

Lawrence Phillips

The South Pacific Narratives of Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London

Race, Class, Imperialism

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of Robert Louis Stevenson
and Jack London

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‘The Canker of Empire: Colonialism, Autobiography and the Representation of Illness—Jack London and Robert Louis Stevenson in the Marquesas’, in *English Association Annual Series of Essays & Studies, 1999: Postcolonial Criticism and Theory*, Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (eds), Cambridge: Brewer, 2000, 115–32.

‘The Indignity of Labour: Jack London’s *Adventure* and Plantation Labour in the Solomon Islands’, *Jack London Journal*, No. 6, 1999, 175–205.

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‘Jack London and the East End: Socialism, Imperialism, and the Bourgeois Ethnographer’, in Lawrence Phillips (ed.) *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007, 213–34.

‘Colonial Culture in the Pacific in Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London’, *Race & Class*, 48.3 (January – March 2007), 63–82.

Introduction

Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London

The South Pacific writing of Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London is a remarkable body of work through which one can explore the ambivalences of class, gender and nationality during the apogee of the imperial era at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. It is a body of writing in which attitudes and beliefs formed at home are brought face to face with the extremes of colonial practice as the West completed its foreclosure of what remained of the 'blank spaces of the earth' to use Joseph Conrad's memorable phrase from *Heart of Darkness*. Their work highlights the historical distinctiveness of colonial practices in the South Pacific and the cultural intersection between imperial discourses, the *fin de siècle* and the emergence of modernism.

Both authors were major public figures in their day, but are now strangely sidelined in most literary canons. Stevenson, a bourgeois author acutely sensitized to the suffering of others was a victim of the backlash against Victorian culture in the 1920s, not least because of the excessive hagiography his memory was subjected to following his premature death; London, an early – if ultimately ambivalent – class warrior best remembered for his work on the Yukon gold rush apparently of too narrow a range to be taken seriously as a literary artist. Of course, that both enjoyed huge commercial success in their lifetimes might also have served to discourage serious study; an ambivalence anticipated by contemporary jealousies and a sometimes equivocal critical reception. A further peculiarity lies in the critical neglect specifically of their South Pacific writing. Not all of it might be said to be aesthetically important – a particular issue for readers of some of London's primarily commercial efforts – but as chroniclers of a new American imperialism that would ultimately eclipse the older European empires, their cultural and historical significance in relation to the development

of the relationship between the United States and Europe in the twentieth century is beyond question. How often is the phrase ‘white man’s burden’ from Rudyard Kipling’s jingoistic poem of the same title taken as the quintessential expression of European imperialism, when it was addressed to and concerned the emergence of the United States as an imperial power after the European model following the dubious war with Spain in 1898? Then there is the interstitial nature of the period itself. The work by Stevenson and London that this study concerns itself with was written and published between 1880 and 1916; a period dominated in most cultural histories by the *fin de siècle* and the emergence of Modernism and in social histories by the somnolent sigh of the late Victorian/Edwardian Indian summer giving way to the horror and social upheaval presaged by the First World War. The period itself is conceived as transitory and is no doubt contributory to the marginal significance afforded to two authors who were literary lions of their day. This neglect perhaps stems from the difficulty of fitting either into this neat script. They are neither easily related to the popular discourses of *fin de siècle* decadence nor ostensibly to the experimentation of some early Modernist writers. They are of their moment and suffer from the historical squeeze afforded by conflicted, thence complex, periods. As David Trotter writes of the Edwardian period but with equal relevance to the longer period from the 1880s as the roots of Modernism are dug ever deeper into the Victorian era:

The Edwardian period would seem to have quite a lot going for it, as a period. However it is defined, it is short, and not lacking in political and socio-economic excitements: National Insurance, Suffragettes, an armaments race, the strange death of liberal England. What more could one possibly want? And yet the feeling persists that, as far as the evolution of British culture is concerned, the Edwardian period was something of an interregnum, or a pause for breath. Historiographically, a bypass that connects the theme park of *fin de siècle* decadence and renovation to the Modernist metropolis, and few commentators spare as much as a glance for the unprepossessing market town that carries them around. (Trotter 2001 12)

Despite the fact that Stevenson, dying in 1894, wrote all his work in the nineteenth century, and London, dying in 1916, wrote much of his work in the twentieth century, they both experienced and participated in an interrelated historical, geographical and social milieu. In outline, this milieu includes political and cultural rapprochement between the United States and Great Britain; the USA’s rapid industrial growth and colonial influence; the emergence of a particular variant of Social Darwinist-inspired racial nationalism which – for want of a better

phrase – I will dub pan Anglo-Saxonism; and, of course, a shared experience of what amounted to a ‘scramble’ for the Pacific islands between the USA, Britain, France and Germany analogous to the ‘scramble for Africa’ between the latter three powers. It is no coincidence that these countries would find themselves in devastating conflict just a few decades later in the First World War.

