and colonies at the end of the 1880s, he wrote of 'one great iron band girdling the earth' (Gilmour, 2003: 75-6), imagining the Empire as both a set of imagined networks and connections between different colonies and nations *and also* as a network of physical infrastructures that spread across and constituted the British empire. In the novels that Kipling wrote during this time, there is a constant struggle between these strong, solid imperial networks, and the huge swathes of empty spaces that still lay beyond imperial control. Looking at the lines of longitude and latitude that apparently consolidated the world into a unified whole at this time shows that networks are comprised of lines, certainly, but also that these webs or nets are necessarily constituted through the *empty spaces that lie in between them*. These empty spaces haunt Kipling's novels and they are not only displaced outwards onto incomprehensible expanses of real geographical landscape, but also inwards, disrupting his efforts to consolidate a global identity.

Despite the success of his early short stories and poetry, at the beginning of the 1890s Kipling wrote in a letter from America to his sister in Britain of yearning 'wildly to write a real novel—not a one volume or a two volume book but a really decent three-decker': for Kipling, the novel was 'the *real* vehicle.' He continues: 'Independent firing by marksmen is a pretty thing but it's the volley-firing of a full battalion that clears the front' (Gilmour, 2003: 106), a suggestive metaphor that makes the direct comparison of an aggressive, expanding

imperial army, with the process of novel-writing. However, both *The Light That Failed* and *Captains Courageous* are certainly not ‘really decent’ three-decker novels in the Victorian sense, but slim volumes that might be thought of as novellas, or the kind of long short stories that a writer like Joseph Conrad was beginning to write at this time. More interestingly, both of these novels have at their centre a climactic moment in which the novel self-consciously foregrounds an *empty* space, one that destabilises the imperial networks to which they otherwise rely on.

In 1993, Edward Said observed in his landmark text, *Culture and Imperialism*, that ‘centrality is identity’: ‘centrality gives rise to semi-official narratives that authorise and provoke certain sequences of cause and effect, while at the same time preventing counter-narratives from forming’ (Said, 1993: 393). If Kipling is trying to imagine the world in its entirety, held together by the vast array of imperial networks, the empty space at the heart of these two novels actually de-centres what Said calls the ‘semi-official narratives’ of the ‘cause and effect’ sequence. And, if these official narratives are *de-centred* by Kipling’s novels, what remains? Perhaps, in these moments, a new space is revealed within which ‘counter-narratives’ may begin to form. In this way, we might view this empty space as a postcolonial one, existing between and beneath Kipling’s imperial networks. If read in the right way, maybe this spatial failure can begin to tell us something about alternative world literary systems and circuitries of exchange that exist beyond, and perhaps even subvert, the global hierarchies that the British Empire had put in place.

### **Empty Spaces in *The Light That Failed***

Dick and Maisie are the two main characters of Kipling’s first novel, *The Light That Failed*. These two characters are both painters, or artists, seeking to express their individual identity through their creative work—much like Kipling himself. Early on in the novel, Dick is walking through London with Maisie when he spots a picture he has painted in the window of a ‘print-shop’ surrounded by a crowd of admirers. He’s delighted, of course, and cries out: ‘Me—all me!’ Maisie is impressed by the popularity of his work and asks him about his creative process, to which Dick responds thus:

From the beginning [Dick] told the tale, the I-I-I’s flashing through the records as telegraph-poles fly past the traveller. [...] At the end of each canto he would conclude, ‘And *that* gave me some notion of handling colour,’ or light, or whatever it might be that he had set out to pursue and understand. (Kipling, 1992: 53-4)

Dick’s ‘tale’ uses the metaphor of the telegraph—a networked infrastructure, the global reach of which had by the 1890s been fundamental for the consolidation of imperial power—to connect the different ‘I’s’ of his past together. He attempts to construct the same sense of ‘historicity’ with which Kipling himself was struggling, plotting the spatial and temporal coordinates of his identity. But the ‘I’s’ remain divided on the page by the hyphens with which they are interspersed, and Dick is subsequently unable to build a ‘cause and effect’ narrative around the separate moments that he discusses. The tension between a consolidated, globally networked identity, and the empty, uncharted or unmapped spaces

of the earth, breaks up Kipling's narrative and, in turn, his protagonist's attempt to construct a global selfhood.

