

## The Dramatisation of Pacific Diaspora in Albert Wendt's *The Songmaker's Chair*

Paloma Fresno Calleja

*Universitat de les Illes Balears*

### Abstract

My paper looks at Albert Wendt's play *The Songmaker's Chair* (2004) as an example of the collective dramatisation of the experience of diaspora carried out by Pacific playwrights in New Zealand. Wendt's play conforms to a conventional five-act structure but contains fragments of Samoan *Fale aitu* –a comic form employed as a weapon of social comment– as well as performative elements borrowed from stand-up comedy and hip hop. By combining western and Samoan dramatic forms, Wendt calls attention to the hybrid quality of Pacific identity in diaspora as well as to the range of multicultural elements available in contemporary New Zealand society.

The oft-quoted statement that New Zealand is a Pacific nation is more than a tourist catch phrase or a description of the country's political, economic or cultural links with its neighbouring islands. In addition to its Polynesian roots, traced from the settlement of its indigenous Maori population, New Zealand's contemporary connections with the Pacific are the result of more recent migration waves which started in the 1960s, following the governmental demand for foreign labour. Contemporary Pacific Island population is a mixture of the descendants of these migrants, second or third generation New Zealand-born, and newcomers who continue to arrive in the country in pursuit of jobs or education. About 14% of Auckland's population is of Pacific descent and several of its southern suburbs concentrate a greater number of Pacific islanders than some of the islands themselves. The city, which holds the title of the largest Polynesian city in the world, has

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

become the centre of a process of cultural negotiation which will determine New Zealand's national identity in years to come.

The Pacific face of New Zealand culture began to be shaped in literature, media and the arts from the 1970s. Albert Wendt, the pioneering and most prominent voice of the Pacific diaspora, has contributed to this inscription with a large body of fiction, poetry, criticism and, more recently, drama. *The Songmaker's Chair* is Wendt's first play to date and even though it premiered in 2003, it explores issues the author has been addressing in his work for the last thirty years. The play focuses on three generations of Samoans living in suburban Auckland and the conflicts that arise when the patriarch Peseola, who is facing an imminent death, decides to organise a family gathering to confer his title on his eldest son. The meeting turns into a source of conflict as secrets from their past are revealed and childhood or adolescent traumas uncovered. Each of the sons and daughters exorcises his/her own ghosts by reflecting on the choices they have been forced to make as a result of social or familial imperatives. Through the retelling of their past Wendt proves that it is virtually impossible to present the process of inheritance as an unproblematic transmission of values, knowledge and traditions and that Samoan identity needs to be renegotiated under the new conditions imposed by diaspora. To a great extent, the predicaments of the Peseola family can be read as part of the collective articulation of migration which Samoan, as well as other Pacific playwrights, like John Kneubuhl, Hone Kouka, Oscar Kightley, Toa Fraser, Victoria Kneubuhl or Vilsoni Hereniko, have been developing during the last three decades.

I would like to concentrate here on how Wendt negotiates these intergenerational conflicts with the specific tools offered by the dramatic genre. The articulation and embodiment of Pacific identity which takes place within the universe of the play can be read metonymically as the concretion of more general strategies of identity formation which take place daily offstage and which, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, "are produced *performatively*" (1994: 2). In his recent study *Pacific Performances*, Christopher Balme employs the term "performance genealogies" to refer to the common theatrical quality of cross-cultural encounters from the late eighteenth century to the present. Both the landfall on the beach and the indigenous ceremonial responses to the European arrivals, both the western depictions of the native cultures

and the contemporary postcolonial re-enactments and revisions of those representations, depend on similar discursive and aesthetic conventions and can be interpreted as part of an uninterrupted performative continuum which, as Balme explains, is citational and reciprocal:

Cross-cultural Pacific performances are [...] always *citational* practices in the sense that performers and spectators both draw on common, but not necessarily congruent repertoires of knowledge. [...] European encounters with Pacific peoples are invariably correlated metaphorically with pre-existing perceptual matrixes [...]. The performative response on the part of the local people was to incorporate this ‘sense-making’ in their own performances for the visitors, thus initiating a strategy of performative reciprocity that begins very soon after first contact was made and which continues until the present. (2007: 2)

My aim is to focus on the most contemporary versions of these performance genealogies, considering the recreation of contemporary Pacific identity in diaspora as developed by Wendt’s play. More specifically, I look at the fusion of different theatrical traditions through which Wendt answers back to colonial representations and calls attention to the potential of syncretic forms in the process of cultural regeneration, thus proving the citational and reciprocal quality traced by Balme in his work.

