

Indigenizing Intertextuality: Literacy and Orality in Albert Wendt's *Pouliuli*

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The intertextuality of Albert Wendt's early novel Pouliuli (1977) reflects the complexity of Samoan modernity, bringing together traditional myths and legends with European and other postcolonial texts. Tracing allusions in Pouliuli further demonstrates the breadth of the novel's intertextual range, and leads to a new understanding of Wendt's negotiation between the strong oral tradition for which Samoa has long been renowned, and the form of literacy introduced by European colonialism. Pouliuli functions as a written narrative that retains characteristics of an indigenous oral mode, staging at a formal level a counter to the novel's otherwise pessimistic depiction of the corruption brought by European colonialism. Identifying Wendt's intertextuality as a development of Samoan storytelling challenges the Eurocentric privileging of the Global North as the seat of literary modernity, and registers the essentially self-determining nature of Pacific literature.

Keywords: Albert Wendt / *Pouliuli* / intertextuality / orality / literacy

Albert Wendt remains the most prominent figure in Pacific literature. Across a career that has spanned nearly half a century, the Samoan author has published twenty-three major works, including books of poetry, novels, short stories, anthologies, a play, and an autobiography. His writing has been published by major international publishers, made into films, and translated into many other languages; he has received prestigious literary prizes, including the New Zealand Award for Literary Achievement, and he has been made member of

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the Order of New Zealand. Wendt has surely had more written about him than any other Pacific writer—well over three hundred reviews, essays, and articles, at last count (Sharrad and Peacock), a relative “embarrassment of scholarly and popular treatment,” as Alice Te Punga Somerville recently put it (486). All the more embarrassing, then, how few critics outside of the region are familiar with Wendt’s work, or even his name.

Pouliuli (1977) is Wendt’s second novel, published after *Sons for the Return Home* (1973) and before *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979), although Wendt started writing the more ambitious *Leaves* long before these other two (Sharrad, *Albert Wendt* 124). It tells the story of Faleasa Osovae, who in his old age finds himself literally sickened by the social structure of the village that he has effectively ruled for much of his life.¹ This crisis provides the novel’s ostensible drama: Faleasa feigns madness, while conspiring with his confidant Lemigao Laaumatua to manipulate village elders, church ministers, family members, and politicians in order to overhaul the institutions that comprise village life. Behind this plot, however, we follow Faleasa in his inward turn, with extended flashbacks presenting to the protagonist the long series of small betrayals and compromises that has led to the corruption he sees around him. This contrapuntal movement between past and present, action and introspection, gives the novel considerable narrative scope.

Still, *Pouliuli* is far more condensed than Wendt’s other early novels (it is often described as a novella), and in many ways more contained. *Sons for the Return Home* is diverse in setting, moving between Samoa, Australia, and New Zealand. *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* is temporally extensive, following some four generations from colonial times to Independence. *Pouliuli*, by contrast, remains in Samoa throughout, for the most part in the small village Malaelua, and directly covers only a few months in the life of the protagonist.

At first glance, the novel also appears more contained in terms of its intertextuality. Unlike *Sons* and *Leaves*, both of which wear at least some of their intertexts on their sleeves, *Pouliuli* contains no explicit reference to any other written text save the Bible. Yet it is filled with literary echoes—from Achebe to Borges to Camus, to say nothing of the Samoan myths and legends that are everywhere to be found in Wendt’s work.² In this article, I begin by identifying a cluster of allusions that open out into *Pouliuli*’s tricky negotiation between two contesting expressive modes: the strong oratorical tradition for which Samoa has long been renowned, and the written mode introduced through European colonialism.

Although he writes in English, Wendt in no way disavows the oppressive history that accompanied the written word, and indeed *Pouliuli* connects a certain kind of colonial literacy with the crisis of modernity for which colonialism is held accountable. Wendt’s allusions to European authors are woven into a narrative that of course remains a written narrative, but that nevertheless retains or transposes some of the characteristics of a more traditionally Samoan oral mode—a narrative that remains unfixed, open, and in an important sense communal. In this respect, Wendt’s novel takes its intertextual impetus not from any of the European writers

that critics have traced in Wendt's work. Rather, its intertextual impulse is drawn from a specifically Samoan form of oral storytelling, which Wendt elsewhere identifies as his formative aesthetic grounding. Ultimately, this article concludes, *Pouliuli* stages at a formal level a constructive counter to the novel's otherwise pessimistic depiction of the corruption brought by European colonialism.

