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Abstract
Albert Wendt is the leading literary figure of the Pacific — that is, Oceania (not the Asian and American rim that the media usually mean by 'Pacific'). Born in Samoa in 1939, Wendt has worked as a student, teacher and writer in Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand, and currently holds the chair of New Zealand literature at the University of Auckland. He has written stories, novels, poetry and essays over the last thirty years, all to do with the effects of colonial incursions on Island cultures and the possibilities of imagining a new complex future that will accord respect to tradition and claim a place in global modernity.
PAUL SHARRAD

Trees, Rainbows and Stars: The Recent Work of Albert Wendt

Albert Wendt is the leading literary figure of the Pacific — that is, Oceania (not the Asian and American rim that the media usually mean by ‘Pacific’). Born in Samoa in 1939, Wendt has worked as a student, teacher and writer in Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand, and currently holds the chair of New Zealand literature at the University of Auckland. He has written stories, novels, poetry and essays over the last thirty years, all to do with the effects of colonial incursions on Island cultures and the possibilities of imagining a new complex future that will accord respect to tradition and claim a place in global modernity. As part of this project, he has drawn on the Samoan oral literature of his birthplace, on writers like Camus, Borges, Naipaul, Faulkner and Yeats, on Hollywood movies, science fiction, New Zealand society and elements of Tao and Zen. His work has been an exciting exploration of different forms and voices, and a continuous wrestling with the role of the artist at the edge of community but speaking to it (and in the postcolonial context, for it) and against the abuses of economic, political and culturally dominating power structures.

Roughly, the work as a whole falls into three groups. It is only roughly because Wendt can work on a novel for an awfully long time while chopping out fragments for publication as stories, writing separate stories, starting bits of a projected novel and building up a collection of poems. Firstly, in the seventies he produced an anti-colonial analysis of the corruptions of modern life in Samoa around the same time as a lot of decolonising protest writing was appearing across the Pacific. (Some of it came out with assistance from Wendt, who has encouraged young writers and produced many anthologies of Pacific poems and stories, culminating in his landmark collection, *Lali*.) This period of Wendt’s output includes the first novel to be published by a Pacific Islander, *Sons for the Return Home* (1973), a collection of short stories about the semi-schooled roguish fringe of Apia, *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree* (1974), a book of poems, *Inside us the Dead* (1976), a novella, *Pouliuli* (1977), and a saga of one family’s move from traditional village community to modern city capitalism, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979). In this period, Wendt also wrote his definitive essay on emergent Pacific writing, ‘Towards a New Oceania’ (1976), in which he sets out his project of correcting colonialist images of the Pacific and critiquing the ‘mimic men’ (he mentions his reading of Naipaul) who sell out traditional ways for private gain, leaving a culturally bankrupt society and neo-colonial dependency in their
The artist, though he or she as a dissident individual could be cut off from communal values, has a prophetic duty and positive recreative role to play in imagining a complexly connected, culturally confident and self-determining contemporary Pacific world. The figure representing this stage of work is the banyan tree: it is a community of branches rooted still in tradition but sending out new aerial roots as part of modern and increasingly mobile Pacific life.

The second period is less overtly anti-colonial but continues to explore possibilities of reconnection with pre-contact traditions while acknowledging the existential crisis facing any Islander who chooses to reject the orthodox mix of opportunistic consumerism and Christianity. It includes the book of poems, *Shaman of Visions* (1984), the story collection, *Birth and Death of the Miracle Man* (1986), and the novel, *Ola* (1991). This last work is a significant shift in Wendt’s outlook, since it attempts a view of the world through the eyes of a contemporary globe-trotting Samoan woman. It not only incorporates stories of Maori cultural revival, reflecting Wendt’s move to a professorship in Auckland and reconnection with the politics of bi (multi) culturalism, but it takes a Samoan pastor on a trip through the ‘Holy Land’, echoing the attempt of *Pouliuli* to understand modern life in the light of the Holocaust. This work is full of playful self-reference and builds on ideas from quantum physics and the postmodern blurring of history, autobiography and fiction. Indeed, all these texts and others that follow work with ideas expounded in the essay ‘The Writer as Fiction’ (1983).

