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## The Journal of Pacific History Inc

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Albert Wendt and the Problem of History

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Source: *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jun., 2002), pp. 109-116

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25169578>

Accessed: 19/01/2015 21:57

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## COMMENT

### Albert Wendt and the Problem of History

Albert Wendt is best known as a literary figure with a long-standing agenda of cultural reconstruction and self-determination. From a literary perspective, this has meant a corrective reclamation of literary history. The false and demeaning images of Islanders and island life perpetuated in outsider writing and taught in colonial schools must be countered:

Up to a few years ago nearly all the literature about Oceania was written by papalagi and other outsiders. Our islands were and still are a goldmine for romantic novelists and film makers, bar-room journalists and semi-literate tourists, sociologists and Ph.D. students, remittance men and sailing evangelists, UNO *experts*, and colonial administrators and their well-groomed spouses. Much of this literature ranges from the hilariously romantic through the pseudo-scholarly to the infuriatingly racist; from the *noble savage* literary school through Margaret Mead and all her comings of age, Somerset Maugham's puritan missionaries/drunks/and saintly whores and James Michener's rascals and golden people, to the stereotyped childlike pagan who needs to be steered to the Light.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, Wendt says:

I've written mainly about my own people. I hope I've illuminated some areas of who those people are and, through them, what people are like everywhere. I hope I've also destroyed some of the stereotypes and fallacious myths about Samoa, Polynesia and the South Seas. (I pray though that I haven't replaced them with other misleading ones!)<sup>2</sup>

This reinsertion of a Pacific voice into the literary world is founded on the historical moment of Western intrusion into Oceania (as Wendt terms it, 'the reefs breaking open' under the impact of *palagi* ships and their freight of guns, Bibles and cash commodities). Literary history, in Wendt's view, is infused with the history of colonialism and the efforts to address its effects. He sees postcolonial texts as both expressing and arising out of losses of culture, pride and power over self-representation: 'Creating our own literature helps us define ourselves in our own terms.'<sup>3</sup>

The decolonising writer's project of rescuing cultural self-respect from amnesia and disparagement places literature in the context of wider engagements with history itself. As Wendt says, 'It's important that we decolonise our histories ... In school our histories were taught as prehistory or folk history.'<sup>4</sup> Wendt in fact trained as a historian, completing an MA at Victoria University Wellington on the Mau resistance movement in Samoa, an interest sparked by the involvement of his grandfather Tuaopepe Tauilo. However, he became a schoolteacher, then lecturer in Education, and a writer of poems and stories. Across these careers his decolonising project has not changed, but his view of history has become more complex. Three quotes exemplify this. The first reflects his early aim to 'fill the gap' or 'correct the record' of colonial history; the other two become refrains in his later essays and fiction, revealing influences of modern textual theory associated with the realisation that history, as written record based on European ideas of the world, might not

<sup>1</sup> Albert Wendt, 'Towards a new Oceania', *MANA Review*, 1 (1976), 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 49; also Albert Wendt, 'The writer as fiction', in Jim Richstad and Miles M. Jackson (eds), *Publishing in the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu 1984), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Vili Hereniko and David Hanlon, 'An interview with Albert Wendt', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 5 (1993), 200-1; Antonella Sartù, 'Albert Wendt' in *Spiritearvners: interviews with eighteen New Zealand writers* (Amsterdam 1998), 208, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Hereniko and Hanlon, 'Interview', 208.

be amenable to simple substitutional endeavours:

We should write our own histories in order to be free of those histories written about us.  
for me there is no difference between autobiography and fiction  
novels are complex histories.<sup>5</sup>

Such 'border crossing' between history and fiction can be traced through Wendt's entire output. On the one hand, he persists with the referential realism and testimony indicated in his early desire to write as 'directly, honestly and unsentimentally as possible',<sup>6</sup> and it is there in his regret that he did not inherit the family genealogies from his aunt.<sup>7</sup> It is also evident in his practice of writing up fiction from travel diaries sent as letters to his children (seen most clearly in the novel *Ola*).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, his use of social observation and historical data is subordinated to the poetic symbols and invented myths that hold them in place and give them form:

The only way to understand our life is to write a novel about it, to bring a shape to it. But we can never understand it. Experiences are actually bits and pieces.<sup>9</sup>

Bits and pieces or not, life experiences can be organised into powerful discourses by systems such as colonialism or the modern state. As Wendt puts it, 'Many of us are trapped in a reality which is choreographed by others'.<sup>10</sup> History is one element in this choreography, and Wendt's work is informed by the move to new historicist or cultural materialist readings of texts in which 'history is no objective knowledge which can be made to explain a literary text ... the object of study is literature *in* history'. In his fiction, Wendt is certainly interested in 'Opening up ... hidden histories' and seeking to have us 'understand how they became hidden in the first place, and what forces are at work in hiding and revealing them in the present'.<sup>11</sup> Recent study suggests that, consistent with his allegorical style, even the 1950s social history of the epic fiction *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*<sup>12</sup> contains allusions to the Mau rebellions in its central section.<sup>13</sup> Writing aimed at historical recovery and witness through fictive indirectness runs through postcolonial writing in general and is partly symptomatic of many writers' equivocal position between orality and print, modernity and tradition, local and international cultures. In Wendt, the mix goes back to his grandmother, Mele Tuaeopepe:

As a child I was fascinated by the oral literature of my own people. Samoa was and still is extremely rich in its oral traditions, and I was lucky with my grandmother ...

She was steeped in Samoan culture and the Bible and spoke fairly fluent English. Every night she dazzled us with *fagogo*, lengthy descriptions of her own life and history, and yarns of her own unique weaving.<sup>14</sup>

Here we have the mix of personal testimony, fable, history and story that permeates

<sup>5</sup> Respectively: Vilsoni Hereniko, 'Following in her footsteps: an interview with Albert Wendt', *Manoa*, 5 (1993), 117; Michael Neill, 'Albert Wendt' in Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams (eds), *In the Same Room: conversations with New Zealand writers* (Auckland 1992), 102; Hereniko and Hanlon, 'Interview', 118.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Wendt, 'Inside "outsider" Wendt', *New Zealand Bookworld*, 8 (Feb.-Mar. 1974), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, 'The travels of a tusitala, Albert Wendt in Burgundy', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 16:2 (1993), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Juniper Ellis, "'The techniques of storytelling": an interview with Albert Wendt', *Ariel*, 28:3 (1997), 80.

<sup>9</sup> Neill, 'Albert Wendt', 115.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Wendt, 'Novelists and historians and the art of remembering' in A. Hooper et al. (eds), *Class and Culture in the South Pacific* (Suva 1987), 82.

<sup>11</sup> John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London 1998), 3, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Wendt, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (Auckland 1979).

<sup>13</sup> Susan Najita, 'Colonial resistance in Albert Wendt's *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*', paper presented at the 13th triennial congress of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies, Canberra, July 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Wendt, 'Inside "outsider" Wendt', 74, 76.

Wendt's own work. He concludes the same personal profile:

In a major way all creative writers are historians. The most revealing and meaningful histories about a people are the stories, poems, myths, plays and novels written by those people about themselves.<sup>15</sup>

What this assessment masks is the typical trajectory of the postcolonial writer, who in attempting to correct colonialist records or to refill the gaps in historical consciousness, goes back to traditions not recognised as history in conventional Western terms and sometimes only existing as vestiges signifying a *departed* knowledge system and its attendant history.

