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Wilderness in 19th Century South Seas Literature: An Ecocritical Search for Seascapes

Denise Dillon
James Cook University Singapore
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0191-7841

Abstract

In Western thought and literature, a terrestrial bias is considered a phenomenological primacy for notions such as wilderness. This ecocritical review draws on nineteenth-century South Seas literature with its influences from frontierism and the literary movements of romanticism, realism and naturism to consider a more fluid appreciation and reconceptualisation of wilderness as non-terrestrial and an oceanic touchstone for freedom. American terrestrial frontierism, that drove colonial settlement of the North American continent, is used as both counterpoint and important embarkation point for ventures into the Pacific Ocean following 'fulfilment' of the 'manifest destiny' to overspread the continent. For American, British and Australian writers, the Pacific represented an opportunity to apply literary techniques to capture new encounters. South Seas works by Melville, Stevenson, Becke and Conrad offer glimpses of seascapes that provide perceptions of heterotopias, archetypes and depictions of dispossessed itinerants at a moral frontier and wilderness that is both sublime and liberating, liminal and phenomenological.

Keywords: South Seas literature, wilderness, nineteenth century, Pacific Ocean, ecocriticism, seascapes

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Wherein differ the sea and the land, that a miracle
upon one is not a miracle upon the other?
— Hermann Melville, *Moby Dick*

Despite the fact that oceans cover the majority of our Earth's surface, there is a bias in Western thought towards the terrestrial.[1] Some identify this bias as a fundamental component in Western ways of knowing (Connery, 2006) and as a phenomenological primacy (Casey, 1993, p. 66; 1997; 2002), which in a very simplified form is to say that our everyday existence is to feel the solid ground of land under our feet. To elaborate, Casey argues that, in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, place takes precedence over time and space in that place is a concrete relational term; it is where bodies reside and thereby where culture resides (Casey, 2002). Consequently, a terrestrial bias is considered a phenomenological primacy for Western notions such as wilderness.

However, wilderness and frontier are both terms that people comprehend and use according to personalised appreciation for whatever uncertainties or aspirations are cogent to them. Wilderness represents more than geophysical characteristics of human environments; it forms a touchstone for perceptions of nature and freedom. Nineteenth-century French poet and novelist Victor Hugo (1866/2002, p. 50), for instance, considered the impossible as "a frontier that is perpetually receding", while Cohen (2010, p. 3) noted that in the 1860s, the sea formed a "continued frontier of modernity". In her literary history of sea adventure fiction, *The Novel and the Sea*, Margaret Cohen defines a span of four centuries of discovery through marine navigation as "two distinct but interrelated histories: the working age of global sail and the era of global exploration" (p. 3). The prominence of the ocean during this time (for her purposes Cohen confines this to the years 1748-1824) meant that it became "one of modernity's most dynamic, productive frontiers" (p. 3); yet she reminds us, "The oceans are wild spaces, ruled by great forces beyond human control" (p. 4). In one early example of an acceptance of the world's ocean as nonterrestrial wilderness, Henry David Thoreau (1865/1988) portrayed an exotic contrast between landscapes and seascapes with typical Romantic embellishment. Reasoning that ocean environments have remained consistently "wild and unfathomable" (p. 148) across aeons, Thoreau compares this consistency with the changes evident to shore dwellers, where human traces are evident: "The ocean is a wilderness reaching

[1] For examples of the continuing recognition of the sea in Pacifika literature, see recent poetic works published in this journal by Craig Santos Perez (2020): "Chanting the Waters," "One Fish, Two Fish," and "Praise Song for Oceania"

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around the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle, and fuller of monsters, washing the very wharves of our cities and the gardens of our sea-side residences" (pp. 148-149).

With a view towards an exploration of literary notions of wilderness applied to the ocean, I employ works of fiction by authors who visited the South Seas during the nineteenth century when the oceans and seas came into prominence under the influence of two major eras: the global age of sail and the global age of discovery (Cohen, 2010). With attention directed to the oceans as an element of the natural environment rather than the typical primary attention to literary characters or plot, a further step requires texts that might be considered "environmental texts". By this I refer to Buell's four criteria for defining environmental texts as opposed to nature writing. The four criteria are as follows: 1) "the non-human environment is present as more than a framing device", and its presence suggests an implication of human history in natural history; 2) "human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest"; 3) "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation"; and 4) "the text provides, at least implicitly, some sense of the environment as process rather than as a constant or a given" (Buell, 1995, pp. 7-8). Through literature, we can search for representations of sociohistorical environments in stylized forms through text, with each text being "environmentally embedded at every stage from its germination to its reception" (Buell, 2005, p.44). Nonetheless, even within South Seas literature we may need to read deeply and closely to search for seascapes in these representations, which Buell admits could be embedded at the unconscious level. This is particularly so in texts that are driven predominantly by plot and narrative rather than specifically guided by environmental topics.

A range of English-language literature based in the South Seas includes works by nineteenth-century[2] authors based on different continents, including Herman Melville (American, 1819-1892), Robert Louis Stevenson (Scottish, 1850-1894), Louis Becke (Australian, 1855-1913), and Joseph Conrad (Polish-British, 1857-1925). They have been the focus of critical evaluative and comparative reviews (e.g., Dryden, 2009; Seltzer, 1970, Spicer, 2021a, 2021b).

Melville spent time at sea as a cabin boy before shipping in 1841 on the whaler *Acushnet* on which he spent a year in Pacific regions including the Marquesas, Tahiti and Honolulu. Stevenson cruised through the South Seas in 1888 to 1890 before settling in Samoa as his permanent home. Becke was a lesser-known Australian author of yarns who acknowledged Melville's influence on his own published

[2] The time frame of the nineteenth century which forms the focus of this paper excludes Jack London, who some would argue is one of the major South Seas writers. However, London's South Seas narratives are based on his cruise through Polynesia and Melanesia in the early twentieth century (1907-1909).