The personal reflections in his inaugural lecture at Auckland University (‘Pacific Maps and Fictions’ 1991) can also be seen woven into *Ola* and subsequent writing.

Mystery, if not also the mystical, is the basis for Wendt’s next book, the novel *Black Rainbow* (1992). This is a fascinating if at times obscure melange of thriller, literary joke, science fiction dystopia, and social satire. The book is however clearly set in New Zealand and represents a break with Wendt’s mainly Samoan focus. It also takes the experiment with mixed genres that began in *Ola* to a new level of metafictional engagement. I have written about this complex work at greater length elsewhere, so will not dwell on it here, save to point to the new concern with blackness. This is present in the darkness signified in *Pouliuli*, but here it assumes a new meaning, by taking previous Camusian uses of the Polynesian hero Maui, combining them with the work of Maori printmaker, painter and installation artist, Ralph Hotere — notably his protests against nuclear testing in the Pacific — and coming up with a modern conceptualisation of the Polynesian creation concept of the Void as a positive though fearsome source of energy related to the Va (the gap between things that allows relationships and life).

After *Black Rainbow* another collection of poetry appears, *Photographs* (1995). This contains some personal lyrics recording Wendt’s change of partners, his travels and his becoming a grandfather. There are elements of Pound’s *Cantos*, Robert Bly, the Black Mountain poets, and some verse narratives that mix traditional Samoan chant with strange allegorical fantasy, hinting at the writer’s
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continued mystical bent otherwise seen in his shaman figures. This period is again bounded by an anthology, a 1995 follow-up to Lali containing Pacific writing after 1980. Called Nuanua, this anthology brings together sixty-five writers from 8 regions. The title is a Polynesian word meaning ‘rainbow’, only this time it is the colourful mix that is emphasised. A pan-Pacific minority/indigenous cultural politics is still signalled as a unifying factor, but the book is fundamentally aimed at cataloguing all kinds of Islander literary expression. The variety of themes is expanding in direct proportion with the global reach of the Pacific diaspora on the one hand, and internal social reassessment of post-independent nations on the other. In the mix is a new kind of Oceanic expression from people living multiple ethnicities while resisting hyphenated co-option (Samoan-American, Cook Island-Kiwi, Tongan-Australian) into ‘mainstream’ metropolitan literatures.

While concerns in this collection shift from anti-colonialist protest to critiques of neo-colonialist capitalist dependency, criticism of patriarchal traditions and the Fiji coup, other issues (life in cities, migration, nostalgia for village simplicity, the quest to retain traditional culture) continue to echo the themes of Wendt’s early writing. The interest in simple love lyrics and concern over the effects of Western schooling remain points of continuity with the previous generation of writers. The latter theme is evident in Wendt’s later work such as ‘Crocodile’ and ‘The Talent’ (in Birth and Death of the Miracle Man [1986]).

Continuities notwithstanding, Wendt has always been a champion of change, criticising those who would fossilise tradition in order to police social conformity, and asserting the ongoing capacity of indigenous cultures for creative reformation. In this context, it is important that Nuanua includes samples from the popular Island traditions of songs (Jon Jonassen’s work) and dance drama (John Kasaipwalova), since they show how print and oral cultures are being constantly renewed in relation to each other. In books taking Pacific culture to the world beyond, this is something of a risk, given that performance material on the page can seem clumsy or jejune. For readers unfamiliar with Oceanian modes of expression and used to print, there is a need for historical and social contexting against which to assess the wider range of Pacific art practice appropriately. Wendt has been a leader in providing such a critical framework with his many essays and his creative exploration of indigenous concepts and their potential for shaping an aesthetic of Pacific writing. An example can be found in his essay on the tattoo, ‘Afterword: Tatauing the Postcolonial Body’ (1994).