Much as both Stevenson and London and their respective nations were drawn into and caught up in these issues, marked differences in national perspective must not be underestimated. While they often use a similar vocabulary in relation to class, ‘race’ and colonialism, their intent can be deceptively at variance and particularly revealing. ‘For although two nations use the same words and read the same books,’ observed Stevenson, ‘intercourse is not conducted by the dictionary. The business of life is not carried on by words, but in set phrases, each with a special and almost slang signification’ (*Scotland to Silverado* 113). Stevenson’s observation gestures towards the complexities that such semantic disruption implies, revealing a deeper cultural and, thence, experiential disjunction. Nor can one simply ignore the chronological distance between the two writers. While this is not wide historically as I noted above, in personal terms they are certainly of different generations. In many ways, Stevenson, whose writing I shall discuss from his departure for the United States in 1879, experienced residual and emergent historical and cultural processes – to employ Raymond Williams’ terminology – that had undergone some realignment by the time of London’s sojourn in the East End during 1902. I do not intend to create some arbitrary teleology here, but part of the value of the Stevenson/London comparison is to reveal such disjunctions, developments and, most importantly, continuities that reflect differing cultural and national outlooks. By doing so it becomes possible to begin to trace those realignments in relation to class, colonialism and ethnicity that are in emergent form in Stevenson’s writing, yet highly developed by the time London made his comparable physical and textual journey some 20 years later.

America and Britain

One overriding issue that spans the entire period of Stevenson’s and London’s writing is the emergence of the United States as a major economic and military power. The younger nation had moved further away from the Old Country and the ways of Europe than many contemporary commentators of either nation were perhaps willing to concede. Yet as this industrial and political expansion proceeded it increasingly brought the United States into close ideological and

practical alignment with the empires of the Old World, even if this is expressed in terms of commercial and political competition. In many ways the old models and frictions still prevailed: for Americans, their particular form of constitutional republicanism was seen as a considerable advance in personal and political freedom over that enjoyed under Britain's antiquated system of constitutional monarchy and traditions. The economic and political aspirations of the vast majority of its people that were so well met in their own country were, Americans argued, in Britain fatally constrained by conservative traditions. Yet as Leonard Reissman observes: 'Americans have been especially predisposed to social, economic, and political conservatism' (Reissman 22). A particular point of contrast being the overt class stratification in Britain contrasted with the American belief in social equality. Arguably this is more a matter of a lack of consciousness rather than a realized achievement, as Reissman continues: 'This anti-radical spirit and philosophy, then, also worked to keep Americans from becoming conscious of class. Class was an alien category that most Americans did not want to recognize or use' (Reissman 22). That this belief perhaps conceals a closer similarity than contrast can be inferred from American respect for the cultural accomplishments of the Old World and the prestige of the European – particularly the British – empires remained. As the historian Milton Plesuer argues: 'The Old World was at one and the same time alluring and repulsive to Americans' (Plesuer 126). Even as late as 1913, Ezra Pound asserted that he felt compelled to move to London because 'it was the cultural capital of the United States, moving from the periphery to the centre' (Carr 213). For Britons, America was often portrayed as an immature offspring, impetuous and naive from the perspective of the condescending sophistication of its parent as can be seen from Kipling's laudatory poem celebrating American acquisition of the Philippine Islands from Spain, 'The White Man's Burden' (1899) mentioned earlier, in which the United States is welcomed to a new maturity worthy of 'The judgement of your peers.' Americans were highly sensitized to such condescension. 'One American newspaper,' observes Plesuer, 'felt that England regarded the United States as an uncouth upstart' (Plesuer 126).

