

## The hero in love: Wiltshire's white identity in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Beach of Falesa*<sup>1</sup>



Márcia Cristine Agustini

Doutoranda/Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC)

**Resumo:** O conto *A praia selvagem* de Robert Louis Stevenson discute a relação desigual e simbiótica entre império e colônia. Esse artigo propõe-se a realizar um estudo interseccional levando em conta estudos antropológicos e da branquidade. Estudos antropológicos informam a noção de desestabilização identitária sofrida por aqueles que interagem com realidades diversas enquanto que estudos da branquidade informam a construção da branquidade como 'norma'. A contradição que emerge entre estas duas posturas torna-se visível nos conflitos pessoais do personagem principal, revelando a proficuidade de estudos similares para o aprofundamento de questões pós-coloniais que vão além da dicotomia colonizador/colonizado.

**Palavras-chave:** interseccional; choque cultural; branquidade.

**Abstract:** Robert Louis Stevenson's short story *The Beach of Falesa* discusses the uneven and symbiotic interrelationship between empire and colony. This article proposes to conduct an intersectional study which takes into account anthropological research and Whiteness studies. Anthropological research informs the notion of destabilization of identity experienced by those who interact with different realities whereas studies of whiteness inform the construction of whiteness as 'norm'. The contradiction that emerges from these two stances becomes visible in the personal conflicts of the main character. This disclosure points to the fertility of similar studies for the deepening of postcolonial issues that go beyond the dichotomy colonizer/colonized.

**Keywords:** intersectional; culture shock; Whiteness.

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**Resumen:** El cuento *The Beach of Falesa* de Robert Louis Stevenson discute la relación desigual e simbiótica entre imperio y colonia. Este artículo se propone a realizar un estudio interseccional que toma en cuenta estudios antropológicos y de *Whiteness*. Los estudios antropológicos informan la noción de desestabilización de la identidad que sufren los que interactúan con diferentes realidades mientras que los estudios de *Whiteness* informan la construcción de la identidad blanca como ‘norma’. La contradicción que surge entre estas dos posiciones se hace visible en los conflictos de carácter personal del personaje principal. Esta revelación indica que estudios similares pueden ser útiles para profundizar cuestiones postcoloniales que van más allá de la dicotomía colonizador/colonizado.

**Palabras clave:** interseccional; choque cultural; *Whiteness*.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Beach of Falesa* (1892) presents the fate of a British subject in a fictional Polynesian island. Inspired by the author’s experience in the Pacific islands, the novel reflects Stevenson’s awareness of the mutual interference the presence of foreigners in the island represented: “Stevenson was [...] conscious of the ways a Western presence altered, rather than simply destroyed, island cultures. And, in turn, he was shrewdly aware of the ways in which native life affected the thoughts and conduct of Europeans residing in the South Seas” (Colley 2008:871).

In *The Beach of Falesa* Stevenson explores this interrelation. The conflicts inherent in this encounter generate a narrative full of contradictions. Wiltshire never let his position of white privilege while, at the same time, demonstrates being affected by the local customs. Eventually, his connections with this people turn him into a supporter of the local culture. The incongruity of his position—after all, he is *part* of the culture that would be destroying the local traditions—makes his defense partial and inclined towards his own interests on the island. In order to investigate this phenomenon, the relation between whiteness and the fragmentation of the traveler’s identity will be dealt with.

Wiltshire is the narrator of the story. Written in an autobiographical mode, the novella presents his adventures in the island along with his

impressions of it. The union of these two modes of narration: travel and autobiography offers, according to Denise Adele Heaps, “fertile fields for poststructural investigations of the autobiographical subject and identity construction. This is because the genre inevitably reveals both how place and displacement affect identity and how identity constructs place” (1996:369). Brian Musgrove, on the other hand, reinforces the importance of focusing “on the points of unraveling, conflict and uncertainty in the travelling subject” (1999:44). That is, post-colonial investigation might benefit by also examining the traveler’s subjectivity which, according to Musgrove, “is neither necessarily nor adequately explained by post-colonialisms” (1999:31).

Heaps and Musgrove’s ideas together point to the postmodern notion of identities as fragmented and unstable. Nevertheless, the position of the subject in societal organizations seems to have direct interference to how the subject will react to this dislocation of identity. Wiltshire is a white European in foreign lands and this position emerges as predominant in his contact with difference.