In 1999 another collection of short stories appeared (labelled ‘The Best of’, though it is almost ‘all of’ plus a body of new work in progress). ‘A Genealogy of Women’ reflects the experiment with a female side in Ola that was a corrective response to criticism of his work as too closely aligned with the macho culture of fa’a Samoa. In it we find a hint of his later novel, The Mango’s Kiss. The fictionalised genealogy includes a supplementary list to the early poem, ‘Inside Us the Dead’: grandmother Mele, his storytelling muse; Mele’s sister, a traditional
healer; his mother Luisa Patu, who died when he was young; his Aunt Ita; his ex-wife. His ‘family album’ is set in counterpoint with mention of the Gulf War. The text works with Wendt’s characteristic ‘you’ narration where the reader is edgily conflated with a narrating alter-ego addressee. Here the device is used to find an objective distance from which confession and self-analysis can occur — an essay more than a story, but autobiography made over into story as a therapeutic depersonalising of pain.

The collection also includes two ‘out-takes’ — ‘The Don’ts of Whistling’ and ‘A Family Again’ — from a work planned as the sequel to *Black Rainbow*. They continue with the totalitarian regime and theme of control of memory from that book and seem to be based around the son of the protagonist during the father’s absence on his quest. Only the first of these narratives works as an independent story, held together by the amusing conceit of whistling developed to an artform. As in other works by this writer, the reproduction of working-class Kiwi speech often seems forced, and his penchant post-*Ola* for inventing bits of song lyric only hits the right note occasionally. ‘Heat’ is a pre-release episode from *The Mango’s Kiss* depicting a comic *faleaitu* performance of ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ by visiting entertainers. A love affair begins between a local girl and one of the musician actors, and her disappearance gives rise to a host of stories speculating about her fate. The theme of endless imaginative invention — how stories beget stories — is increasingly seen in Wendt’s later work, and is paralleled in *The Mango’s Kiss* by a proliferation of tales about the fate of a Samoan youth who runs away to sea.

Other stories mark Wendt’s move to Auckland and depict foibles of family life in the suburbs. In ‘Deliver Us from Alice’ there is a convincing tension as we see a boy traumatised by domestic violence turn into a man fixated on tidiness and a death cult built on the memory of a dead daughter. ‘The Bird’ reveals the complex life of a Samoan gang leader, who is also a devoted grandson, a dedicated aiga ‘fixer’, a supporter of international charity agencies and a spiritual quester. ‘The Eyes Have it’ records the humiliation of a head of family laid off from his job and resenting his slide into ‘female’ domesticity and impotence. It is spoiled by the overworked puns and stretched metaphors of sight indicated in the title. By far the best story is the last, ‘Waiauruhe’, in which a middle-aged woman finds liberation in escaping to the family summer cottage and discovering the underside of her social set as she raids their deserted houses. Wendt evokes the shift in her relations with her husband with effective subtlety. The interest in female experience is slyly signalled in a typically late-Wendt moment, when the husband finds his wife has been reading ‘a novel, *Ola* by Albert Wendt, a writer he’s never wanted to read’ (184). This piece is also worth note because it marks a clear shift towards the urban Auckland society Wendt now inhabits.

The motif of blackness, first developed in *Black Rainbow* and mentioned in passing in ‘Deliver Us from Alice’ and ‘The Bird’, is continued in another innovation in Wendt’s output — the poster-poems in *Book of the Black Star*...
As part of his teacher training, Wendt took art classes, and in recent years he has returned to drawing and painting, mixing visual treatments of Polynesian myth and design (darkness, stars, spirals) that gestures to Ralph Hotere again, but has its own graffiti-like energy — something that crosses gnomic symbolism with a comic book. There is an air of personal jeu d’esprit in Wendt’s (re)turn to his youthful medium that might be seen as self-indulgent, but the ‘messy’ art work (rapid and ragged energetic swirls and sharp angles filled-in with hand-drawn lines of black felt-pen, with irregular, often smudged lettering) is at least a serious piece of fun, addressing some of Wendt’s perennial themes. The book conveys a deliberate sense of the personal and emotionally engaged, as opposed to the ‘cool’ computer-age design of many visual narratives. This is supported by the conversational tone, allusions to Auckland street names and drinking in the back yard. It is appropriate, too, to the story-line of a young philosopher-writer-drug addict friend whose death transfers into the writer’s dreams a vision of life symbolised in the potent mystery of the Black Star (*le fetu utuli*). There is an echo of all Wendt’s other elegiac celebrations of ‘his dead’ and the transformation of the past and pain through art into some vision of tomorrow and laughter.

