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## Ocean of stars: Albert Wendt and pacific literature in english

### Abstract

Paul Sharrad's recently released book on Albert Wendt, the first monograph on the outstanding literary figure of the Pacific region, is not only an ambitious but a profoundly successful scholarly study that deserves our attention. It enters the critical discourse on the 'new' literatures in English as a timely reminder of the importance of a regional literature and of Wendt's literary and critical contribution to this discourse, both widely neglected among critics from beyond the Pacific.

DIETER RIEMENSCHNEIDER

## Ocean of Stars: Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature in English

Paul Sharrad's recently released book on Albert Wendt, the first monograph on the outstanding literary figure of the Pacific region, is not only an ambitious but a profoundly successful scholarly study that deserves our attention. It enters the critical discourse on the 'new' literatures in English as a timely reminder of the importance of a regional literature and of Wendt's literary and critical contribution to this discourse, both widely neglected among critics from beyond the Pacific. Having been engaged with Pacific writing for many years, Sharrad's receptive, accurate and thoroughly informed critical analyses in *Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature: Circling the Void* (2003) offer the reader a balanced appraisal of the writer's achievement. At the same time the book invites examination of Sharrad's arguments and insights and affords the opportunity to comment upon Wendt's most recent works that are not included here, as well as on publications of other Pacific writers to whom Sharrad does not necessarily refer. This twofold approach, I suggest, will contribute to our understanding both of Wendt's literary achievement and the diverse mosaic of Pacific writing. Here though, I am well aware of the terminological problems 'Pacific' writing has encountered, differing geographical, ethnic and cultural parameters having been variously used to categorise the most widely dispersed corpus of literary texts among the 'new' literatures in English. Wendt's own position as the editor of *Lali: A Pacific Anthology* (1980), *Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English Since 1980* (1995), and most recently (with Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan) of *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* (2003) is in itself indicative of the ongoing discourse on naming a regional literature by simultaneously drawing demarcating boundary lines of inclusion and exclusion that stretch or shrink, as the case may be, the locale of 'Pacific' writing within the vast oceanic region extending from Hawaii to Aotearoa / New Zealand and from Papua New Guinea to Easter Island.

Giving expression to the writer's life-time experience in Samoa, Fiji and Aotearoa / New Zealand over a period of more than half a century, Wendt's poems, stories and novels as much as his critical writing represent the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the Pacific expanse, which in Sharrad's words has imbued him with an 'ever-expanding vision of Oceania, including New Zealand, as his adoptive home' — and importantly, with a vision that rejects 'a limiting view of tradition that would insulate local identity from the complex

interactions of global modernity' (vii). It is precisely this awareness of the correlation of the local and the global that underpins Sharrad's study of Wendt's work published between 1955 — when his first story 'Drowning' was included in a New Zealand annual school magazine — and 1999 which saw the release of *The Best of Albert Wendt's Short Stories*. Indeed, the interaction of the local and the global, which I have referred to elsewhere as a transformative process towards the glocal,<sup>1</sup> plays an important role in his more recent writing, including the poetry collection *The Book of the Black Star* (2002) and the novel *The Mango's Kiss* (2003).

*Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature* testifies to Sharrad's sovereign handling of the author's substantial literary output that he subdivides into three chronologically distinct periods that are held together by Wendt's 'consistently looking towards a modern metaphysics grounded in myths of Oceania that might underpin visions of a just, humane society' (18). The book's structure suggests the usefulness of focusing on single works that epitomise the writer's ongoing quest and distinct points of arrival in each period. Thus, among his early works, *Sons for the Return Home* (1973) generates and represents an aesthetic model for the Pacific writer at the interface of a colonial written and a traditional oral culture, while his poetry in *Inside Us the Dead* (1980) expresses a tragic sense of life filtered through different modes such as absurdity and satire, anger, protest and introspection. Jointly, both texts reflect contradictions of Samoan colonial and postcolonial history which are of central concern to Wendt at this time in his literary career.