In Wendt, we see such a salvaging of traditions, moving from the initial appropriation of the Maori versions of cult hero Maui in *Sons for the Return Home* and *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*, to the Samoan trickster figure Pili in *Pouliuli*, and creation chant in *Ola*. With this goes a reworking of himself from an 'exiled' Western-trained writer back/on into the community of Samoa and its foundational concepts, such as the *va* (the constitutive gap in all relationships and the void at the heart of creation), *aitu* (spirits) and a remodelling of the writer as priest-shaman. In the poem 'Conch Shell', for example, we see the writer declaring both his desired (and textually reconstructed) connection with a palpable tradition signified in blowing the shell that will summon ancestral spirits and his helpless separation because of colonial ruptures from the rituals by which to control and give meaning to such an invocation.<sup>16</sup>

This oral tradition (often ironically preserved in colonial writing, as well as in family lore) reveals some unpalatable truths, however. Firstly, there is the realisation of how vulnerable orality is to disruption. (When the *tuua* Toasa dies in *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, his knowledge of protocols and mythic lineages dies with him.) Keepers of the oral tradition, like the 'pagan' healer in Wendt's story 'Daughter of the Mango Season'<sup>17</sup> or the guardians of memories of prophet Te Whiti, whose story never made it into Wendt's New Zealand schoolroom,<sup>18</sup> are reduced to underground or marginalised figures. Secondly, orality can lend itself to communal fixation. Once everyone believes that the missionaries brought the light, everything else is expelled to outer darkness and there is no court of appeal (as we see in Pepe's trial in 'Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree').<sup>19</sup> Chiefs are similarly able to exploit 'tradition' in the name of the nation to shore up class privilege and social conformity.

Wendt is aware from very early on that the quest for cultural roots as a decolonising project is not only a counter-essentialism of a 'negritudinist' kind:

No culture, institution or person is perfect ... No culture is static ... our cultures were changing even in pre-*papalagi* times ... There was no 'noble savage' then or now, there was no 'golden age' then and there is certainly no 'golden age' now.<sup>20</sup>

In his poetic summation of the Polynesian epic, he foregoes the usual heroic celebration, depicting an exhausted people becoming trapped in internecine circles of violence:

And to forget, beside the complacent fires—  
The wild yam harvest safe in storehouses—  
The reason why they pierced the muscle  
Of the hurricane into reef's retina,  
Beyond it the sky's impregnable shell;  
And slept, waking into nightmare

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Wendt, 'Conch Shell', *Inside Us the Dead: poems 1964–1976* (Auckland 1976), 30–2.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Wendt, *The Birth and Death of the Miracle Man and Other Stories* (Auckland 1986), 134–54.

<sup>18</sup> Albert Wendt, 'Pacific maps and fiction(s): a personal journey', in Edwin Thumboo (ed.), *Perceiving Other Worlds* (Singapore 1991), 199.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Wendt, *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree and Other Stories* (Auckland 1974), 124–32.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Wendt, 'A sermon on national development, education and the rot in South Pacific', in T. Brammel, R. May and M. Allen (eds), *Education in Melanesia* (Canberra 1975), 373.

Of spear and club, their own young—  
 Warriors long-haired with blood  
 Cursed, the shrill cry  
 Of children unborn, sacrificed.

No sanctuary  
 From the sun-black seed  
 Inside and self's cell  
 Coral lacerating the promise,  
 Self-inflicted wounds at the altar  
 Of power will not heal.<sup>21</sup>

The tyrannical closure of orality is reflected in the poem, which is itself an historical genealogy while being also broken into an imaginative personal re-creation of the past. Its writing signals connectedness, but it closes in loss of connection (the death of Wendt's brother in a car accident).

A more telling indication of the problem of history in colonised experience is found in the short novel *Pouliuli*.<sup>22</sup> Wendt constantly refers to being haunted by a real man who becomes a symbolic figure reminiscent of Borges's 'Funes the Memorious' — the man who remembered everything. Wendt's prophet figure tells his young minder:

the papalagi missionaries, by bringing their magic of the written word to Samoa, had rescued the people from the brutal nightmare swamp in which the collective memory was rooted and from which it derived its ferocity; had turned their people's attention from the irrational madness of their vain and violent blood to the humane light of the word. This was the crucial mystery Osovae should contemplate when he grew up: because he was literate he would have no difficulty in unravelling it.<sup>23</sup>

On the face of it, this passage reproduces the very images of island savagery and missionary salvation that Wendt has spent his career combating. Tradition, orality, madness, and sleep battle against modernity, reason, writing and waking. There are a number of ironies surrounding this utterance, however, as Joseph Chadwick has pointed out.<sup>24</sup> The words are spoken by a madman, and one whom an excess of memory and exposure to white culture (he is himself quite literate) has made mad.

