

RE-WRITING OTHERNESS: JACK LONDON PHOTOGRAPHER

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Abstract - This paper aims to analyze the relationship between writing, photography and the representation of otherness in Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), the only works illustrated by his own photographs. The first is the report of a six-weeks stay in the East End of London, where he lived with the poor and documented their condition; the second retraces a boat trip in the South Pacific Islands, where he witnessed the effects of colonialism. The purpose is to shed light on London's unconventional approach towards otherness, as well as on the role of intermediality in these works, ascribable to the genre of phototexts. In stark contrast to the common Western representation of poor and non-white people, the author re-writes their stories in a hybrid transposition on the edge between words and images.

Keywords: Jack London; photography; intermediality; colonialism; otherness.

1. Introduction

Jack London's reputation as a photographer has remained largely unknown until the publication of *Jack London Photographer* by the University of Georgia Press (2010), displaying a selection of photographs kept by the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. London supported himself writing and taking pictures for newspapers and magazines and witnessed events such as the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5) and the San Francisco earthquake (1906). He also traveled to Korea and China, but he arguably shot the most impressive body of work in the UK and the South Pacific. His work was recently published in Italy as *Jack London. Le strade dell'uomo* (Contrasto 2015). Both the American and the Italian editions acknowledge the artistic, cultural and historical value of the photographs, which cast a new light on London's private life as well as on wider issues regarding human inequalities at the turn of the twentieth century.

2. Photography: from text to discourse

2.1. What is photography?

The theoretical premises of this work are based on the issue of the photographic medium as tool of interpretation of reality and on the order of Western discourse on otherness established between the 19th and 20th century. Photography played a major role in representing otherness, mostly because of its realistic and mimetic effect. Its ambiguous and elusive character has always made it hard for the medium to fit into distinct descriptive categories. Indeed, the resemblance with reality may persuade us that photography can provide objectivity and truth. Barthes (1982) spoke of *photographic paradox* referring to the clash produced by a photograph's denotative message (the *analogon* or *message without a code*) and its connotative message, corresponding to the whole set of choices made "au niveau de la production et de la réception du message" (*Ivi*, p. 12). According to Eco (1982), photographs may be strongly characterized as icons for sharing 'some properties of the object represented' (*Ivi*, p. 32). However, the resemblance with reality does not deprive them of their arbitrariness; in fact, a photograph "is born of a series of successive transcriptions" (*Ivi*, p. 33), that is to say, it is composed of multiple layers of codes. Acknowledging the coexistence

of many codes in the photographic language – such as exposure, aperture and focal length, or codes that ‘have a larger socio-cultural significance and appear as well in other language systems used by the same civilization at the same time’ (Metz 2001, p. 32) – results in acknowledging photography as a text. Burgin inscribes the photographic text “into a complex ‘intertextuality’” (1982, p. 144) – a network of pre-existing texts corresponding to social functions or “modes of human organization” (*Ibidem*) in virtue of which the image was produced. For this reason, photography’s meaning cannot be univocal and restricted to the aesthetic plane, but it must be contextualized within other discourses and within the author’s and the reader’s experience and knowledge. According to Bull (2010), photographs today are interconnected in the online web space “within potentially limitless discourses” (*Ivi*, p. 45); therefore, they are “mobile signs whose meanings change across space and time and through virtual spaces too” (*Ivi*, p. 46). Considering photography as text is important in that it enables, on the one hand, to analyze its relationship with literature; on the other, to evaluate its influence on the discourse on otherness produced by Western cultural hegemony.

2.2. The representation of otherness



Figure 1 (left). *Grüße von Samoa*, 1916, Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.
 Figure 2 (right). *A fine type of Fijian*, 1920, Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.

Together with cartography, historiography and travel journals, photography also played a role in representing those living at the edges of capitalist and colonialist society as stereotyped and otherised entities. The almost immediate acquisition of the new medium by French and British institutions coincided with the foundation of scientific societies, employing it as an instrument to provide evidence of their theories; in addition, it perfectly served the positivist purpose of typifying and cataloguing reality (Tagg 1988; Marien 2002). Such biased parameters influenced colonial photography (see Figures 1 and 2), which emphasized the subject’s anatomic features or depicted them standing half-naked in front of timeless utopic scenarios (cf. Sampson 2004; Acquarelli 2008). In this way, human beings were transformed into objects diametrically opposed to the viewers who, consequently, interpreted them stereotypically as *others* (Hall 1997). The diffusion of images on the press and during universal exhibitions was then a propeller for the discourse on otherness, which resulted from “the relationship between scientific knowledge (anthropology), popular culture, the

geography of power (colonialism) and visibility (photograph, display)” (Lidchi 1997, p. 197). These photographs worked as metonymies, where a single image ended up becoming an icon standing for an entire social class or ethnic group.