*The Songmaker’s Chair* is organised as a conventional five-act piece and offers a realistic portrayal of familial conflicts in a tragic tone. Interspersed throughout the play, however, we find short scenes which function as plays within the larger play, alter/native enactments of the conflicts that the three generations of characters have experienced over forty years. In these scenes, Wendt combines traditional Samoan comic theatre, contemporary stand-up comedy, ritual chants and hip hop performance. The result is a text which fits into Balme’s definition of syncretic theatre, and whose syncretism functions as “a conscious programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

[...] postcolonial experience [and] one of the most effective means of decolonizing the stage, because it utilizes the performance forms of both Europeans and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements” (1999: 2). The play’s syncretic structure is the result of the multiple cultural allegiances which define the characters’ position in contemporary New Zealand, a position which is articulated through a series of performative modes which share similar citational and reciprocal features, as I discuss below.

The first dramatic mode is *fale aitu*, which translates as “the house of the spirits”, the ancestral Samoan comic theatre devised to address serious social issues and taboo subjects through the use of cross-dressing, parody and irony (Carter, 2002: 149). The actors are called *aitu* (spirits) because spirits were traditionally conceived as shape shifters, and because like actors, they were capable of performing transformations and of embodying different roles (Mageo, 1999: 103-104). In the western world comedy has always been considered as possessing a liberating capacity to overturn social and gender hierarchies and to address issues normally unspoken under normal circumstances. The rich tradition of comic modes, ritual clowning and carnival in the Pacific has been analysed as endowed with a similar destabilising potential (Hereniko, 1994; Mageo, 1999). While *fale aitu* was employed in colonial Samoa to satirise western rule and comment on the changing social conditions deriving from foreign oppression, in the context of diaspora this type of comedy can serve to analyse the transformations implicit in migratory processes where the hierarchies governing gender and ethnicity are often altered (Pearson, 2005: 562).

Although traditional *fale aitu* was limited to male actors who cross-dressed to perform the female roles, in his play Wendt breaks this convention and presents both the patriarch Peseola and his wife Malaga performing a short skit in the *fale aitu* style to recall their first years in New Zealand, a scene which we are told they have “performed many times before” (2004: 15), and which by now has acquired the status of a ritual:

Peseola: We came with Mau and Nofo. Didn’t know  
what a flush toilet, or washing machine, or electric  
stove was-  
*They laugh.*

Malaga: Or how to use a public telephone.

Peseola: Or a public faleuila! Or what milkshakes were –

Malaga: O's fai aku I le dairy owner, 'I want a milk shake'

*(Stands up and assumes the role of the Palagi dairy owner)*

'Flavoured or plain?' 'Plain,?' I said – 'Ou ke le iloa po'o a ga mea e ka'u 'o flavoured or plain' And got churned-up milk!

Peseola: o'u alu laku 'i le butcher shop, fai mai le fa'akau'oloa papalagi. 'What you wan' chief? I stand up straight like a cowboy and reply, 'I wan' meat sir.' 'What kin' a meat, steak or stew meat or...? 'Steak, sir. I want steak!' 'Fillet or porterhouse of rump or...? [...] I said, 'Fillet, sir!' So the Palagi weighed ten pounds of fillet. Paid nearly a week's wage for it so the Palagi wouldn't know I was makiva! *They laugh.* (2004: 16)

The code-switching mode illustrates the dual world inhabited by the characters, it allows them to convey the confusion of those first months in New Zealand and it establishes a connection with a Samoan audience, while creating a similar sense of confusion among the non-Samoans. Although the published version of the play includes a glossary with a translation of these fragments, the untranslated words in performance contribute to maintain a distance and to remind the non-Pacific spectators that the play is informed by a set of cultural practices of which, as members of the privileged white majority, they remain mostly unaware. This *fale aitu* scene is thus more than a mere exotic touch intended for the unproblematic enjoyment of the western audience, more or less eager to connect with their Pacific neighbours, it is rather a specifically Samoan way of effecting social comment without fully disclosing the meaning of the characters' experience.