Of special relevance for the next stage is the critic's positioning of *Pouliuli* (1980) as a text that resists a single reading as either 'universalist' or 'oppositional' (119). Such an assessment connects with Sharrad's interest in contextualising / historicising Wendt's work as Pacific writing on the one hand and postcolonial on the other. Seen in perspective then, *Pouliuli* points towards the author's outstanding work of the middle period, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1980), where in contrast to Homi Bhabha's argument, mimicry does not destabilise the colonial discourse. Such a stance isolates Wendt and his novel from other 'Third World' writers and their work of the 1970s. Besides, and to an even greater extent than previously, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* emphasises the processual character of Wendt's quest manifesting, as Sharrad puts it, 'a strong sense of unfinished business' (144) that in turn appears to have invited the writer to probe into the possibilities of using a whole range of differing narrative approaches such as allegory, fantasy, myth-creation and recreation, realism, sociological and anthropological statement. What is intimated here but really comes to the fore subsequently is Wendt's increasing concern with the distinction between self, history and fiction (180). Both, *Ola* and *Black Rainbow*, his two novels of the 1990s, are such exemplary texts which also connect quite visibly to global postmodernity with their conspicuous featuring of self-referentiality, intertextual playfulness and genre mixing, all of which easily fit into the processual character

of Wendt's work. Nonetheless, Sharrad maintains, this path is not followed for its own fashionable sake, but because of the author's 'dynamic view of enacted identity in the "ever changing present"', that is grounded as much in postmodernity as in indigenous traditions, and here in particular in the image of the *va* with its associations of 'gap, void, outer space, time immemorial' to which Wendt adds his own existential void of modern postcolonial life (247). Letting both experiential spheres converge almost to the point of fusion, Wendt's definition of himself as 'pelagic' man mustering an 'oceanic identity that allows for modern ideas of movement and dislocation while retaining a flexible sense of regional locatedness' (250) underlines the writer's stance as neither of a 'diasporan' nor a 'homegrown' nor of a 'third' or 'fourth' world variety, and consequently questions the usefulness or validity of critical approaches along their respective postcolonial trajectories like mimicry and hybridity, in-betweenness, third space, centre and periphery. In other words, Wendt's self-definition and Sharrad's understanding of his position work against placement in a 'postcolonial critical ghetto' (251).

Basically, I agree with Sharrad's reading of the author's work, which unfortunately has had little bearing on the postcolonial theoretical discourse,<sup>2</sup> yet it naturally also raises a number of questions. Is Wendt's position perhaps less representative than exceptional, even unique among his Pacific colleagues from the various island groups, including Hawaii and Aotearoa / New Zealand and can the contemporary (postcolonial) artist actually bypass the tangible pressures and effects of globalisation any longer? Or put differently, would ignoring them not happen at the expense of self-deceit? Do Wendt's most recent publications follow the clear-cut path of 'circling the void' Sharrad has outlined and finally, has his perception of an 'oceanic identity' not after all been instrumental in moving his work closer to that of 'postcolonial' writers elsewhere?

To respond to these questions let me now look at several recent works both by the author as well as from the Pacific region. The editors of *Whetu Moana* have extended the collection's geographical range further than *Lali* and *Nuanua* but restricted its content to the genre of poetry. On the one hand such a step reflects the overall growth of writing from the Pacific with Maori literature playing quite an important role, which does not make it feasible any longer to publish prose-cum-poetry tomes. The inclusion of Maori and Hawaiian poets on the other hand is obviously meant to set up the signifier 'Polynesian poetry' as a more circumspect category replacing the imprecision of 'Pacific'. Yet, the perusal of more than 250 poems by nearly 70 authors from seven countries hardly enables us to easily define their common ground other than geographically. Their themes, forms and modes as well as the range of authorial concerns differ widely and need to be put into perspective for at least two reasons. Now we are dealing with a younger generation of poets whose mobility is greater and whose exposure to the modern world accordingly exceeds that of their forbears. At the same time we must remember that the historical, political and social conditions shaping

and prevailing in the seven countries Aotearoa / New Zealand, Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga, The Cook Islands, Niue and Rotuma have not been pressured by global processes into a homogenous totality. Indeed, Polynesian poets face simultaneously pervading dissimilarities.