Studies regarding whiteness have indicated that “[t]he critique of whiteness [...] attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential ‘identity’” (Bhabha 1998:21). The conclusion that comes of this statement is that the position of the white subject relates to the construction of power over the others as ‘natural’. This position in colonial terms comes from the cultural notion of superiority in terms of culture, race and economy. The ‘white man’s burden’<sup>2</sup> as it came to be understood by the colonial enterprise was an indicative of the ‘need’ to take civilization to the most remote lands on earth.

As it will be seen subsequently, Wiltshire’s subjectivity is backed up by this notion of cultural superiority. The narrative exposes an identitarian construction that is not bluntly questioned and informs the steadiness of

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2. “The White Man’s Burden’ is a poem by the English poet Rudyard Kipling. It was originally published in the popular magazine *McClure’s* in 1899, with the subtitle *The United States and the Philippine Islands*. Although Kipling’s poem mixed exhortation to empire with sober warnings of the costs involved, imperialists within the United States understood the phrase “white man’s burden” as a characterization for imperialism that justified the policy as a noble enterprise” (Wikipedia)

his self. According to Sally O'Driscoll, the relation between the stability or instability of one's identity is directly connected to the degrees this identitarian construction has been oppressed. Responding to Diana Fuss's (98) conclusion that the greater the instability of one's identity, the stronger his/her reaction, O'Driscoll reverses the gaze and points that "[d]ominant groups, whose identity or position is not under attack, understandably feel less need to buttress identity" (1995:57). This way, the solidity of the white identity functions as an unexpected and additional reinforcement to the naturalness and invisibility of this identitarian position. The predominant characteristics of whiteness—European and 'civilized',—become the norm, placing everybody else under a label that is construed as desirable but unreachable. As Richard Dyer has pointed out: "as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it. ...the equation of being white with being human secures a position of power" (1997:2). Dyer continues: "white people set the standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail" (1997:9).

In spite of these considerations, nevertheless, the human dimension cannot be disregarded. Wiltshire is white but he is also a man. In subjectivity terms, moving to a different place means the loss of connection with identitarian references. This loss might originate uneasiness and internal conflict. This notion of identitarian unbalance is in tandem with the postmodern notion of identities as a construct that is never 'complete' and most importantly, can never be 'whole'. In travel narratives, where the encounter with cultural difference is inevitable, the fragmentation of the human subjectivity is enhanced through the confrontation of the partiality of the subject's knowledge.

Accordingly, this encounter may generate a culture shock in the (white) individual that realizes that his most inner Truths represent, in fact, a cultural knowledge other than totalizing scientific or even religious knowledge. Heaps summarizes the notion of culture shock in a poststructuralist milieu as "the psyche's sudden and deeply felt *awareness* of the arbitrariness of words, of the cultural construction of all things, of a cultural relativity which ruptures long-held notions of the good, the bad, the true, and of the symbiotic relationship

between identity, language, and culture” (1996:359). Heaps continues by bringing Adrian Furnham’s notion that, this moment can bring great stress upon the individual on the one hand, but it also may “include a broadening of one’s perspective and prospectives, an insight into one’s culture of origin, an escape from routine, and the development of a more heterocultural<sup>3</sup> personality (Furnham 33, in Heaps 1996:359).

This insight, eventually reached by the traveler, indicates how aimless is one’s origin and culture. The subjectivity of the traveler is shattered by the slowly acknowledgement of this insight. Musgrove argues that “the traveller’s action of wavering between worlds is potentially annihilating” (1999:32). This view problematizes the notion of the Imperial traveler as “the self-assured colonist” it, instead; points to a subject that “is poised to split and unravel”. This ‘unsettlement’ created in the traveler is directly connected to his reflections: “In travel, the bourgeois subject is involved in a fundamentally reflexive confrontation with the unsustainable values of ‘home’” (Musgrove 1999:39). The shock of this awareness may be among the reasons that make the traveler to seek connections. It is when the subject is closer to lose any sense of belonging that s/he seeks to grab it with both hands.

In this interpretation, even the hero is demystified. Musgrove summarizes Joseph Campbell’s conclusion regarding ‘the hero’ as a figure that represents an exaggeration of the ‘rites of passage’ “with the passage from ‘the world of common day’ into a supernaturalised region of desire and ‘wonder’ as a test of the hero’s decisiveness and majesty” (Campbell 1949:30, in Musgrove 1999:41). In this regard, Wiltshire is the prototype of a hero. He transposes ‘the world of common day’ into a region of desire and wonder. Nevertheless, this transposition tests his decisiveness and majesty in unexpected ways. While this experience confirms his magnificence (i.e., Wiltshire seeks to maintain his cultural ‘integrity’), it also penetrates his narrative in ways that escape

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3. Heterocultural – term coined by Jacques M. Chevalier. Chevalier advocates that “social life thrives on intercourse between those considered different” (Chevalier; Buckles 1999) – that is, the social life origins are not only monocultural or multicultural; it, instead, develops within these two parameters.

the first person narrator's control. The clash between Wiltshire's attempts at maintaining identitarian connections and his eventual loss of control is what we will examine forward.