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recollections of time spent as supercargo and trader on various South Seas expeditions from 1871 to 1892. It takes a whaleman, wrote Becke, to "know and comprehend more of the mysteries and dangers and wonders of the ocean than any other sea-going man" (Becke, 1992, p. 117). Despite Becke's publications being now out of print and his name being little heard of, his first publication in 1894 preceded by one year that of lauded Polish-born and British nationalised author Joseph Conrad (Lane Bradshaw, 2005, p. 209). Both authors found favour with reviewers of the time on the basis of two points of resemblance: South Sea locations and first-hand accounts of the unfolding dramas narrated in their works. Conrad of course also famously spent nearly twenty years at sea with the British Merchant Navy and his novel, *Victory*, is set in Sourabaya (now Surabaya) and the island of Semburan, off East Java in Indonesia – and takes us to the Western limits of Pacific waters.

The South Seas now often refers to the oceans south of the equator (South Seas, n.d.), while the origin of the term is "shrouded in myth and mystery" and it retained an allure for Australians and Europeans for centuries (Halter, 2021). In the nineteenth century, it referred to the Pacific Ocean, so named by Spanish explorer Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, from a description provided by the son of a "friendly chief of Darien" who "said that the other great ocean was always smooth, and never rough like the Caribbean sea" (Markham, 1913, p. 519). To better understand the wilderness of the South Seas, we need to appreciate the differences between the terrestrial gaze onto the "vast illimitable ocean" (p. 519) as opposed to the phenomenological experience of life at sea, and in the edge zones where ocean meets island shore. The conceptual wilderness in literature featuring tropical South Seas seascapes and locations is a rich reservoir for considering perceptions of sea travellers to the far-flung islands in the remoteness of the vast Pacific Ocean and the surrounding connecting seas that flow through the archipelago waters of Indonesia. There is no doubt that the concept of wilderness has already been under scrutiny and is the basis for considerable scholarship. One of the most noteworthy expositions is that of Roderick Nash, the eminent wilderness historian and proponent of environmental education, whose *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Nash, 1969) revealed a veritable galaxy of meanings and associations.[3]

Oceanic wilderness is not considered in the definitions and considerations of Nash and many others in their explanations of wilderness but, as an element of the everyday conditions of survival for early colonisers, traders, settlers and explorers of the South

[3] As the title indicates, this is a notion of wilderness from an American perspective. The 'mind' is that of the dominant culture and the book offers a history of the cultural, philosophical and political ideas of wilderness going back to European routes.

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Sea islands, this type of wilderness was immediate in that life and death hung in the balance once Westerners ventured beyond the "safe" zones of the lagoons. In the past these island nations were considered to be relatively culturally remote as a result of their geographical isolation[4] and the island nations consequently developed their own versions of "civilization" such that their everyday conditions of living constituted a condition of modern-day, legislated wilderness, vis à vis potential for solitude or a "primitive and unconfined type of recreation" as defined by the 1964 "Wilderness Act" (United States Congress, 1964). In island nations residents, we have a combination of human inhabitants successfully adopting subsistence lifestyles in vulnerable environments which, to some, might connote a Crusoesque desert island idyll whereby the inhabitants have managed to overcome hardships of geographical isolation and limited resources. This notion of a wilderness devoid of humans has since been hotly contested and blends into equally controversial conversations about what constitutes "nature" (e.g., Cronin, 1995; Dowie, 2019).

Drawing on nineteenth-century literature featuring the vast South Seas I seek to understand wilderness through an ecocritical review drawing on the perspectives of nineteenth-century South Seas authors, noting their influences from the notion of 'frontierism' and the influence of literary movements. The aim is to consider a more fluid appreciation and reconceptualisation of wilderness as non-terrestrial and oceanic touchstone for freedom. In the works of American writers terrestrial frontierism that drove the colonisation of the American continent is used as both counterpoint and important embarkation point for ventures into the Pacific Ocean following what was considered the 'fulfilment' of their 'manifest destiny' to overspread the continent. For American, British and Australian writers, the Pacific represented an opportunity to apply literary romanticism, realism or naturism techniques to capture new encounters. South Seas works of fiction provide perceptions of heterotopias, archetypes and depictions of dispossessed itinerants at a moral frontier that is both sublime and liberating, liminal and phenomenological.

The ocean remains a remote and relatively mysterious entity that fosters ambivalent opinions even amongst those we might consider most intimately familiar with seascapes. Onetime merchant marine Joseph Conrad, for instance, includes some contradictory reflections ensuing from his years of experience as a sailor. In various entries, Conrad (1923) reflects that "Water is friendly to man. The ocean… has ever been a friend to the enterprising nations of the earth" (p. 101); and yet, "the sea has

[4] Of course, from this Western perspective they were remote from the global north, however, many islands are also geographically isolated from each other, and at one time Australia was thought of as the largest of the South Seas islands.

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never been friendly to man" and is rather "the accomplice of human restlessness, and playing the part of dangerous abettor of world-wide ambitions" (p. 135). Moreover, the sea is "Faithful to no race after the manner of the kindly earth…has never adopted the cause of its masters", and "has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory" (p. 135). Taking these characteristics of the ocean as the basis for comparison with terrestrial wilderness, I explore these and other contrastive assumptions about oceanic wilderness, marine environments[5] and seascapes. Here we might paraphrase a rhetorical question as Melville posed through his narrator, Ishmael: "Wherein differ the sea and the land, that a miracle upon one is not a miracle upon the other?" (Melville, 1851/1998, p. 283). Our specific question becomes: Wherein differ the sea and the land, that a wilderness upon one is not a wilderness upon the other?

