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Shifting Identities in R. L. Stevenson's Postcolonial Fiction

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A Scotsman's Pacific:

Shifting Identities in R.L. Stevenson's Postcolonial Fiction

Sylvie Largeaud-Ort ga

Robert Louis Stevenson first came to the Pacific for reasons of health: in July 1888, aged 38 and chronically ill with tuberculosis, he embarked on a South Sea cruise which, in those days, was thought to be a panacea. The Pacific proved indeed so beneficial that the cruise transformed into permanent exile and subsequent settlement in Samoa:

I shall never take that walk by the Fisher's Tryst and Glencorse; I shall never see Auld Reekie; I shall never set my foot again upon the heather. Here I am until I die, and here will I be buried. The word is out and the doom written. Or, if I do come, it will be a voyage to a further goal, and in fact a suicide.¹

While Stevenson became one of the most famous Scots in the Pacific, his mind always turned back to his homeland. His Pacific letters express an abiding nostalgia for Scotland, such as resonates in a letter written on a rainy Samoa day, two months before he died:

All smells of the good wet earth, sweetly, with a kind of Highland touch. [...] Now the windows stream, the roof reverberates. It is good; it answers something which is in my heart; I know not what; old memories of the wet moorland belike. (p. 604)

He was also prone to compare Pacific islanders to Scottish Highlanders, and to denounce the ravages wreaked on them by British or French (or, for that matter, German, American or Spanish) quasi-colonialism:

Not much beyond a century had passed since [Scottish Highlanders] were in the same convulsive and transitionary state as the Marquesans of to-day. In both cases an alien authority enforced, the clans disarmed, the chiefs deposed, new customs introduced, and chiefly that fashion of regarding money as the means and object of existence. The commercial age, in each, succeeding at a bound to an age of war abroad and patriarchal communism at home. In one the cherished practice of tattooing, in the other a cherished costume, proscribed.²

Yet how Stevenson's Scottishness played out in this imperial context was complex and contradictory. If in Samoa he behaved 'like Cameron of Lochiel or Cluny MacPherson',³ treating the local staff as members of a clan, he did so partly in order to make them work. As Ilaria Sborgi infers, 'clanship was an ethical matter yet it was also part of the colonial game'.⁴ These paradoxes underscore Stevenson's uncertain identity in the Pacific. One may suggest, with Sborgi, that

Scotland represented his country of origins and his past, the ‘cultural identity’ that enabled him to sympathise with the islanders, while England was the present, the ‘home of his literary and intellectual constituency’.⁵ And yet Stevenson’s sense of identity is further complicated because his nostalgia for Britain is counterbalanced by his satisfaction at being in the South Seas, and in Vailima, his Samoan home: ‘I wouldn’t change my present installation for any post, dignity, honour or advantage conceivable to me. It fits the bill; I have the loveliest time’ (*Selected Letters*, p. 472).

This paper examines some of the ways in which Stevenson addresses shifting forms of identity in three of his Pacific works of fiction: ‘The Isle of Voices’ (1893), ‘The Bottle Imp’ (1893), and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894). Stevenson denounced the fact that Pacific islanders were often endowed with a predetermined and counterfeit cultural identity: ‘Everybody else who has tried [writing a South Sea story], that I have seen, got carried away by the romance, and ended in a kind of sugar candy epic, and the whole effect was lost’ (*Selected Letters*, pp. 467-68). Although different in genre and style, these three tales present a pioneering picture of Pacific islands and islanders. The innovative nature of these works in part reflects Stevenson’s prior legal studies, which shape his use of classical references as a means of critiquing imperialism and Western character. That critique is also shaped by a sense that the destruction of Pacific cultures is replaying the damage done to Highland society. Yet two of these tales also herald postcolonial literature⁶ by endeavouring to present things from Pacific islanders’ perspectives: for the first time in Pacific literature, culture clashes are approached from thematic and axiological points of view that purport to be indigenous. Their inconclusive endings reflect the ambivalence of Stevenson’s own status in the Pacific, and signal his ultimate reluctance to speak to the last for them. Moreover, structural elements of the stories demonstrate the shaping influence of a new vocabulary of Pacific myths and an awareness of traditional gift-culture. Examining these stories in this light suggests that Stevenson’s ‘Scottish Pacific’ was shaped by the Pacific as much as by Scotland.