John Wiltshire comes to Falesa to become a trader. He starts the narrative with his first impressions on the island. He describes the wonder and satisfaction the traveler finds in the encounter with difference: "Here was a fresh experience: even the tongue would be quite *strange* to me; and the look of these woods and mountains, and the *rare* smell of them, renewed my blood" (Stevenson 1892:11 *my emphasis*). The 'wonder' (Greenblatt 1991)<sup>4</sup> of the unknown is present along with the mystery the island represents to the white traveler. The unknown, in fact, becomes one of the 'spices' of the travel—one of the forces that propel the traveler forward. This wonder also works for the purpose of postponing the uneasiness of difference and the instability pointed out before. The first impressions seduce Wiltshire who, at the view of the pleasures the island might offer, avoids its first bite.

Among its pleasures, we find the women of the island. For example, the narrator describes Wiltshire's future wife Uma's first appearance in the story very sensually. The imagery created by the narrator's description is of an alluring woman:

I saw one coming on the other side alone. She had been fishing; all she wore was a chemise, and it was wetted through. She was young and very slender for an island maid, with a long face, a high forehead, and a shy, strange, blindish look, between a cat's and a baby's (Stevenson 1892:16).

This idyllic image of the island and its women, nevertheless, had already been breached by mysterious island tales. One of them involves a former trader named John Adams who died of a mysterious sickness. The implied question posed by the story is verbalized by Wiltshire: "Was it thought to be

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4. Stephen Greenblatt defined 'wonder' as "the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference" (1991:14).

the island?” (Stevenson 1892:12).

That is, the island is construed by the narrator as mysterious and dangerous from the very beginning. This construal, nevertheless, demonstrates more the two British men’s expectations regarding the ‘unknown’ than the reality itself.

The captain’s answer confirms the uneasiness felt towards the tropical island mysterious powers. His speech does not confirm that the island is maddening but also does not discard the possibility: “Well, it was thought to be the island, or the trouble, or something,” and to reassure both of them, the captain gives proof of the island’s safety:

I never could hear but what it was a healthy place. Our last man, Vigours, never turned a hair. He left because of the beach—said he was afraid of Black Jack and Case and Whistling Jimmie, who was still alive at the time, but got drowned soon afterward when drunk. As for old Captain Randall, he’s been here any time since eighteen-forty, forty-five. I never could see much harm in Billy, nor much change. Seems as if he might live to be Old Kafoozleum. No, I guess it’s healthy (Stevenson 1892:13-4).

The captain’s reasoning takes method: he examines the lives of three other foreigners to prove that, in spite of John’s craziness, the place is healthy after all. As a first person narrator, Wiltshire’s interpretation of these lines is not promptly put forward. The reader, instead, is left with a mental note regarding Wiltshire’s dubious knowledge of the island. On the one side, the ‘inexplicable’ to the white subjects is blamed on the ‘powers’ of the island, on the other, the superstitions of the islanders will reinforce this uneasiness as we will see subsequently.

The relation of fear and unexpectedness regarding the unknown is construed through several other episodes. One of them happens when Uma’s mother enters Randall’s house. Wiltshire, startled, describes the scene: “a strange old native woman crawled into the house almost on her belly. [...] She came straight across the house, heading for me, and, as soon as she was

alongside, caught up my hand and purred and crooned over it like a great cat” (Stevenson 1892:19). Wiltshire’s reaction is of fear. He asks: “‘Who the devil’s this?’ cried I, for the thing startled me” (Stevenson 1892:19). Randall answers she is Faavao and Wiltshire is more direct in his fear. He does not understand the woman’s gestures then he insists: “‘what’s she carrying on about?’ I asked, more irritated, perhaps more frightened, than I cared to show; and the captain told me she was making up a quantity of poetry in my praise because I was to marry Uma” (Stevenson 1892:19).