Terrestrial Wilderness: "At the hither edge of free land"

As an important embarkation point for nineteenth-century South Seas travel, I first consider accepted notions of wilderness and emphasise that these are land-based with ties to various historical events, particularly with respect to the colonisation of the American nation. While we might be tempted to presume that North America had ample wild areas even after the colonial settlement of the continent from the eastern seaboard to the far reaches of the west coast, an apparent need for wild areas has consistently led to individual expressive outbursts: "Give me a wilderness no civilization can endure," pleaded Thoreau in his 1862 essay, "Walking". This notion of wilderness as a refuge from civilization is common but certainly just one of many understandings of what wilderness implies. For some, although in what others might reasonably consider a reductionist way of thinking, the notion of wilderness is not so much a place but a mental state.

> Essentially, wilderness is a state of mind. It is the feeling of being far removed from civilization, from those parts of the environment that man [*sic*] and his technology have modified and controlled. Although it is impossible to translate exactly the word "wilderness" into many languages, the dominant idea is the absence of man and his works. (Nash, 1976, p. 14)

Yi Fu Tuan, the noted geographer and philosopher, also ascribes to the view of wilderness as a state of mind (1990, p. 112) in that the term is an elastic one whereby connotations have shifted over time, for instance from being felt as perceptions of awe

[5] A maritime environment includes the oceans, seas, bays, estuaries, islands, coastal areas, and the airspace above these, including the littorals.

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and threat in a Biblical sense to that of symbolized orderliness of natural processes and further abstracted as a state of mind for those entrenched in environments of urban sprawl. Wilderness is commonly associated with sanctuary and solitude (largely associated with enclosure and envelopment), but also with freedom (associated with open expanses and prospect). Arguably the predominant idea that has become associated with the colonisation of the American continent is "frontier", with the push to expand the frontier ever further paired with a dispelling of wilderness in favour of civilization. Explaining that the term "frontier" in the US was taken to mean "the boundary between the wild and the civilized," Nash noted that by the end of the nineteenth century the term had lost that specific meaning for the American continent. However, 'frontier' retained rich connotative meaning in terms of differentiation for the American settler colonials between themselves as Americans as set aside from Europe and the rest of the world (Turner, 1894, p. 201).

In his landmark[6] essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", Turner argues that, on the American continent, the shift of focus away from the Atlantic coast towards the continually expanding opportunities for westward advancement meant that the American frontier lay "at the hither edge of free land" (1894, p. 200), and this advancing edge beckoned all the way to the Pacific coast in the far west. Once the western reaches of the US landform had been claimed, US expansion extended offshore and into the tropical Pacific with the addition of Hawaii as a US territory in 1898 and the further acquisition of the Philippines and Guam (also located in the western Pacific), and Puerto Rico (in the Caribbean Sea) (Thompson, 2002, p. 537). Thompson puts the annexation of Hawaii as a US territory as "one of the final frontiers of European American settlement" (p. 537).

According to ecocriticism pioneer Lawrence Buell, the American natural environment has been constructed "thrice over in a tangled ideological palimpsest" (Buell, 1995, pp. 5-6). The first construction takes the image of "old world desire". The second construction takes the image of "American cultural nationalism". The third construction of the American natural environment is the "latter-day scholarly discourse of exceptionalism". Whichever form it takes, the American natural environment is very firmly entrenched in and on the American continent. Gesa Mackenthun, a Professor of American Literature, tells us that "America's foundational narrative is a continental one, its setting the wilderness of the frontier" (as cited in Cohen, 2010, p. 134). Of course, the standard by which wilderness or the 'natural state' of territories encountered by explorers and colonial settlers was (and is) publicly imagined is

[6] The essay was a turning point and an important stage in the development of how the frontier was understood at the time.

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contested (MacKinnon, 2013). I argue that the US frontier did not end at the western boundary of the continent, but moved ahead as a continued horizon of aspiration for those seeking wilderness in the forms of solitude and freedom, and this horizon extended to the Pacific Ocean and to tropical South Sea island locations that feature in popular and relatively well-regarded South Seas literature.

The frontier as a shifting edge is perhaps nowhere more liberating than on the open ocean, where a characteristic absence of the marks of civilization lend to the seascape some semblance of wilderness as well. American philosopher Edward Casey, for instance, remarks on the persistent interest in humans to go "beyond land's end" despite "the anxiety occasioned by the trackless sea" (Casey, 2002, pp. 2-3). "One is driven to go at any cost to earth's end," says Casey, "whether in speculation or in actual exploration, and to do so by leaving the land that subtends one's home place and entering the ever spacious sea beyond the wildness of the boundless. The obsession with land's end comes at the expense of land itself" (p. 5).

In his great novel, *Moby Dick*, Melville (1851/1998) makes the case for a focus away from land and the fascination that we earth-bound humans have for water. There is no sense of simply gazing upon water for aesthetic pleasure; rather we are drawn magnetically as needles on a compass, or through magic or by metaphysical means, entranced, enchanted, charmed as in dreams or in "deepest reveries". There is a craziness in the urge to go to sea, or a "mystical vibration" or a holiness in its deeper meaning. What we narcissistically see in "all rivers and oceans", says Melville's Ishmael, "is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all" (p. 3). "Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land…They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in" (p. 2).

