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STEVENSON'S PYJAMAS

By Ann C. Colley

Introduction

BURIED AMONG ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON'S miscellaneous papers at the Beinecke Library (Yale) is a seemingly insignificant tailor's bill made out to "R. L. Stevenson, Samoa" from Chorley, the tailor in Sydney (Australia). The bill lists such items as "1 pair of white serge tros.," "1 pair of Bedford Cord riding tros.," "and 3 pairs of pyjamas" (Figure 3). Not even his biographers have bothered to mention it.

Although at first this list of outfits seems trivial, it serves to remind one that the whole business of what to wear was a vital element in the life of Stevenson in the South Seas. His choice of apparel was as much linked to his existence on the islands as were the words and subjects of his writing. His attention to his attire and others' commentary on it offer not only some sense of the fabric of Stevenson's experiences and, indirectly, of his prose, but also an opportunity to consider, on a more general level, the function of clothing in our lives. The following essay, therefore, does more than explore Stevenson's rather idiosyncratic relation to his clothes; it also considers how clothing becomes an integral part of the ways in which we relate to ourselves, our surroundings, and our mortality.

In particular, Stevenson's selection of outfits makes apparent the various roles clothes play in representing a life. As we shall see through the reactions to his and his family's garments, a person's vestments can be a means by which people tend to appraise an individual's character and morality. In addition, as we shall also discover (in the section "Undress and the Idea of Cultural Contagion"), to those who look on, the choice of clothing can register the extent to which individuals have been affected by their cultural surroundings and have allowed themselves to be influenced by them. Stevenson's selection of garments also reminds one that clothing is tied to authority and to one's status in society, a well-recognized fact that Stevenson did not ignore when he wanted to establish his position in Samoa. The sections "Dressing Up: The Vailima Livery" and "Dressing Up: The Half-Caste Club" discuss Stevenson's efforts in this regard. Clothes, though, also have a fantasy life, a role that Stevenson and his family indulged in when they either borrowed clothes or adorned themselves in fancy dress. "Dressing Up: Reconfiguring the Body" and "Dressing Up for the Camera" are about their delight in putting on these garments that for a while created an illusion of their being something other than themselves, as well as about the ways in which this activity sustained and entertained them, and, in Stevenson's

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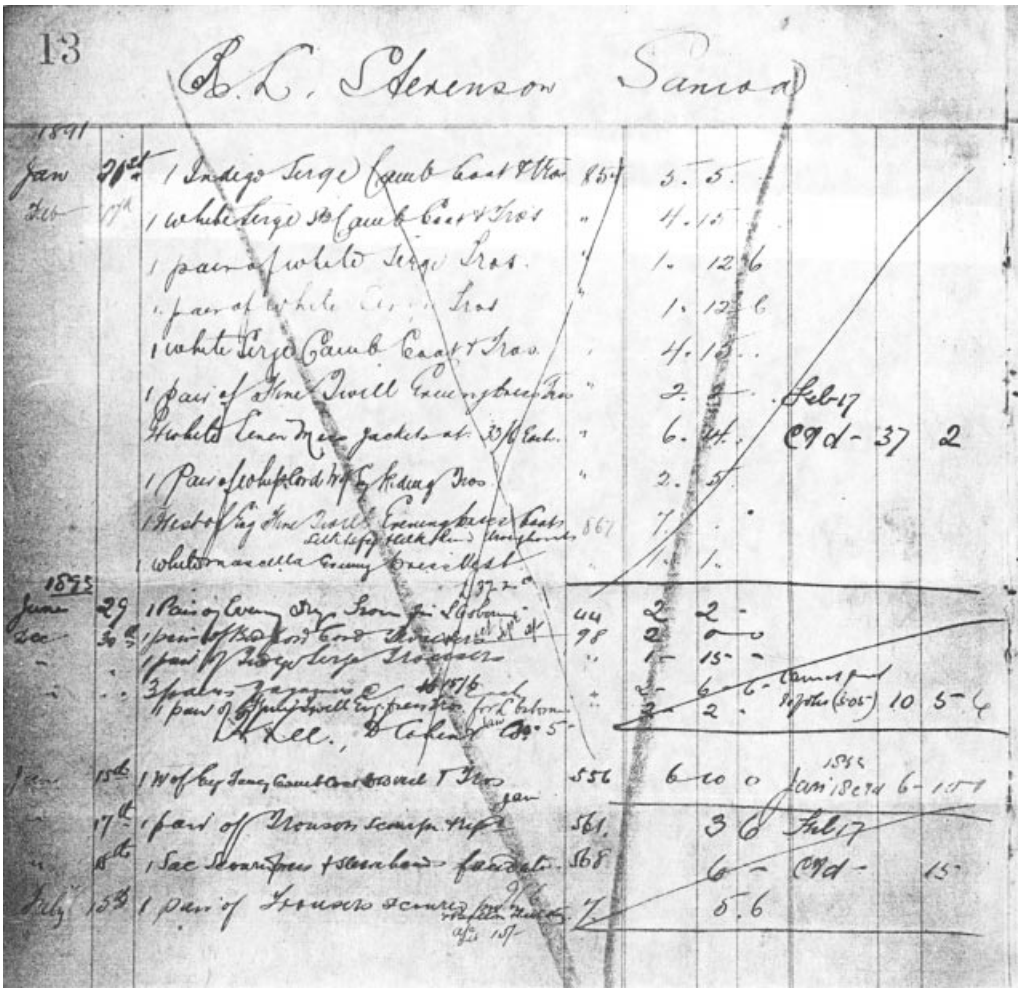


Figure 3. Tailor's Bill for R. L. Stevenson, Samoa, 1891–95. Courtesy of the Robert Louis Stevenson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

case, asserted his will to live. This practice of dressing up, however, was not all play; it had its consequences, for it exposed the discrepancies between the wearer and his or her attire as well as the confusions of cross-cultural dressing. It also inevitably revealed the final discrepancy between one's clothes and one's body and underlined the reality that the body cannot forever be sustained by what adorns it. The last section, "Death and the Gap," is about how this reality marked Stevenson's end.

The Context

WHEN STEVENSON MOVED TO THE SOUTH SEAS in the 1880s, he was entering a world in which clothing had already been and continued to be an issue for those who visited and

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came to live there. In nineteenth-century accounts of travel among the islands and atolls, one comes across passage after passage about the dress and ornamentation of the inhabitants. And in nineteenth-century anthropological studies of the region, one runs into the obligatory chapters describing the function and materials of the islanders' garments. These pages are reminders that outsiders tend to judge an alien society through the mode of its dress or undress, and that dress seems to provide a window through which to catch a glimpse of a culture. For the travelers and the anthropologists alike dress was the code that marked the boundary between the known and the unknown.

