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Literary Citizenship in the Writing of Oceania: The Example of Samoan Literature

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In this paper, I am interested in the emergence and articulation of new visions and practices of citizenship as politicized ways of belonging in transnational and globalized contexts, in which the nation or nation state as empowering framework has come to be widely challenged. As I will try to argue, the development such visions and practices calls for an imaginative rethinking of national identity and as such has much to learn from postcolonial situations where the institutions of the Western-style nation state sit uncomfortably on top of (or beside) social formations shaped by long histories of prior occupation and settlement. While such arrangements do not in themselves make for political innovation, they provide imaginative resources for writers whose lives and work chart and explore challenging ways of inhabiting and sharing globalized nation spaces.

New forms of citizenship are today more commonly associated with global or planetary consciousness than national imagination, with information technologies such as the internet and mobile phones than public broadcasting and national newspapers or literary traditions. Yet, emergent forms of global citizenship are more effective in displacing national citizenship than in replacing the nation state, even if under globalization "national states", as Janine Brodie has put it, sometimes appear "reduced to a zombie-like presence, living yet dead" (323).¹ The transformative potential of emergent forms of global citizenship, embodied for instance in the activism of netizens or the World Social Forum, depend on their articulation with alliances and engagements in the locations where most people spend most of their lives. In these locations the nation remains an important frame, even though, as Donna Palmateer Pennee notes, "globalization, particularly in its economic forms, has put the nation as a category and a structure 'under erasure'" (78). Quoting Stuart Hall, Pennee argues that while "the nation is 'no longer serviceable' in its 'originary and unreconstructed form,' [...] it is necessary to go on thinking with the nation, seeking legal recourse through the nation, doing business through (though not for) the nation, and performing cultural critique with the nation in its 'detotalized or deconstructed' but nevertheless still operative 'forms'" (78). "For the time being," Pennee concludes, "there is no question of doing without the national; it is rather a matter of doing the national differently" (83).

For such rethinking or reimagining of the ‘national,’ Pennee suggests, it is useful “to keep on the table for discussion how the *literary* and the *national* remain categories and modes of productivity and reproductivity [...] sites for arguing that culture represents not only the bounds and parameters of identity but also the less bounded but equally crucial processes of identification” (76). Literary citizenship, as such an identification sustained by an engagement with the national in the institutional spaces of reading and writing, can thus be seen as a critical position from which to construct and articulate alternative visions and practices of living and working together in and across postcolonial nation states.

These observations on literary citizenship may have particular relevance to Oceania, where the transplantation of western political institutions has often proved divisive or disempowering and where the economic and ecological impacts of global interconnectedness are perhaps felt more urgently than elsewhere. As Terence Wesley-Smith (2007) points out in a recent article considering decolonization in Oceania, not only has the internationally recognized principle of self-determination been unevenly applied, reflecting continuing colonial interests in the region, but where political independence has been achieved, it has largely relied on “alien institutions, notably the western-style nation state” (33). He highlights the high financial and social costs of establishing and maintaining national sovereignty within the boundaries of former colonies that “were established with scant regard for the traditional cultural and political features of Oceania” (34) and the damage done to local communities and ecosystems by efforts to make these political entities economically viable. In view of these challenges, Wesley-Smith calls for a strengthening of existing institutions that is consistent with indigenous practices and forms that have proved sustainable, and he points out that the main difficulty in this regard is not the design of institutions or even the availability of resources but “to change the wider political culture in which western-style state institutions must operate over the longer term” (41).ⁱⁱ

Inasmuch as this challenge has been taken up by writers who explore the possibilities for innovation inherent, for instance, in the incongruities between the space of the nation and the space of the state, Oceania may also be seen to have a particular relevance to such institutional rethinking and reimagining elsewhere. Perhaps the most influential effort at such a reconceptualization of the political spaces of the region has been Epeli Hau‘ofa’s vision of Oceania as a “sea of islands”, emphasizing the connecting marine environment and long histories of mobility and settlement as common heritage and resource of Pacific Island societies. In a series of essays, included in the aptly titled collection, *We Are the Ocean*,