At the cost of simplifying the issue, obvious differences can be pinpointed. Thus, Maori poetry (the largest section of the book) offers a wide range of themes, linguistic and formal features that result both from a vivid cultural memory and political self-assertion as well as from its long-lasting contact with Pakeha culture. Both influences have contributed to its present richness, ranging from resorting to oral forms of communication — narrative, dialogue and incantation — to classical and experimental forms including concrete poetry, hip hop and postmodern meta-poetry. Besides, the multilinguistic situation has invited code switching and the use of Maori, Pidgin and colloquialisms. Hawaiian poets, however, still perceive themselves as living in a colonised situation. Their work has much in common with American First Nations writers with whom they share writing-back positions and an insistence on asserting their own cultural heritage including the validation of their myths and legends. The poems' at times incantatory nature is further strengthened by the use of Polynesian words, names and cultural references. By contrast, Samoan and Tongan voices imbued with the experience of national independence frequently critically engage with their respective society's contradictions, at times more subtly, and in the case of Samoan poetry often in a humorous mood, wittily or even satirically. Here we can assume that Wendt's influence has not been altogether negligible, while the two poets from Niue and Rotuma and quite a few Cook Islanders who have spent most of their lives in Aotearoa / New Zealand have certainly been exposed to Maori and Pakeha culture.

Of special interest in the context of Wendt's own more recent writing is the finding that *Whetu Moana* contains voices that tend towards the writer's 'oceanic identity', combining the local with the global. Here, I would like to mention 'urban iwi: tihei mauri ora!' (46–47) with its image of 'the city is our marae; skyscraper/ tekoteko with a hundred square eyes';<sup>3</sup> 'death at the christmas fair: elegy for a fallen shopper' (183–84); 'Why Am I Auditioning for TV?' (205–06); and the concrete poem 'U Turn' (262). All underline the assertion of an oceanic identity which in spite of the global onslaught will yet 'pull the mana of our tupuna from / within our globalised selves, and breathe again' (47).

Among book-length publications of a younger generation of poets, Robert Sullivan's *Star Waka* (1999) invites a reading of many of its poems as 'disembedded' since their 'contextual openness' or the entrance of global cultural signs prevents their being simply tied down to the specific individual or communal events they thematise. However, their 'locality' is not altogether erased since the writer sets out to create their own space, that is, to 'localise' his poems in his own tradition-influenced manner.<sup>4</sup> This often occurs by using handed-down oral poetic and stylistic conventions, prosodic patterns or symbols, among which

‘star’ and ‘waka’ figure prominently. *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002), a poem originally designed by Sullivan as a libretto with multiple voices and intertextual references, displays its pelagic nature literally and metaphorically as distinctly as does *Star Waka*. After his death Cook’s journey to the world ‘down under’ transforms into a fantastic journey through the ‘underworld’ of Hades / Rarohenga, guided by the mythological Greek and Pacific double of Orpheus-Maui. In the realm of this poetically (re)created ‘locality’ that encompasses both worlds, echoes of Homer, Dante and Maui’s story are evoked in a fused, fantastic-realistic-historical narrative. Furthermore, references to (Western) mapping, the use of rhythms and ‘translated’ wording of popular music and colloquial phrases, as much as postmodern ironical self-referentiality to the poem’s textuality, infuse a global dimension into a Pacific world with its memories of Cook’s arrogant and violent colonisation for which he is punished.

Admonished by Orpheus-Maui to learn, ‘to look back on an explorer’s past,’ the final message in *Captain Cook in the Underworld* reminds us of the important Maori concept encapsulated in the saying ‘*nga tipuna ki mua, ko tatou kei muri*’: ‘the ancestors in front, we are behind’. It stands at the centre of Witi Ihimaera’s *Woman far Walking* (2000), a drama whose ‘glocal’ character relates it to quite a few other Pacific plays.<sup>5</sup> The ‘local’ experience of colonisation is remembered by Tiriti, the 160-year-old human ‘incarnation’ of the Treaty of Waitangi, in a dialogic confrontation with her alter ego that results finding the generosity to forgive because she has learned from the past. Circling her own void, Tiriti ‘enacts her identity in the “ever changing present”’ much as Wendt proposes and creatively presents it in his writing. Dramaturgically speaking, globally practiced theatrical devices such as stage props, lighting, music and voice-over are merged with the Maori colours of black, red and white, *waiata* tunes and Maori rhetoric and haka performances at crucial moments in the story. The ‘local’ is neither totally erased nor replaced in a process of global cultural homogenisation but transformed into the *mélange* of the glocal.