Perhaps no more obvious example of these principles exists than the attitudes and policies of Western missionaries living in the South Seas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As is well documented, these missionaries paid close attention to the attire of the natives they wished to convert and control, for they believed that the undermining of the traditional fabric of island society was a necessary prerequisite to conversion.[1] By refashioning the body's surface, they hoped to refashion the mind. In this respect it is especially interesting to read the diaries of missionaries sent to visit the more remote out-stations and note that clothing inevitably becomes the focus and the means by which to mark any progress. Their remarks show that by attempting to obliterate the "strange dresses of the people" ("Missionary Meeting at the Samoas" 178), and by replacing the "disgustingly" scant clothing of their converts (Turner 80) with loose gowns and "coal-scuttle" bonnets (Cumming 13), they were attempting to prescribe a more correct character. Proper clothes were a measure of success. In 1886 the *Missionary Herald* announced: "But to-day! Oh, the glad happy change! Men, women, and children well dressed, some of them richly dressed for this people!" ("The Fourth of July in Micronesia" 523). Another missionary magazine featured pictures of South Sea villages before and after the coming of Christianity (Figures 4 and 5). In "A Village in Pukapuka under Heathenism," natives dance barefoot, half-naked, in grass skirts, and resemble satyrs from promiscuous Roman frescoes. Adorned with feathers, bones, and teeth, the featured figures engage in what once would have been labelled "savage" conduct: in one corner of the picture, for instance, a topless woman cruelly pulls her naked child's hair. But in "The Same Village, under Christianity," politeness, restraint, industry, and a sense of propriety are visible through the native women's loose, shapeless calico dresses, pinafores, bonnets, stockings, and shoes, and through the men's Western shirts and medium-length, skirt-like wraps or kilts to cover their loin cloths (the Reverend George Turner, however, regarded the covering worn by the men of Tana as being highly indecent, as it accentuated the parts concealed).[2] These garments nullify the past and display a people now ennobled, sexless, modest, and "in their right minds" (Marriott).

A fact not to be overlooked is that it was not only the South Sea natives who came under critical scrutiny for the manner of their dress. Western residents were also subjected to close examination. Travelers and missionaries often found themselves surrounded by the curious eyes and fingers of the natives. Out of sheer inquisitiveness, islanders frequently closely examined a visitor's attire and encouraged sailors and missionaries to undress before them.[3] The Reverend James Chalmers (a person admired by Stevenson) when exploring South-Eastern New Guinea reported that the people persuaded him to take off his boots and wanted not only to inspect but to feel his feet. He also described how they were eager to see what lay beneath his shirt and required him to exhibit his chest — a revelation followed by the crowd's giving "one terrific shout." Consequently on

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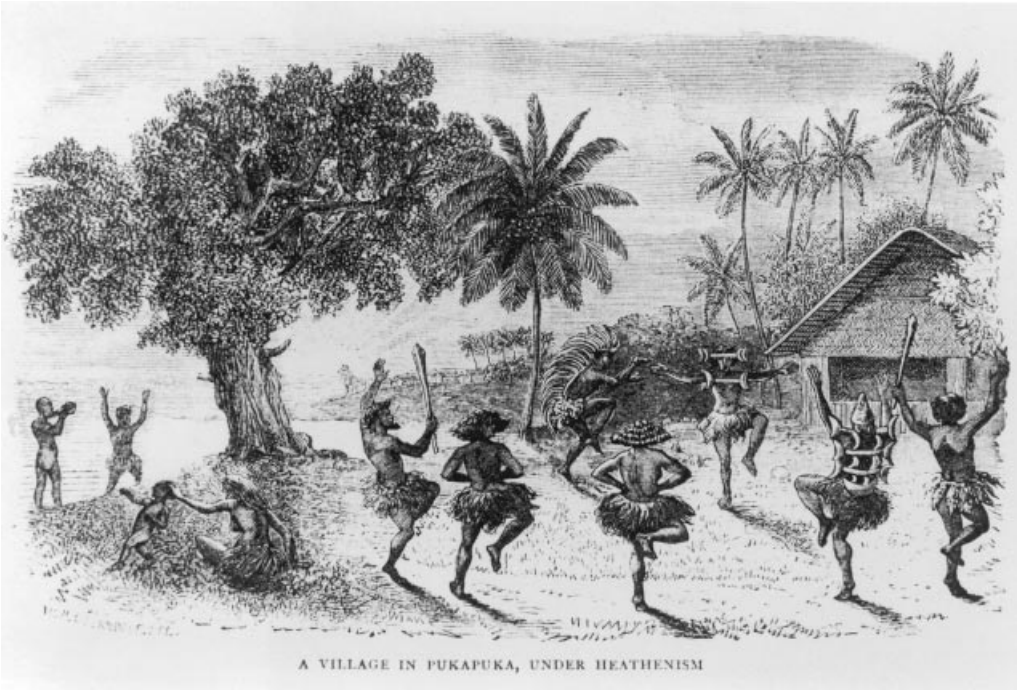


Figure 4. "A Village in Pukapuka, Under Heathenism." *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle* (July 1851): frontispiece.

subsequent excursions into and around the island, Chalmers eagerly threw his shirt aside so he might display his chest — that is "until an old chief, who became much attached to Mrs. Chalmers, brought in to her a present of a man's breast, saying it was the best piece, and she must have it." After that, Rev. Chalmers admitted, "I was a little chary, and very seldom exhibited my chest" ("Explorations in South-Eastern New Guinea" 8); nevertheless, in April, 1901, Chalmers was cannibalized in the Gulf of Papua. Whether the above episode reported by Chalmers is true or not, exaggerated or misunderstood, the incident emphasizes the role of clothes in mapping alien territory and in the uncovering of an individual's identity.

Robert Louis Stevenson and the Mode of Undress

GIVEN THE IMPORTANCE OF CLOTHING in representing the state of the individual and the morality of a culture, it is, perhaps, not surprising that when Robert Louis Stevenson traveled and lived in the South Seas his attire was also subject to close scrutiny and was frequently the subject of observers' commentary. Indeed, it is extraordinary how many memoirs dwell on the manner of his dress. Westerners who came through or who had settled in the area felt somehow compelled to remark upon his appearance. Their reactions are interesting not only for themselves but also for what they reveal about Steven-

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Figure 5. "The Same Village, Under Christianity." *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle* (July 1851): frontispiece.

son's relation to his milieu (his newly-tailored self) and, more significantly, for the insight they provide into the ambiguous nature of clothing: that it both protects one from what is outside and, simultaneously, reflects what surrounds one. As we shall see, clothes can be prophylactic as well as vectors of cultural contagion, for they shield one from the outside at the same time as they register what has crossed the boundary from the outside to the inside, and reveal to what extent one has been contaminated by the surrounding society.