Hau‘ofa proposes the ocean itself as a metaphor shaping and mobilizing cultural and political identifications within and across national boundaries in the region. Building on the recognition of the oceanic environment as the foundation of the atmosphere sustaining all terrestrial life, Hau‘ofa’s vision of an oceanic identity is broadly inclusive, admitting “anyone who has lived in our region and is committed to Oceania [as] an Oceanian” (51). At the same time, he makes it clear that he is “not in any way suggesting cultural homogeneity for [his] region” but considers the regional identity designated by the ocean as “something additional to the other identities we already have” (42). He thus draws attention to the way recognition of a multiplicity of identities requires us to rethink the political affiliations that define citizenship, noting that many “people with origins in Oceania [...] are citizens of [countries outside the region] who consider themselves Pacific Islanders” (50), just as the region of Oceania itself is composed of many nationalities, and people in many islands have national affiliations both within and outside the region.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is not to say that this diversity of affiliations naturally constitutes harmonious and open societies, or indeed that the metaphor of the ocean as a rallying symbol is immune to exclusionary and nationalist interpretations in terms of boundedness, circulation and territoriality.^{iv} The innovative and even transformative potential of Hau‘ofa’s vision of Oceania depends on its concretization within and across the diversely constituted national boundaries in the region, where it may orient action toward openness and connection, mobilize negotiation of difference and broaden notions of identity. Perhaps the best-known example of such concretization is the widespread use of the space-building metaphor of the “canoe” among Pacific Island societies, projecting Oceania as a dynamic space of moving islands.^v In the remainder of this paper, I would however like to suggest another way of concretizing an Oceanic reorientation of national identity and citizenship by focusing on the examples offered by the lives and work of writers from a particular island country, Sāmoa.^{vi}

The example of Samoa is particularly interesting because its far-flung population, stretching across multiple national boundaries, makes it a virtual paradigm for global citizenship. Together with Fiji and Tonga, Samoa forms a part of the Polynesian triangle from which Polynesian culture began to spread across the Pacific some 3,000 years ago. Although never formally unified in a nation state, the Samoan islands have for many centuries constituted a common cultural and political space. As Penelope Schoeffel points out, “the international border between western and eastern Samoa is a colonial artifact drawn in 1900, and most Samoan extended families (*‘aiga*) have branches on both sides of it” (358). The

Western part of the archipelago was a German colony until the First World War, after which it came under New Zealand administration, first as a League of Nations mandate and after 1946 under a UN trusteeship agreement. In 1962, Western Samoa gained full independence and almost immediately signed a Treaty of Friendship with New Zealand, which, among other things, has resulted in a steady flow of Samoans to New Zealand ever since, where, according to Schoeffel, by 1994 Samoans were the “third largest ethnic group after the Anglo-Irish and the Maori” (375). The smaller eastern part of the archipelago meanwhile remains an unorganized and unincorporated territory of the United States and “American Samoans [are] US nationals, but not citizens” (Kiste 246). In terms of political organization, both independent Samoa and American Samoa have long combined Western forms of government with traditional Samoan features, especially the *matai* system of representation, and largely retain communal ownership of land by traditional kin groups (Wesley-Smith 1994: 200, Kiste 249, Larmour 384, 389). Their colonial affiliations have made the Samoans one of the most mobile populations in the world and according to Ron Crocombe, “three times as many American Samoans live in the USA as in American Samoa [and] more Samoans live in New Zealand, Australia, USA and beyond than at home”(66). Since wages are higher in American Samoa, a large proportion of the population of the US territory are in fact immigrants from Western Samoa. According to Cluny Macpherson, this postcolonial history of migration has resulted in the “transnationalization of Samoan society” (178) with its center in the islands and nodes along the Pacific Rim and “strong linkages” between them. Macpherson points out that while up until the 1980s the Samoan center tended to dominate the cultural life in the Samoan diaspora, as the foreign-born proportion among the Samoan population overseas became the majority in the 1990s, “the nodes have become the centers and [...] the standards of the enclaves have become those to which those in the homeland aspire” (179).

