In an early, comic scene from *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, Bollywood’s 2005 epic-melodrama of the 1857 “mutiny,” a group of Indian men, pointedly seated amid a stand of hookahs (indices of “tradition”), express disbelief at a report of the “taelly garaffe” allegedly now “connect[ing] the entire country through wires.” This new expression of “Company” power only becomes comprehensible to them when it is suggested that the “white men have mastered black magic”—perhaps employing, as one opines, “witch’s hair” for wire. Later, when the rebellion has broken out, we learn from an anxious British officer that the natives have “torched the telegraph office”; in a short span of cinematic time, bemused ignorance of the technology has blossomed into a focused act of violence against it. What is particularly striking about these moments in this product of modern Hindi cinema is, it seems to me, precisely their venerability as proairetic atoms in traditional, British narratives of the rebellion. Indeed, despite the ostensible reversal of values represented by the film—the Company is evil, the sepoys heroic—it conjures with a set of codes (a widow rescued from the pyre by a British officer, the momentous parade-ground standoff over the greased cartridges) very like those to be found in classic histories by the likes of Kaye and Malleson. In invoking the topos of Indian hostility to the British wire, construed as an innate suspicion or incomprehension finding release, in the bloody hour of mutiny,
the network’s attempted destruction, the makers of *Mangal Pandey* are in fact rehearsing a similarly durable theme to be found in a host of nineteenth-century mutiny narratives, as the native assault on imperial communications systems serves as a seemingly indispensable component of numerous works of fiction, history, and memoir.⁴

The threat of the mutinous Indian is certainly present, too, in the world of Rudyard Kipling’s fiction—erupting at least once (as I will show) in an Alamo-like attack on a telegraph office. But the picture is complicated somewhat by the concomitant proliferation in his work of a seemingly contrapuntal figure, an interesting foil to the figure of the telegraph-smashing sepoy, who reappears in a variety of incarnations—namely, the Indian information worker. In *The Naulahka* (1892), to choose one of seemingly numberless examples, the American protagonist, Nicholas Tarvin, enters a telegraph office in Rhatore—“a desecrated Mohammedan mosque” with wires streaming into its fractured dome. There he encounters a slumbering native operator who, once roused, is able to adopt a tone of faintly pitying superiority in addressing him (Tarvin being, as it happens, himself adept at signaling):

A sheeted figure lay on the floor. “It *takes* a dead man to run this place,” exclaimed Tarvin, discovering the body. “Hallo, you! Get up there!”

The figure rose to its feet with grunts, cast away its covering, and disclosed a very sleepy native in a complete suit of dove-colored satin.

“Ho!” cried he.

“Yes,” returned Tarvin, imperturbably.

“You want to see me?”

“No; I want to send a telegram, if there’s any electric fluid in this old tomb.”

“Sir,” said the native, affably, “you have come to right shop. I am telegraph-operator and postmaster-general of this state.”

He seated himself in the decayed chair, opened a drawer of the table, and began to search for something.

“What you looking for, young man? Lost your connection with Calcutta?”

“Most gentlemen bring their own forms,” he said with a distant note of reproach in his bland manner. “But here is form. Have you got pencil?”

“Oh, see here, don’t let me strain this office. Hadn’t you better go and lie down again? I’ll tap the message off myself. What’s your signal for Calcutta?”

“You, sir, not understanding this instrument.”

“*Don’t I*? You ought to see me milk the wires at election-time.”

“This instrument require most judeecious handling, sir. You write
message. I send. That is proper division of labour. Ha, ha!” (Kipling, *Naulahka*, 89–90)

The Indian signaler exudes proprietary entitlement, a sense of pride and importance in his position, and a good-natured air of condescension, along with (unsurprisingly from the author of “The White Man’s Burden,” with its recapitulationist premise) an irrepressibly infantile nature: “‘Denver is in the United States America,’ said the native, looking up at Tarvin with childish glee in the sense of knowledge” (ibid., 91). Here, as throughout Kipling’s India, the native has entered the network, not only having undergone a sea change from mutinous Luddite to docile telegraphist (though the former figure is, again, by no means extinct in his world), but, in this case at least, “gleefully” enacting an idealized colonial relationship, “looking up” at the sahib to whom he appears as a child and remarking, “You write message. I send. That is proper division of labour.” The note of racial superiority is sounded in the signaler’s “childish” performance, certainly; but the specificity of setting is crucial as well: in the language factory of the telegraph office we are shown a “division of labour” within English itself, a dual and unequal relation to the language, with the white man presented as origin and author, the Indian as conduit or channel. Yet while the episode is both comic in tone and—to the English or (Anglo-) American reader—ideologically reassuring, it is troubled by a faint but definite ground-note of the uncanny: the Indian operator is first encountered as a “sheeted figure,” a “dead man” in an “old tomb” who proceeds to rise disconcertingly from his ambiguous repose. As I will show when I engage more fully with Kipling’s Indian fiction, the figure of the networked native can be a profoundly unsettling figure indeed.

In what follows I want to look more closely at the imaginary relationship between India and the wire in nineteenth-century British writing—from the mutiny to Kipling—in the belief that this relationship, and the evolutionary path it traced, constitute eloquent evidence of the importance of information technologies to the conceptualization of central questions of British rule in the Raj. Very often, that is, fraught issues of power and subjectivity (British as well as Indian) could best, perhaps sometimes only, be formulated by transposing them onto the conceptual domain of communications technologies and networks. Moreover, in looking at the cognitive uses of the Indian network in Victorian writing I mean to shed light on what might be considered the flip side of a much better-known (now and, doubtless, then) narrative involving the conceptualization of the increasingly worldwide webs of nineteenth-century telecommunications—I mean the role played by information systems in helping to sustain fantasies of global racial unity, particularly of a kind which would repair the sundered bonds of Anglo-American brother-
hood. These have already been thoroughly, and ably, explored: for instance, in her study of the emergent conceptual relationship between “racial alliance and postal networks” in the late nineteenth century, Katie-Louise Thomas shows how Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1888) both draws upon and contributes to a pervasive strain of thought by which technological systems came to be metaphorically transmuted into organic ones, the better to enable the transnational flow of imagined English “blood”:

Both [William] Cowper and [Andrew] Carnegie desire that blood brotherhood might transcend nation. For Cowper, nations are strangely liquid, and the oceans solid: a barrier that keeps the blood of nations from naturally amalgamating. But, Carnegie triumphantly declares, the development of communication technologies means that the nineteenth-century ocean has become a channel—a web of channels—that will actually facilitate the transnational mingling of kindred drops [Cowper’s phrase]. . . . In other words, “kindred drops”—which . . . must always be Anglo-Saxon—can now correspond with each other through the veinlike “All Red Routes”—the postal routes and telegraph lines that spanned the globe. Through the medium of postal networks, blood, for Carnegie and other Victorian writers, flows swifter than water. (par. 2)

Such biologically indebted metaphors of sanguinary mingling worked well, indeed, when Britons wanted to imagine connections with blood kin—whether those kin were associated with the mother country by severed colonial bonds (Americans) or intact ones (Australians, Canadians, South Africans, etc.). But what happened to this fantasy when it came to conceptualizing the integration of alien subjects into the “Greater British” network?