When Stevenson and his family first landed on the shores of Samoa, they were spied by missionaries who immediately determined they were not of their ilk, for the Stevensons were obviously not abiding by the rules regarding dress that the missionaries encouraged. In his diary the Reverend J. E. Newell (someone who later became a friend) records how the Stevenson party burst on the Samoan world in "the most extraordinary, unconventional" costumes — "(I would say *Bohemian*, if you would not misunderstand the term) that was ever seen" (Box 6). And the Reverend W. E. Clarke (yet another missionary to become a close acquaintance) had a similar reaction. When he first laid eyes on them he thought them stray members of a wandering minstrel troupe. In an article he wrote for the *London Missionary Chronicle*, Clarke records the moment:

> I met a little group of three European strangers — two men and a woman [RLS, Lloyd Osbourne, and Fanny]. The latter wore a print gown, large gold crescent earrings, a Gilbert-

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> island hat of plaited straw, encircled with a wreath of small shells, a scarlet silk scarf round her neck, and a brilliant plaid shawl across her shoulders; her bare feet were encased in white canvas shoes, and across her back was slung a guitar.
>
> The younger of her two companions was dressed in a striped pyjama suit — the *undress* costume of most European traders in these seas — a slouch straw hat of native make; dark blue sun-spectacles, and over his shoulder a banjo. The other man [RLS] was dressed in a shabby suit of white flannels that had seen many better days, a white drill yachting cap with prominent peak, a cigarette in his mouth, and a photographic camera in his hand. Both the men were bare-footed. They had, evidently, just landed from the little schooner now lying placidly at anchor, and my first thought was that, probably, they were wandering players en route to New Zealand, compelled by their poverty to take the cheap conveyance of a trading vessel. ("Reminiscences of Robert Louis Stevenson")

This Bohemianism of "undress" that offended the missionaries' sense of propriety also disturbed Western businessmen and visitors. Indeed their repeated references to the Stevensons' uncleanliness, shabbiness, and long dishevelled hair almost parallel the missionaries' scorn and disapproval of the natives they were attempting to convert and make clean, neat, correct, and sober looking.[4] The carelessness of the Stevensons' dress bothered Henry Jay Moors, the expatriate who helped Stevenson to settle in Samoa. In his memoir, Moors complains that even when Stevenson came down to Apia (the town), he looked "about half dressed" and was lax about his personal adornment. He continues his reminiscence by pointing out that he never saw Stevenson "in a stiff shirt nor a stand-up collar in my life." And he adds, "Up at Vailima [the Stevensons' house] they all went about in their bare feet, except when expecting guests" (Masson 225). Another Westerner, J. C. Thiersens, also remarks on Stevenson's slovenly dress and remembers that Stevenson "did not seem to trouble much about his outward appearance, indeed he struck one as being 'artistically grubby'. During the week he was on board he wore the same clothes, namely, a dingy flannel shirt, an aged brown velvet coat, and his trousers and shoes had evidently seen better days" (Masson 256). Perhaps the most scathing reports on Stevenson's attire are to be found in letters written by Henry Adams after a brief visit to Vailima (October 16, 1890) : "As we [Adams and John La Farge] reached the steps a figure came out that I cannot do justice to. Imagine a man so thin and emaciated that he looked like a bundle of sticks in a bag, with a head and eyes morbidly intelligent and restless. He was costumed in very dirty striped cotton pyjamas, the baggy legs tucked into coarse knit woollen stockings, one of which was bright brown in color, the other a purplish dark tone." Later Adams describes Stevenson and Fanny as looking like odd birds: "He seems never to rest, but perches like a parrot. . . . The parrot was very dirty and ill-clothed as we saw him, being perhaps caught unawares, and the female was in rather worse trim than the male" (*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* 7: 2–3). Priggish Adams wished that Stevenson had spent his money buying soap rather than building a house in Samoa.

Undress and the Idea of Cultural Contagion

AS THE ABOVE COMMENTS SUGGEST, the Stevensons' vestimentary practices went against the dominant Western discourse and, worse, as far as their friends in Scotland and England were concerned, showed signs (were tangible proof) of the Stevensons' going native, a metamorphosis that even Stevenson's mother, the usually staid-looking and

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apparently prim Margaret Stevenson, seemed to be undergoing when from Nuka-hiva (August 2, 1887) she wrote to her sister, Jane Whyte Balfour, that she and Fanny had dressed "like the natives" and were enjoying a "strange, irresponsible, half-savage life" (*From Saranac to the Marquesas and Beyond* 85). Charles Baxter [Stevenson's accountant and Edinburgh friend] and Sidney Colvin [Stevenson's London friend and editor] especially worried about the changes they read about and saw in the photographs that Stevenson sent home. At one point (March 21, 1894) Colvin, angry with Stevenson's evident immersion in his new life, asked, do any of "our white affairs" interest you? "I could remark in passing that for three letters or more you have not uttered a single word about anything but your beloved blacks — or chocolates — confound them; beloved no doubt to you; to us detested, as shutting out your thoughts, or so it often seems from the main currents of human affairs" (*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* 8: *n.*279). These friends, from the very beginning of Stevenson's life in the islands, fretted over Stevenson's growing interest and preoccupation with South Sea cultures and feared that he was involving himself too deeply in the life and the study of the natives as well as in the political and natural history of the region. Colvin especially had no taste for Stevenson's "Pacific work" and believed that these interests contaminated Stevenson's prose and forced him into producing dull, lackluster pieces that in their attempts to be scientific lacked anecdote and adventure, the two ingredients necessary for public success.[5] For both Baxter and Colvin, Stevenson's choice of clothing — the Gilbert-island hat, the rolled-up pants, and the garlands of flowers he wore around his head (a practice, by the way, discouraged by the missionaries and one for which a native could be fined)[6] — displayed a similar sort of contagion. They were evidence that Stevenson was becoming increasingly infected by his so-called uncivilized surroundings and that he was, by degrees, being transformed into some sort of broken-down trader and abandoning the stand-up collar society of Edinburgh. In particular Stevenson's pyjamas — a loose jacket and trousers made of striped cloth — were disturbing to his compatriots, for as Reverend Clarke pointed out, these pyjamas were the "*undress* costume of most European traders in the seas." Such an image would have undoubtedly alarmed Colvin, especially after reading a December 4, 1888 letter from Fanny in which she proudly announces that "a simple pajama suit of striped light flannel" is "his only dress" (Figure 6). From Tahiti she also told Colvin that Stevenson was taking sea baths and living "almost entirely in the open air as nearly without clothes as possible" and that he and Lloyd (Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osbourne) wore wreaths of artificial flowers on their hats (*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* 6: 227).

This state of undress was a sign of the erasure of boundaries between what his friends perceived as the civilized and the uncivilized. Clothes were boundary markers and were supposed to protect one from being infected by whatever lurks beyond them. To be in a mode of undress was to violate those frontiers, to lose the covering/protection and status offered by European clothing, and to bring one too close to the unsettling otherness of an alien culture. Such a condition destroyed or weakened the divisions between Stevenson and his alien surroundings. To choose loose clothing and to wear as little as possible was threatening not only because it drew close to the fashion of the natives but also because the openings it created allowed one literally and metaphorically to be infiltrated, even touched, by one's surroundings. In Stevenson's case it exposed him too directly to a way of life and sets of beliefs and experiences that had little to do with the society and rank he

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Figure 6. "King dining with Stevenson party in camp at Apemama." Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, Fanny Stevenson (back to camera), 1889. Photograph. Courtesy of the Writers' Museum, Edinburgh, Scotland.

had left behind and which, according to popular opinion, was not only inferior but also rude, licentious, and even cannibalistic.