The issues connected to religion and superstition represent, in fact, the moments of greater internal conflict. Wiltshire oscillates between reinforcing his beliefs as the only ones truth holders and *feeling* that the stories he is told might bring some account of authority. An example of this occurs in a moment in which Wiltshire’s faith is tested and he asks for the Bible to be brought about. This moment happens when Wiltshire is to go into the bushes to destroy Case’s temple. Due to the mystery Case created about the place, Uma warns Wiltshire that “if [he] went in the high bush [he] should never return; none could go there but by the protection of Tiapolo”<sup>5</sup> (Stevenson 1892:91). In response to this, Wiltshire brings up the Bible and the power to protect him “‘I’ll tell you what, then,’ said I. ‘You fish out your Bible, and I’ll take that up along with me. That’ll make me right’”. Uma disregards his belief telling that a “Bible was no use”. Wiltshire, on his turn, disregards her belief on the power of Tiapolo and the inefficacy of the Bible: “‘That’s just your Kanaka ignorance” (Stevenson 1892:91).

In spite of first person narration, Wiltshire allows contradiction to appear. Uma is the central figure in most of these moments. She does not simply accept that the Bible is the solution saying that it was of “no use”, even though to be soon informed of ‘her ignorance’ (Stevenson 1892:91 above). The same disregard appears when Uma’s talks about pigs and women-devils that haunt the place. She describes a situation in which “she had seen one with her own eyes”. At her assertion that she had had to run from one of

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5. Tiapolo is the word for devil in the local language.



these pigs, Wiltshire replies somewhat ironically: “I wish I had been there with my gun,’ said I. ‘I guess that pig would have holla’d so as to surprise himself” (Stevenson 1892:77). Contradiction, in fact, works to reinforce the superiority of Wiltshire’s beliefs. As in the examples above, he is the one to ‘conclude’ the debate.

Wiltshire’s feelings, however, grant us with the perception that the islanders’ beliefs might present some foundation. As a first person narrator, this perception is hinted at through his thoughts regarding situations that he has to face and what he has heard in the island. These moments abound in the last part of the book in which he goes to the forest to destroy Case’s Temple. In one of these, he is in the middle of the forest and starts reflecting upon a man being in a similar situation: “It’s all very well for him to tell himself that he’s alone, bar trees and birds; he can’t make out to believe it; whichever way he turns the whole place seems to be alive and looking on”. Wiltshire, however, promptly, disregards the possibility of his subjectivity having been affected by the stories: “Don’t think it was Uma’s yarns that put me out; I don’t value native talk a fourpenny-piece; it’s a thing that’s natural in the bush, and that’s the end of it” (Stevenson 1892:78-9).

The irony of this passage is in the contradiction between his assertion of not believing the man-pigs and women-devils but being afraid of something ‘in the bush’. This incongruous discourse goes on while he is walking to Case’s temple and he hears strange noises. Wiltshire narrates: “You may laugh if you like; but I declare I called to mind the six young ladies that came, with their scarlet necklaces, out of the cave at Fanga-anaana, and wondered if they sang like that” (Stevenson 1892:79). It is only later on the narration that Wiltshire admits that he might have been affected by the stories he heard:

We laugh at the natives and their superstitions; but see how many traders take them up, splendidly educated white men, that have been book-keepers (some of them) and clerks in the old country. It’s my belief a superstition grows up in a place like the different kinds of weeds; and as I stood there and listened to that wailing I twittered in my shoes (Stevenson 1892:79).

Analyzing this passage, Jason Marc Harris comments on Wiltshire's fear that "causes [Wiltshire] to speculate that folk beliefs transcend race and culture" (2003:387). From this starting position, Harris points out that "[t]he susceptibility of Wiltshire to superstition and Case's folkloric manipulations underscore that the power structure of imperialism is not necessarily unilateral or limited to political economy. Magic and money are both currencies inextricably connected to the colonial market". (2003:389).

Wiltshire is, in fact, demonstrating the pervasive effects of the stories he has been told since he landed in the island. On the other hand, he does not abdicate his Christian faith. The contradictions between believing the Kanakas's superstitions and falling back on the Bible are reinforced by Wiltshire's awareness of the role of the missionaries in destroying that island's culture. He tells one of the missionaries: "I want to tell you first that I don't hold with missions,' I went on, 'and that I think you and the likes of you do a sight of harm, filling up the natives with old wives' tales and bumptiousness'" (Stevenson 1892:55).