Wendt traces an ironic doubleness of lost origins and shifting presents in his essays 'In a Stone Castle in the South Seas', 'The Artist and the Reefs Breaking Open' and 'Towards a New Oceania'. Another essay that rests on the phrase perhaps most repeated across all his work is 'Novelists and Historians and the Art of Remembering'.<sup>25</sup> The phrase itself is, 'We are what we remember'. It first occurs in a story 'A Resurrection' (*Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*, 1975) and forms the basis of his most recent novel *Black Rainbow* (1992).<sup>26</sup> It supplies the epigraph to his mythic poem sequence 'Nei' in *Photographs* (1996) and is mentioned in his latest interview (in *Spiricarvers* 1998).<sup>27</sup>

A society is what it remembers; we are what we remember; I am what I remember; the self is a trick of memory ... history has everything to do with memory and remembering: history is the remembered tightrope that stretches across the abyss of all that we have forgotten.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Albert Wendt, 'Inside Us the Dead', *Inside Us the Dead*, 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Wendt, *Pouliuli* (Auckland 1977).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 104–5.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Chadwick, 'Allegories of the novel in Albert Wendt's "Pouliuli"', in Cornelia N. Moore and Raymond A. Moody (eds), *Comparative Literature East and West, Traditions and Trends* (Honolulu 1989), 157.

<sup>25</sup> Albert Wendt, 'In a Stone Castle in the South Seas', *MANA Review*, 1 (1976), 27–32. 'The Artist and the Reefs Breaking Open', *MANA*, 3 (1987), 107–21. Other articles cited above.

<sup>26</sup> Wendt, *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*, 65–71. Albert Wendt, *Black Rainbow* (Auckland 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Albert Wendt, *Photographs* (Auckland 1995), 28–56. Sarti, 'Albert Wendt', *Spiricarvers*, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Wendt, 'Novelists and historians', 79.

History is written memory, the objectification of memory. As such, it frees us from the tyranny of being constantly haunted by a personally immanent past and from the need to be constantly reconfirming the collective oral story. The mad prophet in *Pouliuli* was tormented because he had total recall; he was the ultimate traditional island authority and the extremity of his gift drove him insane. But it did so only because the present had moved on to a modernising Pacific in which oral memory was being discounted but written history had not yet found a creative home. The literate memoriser was an isolate.

If we put the past 'out there' for inspection, we can be analytic about social forces and motivations and distance ourselves from the compulsive drive to cyclic repetition. Yet once it is 'out there', distinct from personal memory, history assumes an authority of its own, and the processes of getting it into such a position are also shot through with power and vested interest. We become history's creatures and write from its archive.

Like individuals, societies can and do reorder their memories. Some do so radically to mirror their ruling group's views of reality/history/fantasies/and 'truths'. Many of us are trapped in a reality which is choreographed by others. It is also possible for our histories to be erased almost totally and replaced by other histories.<sup>29</sup>

*Pouliuli* has been read mainly for its mythic cultural metaphysics, but it is also replete with historical references. John Connell makes the interesting point that the novel's title can be read as a metaphorical challenge to the popular historical periodising of Samoa into a pre-contact 'time of darkness' and post-missionised 'time of light' (implied in the court-room scene in 'Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree'). Although the church is only manifest in this novel through the ridiculous figure of the pastor Filemoni, the general contrast of dark past and ideal present can be seen to be questioned. The use of the pre-Christian myth of Pili, the lizard trickster, aligns traditional culture with darkness, but turns it into an image of welcome release. It also suggests that modern life, with its betrayals and its corruptions, is a darker form of existence than the past ever was. Such an interpretation has the merit of grounding general symbolism in historical moments. The life of protagonist Faleasa Osovae spans key phases of Samoa's history and culture as a way of indicating how the complex present and mental struggles of one character carry intimations of 'timeless' human truths and at the same time speak of specific historical intrusions and social change.<sup>30</sup>