Clothing like Stevenson's pyjamas at least offered a minimum amount of protection from his surroundings and, for the most part, served to distinguish him from the natives, but the habit of Stevenson and his family to walk around barefooted offered absolutely none. Consequently, even though Stevenson's preference for pyjamas was somewhat disturbing to his friends, the choice of casting off his shoes was significantly more upsetting, for now there was absolutely no symbolic boundary between the vulnerable flesh and the alien land (Figure 7). Images of his naked feet sinking into the sand and mud and braving the rough, uneven forest floor bothered his acquaintances. In their minds going about without shoes or stockings increased the threat of cultural contagion, a possibility made worse by the Stevensons' delight in this questionable practice. One smiles to think how both fascinated and alarmed friends and family at home must have been to learn that Fanny had had to decline an invitation to a social function given by the American consul because she could only find one shoe and not the other. When she sent her apologies, she signed the note "*Cinderella*" (Newell Box 6). To read the letters and pocket diaries of Stevenson's mother who was fond of commenting upon how "Lou goes about in shirt & trousers & bare feet" (Beinecke #7304. July, Monday 9, 1888) and who bragged to a friend "no such things as shoes and stockings are ever worn by any of us at Vailima" (M.

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Figure 7. "Barefooted Stevenson wearing a *lava-lava*. Fanny is seated next to him," 1888. Photograph. Courtesy of the Writers' Museum, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Stevenson, *Letters from Samoa* 202), and to glance at Fanny's letters explaining that "as to shoes and stockings we all have scorned them for months except Mrs. Stevenson, who often goes barefoot and never, I believe, wears stockings" (*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* 6: 227) is to become aware of their pleasure and pride in their choice. For some of their friends, though, this practice was too close to going native. The Stevensons' wilful discarding of such protection and their adopting the habits of the Samoan natives who, according to the missionary Arthur E. Claxton, had nothing to do with either boots or stockings,[7] were for them yet further unsettling signs of Stevenson's supposed decline, his exposure to a foreign land, and his repudiation of Western culture. To his friends the sight or thought of a shoeless Stevenson destabilized what had been their familiar notion of him and reminded people what anyone (including the missionaries) knew so well: that nothing/nobody ever crosses the beaches of the South Seas unchanged. Once more the manner of dress or undress measures and monitors alteration. For others the practice also had its moral implications and added yet another dimension to people's objections. The Reverend Newell's reaction to the Stevensons' penchant for going barefoot is typical. In his notes he claims he "never but once" saw Fanny wearing shoes and stockings. He recalls that her feet "peeped out . . . innocent of covering" (Newell Box 6) — a condition that compromised his sense of decorum since he, like many other missionaries, insisted his converts and pupils wear shoes as a mark of respect or dignity. To don a pair of shoes, no

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matter how misfitting or uncomfortable, was to demonstrate that one was no longer a heathen.

In a sense the choice to go without shoes makes its mark in many of Stevenson's South Seas tales where he seems, for a moment, to abandon the romantic story telling and adventure traditions of his Scottish fiction in order to expose the bare and factual footprints of characters like Case, Wiltshire, Uma, and Mr. Tarleton in *The Beach of Falesá*. In such stories, he refuses the more conventional heritage, so he can feel the heat of the sand and the sting of the island cultures' complexities with the nakedness of his bare feet. He walks through these tales unshod, more open to the rough edges of experience and to the realities of life on the beach.

Dressing Up: The Vailima Livery

BUT IN THE SOUTH SEAS Stevenson was not always in pyjamas and barefoot, for there were also times when he wished to identify with the colonial powers and to show his respect for authority and European custom. His acquaintances need not have despaired as much as they seem to have done. At these moments Stevenson abandoned his loose, informal clothing, dressed up, and took his shoes along. Once, when he was invited to King Mataafa's house for a state occasion, he tried his hardest to be respectable, even though the mud got the better of his intentions. In a letter to Colvin (May, 1892) Stevenson describes the attempt:

> I had started barefoot; Belle [Stevenson's stepdaughter] had soon to pull off her gala shoes and stockings; the mud was as deep as to our knees, and so slippery that . . . Belle and I had to take hands to support each other. . . . You are to conceive we were got up to kill, Belle in an embroidered white dress and white hat, I in a suit of Bedford cords hot from the Sydney tailors; and conceive us below ink-black to the knees with adhesive clay, and above streaming with heat.

Three miles later they found water to wash their feet, but before they got to the King's house they were "sadly muddied once more" (*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* 7: 299–300). But such incidents did not hinder Stevenson's occasional desire to dress more formally and to remind those around him of his position in society. Especially when he was settled in Samoa and wanting to be thought of as the Laird of Vailima, ready to display his authority, Stevenson often elected (frequently for photographs and portraits) to don leather riding boots, proper cord riding breeches, a white shirt, and a broad, bright red sash around his waist (Figure 8). This costume bore the marks not only of colonial authority and the rule of the white man but also of royalty, for the red sash in the South Seas was traditionally a badge of power. A clue to its symbolic authority is in John Williams's *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises* (1837). He tells how, as a missionary, he collected a red sash and sent it to the missionary museum in England, and he describes how it was used at the inauguration of the greatest kings. He explains that "the most honourable appellation which a chief could receive was, *Arii maro Ura*, King of the Red Sash" (144). In a manner of speaking, by wearing his version of the red sash, Stevenson appointed himself as leader of his realm. Indeed he ran his estate as a small fiefdom: he made the laws, tried misdemeanors, and meted out the fines. And fully understanding the power of clothes to assert

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Figure 8. Robert Louis Stevenson. Self-portrait on board the yacht *Casco*, presented to his old nurse "Cummy" on her birthday in the year 1892. Oil. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

this authority, he also used his servants' outfits to control them and to define the boundaries of his property. By requiring his staff at Vailima on formal occasions to dress in kilts (*lava-lava*) of Royal Stewart Tartan (a tartan Stevenson carefully selected), white shirts for the men, a chemise for the women, and striped jackets, Stevenson created what his mother referred to as the "Vailima Livery" (M. Stevenson, *Letters from Samoa* 231) that served both as a badge of the estate and a reminder of his homeland. When the "Vailima boys" (*Letters from Samoa* 199) were in Apia, the closest town to Vailima, one would know where they came from and whom they served (Figure 9).