This disagreement sounds utterly strange for someone who has proclaimed to have come to civilize (see page 12 below). Christianity, as well as commerce (Wiltshire's interest), is an Imperialist commodity and the changes the missionaries are bringing to that culture do not necessarily differ from those perpetrated by the traders. Wiltshire's narrative, in fact, depicts his own role as a hero. He perceives his presence as the 'good foreigner' who has come to help the natives to get rid of the 'bad foreigner's interests. Phillips' argument is exactly this—that in spite of the oppositional construal between the two traders—Wiltshire and Case—they represent the commercial interests of global capitalism in the island: "In effect, Stevenson almost fatally undermines the authority that masquerades as the 'civilising mission' to sustain, simultaneously, both a moral and a commercial dimension" (2007:72). Phillips goes on with his reasoning. He points out the making of Wiltshire as the "positive moral force in the story" as a deviating look from the culture he represents:

Even though Wiltshire is no middle-class paragon, he does present himself as the representative of western culture, trade and, if reluctantly, assists in the reassertion of missionary influence, his aims are little different to Case's, although the forces he manipulates—the local missionary and his trading firm—represent the colonial establishment compared to Case's more local and individualistic approach (2007:73).

This reasoning foregrounds the violence of white men in the island by bringing forward the commercial interests that represent their enterprise. Phillips makes us turn to the incongruence of the fact that the 'whites' affirm their authority over the burden inflicted upon them—the civilizing mission—nevertheless, it is not the natives but the white characters who seem to lack something: "all the western characters in this story are either ethically, morally or physically wanting, and often all three. Case and Wiltshire compete viciously with each other for local trade, physically acting out the competitive principle of capitalism" (2007:73). And when the missionary talks about Case's prevalent interest in money, it makes it difficult for the reader not to question himself: and what about Wiltshire?

The 'complaint' about the missionaries' interference in the local culture indicates that Wiltshire is becoming fond of the culture that has received him. It is not clear, however, if it represents a shatter in the universality of his identity—i.e., he has acknowledged the value of that culture—or, similarly to Paulo Henrique Britto's reading of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry about Brazil, Wiltshire wants to maintain the 'exoticism' of the island. Britto's reflection about Bishop seems to address Wiltshire's perception of the local culture as well:

Bishop traveled widely in the country, *but she saw what she already expected to see*: a luxuriant natural environment and a population divides between the poor, who were 'primitives' with all the attendant virtues and vices, and sophisticated aristocrats like Lota, who spoke several languages and traveled abroad frequently

(2000:492 *my emphasis*).

Following this interpretation, Wiltshire's complaint, instead of representing the pervasiveness of the island's culture in the character's mind, seems to point to a purist idea in which the 'essence' of the natives should be preserved in spite of eventual statements he might have made regarding their uncivilized ways.

Their 'uncivilized' ways had been, by the way, celebrated previously regarding Wiltshire's fake marriage to Uma. He informs the reader beforehand about the 'custom' in the island of white foreigners taking a woman to be their wife during the period that is convenient to them. The wedding itself and the marriage certificate are a joke. The certificate goes "This is to certify that Uma, daughter of Faavao of Falesa, Island of –, is illegally married to Mr. John Wiltshire for one week, and Mr. John Wiltshire is at liberty to send her to hell when he pleases" (Stevenson 1892:21). Wiltshire admits he feels a little guilty by performing such a fraud but soon he finds someone to blame for this state of affairs:

A man might easily feel cheap for less. But it was the practice in these parts, and (as I told myself) *not the least the fault of us white men, but of the missionaries*. If they had let the natives be, I had never needed this deception, but taken all the wives I wished, and left them when I pleased, with a clear conscience (Stevenson 1892:21 *my emphasis*).

The first information that stands out from this excerpt is the separateness Wiltshire makes between 'us white men' and 'the missionaries' which show he is unable to see any correlation between the two groups. He fails to see that "[b]oth missionaries and traders introduced ideas/goods and promoted their necessity for everyday life, be it an awareness of Jesus or western clothes and firearms" (Phillips 2007:72). The second issue to stand out relates to his positioning as a white man and, as such, 'granted' with the privilege of disposing of the island inhabitants the way he wishes. In Wiltshire's narration,

the missionaries became not guilty of bringing the local populations European and Christian values, but of preventing the White Men from taking as many wives as they wished without having to feel guilty for such purpose.