The glaring mote, the perennial irritant, in the eye of fantasists of consanguineal empire was, of course, India. In his 1883 *The Expansion of England*, which helped to popularize the Dilkean concept of “Greater Britain,” Sir John Seeley in fact carefully distinguished between two such entities, which he saw as both radically different in nature and fundamentally incompatible with each other: the “Colonial Empire” and the “Indian Empire” (Seeley, *Expansion*, 207). The inhabitants of the former, he asserts,

are of our own blood, a mere extension of the English nationality into new lands. If these lands were contiguous to England, it would seem a matter of course that the English population as it increases should occupy them, and evidently desirable that it should do so without a political separation. As they are not contiguous but remote, a certain difficulty arises, but it
is a difficulty which in these days of steam and electricity does not seem insurmountable. (213)

But matters quickly become more problematic when one turns to the East:

Now you see that this argument rests entirely upon the community of blood between England and her colonies. It does not therefore apply to India. Two races could scarcely be more alien from each other than the English and the Hindus. . . . [India’s] population has no tie of blood whatever with the population of England. . . . [W]hile the connection of England with her colonies is in the highest degree natural, her connection with India seems at first sight at least to be in the highest degree unnatural. There is no natural tie whatever between the two countries. No community of blood. . . . (ibid., 213–14)

Clearly Seeley could, by this time, confidently expect his audience to supply the necessary conceptual links underwriting a seemingly paradoxical proposition: namely, that the prosthetic extension (by means of “steam and electricity”) of a “community of blood” could count as superlatively “natural.” (This is shown by his use of enthymeme here, signaled by the breezily elisional “Now you see.”)

What was especially troubling to Seeley, moreover, was the fact that liberal, enlightened Britain, finding itself compelled simultaneously to forge global connections with the English-settled “colonies” and with India, must of necessity grow a second, Janus face, succumbing to a kind of imperial schizophrenia:

Thus the same nation which reaches one hand towards the future of the globe and assumes the position of mediator between Europe and the New World, stretches the other hand towards the remotest past, becomes an Asiatic conqueror, and usurps the succession of the Great Mogul. (ibid., 205)

Interestingly, three decades earlier, the author of an article on the progress and future of the electric telegraph had formulated the matter in strikingly similar terms. If in 1854 Seeley (then studying at Christ’s College, Cambridge) had happened to pick up a copy of the Quarterly Review, he would have read that “the restless spirit of English engineers, having provided for the internal telegraphic communication of Great Britain and her principal dependencies, seems bent upon stretching out her lines to the East and to the West,
so as ultimately to clasp the entire globe” (“The Electric Telegraph,” 84). But while technologically the latter connection presented, if anything, far greater challenges (a transatlantic cable was indeed laid four years later, but gave up the ghost within the month), it came packaged with a ready-made conceptual metaphor of egalitarian kinship and brotherhood: “Here it [the proposed cable] would lock in with the North American meshwork of wires, which hold themselves out like an open hand for the European grasp” (ibid., 84). By contrast (and the contrast could hardly be more stark):

Whilst England would thus grasp the West with one hand, her active children have plotted the seizure of the East with the other. It is determined to pass a cable from Genoa to Corsica, and from thence to Sardinia. From the southernmost point of the latter island, Cape Spartivento, to the Gulf of Tunis, another cable can easily be carried. The direction thence (after giving off a coast branch to Algeria) will be along the African shore, by Tripoli to Alexandria, and eventually across Arabia, along the coasts of Persia and Beloochistan until it enters Scinde [sic], and finally joins the wire at Hydrabad. . . . (ibid., 85, emphasis added)

For this writer, as for Seeley (writing at the dawn of the age of high imperialism over a quarter-century later), the same trope of imperial ambidexterity symptomatizes a pervasive and fundamental problem of conceptual integration: extension of the metaphorically copulative hand (or, in the later examples discussed by Thomas, arterial web) to alien shores (and subjectivities) is, literally, unthinkable.

Nevertheless, as I hope to show in this chapter, when wrestling with this abiding conceptual quandary, no less than when fantasizing about global arterial networks, Britons relied heavily upon the metaphoric domain of communications technology. As a cognitive tool, indeed, the Victorian wire proved almost infinitely adaptable, suggesting imaginary solutions to problems associated with very different colonial contexts. In the following section, after a brief discussion of early accounts of telegraphic innovation and penetration in India, I will consider the symbolic role of the wire in narratives of the 1857 rebellion; in both cases perhaps the preeminent trope to be found is that of parallel, inimical intersubjective networks occupying the same territory. I will then turn to the fiction of Kipling, in which can be found, with striking frequency and in multiple guises, the figure of the native telegrapher, ostensible sign of the peaceable insertion of the native into the imperial system. However, this integration, as I will show, is a deeply fraught one.
II.

The Indian telegraph was born in India. That is, unlike (say) the networks that would overspread Africa later in the century, it was in a very real sense a “native” production—one meriting, in many historical accounts, its own origin myth (as it were), parallel to but distinct from the technology’s “official” history, featuring such luminaries as Morse, Wheatstone, and Cooke. Its creator—the colonial Morse in this technological-historical narrative—was Dr. William Brooke O’Shaughnessy, a medical man and inventor of Irish origin who first began to experiment with telegraphs in India in the thirties. His early experiments were thus contemporaneous with better-known breakthroughs taking place on either side of the Atlantic: in 1837, the year Wheatstone and Cooke patented their version of the telegraph, O’Shaughnessy succeeded in laying thirty miles of operational wire; Morse demonstrated his own model, to both the public and the US government, in 1838. But O’Shaughnessy’s labors, however impressive, attracted little attention until the early fifties, when he was charged by James Ramsay, Lord Dalhousie (who had become governor-general of India in 1848) with networking the Raj—in a bit of timing that would come to seem, from the British perspective, nothing short of providential before the decade was over:

Aware of Lord Dalhousie’s keenness to establish the telegraph in India, O’Shaughnessy asked his principal patron, H. H. Wilson, to bring his 1837 experiments to the attention of the court of directors [i.e. of the East India Company]. Dalhousie leapt at the offer of O’Shaughnessy’s experience and in March 1850 authorized him to proceed with an experimental line. In 1852 he succeeded in establishing communication between Calcutta and Diamond Harbour, eighty miles distant, whereupon Dalhousie sent him to London to win the court of directors’ approval for an all-India network. Upon his return, Dalhousie appointed him superintendent of electric telegraphs. Work commenced in November 1853. In spite of the lack of trained staff . . . the first telegram from Agra reached Calcutta, 800 miles away, on 24 March 1854. By the following February, Calcutta was linked to Agra, Bombay, Madras, and Attock on the north-west frontier, a remarkable technological feat involving the laying of over 3050 miles of wiring through jungles, across deserts, and over unbridged rivers. Soon after, O’Shaughnessy was to hear both Indians and Britons acknowledge the telegraph as a key factor in Britain’s victory over the rebels of 1857. (Prior 1–2)
It was indeed during the 1857 rebellion that the wire, and its destruction, would emerge in the British imagination as perhaps the single most potent conceptual space for the imaginative formulation and expression of the (nearly inexpressible) prospect of an independent—and hostile—Indian subjectivity. But first I want briefly to delineate what might be termed the British semiotics of the Indian wire in the period just before the “mutiny,” by looking synoptically at a trio of representative accounts published within a span of three years.