The careers of Samoan writers have been shaped by these transnational histories and connections and as their work critically and creatively appropriates and reshapes these conditions, it shows how literature can bring forth and sustain identifications that challenge and expand conventional notions of citizenship. I discuss this in greater detail in the longer version of this paper; here I can just summarize the argument by very briefly talking about the two most famous Samoan writers, Albert Wendt and John Kneubuhl. Both writers’ careers were launched within colonial formations and they found their vocations in conditions that they would come to distance themselves from, if not altogether abandon, at the height of

their success. But while openly criticizing conventional notions of good citizenship, their work at the same time elaborates an alternative vision of an Oceanic if not global citizenship by drawing on Samoan traditions and concepts.

The parallels are quite obvious: born in Western Samoa in 1939, Albert Wendt went to secondary school in New Zealand on a government scholarship when he was 13 and stayed in the country until he graduated with an MA in History from Victoria University in Wellington in 1964. In 1965, he returned to Samoa and started teaching at Samoa College, where he became Principal in 1969. From 1975 to 1987 he worked at the University of the South Pacific (mostly in Suva, Fiji, but also in Apia, Samoa) where, by 1982, he occupied the Chair of Pacific Literature and eventually became Pro-Vice-Chancellor. In 1988, he returned to New Zealand and became the first Polynesian to take up the Chair of New Zealand and Pacific Literature at the University of Auckland. From 2004 to 2008 he was Distinguished Visiting Writer and held the Citizen's Chair in English at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Since 1973, he has published 7 novels, 4 volumes of poetry and 3 collections of short stories, as well as a play. He has also been a mentor to many writers in Oceania and edited numerous anthologies of Pacific writing.

Almost 20 years Wendt's senior, John Kneubuhl was born in American Samoa in 1920 and he too was sent abroad to attend secondary school, in Hawai'i, from where he went on to Yale University in 1938, where his talent for theatre was discovered and he studied under Thornton Wilder during his senior year. After graduating and serving in the Second World War, he returned to Honolulu in 1946, where he became associate director at the Honolulu Community Theatre and won acclaim both for his own plays and for his adaptations of Broadway plays. His plays were considered revolutionary for their time, especially in their focus on Hawaiian themes and in their use of Hawaiian Pidgin, which had never before been admitted on the Hawaiian stage. In 1950 he wrote and directed the movie *Damien* and soon later left Honolulu for Hollywood where he spent the next 18 years as a highly successful screenwriter, writing episodes for many popular series of the fifties and sixties, including *Adventures in Paradise*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Star Trek*, and *The Wild, Wild West*. In 1968, he left Hollywood abruptly and returned to Samoa and for the rest of his life devoted himself to the study of Samoan and Polynesian culture and traditions, teaching in Tonga, Hawaii and American Samoa, where he "created and directed the bilingual/bicultural program for the American Samoan Department of Education" (Johnson 256). During these years, he also wrote the only three plays ever to be published, although his collection, *Think*

of a Garden and Other Plays only saw publication five years after he died in 1992 in Pago Pago.

Kneubuhl's career seems energized by tension and contradiction, demonstrated most dramatically when he "gathered nearly twenty years worth of screenplays and burned them in a backyard fire" (Vought 193) before he left Hollywood. Yet a sense of alienation not only seemed to characterize his attitude toward his success as a screenwriter but his vocation as a writer more profoundly. Thus his earlier departure from Honolulu at the very moment when his success there seemed assured and he himself exalted the prospects of a Hawaiian theatre of world-class standard, suggests that his own creativity depended on a certain sense of deprivation. In his later plays, he came to focus most explicitly on a sense of loss, and what is most remarkable about the three plays collected in *Think of a Garden and other Plays* is their affirmation of Samoan and more broadly Polynesian culture and tradition as expressing a commitment to, and even celebration of, living with loss.

