



---

## Picturing Robert Louis Stevenson's Pacific Phototext<sup>1</sup>

### 1.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) remains one of the most widely read Scottish authors, best-known for *Treasure Island* (1883), *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and *Kidnapped: Being Memoirs of the Adventures of David Balfour in the Year 1751* (1886); more than merely a writer of boys' adventure tales and historical romances, Stevenson was also a prolific photographer during the last years of his life and career. Working in close collaboration with his step-son Lloyd Osbourne and his wife Fanny Stevenson, he produced and collected six hundred and four photographs – assembled into four albums – during his extensive travels and settlement in the South Pacific (1888-1894).<sup>2</sup> Literary and photography scholars—not to mention the general public—have rarely had the opportunity to view this extensive photograph collection.

In 1996 approximately thirty photographs from the collection were enlarged, framed and displayed on the walls of The Writers' Museum (Edinburgh) gallery.<sup>3</sup> A year prior to their permanent conservation in 2002, the albums were digitized on *ibase* (a sophisticated image database that permits the viewing and the manipulation of the photographs at an extremely high-resolution) and in 2001-2002 one hundred photographs were made available to the *Scran* project (a Scottish online learning resource which collects images from museums, galleries, and archives); following this important conservation effort, a selection of one hundred images

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of my doctoral research at The Writers' Museum (Edinburgh).

<sup>2</sup> LSH 150/91 contains fifty-four pages and includes one hundred and eighty-two individual photographs. Its measurements are: H 38 cm x W 28 cm x D 4 cm. These photographs, taken during the cruise of the *Casco*, represent peoples and events from the Marquesas Islands, Tahiti, and the Hawaiian Islands. LSH 151/91 contains fifty-eight pages and includes ninety-three individual photographs. Its measurements are: H 37 cm x W 31 cm x D 3 cm. As well as containing photographs of events and peoples in Samoa, the album includes watercolour, pen and ink sketches. The album was purchased at Sotheby's London (15 July 1931) by William Ashbury Bailey JP and presented by him to the RLS Club. LSH 153/91 contains fifty-four pages and includes eighty-one individual images. Its measurements are H 38.5 cm x W 28 cm x D 4 cm. These are photographs of peoples and events on various islands connected with the *Janet Nichol* cruise. LSH 149/91 has an embossed title on cover: "Cruise of the Equator". It has one hundred pages and two hundred and forty-eight individual photographs. The album's measurements are H 38.5 cm x W 55 cm x D 5.5 cm. These photographs are of peoples and events on various Islands connected with the *Equator* cruise. Lloyd Osbourne donated this album to the RLS club on 19 February 1935.

<sup>3</sup> This custodial selection privileges photographs in which Stevenson appears, potentially resulting in the misleading impression that photography was, for the Stevenson family, a medium to record themselves, and was not used primarily in the representation of South Pacific Islands and Islanders.



became publicly available on *Capital Collections* in 2010 (the image library of the city of Edinburgh's libraries, galleries and museums). While these digital exhibitions undoubtedly increased access to the collection, they also severely de-contextualized the images from their original album context: the management of the photographs has been characterized by a lack of documentation of the albums' production or functional context, which belies an assumption that they are simple uncomplicated repositories. Significantly, however, the albums contain important annotations that attest to the photographs' intertextual and paratextual relationships with several of Stevenson's written manuscript collections; for instance, below is a transcript of the marginal annotations, made in Stevenson's hand, found in album LSH 149/91:

Page	The additional information in square brackets indicates next to which caption the notation appears.
14	X [next to] Gilbert Island Girl—Butaritari
16	X ↑ Use" [next to] Same
17	X Use page 213[ next to] Karaiti: - Chief or King of Little Makin—Gilbert Group
20	X next to Speak house or House of Parliament ....
21	X [next to] Wickerwork church
24	X [next to] The manner in which the King is carried about
24	X [next to] The King's carriage seen from the flank
25	X [next to] Same with Stevenson's camp in background
39	X [next to] Ocean beach of Apemama
4	X [next to] King Tembruimoa and wife
4	X [next to] Outside the great dance house...
41	Use best of [ <i>illegible MS.</i> ] page 92 [next to uncaptioned photograph.]
42	not these ↓ [appears to refer to all photos on the page: the arrow runs down the margin.]
43	X Use... Apemama [?] page 92 [next to uncaptioned photo.]
58	X [next to] Same
60	X [next to] Fagaloa Bay Samoa
66	X 14/VIII/95 [next to] One detachment...
7	X Not these X Use page 17 [next to] King Butaritari, Queen, army...
70	X Use anywhere [next to] Native girl coming aboard after bath
8	Not these [next to] A mysterious tomb....
85	X From Apia to Vailima, use page 8 [next to uncaptioned photo.]
9	X Use [anywhere?] [next to] Butaritari Island
9	X Use page [ <i>illegible MS.</i> ] [next to] Nantoki and Natakauti...
90	X Sitione Page 19 [next to uncaptioned.]

Stevenson's detailed reference to the pagination of an as-yet-unidentified manuscript highlights the co-terminous relationship of the albums, the enclosed photographs, and a large



amount of written material. These fragmentary remains represent the raw materials of Stevenson's planned, yet unfinished, composite book, *The South Seas*.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.

In November 1887, Stevenson met with the American publisher S. S. McClure in Saranac Lake, New York. Stevenson agreed that in order to finance his trip to the South Pacific, he would compose, during the course of his travels, a series of vivid and descriptive South Seas letters for syndication in the United States. A formal agreement was reached on 20 March 1888, stating that Stevenson would receive three-fourths of the proceeds, and McClure the remainder. On June 26 1888, Stevenson—accompanied by his wife Fanny, his step-son Lloyd Osbourne and his mother Margaret Stevenson—set sail for the Marquesas and Tahiti aboard the chartered yacht, the *Casco*.<sup>5</sup> From the outset of his travels, however, Stevenson envisaged McClure's epistolary project in terms of a book, "rather than a fragmentary text of letters".<sup>6</sup> In fact, the letters intended for serial publication were actually the conceptual basis for a much larger literary endeavour, "the big book on the South Seas it ought to be, and shall".<sup>7</sup> What "you are to receive," Stevenson wrote to McClure on 19 July 1890, "is not so much a certain number of letters, as a certain number of chapters in my book. The two things are identical but coterminous. It is for you to choose out of the one what is most suitable for the other".<sup>8</sup> Stevenson's idea was far from what McClure expected; moreover, the latter was not alone in his disappointment: Fanny and Sidney Colvin—Stevenson's good friend, literary mentor and editor—also objected to the letters'

---

<sup>4</sup> Although these texts have never been fully compiled in a single edition, Alanna Knight's *R.L.S. In the South Seas: An Intimate Photographic Record* (1986) attempts part of this task. Knight's volume possesses conceptual merit: ninety photographs, predominantly from the LSH albums, are placed alongside excerpts from *In the South Seas* (1896), and published accounts from Stevenson's family members. Numerous critical problems, however, undermine the book; in particular, the extremely poor quality of the reproductions, the inclusion of extraneous materials that were not taken by the Stevenson party, incorrect or inadequately captioned images, and the seemingly arbitrary placement of photographs next to written materials.

<sup>5</sup> The cruise of the *Casco* included visits to the Marquesas, the Paumotus and Tahiti. The cruise ended on 24 January 1889 when the *Casco* reached Honolulu. On 24 June 1889, the Stevensons left Honolulu aboard the *Equator*. The second cruise lasted until 7 December 1889 and came to an end in Apia, Samoa. On 4 February 1889 the Stevensons departed for Sydney aboard the *Lübeck*. They left Sydney on 11 April 1890 aboard the *Janet Nicoll* and sailed for New Zealand, the Tokelau Islands, the Cook Islands, the Ellice Islands, the Marshall Islands, New Caledonia, New Hebrides and Noumea. The cruise came to an end on 26 July 1890 in Noumea. Stevenson left Noumea on 2 August and began to settle the Vailima (Samoa) estate in September.