Pacific explorations opened up erstwhile unknown areas of the Pacific Ocean to Western adventurers and largely ameliorated fantasies about mysterious islands that offered unknown benefits and fortune. The vast dimensions of the Pacific Ocean alone left much to the imagination because, in the early nineteenth century and still in the age of sail, there remained many areas uncharted and offering an enigmatic lure to explorers and civilians alike. Melville (1851/1998) captures some of this allure and immensity in his description of the Pacific:

> To any meditative Magian rover, this serene Pacific, once beheld, must ever after be the sea of his adoption. It rolls the midmost waters of the world, the Indian ocean and the Atlantic being but its arms. The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted by the recentest race of men, and lave the faded but

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> still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham; while all between float *milky-ways* of coral isles, and low-lying, *endless, unknown* Archipelagoes, and *impenetrable* Japans. Thus this *mysterious, divine* Pacific zones the world's whole bulk about, makes all coasts one bay to it; seems the tide-beating heart of earth. (pp. 492-493, italics mine)

Melville's exoticised and romanticised description of the Pacific comes flavoured with preconceptions of what it means to be "pacific," as in calm, peaceful or tranquil. His addition of "serene" as an adjective is redundant if these are the only meanings we take from the term. Further to this tautology, though, Melville infuses the Pacific with further meaning, indicative of mystery and opacity. I have used italics to highlight such instances, including reference to the Milky Way, a galaxy of stars so named because it is difficult to determine one star from amongst the multitudes. When considered the way that Melville describes, the vastness of the Pacific Ocean makes it at once far distant and strange, yet immediately proximate and familiar.

The urge to foster more familiarity was perhaps the driving force behind at least some of the opening up of the Pacific to exploration and commerce. Foucault (1986) realised the human urge to enact utopian ideals in a range of forms as heterotopias (which are realised as opposed to the wholly imagined utopias), with the impelling thrill of life on the open ocean as one of these forms:

> …and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea… you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development…, but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (p. 27)

Connery (2006, p. 496) attributes what he calls "an oceanic turn in postmodernist philosophy" to the likes of Foucault together with Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom have contributed to debates about place and space. The salient feature of the ocean across these discussions is that it remains "the realm of the unbound, unconstricted, and free" (Connery, p. 497). In the introduction to his collection of sea stories, Raban (1992) notes that the sea is little described in Western literature; the focus is on land, on the places rather than the "space" over which people travel. "The water on which it

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[the ship] floats is a *waste*, and sometimes a *rude waste*" (p. 5, italics in original). Far from considering the ocean a waste, in a fresh take on modern historical experience, Klein and Mackenthun (2004) draw on the ocean as a rich ground of historical meaning:

> Such contact zones, according to a recent definition, are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination–like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today." Many of these lopsided cultural encounters…took place not beyond but literally in or on the seas, making the ocean itself a prime example of such contact zones, and investing it with both historical meaning and cultural agency. (p. 2)

It is thus also in acts of exploration and enactments of desire to follow one's passions towards the unfamiliar and to go beyond land's end, to the edge zones, that we must search for notions of wilderness in seascapes.

To leave the land: "The charm of a wild roving life"

In her introduction to Stevenson's *South Sea Tales*, Jolly noted Stevenson's realization that the Pacific represented "a new world, hardly known to Europe and barely represented in literature" (p. xii). Jolly also reported from some of Stevenson's correspondence to various figures including Henry James that he had ambivalent feelings about the sea itself, considering it "a deathful place, I like to be there, and like squalls (when they are over)". Despite any misgivings, the adventurer in him revelled in each new experience of drawing near to a new island. In contrast to the American fascination for frontiers of national expansionism, Stevenson's motivation was of a more personal nature. Driven by desire and romantic notions of "perfect climate; perfect shapes of men and women, with red flowers in their hair", Stevenson's failing health further drove him to seek the South Seas as "absolute balm for the weary" (Jolly, 1996, p. ix)[7].

In his collection of lectures on romantic iconography of the sea, Auden (1950) intimates a stronger, more imperative motivation in the romantic attitude towards exploration with four specific points of distinction:

[7] Refer also to the work of Spicer (2021c), who did an in-depth reading of Stevenson's health during his stay in the South Seas region.

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1. To leave the land and the city is the desire of every man of sensibility and honour.
2. The sea is the real situation and the voyage is the true condition of man.
3. The sea is where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall, and redemption occur. The shore life is always trivial.
4. An abiding destination is unknown even if it may exist: a lasting relationship is not possible nor even to be desired. (pp. 21-22)

This daemonic perspective offers almost unlimited scope for exploring literature with seascapes as a major feature. Referring to Romantic individuals, Nash notes that the "solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation" (1969, p. 47). In much of the South Seas literature we come upon a form of frontierism in which characters choose to isolate themselves in an endless shifting away from, rather than forging towards, a goal. The relative lawlessness of the seas and expanding frontiers offered through ocean travel in the Pacific led many adventurous types to take to the seas in search of both freedom and adventure as 'wandering Ishmaels'. The advent of these types into South Seas locales is a common theme for Melville, Stevenson, Conrad and Becke.

When Melville's Tommo (in his novel, *Typee*) claims that whaling crews had "left law and equity on the other side of the Cape," he is referring to the inequitable power differential on board ships (Melville, 1846/2001, p. 21). The "dastardly and mean-spirited wretches" on board a whaling ship from which Melville, as Tommo, describes an escape to Nuku Heva, an island in the Marquesas, are largely drifters who choose the solitary life at sea in preference to civilized life ashore.