In each play, loss is mediated through the figure of the author, present on stage as a narrator/chorus in *Think of a Garden* and *Mele Kanikau* and as the absent playwright in the preoccupations of the actors in *A Play: A Play*. In different ways, the three plays stage a memory work, with *Think of a Garden* (1991) the most autobiographical, set in Samoa around Christmas 1929, focusing on the writer's family as it confronts its Samoan identity in the experience of loss: the mother's loss of her aristocratic connections to the village in which the family used to command respect and pride; the assassination of Tamasese, the leader of the Mau independence movement in Western Samoa, the loss the writer as a boy confronts in the shape of a dead child's ghost whom he must leave behind as the family separates and he departs for school in New Zealand, and the writer's own loss of his childhood. A "relentlessly sad play", according to Kneubuhl (Johnson 258), *Think of a Garden* emphasizes the connection to the dead as the source of identity and orientation toward community.

In *Mele Kanikau* (1975), a play around the rehearsal of a glitzy pageant in Honolulu, the sense of loss is explicitly pointed out as defining cultural identity, when Noa, a reclusive hula teacher, tells his old friend Carl that he is not a Hawaiian because he doesn't know what he has lost (148). By the end of the play, Carl, the good citizen, "Treasurer, Hawaiian People's Association... Vice-President, the Hawaiian Foundation... President, the Society of Ali'i... Chairman, the Jubilee Festival Week... and so much more" (109), gives up his part in the pageant, declaring "My dead are all around me now. There is no hiding from them. I

know my loss now” (172). The play’s story of love, betrayal and revenge again weaves together multiple layers, including the author, who appears as a commentator on stage and acknowledges that the play is inspired by a story he witnessed as a child in Samoa. His play itself consists of two layers, including the story of the pageant and the events at its rehearsal, where Noa offends everyone by getting drunk, confronting Carl and openly criticizing the players for the artificiality of their idealizing celebration of Hawaiian royalty. He counters this by bringing representations of Hawaiian outcasts on stage and by asking his own dancers to perform the story in a way in which the distinction between performance and reality dissolves and Noa temporarily appears possessed. It is only after Noa and his entourage are driven off the stage and have left, that news reaches the group rehearsing the pageant that Noa and his group of dancers all died in a traffic accident on the way to the rehearsal. While most of the members of the cast dismiss this as a bad joke, Carl believes and accordingly leaves the pageant.

Although set in Hawai‘i, *Mele Kanikau* draws on conventions of traditional Samoan theatre, the *fale aitu* or house of ghosts, in which the boundaries between play and reality dissolve and a ghost appears and triggers a discharge of repressed sexual energy that challenges social hierarchies. This is also the case of *A Play: A Play* (1990), the last play in Kneubuhl’s trilogy. Like *Mele*, it is set in Hawai‘i and presents the story of a group of actors rehearsing a play whose dynamic form is based in the *fale aitu*. Kneubuhl flaunts his iconoclastic vision by bringing the revered volcano goddess Pele on stage in various guises, as mischievous old woman, a young Hawaiian girl and a strong Hawaiian man, to seduce each of the play’s characters. In the course of the rehearsal, the distinction between the actors’ rehearsal and the action of the play disappears, as they all confront the truth of their Hawaiianness and each of them realizes that they have no existence apart from their role in the play, which itself appears on the page of their script even as they rehearse it. Like the main character in their play, who after learning that “you can only define a Hawaiian today by what he has lost” (246) returns home and rejoins his people to play his part, the players, dispossessed of their essence, decide to continue to rehearse their play. In so doing, their action also becomes a metaphor for the memory work of the author, who creates his art not from a rich cultural inheritance but out of a confrontation of his loss.