<sup>6</sup> Vanessa Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, 8 Vols., Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, Vol. 6, p. 401.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 6, p. 394-395.



impersonal tone and to their author's technique of arranging diachronic details around a single theme. Agreeing that this writing was "a complete departure from [his] habitual style and method",<sup>9</sup> they asserted that Stevenson's public was not interested in a scientific treatise on Polynesian languages and peoples, but rather, in the author himself, his adventures and impressions of the "South Seas". In his private correspondence from this period, Stevenson explicitly refers to the challenge of shuttling back and forth between the letters and the planned book; for instance, in the following excerpt he conflates the "letters" and the "chapters" and seems incapable, or unwilling, to distinguish between the two forms and genres: "I have [written] sixteen letters—at least, *not that*, but the draught of sixteen chapters of my book, from which thirteen or fourteen letters will be selected" (italics are mine).<sup>10</sup>

According to Roger Swearingen (1980), *The South Seas* became distinct from the associated letters between 31 August and 25 October 1889: on 2 December 1889, Stevenson wrote to Colvin: "My book is now practically modeled; if I can execute what is designed, there are few better books now extant on this globe". He provided him with a detailed outline—consisting of seven parts and twenty-three chapters—and noted that *The South Seas* "will be copiously illustrated, the Lord knows at what cost".<sup>11</sup> On 19 July he notified McClure that the first fifteen chapters of *The South Seas* were complete, and that he was sending his manuscript to England to be printed. This copy, explained Stevenson, would then be sent to McClure in New York for serialization. Osbourne delivered the manuscript to London that autumn, and by 12 November 1890 it had been printed in twenty-copies, constituting the 1890 copyright edition of *The South Seas*. The *Sun*, however, rejected the material, claiming that the letters did not adhere to the agreed format.<sup>12</sup> McClure was forced to reduce the rate of syndication: instead of fifty installments, thirty-seven appeared in the *Sun* from 1 February through 13 December 1891, and

---

<sup>9</sup> Barry Menikoff, "These Problematic Shores': Robert Louis Stevenson in the South Seas" in *English Literature and the Wider World, Volume IV 1876-1918: The Ends of the Earth*, ed. Simon Gatrell, Ashfield Press, London, 1992, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson, op. cit.*, Vol. 6, p. 401.

<sup>11</sup> Gosse, in his Introduction to the Pentland Edition recounts that in August, Stevenson "tells Marcel Schwob that Mr. Lloyd Osbourne is not unlikely to 'go to Paris to arrange about the illustrations to my 'South Seas'" (1907, 3). I agree with Jolly that Stevenson's book was to be illustrated with photographs (Roslyn Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, Ashgate, London, 2009, p. 31).

<sup>12</sup> As published in the *New York Sun* in 1891, the South Sea letters appeared under the subtitle "Letters from a Leisurely Traveller," evoking the sense of ease and pleasure associated with cruising. Buckton notes that "the first seven parts of the series were not individually titled, making this emphasis on the leisurely traveler rather than on specific locations even more pronounced" (Oliver Buckton, *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson*, Ohio University Press, Athens, 2007, p. 154).



in England twenty-seven installments appeared in *Black and White* from 6 February through 19 December 1891.

McClure and Stevenson's London literary circle—which included Edmund Gosse, Oscar Wilde and Henry James—reacted negatively to the 1890 copyright edition of *The South Seas*: both the ethnographic subject matter and the format were perceived as failures. Prior to the letters' serial appearance, James commented on the copyright edition: "I have read the first chapters of your prose volume [...] I miss the visible in them".<sup>13</sup> Gosse wrongly assumed that the 1890 copyright edition was the first incarnation of the South Seas materials, and that Stevenson must have begun to write the subsequently published letters during the third cruise. Stevenson's extensive two hundred and forty-two page journal (Huntington MS. 2412) composed during the cruises clearly contradicts this: the journal's dated entries extend throughout the first two cruises (the *Casco* and the *Equator*) and presents the first draft of the work that eventually became *In the South Seas* (1896). Gosse's assertion that Stevenson had only begun to write the South Seas letters while cruising on the *Janet Nicoll* appears to be based on the opening chapter of *The South Seas* (1890): "I *begin* to prepare these pages at sea on a third cruise, in the trading steamer *Janet Nicoll*. If more days are granted me, they shall be passed where I have found life most pleasant and man most interesting". Oliver Buckton correctly emphasizes that the use of the present tense suggests that Stevenson was cruising and writing at the same time.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, in the 1896 Edinburgh Edition—used for the 1998 Penguin edition—the present tense is dropped and the introduction reads: "I *began* to prepare these pages at sea, on a third cruise, in the trading steamer *Janet Nicoll*" (italics are mine).<sup>15</sup> Stevenson's journal constituted a common quarry from which he would draw material for both the letters and his putative book.