Faleasa Osovae's problem arises not only out of the dynamics of traditional Samoan society (though the public-private tussle between respect and resentment in a sensitive son towards a tough patriarch seems endemic), but because that society has felt the impact of Westernising capitalist individualism. Faleasa would not be able to see his people as 'cannibals' devouring his soul unless colonial discourse had entered his world already; and his people would not be as grasping and unreciprocating if dreams of personal material gain induced by visits to Apia trade-stores had not begun to push the traditional competitive exchange system towards unbridled consumerism. This is why the story of Osovae's alienation keeps alternating with images of social history: first encounter with white missionary; first trip to town; garnering the goods of War; getting on the new political bandwagon. One of the many ironies generated by the dualist structuring (present/past, personal/collective, tame leader/wild non-conformist) is that it takes sidekick Lemigao — of insatiable appetite, always the leader in trying ice-creams and cash trading — to remind Osovae of what he represents and threatens to destroy:

The individual freedom you have discovered and now want to maintain is contrary to the very basis of our way of life. Have you considered that? For over thirty years you, Faleasa, and a few other matai have led our village, and your leadership, as was the ancient practice, has been based firmly on the principle that you exist to serve others, to serve the very people you are now

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>30</sup> John Connell, 'In Samoan worlds: culture migration and identity in Albert Wendt', in R. King, J. Connell and P. White (eds), *Writing Across Worlds: literature and migration* (London and New York 1994), 264. See also Wendt, 'Novelists and historians', 87.

branding as cannibals. A good leader doesn't live for himself but for his people. And you, Faleasa, wanted the leadership.<sup>31</sup>

Chadwick sees the alternating episodes of the book as constructing a theme of cultural transformation that reaches its critical point when Faleasa Osovae feigns madness in order to attack those who have succumbed to Western values. However, he takes the argument a step further by suggesting that the 'feigned madness seems to be the enabling condition of Faleasa's very existence in fiction, and thus of the existence of the novel itself'.<sup>32</sup> It is this individuating/alienating strategy that makes Faleasa into a 'personality' such as can be recognised as a suitable novelistic character. That is, it is Faleasa's plunge into history which individuates him and brings about his tragic downfall. But it is also his leap back into the mythic that gives his story a connected significance within the Samoan community and Pacific readership generally. We might push this idea one step more and find in *Pouliuli* not just a dramatic portrayal of social change, but also an allegorical auto-analysis of the writer's self-appointed prophetic but marginal position as Westernist 'novelist' in Samoan society.

The Caribbean writer Wilson Harris makes considerable creative use of the correspondences and slippages between indigenous dreaming and the Renaissance neo-classical 'art of memory' — between the tyranny of a totalising fixation of knowledge and identity (either through mythic synchronicity and silence, or colonial documentation and obliteration), and the liberation of partial, dynamic loss and preservation of traces of human being in time, between 'consolidated' fiction and a visionary art of transformation.<sup>33</sup> Wendt's repeated insistence on the constructedness of history, the interconnection of fiction and factual record, is, similarly, a tricky wrestling with the slippery power of the past, confessing our need to know it in order fully to be who we are, and our need to break free of it so as to become who we might be.