On the one side, we see Wiltshire's expectative of keeping the island and the islanders as exotic and 'available' for the white men as it had been previously. The exotic seems to reflect the travelers' desire to revive the first moments of wonder whereas the availability confirms his view of white privilege. White men have not come to bring progress and civilization, as he points out later on in the narrative (below), but clearly, to take advantage of the island. On the other, the fear he feels in the bushes makes him question his capability of remaining detached from the beliefs of the islanders. His conviction that "superstition grows up in a place" seems to indicate more a fear of losing himself to the island's mythical powers than an actual possibility of his starting to acknowledge the islanders' faith.

But Wiltshire should fear not! For, according to Lawrence Phillips, he comes to the island "armed with his own mantra, based on his faith in his identity as a British colonist bringing the village the benefits of western civilisation through the trade of his goods" (2007:66). The narrative, in fact, confirms the dominant perception in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries regarding whiteness as a universal self based on the notion of privilege which was "secured [...] by means of specific historical phenomena, that is, by means of philosophical, economic, political, theological, scientific, and *literary* influences" (Smith 1993:5 *my emphasis*). In these different milieu, "subjectivity metamorphoses into objectivity and impartiality [and] the self assumes its privileged status as the origin of meaning, knowledge, truth" (Smith 1993:7-8).

Even though uncertainty has weakened him, Wiltshire projects his subjectivity 'as the origin of knowledge and truth' in the moments in which the integrity of his beliefs is under attack. It is in these moments that whiteness appears as a 'race'. Wiltshire perceives the unbalance between his notion of cultural superiority regarding whiteness and the treatment he receives by the natives. This situation leads him to the need to 'buttress (his white European)

identity' (O'Driscoll above). One of these moments is at the meeting with the chiefs to clarify whether and why he has been tabooed. As the difficulties rise, he gives his imperialist discourse:

You tell them who I am. *I'm a white man, and a British subject, and no end of a big chief at home; and I've come here to do them good, and bring them civilisation;* and no sooner have I got my trade sorted out than they go and taboo me, and no one dare come near my place! [...] but if they think they're going to come any of their native ideas over me, they'll find themselves mistaken. And tell them plain that I demand the reason of this treatment *as a white man and a British subject* (Stevenson 1892:39 *my emphasis*).

In his discourse we have a good glimpse at his view regarding the superiority of the white man as well as the 'attached goods' of this position. These 'goods' are, in this case, summarized into kindness ("I've come here to do them good"), and civilization. Also, the reiteration of his position as a white British man (that appear twice in his little speech) demonstrates his belief regarding the value of the white race over the local population. It is only in moments like this, in which the 'inalienable' right of the superiority of the white race is threatened to be usurped that Wiltshire comes forward and seeks to restore what was otherwise considered pacific and free of controversy.

The notion of an objectivity that departs from a partial knowledge is not questioned, and Wiltshire goes on to explain *his* truth regarding the Kanakas' lack of a law system:

They haven't any real government or any real law, that's what you've got to knock into their heads; and even if they had, it would be a good joke if it was to apply to a white man. It would be a strange thing if we came all this way and couldn't do what we pleased. The mere idea has always put my monkey up, and I rapped my speech out pretty big (Stevenson 1892:39).

Again, as in his report about white men and local women, Wiltshire

is very assertive in imposing that white men should be able to do anything that pleases them. Once again he is unaware of the contradiction between ‘doing what we pleased’ and respecting any kind of government or law that the Kanakas certainly had. Cultural difference does not appear as a possible explanation for diverse behaviors and expectations. The stability of the white position leads Wiltshire to ‘read’ the local culture from an European point of view and disregard anything that does not correspond to this cultural tradition as *acultural* and *ahistorical*.

His speech, in fact, starts getting schizophrenic when he, referring to a chief, maintains that: “There is no doubt when an island chief wants to be *civil* he can do it” (Stevenson 1892:86, *my emphasis*). His reasoning seems to lead to a notion of civilization that only means respect for the white men and their values and nothing else. That is why the missionaries are such a nuisance—they dared to teach the islanders Christianity and, by this token, taught them (some) values of whiteness. The result would be a *promotion* of the islanders to a ‘level’ similar to the white men, and, accordingly, to the same level of the traders and missionaries in the island. This state of affairs would mean a greater balance in the power relations, situation that no trader in the island is interested in.

Wiltshire attempts to balance his schizophrenia by construing a view of the Kanakas that is at the same time depreciative and condescending. Depreciation comes from the need to assert his superiority and condescension comes to justify the maintenance of the *status quo*. The depreciation has been demonstrated in his previous assertions regarding the ‘ignorance’ of the Kanakas’ beliefs as well as in Wiltshire’s failure to acknowledge the local customs regarding marriage and a law system; whereas the condescension has appeared disguised as an interest in protecting the local culture. This interest in ‘fixing’ the island’s culture in its picturesque characteristics reflects Wiltshire’s fear of losing what he has come to construe as a paradise at the white man’s disposal.