Yet Stevenson's dress code could and did go astray. As was often the case in the South Seas, no matter how many regulations concerning clothing were laid down, one could never be sure of their execution. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers' and missionaries' accounts of Pacific islanders frequently contain passages about how the natives, even when instructed in matters of fashion, adorned their bodies with the bits and pieces of European clothing and got it all wrong. There are numerous reports of islanders endeavoring to push their legs through the sleeves of coats, of natives sticking their arms through trouser legs, wearing only one boot, placing the shirt over the coat,[8] and, worse

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Figure 9. "Mitaele." Illustration from photograph, from Isobel Strong and Lloyd Osbourne, *Memories of Vailima* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 59.

yet in these writers' opinion, mixing up the gender of the clothing, so that like the Reverend Chalmers they have to persuade a male native in the Gulf of Papua to take off the woman's dress and put on a man's shirt ("An Adventurous Journey in the Gulf of Papua" 55). Vailima was no exception to this confusion: the neat, trim, controlled appearance one sees in the photographs of Stevenson's household help was not always to be (Figure 10). There were times when the staff created confusion by borrowing Stevenson's or Lloyd's clothing or dressing themselves up in family discards. The costume code that Stevenson wanted to impose was not always understandable or logical to those from the island culture, so his sense of authority was frequently undermined by the disorder of their dress. On one occasion Stevenson's mother, exasperated, exclaimed that Simé (one of the

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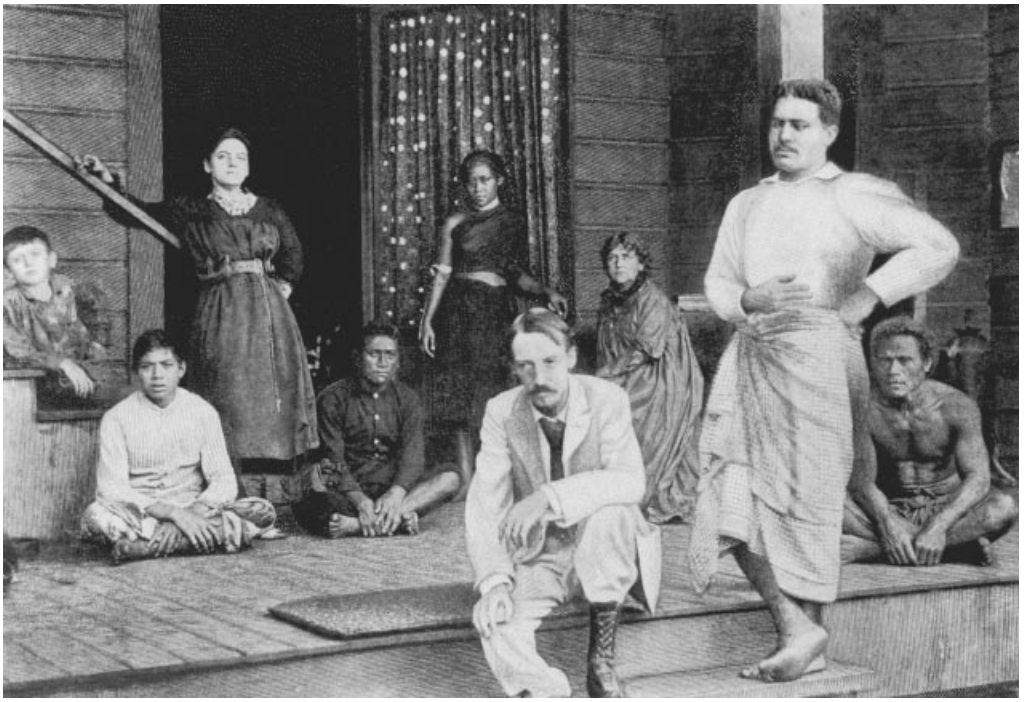


Figure 10. "On the back Veranda." Illustration from photograph, from Isobel Strong and Lloyd Osbourne, *Memories of Vailima* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 133.

staff) "is just now wearing a dark *lava-lava* with a long flannel nightgown of Lou's on top of it; while Arick (another servant) has a pink and white striped flannel jacket over his tight red 'petticoat'!" (M. Stevenson, *Letters from Samoa* 170). Later in December, 1892, Margaret Stevenson despaired at the staff's fondness for wearing any old clothes on which they could lay their hands, even "an old red cotton tablecloth that Fanny had thrown away" (*Letters from Samoa* 57–58). For this reason, Stevenson's mother burnt her old widow caps [these are the widow caps that King Mataafa recognized as being like those worn by Queen Victoria]; but, as she explained to her sister, "the other day, being in a hurry, I threw one all crumpled up into my waste-paper basket. The next day . . . you may fancy our laughter when one of the boys appeared proudly decorated with my cap. He evidently thinks it very fine, as he has worn it ever since, and is so pleased with his adornment that we have not had the heart to interfere" (*Letters from Samoa* 254–55).

Dressing Up: The Half-Caste Club

STEVENSON'S SENSE OF THE IMPORTANCE of dress in determining social rank also becomes evident in his dealings with the Half-Caste Club he founded and that met at Vailima until it failed after a few meetings. Following the lead of his missionary friends who were concerned about the role and fate of the half-castes in Samoa and who, consequently, set

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up special schools so that they might take a more prominent role in the leadership of the islands, Stevenson, his mother, Fanny, and Belle held weekly gatherings at which the half-castes were supposed to learn European manners and customs. An essential element in their education was the requirement that they "dress as neatly as they could." On every meeting night Stevenson's mother and Belle criticized the women's "appearance and deportment" (Moors 103). This attention to the half-castes' clothing is readily visible in Belle's sketches of a ball at which Europeans and Samoan half-castes were present (Figure 11). It is interesting to note that the half-caste woman is not allowed the plunging necklines and corseted waist of the European woman; rather, she is required to follow the missionary fashion and wear a loose dress that disguises the sexual contours of her body and demurely fastens at her neck. Her attire, therefore, makes sure that no matter how thoroughly she absorbs Western ways and no matter how much her features and skin color resemble those of a white person, she is not to be misread and mistaken for something other than herself. It guarantees that there will be no passing and that she is to carry on the missionary agenda. In other words, her dress, while in one way conforming to European standards, in another way registers the limits of her power; it is a badge of her bondage to the Europeans. Her position is tailored into her costume.

Dressing Up: Reconfiguring the Body

AS CARELESS AS STEVENSON MIGHT HAVE SEEMED to those who happened to see him in his shabby and informal pyjamas, his broad red sash, the Vailima livery, and the dress of his half-caste club suggest that he was perfectly well aware of the role played by dress in distinguishing those who had power from those who lacked it. Clothes were a way of establishing oneself in society, a means that becomes even more obligatory when one is stranded in a place far away from the usual associations and cut loose from familiar social patterns. But for Stevenson these items of clothing as well as the boots and the Bedford cord breeches were not only vestments of societal structure and authority, they were also expressions of a lifelong fascination with the romantic exploits of his fictional creations, like the brooding, exiled, but virile Mr. Henry in the *Master of Ballantrae*; they formed a part of his personal fiction. They expressed his own need, as a chronically ill person, to reconfigure himself, to cut a swashbuckling figure, to feel the pleasure of vigorous activity (as he did when he weeded the grounds around Vailima), and to create robust, vital subjects that, in a sense, put on leather riding boots and turn their backs on the naked realities of *The Beach of Falesá*. The outfit and pose he adopted for a portrait painted on board the *Casco* (1891) and later in Vailima display his desire for this reconfiguration. They furnish his weak, skeletal body with a simulacrum of strength and activity, an illusion that was somewhat successful, for his friends, when they saw him in such an outfit, thought he appeared "chivalrous" (although incongruously so when riding Jack, his aged and less than graceful horse). [9] The riding breeches, boots, shirt, and sash were a way of projecting his desires.