Tahiti and the Tuamotu: Paradise and Antiquity Regained

In the South Sea travel literature and fiction surveyed by Rod Edmond,⁷ Tahiti and the Tuamotu islands are commonly represented as a Biblical Paradise, replete with prelapsarian Noble Savages and nude *vahine* (women), all for the benefit of visiting Westerners. It may at first seem that Stevenson’s fiction complies with these stereotypes, for instance with *The Ebb-Tide*’s representation of a Tuamotu atoll: ‘The isle – the undiscovered, the scarce-believed in – now lay before them [...]. The beach was excellently white, the continuous barrier of trees inimitably green’.⁸ This pristine island, offering salvation to erring white navigators, resembles the ‘garden of Eden’ that miraculously materialised to Bougainville’s bemused eyes, and which started the myth of Tahiti and its neighbouring islands as Paradise regained, in literature and in collective consciousness.⁹ Another leitmotif in South Sea literature was to match up Pacific islands to their Mediterranean counterparts in antiquity. Again, Bougainville’s travel account set the trend by eliding Tahiti and Virgil’s ‘Happy Groves’.¹⁰ The epigraph to the *Voyage autour du Monde* (1771)

is a quote from *The Aeneid*'s catabasis, or voyage to the underworld – '*Lucis habitamus opacis, riparumque toros et prata recentia rivis incolimus*'¹¹ – and he named Tahiti 'New Cythera' after the birthplace of Aphrodite/Venus.¹² The image of the amorous Venus-like *vahine* instantly became another South Sea *topos koïnos*.¹³ And because the Pacific islands were perceived as having been preserved from the corruption of the Old World, they offered an opportunity for visitors to experience a beatific catharsis, or process of purification. This other classical *topos* was also lavishly applied in South Sea literature.

Stevenson's experience of the Pacific was often filtered through classical texts. Virgil's *Aeneid* was a favourite read; it was his only book in Tautira in 1888,¹⁴ and while circumnavigating Tutuila, Eastern Samoa, in 1891. Like Bougainville, Stevenson also referred to *The Aeneid* when describing his Pacific landfalls. In Aoa Bay, for instance:

I had Virgil's bay all morning to myself, and feasted on solitude, and overhanging woods, and the retiring sea. [...] I confused today and two thousand years ago, and wondered in which of these epochs I was flourishing at that moment; and then I would stroll out, and see the rocks and woods, and the arcs of beaches, curved like a whorl in a fair woman's ear, and huge ancient trees, jutting high overhead out of the hanging forest, and feel the place at least belonged to the age of fable, and awaited Aeneas and his battered fleets. (*Selected Letters*, p. 405)

The Ebb-Tide contains numerous quotations from and allusions to Virgil's classic.¹⁵ More destitute than Stevenson in Tautira, the main protagonist, Oxford-educated beachcomber Herrick, has a single possession, a copy of *The Aeneid*, parts of which he can recite by heart. Half of the narrative takes place on a Tuamotu atoll likened to Virgil's '*nemorosa Zacynthos*' (p. 202).¹⁶ On the atoll, Herrick experiences a catharsis, illuminated by the anaphoric 'he forgot the past and the present; forgot [...]; forgot' (p. 189); drinking the Lethean waters of forgetfulness, he enters a state that in many ways parallels Virgil's underworld. Intriguingly, however, this very move signals a variance from the classical *topos*: the waters of Lethe were drunk to get *out* of the underworld, in order to re-enter the world of the living. The straightforward application of the classics to the Pacific is disrupted.

Such classical references therefore function differently in *The Ebb-Tide* than in most other works of South Sea literature: when Stevenson revisits texts from antiquity and Western settlement in the Pacific, it serves to demonstrate how incongruous they are in the context of the late nineteenth-century Pacific. As Roslyn Jolly argues, Stevenson's approach to Virgil was not only literary: 'Roman law', which was a compulsory part of his legal studies at Edinburgh University, 'took the place of classical literature in Stevenson's education', and Stevenson used 'the Roman comparison to measure difference'¹⁷ with the Pacific. *The Ebb-Tide* goes backwards indeed, as the title indicates, recalling antiquity in order to revisit the foundations of empire-building. Like a receding wave, it tries to clear the South Seas of the flotsam and jetsam that have so far hampered

their true representations. Stevenson uses Virgil to 'measure' the inadequacy of Western civilization in the Pacific by likening his disreputable adventurers to Aeneas, icon of colonialism in the Mediterranean. Through them, Stevenson questions the foundations of Western colonialism, demonstrating the disreputable nature of the British, French, American, German and Spanish enterprises.

The Ignoble White Savage and the New White Man in the Pacific

In much of his South Sea fiction, Stevenson chooses to delve into more serious topics than exotic romances: he writes against colonialism and in support of the islanders' assertions of their own autonomous identity. This purpose is equally evident in his non-fiction Pacific writings, notably his eleven letters to the *Times* (1889-1893) and his impassioned survey of contemporary Samoa, *A Footnote to History* (1893). One should not conclude, however, that Stevenson's mostly unfavourable representation of Attwater – he is a tyrant and a murderer – is a distinctively post-colonial feature: paradoxically enough, most colonial literature conformed to a sweeping fatal impact argument which duly blamed the West for the Pacific peoples' demise.¹⁸ Where Stevenson does depart from previous South Sea literature is in his incisive indictment of the West, presented as a *deliberately* destructive force. Attwater is a cold-blooded murderer who shoots any islander who breaks his autocratic rules. Attwater is also a slaver: Jolly demonstrates that his 'engagement in the labour trade violates the most important law governing the activities of British subjects in the region, the Pacific Islanders Protections Acts'.¹⁹ Jolly also demonstrates that Attwater is a phoney missionary, like 'the many who went to the Pacific to evangelise [and] established a strong unofficial British presence in the region'.²⁰ And yet, she indicates that his impact is comparable to some missionaries' dismantling of the political, economic and social structures of the Pacific. Stevenson made this clear in a letter to an aspiring missionary: 'remember that *you cannot change ancestral feelings of right and wrong without what is practically soul-murder*' (*Selected Letters*, p. 593). As a Scotsman in the Pacific, Stevenson was particularly sensitive to that cause, owing to the affinity he would trace between Pacific peoples and the Scottish Covenanters whose 'child' he claimed to be (p. 450n3).