Reiteration of Wiltshire’s depreciation of the natives appears when he refers to the natives’ lack of (rational, European) knowledge. This attack

refers, once again to the natives' beliefs. Due to their superstitions, Wiltshire compares them to children: "It's easy to find out what Kanakas think. Just go back to yourself any way round from ten to fifteen years old, and there's an average Kanaka" (Stevenson 1892:83). In these lines, Wiltshire, once again, makes it clear his unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility of different cultural constructions of thought. In order to assert his superiority, his reaction is simplified in acts of denial.

On the other hand, reiteration of Wiltshire's condescension reports to the interference of the missionaries in the island. At the end of the short story Wiltshire summarizes the destiny of the characters of his story. One of them is the missionary Mr. Tarleton who has left the island. Wiltshire concludes: "Well, that's best for him; he'll have no Kanakas there to get lunny over" (Stevenson 1892:104). In which 'to get lunny over' means 'to drive crazy'. Wiltshire again refers to the malefic influence of the west over the natives. His inability to recognize his role as interference in the island's culture and his interest to preserve what he himself has named, among other things, 'ignorance', show that his concept of culture is selective. He seems to value the exotic and paradisiacal features of the island but to condemn the 'logic' of the islanders.

As we can see, depreciation and condescension are reiterated through the short story. This fact inevitably directs our attention to the notion of performance as described in the *Sage dictionary of Cultural Studies*: "performativity is a discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names through citation and reiteration of the norms or conventions of the 'law'" (Barker 2004:143). That is, through the reiteration of the inferiority of the natives—and consequent reiteration of the superiority of the white men—as well as the reiteration of Wiltshire's granted 'kindness' as the white man who places himself at the natives disposal to protect them from Case's spurious commercial interests and the missionaries religious and cultural distortion, Wiltshire construes himself as the hero of the narrative. As a consequence, race is produce as opposition: the whites appear as ultimately capable of controlling the situation and the natives appear again childlike and in need of



help. The 'white man's burden' fiction becomes complete.

Wiltshire's notion of superiority also appears in his confidence in the white men over the natives. He notices something is going on, that he might have been tabooed, but he first consults the white men available in the island and only after this he looks for his native wife Uma's explanation. He, in fact, tells her he thinks he is tabooed, but at her reticence, he does not insist. His reasoning is "I thought awhile whether I should ask her more, but it's a bad idea to set natives up with any notion of consulting them, so I went to Case" (Stevenson 1892:36-7). Only after wandering about the subject, having talked to the priest, to Case and gone to the meeting with the chiefs, Wiltshire asks Uma directly: "you belong round here, you're bound to understand this. What am I tabooed for, anyway? Or, if I ain't tabooed, what makes the folks afraid of me?" (Stevenson 1892:44).

His fellow Case is in fact the one most interested in keeping him in the dark. He is the one who has tricked him into marrying a tabooed woman so that the natives won't trade with him. Case, nevertheless, pretends deep interest in his problems and plays the white man community card: "I'll stand by you, Wiltshire, man to man. [...] Understand me, Wiltshire; I don't count this your quarrel," he went on, with a great deal of resolution, "I count it all of our quarrel, I count it the White Man's Quarrel, and I'll stand to it through thick and thin, and there's my hand on it" (Stevenson 1892:37-8).

Case's alliance is questionable nevertheless: "I'll go as far as I dare for another white man; but when I find I'm in the scrape myself, I think first of my own bacon. The loss of me is I'm too good-natured" (Stevenson 1892:42). Wiltshire is ironic in his answer: "'Well,' says I, 'you're a nice kind of a white man!'" (Stevenson 1892:43). The complaint explicit in his utterance does not question the 'essential' connection between his fellow white men, it, in fact, requests what he acknowledges as expected.

