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Sia Figiel, Albert Wendt and all the others: The Strange Case of R.L. Stevenson and Contemporary Pacific Writing

Contemporary Pacific writers have often had an overtly critical or at best ambiguous attitude towards Stevenson's presence in the South Seas. Yet, the Scottish novelist cannot be equated with those Western authors who promoted a view of the Pacific as tropical/erotic paradise and contributed to the success of the commercial genre known as "South Sea idyll". Conversely, in the six years spent in the South Pacific before his premature death in Samoa in 1894, Stevenson showed intellectual honesty, sobriety in lifestyle and seriousness of scope in his approach to a new culture. His fictional and non-fictional works in this period are marked by vocal criticism of the colonial enterprise and make him one of the very first European writers who subverted the myth of Western imperialism. Furthermore he not only dismantled colonial literary clichés but he also acknowledged the viewpoint of the indigenous "other" and the legitimacy of resistance to imperial power. An accurate postcolonial reading of Stevenson's late production cannot but relocate his position within the panorama of late 19th century Western writers dealing with the Pacific. This entails drawing distinctions between authors and overcoming rigid counter-discourses and polarisations that may be politically legitimate but also lead to simplifications and homogenizations.

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