All in all, Attwater is the Savage man: through him, Stevenson daringly inverts the nineteenth-century hierarchies of racial and social identities in the Pacific. Moreover, this kind of Savage proves to be, not Noble, but Ignoble:

As the [native] boy was filling [a white guest]'s glass, the bottle escaped from his hand and was shattered, and the wine spilt on the veranda floor. Instant grimness as of death appeared in the face of Attwater; he smote the bell imperiously, and the two brown natives fell into the attitude of attention and stood mute and trembling. There was just a moment of silence and hard looks; then followed a few savage words in the native; and, upon a gesture of dismissal, the service proceeded as before. (p. 215)

At a linguistic level, Attwater in fact resembles a cannibal – the epitome of Ignoble Savagery – because he is, in Louis-Jean Calvet’s term, ‘glottophagous’: he denies his native labour even the right to speak.²¹ This cannibalism is epitomised by the suicide of one of Attwater’s servants, who kills himself because he is not allowed to have a word in his own defence after being unjustly punished. Attwater’s glottophagy is underlined in the image of the corpse, whose ‘tongue stuck out, poor devil, and the birds had got at him’ (p. 217). One may conclude with Ann Colley that Attwater is ‘a hybrid of the worst elements delineating a destructive colonial presence’.²² Despite the portrayal of Attwater, *The Ebb-Tide* also offers a pioneering rejection of the fatal impact argument that Pacific peoples were doomed to extinction. This argument was traditionally developed along the following narrative pattern: a white male hero would visit Tahiti or its neighbouring archipelagos, spend some time in the company of the indigenous people – lovers, most of the time – and would finally sail back home to the comfort and safety of Western civilization. The lovelorn islanders left behind, who soon perished in despair, offer a metonymy of their whole race. This elegiac tone is evident in the writings of Melville, Charles Warren Stoddard, and Pierre Loti.²³ While Stevenson’s protagonists are white, too, their final destinies in the Pacific are at complete variance with this pattern. One of them, Huish, dies on the Tuamotu atoll, a victim of his own viciousness. Another one, Davis, chooses to stay on the atoll, having become a religious convert and a besotted disciple of Attwater’s. Attwater plans to sail home in the distant future, but the narrative does not reach as far as that. The South Sea convention is thus belied, with three protagonists out of four failing to return home. As to the hero, Herrick, his future is totally undecided. The reader does not know whether he might follow Anchises-like Attwater’s admonitions to contribute to the colonial exploitation of the island; or whether he might respond to Davis’s invitation to help in a mission; or whether yet he may leave the Tuamotu atolls for some unknown place. While the odds are that he will leave Attwater’s island, in keeping with his repeatedly expressed opposition to colonialist and evangelical activities, the end of the narrative is inconclusive and it leaves the reader’s expectations suspended in mid-air.

As to the native crew that came with the protagonists, while they are now ‘disposed of’ (p. 252), whether they are to stay on Attwater’s island or sail off is not revealed either. This open ending may reflect Stevenson’s uncertainty about the prospects of Pacific islanders, or it might reflect Herrick’s unfinished quest for an identity: a new type of a white man in the Pacific had yet to be defined. Herrick had befriended the native crew, and their mutual future might lie on some other island beyond the horizon, which Herrick is left gazing at as the narrative closes. Is this a perspective of hope for a joint fresh start, for some cross-cultural new identity? What defines the new prospects of the Pacific may be, after all, this very inconclusiveness, which remains open to all kinds of possibilities. As Oliver S. Buckton similarly discusses in relation to *Catriona* (1893), such indeterminacy may eventually reflect Stevenson’s sense of his own ambiguous status in Samoa.²⁴ Stevenson was eager for things to change in the Pacific, but found to his dismay that he had only very limited power to help. The letters he wrote to *The Times* had no resounding effect – except putting him at personal risk – nor had the time-consuming *Footnote to History*. He was a

Scotsman opposed to quasi-colonial rule and yet he contemplated seeking an official British appointment in his adopted country. He denounced Western interests in the Pacific, but, as a writer, ‘was still invested in British and American interests through his literary, publishing and social networks in those countries’.²⁵ He was a white supporter of Mataafa, the chief whose opposition to colonialism in Samoa ran so high that, on his approach, white travellers were ‘waved from his path by his armed guards’.²⁶ In light of Stevenson’s own contradictory experiences and attitudes, Herrick’s quest for an identity in the Pacific is unsurprisingly unresolved.