In these moments, the notion of racial community stands out. By picking white men above any native (including his wife), Wiltshire demonstrates his need of keeping a distance from the locals as well as the need of safety. In this case, his need of safety is erroneously directed to the other white traders who

reveal to be his fierce competitors. Even though ‘racial community’ has not an attribute commonly used to refer to whites, this notion stands out in this short story. As a minority in the island, Wiltshire attempts at creating a racial unification that is denied by the capitalist greed that these traders have brought with them to the island. Case’s betrayal denounces the impossibility of this alliance which then sets Wiltshire free to congregate with the natives—in the story expressed by his increasing love and confidence in his native wife Uma. Nevertheless, Wiltshire’s attempts at maintaining the two groups separated makes us glimpse at the events that brought different cultures together at colonial times but that has also produced a history of racial segregation that managed to survive up till now.

By the end of the narrative, Wiltshire has to finally deal with the cultural hybridity he so insistently denied but that inadvertently has taken him over. The initial issue of absorbing the Kanakas’s beliefs is replaced for a more concrete one. Wiltshire has fallen in love with the native woman he had initially intended to abandon and has had hybrid children with her. As Phillips warned us, his deeds reflect the heroism that has construed a pretense figure of the island’s savior through the killing of the ‘bad guy’. His defense of the native culture reinforces this construal and, as a final act of redemption, he redresses his past mistake (the fake wedding) and appropriately marries Uma.

The ending shows Wiltshire reflecting upon his destiny. He realizes that his dreams of a public-house back in England are past. His children are the primary force to keep him in the island. He is aware of their hybridity and recognizes the difficulties they might have in England:

I’m stuck here, I fancy. I don’t like to leave the kids, you see: and—there’s no use talking—they’re better here than what they would be in a white man’s country, [...] But what bothers me is the girls. They’re only half-castes, of course; I know that as well as you do, and there’s nobody thinks less of half-castes than I do; but they’re mine, and about all I’ve got. I can’t reconcile my mind to their taking up with Kanakas, and I’d like to know where I’m to find the whites? (Stevenson 1892:105).

The novel's last paragraph reflects the paradox of a traveler that has remained 'too long on the island'. As Ann C. Colley explains: "Living on the islands teaches him that there is no such thing as a pure white in such contact zones where Westerners and native peoples mix to create hybrids and where, consequently, the balance of power can be easily unsettled" (2008: 878).

The course of things has taken him to a crossroad he did not expect: he loves his children and 'thinks less of half-castes' at the same time. This ending brings out the possibility of him dealing more closely with the instability of his whiteness, something that the narrative has hinted at but has not dealt with. He now has solved the issues that prevented him from exploring the island commercially and has time for more domestic preoccupations. His children, then, become "a permanent reminder of his life among island cultures where nothing is 'pure'—where 'essence' has disappeared to be replaced by syncretic vision" (Colley 2008:878).

As a narrative written in the late nineteenth century, the expectation of subjectivity closure and the construal of a united subject are partially destabilized. The narrative played its role: the bad guy was defeated and the good guy emerges victorious. In the last lines, his uneasiness comes out; even though it is contained, restricted and presented as an afterthought. The greatest blow to the main character's notion of his superior origin is presented only after the narrative has reached its closure. The total closure sought by the narrator is denied showing that "[h]egemonic discourses can also be tested through and displaced by nonhegemonic discourses, or what might be called unofficial knowledges" (Smith 1993:21).

*The Beach of Falesa* has, indeed, been pointed out as a narrative that erodes the boundaries between the native culture and the Imperialist pretense civilizing mission (cf.: Harris 2003:383). Wiltshire—and the other white traders in the novel—can hardly be considered promoters of a 'better' civilization. Also, Wiltshire's partial acceptance of the island's superstition and the undeniable blending that produces his children reveals that the pretense universality and fixity of the white men's subjectivity can and has

been destabilized in literary narratives. As Musgrove asserted, the traveler's subjectivity is influenced by his or her experience with the other, but, as postcolonial theory; and more recently, whiteness studies, have proposed, the *position* this subject occupies also has great effect upon the ways this personage will act and react in face of difference.

This investigation of a white man's subjectivity in a colonial world has showed that, at the same time that cultural exchanges produced instability it promotes moments of reiteration of the white identity. In these encounters, whiteness has construed itself as universal and stable in opposition to the different cultures they came across the colonial expansion. Stevenson's *The Beach of Falesa* has shown that this construal was not pacific but it was nevertheless prevalent. At the end of the story Wiltshire has to deal with his cultural and biological hybridity: his beliefs and his children. These characteristics, nevertheless, have not changed the core of his belief of whiteness as a superior race. His final preoccupation is in fact, to promote the whitening of his female children. He admits he "can't reconcile" with the idea of their relations with Kanakas. In a strong assertion of whiteness superiority, he wonders "where I'm to find the whites?"

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