In the context of New Zealand art, the use of hand lettering as part of the visual text also connects with the influential experiments of painter Colin McCahon, carrying the same portentous element of religious vision alongside a personal intensity that is both Romantic and destructive of the Modernist elevation of the artistic persona and/as the great work of art. This problematic of self-presentation and the religious theme can be tracked back to Wendt’s early debt to New Zealand poet, J.K. Baxter, and can be seen in the self-deprecating but always present narrator who is loaded with a vision he feels helpless, but compelled, to transmit (see Wendt’s poem, ‘Conch Shell’, for example). Dreams are the usual vehicle for managing these troubling legacies, and the reluctant shaman, accused like the Biblical prophets of being always ‘dark’, is a figure running back through all Wendt’s work, notably manifesting in his novella *Pouliuli*. However, *The Book of the Black Star* is more playful in delivering its minatory message of global destruction (seen here in images of ecological damage to the ocean and its creatures). The quirky buses that drive through its pages, for instance, have the quality of children’s art, echoing the nursery-rhyme elements of a grandfather’s celebration of family in *Photographs*.

The spiral of generation and cosmic swirl fits with the open-endedness of much of the work in this book. As with a lot of the author’s other writing, it has the air of pieces left over from earlier publications and sketches of work to come (the notes confess that part of this book ‘comes from Albert Wendt’s forthcoming, as yet untitled, novel’). Wendt is a good example of that dictum about the great writer producing the same work over and over again, but more than most writers, he seems always to be able to express that work in new and challenging forms, always on the move in his ‘ever-moving present’.
Fig 1. From *The Book of the Black Star*, Albert Wendt, 2002, reproduced with permission of Albert Wendt.
Fig 2. From *The Book of the Black Star*, Albert Wendt, 2002, reproduced with permission of Albert Wendt.
Those who have followed Wendt’s work will know that one of the novels he has long-promised is a tribute to his grandmother. All of his literary experiment, in prose at least, harks back to his grandmother Mele, a family storyteller who blended moral fable, local history, traditional myth, tall yarns and ‘the good bits’ from Western literature in what is known in Samoa as fagogo (Fairbairn-Dunlop). He also deals in fierce social satire, taking on the license of the shaman-actor in faleaitu theatre supposedly possessed by ancestral spirits (Va’ai). All of these strands came together in his prize-winning epic, Leaves of the Banyan Tree, a portrait of Samoan society in the latter days of colonial rule and the early days of independent subservience to the cash economy; but the full-length treatment of Mele’s lifetime — growing up through the late 1800s and into the beginnings of Samoa’s resistance to colonial disregard for local culture and social mismanagement — appears as The Mango’s Kiss (2003). Like much of his other work that has been turned out between teaching and promoting new writers from the Pacific, this new book has been drafted over many years. Sections have appeared as self-contained stories (‘Prospecting’ [1981] and ‘Daughter of the Mango Season’ [1984]) and the author has gone as far back as his very early story ‘A Descendant of the Mountain’ (1963) to dramatise the traumatic impact of the 1918 influenza epidemic that led to political protest against New Zealand’s administration. There is an echo, too, of ‘Birth and Death of the Miracle Man’ (1977) in the novel’s slow transformation of Mautu, the upright pastor of Satoa, into an agnostic storyteller. In the short story, this happens mysteriously and suddenly, but in the book, the transformation is due to a growing friendship with Barker, the atheistic Englishman turned Island trader. (Barker is an avatar of the dwarf trickster Tagata from the ‘Flying Fox’ section of Leaves of the Banyan Tree).