2.3. The phototext. A hybrid genre

The notion of intertextuality related to photography takes us to the “struggle for territory” between image and text in the literary field, an expression coined by W.T. Mitchell and quoted by Michele Cometa in his research on *phototexts* (2016). Starting from Wagner’s definition of *iconotexts*¹, Cometa refers to a *phototext* as the product of the intertextuality between words and photographs. In these works, the coexistence of image and text on the page is not simply meant as the use of captions to describe images; on the contrary, it refers to the production of meaning resulting from the interaction between the two media. As a consequence, such hybrid forms challenge the literary canon, questioning the primacy of words over images and affirming new ways for representation (Cometa 2016, pp. 72-75). According to Liliane Louvel (2008), not only does photography change the way we look at things, but also the way we read texts; indeed, she theorized a method which employs photography as a “critical idiom” helping to “open the text and enable the viewer/reader to take into account the pictorial turn of a literary text when informed by the visual” (*Ivi*, p. 44). This method involves an intermedial way of reading fiction, where the passage between the two media generates what Louvel calls the “pictorial third” (*Ivi*, p. 46), an in-between image floating in the mind of the reader during the passage from one medium to the other. The third dimension evoked by the intertextuality between writing and photography is produced by their interaction. In this way, the dialogism between the two media becomes a source for new possible representations, ways of seeing and stories generated especially from that deviation in-between genres.

¹ Wagner understands intermediality as the “‘intertextual’ use of a medium in another medium’ (2012, p. 17); he defines *iconotexts* those “artefacts where the verbal and the visual signs mingle to produce rhetoric that depends on the co-presence of words and images” (pp. 15-16).

3. Jack London photographer



Figure 3. *Courtyard, Salvation Army barracks Sunday morning*, Jack London, 1902. JLP 466 Alb. 28 #03635, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Jack London lived a short but very intense life, dying at the age of forty years old. Although his childhood was marked by the struggle against poverty and social exclusion, his strong personality led him to wander around his country and overseas when he was still a child. He received a multitude of stimuli in his household – torn between a racist mother and a proud Afro-American babysitter – and in the multicultural environment of San Francisco, which allowed him to live a broad array of racial lives; as a consequence, he transliterated these multiple selves into his fiction, giving life to diverse characters and taking on their point of view (Reesman 2009). London's heroes are outsiders, subaltern people struggling against inequality and injustice; he shapes them on the basis of his real-life experiences through a process of complete identification.

3.1. *Witnessing the abyss*

Jack London made his first significant contribution to photography in 1902, when he was in the UK waiting to go to South Africa to report the Boer War for the American Press Association. As the journey was cancelled, he decided to take on a project about the East End of London, which he had already discussed with the Macmillan editor George Brett (Maffi 2014). *The People of the Abyss*, a written and illustrated report of the experience in the slums, was published in 1903.

Unlike other bourgeois social explorers who ventured in the suburbs out of curiosity or for philanthropic reasons, London had first-hand knowledge of warehouse labor and poverty. Therefore, he replaced his clothes with second-hand rags and joined the homeless, turning into a character of his own story. The research for an internal point of view removed the class hierarchy between author and object of study, which was common for the hegemonic approach of slum narratives (Swafford 2006). Through the identification and the dialogue with the other, London is able to go deep into the East End and to observe the city from the bottom of the abyss, while giving voice to its inhabitants.

The text is structured on multiple layers corresponding to the different voices speaking in the book; the narrator's voice moves following a wave motion, alternately confusing or isolating itself from the choir of the poor. The superposition of narrative voices creates a hybrid text in-between journalistic reportage, autobiography and fiction. Likewise, the photographs present multiple views of the slums, highlighting either the stories of single individuals or particular episodes experienced by the author and his mates, but most importantly, supporting London's report and denunciation of the condition of the poor.

The contrast between the pomp of the ruling class and the poverty of the East End clearly emerges in chapter X. After spending all night in search of a shelter, the writer ends up in Green Park, where the lawn looks like a battlefield where the homeless lay exhausted, surrounded by fog. A few hours later, the park is crowded with the wealthy West End people. The two scenes (see Figures 4 and 5) are printed in the book, one after the other; the echo bouncing between the photographs and the text contributes to convey the desolation of the poor and the writer's restive attack to the institutions: "All night long they make the homeless ones walk up and down. They drive them out of doors and passages, and lock them out of the parks. The evident intention of all this is to deprive them of sleep" (London 1903, p. 118). The juxtaposition of the scenes personally witnessed by the author and his considerations bring about an amplifying effect; photographs and written commentary compensate each other and, by a sort of a boomerang trajectory, conjure up a complete image of the slums and allow the reader to reflect on the political and social implications of their condition.