Modern-Day Fridays

Stevenson’s opposition to the fatal impact argument is outlined more fully in ‘The Isle of Voices’ and ‘The Bottle Imp’, where for the first time in Pacific literature, the indigenous people are neither an exotic background nor simple foils to white characters. In placing them centre stage and acknowledging that they have an identity of their own, Stevenson thus anticipates G erard Genette’s plea one century later for a ‘*Friday*, where Crusoe would be seen, described and judged by Friday’.²⁷ The indigenous people are no longer objects, the ones who that are gazed at, the passive recipients of the actions of a white hero. Instead they are subjects, the ones who steer the action, and who may gaze in wonder at the European interloper. In ‘The Isle of Voices’, it is the white man’s turn to be infantilised: ‘Keola knew white men are like children’,²⁸ a form of disparagement formerly levelled at islanders. It is the white man who is now deemed untrustworthy: ‘it was the trouble with these white men [...] that you could never be sure of them’ (p. 113). European characters are repeatedly declared to be ‘a fool of a white man’ (p. 116) by contemptuous islanders. It is their ‘customs’ that are represented, in ‘The Bottle Imp’, as alien and meaningless: ‘the Haoles [white men] sat and played at the cards and drank whiskey as their custom is’.²⁹ Here again, Stevenson inverts racial hierarchies; white men are now given new identities by Pacific islanders.

Nor are the islanders reduced to the conventional clich e of the Noble Savage. If Stevenson’s native characters are to be typified at all, it may be for their signs of Western acculturation. In Tahiti for instance, the heroes of ‘The Bottle Imp’ are champions of a society of consumption. They ‘make a great parade of money, and themselves conspicuous with carriages and horses’, while Kokua exhibits her ‘fine holoku’ – a garment imposed by missionaries – and her imported ‘rich lace’ (p. 93). Another striking instance of the islanders’ acculturation can be found in the Tuamotu atolls, where part of the narrative of ‘The Isle of Voices’ takes place. The most isolated archipelago in the Pacific, the Tumaotu was doubly protected from Western influence because of the risks it posed to sailing ships, as attested by its Western appellation, the Dangerous Archipelago. And yet the Tuamotu islanders, or Paumotu, define their home as a ‘rich island, where [...] ships c[o]me trading with rum and tobacco’ (pp. 115-16), as well as ‘a warship’, and with both a ‘catechist’ and a trader stationed there (pp. 117-18) – in other words, it is ‘a business, and a colony, and a mission’ similar to Attwater’s island. Consequently, even the most isolated Paumotu

partly rely on imported Western goods for their subsistence and enjoyment.

As they are also cannibals, it may seem that the Paumotu remain cast as Ignoble Savages. Keola's Paumotu wife confesses to her Hawaiian husband:

[T]o tell you the truth, my people are eaters of men; but this they keep secret. And the reason they will kill you before we leave [the Isle of Voices] is because in our island ships come, and Donat-Rimarau comes and talks for the French, and there is a white trader there in a house with a verandah, and a catechist. [...] Ah, [...] it is the finest place in the seas except Papeete. (pp. 117-18)

Yet, this kind of cannibalism proves to be a far cry from its original form: human flesh now is a subsidiary delicacy, all the more coveted since it has been declared illegal by forceful Westerners. In sharp contrast, cannibalism was once highly ritualistic. According to Marcel Mauss, cannibalism was part of the gift/counter-gift system that structured all indigenous Pacific societies; it was known as the *kai-hau-kai*, indicating that the *hau*, or life principle, was inserted between two *kai*, or food gift exchanges.³⁰ All this Stevenson may reasonably be assumed to have known by the time he wrote 'The Isle of Voices'. It was his ambition to write '*the big book on the South Seas*',³¹ and he had gathered prodigious anthropological information, through an intuitive use of the gift/counter-gift system:

When I desired any detail of savage custom, or of superstitious belief, I cast back in the story of my fathers, and fished for what I wanted with some trait of equal barbarism: Michael Scott, Lord Derwentwater's head, the second-sight, the Water Kelpie, – each of these I have found a killing bait; the black bull's head of Stirling procured me the legend of Rahero; and what I knew of the Cluny Macphersons, or the Appin Stewarts, enabled me to learn, and helped me to understand, about the Tevas of Tahiti. The native was no longer ashamed, his sense of kinship grew warmer, and his lips opened. It is this sense of kinship that the traveller must rouse and share.³²

This gift-exchange of Scottish and Pacific stories contrasts with the late-nineteenth-century 'Isle of Voices', where the gift/counter-gift system has been discarded for a monetary system: the atoll turns out to be 'a cried fair', a 'business' place where 'millions and millions of dollars' circulate (p. 119). Accordingly cannibalism has not only turned into a Western, profane taboo, but it is no longer associated with any kind of heroism: the Paumotu now secretly pamper their prospective victim so that he may be plump to a turn, and plan to have their treat behind the white men's backs.

