

Dominic Davies: Imperial Infrastructure and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature, 1880–1930, Oxford / New York: Peter Lang 2017, 296 p.

Reviewed by
Steffen Wöll, Leipzig

Currently working as a lecturer at City University of London, Dominic Davies is an English scholar with a focus on colonial and postcolonial literature. His recent publications include the co-edited *Planned Violence Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructure, Literature and Culture*¹ and *Urban Comics: Infrastructure & the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives*.² Davies' thesis-turned-book *Imperial Infrastructures and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature, 1880–1930* scrutinizes the dynamics and cross-effects that play out between “infrastructures, borders, urban planning, the built environment, and literary and cultural narratives”³ and represents an example of those works whose relevancy has only increased over the course of the last years. This is not only due to a recent surge in the fields of cultural and literary geography but also comes as a result of a renewed interest in the linkages between the workings of spatial formats such as empires and nation-states and their discursive constructions or subversions in fictional texts past and present.⁴ With its intriguing subject matter and accessible prose, *Imperial Infrastructures* makes productive these linkages by utilizing a methodology

Davies calls “infrastructural reading” that is designed to “open a critical space within what is, predominantly, pro-imperial literature” (p. 4; original emphasis).

Setting the tone for the subsequent examinations, the book opens with a quote by Rudyard Kipling whose overt message encapsulates the deep entanglements of colonial and literary space and history in the epistemological networks of so-called western civilization. “Month by month,” Kipling muses, “the Earth shrinks actually, and, what is more important, in imagination. [...] We have cut down enormously [...] the world-conception of time and space, which is the big flywheel of the world's progress.”⁵ Working through a new-fangled and subversive reading of colonial literature by a number of South African and Indian writers, Davies offers a methodological reappraisal of infrastructural development as a linchpin of the British Empire. Infrastructures and their integration into the power structures of geopolitical world systems, he suggests, should not be restricted to their understanding as straightforward economic and narrative pivots of accumulative capitalism and racism and their exploitative mechanisms in the colonizing of peoples and spaces. Conversely, by utilizing an alternative methodology, the book puts emphasis on the support, but also the underlying insecurities, critiques, and implicit oppositions that permeate examples of literary fiction which have thus far mostly been viewed as championing imperial accumulation of power through the means of infrastructural development.

Across four chapters, Davies' study offers a thorough and convincing revaluation of colonial discourses that oftentimes forfeit

historical nuance and thematic complexity in favor of seemingly unambiguous dichotomies between colonial abusers and subaltern victims. What is interesting in particular is Davies' selection of primary sources that consciously attach themselves to a sensitive point of Britain's imperial history: Rather than pointing to more obvious examples of resistances in texts written by subaltern authors, the book complicates the subject by tracing resistances, contradictions, and insecurities in the literary production and representation of colonial infrastructures in the writings of authors such as H. Rider Haggard, Olive Schreiner, and John Buchan. Rightfully arguing that "the avoidance of such texts can be defeatist" (p. 13), Davies lays out a cross-section of colonial wirings in British-controlled South Africa and India, identifying humanitarianism, segregation, frontiers, and nationalism as their thematic fulcrums. At the same time, in its goal to map out infrastructures and resistances based on an eclectic corpus of colonial literature, the book could have benefited from a more focused engagement with fewer aspects rather than splitting its attention across its relatively short chapters. As a whole, *Imperial Infrastructure* succeeds in providing a lucid perspective as well as valuable insights into the role that colonial literature played in the construction and subversion of the British Empire during its heyday from 1880 to 1930. Importantly, the book demonstrates that the literary subjects, metaphors, themes, and tropes of infrastructure do not exist as part of a solely fictional dimension that can be easily demarcated from physical embodiments such as bridges, railway lines, and territories. Fictional narratives not