Figure 4. *View in Green Park, men sleeping*, Jack London, 1902. JLP 466 Alb. 28 #03602, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



Figure 5. *Sunday afternoon well-dressed West Enders with their wives*, Jack London, 1902. JLP 466 Alb. 28 #03603, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

3.2. The South Pacific photographs: a matter of choices



Figure 6. *Two Marquesan children*, Jack London, 1907. JLP 495 Alb. 57 #07143, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

After reading *Sailing Alone Around the World* (1900) by Joshua Slocum, who circumnavigated the globe on board of a renovated wreck, Jack London decided to build his own sailboat, the Snark, and planned a self-funded trip around the world. He took off with his wife and crew from San Francisco in 1907 and sailed to Hawaii, the Marquise Islands, Bora Bora, Samoa and the Solomon Islands; eventually they stopped in Sidney in 1908, where the writer was hospitalized because of tropical diseases.

At first, London did not mean to write a book on the journey; in fact, he wrote articles and essays for different magazines published between 1908 and 1911. Each article was designed for a specific magazine and was published along with pictures and illustrations. His

letters show his commitment in curating the visual aspect of his articles – he charged the magazines for each picture and gave scrupulous instructions about the storage of films, personally titling and labelling each frame and roll. When it came to the illustrations of the *Snark* book – published in 1911 – he was just as meticulous; however, the proof-illustration did not match with the author’s instruction and some negatives and prints got lost. Moreover, the publisher’s choice of illustrations looks meagre compared to the hundreds of photographs London took along his journey (cf. Tucker 2017). Today it is possible to browse the writer’s original photo-albums in the *Jack London Photographs and Negatives* online collection of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. The archive houses much more than the selection of images found in the *Snark* book. Many good photographs were left out of the official edition; moreover, the quality and size of those published in the book still don’t do justice to the original prints.