Jumping forward to the novel's climactic, central scene, we find a similar theme of artistic identity coming to the fore. Here, Kipling's plot makes one final attempt to isolate and control, to literally 'frame' the identity Dick is seeking to express through his creative work, but this once again ends in failure. After receiving news that a head wound he sustains in the novel's opening pages is soon going to make him blind, Dick embarks upon what he claims will be his final, self-defining masterpiece, and he repeatedly reiterates the 'centrality', or significance, that this artwork will have for him. Coincidentally, on the night that Dick completes this final work, his blindness overcomes him and he loses his eyesight (1992: 129, 136). The picture is a portrait of a model, Bessie, who then comes to see the painting, and on viewing it decides that 'it's just the horriest, beastliest thing I ever saw'. Out of spite, she scrubs and scrapes the face of Dick's artistic masterpiece with a pallet knife. Within five minutes, we are told, the picture is reduced to 'a formless, scarred muddle of colours' (ibid.: 135).

However, Dick doesn't realise what Bessie has done to his masterpiece, and because he is now blind he is unable to see the damage. The result is that he believes the framed picture in his hands to be the pinnacle of his life's artistic work, whilst in fact it has been reduced to nothing more than a smeared, indistinguishable space. The climactic scene occurs when Maisie, his admirer, visits the recently blinded Dick. He offers the portrait up to her, and Kipling writes that 'the man knew he was speaking of his best work' as 'he turned a scarred, formless muddle of paint towards Maisie' (ibid.: 161). The artist's work, a framed empty space at the centre of the novel, is offered up by the central character to the reader, as though drawing attention to the futility of Kipling's own narrative art. The critic Harold Bloom discusses Kipling's fiction alongside decadent figures such as Walter Pater and Friedrich Nietzsche, arguing that 'the darker and truer Kipling' 'lingers' on the edge of 'the sudden vision of nothingness' (Bloom, 1987: 6). But there is no 'lingering' here, as the reader is presented, first published almost coterminously in an issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* with Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (and which appeared, notably, in the same magazine), with a portrait that evokes the dislocated identity of its protagonist and predicts his forthcoming death.

As though to emphasise the centrality of this scene, it is at this point that the 'two versions' of the novel diverge: the first version, which Kipling completed and published in *Lippincott's* in 1890, is longer and is prefaced solemnly with the words 'as it was originally conceived by the Writer'. This version ends in Dick's death, completely eradicating his identity, whilst the latter, rewritten in 1891, is a shorter version with a rather forced 'happy ending' that culminates with the 'engagement' of Dick and Maisie (1992: xxiv, 5). It is illuminating to compare these two endings. In both versions, Maisie isn't honest with Dick, forcing instead an empty compliment: 'Oh, Dick, it *is* good,' she says. However, in the shorter, 'happy' version she quickly follows this remark with these words: 'do you imagine when a woman loves a man that she cares for his work? She loves him for himself—self—self.' Presented by a framed, empty space, Maisie disregards the picture and echoes the hyphenated 'I-I-I's' noted in Dick's description of himself just a moment ago. Despite Dick's failure, she is

determined to recognise in him a distinct and coherent identity. However, the very act of this recognition results in the swift death of the novel's narrative, which lasts for just another page and a half before coming to an abrupt end. As Robert Caserio writes, '*The Light That Failed* suggests an ultimate, necessary rubbing out of its own power to act as a world-portraying canvas' (Bloom ed., 1987: 121).