These texts—Edward Highton’s *The Electric Telegraph: Its History and Progress* (1852), Laurence Turnbull’s *The Electro-Magnetic Telegraph* (1853), and the already-mentioned *Quarterly* article “The Electric Telegraph” (1854)—all served to represent the Indian network to the British reading public while it was in the process of construction. Together they paint a collective picture of a triumph of Western engineering within supremely inhospitable conditions, a picture painted by the use of language that is not, to put it mildly, ideologically neutral. O’Shaughnessy himself is depicted (not inaccurately) as a kind of combination of engineer and *bricoleur* whose ingenuity was sorely taxed by the absence in India of vital materials for construction—crucially, wire itself (Highton praises O’Shaughnessy’s “energy and perseverance” in developing a superior telegraphic system in the absence of “necessary materials”) (Highton, *Electric Telegraph*, 152). From the beginning, then, India was represented as a hostile space inimical to the English network, and this formulation would prove an enduring one. The resourceful O’Shaughnessy employed “such materials as he could obtain in India at the time”—bamboo poles, for instance (ibid., 151). But the truly novel feature of his telegraphic system was the substitution of “an inch iron rod” for cable—in pointed contrast, as the *Quarterly* noted, to the “delicate harp-string” of the European wire (“The Electric Telegraph,” 84). While born of practical necessity, this innovation was felicitously adaptable to a discourse that made use of a thoroughly unnuanced language of penetration and dominion; the iconography of British potency was well served by the image of a system of nearly indestructible rods, sunk directly into the soil of its imperial possession. These rods had practical advantages that simultaneously spoke of unequal power relations: they could be produced, as Turnbull tells us, by “one village forge” worked by “two coolies” (Turnbull, *Electro-Magnetic Telegraph*, 170). Indeed, apparently the labor of telegraph-building was itself a salubrious gift to the native, a goal or good in itself: “This all infusing [*sic*] enterprise has aroused the lethargic inhabitants of the tropical climate” (ibid., 169). In fact, the advantages of a networked India to the native population were potentially boundless, or so the *Quarterly* suggested in a paternalistic aside within a
Machiavellian celebration of the technology’s “power” as an empire-builder: “When these two systems”—the telegraph and the railway that followed in its wake—“are completed, the real consolidation of England’s power in the East will have commenced, and the countless resources of the Indian peninsula will be called forth for the benefit of the conquered as well as the conquering race” (“The Electric Telegraph,” 84).

A favorite, and suggestive, topos in such celebrations is the rods’ imperiousness to the manifold dangers of a savage land. Several accounts mention the threat posed to telegraph wires by India’s climate, fauna, and human inhabitants, among which three classes very little distinction is typically made: “The importance of this discovery of the superiority of rods over wire will be fully appreciated in a country like India, where the lines must often run through a howling wilderness, tenanted by savage beasts, or more savage men” (Turnbull, Electro-Magnetic Telegraph, 170). The telegraphic line needed protection from “crows,” “monkeys,” and the “trampling” of “passengers, bullocks, buffaloes, and elephants” (ibid.). River cables had to be sheltered “from the grapnels of the heavy native boats which are constantly passing up and down” (ibid.), and “highly ingenious arrangements” were developed to guard against “the fearful discharges of atmospheric electricity which characterize thunder-storms in the vicinity of the tropics” (Highton, Electric Telegraph, 152). The constant in these accounts is a vision of India as a hostile topography to be conquered by Western “ingenuity.” Commentators seemed to take particular pleasure in describing the invincible strength, and even exterminative powers, of the rods—the Quarterly boasts that “the weight of the heaviest monkey is not sufficient to injure them” (“The Electric Telegraph,” 84), and more than one writer gleefully relates how, by channeling a lightning-strike, they killed “swarms of kites and crows” that had perched on them (Turnbull, Electro-Magnetic Telegraph, 170). Particularly interesting is the suggestion of hostile agency attributed to the colonial environment. The Quarterly’s writer, for one, employs frankly, if facetiously, militaristic tropes in describing the confrontation between India and the telegraph, noting that the former’s “troops of monkeys” threaten to put the latter “hors-de-combat” (“The Electric Telegraph,” 84). Turnbull, presciently, makes the suggestion of a strange autonomy on the part of the telegraphic system yet more explicit: “The lines must therefore protect themselves, and this is secured by the use of thick rods” (Turnbull, Electro-Magnetic Telegraph, 170). Half a decade before the mutiny, India is already at war with the nascent British network.

It was, however, with the rebellion that the wire truly came into its own as a technology not only for facilitating, even preserving, British rule in India but for imagining its very nature—and for focalizing Anglo-Indian
antagonisms in symbolic form. Of course, in tracing its cognitive uses during and after the mutiny I do not mean to suggest that the telegraph was “only” of symbolic value to the English: there is no doubt “that the British possession of the telegraph played a vital role in defeating the sepoy uprisings” (Wilson, Victorians, 493). Colonel Edward Vibart even appended to his memoir of the rebellion a kind of monograph entitled “How the Electric Telegraph Saved India” (and the casting of the telegraph as a kind of autonomous actor or protagonist is significant, as I will presently discuss). The author of this work offers, in effect, a detailed historical narrative of a single act of telecommunication, to which he assigns world-historical importance. Besides its role in suppressing the mutiny, the telegraph also flashed the news of this suppression across the globe: in one of the first messages wired across the ocean: in the brief interval before the first transatlantic cable failed in 1858, it was able to announce, its laconic, euphemistic expression wonderfully suggesting the voice of supreme power: “GWALIOR INSURGENT ARMY BROKEN UP. ALL INDIA BECOMING TRANQUIL” (Standage, Victorian Internet, 153), thus ensuring a place for the rebellion in future histories of the technology.

Interestingly, the telegraph is in fact offered, along with the railway, in at least one canonical Victorian history as a putative cause of the rebellion. “[T]he hierarchy of India,” assert Kaye and Malleson in their History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857–8, “were alarmed and offended” by British “innovations of moral progress,” but also by the “inroads and encroachments of physical science”:

A privileged race of men, who had been held in veneration as the depositories of all human knowledge, were suddenly shown to be as feeble and impotent as babes and sucklings. It was no mere verbal demonstration; the arrogant self-assertion of the white man, which the Hindu priesthood could contradict or explain away. There were no means of contradicting or explaining away the railway cars . . . or the electric wires, which in a few minutes carried a message across the breadth of a whole province. . . . The prodigious triumphs over time and space achieved by these ‘fire-carriages’ and ‘lightning-posts’ put to shame the wisdom of the Brahmans. . . . (138–39)

In any event, the telegraph would, indeed, become a prominent target of attack during the rebellion; there is historical basis for its off-screen “torching” in Mangal Pandey. And just as in Tom McCarthy’s depiction of a similar attack on the imperial network in early twentieth-century Egypt,
the Indian destruction of the British wire was not merely inconveniencing but, “[f]rom a symbolic point of view” (McCarthy, C, 250), profoundly significant. To Britons, the attack on the network was construed as the infliction of an emasculating or castrating wound: “The Europeans listened to the shouting of slogans, the crackling of flames. . . . The Indians were crying out that they had ‘broken the Electric Telegraph and overturned the British Rule, and boasting they had committed these atrocities in the name of religion’” (Wilson, Victorians, 205). “Breaking” the telegraph could be construed as an “atrocity,” presumably, chiefly because of its great symbolic importance, as an emblem of potency and “Rule”; the two objects of attack are linked here by a parallel construction that seems to render them equivalent rather than merely sequential. Certainly British writers stressed native ignorance of the technology and its principles of operation, even as the Indians were bestially attacking it, reinforcing the sense of a symbolic, rather than a tactical, act: in one novel (to which I will shortly return) the mutineers’ violence against the telegraph poles does only limited damage, since “the one thing these black rascals don’t understand is the importance of cutting the telegraph wires” (Tracy, Red Year, 138).