*Fale aitu* is performed according to a set of conventional rules, in a non-naturalistic acting style and with exaggerated gestures. These are employed both to impersonate *Palagi* (white) characters, which can be read as an example of Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry, and their own past selves, in what Balme calls "reverse colonial mimicry", the

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

performative postcolonial version of Bhabha's well-known term. As Balme explains: "Instead of imitating the colonizer and developing forms of subversion by holding up a distorted image of the European, [the Samoan characters] appear to be mimicking European projections of themselves" (2007: 182), thus demonstrating their capacity to appropriate and undermine what are still very popular representations of Pacific Island migrants, often perceived as naïve children in need of instruction, ignorant "fresh off the boat" newcomers lost in the big city, or gullible islanders who corroborate colonial views of the noble savage. Through the parodic appropriation of these stereotypes, Peseola and Malaga revise and question their effectiveness. By acting as commentators of their own experience, they distance themselves from these notions, and underline their performative and hence constructed nature.

On the other hand, Wendt's capacity to undermine hegemonic representations is combined with his rejection of defeatist views of his characters as passive recipients of discriminatory attitudes. In this way he avoids a simplistic dual rhetoric of oppressor-victim (Keown, 2005: 17; Sharrad, 2003: 18), and offers critical views of Samoan cultural impositions from an insider point of view. The conflicts endured by the characters in the play do not only derive from discriminatory practices in the host country, they are also part of the luggage they take along from their native land or inherit as members of the diasporic community. This is an issue Wendt develops in connection with the second generation, by resorting to the performative conventions of stand-up comedy. For Falani, one of Peseola's sons, whose views of his native land differ notably from those of his parents, Samoa is only a place he experiences vicariously, through the cultural practices reproduced abroad by the migrant community. At one point, he entertains his family with the following humorous monologue:

[I]t's not easy being Seemorean! Being Seemorean is to be suntanned forever. You have no choice in the matter, and that's unfair if you believe in free will and free choice. Being Seemorean also means having a very large, very hungry 'aiga. You don't have a choice in that either, and that's unfair because 'aiga means lots and lots of fa'alavelave. For the sake of

Ms White-Always, I'd better explain what a fa'alavelave is. Fa'a means to make; and lavelave means a tangle. So fa'alavelave is something that entangles you. For instance, a wedding. To non-Seemoreans a wedding is a happy celebration [...] To a Seemorean and a member of the 'aiga putting on the wedding, a wedding means having to contribute in terms of money –and twenty dollars won't do- in kind, time, headaches, badmouthing your elders behind their thick backs and so forth. (2004: 62)

Falani pronounces these words facing the auditorium, microphone in hand, and occasionally addressing “Ms White-always”, his brother’s Kiwi wife, and by extension the non-Pacific audience. This comic monologue allows him to problematise the cultural allegiances of his generation to a homeland they no longer experience as such, responding both to insider and outsider views on Samoan culture, but without adhering completely to any. When he concludes, he passes the microphone to his brother Fa’amau, who continues discussing funerals as experienced by Samoans, eventually engaging his two sisters. The monologue becomes then a choral response of a generation affected by strong familial and cultural impositions but whose upbringing has also been determined by more individualistic values and the achievement of a fairly comfortable position in contemporary New Zealand society. The stand-up sketch also demonstrates that they are more at ease with a western comic mode whose conventions they seem to recognise and dominate; in fact stand-up comedy has been the medium through which many Samoan comedians and playwrights have achieved a reputation in the entertainment industry. Despite the tragic experiences which have affected them and which are disclosed as the play advances, at this point the four siblings manage to adopt a more detached approach, resorting to irony rather than parody, and witty remarks rather than open mockery, but employing nevertheless a similar citational and reciprocal response.