Such transformation is further enhanced through the employment of the fantastic, an artistic device not only shaping this play and *Captain Cook in the Underworld* but also of relevance in Ihimaera’s story *The Whale Rider* (1987) and his novel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997). In *Sky Dancer* (Ihimaera, 2003) however, recourse to the fantastic is more sustained and reveals more than a temporary incursion of the modern, global-wide near-obsession with the fantastic. Here the fight of the land birds in defence of their territory, and their survival as the inhabitants of Tane’s forest against the sea birds that try to occupy it for their own colonising and exploitative purposes, echoes a Maori cosmogenic myth and ecological concerns to save the forest in Aotearoa / New Zealand against capitalist profiteers. The narrative of the dramatic events in the fantasised realm of space and time that happen far beyond the ‘time portal’ through which two humans enter to support the land birds, merges Maori myth retelling with the technical aspects of Star Wars into a glocal heroic fantasy. Additionally, in both the fantastic

and the realistic sections of *Sky Dancer* we also encounter numerous intertextual references — to European medieval romance, St. John's 'Revelation', Chaucer's 'Parlement of Foules', contemporary musicals, action films and actors — all of which underline the openness of this Pacific text to global literary practices and cultural elements.

*Sky Dancer* invites comparison with Wendt's earlier *Black Rainbow* (1995). Although its author has called it 'an allegorical thriller' (Sharrad 205), it boasts a great fondness for intertextuality as well as a fantastic dimension in the protagonist's search for his family and in his repeated encounters with fantastic figures that transform his quest from its realistic beginnings into a virtual reality. In contrast to Ihimaera's work, however, Wendt's novel focuses much more strongly on the individual, while *Sky Dancer* foregrounds communal action and the fate of the community.<sup>6</sup> Apart from this, and though its mode is not exactly utopian, it still gives us cause for hope, whereas *Black Rainbow* is much closer to dystopian fantasy fiction.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the Samoan author's last novel *The Mango's Kiss* invites comparison with the Maori novel. In its design as a fictitious history of Samoa over a period of nearly half a century, exemplified by the fate of Peleiupu and her family, it joins the female protagonist's successful handling of 'modernity' in its differing garbs with the gradual transformation of a closed-in and self-sufficient insular society. The economic, financial and social success story is one of individual entrepreneurship and communal flexibility. Yet as both do not permit themselves to be cut off totally from their Samoan cultural heritage, tensions arise as much in individuals as in public life: strains, however, that again testify to the emergence of the very oceanic identity Wendt situates in the conjunction of modern aspects of dislocation and the sense of flexibility of regional locadness.

I want to conclude my observations on a small and selected number of Pacific texts by asking whether we come across a similar constellation in two recent volumes of poetry. In Wendt's *The Book of the Black Star* the multivalent metaphor of the black star evokes a number of varying responses in the poet who describes it, attempts to define it or simply addresses it in a questioning mood like: 'Black Star, were you born during the First Dawn before Tagaloa-A-Lagi invented the Alphabet of Omens?' Furthermore, we come across apparently simple epigrammatic statements, references to and memories of a person called Sam, of family, home and Samoan myths and finally, of poetic reflections upon the efficacy and the effects of the mysterious black star. The pattern of individual poems and their boundedness to this important Pacific signifier remind us of *Star Waka* and yet at the same time draw our attention to the very different and specific nature of 'imagetexts'. Combining, even fusing handwritten texts in English or Samoan with ink drawings, white and black, light and shade, script and drawing, creates symbiotic enunciations where text and image mutually support, underpin and enhance each other in a manner similar to contemporary Pacific paintings where artists have incorporated texts and numerical figures into coloured images and



forms.<sup>8</sup> But the recurring shapes of star and spiral are to be read as ever present symbols of life, in contrast to many paintings where texts are messages of postcolonial ‘writing back’. It is precisely in this assemblage of the mundane and the mythical where I would again locate the glocal element, now not in the writer’s written work but in imagetexts through which Wendt adds a new facet to Pacific art.