One of the strengths of The Mango’s Kiss is the sympathetic treatment of the complex central characters. This owes something to Wendt’s interest in the many ‘sides’ we all have to our selves (52) and our cultures. Mautu’s father was both ‘the staunch quiet Christian whose main “weakness” was for women’ and the taulaaitu (medium-priest) of the pagan god, Fatutapu:

As children, Mautu and Lafatu were soon conscious of the other side of their father and aiga, and, like everyone else, learned early not to refer to it publicly or directly. It existed: you observed it, learned from it to respect it, to be afraid of offending and mishandling it, and to be proud that your aiga possessed such power and knowledge. You accepted the missionary outlawing it, but you also accepted it was in your moa, your centre. (200)

The multi-faceted bearing of such a contradictory load is manifest in Mautu’s spiritual wrestling which continues as a frame for other stories across the whole novel (he is a version of Pastor Simi in Leaves of the Banyan Tree). Within this frame, we follow the growth of his precocious daughter Peleiupu, as she both discovers a traditional gift of second sight (25, 82) and learns her way into white
education. The portrayal of her mother, Lalaga, is admirable for its complexity. She is simultaneously worried about, disapproving of, fearful for, and resentful of the talents and license afforded her husband and daughter. Lalaga has her own inner contest between obeying her mission education, maintaining the social respectability expected of a pastor’s wife, supporting her husband despite his tolerance of ‘pagan’ tradition, and indulging her lively physical passions — this latter trait permitting some of the most graphic sex scenes in Pacific writing.

Some readers may find parts of the novel excessive, distasteful and perhaps gratuitous. But Wendt uses his sex scenes to engage with the long-running debate over the real nature of Samoan society — paradise of free love or straight-laced rule-bound conservativism. Later in the book, there is a ‘splatter movie’ (a blood-soaked horror genre developed into a cult artform in New Zealand) episode about child pornography. The reader at once squirms at the relish shown in the violence and recognises the critique of something so topical in many societies. Wendt plays with the titillating and sensational aspects of popular culture, but always turns them into serious social comment. As suggested earlier, though, storytelling is mainly what the book is about. One chapter is dedicated to the meta-fictionist labyrinths of Borges, and Mautu the pastor spices up his teaching — even maths lessons [35] and his sermons (23) — with stories derived from the secular books and parodic colonial romance tales of his friend Barker’s life and library (27–32). Self-aware narration of a range of stories is also indicated when Wendt has Peleipu attend school in Apia and meet a version of Robert Louis Stevenson (91–116) whose presence also haunts ‘Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree’/Leaves of the Banyan Tree. The author also depicts three generations of two families that show traces of his own genealogy. As in Black Rainbow, there are hidden jokes from real life: one stern missionary’s name, for example, is a Samoan version of ‘Smiler’, which is an Anglicised version of the name of Wendt’s colleague and friend Witi Ihimaera, that name in turn being a Maori form of the Biblical Ishmael. A doctor who settles in Satoa to pry into cultural tradition while cultivating gay relationships with local men is given a name blending those of Samoa’s most famous anthropologists, Derek Freeman and Margaret Mead. Part of Mautu’s genealogy ties him to Tauilopepe from Leaves of the Banyan Tree (41, 203, 245) and so the narrative keeps circling and spreading. The novel thus parades its view of culture as a dynamic of mixedness, in particular connecting its episodic tall tales, fictionalised history, disguised autobiography to the oral tradition of fagogo.

In this, there is perhaps something of the multi-faceted cubist assemblage of Picasso, but the rambunctious yarning of the sensationalist and moralising fagogo does not necessarily aim to make its complexity into a modernist organic unity. The aesthetic of the fagogo as performance for a mixed audience is that it should have something to suit all tastes. Of course, this also means that not everything will be to everyone’s taste. In a performance, the audience can wander off, sleep, start up a game of cards and tune back in when ready. In a novel, because it is a
novel and we are used to certain conventions there as well, we might expect some kind of suspense, or thematic or symbolic continuity to sustain our interest, especially when it is a thick novel. In other words, we need handles to grab onto if the novel allows us to wander and return. Wendt does set up such techniques in *The Mango's Kiss*: the mystery of the missing sailor son Arona, for example, is kept alive until the end, and there are certainly some moments of lurid action to grab our attention. (The trader Barker reveals a Dickensian tale of child abuse and vengeance in the confession opened after his death.) Wendt also entertains in a virtuoso invention of Mautu’s entire genealogy complete with foundation myths and the proverbs deriving therefrom (203–10).