The third performative mode, I would like to refer to is *Pasifika* hip hop, which has become in the last years an empowering way of addressing social issues and articulating identity politics (Zemke-White, 2004); a genuine expression of the diasporic community and a clear

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

reflection of the syncretic nature of a Panpacific urban culture, as experienced mainly by the youngest generations. The genre combines American hip hop and R&B rhythms, Maori and Pacific instrumentation, English and Polynesian languages, with highly politicised lyrics which reflect diasporic and ethnic consciousness and a commitment to define themselves as *Tagata Pasifika* (Peoples of the Pacific), a sense of group identity determined by routes rather than by roots, to borrow Gilroy's (1992) well-known pun. Hip hop is the mode through which Peseola's grandchildren negotiate their position in the family and the tool through which they trace their ancestral origins, and it becomes their means of expression and celebration during the family gathering:

We came from Sapepe Village of the Brave  
Where the Lulu was king until Jesus came  
And our sharks zipped through missionaries  
Like KFC hadn't seen the light of day.  
Peseola and Malaga are our cool daddy names.  
We sailed on the Matua of banana boat fame  
With our handsome heirs Nofo and Mau the Sane  
In search of the Palagi cargo of education and pay  
And the gold on the streets of Freemans bay.  
[...] Why is it we've stayed this far?  
We think we've found a firm fit to this land. (2004:  
114-116)

At the end of the play, the song composed by the grandchildren is appropriated and recited by the patriarch Peseola before he is about to die. In this way, Wendt opens and closes his work with two very different performances, whose function nevertheless is strikingly similar. The opening one is a Samoan genealogy which goes back to their myth of creation and connects the family with their ancestors; the final rap song traces the more personal genealogy of the Peseolas in their journey from Samoa to their new land, placing the emphasis on recreation. Peseola, whose name means "the song that grows" (2004: 97), illustrates this capacity of transformation by blending very different rhythms in a song where there is room for indigenous, colonial and global cultural references. This song reveals



the capacity of adaptation displayed and performed daily by Pacific Islanders in New Zealand and concurs with Wendt's rejection of the role of the "true interpreters" and the "sacred guardians" of his culture (1996: 645), as well as the naive assumption that there is a pure precolonial Pacific identity to be recovered. Instead, he has insisted that cultural borrowing is not only unavoidable but probably the only way for their cultures to survive. *The Songmaker's Chair* illustrates some of the multiple possibilities of articulating and performing contemporary Pacific identity in diaspora and the need to reassess the narratives of the nation by embracing the regenerative potential of these syncretic cultural forms.

### References

- Balme, C. 1999. *Decolonising the Stage. Theatrical Syncretism and Postcolonial Drama*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 2007. *Pacific Performances. Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bhabha, H. K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Carter, A. 2002. "Taking Centre Stage: Pacific Theatre in New Zealand". *Pacific Art in Niu Sila. The Pacific Dimension in Contemporary New Zealand Arts*. S. Mallon and P. Pereira. Eds. 116–159. Wellington: Te Papa Press.
- Gilroy, P. 1992. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hereniko, V. 1994. "Clowning as Political Commentary: Polynesia, Then and Now." *The Contemporary Pacific*. 1–28.
- Keown, M. 2005. *Postcolonial Pacific Writing. Representations of the Body*. London: Routledge.
- Mageo, J. M. 1999. "Toward Historicizing Gender in Polynesia: On Vilsoni Hereniko's *Woven Gods* and Regional Patterns". *Pacific Studies* 22:1. 93–121.
- Pearson, S. 2005. "Pacific Camp: Satire, Silliness (and Seriousness) on New Zealand Television". *Media, Culture and Society* 27:4. 551–575.
- Sharrad, P. 2003. *Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature. Circling the Void*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wendt, A. 1996. "Towards a New Oceania". *The Arnold Anthology of Postcolonial Literatures in English*. J. Thieme. Ed. 641–652. London: Arnold.
- . 2004. *The Songmaker's Chair*. Wellington: Huia.
- Zemke-White, K. 2004. "Keeping it Real (Indigenous): Hip Hop in Aotearoa as Community, Culture and Consciousness". *Culture Studies in*

**PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE**

*Aotearoa/New Zealand. Identity, Space and Place.* C. Bell and S. Matthewson.  
Eds. 205–228. Oxford: OUP.