Contrasted with the figure of the enraged, network-smashing native is a particularly interesting figure that recurs in such texts as well, namely, the youthful (British) martyr of the telegraph office at Delhi, allegedly slain at his post during the first wave of the rebellion. Flora Annie Steel, in her 1896 mutiny novel On the Face of the Waters, imagines this operator cut down in the act of signaling, in a tableau only partially mock-heroic:

“They will come soon,” said a young telegraph clerk coolly, as he stood by his instrument hoping for a welcome kling; sending, finally, that bulletin northward which ended with the reluctant admission, “we must shut up.” Must indeed; seeing that some ruffians rushed in and sabered him, his hands still at the levers. (239)

The jingoistic novelist Louis Tracy, probably best remembered for his paradigmatic future-war fantasy of 1896, The Final War, handles the same episode with uncharacteristic understatement in his The Red Year: A Story of the Indian Mutiny (1907). After a (far more characteristic) catalogue of luridly painted outrages, “vile deeds” (45) and “unheard-of atrocities” (22) perpetrated by bloodthirsty “scum” and “rabble” (21–22) and dwelt upon in loving detail by the narrator, Tracy gives an account that again notes the youth of this dual saint of empire and telecommunications, as well as the primitive nature of his equipment:
In the telegraph office a young signaler was sending a thrilling message to Umballa, Lahore, and the north.

“The sepoys have come in from Meerut,” he announced with the slow tick of the earliest form of apparatus. “They are burning everything. Mr. Todd is dead, and, we hear, several Europeans. We must shut up.”

That was his requiem. The startled operators of Umballa could obtain no further intelligence and the boy was slain at his post. (46)

The scene is deemed important enough to warrant a footnote documenting its historical accuracy, while also—in the manner of myth at its purest—offering an alternative, in fact contradictory, version equally well-supported by authority. (I will return to this shortly.) Such after-the-fact beatifications in fiction are based upon contemporary encomiums; Sir Herbert Edwardes, for one, praised the young signaler’s imperial skill set: “Just look at the courage and sense of duty which made that little boy, with shot and cannon all around him, manipulate that message which I do not hesitate to say was the means of the salvation of the Punjaub [sic]” (Vibart, Sepoy Mutiny, 265).

Of course, this heroic “boy,” like the rest of the mutiny’s English victims, is in due course avenged, and fittingly, the wire is itself often cast as an instrument or agent of this vengeance, a kind of information-technological analogue to the cannon notoriously employed to blow apart mutineers. At times it seems a quasi-autonomous avenger itself, exacting a direct, physical retribution upon the rebellious Indian body. In a much-repeated anecdote, one Indian called the telegraph-wire “the string that had hanged him.” This may have been figurative, but Tracy vividly literalizes the conceit, as he imagines the telegraph as the site of execution: “As one of [the sepoys] said, looking up at a damaged pole”—damaged, that is, by the sepoys in their rampage—“which was about to serve as his gallows: ‘Ah, you are able to hang me now because that cursed wire strangled us all in our sleep.’ His metaphor was correct enough” (Tracy, Red Year, 258). This is only a particularly bloodthirsty depiction of the network as a seemingly living, volitional agent of imperial retribution; the wire that “saved India” has become a “metaphor[ical]”—indeed, as here, precisely more than metaphorical—agent of corporeal discipline and punishment. In this fantasy the network itself, the figure of English intersubjectivity, becomes capable of direct vengeance against the mutinous Indian.

It is, indeed, difficult to read accounts of the imperial wire, particularly those written during and after the mutiny, without concluding that the Indian network did function as just such a figure—as a trope, that is, for British subjectivity in the alien colony of India (or rather, the intersubjective structure
which served as its condition of possibility) imagined as a prosthesis, technologically enhanced and mapped over colonial space.

In large part, no doubt, the figuration of what one might term a cybernetic subjectivity—a partnership of mind and wire—springs from (and resonates with) the perception of the British presence in India as an artificial hybrid. (Paul Scott’s Raj Quartet is only one example of a fictional work that strikingly conveys the sense of the English social order as a rigidly unnatural transplant in India.) The sense of a transported or artificial English social network both modeled and precariously maintained by its technological analogues is well conveyed in Kipling’s story “At the End of the Passage,” with its depiction of four Anglo-Indians who gather weekly, ostensibly for recreation but more fundamentally, it is clear, for the purpose of mutually affirming a sense of their English identity. Professionally, these Britons are paradigms of colonial service, imperial men representative to an almost Chaucerian degree—their little society comprises an engineer, a civil servant, a colonial surveyor, and a “doctor of the line,” a neat microcosm. While bound by little in the way of affective ties—“they were not conscious of any special regard for each other”—nonetheless “they desired ardently to meet, as men without water desire to drink” (Kipling, Life’s Handicap, 139). As Benita Parry notes, the men’s weekly communions are symbolic of a desperate, even obsessive Anglo-Indian circling of the sociocultural wagons within an “environment which disturbed and discomposed because it seemed to threaten their identity and values” (Delusions and Discoveries, 209). Kipling, significantly, portrays this quasi-ritualistic (re)instantiation of British colonial identity, this transplanted microcosm, as utterly dependent upon the networks of “the Great Indian Empire” (Life’s Handicap, 148). The wire, frequently invoked within the story, binds together the four men within an alien, literally fatal climate:

When one of them failed to appear, he [Hummil, the engineer and host of the gatherings] would send a telegram to his last address, in order that he might know whether the defaulter were dead or alive. There are very many places in the East where it is not good or kind to let your acquaintances drop out of sight even for one short week. (ibid., 139)

The maintenance of British identity in the colonies, then, seems impossible, perhaps unthinkable, without the prosthetic intersubjectivity upon which it is erected.

To us, of course, the identification or collapse of information systems with intersubjective networks has become something of a critical commonplace: speaking from (and for) a Lacanian perspective, for instance, Slavoj Žižek
has aligned such telecommunications systems as the telephonic network in Anton Litvak’s *Sorry, Wrong Number* and the virtual reality construct in *The Matrix* with the symbolic order, alias the inscrutable, transpersonal “big Other,” maker of subjects. Certainly some such reading would seem to illuminate the ostensibly disproportionate importance with which the telegraphic network is invested in the collectively constructed mutiny ur-narrative. The machinic or cybernetic symbolic order discernible in so many Anglo-Indian texts should, on such a reading, be taken to represent the “Other” of empire itself, understood as a seemingly autonomous, transpersonal entity whose address is necessary for the constitution of the Anglo-Indian subject. The sense of the telegraphic network as the privileged site for contact or communion with this imperial Other is strikingly captured by Steel: “An hour or two later, the strangest telegram that ever came as sole warning to an Empire that its very foundation was attacked, left Meerut for Agre; sent by the postmaster’s niece” (*On the Face of the Waters*, 189–90). (Such an entity also looms large in Kipling’s work, as I will show presently.) Moreover, on this view, the slain English operator, cut down in the flower of youth, ought to be understood as not just a brave British lad but a figure to be placed alongside such other conflict-specific archetypes as the soldier, the besieged Englishwoman, and so on. He represents youthful imperial subjectivity itself, positioned at the network’s interstices and in privileged communion with Empire, and is its martyr, meeting his end in the irruption of the wire’s own “Real,” namely, its destruction by the constitutive kernel of its discourse; its central, ultimately perhaps sole referent: “MUTINY.”