The version 'originally conceived' by Kipling does include a few more chapters, though this climactic scene still ends abruptly, a paragraph after the empty portrait's revelation, with a bitter sentence: 'And that is the end of Maisie' (ibid.: 161). She concludes that he must have gone mad and leaves Dick's apartment, never to appear again. The remaining pages of this version, whilst creating more narrative space, indicatively detail Dick's movement abroad into imperial space by traversing its transportation networks, but still ultimately results in his death. The novel's attempt to assimilate a wider world into its grand narrative forces Kipling's text to admit, albeit at these levels of metaphor and narrative, the inherent failure of such a project. Dick, now blind, undertakes a suicidal mission into North Africa, where at the time British imperial forces were fighting a violent war with the Sudanese from their colonial foothold in Egypt. Dick boards a train on a railway line that 'runs out' to the frontline of 'English troops'. This train not only provides the soldiers with 'everything they require', thus reminding us of the importance of these infrastructural networks for the consolidation of imperial military power in colonial warfare (see Arnold, 2000: 102), but also serves a more specific function for Dick: 'the narrow-gauge armoured train, plated with three-eighths inch boiler-plate' is described and acts as 'one long coffin' for Kipling's death-seeking hero (ibid.: 200). Meanwhile, the 'darkness' of the landscape traversed by the railway line is emphasised throughout these final pages, as the train carries him to his death (ibid.: 201-5).

This portrayal of the railway penetrating a dark space, its 'rapid progress' allowing it to pass through an incomprehensible and dangerous landscape, recalls Kipling's conception of 'one great iron band girdling the earth' (Gilmour, 2003: 75-6). For Kipling as for Dick, these imperial networks are, at this historical moment, beginning to 'cut down' this incomprehensible expanse, making the earth's vast, empty spaces that threaten an imagined global identity knowable and penetrable. In so doing, Kipling's novel self-consciously foregrounds the relationship between the construction of narrative and that of imperial infrastructural networks, as each one contributes to the consolidation of the other. As Elleke Boehmer explains, the 'metaphoric connections of the syntax of a journal plotted lines of orientation' that allowed the coloniser to 'decipher unfamiliar spaces', and these metaphoric connections extend into the 'actual' world (1995: 13-16). Kipling's descriptions of the colonial train network are inspired by its physical reality, and in turn, his own narrative helps to build a global imagination of the imperial networks that operate across space and time. As these grids, both actual and imagined, solidified, drawing the world into the clasp of empire, Kipling at last begins to find a secure location from which he can further articulate his consolidations of a worldly (though importantly, still imperial) identity.

But whilst Kipling was able to articulate this more fully in the speech he delivered to the Royal Geographic Society in 1914 (and by which time he had written his 'great' novel, *Kim*), the networks of imperial infrastructure remain, like the novel that describes them, unstable,

fragmented and incomplete. Dick actually laments that 'the world's so big, and all but a millionth of it doesn't care' about his individual identity or his own artistic output (ibid.: 77). The lines of the railway network and the lines of the novel, which are here metaphorically conflated, might be able to traverse, cut across and 'cut down' the world's three dimensional spaces, passing over and penetrating through them. But Kipling's novel suggests, through the fragmentation of its form and the recurrence of a set of thematic and visual preoccupations, narratives that attempt to negotiate spaces of such massive epistemic and geographic proportions still remain vulnerable to de-stabilisation, contingency and incompleteness. The de-centring, vacant artistic space that lies at the heart of *The Light That Failed* might be said to preempt Joseph Conrad's 'heart of an immense darkness' or E.M. Forster's 'Marabar caves', both of which remain 'entirely devoid of distinction' (Conrad, 2006: 77; Forster, 2005: 136-7). However, it is not my intention to argue that Kipling is somehow a 'modernist' writer, a contention made by others elsewhere (see Raine, 1992). Rather, I want to emphasise that what we see in Kipling's early attempts at novel writing is an attempt to work out the symbiosis that might operate between the physical, infrastructural networks of empire and the role that literary narratives played in imagining and even shaping them. If he has in large part achieved this by the time he writes *Kim* at the turn of the twentieth century, Kipling's first novels of the 1890s show a global, or worldly literary writing *in the process of its construction*, one that because unconsolidated, largely results in literary *failure*.