Similarly, the crew of the Pequod in *Moby Dick* are predominantly island men who form not a collective whole but rather a collation of isolatoes, each a continent to himself, "not acknowledging the common continent of men" (Melville, 1851/1998, p. 122). Acknowledging that fewer than half of those in the American whale fishery were born on American soil, we learn that the "American liberally provides the brains, the rest of the world as generously suppl[ies] the muscles" (p. 122): "They were nearly all islanders in the Pequod" (p. 122). Stevenson and Conrad, too, feature apparently rootless drifters whose transience Goh (2009) describes as representing "part of a deeper (if inchoate) existential state" that is also a consequence of "being caught between conflicting sociopolitical forces" (p. 129).

In his study of Stevenson's South Seas fiction, Hillier (1989) promotes the idea of the South Seas as an archetype, by which he means a psychological pattern in the human psyche that "pervades our individual dreams and our collective thoughts" (p. 1). The

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archetype includes elements of an apartness whereby the South Seas region is a liminal expanse, outside the boundaries of morality and "exempt from the ravages of nature" (p. 2). As a space that features as a moral frontier, otherwise common restrictions and prohibitions leave the archetypal South Seas open to the active influences of evil, but also to the passive influences of "ennui and paralysis amid a plethora of warmth and beauty" (p. 197); it is thereby "adventurously dangerous" (p. 2).

Stevenson hints at this notion in his short story "The Isle of Voices" in which the notion of wilderness is used to confer authority on those who could interact with the spirit world. The "wise man" or "sorcerer" of Molokai would "go alone into the highest parts of the mountain, into the region of the hobgoblins, and there he would lay snares to entrap the spirits of the ancient" (1893/1996, p. 67). Developing further these symbolic associations of the sacred, Stevenson describes the sorcerer's use of an oceanic wilderness notion as a threat to his son-in-law:

> This part of the sea is called the Sea of the Dead. It is in this place extraordinarily deep, and the floor is all covered with the bones of men, and in the holes of this part gods and goblins keep their habitation. The flow of the sea is to the north, stronger than a shark can swim, and any man who shall here be thrown out of a ship it bears away like a wild horse into the uttermost ocean. Presently he is spent and goes down, and his bones are scattered with the rest, and the gods devour his spirit. (p. 72)

Drawing on exoticised South Sea notions of taboo, and symbolism of the sacred, Stevenson thus develops for the reader alternative images of wilderness from those commonly expounded in the mainstream realist literary tradition wherein the focus was on mundane aspects of life.

In the isolated locale of Conrad's South Seas novel, *Victory* (1914/1996), he intimates that the surrounding seascapes animate the otherwise "inanimate, brooding" (p. 7) nature of the tropics. As with Becke's accounts, explored below, of island glamour weaving spells over visitors, Conrad's protagonist Heyst is a self-imposed outcast from society who withdraws, hermit-like, to Semburan, an isolated island in the Java Sea that "was surrounded, instead of the imponderable stormy and transparent ocean of air merging into infinity, by a tepid, shallow sea; a passionless offshoot of the great waters which embrace the continents of this globe" (p. 7). In this Indonesian setting, at the far reaches of the Pacific imaginary, Conrad draws on the vocabulary of the supernatural to explain why protagonist Heyst did not depart like other visitors. Conrad

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infuses his description of Heyst's attachment to his location with occult terms – enchantment, spells, magicians (pp. 9-10, p. 57) – and indeed situates his limits of attachment in such terms: "a radius of eight hundred miles drawn around a point in North Borneo was in Heyst's case a magic circle" (p. 10).

We learn that his nearest neighbour is "an indolent volcano which smoked faintly all day with its head just above the northern horizon" (p. 8). Heyst himself gives a reassurance that this "neighbour is generally well behaved" (p. 155) and is "a good-natured, lazy fellow of a volcano" (p. 155). The volcano provides a landmark by which intruders are able to locate Heyst in his isolation in an "empty, solitary part of the sea" (p. 133), where there is a good chance of coming upon him unseen. With a direction to the island a mere "steer northeast for fifty hours" (p. 134) there is little chance of coming across other sea craft, so that "it's a thousand to one that no human eye will see you on the passage" (p. 134). It becomes apparent that native craft are not included in this empty seascape, and native eyes are not considered part of the human gaze (p. 133). In contrast to portrayals of a passive, benign landscape feature, we elsewhere learn that others find the volcano more threatening: "There's a volcano in full blast near that island...An active volcano to steer by" (p. 135). The sense of an animated landscape helps to develop the idea of an unpeopled wilderness, where there are only the transient visitors available to interact with the land and seascapes. However, this is incongruous against the reality whereby the visitors are only isolated because they consider themselves apart from the island natives, whose existence they perceive as a "mere play of shadows" (p. 133). Individual perceptions of both nature and people thus determine the extent to which either is deemed to be "wild".

This venturing outside of ordinary spaces is raised by Bakhtin (1981, p. 85) in his taxonomy of adventure as a disconnected or disordered quality. As Cohen (2010) describes: "Bakhtin qualified adventure fiction as moving through an 'empty time,' which was an effect of the haphazard, sometimes disconnected or disordered quality of adventure found in classical romance" (p. 71). Through these ideas we see an integration of spiritual and geographical landscapes (or seascapes), which Peck (1973, p. 22) describes using the case of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, and he further expounds on the "moral fluidity that sea-travel makes possible". Says Peck, "The imagery of 'floating' on the sea as well as on the surfaces of life is dominant, and it is obvious that voyaging allows Crusoe to avoid 'placing' himself in either a moral or a geographic sense" (p. 22). There are obvious parallels to be found between Crusoe's island isolation, and associated connotations of moral isolation coming from being set apart from social mores.