Also suggestive in this context is the tendency of many British accounts of Indian discontent to imagine not only, or even primarily, a putatively traditionalist or Luddite fear of technology, modernity, or innovation as such, but rather a coded or symbolic attack on British subjectivity itself. Of course, Victorian (as well as post-Victorian) narratives often attempt to construe the rebellion as, precisely, a symbolic war—not in the sense, of course, that it wasn’t violently “real” (and beyond the sense that it “stood for” more than itself in the annals of Empire—it was “the epic of the race,” and so on) but in the sense that it arose from conflicts enacted in a symbolic register. This might help to explain, for instance, the focus on Indian fear of expulsion from a native symbolic order (through the consumption of proscribed foods) as the primary or even sole cause of mutiny, to the exclusion of other motives documented by later historians. In some versions, the rebellion is, one might say, reducible to the dissemination of a single datum or bit of information, a supremely consequential, yet purely symbolic, either-or: the knowledge that what a Hindu has tasted is beef, a Muslim pork.
In any case, mention of a “native symbolic order” leads us to the highly significant fact that the Anglo-Indian intersubjective network possesses, inevitably, an uncanny rival in British accounts. The same mutiny narratives, that is, in which the British networks feature so prominently usually provide a symbolic foil or counterpoint in the form of native systems of communication, media and practices either likened to or contrasted with (but in either case sharing a metaphoric ground with) Western technologies, to which the Indian networks are somehow both irreducibly alien yet strangely akin. While resistant to the incursion of British cables, India is in fact depicted as a space inherently conducive to the promiscuous flow of information: “In India,” declares one writer, “news travels with a mysterious and miraculous rapidity” (Knollys, *Incidents in the Sepoy War*, 17). Its chronotope seems naturally susceptible to the swift, uncontrollable diffusion of messages, disseminated via tongues, bodies, and (other) conspicuously material signs, with a speed and reach rivaling or surpassing those of the telegraph itself.

In the first chapter of Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters*, in which Steel uses the conceit of an auctioneer’s cry of “Going! Going! Gone!” to suggest the unwelcome transformations wrought upon traditional Indian society by British rule, a narrative voice meant to represent a collective Indian consciousness expresses a disbelieving consternation like that depicted in *Mangal Pandey*, meditating upon “tales” of news flashed faster by wires than any, even the gods themselves, could flash it (Steel, *On the Face of the Waters*, 11). “Wires” are better transmitters than “the gods,” but the very analogy implies a ground for comparison: the difference seems one of degree rather than kind. Later, Steel imagines the native intelligence network as an uncontrolled, parasitic extension of the telegraph, as one character complains: “The telegram is all through the bazaar by now. You can’t help it if you employ natives” (ibid., 158). Often, as in Tracy’s *The Red Year*, native networks possess powers either implicitly rivaling the telegraph’s speed—“The lie [i.e. the supposedly false report of the greased cartridges] and the message flew through India with the inconceivable speed with which such ill tidings always travels [sic] in that country” (Tracy, *Red Year*, 2)—or explicitly besting it: “No man knows how rumor travels here . . . it beats the telegraph at times” (ibid., 131). The sense of a war between networks, preceding and prefiguring the more literal conflict, the familiar progression of set-pieces from Meerut to Cawnpore and Lucknow, could hardly be clearer.

Again, and unsurprisingly, there are essential differences between the two antagonistic networks, differences strongly delineated within these texts (and whose nature and significance I will want to explore further in my discussion of Kipling). This alterity is perhaps most clearly suggested in another
oft-included component of the classic mutiny narrative, namely, the “mysterious” episode of the chapatis, one reproduced with striking consistency, from novels like Steel’s to historical accounts like T. Rice Holmes’s:

[T]he English . . . were asking each other what could be the meaning of a mysterious phenomenon which had startled them a few weeks before. In January a strange symbol, the flat cake or chapatty which forms the staple food of the Indian people, began to pass from village to village through the length and breadth of the North-Western Provinces, like the fiery cross that summoned the clansmen of Roderick to battle. . . . The meaning of the portent has never been positively discovered. . . . (History of the Indian Mutiny, 90)

Henry Knollys’s account in his Incidents in the Sepoy War is similar:

In the middle of 1856 numerous villages in the north-western provinces were visited by messengers, coming no man knew whence, and conveying a mysterious token in the shape of chupatties . . . month after month this process was continued with inconceivable rapidity and secrecy, until at last every station had been communicated with. (Knollys, Incidents, 13–14)

Again—inevitably—“mysterious,” but (or rather, consequently) necessarily a threat to British power; as Disraeli proclaimed in Parliament: “This is a secret communication, and therefore a communication dangerous to the government” (ibid., 15). While then rivaling, perhaps mirroring, the telegraph in many respects, in contradistinction to it native systems are characterized by a certain semantic ambiguity or polysemy, as well as a conspicuous grounding in the resolutely material sign—whether the body, the voice, or the cake of bread charged with “mysterious” meaning. (A similarly dualist conception would, as I hope presently to show, strongly inform Kipling’s writing as well.)

As I have already hinted, the episode of the martyred telegraph-boy seems to have been mythic, not only in the sense of bearing a larger cultural significance but also in the simple sense of being untrue. This at least is the contention of the author of “How the Electric Telegraph Saved India,” who certainly cannot be accused of a lack of investment or immersion in his chosen subject. Seeking to deconstruct the myth (thus showing, of course, that it had indeed attained the status of imperial myth, at least a minor one) he notes rather contemptuously of one history:
The writer goes on to say that the mutineers burst in on the devoted lad, the last click died away, and in the performance of his duty the signaller was slain. A touching and exciting story, but unfortunately (?) [sic] not quite true, as the signaller in question is still alive, and able to recollect what really did happen . . . (Vibart 251–52)\textsuperscript{15}

Whether the episode is literally true or not, the English boy who meets his demise in the colonial telegraph office was a figure that clearly fired the imagination of many British novelists and historians.

A half-century and more of mutiny narratives, then, circled persistently about the trope of the imperial wire, as the telegraphic network assumed its highly charged status as a kind of externalization of English authority. From this conceptual crucible, two archetypes in particular emerged: on the one hand, the murderous native Luddite, striking directly against Britain’s symbolic network; on the other, the young English signaler, sending word of the rebellion to that network itself, with a courage and alacrity that led some to call him, without hyperbole, the savior of the empire. I want now to turn to Kipling, who blended aspects of both of these figures in his conceptualization of a character type that populates his fiction with great frequency.

III.

In \textit{Rujub the Juggler} (1893), a mutiny novel for children (less well-known than the same author’s \textit{In Times of Peril}), G. A. Henty constructs a fantasy in which the loyal native not only remains faithful to the British cause but also aids it in the role of information worker: the novel centers upon the conversion, in essence, of a pair of natives into instruments of telecommunication for the use of their English masters. The “juggler” of the title first appears in his capacity as mere entertainer, performing a trick involving the mysterious extension of a “bit sawn off a telegraph pole” (Henty, \textit{Rujub the Juggler}, 18), from which magically elongated perch his daughter then vanishes. This particular conjuring act is a suggestive one, since this pair possess, as it turns out, telepathic powers, together forming a circuit which the British heroes are able to exploit after the outbreak of mutiny.\textsuperscript{16} In effect, Rujub and his daughter become the telegraph.\textsuperscript{17} Rujub speaks of an elite class of “masters, who have powers that have been handed down from father to son for thousands of years, who can communicate with each other though separated by the length of India” (ibid., 279).\textsuperscript{18} In the service of Henty’s Britons, these native signalers
are put to work in the service of Empire, allowing messages to be sent to an
imprisoned Englishwoman, while also acquiring intelligence about the prison
itself: as Rujub announces, “The information is of use, sahib” (ibid., 335).