### **Grids and Networks in *Captains Courageous***

Kipling's other novel of the 1890s, *Captains Courageous*, similarly conflates identity construction with the development of imperial networks of communication, transport and exchange. As the title might suggest, this novel is set mostly at sea, and tells the story of a small fishing boat, the very name of which, the '*We're Here*', suggests an attempt to construct a stable location and identity in the face of the turbulent seascape it negotiates (2008: 7). By the 1890s the 'great complicated web' of the British Empire had become 'an industrial loom spanning the globe, in which the shuttles flying to and fro were the ships of the British merchant marine' (Boehmer, 1995: 37), and Kipling himself had already used this metaphor in his poem, 'The Exiles Line' (1890). The gridded network of Britain's imperial shipping lines is imposed onto the seascape throughout *Captains Courageous*, but these conceptual networks are nevertheless threatened throughout by the ocean's unpredictable currents that run *beneath* and *between* them:

The *We're Here* slid, as it were, into long, sunk avenues and ditches which felt quite sheltered and homelike if they would only stay still; but they changed without rest or mercy, and flung up the schooner to crown one peak of a thousand grey hills, while the wind hooted through her rigging as she zigzagged down the slopes. (2008: 59)

In this passage, we see Kipling struggling to control the seascape through an imposition of gridded lines, 'sheltered and homelike' in their efforts to map and control, dangerous in the attention they draw to their own instability. In the face of the sea's restlessness, a gridded image is repeatedly imposed as each previous attempt is destabilised: the 'sunk avenues of the ditches' of the water become merciless, the 'rigging' is disrupted by the hooting 'wind',

and the schooner's own 'zigzagged' tracks lead only 'down' into the empty space below. The threat of this incomprehensible expanse of empty seascape is emphasised in one of the novel's climactic scenes, occurring at almost exactly the same narrative point as the scene in *The Light That Failed* already discussed. Harvey and Dan, the novel's main characters, are out fishing, when they think they've made a prize catch. However, out of the sea comes not a large fish but,

the body of the dead Frenchman buried two days before! The hook had caught him under the right arm-pit, and he swayed, erect and horrible, head and shoulders above water. His arms were tied to his side, and—[here Kipling inserts a hyphen in order to delay the flow of his syntax before uttering a final four words that describe the dead sailor] he had no face. (2008: 106)

The bizarre climax of this passage, the corpse's facelessness, isn't explained by the novel, and we never find out exactly how or why the dead Frenchman has 'no face'. Instead, the narrative speeds away from this horrifying moment in a manner that draws attention to its own anxiety about imperial identity and the precarious nature of the networks that consolidate it. This contrasts notably with the meticulous details that set up the scene: as with the artistic portrait in *The Light That Failed*, Kipling makes sure we understand the sudden and dramatic presentation of the 'face', detailing where the 'hook had caught him' and exactly how the sailor is positioned when his blank face is revealed. The hyphens interrupting this descriptive process again allude to the way in which the narrative is constructed, highlighting its deterioration, or precariousness, even as it puts itself together.

However, despite this central episode, the remaining half of *Captains Courageous* is able to conclude with a sense of imperial confidence that is articulated through the the successful consolidation of these global networks. We learn in the novel's closing pages that Harvey's father is a businessman, who uses the shipping lines and other imperial networks to sustain his commercially successful career driven imperialist. Indicatively, the novel concludes by suggesting that Harvey, too, will become a successful shipping merchant. In this novel, Kipling's protagonist comes close to death at the novel's midway point, but the narrative is able to claw its way back from this moment of insecurity to position Harvey as a new model imperialist, one who can comfortably travel across the face of the globe along the imperial networks it describes. Kipling's character is imbricated in what Benedict Anderson has called 'the march to space,' one that draws on the 'totalising classification' of 'European-style maps' that subjected the 'entire planet's curved surface' to a 'geometrical grid', squaring off 'empty seas and unexplored regions in measured boxes' (2006: 173). Kipling's novels of the 1890s, which are attempting to construct narratives that can imagine space on a global scale, contribute to this imperial project, as they address and control these spaces through a series of 'geometrical' lines and attempt to assimilate the three dimensional land and seascapes into the linear grooves of realist narrative.