The old theme of Camusian existentialism as a middle way between ancient spirituality and either modern godlessness or ‘mission’ rectitude is reworked in the friendship between Barker and Mautu. The interest in how we become the stories we are told and tell is also present. Arona and Barker’s son, Tevita, for example, are nicknamed ‘Crusoe’ and ‘Friday’ as a result of Barker’s storytelling and their close friendship, though it is the native Arona who lives out the Crusoe adventure, while *afakasi* Tevita remains in the village to marry Peleiupu (175–77). If there is one central theme besides storytelling, it is perhaps the idea that asserting independent will and breaking with tradition (180, 236) are necessary acts but the actors and their families always pay a price (279) and are only redeemed if their deeds serve to carry the past forward into the future; but the tightness of symbolic continuity found in other work (notably the novella *Pouliuli*, and even the epic *Leaves*) is not here. *Mango’s Kiss* is a ‘good yarn’ with dramatic highlights.

Another recurrent motif, however, is that of the mysterious, often unwanted, talent — a motif which runs through all Wendt’s writing. This theme or motif is centred on the child prodigy Peleiupu (her name means ‘beloved in words’ and she inherits R.L.S.’s library as well as a weighty understanding of human sorrow). She is the favourite daughter of the doubting pastor Mautu and protegée of trader Barker. When she realises she has unusual insights that seem to connect to the pre-Christian spirit culture of Samoa, she seeks out an old healer, who advises her never to deny the gift, since it is what she is, but not to display it to others (82). When she foresees the suicidal end of the atheistic English renegade Barker, she is traumatised into catatonia and, against her mother’s staunchly Christian principles, has to be taken to her aunt, who is the keeper of the cult of her clan’s ‘pagan’ deity and a skilled exorcist/healer. The price for Peleiupu’s healing is paid by her younger sister who is taken to train as the next ‘priestess’ of the *atua* Tuifolau. Unfortunately, Peleiupu’s wisdom and preternatural connection with the spirit world seems to fade away from this point into mere business acumen when she becomes an adult.

This transferral of Peleiupu’s powers from the spiritual to the material world is incorporated into the drama of the book. At first, it occurs as part of her
mother’s price for her return to the aiga — Pele has to teach the village how to cultivate vegetables, and her business sense spills over into developing the Barker family’s trading network when she marries Barker’s son Tevita. Part of the anti-colonial, anti-racist message of the book relies on regular upstaging of white prejudice by smart ‘natives’, and Pele’s force of personality and strategic acumen plays a leading role in dramatising this. However, it does modify our admiration for her and leads to resentments in her community as well as in her husband. At one point a character is mocked as a navigator who has forgotten how to read the stars, and there is a danger that readers will see all the people in the book as having lost their way and thus find no one they can identify with strongly (336).

It is interesting to see what would have been a trenchant condemnation of the commercialisation of culture in *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* accepted here as a clever means of modernising Samoan society, even though we see Pele profiteering from the ravages of the influenza epidemic and becoming a ruthless ‘godfather’ when she avenges her crime syndicate-leading brother — there are clear echoes of the *Black Rainbow* underworld in the last section (332, 415). So long as the stories arising from the mix are entertaining and the effect is to consolidate the family and to maintain links with the traditions of pre-Christian spirit worship, all this seems to be forgiven by the writer as another aspect of the rich and sordid tapestry of modern life.