A sense of loss thus connects the three plays, but what is most interesting is the way this sense of loss is reworked in the sequence in which they have been arranged, which is not the order in which they were written. In *Think of a Garden*, the experience of loss is

traumatic, in *Mele Kanikau*, it is revelatory or epiphanic, and in *A Play: A Play* it is finally shared and informs a conscious choice. Ostensibly, the sequence leads away from Samoa, with *Mele* linking Samoa and Hawai‘i and *A Play* Hawai‘i and the world. But as Caroline Sinavaiana (227) has suggested, it is *A Play* rather than *Think of a Garden* that may be considered the most Samoan of the three plays in that its form and vision are most strongly shaped by Samoan tradition, specifically the conventions of the *fale aitu*, even though its story is set elsewhere.

A sense of loss as a binding experience and the importance of memory work are also central to Albert Wendt’s writing. And although his career doesn’t show the drastic about-turns of John Kneubuhl, the motivation for his writing too can be characterized as the intellectual’s contradictory attitude toward the institutions to which he is professionally tied. His early novels, written after his return to Samoa during his time at USP, were marked by their criticism of Samoan society and its establishment. For a discussion of citizenship of particular interest is his writing after his return to New Zealand in 1987 to take up the Chair in New Zealand and Pacific literature at Auckland University. In the essay, “Pacific Maps and Fictions: A Personal Journey,” based on his inaugural lecture, he admits his reluctance to giving the lecture, partly as a result of “reading, with growing anger, the pontifications of elderly white Old Victorian Rambos who, for too long, have styled themselves the infallible guardians of a New Zealand historical/literary canon and honesty” (180). In this lecture, Wendt acknowledged his genealogical ties to family and to Pacific traditions of storytelling inseparable from kinship affiliations, pointing out that “throughout the Pacific, these early maps and fiction, in the treasure-house of oral traditions, were the ones almost 200 years of colonialism has altered, erased, replaced, threatened” (188). He identifies and analyzes the various maps and fictions that have superseded the indigenous ones and shaped his formation as a writer: from missionaries’ teaching, Eurocentric education, anthropology, movies, to a New Zealand literature that failed to acknowledge the presence and precedence of the Maori. He thus recognizes “a sense of loss [...] as a major concern in Pacific literature” (202). Asking “how [we can] decolonize ourselves of historical/cultural maps and fictions that exalt our position as ‘civilizers’ and relegate others to positions of inferiority” (207), he declares “the act of writing [as] sedition” (202), inasmuch as it seeks to redress the injustices of history.

Wendt’s novel, *Black Rainbow*, published in 1992, enacts the argument of his inaugural lecture and in so doing questions the value of citizenship in the neoliberal state and

projects the possibility of an alternative vision of national identification, based on a shared sense of loss and a commitment to justice. Described by Wendt as an “allegorical thriller” (Interview 92), *Black Rainbow* recalls Huxley, Orwell and Kafka as it presents a dystopian view of New Zealand in the early 1990s as a neoliberal state, training its citizenship as oblivious and unquestioning consumers and feeding them ready-made myths and fantasies. Central to the government’s control of its citizens is the powerful Tribunal, which in endless sessions of confession extracts people’s histories and memories and orders their “reordinarination” as docile consumers. Wendt’s representation of the Tribunal recalls the New Zealand government’s attempt in the early 1990s to co-opt the Waitangi Tribunal and its investment in historical research in order to buy itself out of its obligations to Maori under the Treaty of Waitangi.