Native Paradise regained

The hero of 'The Isle of Voices', Keola, learns the hard way how to dispense with the Western society of consumption altogether. Keola initially appears as a thoroughly Westernised Hawaiian, used to a modern urban setting and a high standard of living. But once marooned on a deserted Tuamotu atoll, he finds that he has to learn how to survive. Unlike Crusoe, he doesn't have a wreck at his disposal, so survival has to be carried out the local way: 'he made a fire drill, and a shell hook, and fished and cooked his fish, and climbed after green cocoanuts, the juice of which he drank, for in all the island there was no water' (p. 114). In these primordial actions, Keola may be said to reproduce the founding deeds of the Pacific. His stay on the Tuamotu atoll can be seen as a catabasis similar to Herrick's in *The Ebb-Tide*: both Western and native heroes revisit the foundations of their own cultures, the grounds of their mythological forefathers. Tahiti and the Tuamotu atolls were indeed viewed by Hawaiians as their lands of origin, both historically – many of the first Hawaiians sailed from there – and mythologically: Tahiti and the neighbouring atolls were 'Kahiki, the invisible place out of which come the gods, ancestors, regalia, edible plants and ritual institutions'.³³ When Keola carves a shell hook, and when he goes fishing on this island of origins, he follows in the footsteps of the giant hero Tāfa'i (for Tahitians) or Kaha'i (for Hawaiians). According to Polynesian myths, Tāfa'i/Kaha'i fished Tahiti and its surrounding islands, then the Tuamotu archipelago, before he fished the Hawaiian islands. He attempted to haul the latter South, but he was let down by his brothers and the rope snapped.³⁴ In some variants, these high deeds are attributed to Hawai'i-loa, in others to Kapuhe'euanui; in other Hawaiian variants, it is Maui, a highly celebrated semi-god and a major Polynesian founding figure, whose deeds Keola may be seen to repeat here.³⁵ What matters more than the specific names is the mythical exploit per se,³⁶ which is explicitly referred to in Stevenson's narrative: 'since first the islands were fished out of the sea' (p. 111). Keola tentatively repeats the fishing exploits of these mythical heroes: as in the most celebrated Hawaiian Creation chant, the *Kumulipo*, he 'draws together the lands of the old ocean'.³⁷ After fishing up the North Island of Aotearoa, Maui returned to challenge his father/elder brother figures. Keola also recapitulates this action: he challenges his Westernised father-figures, which can be seen as an attempt to recapture a truly indigenous identity – for himself and, symbolically, for the whole Polynesian people whose native culture seems to be falling into oblivion.

In some variants of the Pacific myths of Creation, Maui is also credited with giving light to the world, while in others it is the work of Tane, the most daring son of Mother Earth and Father Sky. Keola re-enacts this founding deed, too: he makes 'a fire drill' (p. 114) and learns 'the art of fire-making, a well-known sex-symbol'.³⁸ In doing so, he revisits the times when the primal couple was one eternally-copulating body in primal darkness: Maui/Tane decided to wrench their bodies apart so that there should be light. In the wake of Maui/Tane, Keola sparks off a light by rubbing two sticks together – one supine and tender like Mother Earth, the other erect and hard like Father Sky. He does so in awe, for starting a fire in this ritualistic way could only be performed by consecrated priests. This explains why, although 'he made a lamp of cocoa-shell,

and drew the oil of the ripe nuts, and made a wick of fibre; and [...] lit his lamp', every night he 'lay and trembled till morning' (p. 114). Keola's concern is not only, like Crusoe's, to engineer a way to make light; it is also to try and learn how to live with the terror of transgressing one of his own culture's fundamental and most fatal *tabu*. Yet at the same time he is reviving Polynesian awareness of this culture; he resuscitates the sacred rituals that have been left dormant by failing forefathers and wayward priests. Hence his name, *ke ola*, 'life' in Hawaiian: he resuscitates and carves out an identity for his own people. In a way, Keola is reaching for Paradise regained on the atoll – but this time, the Paradise is indigenous.

The Fertile Impact Counterargument

The same may be said about the Hawaiian heroes of 'The Bottle Imp': in Tahiti, they too experience a catabasis and revisit the land of origins, Kahiki. Keawe is another highly Westernised hero, as symbolised by his possession of the Bottle Imp, previously owned by Napoleon, Captain Cook, and Prester John (p. 75). The bottle has enabled him to become the owner in Hawaii of the 'Bright House', a magnificent Western-style palace that – from a Hawaiian perspective – is also a glaring sign of his demented pride. Indeed, under the spell of the Western Imp, Keawe has wished his house to be 'all about like the King's palace' (p. 78). But the Hawaiian king is not to be equalled: he sits at the top of the Hawaiian hierarchy, next to the gods. The names of Keawe's house also illuminate his sacrilegious tendencies. One, the 'House of Keawe', literally duplicates the *Hale o Keawe*, a sacred mausoleum built to the glory of Keawe the Great, an ancient divinised king whose remains must be worshipped by his descendants – that is, none other than Keawe. But Keawe puts his faith in the spirit of the bottle, and completely neglects the spirit of his ancestor. The other name, the 'Bright House', literally means *Hale Kula* – bright or 'Sacred House' – i.e. the house of supreme god Tangaroa-rangi, or Tagaloa-lagi, set in mythical Hawaiiiki. This means that Keawe claims to equal even a supreme god. To make matters worse, in sharp contrast with the gift/counter-gift system, which adds value to a gift every time it is transferred, the magic bottle loses value every time it is transferred: it may only be sold for a decreasing amount of money. When it can no longer be sold, its last owner shall be damned. Such is the situation the hero faces as he reaches Tahiti, or Kahiki.