The trope of the potentially mutinous Indian rendered useful to the impe-
rium as a channel or medium of British communication—far from uncom-
mon in the decades following the rebellion—deserves closer attention. In
Henty’s hands, to be sure, the figure serves as an ingredient in a relatively
uncomplicated fantasy of native loyalty. But the prevalence, and manifold
elaboration, of the trope also suggests a culturally broader attempt to engage
imaginatively with the kinds of issues of integration—political and social as
well as conceptual—relative to colonial India with which figures like Seeley
were, again, grappling in the later nineteenth century. It is my contention here
that the incomparably richer fiction of Kipling (richer, I mean, than Hen-
ty’s) provides a particularly clear window through which one may view such
efforts, and in so doing, to understand better the role played by information
technology in helping British writers to conceptualize the integration of the
post-mutiny Indian into the imperial network.

It is no secret, of course, that modern technology occupied a central place
in Kipling’s writing. A large portion of his life’s work can justly be placed
under the rubric of, in Herb Sussman’s apt phrase, “The Romance of the
Machine.” 19 The feats and products of nineteenth-century Western inven-
tion figure prominently in his writing, from tales relating heroic projects of
engineering (“The Bridge-Builders”), to stories centered upon a particular
technology (“The Ship that Found Herself”), to full-blown science fiction fea-
turing, for example, a fleet of airships (“With the Night Mail”). And informa-
tion technology in particular provided a keen spur to Kipling’s imagina-
tion, from his poetic exploration of submarine communications in “The Deep-Sea
Cables” to his potently spooky tale of the new radio, “Wireless.” Above all,
the wire of the electric telegraph is woven inextricably into the fabric of his
fictional world. Throughout his tales, not only are telegrams constantly in evi-
dence, and often of crucial importance, but the reader is frequently led into
telegraph offices (as well as newspaper offices that are depicted as termini
for masses of chattering wire). Kipling’s work, furthermore, demonstrates a
fascination with the telegraph map as an imaginary representation of India
as a colonized, administered unity; it is, indeed, perhaps one of the defining
images of India in his fiction. Telegraphy also serves, as it did for many oth-
ers, as a metaphoric ground for human communication more generally, as in
“An Habitation Enforced,” a tale in which a cosmopolitan American couple—
the husband being sufficiently addicted to telegraphic communication as to
have the estate they purchase connected by wire—seem irrevocably alien to
the natives of the remote English village where they find themselves, natives whose gossip Kipling calls “farm-telegraphy, which is older but swifter than Marconi’s” (*Actions and Reactions*, 22).

Furthermore, as even a fairly casual reading of his Indian fiction shows, Kipling had a particular fascination, amounting almost to obsession, with the figure of the native signaler—the replacement, as it were, of the martyred English boy within the telegraph offices of the sprawling web of empire. This figure appears, in multiple guises, seemingly everywhere in Kipling’s tales of the Raj. I have already mentioned one incarnation, from *The Naulahka*. In some tales the Indian information worker plays a minor role, functioning more or less as part of the scenery. For example, in “The Daughter of the Regiment,” an Irish private relates to the story’s narrator, in heavily accented tones, a tale of a cholera-stricken “throop-thrain” wiring ahead for assistance:

> The Officer Commandin’ sent a telegrapt up the line, three hundher’ mile up, askin’ for help. Faith, we wanted ut, for ivry sowl av the followers ran for the dear life as soon as the thrain stopped, an’ by the time that telegrapt was writ, there wasn’t a naygur in the station exceptin’ the telegrapt-clerk—an’ he only bekase he was held down to his chair by the scruff av his sneakin’ black neck. (Kipling, *Plain Tales*, 152)

(This cowardly figure is, in fact, unusual in having to be forcibly “held down” to his post; the “glee[ful]” signaler from *The Naulahka* is more representative.) Other examples include the “Madrassee telegraph-clerk” in “William the Conquerer” and the telegraph operator in “The Arrest of Lieutenant Golightly.” Elsewhere the operator plays a more central, even pivotal role, as is the case with Gunga Dass, the treacherous telegraph-master in “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes” and Michele D’Cruze, the “shamb[ing]” protagonist of “His Chance in Life,” respectably employed as “a Telegraph Signaller on Rs.35 a month” (ibid., 60).

In what follows I propose to consider a few of the multifarious avatars of the figure of the Indian telegrapher featured in Kipling’s tales, in order to trace some of the ways in which British figurations of the imperial system in post-Mutiny India could be conceptually shaped by the wire.²⁰ Most obviously, the figure of the native information worker suggests the peaceable integration of the Indian into the imperial network; more, as a peculiarly forceful example of a native colonized, body and soul, by the English language, he symbolizes the Anglicized Indian envisioned by men like Macaulay, earlier in the century. In Kipling, however, the case is more complicated than this. As I will show, his fiction not only exposes anxieties associated with the prospect
of a racially hybrid language network; it also, and more fundamentally, depicts the imperial system as a sublimely indifferent Other, in a fashion that tends to undermine the very hierarchies of nature on which British rule supposedly depends.

The Indian telegrapher from The Naulahka is, again, described as “childish” (91). Indeed, and unsurprisingly, the native operator, like other Indian characters, is often infantilized in Kipling. What strikes me as worthy of further consideration, however, is the persistent way in which this infantilization, particularly though not exclusively in the case of the signaler, also registers as a relationship to the English language itself. In his depiction of the Indian’s relationship to English, I want to suggest, Kipling posits or imagines the presence of an essential and hierarchized division within language, one strikingly similar to that which Kristeva would identify as “two modalities of . . . the same signifying process” (Revolution, 23–24, emphasis original). I refer of course to her “fundamental categorical distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic” (Beardsworth, Julia Kristeva, 39), between on the one hand a modality associated broadly with the materiality of the sign (as well as, perhaps, revolutionary or anarchic connotations), and on the other the supposedly masculine domain of structured meaning and syntax (allied with law and order).

In fact, a powerful and pervasive association of the Indian with the semiotic (in, again, something very like Kristeva’s sense) can be found quite early in the young writer’s development: in a letter written from the press room of one of the Indian papers where he cut his teeth, the twenty-three-year-old Kipling, while sitting and “wait[ing] for the last telegrams,” complains: “It isn’t a cool night by any means and there is a mixed flavor of printers [sic] ink, baled paper, deodar wood and hot coolie that is not sweet” (Pinney, Letters of Rudyard Kipling, 173). This olfactory conflation, part of a larger mise-en-scène also comprising sleeping Indian boys and “native” workers whose drowsiness causes them “to mangle the wisdom of Reuter” (ibid.), renders vividly palpable the material conditions of linguistic production. And in linking the body of the “coolie,” an ineluctable but problematic component, with such other textual ingredients as paper and ink, the young writer is establishing the formula that can be found throughout his Indian fiction—as, for instance, when Kipling displays native communications systems in all their material concreteness. There are, to take a pair of examples, the “object-letters” mentioned in “Beyond the Pale” (“Next morning . . . an old woman threw a packet into his dogcart. In the packet was the half of a broken glass-bangle, one flower of the blood-red dhak, a pinch of bhusa or cattle-food, and eleven cardamoms” [Plain Tales, 128]), and the “string-talk letter” in “The Man Who Would be
King” (“I remembered that there had once come to the office a blind man with a knotted twig and a piece of string which he wound round the twig according to some cipher of his own” [264]). In their inveterate materiality such systems resemble the chapatis inevitably, and nervously, invoked in British accounts of mutiny. Even integrated into the imperial information network as signaler, the native retains a decided association with the brute stuff of language, in marked contrast to the disembodied flashes of telegraphic information, apparently (as we will see presently) the empire’s own characteristic voice. He is, or is supposed to be, a passive channel for the messages that traverse his body as meaningless units (as the Saussurean arbitrariness of Morse, or—to anticipate an example I shall discuss presently—as fragmented, phonemic pulses issuing from the mouth), rather than an active producer of meaning. Or, to recall the words of the unnamed signaler from The Naulahka: “You write message. I send. That is proper division of labour.”