Early in the novel, the narrator-protagonist is released by the Tribunal and declared a Free Citizen, given a Final Reference that will allow him to get whatever he desires. He is then sent on a quest to find his family, which leads him into an intertextual labyrinth inscribed on a map of New Zealand, full of references to New Zealand and world literature and Hollywood movies like *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*. He is helped by three Polynesian street kids, who call themselves “Tangata Moni”, meaning “true people” in a combination of Maori and Samoan words that reflects their alliance of urbanized Maori and Pacific Islanders, as well as like-minded white people, who have resisted the government’s attempts at “reordinarination”. Siding with the Tangata Moni, the Free Citizen defies the government’s ban on history and reminding himself that “we are what we remember” (178), decides to track down and recollect as much of his past and history as he can. Yet the more he recovers of his family history, the more he understands that, as if quoting Kneubuhl, “I had become the sum total of what I had lost. That loss defined me” (196). Eventually, he confronts the Tribunal once more and is offered three options: another “reordinarination” into “a useful and productive citizen”, temporary death followed by reincarnation “as a citizen of [his] choice”, or “permanent death” (261). He chooses permanent death, but the novel ends with a series of possible endings/ beginnings, most of which disregard his choice and return him instead to the government’s Game of Life in another role. In a move that recalls Kneubuhl’s *A Play: A Play*, where the audience is left at the end with the prospect of the actors forever rehearsing a play from which they cannot escape, Wendt’s novel too translates the experience of loss into that of its readers contemplating the disappearance of meaning and the responsibility that

consequently falls on them as they “are free to improvise whatever other endings/beginnings they prefer” (267).

It is finally by allowing their audience to share the sense of loss embodied in their work and to contemplate the significance of choice in a play or game that is inescapable, that Kneubuhl and Wendt evoke the possibility of doing the national differently. While exposing the dispossession caused by histories of colonial nation building, they affirm the resilience of Samoan (and Polynesian) culture by identifying memory and an acknowledgment of loss as the source of distinctive traditions of storytelling and theatre capable of guiding action in the contemporary world devoid of enduring identities. In so doing, they demonstrate not only the usefulness of a national identification but also the possibility of its revision in ways that are not based on ethnic identity or territorial claims but a shared sense of loss and a concomitant calling to reach out to others. If the nation, as Ernest Renan said in 1882, is “a soul, a spiritual principle” (19) that is not defined by race, language, religion, material interest or geography but nevertheless binds people as a “spiritual family” (19), then this bond, which Renan saw as a shared pride in having done great things and wishing to do still more together can perhaps, as Kneubuhl’s and Wendt’s examples suggest, be recognized as the willingness not to forget what has been lost and to act in alliance with others dispossessed. A national identification thus re-imagined might then not only be relevant to the members of a transnational Samoan community, but to a globally oriented national consciousness anywhere.

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ⁱ Note also observations of the diminished reach and power of national sovereignty by Dirlik (34-35), Slater (23), Keohane (117), but also Mann.

ⁱⁱ Satendra Nandan has told us about recent efforts in this regard in Fiji (People's Charter).

ⁱⁱⁱ "Cook Islanders are citizens of their own country and simultaneously of New Zealand. French Polynesians and New Caledonians are French citizens; Guamanians are American citizens; American Samoans have one leg in the United States and the other in Eastern Samoa" (50).

^{iv} Note the tightening of the circle in Hau'ofa's own writing, "The Ocean in Us", also the nationalist connotations of the metaphor of blood associated with the fluidity of the Ocean, and the risk of overlooking conflicts within, as suggested by Hereniko: "no one I know is fighting for a piece of the ocean to build a house on" (167-68).

^v See Kauanui and Diaz. I discuss the usefulness of the canoe metaphor for a rethinking of sovereignty in "Breathing Space: Ecology and Sovereignty in Pacific Island Poetry", paper presented at the Oceanic conference on creativity and climate change – oceans, islands & skies, USP, Suva, Fiji, September 13-17, 2010. See also my "Breath as Metaphor of Sovereignty and Connectedness in Pacific Island Poetry".

^{vi} For another example, see Teresia Teaiwa's discussion of 'patriotic literature from post-coup(s) Fiji' (2004:82), where she shows 'how [...] particular representations of identity interrupt and intervene on a nationalist imaginary, and assist in the patriotic project of nation-building' (2004:85). For Teaiwa, too, doing the national differently requires nurturing 'the power of the imagination' and recognizing that '[l]iterature and the arts are the cornerstones of a nation's imagination' (2004:92-3).