only become valuable historical sources through which the circulation of colonial-infrastructureal networks can be observed and understood; they also are significant actors in these networks as they partake in discourses regarding the policing or undermining of British-controlled spaces abroad. Davies' method of infrastructureal reading proves effective in exposing these dynamics, leading him to the conclusion that colonial literature played a vital part "in the production of an unevenly and unequally developed landscape that has continued to scar the material and imagined geographies of now formally decolonised states, and that continue to shape the twenty-first century's post-imperial word" (p. 255). What informs the book's main finding is hence the cognizance that literary fiction not merely reflected imperial infrastructures that were hailed as signifiers of progress or humanitarianism but themselves became constituents of an overarching discursive infrastructure that supported or defied the projects of empires – an insight that equally augments and complicates present-day inquiries into the matters of colonialism and imperialism.

Notes

- 1 E. Boehmer / D. Davies (eds.), *Planned Violence Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructure, Literature and Culture*, Oxford 2018.
- 2 D. Davies, *Urban Comics. Infrastructure & the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives*, New York 2019.
- 3 City University of London, Dr Dominic Davies, URL: www.city.ac.uk/people/academics/dominic-davies.
- 4 See, e.g., S. Wöll, *Bleeding Borders. Space, Blackness, and Hybridity in Jack London's Representations of the American Southwest*, in: *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 63 (2018) 1, pp. 5–28.
- 5 A. Lycett (ed.), *Kipling Abroad. Traffics and Discoveries from Burma to Brazil*, London 2010.

Julia Obertreis: Imperial Desert Dreams. Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Central Asia, 1860–1991 (Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte Osteuropas / Cultural and Social History of Eastern Europe, Bd. 8), Göttingen: V&R unipress 2017, 536 p.

Reviewed by
Jan Zofka, Leipzig

History books about single raw materials, goods, commodities, or techniques are on the rise. In line with the global and transnational turn, a growing number of studies approaches global and (trans-)regional transformation processes through a material dimension. Cotton, coffee, salt, tobacco, water, and dams that guide it, coal, and nearly everything that can be found in a household serve as starting points for histories of capitalism or human society and culture. While Bill Bryson uses this approach through “things” in a very eclectic and entertaining way, in the more strictly scholarly field Sven Beckert’s global history of cotton has caught the greatest attention.¹ Julia Obertreis’ book on cotton growing and irrigation schemes in Tsarist and Soviet Central Asia is an important contribution to this growing field of global history, especially as the Soviet Union is to a large extent absent in Beckert’s “Empire of Cotton”. However, the book plays in more than one field – more than a transregional or *global* history of cotton and irrigation, it is a history of the (Central Asian) peripheries of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union, and about how these were

ruled in the context of an ever-transforming society.

The starting point and linchpin of Obertreis’s *longue durée* history from the late Tsarist Empire to the end of the Soviet Union are the actors. Engineers working on irrigation schemes, aristocratic capitalists financing large canals, or national party leaders promoting the Hungry Steppe development project are the heroes of the story. The study deliberately does not go down to the level of the actual farmers and village people but stays on the level of decision-makers and specialists. This proves to be the perfect angle to detect the patronizing mechanisms of power in the Soviet system, a continuity of expert networks and their agendas from Tsarist to Soviet reign, as for example the “cotton autonomy” and the civilizing-mission mentality of European modernism, and a contraposition of “actors on the ground” towards central planning institutions.

The reader is introduced very closely to the world of the protagonists – a world of large-scale campaigns and mobilization of resources for overambitious goals and of a mentality of fighting and battlefield with the corresponding pride of the “Hungrysteppers”. The Hungry Steppe development project in Uzbekistan from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s shall be highlighted here as an example of Obertreis’s approach and the extremely valuable insights revealed by it. In the framework of the hungry steppe development project, several large-scale measures were combined to win huge parts of land for cotton growing: a large irrigation scheme, several state farms and the corresponding villages, a regional centre town, Yangier, and the corresponding infrastructures were built