We readers are woven into this tapestry: we are our stories; stories do not need to be tidy with a clear moral at the end; stories feed on stories and generate more stories; culture is an ongoing story in a never-ending present (299, 380). These ideas are not pushed to the ‘experimental’ metafiction of *Ola* or *Black Rainbow* in *Mango’s Kiss* (although there is reference to several South Seas romancers, mainly Somerset Maugham; and Janet Frame appears as Janet Border, also a writer of romances [385]) so much as reinserted into the ‘traditionally syncretic’ *fagogo* form. This suits the novel in its ‘baggy monster’ mode, but its potential for an endlessly rambling lack of focus can be frustrating. Readers accustomed to Wendt playing with complex philosophical ideas and powerful poetic symbolism may see in this work something of a step backwards; it is certainly a relaxation. There are, however, satisfying complexities, one being the motif of disease. For example Barker ultimately finds belonging in his adoptive community when he catches its unique mysterious fatal illness and the holy outsider Lalaga also submits to the ‘blessing’ of this local disease. Illness as a challenge to orthodox acceptance of God’s benevolent purpose reaches its most intense expression in the recreation of the influenza epidemic that killed off so many Samoans (due in large part to colonial indifference). Here Peleiupu’s talents are put to good use in organising quarantine and sanitation for the village, and there are some biting exchanges between the desperately self-reliant and embittered villagers and the pompous, ineffectual New Zealand officials and their Samoan lackeys, that effectively exploit the protocols of Samoan speech-
making. We see a version of Wendt’s grandfather here in the old chief Sao, who declares in favour of the Mau resistance (302), and his half-caste grandson Tevita assumes something of the identity O.F. Nelson - one of the leading figures in the fight for self-government later on. However, the emotional intensity of this section tends to dissipate, sliding into the sentimental deaths of Mautu and Lalaga and into the voyage by Peleiupu and Tevita to New Zealand to find the long-lost brother Arona. The book overall, though, has definite narrative drive, and as a lively entertainment offering insights into shifts in Samoan attitudes and practices over the last two hundred years, is a perfectly successful ‘big yarn’, sending up its own devices in regular mention of the colonial romances many of us, including Samoans, were raised on.

Finally then, to Wendt’s latest work. In the ongoing process of renewal and return that marks his oeuvre, he has revisited the start of his public writing career at the time he was teaching at Samoa College. There he wrote two plays, staged in 1972 for the Apia School Drama Festival and the first South Pacific Arts Festival, but never published. As he returned in later years to the visual arts, so too, he has turned again to writing for theatre, fulfilling a promise first made in 1970. After years of having a typescript in a drawer, revising it to final draft in 1996, and having a couple of stagings come to nothing for lack of funds, The Songmaker’s Chair appeared as part of the Auckland Festival in 2003. It was performed by the Auckland Theatre Company, with Nathaniel Lees as Director and main actor. The story is of the family of Peseola, living in New Zealand since 1953. The children adapt to their world in different ways: one rises through the Education Department and marries a palagi (white woman); another drops out of school and signs up for the military, marrying a Maori marijuana dealer who is trying to make it in the arts. Peseola rules everyone like a mafia don and his long-suffering wife, Malaga, tries to keep the peace among their offspring. Gradually their stories all come out: the resentments, the rivalries between brothers, the daughter who goes wild to compensate for a secret shame, all of them longing for the approval of the stern patriarch. The action gains intensity as accusations and confessions intertwine and the father reveals he has called them together to pass on his chief’s role.

Social realist content, with some comic repartee interspersed (including some impromptu material, much of it in Samoan), is offset by a gauze drop that shifts the lighting and allows a sense of mystery and ritual, which is enhanced by moments when the family mimes communal meals. Creation chant and hauntings by totemic owl spirits mix with contemporary rap songs. The price of migration, the struggle to keep community and tradition alive in a different society, and the nature of the ‘heart’ that ensures survival are the central themes. The old man’s chair stems from Wendt’s memories of his own father, a matai in Samoa, and is the centre of the play’s action. Mats become changeable objects until the end, when the old man dies and is wrapped in them to be carried off by the mourning
family, an action that gives the play the iconic aura of Greek tragedy. The play is a tribute to the generations of Pacific Islanders who moved to New Zealand and to the people who received them.

The purpose of this article has been to introduce readers to the more recent work of a major if still widely undervalued writer. If there is a focal point of critical analysis, it is to demonstrate how complexly interconnected Wendt’s output has been, and how richly varied. The storytelling goes on in endless mutations of a quest for justice and for meaning in the particular terms of Samoan and Pacific postcolonial existence.

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