
Oliver S. Buckton. *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. 344p.

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In his Introduction to *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson*, Oliver S. Buckton deploys *cruising* as a critical paradigm from which to explore the interconnections between Stevenson's travel practices and his travel writing. Buckton's use of the term is multiform; it is at once a description of a particular kind of travel—"cruising signifies a process of travel characterized by leisurely movement and random progress, rather than a planned journey toward a specific destination" (3)—and a literary methodology for expressing that movement—"The second meaning of *cruising* is to designate Stevenson's narrative practice, which is based on his method of integrating the materials and experiences of travel into his writing" (4).

While the interconnection between *cruising* as an authorial practice and *cruising* as a style of travel forms the central conceit of Buckton's study of Stevenson's writings, he further broadens the definition of his critical terminology to allow for nuanced readings of the late Victorian anxieties that permeate Stevenson's narratives, such as the instability of fin-de-siècle gender roles, the European colonial contest, and the tensions implicit to literary production at the century's close. By presenting him as an author whose literary *cruising* of generic conventions reveals their problematic fallibilities, Buckton convincingly argues for continued consideration of Stevenson as a writer who productively engaged with the social concerns of the contemporaneous moment.

Although Buckton has a tendency to toy with language—the teasing of the boundary between corpse and corpus in Stevenson's *The Wrong Box*, *The Master of Ballantrae*, and *The Ebb-Tide* is particularly conspicuous—his intellectual play is always productive. For example, his assertion that "By attending to the narrative energies associated with the corpse...we are better able to grasp an important technique of romance fiction by which Stevenson and other writers, such as Oscar Wilde and Rider Haggard, sought to reanimate the corpse of Victorian realism through a revitalized use of gothic and sensational motifs" (36) breathes new life into the often reiterative discussion of Victorian realism and offers a new perspective that challenges the prevailing opposition of realist fiction and its less critically-respected counterparts. This move allows Buckton to reconsider Stevenson as an author who could become central to rethinking the modes of late Victorian literary production: "his position is best understood not as a refutation of realism, as such, but as a rejection of the system of generic classifications" (38).

Despite the expansive set of social concerns he attempts to cover, Buckton's framework proves flexible enough to manage the complex intersections that his theoretical *cruising* enables. His discussion of Stevenson's documentary South Seas writing, *The Ebb-Tide*, and "The Beach of Falesá," both allows for the resonate possibilities of intertextuality between Stevenson's fictional and nonfictional work and contributes to critical conversations about the interaction between empire and colony. Buckton maintains that Stevenson not only made use of his travels as the raw material for the writing of "commodity-books," but also used his writing "to disrupt the rigid hierarchy of white man and savage and thus dispute the ideological basis for colonialism" (178).

Though Buckton's critique of Stevenson's Samoan writings draws on the thought of Edward Said, his argument remains original, due in part to the special attention he places on the colonial body in Stevenson's South Sea works as locus of political and erotic desire that challenges the normative depiction of the colonized Other. As Buckton writes, "Stevenson's portrayal of the Polynesian body—its appearance, arts, and adornments—and his comparison of these with European practices were far from asserting the superiority of the latter. On the contrary, Stevenson often ascribed a higher value to the 'primitive'" (24) and "The body as a sign of racial identity is unstable in Stevenson's travels, in that he often inverts the 'white supremacy' of imperial discourse" (19).

Buckton's account is also remarkably balanced; while many interpretations of empirical desire focus solely on the body of the colonized, Buckton places Stevenson's body under close scrutiny as "a mediating link between the binary opposites of colonial Self and Other" (21). As such, *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson* interjects a provocative reading of Stevenson's writing on the South Seas as a self-aware repetition of the ambivalent attraction of the European colonial project to the "natural beauty" of the Polynesian people and land "while seeking to extract native commodities" (255) that is troubled by a fundamentally liminal figure who *cruises* the demarcation between native and imperial subjectivities.

However, not all of the promises made in the Introduction are fulfilled. While Buckton writes persuasively about the Butlerian performativity of various racialized and sexualized colonial identities at the book's outset, a thorough exploration of the sexual aspect of Stevenson's dual-natured *cruising* is largely absent from his book. Similarly, despite situating his discussion of travel writing as a force of generic disruption within the context of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men*, the implied queer reading of travel writing as "a significant forum for challenging the narrative conventions of the Victorian novel" (11) is never fully realized, even though the term *cruising* possesses an inherently, and unavoidable, queer context. Buckton's argument

that “Stevenson was attracted to the possibilities offered by travel for escape from the rigid gender and sexual codes of Victorian Britain” (7) is certainly compelling enough to warrant further explication, but the point remains underdeveloped. While not every space that Buckton “opens up” in regard to Stevenson’s travel practices and travel writing is plumbed to its deepest depths, the act of opening-up Stevenson’s life and work to further scholarly inquiry in itself constitutes a significant contribution to the study of late Victorian travel writing, colonialism, and Stevenson as an author of importance to several ongoing literary discussions. And perhaps that is ultimately the pleasure of this endeavor, the utility of cruising as an inventive critical apparatus, and the strength of *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson* as a work of literary criticism: it invites another pass and further wanderings. ✱