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In his introduction to Becke's *By Reef and Palm* (1894/1900), the 13th Earl of Pembroke reflects on the draw of the peripatetic existence: "[W]hen once the charm of a wild roving life has got into a man's blood, the trammels of civilisation are irksome and its atmosphere is hard to breathe" (p. 4). It is thus clear that the South Seas backdrops under dominion of nature are employed by Becke and his contemporaries in opposition to societies dominated by social and cultural mores. Their wilderness experiences are thus both geographical and moral. The floating hordes of wandering seamen are transient visitors who are often and variously washed ashore, shipwrecked, abandoned, or engaged in a "fruitless quest" (p. 4) for imaginary wealth of some description, or simply for freedom. Both Becke and Stevenson challenge commonly held Western primitivist beliefs about the barbarisms expected of native Pacific peoples, albeit in their own inimitable ways.

In his short story, "The Ebb Tide", Stevenson (1893/1996) portrays three white visitors to Tahiti as being "on the beach" (p. 124), meaning unemployed or destitute, who "continue, even in these isles of plenty, to lack bread" (p. 123). Through his analogy of the visitors to flotsam and jetsam–parts of a ship that are either set afloat or are washed ashore and are revealed at low tide–we get a sense of his reproof for such characters: "Throughout the island world of the Pacific, scattered men of many European races and from almost every grade of society carry activity and disseminate disease. Some prosper, some vegetate" (p. 123).

In her chapter on Travel Writing and its Theory, Mary Baine Campbell (2002) listed the various 'types' of travellers who contributed observation and opinion about places to which they ventured:

> Much of the work of observing, interpreting, articulating the explosion of that world, as well as the historical development of the imperialised world that led to it, was done through recovery and analysis of people's writings about 'foreign' and especially 'exotic' places in which they had travelled and lived: as colonial masters, pilgrims, explorers, ambassadors, ambivalent wives, roving soldiers, ecstatic cross-dressers, conquistadores, missionaries, merchants, escaped slaves, idle students of the gentry and aristocracy, 'adventurers', and alienated modern artists. (p. 261)

Although they might well fall under the 'adventurers' category, Campbell does not specifically acknowledge the dispossessed itinerants, described by Stevenson, Becke and others, who grounded themselves neither amongst the islands they visited nor in

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their respective countries of origin, for these individuals are themselves the observed rather than observers.

Lyon (1996) made reference to Joseph Campbell's hero myth as an element in nature writing, whereby there is a pattern of departure from the everyday world, to initiation by or assistance from supernatural forces, and onto the hero's return. In this sense, wilderness is a realm apart from the regular world of the traveller and adventurer. In several of Becke's short stories, the pattern of departure and return is recapitulated for those who manage to break free of the supernatural spell of island life. However, Mary Baine Campbell (2002) emphasizes the need to reconsider the "old motifs of the journey – home, departure, destination, the liminal space between" because their reference to lived experience is irrelevant for "most people who are not tourists" (p. 263). These drifters, who go away and do not return, portray what might be a form of learned helplessness. Becke describes several such dispossessed itinerants who think about "going back" but settle into island life and take a native wife or wives, but in no way assume the hero's guise.

Indeed, Becke noted that the runaway or "wandering Ishmael" prefers "living among the intractable, bawling, and poverty-stricken people of the equatorial Pacific to dreaming away his days in the monotonously happy valleys of the Society and Marquesas Groups" (1894/1900, p. 34). Here Becke contrasts the low-lying equatorial coral atolls such as those of the Ellice Islands with the volcanic islands with elevations more than a thousand metres above sea level that typify the latter groups, which are further from the equator. In his poetics of thought or articulate imagining of tropicality Becke intuitively hints at how the degree of morality and the degree of the latitudinal tropics are entwined with atoll seascapes and volcanic landscapes (Lundberg, et al., 2021). The flat landscapes of coral atolls attracted some rough, exilic characters, according to Becke, who described men "with that curious, far-off look in their eyes", who have "dissevered [themselves] from all links and associations of the outside world" (1894/1900, p. 40). Indeed, the circumstantial extremities for some were such that they never returned "home" but remained in the limbo of that moral wilderness.

"Reeking with gore" and "unpleasantly free"

Other influences of shifts in wilderness notions and understandings come from transitions in literary movements, which in the nineteenth century include American Romanticism and Australian Realism. Some forms of American Romanticism revered a personified form of 'Nature' as awe-inspiring and uplifting, while other forms considered nature a dark and threating force as a warning to the sinfulness of 'Man' (Murfin & Ray, 2003). Across the other side of the Pacific in Australia, Realist literature

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in the nineteenth century developed in response to the nationalist sentiment and the movement towards federation. This realism debate, predominantly carried out in the pages of *The Bulletin,* an Australian periodical magazine, but also featured elsewhere, was largely based on whether realistic portrayals of the bush had any value in literature and dealt as well with the moral value of realism (Jarvis, 1983). In a volume on Australian literature and commenting on various writers of the time, Turner and Sutherland (1897) dispatched Becke with almost gleeful relish, outraged that some critics had dared to compare Becke with Robert Louis Stevenson.

> Though there is some strong writing in Becke's stories, and an abundance of local picturesqueness, they are on the whole course in tone and fleshly in colour. Many of them positively reek with gore, and nearly all are unpleasantly free in their pictures of a very loose morality.