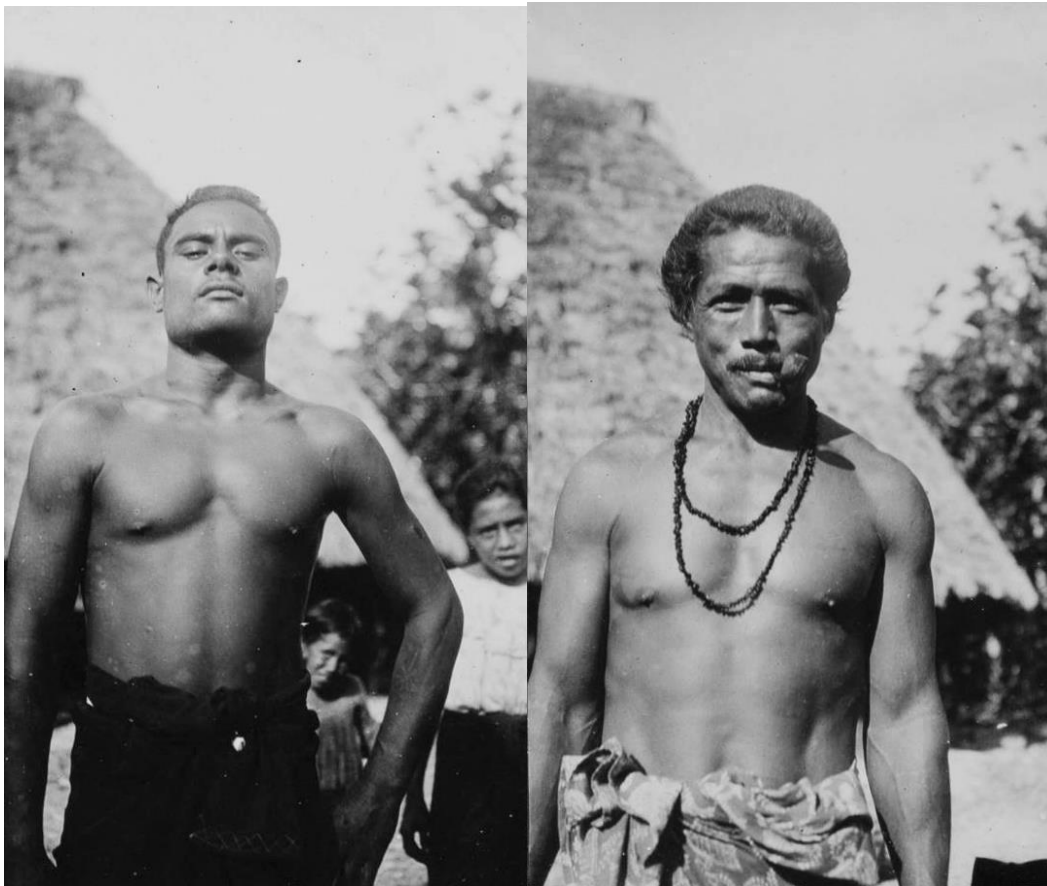


Figure 7 (left). *Oh! He had been on a man-o-war, he had!*, Jack London, 1908. JLP 500 Alb. 62 #07724, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Figure 8 (right). *Manuans*, Jack London, 1908. JLP 500 Alb. 62 #07709, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Among the portraits taken in the South Pacific, the series dedicated to the people of Samoa is especially remarkable for the unconventional approach and non-colonial gaze (see Figures 7 and 8). The photographer is in a lowered position compared to the portrayed subjects; shooting from this point of view emphasizes their dignity and pride. This result can be achieved through the communication between the photographer and the photographed: it is a non-domineering relationship based on mutual trust; thus, the subject is not intimidated by the camera, but appears conscious and in control of the situation. On the background of huts and vegetation, a glimpse of two children, probably intrigued by the presence of the camera. What

could be interpreted as a lack of precision in the composition of the image is yet useful to point out the extemporaneity of the shot; although it is a staged portrait, London does not exclude those elements of reality that enter the frame almost by chance and make the picture less solemn and more spontaneous. In contrast to ethnographic and colonial photography, the emphasis is on the subject's expression and not on their traditional clothes or anatomic features; indeed, the portraits do not convey a sense of exotic timelessness, nor do they work as icons or metonymies representing the "native" category, but they draw attention to each person's uniqueness.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of London's *The People of the Abyss* and *The Cruise of the Snark* within the context of the discourse on otherness has underlined the possibility for an alternative vision compared to the colonialist, racist and suprematist Western representation at the turn of the XX century. Travelling across two areas at the edges of Western empire – the London slums and the South Pacific colonies – he tried to delve as much as possible into the life and habits of their inhabitants. Mario Maffi calls this attitude "il bisogno quasi fisico di stare *dentro* alle cose, *dentro* il loro accadere"² (2014, p. XVIII); his deep interest in the diversity of life and people made him able to cross the borders of otherness and get in close contact with the subjects of his stories, willing to be a witness of their life rather than a collector of exotic items. This internal perspective shortened the distance and replaced the mainstream colonial gaze with a more inclusive approach, achieved through communication and listening. As a photographer, he established a dialogue and a relationship of trust with his subjects; in this way, his pictures produce a shift in perspective and dignify the people portrayed. They do not appear as an object compared to their observer, but as individuals bearing their own identity and history. The spontaneity and the immediacy in the images were also ensured by the portability of the camera: a folding Eastman Kodak 3A, one of the first pocket devices ever using cartridge roll film, much handier and faster than glass plates (Hannavy 2013; Reesman 2010). In this way, pictures could be taken in different lighting conditions and settings. Indeed, London captured images of a high documentary and narrative value either in the case of portrait or landscape – every image sheds light on the human element on the background of the urban or the natural context, somehow anticipating the style of the great photojournalism and street photography of the 1930s.

For these reasons, Jack London's photography can be considered as a way of *re-writing otherness*: in response to writing as a tool of Western appropriation, he opposes an unconventional vision of otherness through the people's stories and portraits. This re-writing may be seen, to some extent, as a form of *de-linking* from the idea of coloniality as the only frame to represent a world which is in fact the result of multiple local histories (Mignolo 2007), and from the hegemonic narrative of the early twentieth-century ethnography. Last but not least, the choice of working with writing and photography can be seen as a detachment from the literary canon of the supremacy of words over images. On the contrary, the strength of the account of London's journeys lies exactly in his photographs and in their relationship with the written word. In *Uses of Photography*, Berger advocates an alternative use of photography incorporated in social and political memory, where the photographer would be "a recorder for those involved in the events photographed" (1980, p. 58) and images would work in a "radial system" with "words, comparisons and signs" (p. 63). As a matter of fact, London's approach with the East Enders and the South Pacific islanders allowed him to

² "The almost physical urge to be *within* things, *within* things happening" (Translated by the author – italics by Maffi).

record their stories and to embed them into a hybrid form of photo and text encompassing personal, historical and social issues.

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