This is, of course, to deal in contemporary generalizations and stereotyping to some extent, although it is best not to overlook the power of such views at any time. Moreover, there was little to choose between the great metropolitan centres of the United States and Europe in term of complexity, industrialization or, indeed, the misery of the urban working classes and the destitute. This was also evident in terms of cultural sophistication evidenced by the import of talent from Europe to supply American tastes, even if it awaited the emergence of

Modernism focused on New York and Chicago before America could be said to have been a major contributor to an international cultural movement of significance. Indeed, one might note that the rise of the great industrial cities following in the wake of the Industrial Revolution was little more than a century old as a phenomenon, so transatlantic comparisons in fact imply less of a historical disjunction than might at first glance appear to be the case. Stevenson certainly had little to say on the score of relative development as he passed through the economic and transportation hubs of New York and Chicago other than the unsettling contradiction between the rudeness and kindness of their inhabitants. Indeed, even after going 'out upon the New York streets, spying for things foreign' he compares the city with another industrial and transportation hub, Liverpool (*Scotland to Silverado* 95). London also saw little to distinguish the East Coast conurbations from their European counterparts. For him they held an equal horror, as his daughter and biographer Joan London recalled: 'He hated and feared New York. When he had become a successful author he went there only when it was absolutely necessary and, acutely aware of what the city meant in term of suffering and deprivation, he never stayed longer than business demanded' (Joan London 83). The comparison is underlined when, while crossing the Atlantic in 1902 on the way to the East End, he wrote to Anna Strunsky: 'A week from To-day [sic] I shall be in London. I shall then have two days in which to make my arrangements and sink down out of sight in order to view the Coronation [of Edward VII] from the standpoint of the London beasts. That's all they are – beasts – if they are anything like the slum people of New York – beasts shot through with stray flashes of divinity' (*Letters* 303–4).

If the East Coast cities were nothing other than absolutely modern in their relative sophistication and potential for human misery, American feelings of cultural insecurity and European condescension might appear to be founded on little more than the stereotyping already mentioned. Yet even stereotypes have some connection to cultural actuality, however perverse or abstracted that connection may have become. Sander Gilman suggests that stereotypes are 'part of our way of dealing with the instabilities of our perception of the world' (Gilman 18), so European condescension might be said to betray an uneasiness at the United States' rapid accumulation of economic and political power, while American insecurity might betray a sense of not having distinguished themselves as far in cultural terms as they had in more material accomplishments. Such popularly held attitudes represent varying degrees of historical distortion and are related to another rather amorphous concept – the frontier, a culturally significant national 'idea' for both Americans and Britons.

The Significance of the Frontier in British and American History

For Americans, the frontier was (and is) a powerful enabling national myth, but its crudities and lawlessness have also been a source of cultural embarrassment. A vestige of this persisted even as late as the early 1900s. Indeed, for the early leaders of the new republic, the 'frontier' and the people who settled there represented an essentially uncivilized zone, virtually ungovernable with, ironically, the potential for insurrection, even revolution. It is no accident that the plot of many popular Westerns pivots on the extension of the federal government's writ to newly settled regions. As the historian Gregory H. Nobles observes: 'Anglo-American writers had commonly described frontier folk as the dregs of [an] otherwise decent society, a deviant and dangerous element hardly worthy of tolerance' (Nobles 103). But increasingly through the nineteenth century the idea of the frontier had also come to shape American attitudes towards class. As Reissman argues: 'The frontier . . . as a social value fitted neatly into the dominant tones of individualism, self-achievement, and social equality that were so characteristic of the American value system. Like the value of anti-aristocracy, the frontier belief served to delay the recognition of class differences' (Reissman 16). By the turn of the nineteenth century congruent with the emergence of the United States as an Old World imperial power following the war with Spain; this belief in a classless individualism existed side by side with a xenophobic class consciousness in response to mass immigration. Like the early elite of the republic this can be discerned among the educated WASP elite of the Eastern states at the end of the nineteenth century in response to anxieties towards mass immigration of decidedly non-Anglo-Saxon origins. As Helen Carr observes: 'The United States was, after all, territorially, demographically, and economically a different country from a hundred years earlier, and many of the East-Coast intelligentsia were not at all sure they liked it, particularly not the influx of supposedly ill-educated and culturally dubious immigrants' (Carr 214). Such anxieties reflect a powerful class discourse that is related to contemporary fears of the urban poor on both sides of the Atlantic in which class could masquerade as race and race as class. While the frontier could represent pioneering vigour and – in popularized Social Darwinist terms – racial triumph and virility, it could also signify violence, ignorance and an element of anarchy to Americans of the longer-settled regions as well as Europeans who could easily be displaced onto the culturally alien slums of the most modern of cities. As John Marriott