For Wendt the writer, shaped by the forces of colonial and decolonising history, this has meant seeking a kind of existentialism that does not mean total social alienation from the group or aestheticist isolation,<sup>34</sup> but which nonetheless acknowledges the separation and loss of entering modernity. Secondly, he needed a literary form that might hold out the prospect of unity while realistically delineating the forces against it. No longer was it possible simply to repeat the old myths; new ones had to be forged that could pay tribute to the old and, through multivalent poetic symbolism, provide a means of holding together disparate aspects of reality without melding them into any false uniformity, social or aesthetic.<sup>35</sup> 'Reality is not fixed and permanent for everyone', especially in times of radical social change, but also as a condition of modern life generally, since to produce history (rather than recite 'memory') is to 'recreate the past' in relation to where the present is. 'The reality of symbols is an illusory reality but we can't help living in that reality because we have nothing else.'<sup>36</sup>

Wendt's most recent novel, *Black Rainbow*, based on a futuristic society which seeks to deny all history, even in its weaker moments of narrative contradiction operates to show how memory cannot be erased or dispensed with: it surges up through cracks, like the seeds of humour in the lava rock of grim existence alluded to in 'Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree'. Memory is both the impulse behind the hero's quest and the prize at its end.

In the totalitarian world of post-nuclear holocaust New Zealand, history is managed by the state, and citizens can be reprogrammed with new identities and the memories to match (Wendt appears to be building on some scenes from *Bladerunner* here), and the hope for

<sup>31</sup> Wendt, *Pouliuli*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Chadwick, 'Allegories of the novel', 156.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space: the cross-cultural imagination* (London and Westport 1983). Paul Sharrad, 'The art of memory and the liberation of history: Wilson Harris's witnessing of time', *Callaloo*, 18 (1995), 94–109.

<sup>34</sup> Hereniko, 'Following in her footsteps', 57–8.

<sup>35</sup> Wendt, 'The Artist and the Reefs Breaking Open', 108–9.

<sup>36</sup> Wendt, 'Novelists', 82–4; Wendt, 'The writer as fiction', 49.

retaining self-determination rests with an underground tribe of Maori–Polynesian–Pakeha youth who exchange their memories as stories. Playing with postmodern ideas of textual construction, Wendt shows myth and history — even buildings — to be fictional contrivances. But despite this admission, there is a commitment to stories of family, community and self that resists total deconstructive cynicism or indifference.

Our understanding of *Black Rainbow* might well be enhanced by a reading of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in which shifting tactics by the small and ordinary disturb the work of established big fields of labour and knowledge. Like Wendt, this book examines the 'art of memory' especially as it is exercised by common people. Their stories and private 'know-how' become 'the legendary and at the same time active memory of what remains on the margins or in the interstices' of the official and the orthodox. 'Memory comes from somewhere else, it is outside of itself, it moves things about.'<sup>37</sup> In *Heterologies*, memory is the site of struggle between 'forgetting ... and the mnemonic trace', an active contingency of the present in opposition to 'cannibalistic' history, and literature serves as a meta-text on history, connecting in mystical moments 'to the nothing that opens the future'.<sup>38</sup> Folk memory and myth deploy surreptitiously in relation to circumstance; they modify the situation they respond to in being moved themselves; they are a style, like the telling of a story.<sup>39</sup> These ideas are illustrated in *Black Rainbow* by one of the street gang, Aeto, and his mother who trained her memory in resistance to the Tribunal's obliteration of history. 'Her knowledge was in the stories she filled their lives with. The usefulness of uselessness, she described her stories.'<sup>40</sup> Her phrase sums up the point of Wendt's apparently 'silly' tactical mix of fantasy, allegory, topical allusion and parody.

De Certeau's essay 'Walking in the City' develops the idea of memory and story as shifting itineraries whereby reality is multiform, palimpsestic; regulatable space is shot through with unregulated time: 'A *migrational*, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city'. The city itself generates its own disorder in its very management of space: 'The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place ... [it] is only a name, the City'. We can clearly detect in this aspects of Wendt's dystopian Auckland, and it is perhaps only fitting that de Certeau goes on to cite Borges (one of Wendt's textual avatars) and relate tactical subversions of order to writing and reading in which the reader 'poaches' on the meaning of the text, reinvents memories of it detached from origins and allows for an indefinite plurality of meanings.<sup>41</sup>

At the start of such multiplicity, though, is a web of reference to real places, writers, Wendt's friends and family. Fiction harks back to autobiography, even if autobiography is fiction. History is narrativised autobiography becoming collective genealogy:

Memory is our only source of finding out who we are. If we had no memory, we wouldn't be conscious that we're alive. The self, really, is a trick of memory. We are what we remember, society is what it remembers. That is why we must control what we remember — history — and hand that on to our children.<sup>42</sup>

And so we end up with a shifting compendium of views in which memory is vital and total recall madness; history is tyrannical but necessary as a basis for understanding and change, and fiction is the mediator between the two. As Wendt said in an interview, 'Tradition is always imperfect and alive only in dynamic adaptive appropriation of the new'.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. S. Randall (Berkeley 1984), 5, 70, 87.

<sup>38</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: discourse on the Other* tr. B. Massumi (London and Minneapolis 1986), 4, 18, 100.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 82–3, 86–7, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Wendt, *Black Rainbow*, 159.

<sup>41</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108, 93, 103, xxi, 169.

<sup>42</sup> Sarti, 'Albert Wendt', 209.

<sup>43</sup> Hereniko, 'Following in her footsteps', 56.

The constant revisitation of motifs and themes across Wendt's output suggests a Yeatsian artifice in which the writer is his own developing history: a tension between postmodern fictive play and histo-political commitment. In Wendt's words: 'I play games, but serious games'; or 'Writing is tricks but deadly tricks [arising from] a desire to explain to ourselves what has happened to us in the colonial process and to argue for political change'.<sup>44</sup>

The works fluctuate between closed circles related to both community and insularity, and open ones as both adaptation and rupture, all based around the search for 'centredness'.<sup>45</sup> They engage in postmodern bricolage which is at the same time an extreme kind of naturalism.<sup>46</sup> They shuttle between the meaningless void of colonial disintegration and the creative void of creation myth and existentialism in which 'darkness is fertile', and barren lava fields can break down to propagate new growth.<sup>47</sup>

Wendt's writing negotiates a flexible borderline between identity/origin and syncretism/flux. He rejects the notion of hybridity as too theoretical and static, and applauds a kind of dynamic interaction of coexisting differences that is underpinned by a sense of time as a mysterious element mediating memory, history and change.

For me there is no difference between time past, time present and time future. I've been persuaded by the new physics and Samoan philosophy that there is only an *ever-moving* present ... For us also the future is past; we look to our ancestors and the principles they lived by to guide our lives. Time is a continuum that changes as a unity if we alter a part of it ... it's a holistic, ecological view of the world.<sup>48</sup>

All this is hung on the crucial refrain hovering between history and fiction, postmodernity and oppositional testimony: 'We are what we remember'.

Like Wendt's tricksters, the shaman-novelist may never defeat the void, but the incorporation of history as fictionalised memory may prevent darkness from ever taking over completely, and may even find some solace or restorative energy within its circles.

PAUL SHARRAD

#### ABSTRACT

Poet and fiction writer Albert Wendt has taken on the task of correcting colonialist representations of the Pacific from an insider perspective. This involves him in questions of historical record and modes of recording history. The role of memory becomes central to the artist transposing oral traditions into written forms. Trained as an historian, Wendt progressively blurs the boundaries between imaginative and factual, personal and public re/constructions, aware of the illusions of both nationalistic nostalgia for lost perfection and colonialist 'objective' encyclopaedism. History both liberates and traps; in the poem 'Inside Us the Dead' and novels *Pouliuli* and *Black Rainbow*, Wendt looks for a postcolonial dynamic between postmodern deconstruction and representational texts that can be seen in terms of de Certeau's ideas of tactics and strategies.

<sup>44</sup> Neill, 'Albert Wendt', 118. Hereniko, 'Following', 55.

<sup>45</sup> Neill, 'Albert Wendt', 109. Wendt, 'The Artist and the Reefs', 108, 110.

<sup>46</sup> Neill, 'Albert Wendt', 116.

<sup>47</sup> Wendt, 'Pacific maps', 197. Hereniko and Hanlon, 'An interview', 212.

<sup>48</sup> Sarti, 'Albert Wendt', 210.