"THE INFINITE POSSIBILITIES OF TRUE MYTHOLOGY": ORALIZING THE WRITTEN TEXT

Alongside Albert Camus, W.B. Yeats is the most obvious European intertextual reference point in Wendt's early work, and both *Sons for the Return Home* and *Pouliuli* contain unmistakable echoes of "The Second Coming." In Wendt's earlier novel, the returning protagonist is unable to adapt to the basically communal Samoan way of life, yet he finds a way to assert an unbroken connection between himself and his ancestors: "the circle had not disintegrated; the centre had held and would continue to hold. The best, like his father, still possessed conviction" (207). In *Pouliuli*, Faleasa holds no such faith. His realization that a colonially introduced consumerist individualism has altered the traditionally communal *faa-Samoa* [Samoan way of life]³ is again presented in Yeatsian terms, but now inverting the earlier optimism of *Sons*: "The centre has held all right but the sickness has invaded that centre and is infecting it cell by cell" (131).

Both passages follow the protagonists through free indirect discourse. Yet aside from their very different assessments of Samoan modernity, these two evocations of Yeats function very differently in their intertextual dynamics. In *Sons for the Return Home*, there is a naturalistic justification for the allusion. The protagonist has moved from Samoa to New Zealand at a young age, and received a university education. He writes poems, and buys a "collection of essays by Camus" (73) as a present for his girlfriend. He may therefore very well be able to quote Yeats's famous poem, and the passage reads easily as an expression of his literary consciousness. Faleasa, by contrast, was born in a Samoan village in 1900, and his education, while literate, was completed well before Yeats was troubled by *Spiritus Mundi*. If, as with *Sons*, the narrative is taken as a straightforward representation of the old man's thoughts, the knowing and ironic redeployment of Yeats's line is mimetically implausible.

Yet *Pouliuli* is anything but a straightforward representation, and the difference between these examples demonstrates an important shift in Wendt's approach. Both of these early novels set up intertextual dialogue, drawing in diverse sources, from European texts to the Bible to Polynesian myth. Yet while in *Sons* the naturalistic illusion remains more or less intact, in *Pouliuli*, Wendt begins to let it go, moving toward a more complex intertextual mode. Here, with the Yeats example, the complication lies in its resistance to any naturalistic justification; the reference itself is all but unmissable. Elsewhere in the novel, things are complicated still further by the suppression of the reference itself, leaving only faint and partially assimilated traces to trouble the realist pretense.

Camus and Yeats may be the more obvious reference points, but there are traces too of James Joyce. As Faleasa sets out on his “exhilarating battle for survival as a free man” (10), he affirms that “silence was another effective weapon he could use” against his grasping *aiga* [extended family] and the leaders of the village of Malaelua (12). Faleasa is no more likely to have read Joyce than he is Yeats, but his resolution echoes Stephen Dedalus’s famous declaration from the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning” (251). Stephen’s “defence,” Faleasa’s “battle for survival”; Stephen’s “arms,” Faleasa’s “weapon”; Stephen’s “life” expressed “freely,” Faleasa’s “free man”—all are brought together in the “silence” assumed by the two protagonists. (As with the Yeats passage, we again see here Wendt’s elaboration of an intertextual reference first made in *Sons*, where another independent Samoan elder has also defied convention with his “silence, solitude, courage” [188]—a still more obvious adaptation of Stephen’s “silence, exile, and cunning.”)

If Faleasa resolves upon a tactical silence, this does not last long. By the end of the first chapter, the rumors that Faleasa has had his friend Laaumatua spread as part of their elaborate manipulation of *aiga* and village have started to take effect: “That week an exciting tale [...] circulated [...]. The tale, like any other, grew in complexity, size, and inventiveness as it spread from imagination to imagination” (18). This emphasis on orality signals another key advance made on *Sons for the Return Home*. Developing the experiments with narrative voice presented in the short stories of *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* (1974), Wendt uses various techniques in *Pouliuli* to “oralize” the written text, and this creates a very different narrative form. Where the free indirect discourse of *Sons* binds the narrative to a limited number of particular subjectivities, reflecting the theme of individualist rebellion that is central to that novel, *Pouliuli* balances the subjective narrative viewpoint with what we might call the voice of the communal storyteller. We hear this voice most distinctly in scenes that describe Malaeluan values:

Malaeluans expected everyone to be generous. [...] Thus, when they learnt that Laaumatua and Mua were saving most of their money—something which only papalagi and selfish Malaeluans did, and thank goodness they were few and far between—they gossiped about it. (80–81)

The interjection—“and thank goodness they were few and far between”—indicates a shared sensibility, the voice of a narrator addressing a small, like-minded community, perhaps even the Malaeluan villagers themselves. This voice can be heard again and again in *Pouliuli*, even when the narrative is ostensibly tracking Faleasa’s thoughts. In the third chapter, when Faleasa meets the council of elders, the narrative follows the defiant consciousness of the protagonist: “Vain, brainless fool! Faleasa thought” (36). Yet the description of a “pig thief” whose infirmities are sent “by God as payment for his life of sin” (27) is surely not Faleasa’s. After all, the previous chapter describes his own youthful disproving

of divine punishment, where he too steals a pig, and then lies about it on the Bible to escape detection. The assumption of a shared moral system is typical of the communal storyteller, and it is this voice that we find interwoven with the thoughts and impressions of the radically dissenting Faleasa.