argues: 'Within the orbit of modernity, poverty, slavery and colonial expansion came to be perceived as aberrant; the poor, slaves and colonial subjects as defiant. Progress thus acted as an antithetical articulating principle, as a result of which distinctly dystopian visions of degeneration, decline, failure and evil gained currency' as we shall see from Stevenson's and London's Pacific writing (Marriott 12). Upton Sinclair's novel depicting the squalor and exploitation of the immigrant working classes of Chicago *The Jungle* (1906) is a powerful example of a how a different type of uncivilized zone could be imagined within an otherwise 'civilized' context – the jungle projected onto an urban setting. The jungle suggests an absence of civilization, of the dominance of nature, whereas the frontier conjures ideas of a vast, open and empty space eminently ripe for taming and settlement, the jungle conveys ideas of density, darkness, horror and anxiety, which Conrad exploits to the full in the analogy he draws between the view of urban London from the Thames and the jungle from the river Congo in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The jungle is readily associated with an overseas, explicitly colonial, frontier and the presumption of racial difference. The jungle is after all not 'native' geography to Europe or North America, but an exotic alien environment. Yet, just as the burden of blame for the dangers of the frontier in America were displaced onto the 'savage' Indians rather than settlers, so responsibility of the appalling conditions of the urban slums was shifted from rack-renting landlords, exploitative employers and government neglect to the assumed racial and cultural degeneration of the poor.

The frontier in North America also continued to resonate as a popular idea in Britain and in a similar way it was presumed to have energized American culture. Certainly, even before the publication of F. J. Turner's seminal essay of 1893 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', a more positive conception of the frontier as constitutive of the strength and values inherent in the 'American character' had long been in the ascendancy as a national mission and cultural rebirth (Turner 271–9). For example, the slogan 'Go west, young man, go west and grow up with the country' was given currency through Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* from 1841. Yet it was also a conceptualization in which the British saw themselves sharing; the frontier *topos* in this instance reinforcing a sense of racial and cultural continuation. Richard Heindel in his 1968 study, *The American Impact on Great Britain, 1898–1914*, emphasizes this sense of shared cultural imaginary:

The United States had been a frontier to Great Britain, and just one significance of the frontier in America had been a fertile clue, *mutatis mutandis*, one may

reflect that meditations on the hypothesis may well wander eastward, beyond the seaboard states, on across the Atlantic Ocean, and, in point of time, on beyond the first century and a half of plantations in America, perhaps, the more obvious period of European repercussions. (Heindel 3)

Stevenson's fascination with this energetic, pioneering image is significant in this respect: 'For many years America was to me a sort of promised land. "Westward the march of empire holds its way;" the race for the moment young; what has been and what is we imperfectly know; what is to be yet lies beyond the flight of our imaginations' (*Scotland to Silverado* 89). The play on the 'youth' of the United States nicely demonstrates the cultural condescension noted earlier, but the misquotation from Berkeley's 'On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America', which in fact reads 'Westward the course of empire takes its way' is significant. Berkeley's 'Takes its way' implies *British* expansion with its American 'colonies' acting as its proxy in the expansion of the empire across the continent – an ambition taken up later by the internal colonial discourse of the United States with some vigour. Stevenson's 'holds its way', however, is rather more ambivalent. While hold could of course mean direct physical influence, seen from the context of late-nineteenth-century Anglo-American relations it more likely implies cultural hegemony, especially from the pen of a British author. Yet Stevenson's evocation of a sense of 'racial family' and echoes of 'manifest destiny' favoured by cultural and racial theorists on both sides of the Atlantic is so in keeping with the contemporary context of this sentiment that it seems likely that the misquotation was either deliberate or subconsciously altered. Stevenson's use of this discursive register – 'the race is still young' – stresses a cultural kinship which transcends national boundaries for Stevenson as a Briton – 'America was to me a sort of promised land' – even to the extent of implying that there exists a single Anglo-American cultural empire of which the United States is the youngest offshoot. At the turn of the nineteenth century, such shared mythologies were invariably expressed in racial terms. Thence for him American had been a 'promised land' and 'our imaginations' clearly encompasses both 'Anglo-Saxon' Americans and Britons.