This is not to say that the native signaler, the grounding body as it were for the imperial symbolic order, is always docile or trustworthy. Take the case of the dastardly Gunga Dass, the former telegraph master in “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes.” When he first appears to Jukes, who had known him in his former capacity, he is terribly altered, decoded—“Caste-mark, stomach, slate-coloured continuations, and unctuous speech were all gone” (ibid., 8)—but Jukes manages to recognize him by a scar, and recalls what had been Dass’s most memorable, if not defining, characteristic:

He was in charge of a branch telegraph-office there, and when I had last met him was a jovial, full-stomached, portly Government servant with a marvellous capacity for making bad puns in English—a peculiarity which made me remember him long after I had forgotten his services to me in his official capacity. It is seldom that a Hindu makes English puns. (ibid.)

Zohreh T. Sullivan points to this trait, among other qualities, in noting Dass’s “mastery over language,” an “inversion” terrifying to the Englishman (Narratives of Empire, 75–76). It may thus be said that the former telegraph-master, destined to become a traitor to his own “masters,” stands in an active relation to the English tongue; he has made it his own and wields it as a tool or weapon. Yet it should be pointed out that this is a “mastery” enacted in the semiotic register rather than the symbolic, a gift for wordplay rather than a capacity for semantic production, with Dass’s acts of punning, the irruption of the semiotic into language, prefiguring his own “mutinous” act of braining Jukes, and leaving him for dead. In other words, it is striking that Kipling combines in a single figure an association with the exuberant, irrepressible
energies of presymbolic language with an unexpected capacity for treachery against the figure of the sahib.

I emphasize here what I see as Kipling’s depiction of discrete (separate and unequal) registers or modalities of language first of all because of the way it suggests the complication (as well as the substantial realization) of older projects of Indian assimilation in the later nineteenth century. A half-century before Kipling wrote his Indian stories, Thomas Macaulay delivered his 1835 “Minute on Indian Education.” It is hardly a politically correct document, certainly when viewed from our twenty-first-century vantage point, but two moments in the Minute have earned special opprobrium in our time, each vying for the title of “Macaulay’s infamous statement.” The first is the well-known line about the “single shelf of a good European library” outweighing the entirety of Oriental literature (Macaulay, *Macaulay*, 722). Works written in Sanskrit and Arabic Macaulay blithely dismisses as a mass of superstitious hokum, mediocre poetry, and sheer bunk, containing “medical doctrines, which would disgrace an English farrier,—Astronomy, which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school,—History, abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long,—and Geography, made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter” (ibid., 723). But it is the second popular candidate for this particular title that I want to focus on here. This is (and has long been) his assertion that “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (ibid., 729). In Macaulay’s vision—shared by men like Charles Trevelyan, his future brother-in-law—this buffer caste was to be created primarily through (English) language education (“Less than half the time which enables an English youth to read Herodotus and Sophocles, ought to enable a Hindoo to read Hume and Milton” [ibid.]).

Offensive, at least to modern sensibilities, the Macaulayan formula may be; I mean to sidestep here the debate over the extent to which it deserves to be called “infamous.” But it is interesting to note that conceptually Macaulay seems to be able to distinguish between “blood” and “language” in a way that would become far more difficult in the later nineteenth century: he has no trouble imagining that one might be mentally formed by the English tongue while remaining unequivocally “Indian [or anything else, for that matter] in blood” (729). The Anglicists of the day were in other words untroubled, for the most part, by the kind of conceptual conflation or collapse for which Victorian information systems, and the conceptual metaphors that became attached to them involving circulatory and other biological systems, would be largely responsible. But once these metaphors became dominant—at a
moment in history, that is, at which it seemed natural to imagine networks as closed systems facilitating the free intermingling of blood (via the conceptual metaphor $\text{BLOOD = (TELEGRAPHIC) LANGUAGE}$)—then the old Angli-
cist formulations became increasingly problematic. One explanation, then, for Kipling’s proto-Kristevan discovery or invention of a hierarchized “di-
vision of labour” within language lies in the fact that it offers another way to conceptualize difference between two races, linked within a single language
network. If, in other words, the native telegrapher functioned as (among other things) a figure for the Anglicized Indian in the later nineteenth cen-
tury, then—in Kipling’s treatment at least—his depiction also resonates with
efforts to ensure that the British-enculturated native remain plainly legible as a figure, in Homi Bhabha’s phrase, for “which to be Anglicized, is emphati-
cally not to be English” (“Of Mimicry and Man,” 125).

Yet there is no denying that the prospect of networking with natives remained troubling to Kipling. If (as I have already suggested) the native
operator is often an uncanny figure in his fiction, this fact may not be unre-
lated to a profound ambivalence towards the idea of such linkage. In his autobiographical Something of Myself, while giving a retrospective account of his newspaper days, Kipling recalls a circuit of telecommunications which he would daily enact in concert with an unseen Indian counterpart, both of them constituting relays in a cybernetic system comprising telegraphic, telephonic, Indian and British components: “I took them [cabled messages] down from the telephone—a primitive and mysterious power whose native operator broke every word into monosyllables” (30). The association of the telephone with the “primitive” is both counterintuitive and suggestive; as employed by the “native operator” who seems naturally to belong to its “mysterious” dispensation, it works to break messages, whatever their particular semantic value, about which the speaker seems unconcerned or ignorant, into basic phonemic units. (Another example, perhaps the first, of Kipling’s “semitic” native.) Is it fanciful to suggest that this figure may be the prototype of the Indian charlatan in Kipling’s later story “In the House of Suddhoo”? There the native figure, casting his voice by a ventriloquism resembling an uncanny form of telephony into “the dried, shrivelled, black head of a native baby,” converts messages secretly gleaned from telegrams into a strikingly similar modality, one that fills the English narrator with horror: “There was an interval of a second or two between each word, and a sort of ‘ring, ring, ring,’ in each note of the voice, like the timbre of a bell. It pealed slowly, as if talking to itself, for several minutes before I got rid of my cold sweat” (Plain Tales, 112–13). This scene forcibly strikes one as a kind of nightmarish restaging of the younger Kipling’s habitual telephonic link with the native operator, one in
which a certain ambivalence, at the very least, might be detected towards the experience.26

The above two figures, then—the uncanny, unseen native on the phone and the eerie ventriloquist—suggest the possibility of a parasitic appropriation from, or insertion into, British information networks. Even they, however—like the other figures I have cited—remain visibly (or audibly) distanced from the language they channel by their innately “semiotic” relation to it: both parse or (as Kipling puts it) “break” English up unnaturally (sentences into isolated words, and words into fragmentary phonemes, respectively). So far, then, the story is a familiar one: the Anglicized Indian does not fully or “really” possess the language, a condition mirroring his partial, subordinate status within the networks of the Indian empire. Here, however, a further question naturally arises: where (if we have here to do with the stuff of classic racialist-imperialist fantasy) is one to find the logically corollary figure, the Englishman in unproblematic possession of the voice of empire, the natural agent of the symbolic order?