Kahiki may be said to be an alternative for the original *Hale Kula* in Polynesian lore, as a mythical land of origins. Keawe is led to Tahiti by his wife, Kokua, in what turns out to be an expiatory voyage where, like Keola, he is taught the hard way how to reconnect with his own past and how to ask for the forgiveness of the gods. Kokua demonstrates to him that the value of money can vary, according to currencies, and that Western powers are random and uncertain: the couple have come to Tahiti to try and sell the bottle for a few French *centimes*, of lesser value than an American cent. But they fail to sell the alien spirit to the Tahitian people: on the sacred land of gods, nobody will approach the bottle. Kokua then demonstrates that Tahitian, or Polynesian, values can exceed Western ones in the Pacific, for she ultimately decides to make her husband a

supreme gift, Polynesian style: she contrives to buy the bottle herself, so as to save Keawe from damnation. Keawe discovers it by chance, and in his turn, decides to secretly repurchase the bottle, which has reached, by then, the lowest price possible. This is his counter-gift. Keawe has finally learnt that the gift/counter-gift system is the only way to salvation in Tahiti. This allows the tale to end well: the bottle is ultimately bought by a vicious Westerner, which renders unto Caesar the thing that is Caesar's. The narrator concludes: 'great, since then, has been the peace of all their days in the Bright House' (p. 102). Paradise is regained for Keawe and Kokua. And this paradise is strikingly cross-cultural: both Western, as the couple live happily ever after in the 'Bright House', acquired through the spirit of the bottle – and Polynesian, since they are now reconnected with the *Hale Kula*, and the spirits of their ancestors.³⁹

It must also be noted that in both tales, the myth of the *vahine* is debunked by Stevenson: his Polynesian female characters are now the powerful vindicators of Pacific traditions, and the level-headed members of a Western-style society of consumption. They prove to be the saviours of their husbands – a far cry from South Sea conventional exotic adornments, and another of Stevenson's bold inversions of the racial and gender hierarchies of his time. For their survival, the male heroes are now completely dependent on Kokua, Lehua, and even Keola's unnamed Paumotu wife. It is most striking that Stevenson, who was notoriously reluctant to create full-fledged female characters while writing from Europe, should now create female Pacific characters in a way no one had dared attempt before him. In their mastery of genealogy – which is of fundamental importance in the Pacific, as it secures the oral transmission of one's identity – these women root their husbands back in the islands where they belong, and help them to restore their damaged identities. These Pacific female characters may be compared to another pre-eminent female character of Stevenson's, equally created in Samoa – but Scottish, *Weir of Hermiston's* Kirstie:

[She] knows the legend of her own family, and may count kinship with some illustrious dead. For it is the mark of the Scot of all classes: that he [...] remembers and cherishes the memory of his forefathers, good or bad; and there burns alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the twentieth generation. [...] They were all, and Kirstie the first of all, ready and eager to pour forth the particulars of their genealogy, embellished with every detail that memory had handed down or fancy fabricated.⁴⁰

Both 'The Isle of Voices' and 'The Bottle Imp' end on the perspectives of a revived Pacific society that is striving to achieve a balanced union between modern Western and traditional Pacific cultures. The fatal impact argument is thus turned into a demonstration of cross-cultural 'fertile impact'.

Scottish *Tusitala*

At the end of 'The Isle of Voices', however, this hopeful perspective looks uncertain. Instead of closing on the traditional image of the happy-ever-after couple – Keola and Lehua, Western and Pacific cultures reconciled – the focus is on *three* characters. The third figure, Lehua's father, Kalamake, is a completely westernised Hawaiian.⁴¹ He looms so large in the last lines that he is the character on whom the whole narrative concludes: 'from that day to this, Kalamake has never more been heard of. But whether he was slain in the battle by the trees, or whether he is still kicking his heels upon the Isle of Voices, who shall say?' (p. 122). Like *The Ebb-Tide*, 'The Isle of Voices' is strikingly inconclusive, ending on an unanswered question. The narrator's voice in 'The Isle of Voices' suddenly chooses to be voiceless. Paradoxically enough, such inconclusiveness may actually express Stevenson's most sanguine support for a revival of indigenous Pacific identity. Through these inconclusive endings, Stevenson relinquishes his identity as narrator, his supreme authority as teller of tales. Indeed, Stevenson deliberately avoids the glottophagy of Attwater, refusing to rob the indigenous islanders of their own words. Stevenson was renamed *Tusitala*, 'the one-who-writes-stories', by appreciative Samoans; but he knew it was not for him, a Scotsman, to deliver any authoritative message to Pacific islanders. It was not for him to answer the late-nineteenth-century islanders' quest for an identity in the modern Pacific. In Samoa, *Tusitala* was aware of his own shifting identity: he enjoyed international fame (which left Samoans indifferent, except for its material benefits) and he incarnated a vigorous Scottish tradition of story-telling. But when dealing with the identity of the indigenous people in the Pacific islands – a region where story-telling is a sacred ritual, a consecrated way to reconnect with man's divine origins, back to the times of Creation – he was but an apprentice teller of tales.