'Race' in the century between 1850 and the beginnings of systematic decolonization following the end of the Second World War was a widely used and very influential analytical concept in the West with a number of possible connotations. It could designate an organic species or subspecies or variety, as in the subtitle of Darwin's *On the Origins of Species by means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of favoured races in the Struggle for Life* (1859), or a human

group, usually regionalized, such as the 'European race'. Equally, in a formulation influenced by theories of cultural development that collapsed national traits and institutions into 'racial' characteristics, it could designate a single nation, such as the 'English race'. Closer to the modern – and bitterly contested – meaning is the 'scientific' categorization based ostensibly on superficial physical characteristics such as 'Negroid' and 'Caucasoid'. Each of these perspectives is at work in Stevenson's sentence, but uppermost is a particularly subjective deployment of racial congruence: the call to broad racial categories that had been derived from the categorizations of philology such as 'Celtic' or rather more broadly 'Aryan', but here especially 'Anglo-Saxon'. As Mike Hawkins observes, such notions were also 'hierarchically arranged according to a scale of physical, mental or moral value' (Hawkins 5) closely aligned with class. This sense of shared cultural and racial heritage could prove an irresistible allure to Americans drawing them eastward, quite as much as the frontier mythos attracted the imaginations of the British. Alternatively, perceptions of the British Empire could simultaneously conjure visions of the despotic oppressor of the Revolution and the war of 1812, a great power and competitor to be feared and resisted, but also in some sense reflecting racial glory on Americans as well as Britons an emblem of an intensely intimate and mutually supportive tie between the two nations. London, writing to his friend Cloudesley Johns towards the end of 1899 about the Boer War, strenuously insists on the overwhelming importance of this cultural, economic and racial – 'blood' – interdependence: 'The day England goes under, that day sees sealed the doom of the United States. It's the Anglo-Saxon people against the world, and economics at the foundation of the whole business; but said economics [are] only a manifestation of the blood differentiations which have come down from the hoary past' (*London* 1 123). Even more than Stevenson who merely implied that Americans and Britons were culturally and racially one, London directly creates an image of an embattled single people, the 'Anglo-Saxon people', suggests an intensification of the sentiment in the late 1890s compared with Stevenson's observation in the late 1880s in the face of the stiff economic competition that would contribute to the causes of the First World War a few decades later. However, the sentiment can be found throughout the second half of the nineteenth century even when contemplating the grimmest urban poverty as in Thomas Beames' *The Rookeries of London* (1850):

True, thoughts of Rookeries recall, if not old Saxon times, yet times when we Anglo-Saxons were one people, ere the First and Second Charles had driven out the stern Republicanism destined to bear such fruit in the next century, ere

the traveller's gig broke down in a Cheshire village, and a night's lodging at the hospitable home of a stranger gave him a bride, and that bride gave the world George Washington, – ere in a word, the Anglo-Saxon name, language and string manly spirit had become common to vast nations in both hemispheres. (Beames 3–4)

For both authors, the direct experience of the other's country revealed the strain that lay beneath such abstractions, which materially affected their personal and literary response to the South Pacific.

The Pacific and Colonialism

The colonial history of the Pacific Islands begins with the early explorers and the published accounts of their voyages, particularly Cook's and Bougainville's expeditions and Joseph Banks' account of Cook's first voyage (Rennie 83–108). Such accounts were replete with favourable reports of the climate and picturesque geography of the high islands, and of the attractiveness and apparent sexual freedom of Polynesian women and society. This in turn inaugurated in the 1760s and the 1770s a fascination among Europeans who represented the islands of the South Pacific as not only inhabited by 'noble savages' in a state of prelapsarian sexual innocence, but also something darker. It was these voyages that also introduced the innovation of including professional naturalists to augment the cartographic record with scientific observation. Joseph Banks, Fellow of the Royal Society and later founder of Kew Gardens (a significant imperial institution in itself as it developed throughout the nineteenth century on Banks' foundation), accompanied Cook on his first voyage. His journal demonstrates the emergent dichotomy in Western approaches to South Pacific Island customs that would persist throughout the nineteenth century and beyond – an Edenic paradise or something uniquely perverse. The following two passages from Banks' Journal recording observations on Tahiti illustrate how in a single narrative the Western observer may travel between desire and what can only be called cultural horror:

Three [pieces of cloth] were first laid. The foremost of women, who seemed to be the principal, then stepped upon them and quickly unveiling all her charms gave me a most convenient opportunity of admiring them by turning herself gradually around: 3 pieces more were laid and she repeated her part of the ceremony: the other three were then laid which made a treble covering of the

ground between her and me, she then once more displayed her naked beauties and immediately marched up to me. (Banks 275)

This passage suggests something of the titillation of the formal disrobing, a graceful and arousing act performed for the European male observer. By contrast, the following passage is significantly not performed for the pleasure of the European male strikes a rather different note:

One amusement more I must mention tho I confess I hardly touch upon it as founded upon a custom so devilish, inhuman, and contrary to the first principles of human nature that tho the native have repeatedly told it to me, far from concealing it rather looking upon it as a branch on which they valued themselves. I can hardly bring myself to believe it much less expect anybody else shall. It is this that more than half of the better sort of the inhabitants of the Island have like Comus in Milton entered into a resolution of enjoying free liberty in love without possibility of being troubled or disturbed by its consequences; these mix together with utmost freedom seldom cohabiting together for more than one or two days by which means they have fewer children than they would otherwise have, but those who are so unfortunate as to be begot are smothered at the moment of birth. (Banks 351)

The actions in the second passage are condemned as 'contrary to the first principles of human nature' when promiscuity and its consequences occur among the 'natives' whereas the first seems to accept the promise of promiscuity directed towards the European male. The sense of duality of, on the one hand, admiring Polynesian people and culture as something natural and desirable and, on the other, uncovering a savage and unnatural way of life sets the basic template of writings on the South Pacific for subsequent European visitors.

Yet both Cook and Bougainville recognized that their own sailors brought several viral serpents into this paradise but, above all, syphilis. Cook who visited Tahiti after the Bougainville expedition noted in his journal that 'the venereal distemper [is] now as common as in any part of the world' (Cook 98–9). During his third voyage when making landfall on the Hawaiian island of Maui it became apparent that Cook's previous measures to control the spread of venereal diseases had failed since two of the islanders who boarded the ship 'had a clap'. Consequently, Neil Rennie observes: 'Perhaps because the damage had been done, Cook lifted the ban on women' (Rennie 133). Cook himself had been repelled by the sexual licentiousness he had witnessed on Tahiti and certainly saw this as a flaw in Polynesian culture, but his recognition that the sexual

desires of his own crew posed the threat of infection is interesting in light of the later history of the colonial Pacific over which European and American ships spread both alien diseases and trade good with near equal levels of devastation for indigenous communities.

The missionaries who followed Bougainville and Cook to the South Pacific in the nineteenth century vigorously suppressed not only local religious practices but also anything that hinted at the erotic, which sounded the death knell for the culturally central expressive dances widespread throughout the Polynesian islands. As one of the last major explorers of the South Pacific, the Russian Otto von Kotzebue was to observe, the new regime was total: 'By order of the Missionaries, the flute, which once awakened pleasure, is heard no more. No music but that of the psalms is suffered in Tahiti: dancing, mock-fights and dramatic representations are no longer permitted. Every pleasure is punished as a sin, among a people whom Nature destined to the most cheerful enjoyment' (Kotzebue 172). Moreover, the different groups were divided both by doctrine and by nationality and competed among themselves to gain a foothold for their sect or doctrine closely mirrored the imperial interests of their home nations. It scarcely needs stressing that the agenda of these later colonists differed fundamentally from the eighteenth-century explorers conditioned by the 'noble savage' tradition of Montaigne and Rousseau. If direct colonial exploitation and occupation tempered the view of the Pacific Islanders, the eighteenth-century valorization of the Pacific Island as both natural paradises and a space of sexual adventure persists to this day, thanks, in no small part, to popular American authors such as James A. Michener and the Hollywood film industry. Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947) – winner of the Pulitzer prize for the same year – provided the raw material for the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, which was filmed in 1958, reflecting the revival of American popular interest in the region among American servicemen who were stationed there during the Second World War.