In addition, costumes were part of his and his family's delight in simply dressing up. S. R. Lysaght recalled that Stevenson "found a curious pleasure in dressing, or as children say, 'in dressing up'." He remembered that one evening at dinner Stevenson wore an Indian costume, "an embroidered thing [obviously Lysaght did not approve] folded and crossed upon his chest" (Masson 266). His love of his black velvet and brown velveteen

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Figure 11. Isobel Strong. "White, Samoan, Half-caste." Pen and ink. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

jackets was allied to this impulse; in the tailor's bill there are several entries for these materials. Stevenson was not alone, for the family took enormous delight in fancy-dress balls held by the German and British Naval officers and at the various consulates. Margaret Stevenson reported to her sister (October 18, 1891), "We are very much interested in a fancy-dress ball that is to come off on the 9th November in honour of the Prince of Wales's birthday. . . . Fanny has designed one for Mrs. G — [Gurrs] to wear, which will be

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most effective, I think; she is a very pretty Samoan girl, and the natural native dignity will help to make her a charming 'Zenobia, Empress of the East'" (*Letters from Samoa* 96). This romantic, splendid, fantastic costume was far more appealing to them than the European clothes that, according to Stevenson's mother, "do vulgarise all these brown people so terribly." Though this kind of clothing was *de rigueur* in the Stevensons' half-caste club, Mrs. Stevenson complained that, "the ugliest style of dress in existence seems destined to overrun the world" (*Letters from Samoa* 45). The extravagant costume evidently fit more conveniently into their exotic notions of their surroundings.

Dressing Up for the Camera

THERE WAS, HOWEVER, NOTHING quite like dressing up for photographs. Here the fantasy of being something one is not could have its freeest and, sometimes, most private play. At home in Vailima and when they traveled, the Stevensons spent considerable time on photographic projects. One of the tragedies of their travels occurred when a chest-load of photographs was thrown overboard and other packets of film were damaged as a result of a fire on board one of their chartered yachts. Eager to impress their readers and friends in Britain, they also took idealized pictures of their household staff (Figure 12). In a January 20, 1890 letter to Colvin, Fanny recalled one of these photographic sessions and revealed how in dressing the servant up, the mundane was once more discarded in favor of the exotic.

> The secretary who usually comes clad in an undershirt and a strip of curtain stuff is gorgeous in the photograph with all sorts of finery. The undershirt cast aside, leaves are bound round his loins, beads and particoloured leaves are twined through his hair, and round his neck he has a borrowed chief's necklace of large white teeth, to say nothing of a bead bracelet borrowed from a lady. He looks much better in these borrowed plumes than when dressed as the secretary. (Beinecke #3670)

One is reminded of the time when the Reverend Newell traveled to England with Saaga (a South Pacific islander), dressed him up as a Samoan warrior, and paraded him before the congregation of the Grosvenor Street Chapel.

What is not recorded in Fanny's report or in any of the biographies is that members of Stevenson's family also participated in this "borrowing" and arrayed themselves to be photographed in native costume, rather in the manner of Williams, the missionary, who back in England decked his own portly person with the native tiputa and mat, fixed a spear by his side, and adorned his head with the cap of many colors, worn on high days of chiefs.[10] In the Huntington Library is an 1888 photograph, taken in the Marquesas, of Lloyd wearing some sort of makeshift native South Seas costume, holding a Samoan club and posing as "Chief Moipu," as if for some ethnographic study, on a mat and in a makeshift studio – a shadow indicates the use of flash. The bits and pieces of the costume are mismatched, from the headdress resembling a diving mask to the anklets and the tunic hiding Lloyd's nakedness (Figure 13). It is best to treat the photograph as a parody of the many ethnographic engravings supplementing descriptions of Pacific voyages. In particular, the picture bears a startling resemblance to one in an 1886 missionary travelogue showing a Marquesan warrior (Figure 14). The angle of Lloyd's head, the mock-studied

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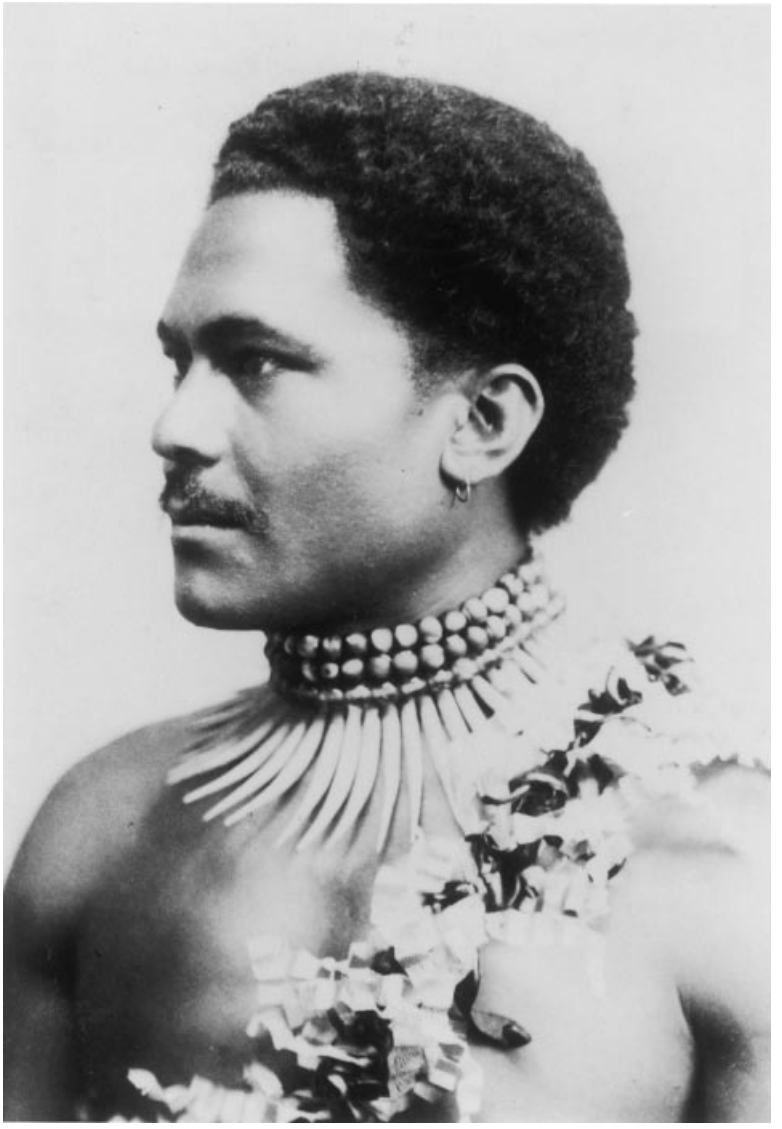


Figure 12. "Talolo Vailima." Photograph. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

seriousness of his expression, the displaying of the Samoan club, and, most of all, Lloyd's monocle add to the parodic tone and, furthermore, anticipate the satiric ethnographic photos of South Seas expeditions that apparently were later available to English and American readers. One example of this genre that came to my attention when a friend found the book in a secondhand bookshop is *The Cruise of the Kawa: Wanderings in the South Seas* by a "Walter E. Traprock" (1921). Its pages sport seventeen illustrations, each