Stevenson was struggling with his ambitious project, confessing to Colvin in November 1890, that the "job is immense [...] I stagger under the material".<sup>16</sup> Stevenson's frustration at having to split apart his South Seas manuscript into the series of letters is explicit in a letter to James in December 1890: "What a strain is a long book! The time it took me to design this volume, before I could dream of putting pen to paper was excessive. And then think of writing a book of travels on the spot; when I am continually extending my information, revising my opinions, and seeing

<sup>13</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas*, ed. Neil Rennie, London, Penguin, 1998, p. XXI.

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Buckton, *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 7, p. 29.



the most finely finished portions of my work come part by part in pieces.”<sup>17</sup> Despite his efforts, Stevenson became overwhelmed by criticism, familial responsibilities, and other publication deadlines; on 22 April 1891, he lamented to Colvin: “No one ever seems to understand my attitude about that book; the stuff sent was never meant for other than a first state, I never meant it to appear as a book [...] I am now so sick that I intend, when the Letters are done and some more written that will be wanted, simply to make a book of it by the pruning-knife.” He anticipated making “up a book of shreds and patches; which will not be what I had still hoped to make [...] I cannot fight [...] perhaps I could not make the book after all.”<sup>18</sup>

Four years later, Stevenson and Colvin reached a compromise: Colvin was working on The Edinburgh Edition of Stevenson’s works and proposed to the latter that he publish “picked passages from the out-of-print *Black and White* letters”.<sup>19</sup> Stevenson responded to the suggestion positively: “I am strong for making a volume out of selections from the South Sea Letters”.<sup>20</sup> A few months later, before Stevenson could make this “selection”, he had succumbed to a cerebral hemorrhage at his Samoan estate of Vailima. Colvin carried on with The Edinburgh Edition and published a selection of the letters under the title *In the South Seas* (1896). In his Introduction, Colvin explained that the letters had not previously been published in book form because Stevenson had “realized that the personal and the impersonal elements were not successfully combined, nor in proportions that contented his readers.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, “when the scheme of the Edinburgh Edition was maturing” Stevenson had, according to Colvin, “desired that a selection should be made from them”.<sup>22</sup> The Hawaiian chapters, for instance, “did not come out at all to his own satisfaction,” Colvin stated, “and have accordingly been omitted”.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the material on the “Kona Coast” of Hawaii, the account of “Pearl Island: Penrhyn” was likewise removed by Colvin.<sup>24</sup> The Marquesas, Paumotus and Gilberts chapters were all included, however, and Colvin added that the Gilberts sections were “the part of his work with which the author was himself best satisfied”.<sup>25</sup> According to Swearingen, Colvin’s edition was

<sup>17</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 7, p. 65-66.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 7, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *RLS: Letters to Charles Baxter*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, 1973, p. 346.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 8, p. 344.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas*, Longmans, Green, Edinburgh, 1896, p. X.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> “Kona Coast” and “Pearl Island: Penrhyn” appeared in the *New York Sun* series.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (1896), *op. cit.*, p. X.





based on the text on the 1890 copyright edition, proofs sent in 1891 by McClure (which possibly included those with Stevenson's annotations), the detailed plan of the work which Stevenson sent him, and possibly on Stevenson's revised or unrevised manuscripts.<sup>26</sup> Two subsequent editions of *In the South Seas*, published on 26 September 1896 (Charles Scribner's sons, New York), and on 11 December 1900 (Chatto and Windus), were derived from Colvin's edition of the text. In 1912 Andrew Lang extended *In the South Seas* by including material on Hawaii in a new third section titled "The Eight Islands". Most recently, Neil Rennie's 1998 Penguin edition of *In the South Seas* is based on Colvin's text but in light of Stevenson's original MS journals of his cruises in the *Casco* and the *Equator* (Huntington MS. 2412), the versions published in 1891-2 in *Black and White* (for the Marquesas and Paumotus materials) and the *Auckland Star* (for the Gilbert Island material, which was not included in *Black and White*).