Despite the persistence of this paradisaic image, the movement from explorers to direct colonization heralded a distinct alteration in attitudes towards the Pacific Islanders; less innocent children of nature they came to be seen as recalcitrant savages with appalling customs in dire need of the benevolent helping hand of the 'civilized' West, a view which typically existed alongside the stereotypical image that such 'savages' were biologically degenerate and naturally dependent on and subservient to the white man. Underlying this self-justifying discourse lie the economic and political imperatives of empire. As Ania Loomba suggests 'representations of the "other" vary according to the exigencies of colonial rule'

(Loomba 113), and certainly one of the most important of these factors was the change in status from anthropological/philosophical curiosity to potentially lucrative work force and consumer supported by the missionary homily that saved souls were usefully employed hands. In fact, missionaries had early been engaged in trading activities to fund their work in the Pacific and were, quite often literally, supported by the labour of their converts. It is unsurprising, therefore, that William Ellis, who had been dispatched to the South Pacific by the London Missionary Society in 1817, was to publish a strongly worded refutation of Kotzebue's claims:

No one can have read the accounts of the most transient of early voyagers without the disgust at the manners they describe . . . deeds, in broad open day, so gross and horrid, that the slightest notice of them would be to outrage every feeling of delicacy and propriety implanted by nature, or cherished by religion . . . Now what is the fact? In 1815, 16, and 17 the people embraced Christianity . . . The virtue of chastity was inoculated and maintained; Christian marriage was instituted soon after . . . and whatever deviations may have arisen, the great principle is uniformly maintained to this day. (Ellis 78–9)

Note how the local culture is 'gross and horrid' in a way that encompasses not only the public displays of eroticism and indigenous ritual that offends nature itself, thence pointedly naturalizing both Christianity and Western moral ideals in one rhetorical flourish. Indeed, missionaries soon sought legitimization as healers representing success – often exaggerated – as evidence for the superiority of Christianity by taking advantage of the Islanders' belief in the supernatural causes of illness. Yet as Western-imported diseases reached epidemic proportions in the Pacific, many Islanders soon learnt that Westerners were more typically bearers of disease rather than supernatural healers and soon comprehended such ideas as infection. Indeed, local diseases were practically forgotten faced by this onslaught as Frederick Bennett reported when he visited Tahiti in the 1830s. The Islanders had become,

. . . staunch ultra-contagonists: they consider that all diseases are infectious, and should they so far overcome their prejudice as to attend upon a sick relative, they will on no account use domestic utensils in common with him. Upon the same principle, also, they find an exotic origin for nearly all their disorders, leaving us no doubt (if their traditions of imputed disease are to be believed), how the aborigines terminated their existence, unless by violent death or extreme old age. (Bennett 93)

The subtle mockery of the fastidious Tahitians seems misplaced since their precautions are nothing but sensible given their susceptibility to these new diseases, so why the humour? Bennett mocks the Tahitians for suggesting that all diseases derive from an 'exotic' cause, from beyond Tahitian culture. In short, from the white man. Their quite logical precautions towards imported disease betray, to Bennett, the incompleteness of their comprehension and adaptation of Western medical methodology, which blinds them to the local origin of any disease. This is not surprising, given that familiar distempers have an indigenous cultural interpretation that dictates both cause and treatment. Alien disease is treated using the methodology of those who brought it to the Pacific. What Bennett fails to recognize is that the Tahitians do recognize indigenous diseases; it is he who cannot see how it is encoded into Polynesian culture. The Tahitian practice represents a far more accomplished and culturally sophisticated negotiation in that they manage to give meaning to both signifying systems. Indeed, it is Bennett's position that is potentially undermined here on two key levels. First, there is the tacit recognition that it is the Western explorers, traders, missionaries and colonists who have infected the indigenous population with new diseases. Second, his mockery of Tahitian adaptation of Western medical methodology betrays his uneasiness that the Islanders can also interrogate his culture and appropriate what they need reversing the observers presumption of superiority.

Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry are useful for understanding such colonial encounters:

It is precisely in that ambivalent use of 'different' – to be different from those that are different makes you the same – that the Unconscious speaks of the form of Otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. It is not the Colonialist Self of the Colonised Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness – the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body. It is the relation to this impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of identity and its vicissitudes. (Bhabha 1986 117)