The voice of the communal storyteller never attains such prominence as to imply the identity of a distinct character, narrating all the other voices in the novel. But there are countless smaller instances in which events are narrated at a remove, essentially adding another narrative layer to the text. We see this narrative remove most clearly in the scenes where either Faleasa or Laaumatua describe to the other how their scheme is progressing: almost every chapter has at least one such scene. But even elsewhere, a seemingly omniscient narration may be interrupted by the intrusive, parenthetical attribution of a particular phrase to a particular character. Sometimes these phrases are presented as explicit quotations, as with the description of Felefele in a “frantic nervous condition” (Faleasa’s description)” (32); elsewhere the phrase is interpolated by the narrator: “every week-end when they went home they had generous gifts from the generous Yanks (Laaumatua’s description)” (56). In either case, the move distances the present narrative situation from the events described, implying that these characters are supposed to have narrated these same events elsewhere, in other narrative situations.

Such small narrative framings do not add up to a unified frame narrative. In fact, it is quite the opposite: they produce something that is multiple, a telling of tales told also elsewhere. Indeed, this multiplicity of narrative is made explicit in the description of the villagers’ trip to the Samoan capital: “The car flashed past like an angry shark (that was how Laaumatua described it to the young people in Malaelua when they got back)” (48); “they experienced the mystery of the electric light. (Brighter than daylight, as Laaumatua later described it)” (52). The narrator here recounts not just a scene, keyed to a particular character’s perspective, but also that character’s later recounting of the scene.

These otherwise distancing acts give to *Pouliuli* a new metafictional dimension, which continually stages the written narrativization of oral accounts. Laaumatua Lemigao is the key figure here, and throughout the novel, much of this narrativization of orality centers on him.⁴ Certainly, Wendt makes clear that we are not meant to see the character as unique in this respect, and that storytelling is a central part of Malaeluan life: “These discoveries became the basis of stories, exaggerated or otherwise, that they, especially Laaumatua, dazzled the young people of Malaelua with on their return, just as those who had visited Apia before them had dazzled them with stories” (52). Laaumatua is the bearer of a storytelling tradition here, not the founder. All the same, it is chiefly through this character that Wendt portrays the powerful, transformative potential of oral narrative—for we do not just see Laaumatua turning his life into stories, we also see him turning his stories into real life.

Introduced at the start of the novel as the circulator of the “tale” that grows in “complexity, size, and inventiveness” (18) as it passes from person to person,

Laaumatua is instrumental in the overhaul of the Malaeluan leadership that forms the plot of *Pouliuli*. Chapter 6 frames his machinations as another telling within the tale, with Laaumatua relaying to Faleasa the undoing of his political rival Sau. By chapter 9, their plan is coming to fruition:

[W]hen the rumour about Sau and a certain young girl, one of his own nieces, detached itself from the general rotting bread-fruit stench [...], it quickly took on highly enriched odours and deviously monstrous (but captivating) shapes, which in turn divided and multiplied in the contented but by then blazing imaginations of the Malaeluans until they reached the infinite possibilities of true mythology. (87)

From rumor to myth, this oral mode is multiple and collective, and Laaumatua's narrative mastery lies not in the assertion of a single authoritative voice, but in the initiation of an open process that is enacted communally. The "rotting bread-fruit" is more than local color here. We are told that it is in the "abundant bread-fruit season" that "the rumours and stories were more imaginative, more vividly elaborate, more downright devastating than usual because there was more time to weave them in." Associated with seasonal productivity, storytelling is thus presented as an organic process—a connection that Laaumatua himself makes explicit when he remarks that "more children and stories and songs were conceived during the bread-fruit season than at any other time" (87). Children and stories and songs: the parataxis presents oral narrative as a natural part of village life, as basic as reproduction.