What one encounters instead in Kipling (and perhaps, given the thinkers I have invoked in this chapter, this story will not be an entirely unfamiliar one either) is the figuration of imperial power as something that no one, of whatever race, truly or ultimately “possesses.” And once more Kipling’s treatment of the telegraph—specifically, his depiction of telegraphic language—is enlightening here. At the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore, the young Kipling soon became intimately familiar with the characteristic language (“technolect”? of the wire, as the lion’s share of his duties seemed to involve the reception, sifting, and arrangement of cables, the creation of a kind of telegraphic pastiche (“I write, so to speak, between the horns of the gum pot and the scissors,” as he complains to a correspondent in his early days at the paper [quoted in *Kipling’s India*, 3]). Unlike Hemingway, though, who seemed to transfer the telegraph’s sense of condensation and standardization into his fiction, Kipling’s prose explodes, perhaps compensatorily, with a Babel of languages, dialects, idiolects, remarkable and odd names, and so on.27 But within this polyglot milieu the telegraph can be counted on to speak a radically pared language, a classic form of “cablese”—its elliptical fragments of utterance punctuating, and to be contrasted with, the proliferation of diverse voices that surround it in the text. It seems indeed to represent a kind of asymptotic limit, a condensed language that no person could actually speak. The telegraphic “voice” in Kipling is abstracted from any individual speaker, seeming to possess an inhuman, or at least an impersonal, autonomy, as in “Only a Subaltern”: 
The message flashed to the Hill stations.—“Cholera—Leave stopped—Officers recalled.” Alas for the white gloves in the neatly-soldered boxes, the rides and the dances and picnics that were to be, the loves half spoken, and the debts unpaid! (Man Who Would Be King, 16)

The austere “flash[es]” of information, like the authority they represent, seem to be detached from any localizable entity or power—an apt voice for the transpersonal “Other” of Empire (such as that invoked in Steel’s novel). Even where a “tar” (“wire”) has a determinate sender and recipient, its very abbreviation of expression tends to depersonalize the message, as in “The Bridge-Builders”: “Heavy rains here. Bad,” runs one message (prompting the musing that it could have been cut still further: “He might have saved the last word” [Kipling, Day’s Work, 14]). The abridged language of the wire, shorn of identifying idiolect, seems to belong to no one.

Such an impression is only reinforced when one looks more closely at precisely what elements of language are characteristically elided in such maximally terse utterances. Messages like “Cholera—Leave stopped—Officers recalled,” and “Heavy rains here. Bad,” omit a number of lexical units—articles, for example, and in these cases, verbs. But more significantly, when the telegraph speaks in these stories it is in a language without pronouns, precisely that feature which Emile Benveniste identifies as common to all languages:

It is a remarkable fact—but who would notice it, since it is so familiar?—that the “personal pronouns” are never missing from among the signs of a language, no matter what its type, epoch, or region may be. A language without the expression of person cannot be imagined. (“Subjectivity in Language,” 730)

But in fact this absence is a defining characteristic of telegraphic language, certainly as Kipling represents it. Benveniste is, of course, concerned with pronouns chiefly in their relation to human subjectivity, their power (in his view) to help construct identity by offering positionality within a structure. As he famously puts it, “Language is so organized that it permits each speaker to appropriate to himself an entire language by designating himself as I” (ibid.). In Kipling’s treatment, then, telegraphic language not only suggests the transpersonal voice of empire, speaking through native relays to the Englishmen at its interstices; it implies that those very interstices might have something to do with producing the white men it is calling upon to take up
the imperial burden. More, this vast, distributed machine of interpellation, with its enthymemetic language shot through with pronomial gaps to be filled by action, tends to destabilize the very categories of “nature” on which British hegemony ostensibly depends.

And indeed, Kipling suggests in one story that the imperial network, figured as telegraphic system, has the power quite literally to make Englishmen, or white men, out of natives, in case of extreme need. This at least seems to be the suggestion of “His Chance at Life,” whose central figure, Michele D’Cruze, is a native operator whose position (predictably, as I have tried to show, for this character type) gives him a sense of participation and status as an ersatz Englishman. His employment as a signaler causes his beloved’s mother (pathologically invested in her own family’s “descent from a mythical [English] platelayer”) to be “lenient to the shortcomings of his ancestors” (Kipling, Plain Tales, 60). Significantly, however, Michele does himself possess (a negligible modicum of) English blood; we read that while he is “very black,” he “looked down on natives as only a man with seven-eighths native blood in his veins can” (ibid.). This formulation prefigures the great event of his life. Having been appointed to a minor relay-station in the sticks, he resigns himself to scrimping and saving (his sweetheart’s mother approves of his position as a cog in the imperial machine, but insists that he earn at least 50 rupees a month before he marry her daughter). Nothing much happens at his post until, one day, the locals decide to raise a “Donnybrook just to see how far they could go” (ibid., 62). This is the Mutiny in miniature, or the Mutiny replayed as farce—enacted on a purely local scale, and denuded of all political content. Nonetheless, the rioters select a familiar target for their wrath:

The Native Police Inspector ran in and told Michele that the town was in an uproar and coming to wreck the Telegraph Office . . . [the Inspector], afraid, but obeying the old race-instinct which recognizes a drop of white blood as far as it can be diluted, said, “What orders does the Sahib give?”

The “Sahib” decided Michele. Though horribly frightened, he felt that, for the hour, he, the man with the Cochin Jew and the menial uncle in his pedigree, was the only representative of English authority in the place. (ibid.)

The Police Inspector’s act of interpellation, his recognition of the telegraph operator as “the Sahib” in town, is subsequently echoed and reinforced by that of the telegraphic network, which, in effect, makes him a “Sahib.” Michele sends a message for help up the line, thereby asserting a position—albeit a
highly provisional one—within the colonial system, which in turn recognizes him, as do the townspeople, as the embodiment of “Authority”; he has gone from being a mere relay to a point of origin. His “drop of white blood” is activated, transforming him, for the duration of the riot, into a quasi-Englishman. When confronted by a local delegation, he tells them, haughtily, “that the Sub-Judge might say what he pleased, but, until the Assistant Collector came, the Telegraph Signaller was the Government of India in Tibasu. . . .

Then they bowed their heads and said, ‘Show mercy!’ . . . and went back in great fear; each accusing the other of having begun the rioting” (ibid., 63). Michele’s tenure as an Englishman is, again, transitory: when the white “Collector-Sahib” arrives at last to deal with the rioters, the signaler “[feels] himself slipping back more and more into the native” . . . until “the white drop in [his] veins [dies] out” (ibid.). But he is rewarded, in the story’s ironized fairy-tale ending, with promotion to the central office, and “the Imperial salary of sixty-six Rupees a month” (ibid.). Michele and his sweetheart are able to marry, “and now there are several little D’Cruzes sprawling about the verandas of the Central Telegraph Office” (ibid.). The story thus ends with a tableau in which symbolic and biological reproduction are mingled, with the prospect of a future line of dutiful imperial servants being embodied in the host of “little D’Cruzes” spawned within the shadow of the central nexus of the British colonial network in India.

Herb Sussman suggests that “[i]f Kipling had remained in India, it is unlikely that he would have been tempted to create a literature of the machine,” noting that “[h]is rare newspaper descriptions of technology in India, like Dickens’ journalistic pieces on the machine, are written in the manner of the technological grotesque, with little concern for social criticism or symbolic meaning” (Sussman, Victorians and the Machine, 195). As regards the world of mechanical invention in the sense of steam engines, locomotives, ships, and so on, this may well be true, but, as I have sought to show here, it was emphatically not the case with Kipling’s treatment of information technologies. On the contrary, his Indian fiction to a large extent constitutes a kind of romance of information systems—a body of writing in which media technologies and networks contribute actively to the construction of the author’s vision of colonial India.