### **Global Infrastructures and Imaginations in 'The Deep-Sea Cables'**

In conclusion, I want to turn briefly to a poem written by Kipling in the 1890s, the same decade in which he was attempting to write these 'global', *worlded* novels. 'The Deep-Sea

Cables' is a poetic tribute to the 'submarine cables' that were laid, in sprawling networks between different imperial possessions and geographical spaces, in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first cables to connect Britain with America were completed in 1858, and cables were also laid between Britain and India in 1870. These astonishing infrastructural feats, which quite literally laid cross-national networks of communication along the seabed of these different oceanic spaces, allowed for the integration of different colonies 'more completely than ever before into the administrative, military and commercial network of the British Empire' (Arnold, 2000: 114). Again, Kipling's poem emphasises the symbiosis between the networked lines of longitude and latitude on the map, the physical infrastructures of railways and telegraph routes built during this period and, I want to stress, the lines of Kipling's writing. They each speak to and reinforce one another, building an imagination of space that is not regional or national in scale, but global. Here, the 'shell-burred' telegraph cables 'creep' across the 'deserts of the deep'. The 'utter dark' of the 'great grey level plains of ooze' is reiterated, drawing attention to the emptiness of this incomprehensible space (Kipling, 2006: 138). It is only the telegraphic networks that have the 'Power' to traverse and defy this space, systems of communication and cross-national exchange: 'the words of men, flicker and flutter and beat' across the emptiness of the ocean, just as we have seen Kipling's novels negotiating the spatial dimensions of landscape, seascape and identity (ibid.). Kipling's lines map the imperial networks that fix, arrest and regulate space and time, both symbolically and actually, working both in the imagination and, quite physically, upon the earth's surface, enhancing imperial control of colonial spaces and enabling the kinds of global economic and social exchange that we are used to today. Dislocated by his cross-national movements and geographic instability throughout the 1890s, Kipling strives to stabilise his global identity through coherent, controlled 'narratives' that seek to realise his vision of 'one great iron band girdling the earth' (Gilmour, 2003: 75-6). The poem's final sentence claims, 'Let us be one!': these cross-national communications unite the globe into one unified system, a worlded space bound together by imperial networks.

However, we also find a sense of futility in this poem, as the difficulties that are perhaps more obviously articulated by his first attempts at novel-writing continue to haunt his more confident poetic depictions of these networks. These two dimensional lines might be able to traverse three dimensional spaces, but narratives that negotiate areas of such massive geographic proportions necessarily have to allude to the spaces in between them. Despite that final claim—'Let us be one!'—they are still only 'whispers'. The words of men only 'flicker and flutter', they do not dominate and control—this is not a particularly confident rhetoric. In the same moment that Kipling seeks to build imperial networks through the development of a new global, or worlded infrastructural imagination, he must also always acknowledge the futility of such a project. Returning to Said's terminology, these imperial lines are always haunted by a de-centring space within which counter-narratives might begin to form. It is in this sense that we might think of these spaces as postcolonial, in that they bring elements of doubt into the imperial attempt to establish its power across the face of the globe. This space that lies at the very centre of these two novels encapsulates a moment of fragmentation that disrupts the ideological confidence of what Kipling had called the 'really decent' three-decker realist novel, destabilising his attempts to consolidate an imperial identity. Notably, this is a trope will go on to inform the political and aesthetic

projects of more self-consciously postcolonial novels in the first decades of decolonisation. Consider the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958. Achebe takes his title from the Irish modernist poet W.B. Yeats, and his poem, 'The Second Coming', the full line of which reads: 'Things fall apart; the *centre* cannot hold' (Yeats, 1999), which once more recalls the terminology described by Said.

World literatures in English no longer orbit one geographical centre—the British imperial centre—and though they may gravitate towards the U.S., the number of economic and cultural lines of communication and exchange, facilitated by today's proliferation of intersecting and criss-crossing global networks and multiform infrastructures, are becoming increasingly more numerous, if also unevenly developed and unequal. In the twenty-first century, associations with the geographical category of 'the West', which for so long signified for writers like Kipling an 'advanced' industrialisation and economic growth, have clearly migrated 'East'. Kipling's early attempts at envisioning a planetary order centred on a globally interconnected network, as opposed to one specific imperial country, were therefore astonishingly prescient. By writing—and indeed failing to write—novels that were truly 'worlded' along those networked lines, his novels still have something to teach us about the infrastructures and imaginative models of 'World Literature' today.

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