The convoluted, ambiguous and fragmentary composition and publication of Stevenson's text leads Cinzia Giglioni to claim that *In the South Seas* suffers from the "absence of a well-defined and planned literary project",<sup>27</sup> and to echo Richard Hillier's remarks that the text possesses "disunity".<sup>28</sup> Such claims are, however, potentially misleading since they are directed at Colvin's editorial intrusion, or in Jack Stlinger's terms "nonauthorial authorizing",<sup>29</sup> of Stevenson's "shreds and patches".<sup>30</sup> Colvin's edition of *In the South Seas* has been "mishandled" and "repunctuated"<sup>31</sup> through repeated omissions of Stevenson's photographs. Although the likelihood of Colvin having access to—or being aware of—the photograph albums in 1896 (which remained in Osbourne's possession until the 1930s)<sup>32</sup> is incredibly slim, the neglect of the photographs during the second half of the twentieth century belies the assumption that Stevenson's Pacific photography was purely hobbyism and by extension, critically uninteresting,

<sup>26</sup> The resulting *In the South Seas* consists of four parts, thirty-five chapters, and is divided as follows: 1. The Marquesas (15 chapters), 2. The Paumotus (6 chapters), 3. The Gilberts (7 chapters), 4. The Gilberts—Apemama (7 chapters).

<sup>27</sup> Cinzia Giglioni, "Stevenson gets lost in the South Seas", *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 4, 2007, p. 199.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Hillier, *The South Sea Fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Peter Lang, New York, 1989, p. 245.

<sup>29</sup> Jack Stlinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Treating Colvin's edition, and all subsequent editions based on Colvin's, as though it were Stevenson's authoritative text leads to specious assertions, such as Giglioni's argument that the title *In the South Seas*, "reveals much about the way in which [Stevenson broaches] his subject" (Cinzia Giglioni, *op. cit.*, p. 199). *In the South Seas* was the title given by Colvin, after Stevenson's death in 1894.

<sup>31</sup> Jack Stlinger, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> In 1914 Fanny edited and published her diary of the *Janet Nichol* (her misspelling of the trading vessel) cruise which was heavily illustrated with the album's photographs; this was, effectively, the first time a selection was made publicly available.



an approach seemingly bolstered by the paucity of written records describing Stevenson's photographic method. The gap between what is actually known about Stevenson's photographic method, intention and the collection itself produces a degree of anxiety over the question of this collection's "authorship"; indeed, the albums and their photographs emphatically deny any straightforward evidence of authorial control. In the Stevenson family's written records—mainly Fanny's diary of the *Janet Nicoll* cruise—Stevenson and Osbourne are referred to as the photographers, while Fanny is often responsible for the maintenance and fixing of the photographic equipment. The photograph albums' captions and marginal annotations are in the hands of Stevenson and his step-daughter, Belle Strong.

This authorial entanglement challenges the assumptions of a nominal, uncomplicated author and a homogenous photo-literary project. Thus, it is impossible to attribute a single "photographer" to this collection; indeed there is a pervasive sense that the family members each felt involved in the photographic event. Co-authorship of the photographs is exemplified in Beinecke MS. 6717: this eleven-page notebook is composed in both Fanny's hand and Stevenson's, with hers appearing always on the left opposite her husband's. Fanny provides the captions, in alphabetical order, for approximately two hundred photographs, while Stevenson's notes suggest on which pages, in an unknown manuscript, these photographs should appear. In addition to photographic captions, Fanny assigns each photograph a letter—either A, B or C—and a number. Cross-referencing this MS. with the albums reveals that A corresponds with LSH 149/91, B with LSH 151/91 and C with LSH 153/91. Fanny's index of photographs, which were to be possibly published alongside her husband's text, suggests that the albums were being used as functional—as opposed to display—archival objects.