Jarvis (1983) named J. F. Archibald, among others associated with *The Bulletin*, as having a particular interest in cultural development, and specifically that of Australia's distinctive, because realistic, literature. In this sense, realism refers to "a spare, laconic style; it preferred a humorous attitude to life's hardships" (Mitchell, n.d.). Later in the century, we see a shift to realism in the US as well, under the influence of America's "intense engagement with its social and cultural context" (Barrish, 2011, p. 2), and also through the new ideas proposed by Charles Darwin (e.g., *The Voyage of the Beagle,* published in 1839) and Alfred Russell Wallace (e.g., *The Malay Archipelago* published in 1869). These published works were popular as travel adventures as much as for the scientific advances they revealed, while the new ideas about human origins made large waves in thinking all over the world and led to challenged assumptions and huge shifts in mindsets concerning the origins of life.

Literary realism is assumed to be "an essentially pragmatic mode whose predication of character as something enacted, partially but inevitably, within environmental restrictions is designed to reveal an imperiled ecological system of soul and society..." (Kearns, 1996, p. 1). The realist tradition together with Darwinian thought led further to a shift to naturism as a literary movement, with a focus on the environmental influences on human behaviour (Abrams, 1999; Murfin & Ray, 2003). Under Darwin's influence, "boundaries between species became porous" (Buell, 1995, p. 417) as he provided an ecological vision of human history as parts of a single environment, which were observed under the "imperial gaze of an Olympian observer, especially when travellers focused on 'primitive' peoples". Social Darwinism became a further consequence of this, and was adopted as a tool of imperialism whereby British and other colonizing forces considered they had the right to dominate or patronize "native" peoples because they were more "advanced" and therefore in a superior moral

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position to guide these "innocent" and "backward" others (Short, 1870). Nineteenth-century attitudes of superiority allowed a view of South Seas island locations as wilderness areas that were "untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" as later defined in the U.S. "Wilderness Act" (United States Congress, 1964). Writers like Stevenson and Becke revealed that many island visitors considered native peoples as mere background and part of the wilderness experience rather than as civilized and cultured others.

Becke's stories of his time spent as supercargo and trader among the islands of the South Pacific region began in the oral tradition[8] as yarns repeated to family and friends. He converted them to text at the request of Archibald and thereby became connected with the newly forming Australian colonial tradition in literature. Becke draws on the familiar in the almost chivalric love stories he portrays, as well as in the betrayals, desertions and barbaric acts carried out by various of his characters. He also draws on the strange and unfamiliar through the exotic settings and in the acceptance of these various acts within a moral system that differs from those of European traditions. The strangeness is portrayed from a triple perspective, primarily from within the code of the onlooking, reading public, but also from the viewpoints of the 'colonising' whites, and to a lesser degree, the local islander populations. The last angle provides an insight for Australians back home into how aspects of their own relationships are perceived from the other side of the beach.

One of Becke's stories, "Tis in the Blood" (1894/1900, pp. 29-35) revolves around a German planter's acquisition of a Samoan half-cast girl, on whom he has spent a considerable sum, in order that she be properly educated – meaning in the Christian tradition. His intention is ultimately to marry the girl, but in the opinion of Robertson, an English trading skipper, "any old beach girl" is "good enough for a blessed Dutchman." "Tis in the blood", he infers, for the girl to fall into native, promiscuous ways, and to mingle with the "fast Samoan women". The assumption is that this warmer climate makes those of native blood warm and torrid lovers. It could also be argued that the Englishman's inclination to accept the superiority of Englishmen (to both Samoans and the Dutch) is 'in the blood', with Robertson coming across as portentous and condescending in his self-righteous manner.

The type of thinking evidenced here equates with one side of the morals debate as reported by Jarvis (1983), and with the Malthusian theory that social differences are pre-ordained, extending here to cultural differences. On the other hand, and supported

[8] Oral traditions continue to thrive in many cultures, including Western cultures. In nineteenth-century Australia, colonial settlers were not so very far removed from some of those traditions from England and Ireland.

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by *The Bulletin*, were the late nineteenth-century scientific explanations, based on studies that related immorality, intemperance and criminality to socio-economic factors. In essence, we have an instantiation of the long-standing nativism-empiricism controversy that continues to be raised in philosophical and psychological circles.

In "The Methodical Mr Burr of Majuru" (1894/1900, pp. 87-96), the morals of white men are called into question when the trader's newly acquired islander wife is unfaithful, and he kills her lover. With the assistance of his island cook, the trader cuts off the man's head and forces his wife to carry it back to their home, in front of the village people. Ned Burr describes the incident as "the luckiest thing as could ha' happened", because "it's given Le-jannabon a good idea of what may happen to her if she aint' mighty correct. An' it's riz me a lot in the esteem of the people generally as a man who hez business principles." Burr might indeed have been methodical, but also comes across as one of the floating hordes of white men, washed up on the beach of Majuru because he could not make a living back home.

In letters home to his mother, Becke portrays himself as one of the fair-minded, virtuous and "fairly educated" traders (Thomas & Eves, 1999, p. 118). Despite his attempts to show the contrary, Becke's attitude towards the locals was that of the superior white man. In one incident, with his station threatened by a hurricane, himself under cover of his servant's house, and the furiously blowing wind filling the air with salt spray, Becke sends "a little girl to crawl along the sand to …see if the tide was coming in" (Thomas & Eves, p. 113). Perhaps the loss of a little brown girl could be better withstood than the loss of a more trade-relevant white servant. The employment of realist literary styles within the context of South Sea island environments gives rise to the exploration of some questionable notions of superiority of the transient visitors characterised in either fictional or semi-autobiographical accounts over the indigenous residents of the island locations and consequent notions of what constituted the wild or wilderness.

Cohen (2010) for her part makes the argument that "remarkable dangers at sea" form a crucial element to modernist works, in allowing a dramatization of "skilled work in other edge zones that, like the maritime frontier, were murky, unknown, and risky, but that were qualitatively different: situated at the level of language and the human psyche, rather than the physical world" (p. 180). In Deep-Sea Fishing in Polynesia (from *Wild Life in the South Seas*, 1897), Becke describes a temporal dislocation to primeval times in his observation of the skilled work by the peoples living in Pacific island edge zones, close to the sea.