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Figure 13. Lloyd Osbourne in South Sea Costume, 1888. Photograph. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

of which is more preposterous than the other and each of which pokes scathing fun at the clichés of South Seas voyages. One of these illustrations is a photograph of Herman Swank, the "Premier painter of Polynesia," wearing "his paloota, or wedding crown, the gift of his lovely island bride" while standing in his Western slippers and nightshirt on the beach (Figure 15). These photographs in *The Cruise of the Kawa* recall the missionary

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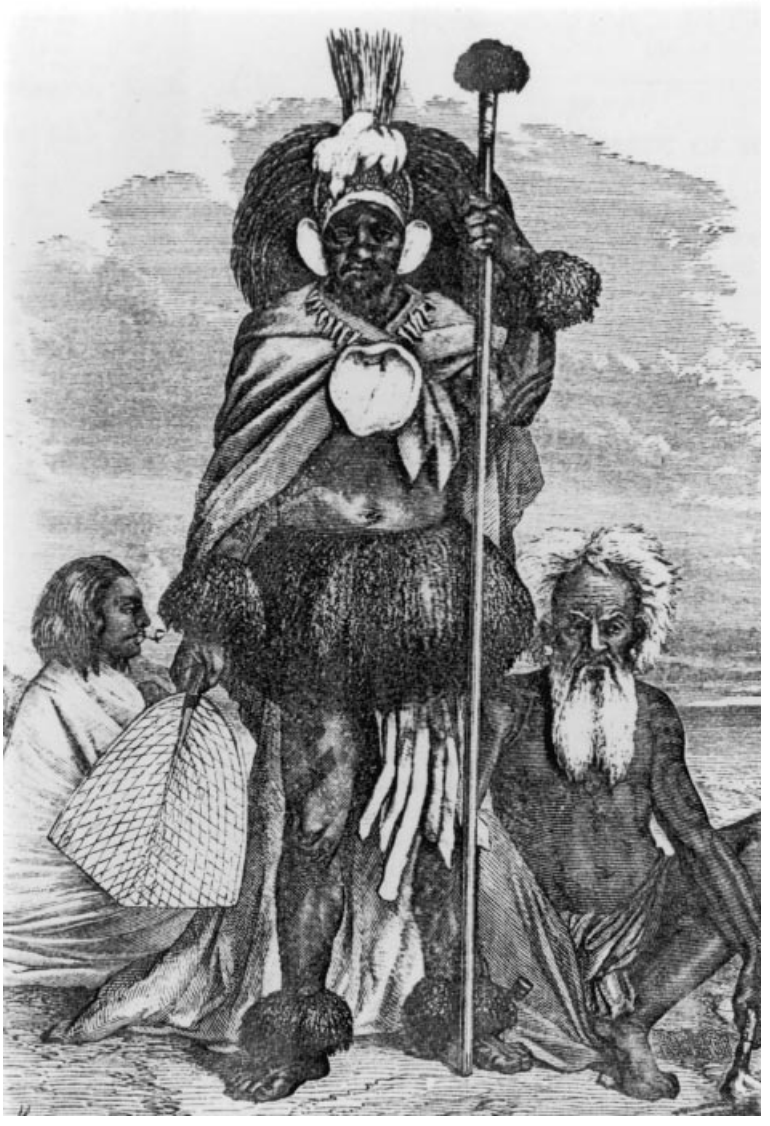


Figure 14. "Young Warrior, Old Man, and Woman of the Marquesas Islands." Illustration, from *Missionary Herald* 82 (December 1886): 523.

fashion shows in England: in the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century it was possible to rent South Seas outfits from the London Missionary Society and use them in Sunday School pageants and plays.[11]

These pictures are as disturbing as those taken by Westerners of South Seas chiefs dressed up in mismatching and ill-fitting European clothes, an event, by the way, that was

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Figure 15. "Herman Swank." Photograph, from Walter E. Traprock [George Shepard Chappell], *The Cruise of the Kawa: Wanderings in the South Seas* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), facing 52.

frequently recorded in the travelogues of explorers and missionaries and one that seems to have been a facile way in which to register the authors' feelings of superiority to the natives.[12] C. F. Wood's 1875 account of his yachting cruise among the Pacific islands includes one such incident when a chief, proudly wearing a melange of souvenirs and castoffs left by Western visitors, endured having his picture taken in the sweltering heat.

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The chief first "put on a warm flannel shirt of some blazing red tartan, wrapped a heavy woollen shawl of a somewhat similar pattern around his loins, on the top of this put an old Russian naval officer's coat, buckled an ancient military sword round his waist, put an Inverness cape on the top of this coat, covered his head with a wide-awake hat, and grasping a telescope in one hand and an old Tower musket in the other, went forth to be photographed" (Wood 13–14). In another incident Wood describes how a Fijian chief, Thakombau, was dressed by his ministers to be photographed on board *HMS Dido*. Instead of his usual loose flowing robes of Fijian tappa, in which he looked every inch a king, his ministers tricked him out in a close-fitting sky-blue jacket and flesh-colored tights. Wood remarks, "I don't know where they got the idea from, but the result was a mixture of a London footman and a barrel-organ monkey" (66). Even the marginally more sensitive Stevenson was guilty of participating in such activities when he photographed King Maka of the Gilbert Islands and encouraged him to pose before the camera in the vicious heat while burdened by a European uniform bedizened with gold lace and melting under his cocked hat (*In the South Seas* 250).

Death and the Gap

THE ATTEMPT TO MIMIC or represent the values and codes of another culture by borrowing its clothes not only exposes the confusions resulting from the imposition of one order upon another but also, and more poignantly, reveal the inevitable gap between the wearer and his or her clothing. That is to say, the incongruities of dressing up in someone else's costume force one to realize that the body underneath and its surroundings are often at odds with its covering (Figures 16 and 17). The garment and the body it adorns do not exhibit a seamless continuity. Consequently, rather than seeing a native or a Westerner in these photographs, one notices someone attempting to masquerade as something other than him or herself. Individuals like Lloyd and the King and Queen of Butaritari never revealed their foreignness, their otherness, more blatantly than when they put on their guises. At least the Fijian chief, after having his picture taken in European attire, immediately took the alien garments off (something one could not do with a tattoo). It is interesting to note that accounts of such photographic sessions typically close with a description of the rapidity with which the incongruous and misfitting clothes are discarded. Wood in his *A Yachting Cruise in the South Seas* mentions that after a chief had endured being photographed in uncomfortable European clothing, "he then retired to his house, where I shortly afterwards found him, in the costume of our first parents, drinking cocoa-nuts and fanning himself" (14). Dressing up can become a dressing down.