In the same manner as 'The Isle of Voices', 'The Bottle Imp' may be compared to the *Kumulipo*, Hawaii's most celebrated Creation chant.⁴² In a way not dissimilar to the *Kumulipo*, Stevenson's tale recites Keawe's genealogical chant, extolling the sacred link between the past and the present, the gods and their human descendants. But here again, Stevenson's ambition is not to usurp the indigenous people's voices: 'The work of weaving genealogies into a hymnlike chant commemorating the family antecedents was the work of a *Haku-mele* or "Master-of-song", attached to the court of a chief, one who occupied also the special post of a Ku'auhau or genealogist. He held an honored place in the household'.⁴³ Stevenson does not claim to be a *Haku-mele*: he is but *Tusitala*, a Western teller of profane tales on the Pacific. His other difference with a *Haku-mele*, however, is that he has a wider audience, or readership. Such may be the import of Stevenson's prefatory note to the reader of 'The Bottle Imp': 'the fact that the tale has been designed and written for a Polynesian audience may lend it some extraneous interest nearer home' (p. 72). Stevenson delivers to the world what Lewis Carroll calls 'the love-gift of a fairy-tale',⁴⁴ or *mea-alofa* (literally 'thing of love') in pan-Polynesian.

A few weeks before he died, the Samoan chiefs made Stevenson a sumptuous 'love-gift', or *mea-alofa*, by building 'the Road of the Loving Hearts' from Apia to his place of residence, Vaili-

ma. In return, he offered the counter-gift of a tale. He told them about the Highlands of Scotland where ‘other people’s sheep’ now grazed:

You Samoans may fight, you may conquer twenty times, and thirty times, and all will be in vain. There is but one way to defend Samoa [...] it is to make roads, and gardens, and care for your trees, and sell their produce wisely, and, in one word, to occupy and use your country. If you do not, others will. (*Selected Letters*, p. 602)

To all, Westerners and Pacific islanders alike, Stevenson made gifts that may allow each one to find out more about each other, and about their respective identities. Such was his all-encompassing counter-gift to the Pacific islanders’ *alofa* to him, which helped him try and redefine his own identity as an author.

Conclusion

If Stevenson’s *The Ebb-Tide*, ‘The Isle of Voices’ and ‘The Bottle Imp’ revisit many South Sea stereotypes, they most often do so the better to discard them. Classical references to antiquity offer a pretext to search for new literary, political, social, religious and economic representations. When Paradise is regained in the Pacific, it may be Biblical no longer, but it may reflect indigenous cosmogony instead. The conventional representations of Noble and Ignoble Savages are boldly inverted, together with the Western gender, social and racial hierarchies that prevailed in the nineteenth century. The proposition of an inexorably moribund Pacific people is belied by indigenous male protagonists – a first in Pacific literature – who heroically revive the high deeds of their own ancestors, mythical and divine, and strive to combine modern and traditional cultures in the Pacific. *Vahine* are valiant heroines, the repositories of traditional values, and the harbingers of a brighter, cross-cultural future. Finally, Stevenson may be said to try and redefine his own identity as a story-teller in Samoa, by questioning the authoritative narrative voice of South Sea representations. In a remarkably postcolonial stance, true to the Oceanic ritual of the gift/counter-gift, Stevenson/*Tusitala* hands his narratives over for Other storytellers to speak and delineate their own shifting identities for themselves.⁴⁵

NOTES

- 1 *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Ernest Mehew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 541. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
- 2 Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas*, ed. by Neil Rennie (Penguin: London, 1998), p. 12.
- 3 Frank McLynn, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1993), pp. 399-400.
- 4 Ilaria Sborgi, “‘Home’ in Samoa: R. L. Stevenson and the South Pacific”, in *The House of Fiction as the House of Life: Representations of the House from Richardson to Woolf*, ed. by Francesca Saggini and Anna Enrichetta Succi (Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2012), pp. 150-155.

5 Sborgi, “‘Home’ in Samoa’, p. 153.

6 For Stevenson as ‘postcolonial’, see Roslyn Jolly, ‘*The Ebb-Tide and The Coral Island*’, *Scottish Studies Review*, 7.2 (2006), 79-91.