Again, Laaumatua is not unique in his ability to produce stories; Faleasa's own daughters are described at the start of the novel as "prodigious breeders, gossips, and relentless schemers" (6). The oral principle is nevertheless focalized upon this figure, who serves not only in his naturalistic role as the "real" friend of Faleasa, but also in a metafictional or mythical role, as the embodiment of the "infinite possibilities of true mythology." His mother's name is Talanoa (*talanoa* in Samoan signifies "chat," "talk," "storytelling"), and Laaumatua and his family are the only characters to be overtly mythologized within the fictional world of the Malaeluans, with the narrative frame abruptly broken to describe a much later recounting of the tale: "Years later, an old man describing the relationship between Laaumatua, Mua, and Mose claimed that Mua was the abundance and strength of the earth itself, the material out of which true myth was spun" (82). Born to Talanoa, subject of *talanoa*, it is Laaumatua who most masterfully turns gossip into rumor, rumor into story, story into reality, reality into myth.

"STORE, DESCRIBE, IMPRISON, EXORCISE": THE FAILURE OF THE WORD

The name of Faleasa's village, Malaelua, literally means "two village greens," but given the social significance of the *malae* as the site of oratorical performance, the name also suggests some kind of verbal contest between competing oratorical spaces. The name is fitting, for in *Pouliuli*, the open, transformative potential of

oral narrative continually clashes against the fixed authoritarianism of the written word. Early on in the novel, the boys are summoned for *tautoga* [a public oath], to swear on the Bible that they have not stolen and eaten a pig. The young Faleasa is terrified: taught to submit to the “Holy Book,” the trial reduces him to fever and despair. Laaumatua, on the other hand, remains unfazed—“‘Just leave it to me,’ Laaumatua said. ‘I’ll get us out of it’” (25)—and is exhilarated to find that his spoken lies can resist the authority of the symbolic written text: “‘See, I told you!’ he said. [...] He hopped a few paces forward on his good foot and then did a cartwheel” (27).

Elsewhere, the contest between orality and the written word is less decisive, as in the story of Laaumatua’s adopted son, Mose. Laaumatua has instructed Mose in the Samoan oral tradition, “in oratory and the genealogies and in the history of Malaelua” (82). However, determined also to allow Mose a modern, colonial education, Laaumatua sends the boy to school, where he masters “reading, writing, and arithmetic” (82), before he is sent away to board as the first Malaeluan student accepted at Samoa College. At the end of the second year, a letter arrives for Laaumatua, who sets off immediately for the hospital in Apia to find Mose languishing in some kind of coma. The white doctor tells Laaumatua that “the night before Mose collapsed he had written an essay about his aiga and his village,” and in an unlikely diagnosis suggests that “[p]erhaps a clue to his illness lay in that essay” (85). Laaumatua goes to the school, and though he does not find the essay, he comes across a page of an unsent letter from Mose, which he reads over and over and then destroys. Two nights later, Mose dies.

That this is in some way a contest between orality and literacy is evident not only from the competing modes in which Mose is instructed, but from the excess of written forms that beset the oral storyteller Laaumatua: the mere sight of the schoolboy delivering the letter provokes “an almost overwhelming fear” (82). In her 1985 overview of Samoan literature, Peggy Dunlop suggests that many Samoans still see literacy more as a question of “getting it right” than a means of expression, an attitude she says is influenced by “the strong oral tradition,” by the sense that “literacy was the art of the *palagi* [European],” and by the fact that “the early literature Samoans saw was mainly functional in purpose, full of authority and sacredness” (42). It would be too much to claim that Samoa’s first published novelist is recommending illiteracy, but the gist of the Mose parable is clear: the absolute overwriting of the indigenous oral mode with a certain form of colonial literacy is fatal to Samoan identity.

In an interview given to Marjorie Crocombe around the time he was working on *Pouliuli*, Wendt attributed his own early artistic sensibility to his instruction in “oral literature—stories, poems, chants, legends and myths of our own people” (45). At the same time, he spoke scathingly on the effects of the colonial education system in Samoa, describing it as a “process [...] of castration” (46) that imposes modes “largely unrelated and contrary to our needs and ways of life,” which thus distance students from traditional Samoan expressive forms, “[m]usic, dance, oratory, poetry and crafts” (47). (In his recent autobiography, *Out of the*

Vaipe, Wendt identifies this process in his own colonial education, pointing out that in his school “little was taught of our indigenous ways of life. The culture of the colonizer was substituted for ours” [2].) Although Wendt obviously holds the colonizer responsible for “educating” young people “away from their own cultures,” he does not leave it there, asserting that “[i]n our islands, we have betrayed and are betrayed because we have been successfully colonized as individuals—betrayed the visions of independence” (“Samoa’s Albert Wendt” 46). This sense of collective betrayal is central to *Pouliuli*, and the novel ends with Laaumatu’a’s reflection that he “betrayed” Mose by “trying to turn him into someone he did not want to be” (145).