But dressing up not only makes more noticeable the gap between the body and the dress; it also makes more real the certainty that, finally, the body can no longer be sustained, protected, or represented by what adorns it. Stevenson's loose-fitting pyjamas may have shielded him from the sun and filled out his skeletal thinness and may have momentarily disguised his physical weakness, but not for long. The body has its own rhythm and deteriorates beneath the freshly tailored material. Some of the photographs taken at Vailima, even the ones taken a few days before his death, show Stevenson wearing his riding boots, red sash, cord trousers, and dress shirt (Figure 18); he appears to be a figure untouchable by death. But these dress clothes mask the clock of mortality that

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Figure 16. Robert Louis Stevenson, "H. M. King Tembenoka of Apemama," 1889. Photograph. Courtesy of the Writers' Museum, Edinburgh, Scotland.

beats beneath them. For a while they can function as a form of physical editing, but they can never completely conceal the body's vulnerability. In the end, perhaps, clothes serve not so much as a symbol of cultural contagion or of one's position in the world, but as some sort of sign that one is alive and out in the world. They represent the will to live. Margaret Stevenson wrote in a December 4, 1894 diary entry, shortly after Stevenson's death, that "Dear Lou . . . wanted to die *with his clothes on*" (Beinecke #7304). Indeed his wish was granted, for he died dressed in the illusion that clothes create and in the delusion that his life would continue. Stevenson literally died with his boots on. When he collapsed, Lloyd unlaced his stepfather's boots, temporarily admitting that the mirage could no longer be maintained. Soon, though, custom saw to it that once more clothes would attempt to mask mortality. Late in the night of his dying, the family, according to Lloyd, "washed his body and dressed it in a soft white-linen shirt and black evening trousers girded with a dark-blue silk sash. A white tie, dark-blue silk socks, and patent leather shoes completed the

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Figure 17. Robert Louis Stevenson, "The King and Queen of Butaritari," 1889. Photograph. Courtesy of the Writers' Museum, Edinburgh, Scotland.

costume." This attire would remind the European world that Stevenson was one of them, that he had not gone native. To emphasize this point, Lloyd was quick to point out that the sash was not an unusual or improper piece of clothing: "The sash may sound extraordinary, but it was the custom to wear sashes in Samoa" (Osbourne 147).

Lloyd's attention to the clothes in his account of Stevenson's last hours is indicative of the way individuals turn to clothes to help them respond to and define critical events. Indeed so important was the matter of dress at this moment, that one of the first reactions to the news of Stevenson's passing was that messengers were sent "from every direction" so that one of the shops could be opened in Apia and "dozens of bolts of black cotton cloth" brought up to Vailima. Lloyd explained that "two yards of this wide, black cotton would suffice to make a *lavalava*, as the kilt-like Samoan garment is called; and in these and white-cotton undershirts our Vailima retainers would make a creditable appearance, and one which they would consider appropriate" (Osbourne 146–47).

Clothes marked the end as well as the beginning of Stevenson's years in the South Seas; they were the subject of both his arrival and his departure. In this context the tailor's bill from Sydney emerges as one of the more salient leftovers of Stevenson's life between 1888 and December, 1894. And Stevenson's clothes are still with us. When one goes to the Writers' Museum in Edinburgh, one cannot help but be drawn to the cabinets displaying

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Figure 18. One of the last photographs taken of Robert Louis Stevenson (the Samoan chief was edited out), 1894. Photograph. Courtesy of the Writers' Museum, Edinburgh, Scotland.

his white cotton yachting cap, his boots, and his jackets. When they stand alone, without the person within them, these items, for a minute, seem to restore credibility to that life; they carry on and make more real what has gone, no longer as a mask for, but as an emblem of, a person.

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NOTES

1. See, for instance, Edmond 111.
2. See Gunson 200.
3. Sutton speaks of this principle in *Strangers in Paradise*. In Wilson there is an account of another episode:

> They [the missionaries and the ship's captain] were received by young king (Otoo) and his wife Tfltua, both carried on men's shoulders; each took the captain by the hand, and in dumb silence surveyed him attentively, looking in his face and minutely examining every part of his dress. . . . The queen opened Mr. Cover's shirt at the breast and sleeves, and seemed astonished at so clear a sight of the blue veins. (62)

4. In *Nineteen Years in Polynesia: Missionary Life, Travels, and Researches in the Islands of the Pacific* Turner writes about changes in dress since the landing of the missionaries in Samoa:

> Soon after the arrival of the missionaries, a marked change took place. With few exceptions, the men cut their hair short, abandoned the short and narrow leaf apron . . . and, when they appeared at public worship, dressed, if possible, in a regatta or white shirt, and a piece of calico round the loins. Coats, waistcoats, trousers, neckerchiefs, and straw hats came into use. The women, too, commenced wearing loose calico dresses, and were rarely seen without a *tiputa* or upper garment of some kind. (207–08)

5. For a sense of Colvin's objections to Stevenson's preoccupation with the South Seas cultures, see Fanny's letter to Colvin in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, 7: 79–80.
6. See the 1872 diaries of Reverend James Chalmers (item #162), London Missionary Society Archives, in which Reverend Chalmers talks about the practice of fines for putting a flower or a feather in the hat. It is probably important to mention that he thought the fines a bit ridiculous and encouraged the native preachers to stop enforcing them.
7. Claxton 432.
8. An example of one of these passages can be found in Lamont:

> They [the Penrhyn Islanders] endeavoured to push their legs through the sleeves of a black dress coat that had been mine, after the manner they observed I wore my trousers, till I showed one of them how to wear it properly. As an evidence that he thoroughly understood my lesson, the illustrious ambassador, seizing a pair of black trousers, stuck his arm through them, and ensconced his head in the body so that he could not find his way out till he roared for assistance. . . . trousers were evidently an incumbrance. . . . Coats (which they adopted on state occasions) were worn after their own fashion — that is, with the sleeves fastened round the loins in front. . . . Sometimes they were to be seen with one boot or shoe, and nothing else. . . . Stockings were usually left to the women, by whom they were worn as a kind of cross-belt, secured, top and toe, on the shoulder, and occasionally even used as a dress turban on festive occasions. (127–28)

9. S. R. Lysaght of Samoa recalled that Stevenson's "appearance on horseback was amusing — dressed in white, with riding boots and a French peaked cap, chivalrous in his bearing, but mounted on a horse which would not have been owned by any self-respecting English costermonger" (Masson 265).
10. The account of Reverend John Williams dressed in native costume appears in Prout 132.
11. In the London Missionary Society Archives is a pamphlet by J. M. B. entitled *He and She from O'er the Sea: Missionary Recitations and Hymns for Twelve Boys and Girls*. London: London Missionary Society. n.d. On the title page the Society announces that "the costumes

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and curios can be borrowed free, after due notice, from the Mission House for use at Meetings held on behalf of the L. M. S."

12. In the nineteenth century there seems really to be no record of how the inhabitants felt about having their pictures taken while dressed in Western clothing. It is a relief to note, however, that the island inhabitants occasionally had their revenge and got to laugh at the Westerners and their costume. Churchward records a time a circus (Woodyear's Electric Circus) came to one of the islands of Samoa. As part of the performance a trick monkey appeared dressed "for all the world, as similar as possible" to the British Consul. The response from the natives was immense roars of laughter (150).

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