7 Rod Edmond, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

8 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and Quartette*, in *South Sea Tales*, ed. by Roslyn Jolly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 123-252 (p. 187). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

9 Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Voyage autour du Monde par la Frégate du Roi La Boudeuse et la Flûte l’Etoile* (Paris: La Découverte Poche, 1997), p. 138. The analogy between Tahiti and the Tuamotu is allegorical – like *The Ebb-Tide* as a whole – and cannot be taken literally, for an atoll is a low island, whereas Tahiti is a high, mountainous island.

10 Bougainville, p. 6.

11 ‘We tenant the shady groves, and dwell pillowed on the velvet banks, or in the meadows fresh with running brooks’. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. by John Jackson (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), p. 104.

12 Bougainville, p. 138.

13 Bougainville, p. 138.

14 In addition to ‘a Latin dictionary, which is good for naught’. Mehew, *Selected Letters*, p. 384.

15 For a fuller comparative study of *The Ebb-Tide* and *The Aeneid*, see Sylvie Largeaud-Ortégua, ‘Stevenson’s *The Ebb-Tide*, or Virgil’s *Aeneid* Revisited: How Literature May Make or Mar Empires’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, in press.

16 Both Mediterranean and Pacific islands ‘arise, tree-crowned, in the middle of the sea’. Virgil, *Aeneid*, p. 43 (my translation).

17 Jolly, ‘*The Ebb-Tide and The Coral Island*’, pp. 37-39.

18 For a full presentation of the fatal impact argument see Edmond, *Representing the South Pacific*.

19 Jolly, ‘Piracy, Slavery, and the Imagination of Empire in Stevenson’s Pacific fiction’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35.1 (2007), 157-173 (p. 167).

20 Jolly, ‘Piracy, Slavery, and the Imagination of Empire’, p. 157.

21 Louis-Jean Calvet, *Linguistique et Colonialisme: Petit Traité de Glottophagie* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 2002), p. 23.

22 Ann Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), p. 39.

23 For a comparative study of Stoddard’s and Stevenson’s South Sea fictions, see Sylvie Largeaud-Ortégua, ‘Îles Mythiques: Les Archipels de la Société et des Tuamotu dans la Littérature Anglophone de la Fin du XIXe Siècle, d’après une Étude Comparative des Œuvres de Stoddard et de Stevenson’, in *5000 Ans de Culture Ultramarine Pacifique*, ed. by Serge Dunis (Tahiti: Haere Po, 2010), pp. 121-42.

24 Oliver S. Buckton, *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), pp. 181-212.

25 Buckton, p. 188.

26 Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), p. 151.

27 G rard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La Litt rature au Second Degr * (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 424 (my translation).

28 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Isle of Voices', in *South Sea Tales*, pp. 103-122 (p. 112). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

29 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Bottle Imp', in *South Sea Tales*, pp. 73-102 (p. 87). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

30 Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), p. 160n1.

31 Buckton, p. 152. The book was never completed, and the notes were posthumously published (in part) in *In the South Seas*.

32 Stevenson, *In the South Seas*, p. 14.

33 Valerio Valeri, *Kingship and Sacrifice: Ritual and Society in Ancient Hawaii*, trans. by Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 8.

34 Teuira Henry, *Tahiti aux Temps Anciens*, trans. by Bertrand Jaunez (Paris: Mus e de l'Homme, 1993), pp. 454-6.

35 Henry, p. 578.

36 Henry, p. 580.

37 Henry, p. 578.

38 *The Kumulipo: A Hawaiian Creation Chant*, trans. and ed. by Martha Beckwith (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1951; repr. 1972), p. 108.

39 For a fuller cultural study of 'The Bottle Imp', see Sylvie Largeaud-Ort ga, *Ainsi Soit- le: Litt rature et Anthropologie dans Contes des Mers du Sud de R. L. Stevenson* (Paris: Honor  Champion, 2012), pp. 211-12.

40 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Weir of Hermiston*, in *Weir of Hermiston and Other Stories*, ed. by Paul Binding (Penguin: London, 1996), p. 53. In the Pacific, Stevenson created another full-fledged Scottish female character, Catriona, in *Catriona* (1893).

41 For a more detailed approach to Kalamake, see Sylvie Largeaud-Ort ga, 'Who is Who in "The Isle of Voices": How Victorian Robert Louis Stevenson Viewed Pacific Islanders' Perceptions of Victorians and of Themselves', in *Oceania and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Richard D. Fulton and Peter Hoffenberg (London: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 93-106.

42 For a fuller comparative study of 'The Bottle Imp' and the *Kumulipo*, see Largeaud-Ort ga, *Ainsi Soit- le*, pp. 519-26.

43 *Kumulipo*, ed. Beckwith, pp. 9, 35.

44 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 10.

45 Part of the argument developed in this paper has been published in Sylvie Largeaud-Ort ga, *Ainsi Soit- le: Litt rature et Anthropologie dans Contes des Mers du Sud de R. L. Stevenson*, (Paris: Honor  Champion, 2012). My thanks to Robert Louis Abrahamson and Philip Steer for their help with this paper.