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> With the exception of the coast of New Zealand I do not think that there can be better deep-sea fishing grounds in the whole Pacific than the calm waters encompassing the many belts and clusters of the low-lying coral islands of Polynesia. Unlike the fortunate inhabitants of such mountainous but highly fertile groups as Samoa, the Society, Cook's, and Austral Islands, the people of these low, sandy atolls literally depend upon the sea for their existence; for, beyond coconuts, the drupes of the pandanus palm, and a course vegetable called puraka (a species of gigantic taro), they have little else but fish to support existence. The result of these conditions is that they are very expert fishermen and divers, and the writer, during a twenty-six years' experience of the Pacific Islands, was often lost in admiring wonder at their skill, courage, and resourcefulness in the exercise of their daily task of fishing, either in shallow water within the reef, or miles away from the land on the darkest nights, and using tackle of such weight, size, and peculiar construction that the uninitiated beholder imagines he is living in the age of primeval man.

Becke's admiration of the skills exhibited by those experts is tempered by his reference to the conditions that supported that expertise. His wonderment is moderated by reference to the animal instincts of primitive peoples, still living a wild existence. In seeking non-terrestrial aspects of wilderness we also need to examine these high-risk areas of "flux, danger, and destruction" including the open ocean but also more literally on the edge, such as reefs, vertical shorelines and other seascapes as described by Becke.

J. Baird Callicott, an American philosopher in the field of environmental philosophy and ethics, allows that wilderness is a hotly contested term (Callicott, 2008, p. 235), and indeed the notion that wilderness must be devoid of humans other than as visitors does not sit well with those who consider that indigenous people are in close relation with their ecosystems (p. 249) and, by default, intrinsic to the wilderness. Further, where humans and nature are held to be spiritually united, the notion of a wilderness devoid of humans is redundant (Sloan, 2002, p. 295). According to his holistic orientation– "to speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness" (p. 12)–American poet Gary Snyder (2010) ponders the persistence of the wild in the human animal. "Our bodies are wild," proclaims Snyder (p. 17), such that to perceive a clear dichotomy between wild and civilized is to observe a falsehood. He goes further to suggest that, given that humans emerged from a holistic system, there remains scope to reintegrate our species into the "Assembly of all Beings" (p. 12) and as such remove any artificial division between nature and culture, or between civilized and wild (p. 16).

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Assertions of the dual influences of nature and environment are often stylized as literary naturism, with a frank and unromantic acceptance of an essentialist dichotomy between the "native" and the "civilized" worlds. Such a dichotomy allows for the acceptance of indigenous humans into what might otherwise be considered desert island (i.e., uninhabited) locations, for the island natives come to be viewed as part of the natural environment. Consider Becke's (1894/1900) description of local houses as part of the natural landscape on one of the Ellice Islands, in Funafuti Lagoon:

> ... such a beach, white as the driven snow, and sweeping in a great curve for five long miles to the north and a lesser distance to the south and west. Right abreast of the brig, nestling like huge birds' nests in the shade of groves of coconut and bread-fruit trees, were the houses of the principal village in Funafuti. (p. 39)

Becke's portrayal here borders on the picturesque and allows an interpretation of the setting as a wilderness in the absence of humanity through the notion of natives who blend into the environment (houses nestling like birds' nests) such that they are truly part of it. The picturesque scene depicts a landscape untrammelled by humans who instead become integral to the landscape, as island fauna. This easy presence forms an offset to those human visitors to the islands who are not such a ready fit and who do not stay.

Wilderness as touchstone for freedom

The notion that wilderness can encompass places within the ocean and coastal waters is relatively new in Western traditions and is yet coming to be a more common assumption (Barr, 2001; Jones et al., 2018). We can draw on the idea that wilderness includes not only geophysical characteristics of an environment but also forms a touchstone for human perceptions of nature and freedom. These can include "ideal places" in the argument proposed by Yi Fu Tuan concerning "environments of persistent appeal" (Tuan, 1990, p. 114), which include seashore and island. Tuan puts forward the argument that the seashore as an ideal place appeals to humans because of links with the origins of the human species and our earliest homes, while the attraction to islands lies more strongly in the imagination. Images of islands as symbolic of paradise or good fortune tempered the perceptions of the earliest European explorers and subsequent visitors from various nations in their encounters of islands in the South Seas and elsewhere. Islands also hold an element of mystery that gives them a lasting appeal, a truism understood by Melville's Ishmael: "Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is

not down in any map; true places never are" (1998/1851, p. 56). In making places locatable we diminish their mystery and associate them incontrovertibly with human presence.

Wilderness and frontier are both terms that people comprehend and use according to cultural and personalised appreciation for whatever uncertainties or aspirations are cogent to them. Nineteenth-century literature of the South Seas is a rich reservoir for considering the influence of the American, English and Australian nationalist and literary movements on the portrayal of the ocean and island environments – of seascapes and their associated edge zones – described in literary works. Whether these works lure us merely to the edge or tempt a plunge into the depths, they stand as useful resources for insights into alternative understandings and problematics of wilderness as nonterrestrial and oceanic.

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Dr Denise Dillon is an Associate Professor of psychology whose major focus in both teaching and research is environmental psychology. Having majored in both psychology and English literature, Denise's interests extend to the field of ecocriticism and other forms of literary criticism. Based in Singapore for over a decade now, Denise has developed a deeper appreciation for phenomenological groundedness in green spaces.