Roslyn Jolly, Heather Waldroup and Gordon Hirsch note that Osbourne was the primary photographer—"Osbourne took on the role of photographer for the Stevenson party"<sup>33</sup>—without ever labeling him as the "author" of the photographs; this position echoes a palpable reluctance to affirm that the photographs were not produced by a sole member of the family. The desire to hypothesize who took which photographs is understandable, but as critics of a fragmentary photographic record we must confront the fact that a single "photographer" is likely impossible to identify. This urge to identify a photographic author is clear on *ibase*: while entire album pages

---

<sup>33</sup> Gordon Hirsch, "The fiction of Lloyd Osbourne: was this 'American gentleman' Stevenson's literary heir?", *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 4, p. 52.





confidently proclaim that their “maker” is “Osbourne, Lloyd”, others fall back upon the label “unknown”. The ambivalence creates unnecessary confusion; if Osbourne is supposedly the camera’s operator, then why not attribute all of the photographs to him? In any case, such speculation leads to an impasse, and results, rather, in a shared sense of ignorance and bewilderment. While it may be unsettling to have to deal with texts whose “maker” remains “unknown”, it is far more productive and compelling to embrace the inextricable and intangible presence of co-authors.

Despite the fact that Stevenson’s intended book does not exist, critics continue to be drawn to its surrogate, *In the South Seas* (1896) and approach this work from various angles, for example studies have examined it in light of the emergent science of evolutionary anthropology, travel writing, and as a textual response to the Pacific colonial world. While these perspectives have produced several important book-length studies, a serious lacuna persists: Colvin’s edition was conceived and published *without* photographs. Thus, what is systematically overlooked in scholarship about *In the South Seas* is that Stevenson’s “Big Book” was supposed to have been published with the photographs he was concurrently producing with his step-son Lloyd Osbourne during their travels. In the aftermath of Stevenson’s abandonment of his photo-literary project, the four photograph albums—comprising 604 images—became a completely marginalized collection.

Recent scholarship—regardless of all the references to the photographic project in Stevenson’s letters and diaries, as well as the Beinecke MS. 6717 which lists dozen of photographs intended for publication—convey the highly misleading impression that Stevenson’s interest in photography was merely that of a bumbling hobbyist. My aim is to initiate new analyses of Stevenson’s Pacific *oeuvre* in light of his photographic practice. My theoretical approach to Stevenson’s photographic practice builds on recent work on colonial photography which highlights the limits of the application of postmodern theory to photographic practices from the colonial period. 1970s and 80s postmodern studies—heavily influenced by the work of Foucault and Saïd—treated photography as a decisive instrument of oppression on the native Other; thus, they produce studies of colonial photography which overdetermined the instrumentality of photography and its oppressive gaze. In reaction to this trend, current studies of colonial photography employ phenomenological concepts in order to account for individual visual perception and experience. A phenomenologically inspired approach to photographic



practice questions how photographic equipment structures the photographer's experience; in other words, it is an approach which considers how the camera mediates, enhances, or distorts the subject's perception. In this manner, the phenomenology of photographic vision goes beyond bleak postmodern assumptions about the observer/object hierarchy and examines the dialectical relation between the photographer and the photographed. Indeed, what would happen if we rethought the photographic act in the colonial setting and removed it from the tropes of panoptic imperialist fantasies? Might some colonial photographic practices be redeemed by considering the possibility of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's chiasmus, in which the distance between the viewer and the viewed is not narrowed, but compressed or non-existent? The efforts of recent scholarship to revise postmodern approaches to colonial photography argue, broadly, for the need to particularize the colonial subject's experience and his photographic practice, to understand vision "as a material engagement in and with the object world",<sup>34</sup> and to achieve a more nuanced understanding of photography's role in cross-cultural encounter and experience. A phenomenologically based approach to photography is particularly valuable when seeking an understanding of photography's role in the lived and affective aspects of visual experience under colonial conditions since it considers "the colonial figure as a corporeal being, a sensate body who alongside discursive accretions must also be seen to live in place and through perception".<sup>35</sup>