John Puihiatau Pule’s *Tagata Kapakiloī — Restless People* (2004)<sup>9</sup> is a very different book in its insistence on the existential problematic of the individual. In place of communal concerns or connotations to the noumenon in Wendt’s imagetexts, there are two voices who infrequently enter a dialogue from shifting perspectives: unstable identities whose existential predicament reflects dislocation and search. ‘Restless people’ refers back to Pule’s earlier written and painted work — ‘which relocates’ the artist to his home Niue that he left for New Zealand at the age of two<sup>10</sup> — and at the same time relates them to Wendt’s early poetry. Interestingly, Sia Figiel’s Samoan novel *where we once belonged* (1996) similarly underlines, I would conclude — if such conclusion is indeed required — that the literary development of the Samoan author as presented in Sharrad’s study of Albert Wendt, does not reflect that of Pacific writing in general. Yet, it is similarly correct to say that it indicates the direction other writers have also chosen, though the overall picture of Pacific writing is far from uniform.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> ‘Contemporary Maori Cultural Practice: From Biculturalism towards a Glocal Culture’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 18/19 (2000/1), pp. 139–60.
- <sup>2</sup> Considering for example the then momentous status of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), this is the more astounding because of the three authors’ local and cultural ‘vicinity’ to the Pacific and, even more so, because of Wendt’s seminal essays on Pacific writing — for example, ‘Towards a New Oceania’ (1976), ‘The Writer as Fiction’ (1983) or ‘Novelists and Historians and the Art of Remembering’ (1987) — all of which contribute essentially to understanding Samoan and Pacific writing. Nor for that matter has Subramani’s comprehensive study *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation* (1985) impacted at all on *The Empire Writes Back*. It appears that neither Wendt nor other Pacific authors fitted its grid of postcolonial theory. See also Sharrad’s Bibliography (265–81) for the scant critical reception of the whole region.
- <sup>3</sup> The poet Samuel Cruikshank in his own words is a Maori-Scots kid, conceived in Christchurch, gestated in Tonga, surfaced in Fiji (46). Authors of the other examples are Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard from Samoa, Tracey Tawhiao and Briar Wood from Aotearoa/New Zealand.
- <sup>4</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s phrase of a procedure ‘in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices’ (49) aptly describes this process.
- <sup>5</sup> Since Christopher Balme’s *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-colonial Drama* (1999) quite a few publications have dealt with the Pacific Theatre. See for example, Balme and Carstensen (2001), Kelly (2001), Peterson (2001), and Maufort (2003).

- <sup>6</sup> See also Wendt's novel *Ola* (1991) where the first person narrator is almost obsessed with her own self. Similarly, Sia Figiel's *where we once belonged* (1996) highlights the predicament of the Samoan woman caught between individual needs and communal constraints. In contrast to the Samoan writer's general foregrounding of the individual, Maori novelists commonly create much closer bonds, tense though they often are, between the individual and her/his community. See for example, Patricia Grace's novels or Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* (1990) and *Both Sides of the Moon* (1998) or Kelly Ana Morey's *Bloom* (2003).
- <sup>7</sup> Sharrad mentions a few postcolonial writers whose recent works have similarly turned 'to dystopian fantasy fiction' and suggests that perhaps 'living on the edges of empire makes people particularly aware of the corruption of high ideals' (214). Yet such reading not only leaves aside Ihimaera's writing (see for example, *The Whale Rider*) but also that this particular subgenre is a global phenomenon.
- <sup>8</sup> Among quite a few painters who come to mind are Shane Cotton, Emare Karakawa and Robyn Kahukiwa from Aotearoa/New Zealand, John Pule from Niue and Lily Laita, a Samoan-Maori artist.
- <sup>9</sup> See also his novel *The Shark that Ate the Sun* (1992).
- <sup>10</sup> See the entry 'Pule, John Puihiatu' in Robinson and Wattie (454–55).
- <sup>11</sup> For a very recent overview of Pacific writing cf also Paul Millar (2002).

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