The ontological insecurity is present here in the need to both reinscribe and preserve the boundaries of difference towards the diseased as well as racial others. Both threaten to undermine the integrity of colonial identity. What this pattern suggests is that colonial encounters in the Pacific actualize an intensely unsettling moment of identification and repulsion. This is of course inherent in all colonial encounters that Bhabha discursively identifies as a 'place of hybridity . . . [where] the construction of a political object that is new, neither

one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics' (Bhabha 1994 25). When Stevenson first arrived in the South Pacific in the late 1880s, European and American commerce, politics and religious interests already dominated the Islands and yet, perhaps because of this and the history of Western fantasy about the climate and peoples, Island cultures continued to both repel and attract the interlopers. This contradiction mirrors emerging uncertainties in relation to racial, class and gender difference that would gain its ultimate expression in the deliberate cultural alienation and hybridity of Modernism. The culture of fear that underlies Joseph Conrad's disturbing novella *Heart of Darkness* also lies behind the work of Stevenson and London. As Michael North observes: 'Modernism could not escape the contradictions of European colonialism; indeed it was only because it pushed these extremes that it could exist as a movement at all' (North 76). It is, therefore, in the metropolitan heartlands and the emigrant trail that we must first look for Stevenson's and London's negotiation of both class and colonial discourse.

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The shape of this book takes the form of three interconnected sections. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 discuss examples of Stevenson's and London's travel writing in the context of contemporary discourses of national identity and attitudes towards class and racial others, particularly the way that categories of class and race can collapse into each other within a prevailing context of degeneration. Chapters 2 and 3 explore these themes through two texts that are, I would suggest, not only key to the thematic direction of Stevenson's and London's writing after their publication, but also had a significant impact on the development of their narrative technique – Stevenson's *The Amateur Emigrant* and London's *The People of the Abyss*. While both texts concentrate on largely urban environments in Britain and the United States, and the emigrant trail from Britain to and across the United States, they provide an important foundation from which to examine both authors' negotiation of the interrelated discourses of race, class and colonialism.

Chapter 4 pursues these themes as they manifest themselves in Stevenson's and London's first writings on the South Pacific, *In the South Seas* and *The Cruise of the Snark* respectively. While Chapters 2 and 3 drew out what might be called a colonial discourse in the metropolitan settings of Britain and the United States absorbed through class and national cultures, this chapter sees those ideas tested by direct encounters with Western colonialism. The focus of Chapter 4 is on

the extensive attention that both authors pay to tropes and examples of illness and disease among the Polynesian Islanders of the Marquesas group who had suffered a devastating population decline following contact with Westerners. The result is a personal and discursive displacement by both authors as they negotiate their own narrative identities in an unfamiliar and disorientating cultural and colonial context. For Stevenson and London, illness in the South Pacific represented very different personal experiences, which is apparent from their narrative personas – in Stevenson’s case, a return of health and relative vitality after years of invalidity; for London, progressive exposure to the tropics leads to physical and psychological collapse. By examining the development of Western images of class, disease and degeneration from the earlier travel texts examined in Chapters 2 and 3, illness and disease become part of a strategy of displacement of their own, their nations’ and cultures’ negative impact on the Marquesas Islands. These strategies are at one and the same time individual and markedly different in tone, and also reach comparable conclusions through the trope of and actual illness.

Chapters 5 and 6 build on the foundation of the preceding chapters to forward an extensive close reading of Stevenson’s and London’s major South Pacific novels – Stevenson’s *The Wrecker* in Chapter 5 and London’s *Adventure* in Chapter 6. Neither of these novels has benefitted from an extensive critical reading despite representing important landmarks in Stevenson’s and London’s Pacific writings. In Stevenson’s case, this reveals a novel of not inconsiderable literary merit. While London’s novel does not reach the same literary quality, it is a fascinating representation, if not a parable, of American’s formal entry into the colonial South Pacific, as well as the most extensive dramatization of the South Pacific labour trade, which, from 1870 to its final cessation after the First World War, was a *cause célèbre* for missionaries and anti-slavery campaigners both in the Pacific and in Britain. Both texts explore the relationship between commercial and national interests in the South Pacific Islands and the region as a whole, taking in not only the exploitation and transportation of labourers from both the Islands and China, but also the opium trade and the development of San Francisco as an important commercial centre. Both novels trace the extent of the influence of these lines of commercial interest and this analysis interrogates the shaping and distortions of narrator, colonizer and colonized.

The relationship between a commercial exchange relation in a colonial context and the literature produced in and of that relationship is particularly revealing, as Gary Day observes: “literature” enacts aspects of the exchange relation and, in doing so, reveals how its logic is contradictory . . . “literature” itself becomes