Drawing upon relevant postcolonial photography theory in order to produce a phenomenological interpretation of Stevenson's photographic practice, I am especially inspired by Stevenson's own philosophical sensitivity to embodied vision. In his text, Stevenson represents his vision as subjective and as intricately connected to his sense perception. Instead of experiencing his eye as disembodied and authoritative, he is keenly aware that vision—like touch and smell—allows for a physical immersion in the Pacific. For instance when sailing through the archipelago, unable to locate the source of "regulgent and revolving lights", instead he interiorizes them as "light-houses of the mind or of the wearied optic nerve, solemnly shining and winking as we passed".<sup>36</sup> In this case, the "mind" is analogized with "the optic nerve": both are understood as components of the same physiology; Cartesian duality is replaced by experiential and modern conception of sight.

---

<sup>34</sup> Jessica Dubow, "'From a View on the World to a Point of View in it': Rethinking Sight, Space and the Colonial Subject", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2, 2000, p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Dubow, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 109.



In light of this, I will read a series of Stevenson's photographs, in order to demonstrate how his photographic practice narrows the distance between Stevenson and his photographic subject, and thus reverses the familiar expectations about colonial photography. Furthermore, because these photographs were produced with a written text in mind I believe that they must be considered within their intended textual surroundings.<sup>37</sup> This photographic series has never been published as *a series*, and has never been placed under any scrutiny, even though it is clear from the Yale manuscript and from notes made in the margins of the photograph album that they were intended as accompaniments to passages from *In the South Seas*.

In Melanesia Stevenson spent a couple of months on the island of Butaritari. Describing this visit, David Farrier has recently argued that because Stevenson was working on his diary he “fails to initiate the reciprocal relationship he desires”, thus writing is a “consistent obstacle to his efforts to be received among the island people, to enter into an attitude of reciprocity”.<sup>38</sup> Farrier's hypothesis of failed reciprocity, however, remains inadequate since it does not account for the fact that while Stevenson was writing he was also busily photographing Butaritari's islanders. In fact, the lengthy episode of the Butaritari dance competition that is recounted in *In the South Seas* possesses a photographic counterpart. These photographs—which Farrier does not mention—raise the question of the relationship between Stevenson's written and photographic representation of the Butaritari dance.

The context for the Butaritari series of photographs derives exclusively from Stevenson's account of the dance competition in *In the South Seas*. The reader learns that throughout the dance competition Stevenson sits in the front row at the invitation of the chief, a privileged viewing position as the honoured guest. Indeed, Stevenson's presence in the community was well-known: during his stay in Butaritari he often spent his evenings at the local bar, the *Sans Souci*, the social hub for white merchants and islanders. His social activity would have familiarized him with the dancers themselves; for example, from the written account we know that he knew some of the dancers by name. Moreover, his camera would be a familiar sight, since he took it with him on his many explorations of the village.

---

<sup>37</sup> The images discussed in the remainder of this essay are not publicly available; however, a sample of Stevenson's photographic collection is available <http://www.capitalcollections.org.uk>.

<sup>38</sup> David Farrier, *Unsettled Narratives*, Routledge, London, 2007, p. 55.



In the photograph captioned “Two dancing girls” (LSH 149/91p15) the dancer on the right looks straight at the camera while the one on the left turns away towards the members of the audience; in “Butaritari—native dance” (LSH 149/91p15) the audience members are not looking at the dance performance, but rather at the camera, and one of the kneeling male dancers even looks towards the camera as he dances; in the photograph captioned as “same” (LSH 149/91p15) the audience’s bodiless heads are visible on the edges of the frame—only their peering eyes remain, fixed directly upon the camera. In the whole series of photographs, some of the dancers are intent on their performance, while others look straight at the camera: the latter, it seems, are explicitly *dancing for the camera*.

The camera is present not only as a recording tool, but as a distraction: its presence clearly redirects attention from the dancers towards the photographer. The overwhelming impression offered by this series is the sense that the real performance is not the dance, but the exchange of looks—dancers and audience members are more interested in the camera, which reciprocally captures the dance as well as their interest. The result of these interlocking gazes is an ongoing encounter that persists, long after the written text finishes. In this way, I consider these photographs as more than one-sided recordings; instead they are collaborative series of performances. The native audience is in fact enjoying two performances: the islanders as dancers and Stevenson as photographer. Several of the figures in the photos actively ignore the dance performance and peer curiously over shoulders in order to catch a glimpse of Stevenson and his camera: the photographer himself becomes the subject of his camera as he is simultaneously surrounded by the watching crowd, but also outside of it. His photographic gaze upon the islanders becomes introspectively recursive: a watching of others who watch him as he watches them and so on.

These faces on the edge of the frames add an incredible dimension of intimacy to the photographs, not only because they register Stevenson’s presence as benign and familiar, but because the reader/viewer is reminded of Stevenson’s presence. They are important records of Stevenson’s physical presence and engagement in the social life of the islands, but they simultaneously evoke their subjects’ physicality. For instance, the large blank space in the foreground is filled with the shadows of the crowd of onlookers, a reminder of the physical bodies that cast them.



It is clear that these photographs have recorded much more than the photographer's intention, they thus intensify what may have gone unnoticed before the photographic act. The album captions signify the photographer's intention (to record the dancers competing), even as the images persist in drawing the viewer's attention to what is not in the foreground (the dense audience that is, with Stevenson, observing the dance). The audience members framing the edges of the photographs are a striking aspect of the series, since they reveal Stevenson's idiosyncratic and interactive use of the camera: rather than simply record the performance in a disembodied, disinterested fashion, Stevenson has captured those individuals *experiencing* the same event as himself. While this manner of framing highlights the exchange between the photographer and the marginal, it also suggests that Stevenson is working against the very concept of framing: if the photographic frame represents the photographer's selection of what should or should not be included, then Stevenson's rough, inelegant crowded frames are suggestive of ambivalence over what to include and indicate *the process* of framing itself. In fact, Stevenson's crowded frames ask the viewer to forget that the image is a photograph: the surfeit of human bodies overwhelm the photographer's desire to collect them, neatly into the camera's viewfinder. Stevenson's inability to discriminate between different human subject matter and his tendency to record an excess of information stands in stark contrast to his literary recording of the event. In *In the South Seas*, Stevenson attempts to describe the dancers' gestures, "all the dancers, waving their arms, swaying their bodies, and clapping their breasts in perfect time",<sup>39</sup> and to interpret their performances "I would at times make out some shadowy but decisive outline of a plot";<sup>40</sup> in all these textual descriptions, however, he never refers to what the photographs foreground, the large audience that is watching both the dancers and himself.

Stevenson's photographic method is characteristic of the variety of contemporaneous approaches in proto-modern anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century. In the last decade of the century, fieldwork was often of the expeditionary type and it involved a combination of ethnological and physical anthropological interviews and questionnaires; only much later was longer, participant observation *in situ* introduced and systematized by Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. Stevenson's inherently reflexive photographic vision—his photographs refer back to him and the moment of their creation, at the moment of encounter—belongs to a period of

---

<sup>39</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 190.



methodological unruliness in which the boundary between “scientific” and “artistic” photography was often blurred. Stevenson, it goes without saying, does not belong to the anthropological canon; however, his Pacific photographs, although they are rich with ethnographic detail, maintain a strong sense of personal engagement, affect and emotion, which places them within a proto-humanistic documentary tradition. Stevenson’s “Big Book” is strikingly proleptic of the current sensory turn—the subjective experience of the senses—in anthropology and photography studies: were his photographs to be re(assembled) to their literary kin, Stevenson’s photo-text would be important contribution to our understanding of the generic and disciplinary convergence between art and anthropology, photography and literature.

Carla Manfredi  
Queen’s University, Canada

MANFREDI, Carla, « Picturing Robert Louis Stevenson’s Pacific Phototext », in actes du colloque « Photolittérature, littératie visuelle et nouvelles textualités », sous la dir. de V. Lavoie ; P. Edwards ; J-P. Montier ; NYU, Paris, 26 & 27 octobre 2012, publié sur Phlit le 31/05/2013. url : <http://phlit.org/press/?p=1699>