The sentiment is expressed more strikingly still in the centerpiece of the novel, Faleasa’s epiphanic recollection of the old man who had visited Malaelua during Faleasa’s adolescence. The old man is discovered on the steps of the church in Malaelua, reaching toward the sun and “screaming in terrifying soundless pain” (98). He is taken in by the village, and becomes close to Faleasa, open and affectionate toward the boy in a way that Faleasa’s domineering father is not. (Twice Faleasa obliquely wishes his father dead, in place of the old man [103, 108].) Despite his peculiar nocturnal activities, laying strange pebble circles at symbolic sites in the village and thus provoking—of course—rumors and stories among the villagers, the old man is ultimately welcomed “as a blessing from God” (102). Soon after, he disappears, leaving a distraught Faleasa stripped of his “caul of innocence” (110).

All of this is told through free indirect discourse, but in the final two pages of the chapter, the narrative shifts jarringly into the second-person, returning Faleasa to the present, and revealing the buried cause of the breakdown that provides the novel’s main drama: “You swim up out of the painful depths of memory to feel again the agonising prison of your ancient carcass around you like Lazarus’s foul bandages. You betrayed the old man” (112). It emerges that Faleasa had one night followed the guest, and, in a self-willed overcoming of his attachment, broken the old man’s symbolic circle by throwing the center pebble, “the heart, into the darkness” (113). Faleasa leaves him once again transfixed, “arms and fingers outstretched to the moon’s blade, his head thrown back, his mouth uttering that soundless scream, unable to bear the world’s pain any longer” (113). In the morning, the old man has gone.

This story within the story performs multiple significatory functions. At a naturalistic level, it offers some explanation for Faleasa’s present crisis, his sense of guilt at having “betrayed” this alternative father-figure. The recounting of this returning memory in the present tense, with all the immediacy of the second-person narration, effectively stages Faleasa’s major epiphany: “Vanity, all is vanity’ you hear the old man reciting from the Bible. Your bid for freedom in these last years of your life is vanity too” (113). At a mythological level, the old man’s story is part of this chapter’s complex interweaving of mythic and legendary parallels for Faleasa’s situation, presented alongside the Pili and Pouliuli myth, which gives the novel’s title, and explicitly presents “truths” about

Faleasa's "present reality" and "the darkness that was the future" (94).⁵ Finally, in keeping with the sense of collective betrayal expressed in Wendt's interview with Crocombe, Faleasa's rejection of the old man's "love"—"a love which your father denied you and which all your married life you have denied your wife and children" (113)—stands as a political allegory for the betrayal of the *faa-Samoa*, the breaking from traditional principles of *alofa* [love] and communality in the pursuit of a new, consumerist individualism. The narrative switch, then, is not merely a stylistic flourish; it points out toward "you" the reader, Samoan or European, asserting a shared responsibility for the crisis of Samoan modernity.

Wendt's masterstroke is to translate the social terms of this crisis—communal vs. individualist—into their respective expressive modes, for he uses the story of the old man to work through more fully the contest between orality and literacy introduced in chapter 8. In the only extended exchange that we see between the two characters, the old man asks Faleasa to read from the Bible. Although he tells the boy that he is "illiterate, completely without education," he proceeds to correct the boy's errors, reciting the verses aloud (103). Lamenting his own illiteracy, the old man assures Faleasa that the written word can overcome the trauma of the past: "literate people were lucky because they could store, describe, imprison, exorcise, and identify their memories in written form" (104). These are metaphors of control, and there is pathos in the way that the old man identifies agency with the very means that have been used to control him in the colonial situation; we later learn that he was "the first Samoan sent abroad to be trained for the ministry" (110). The old man's conception of the written word as the expression of something fixed and fixing is evidently colonial, arising from the Christian conception of the Bible as the Word of God, and—to follow the imperial maneuver—the use of the written word as the mechanism of colonial rule, in deeds of cession, colonial law, property ownership, standardized education, and so on. His approving comments reflect the internalization of an imperial account that sought to replace the "infinite possibilities" of the communal oral mode with a single version of history, teleologically justified as the Christian enlightenment of pagan darkness. As the old man expresses it, in a distinctly colonial idiom, the Europeans "saved" the Samoans, turning them "from the irrational madness of their vain and violent blood to the humane light of the world" (104–5). Formulated in this way, the pre-Christian Samoan worldview is effectively overwritten, now inexpressible except through the authorized terms of Church and Empire—a fixed vocabulary of darkness, evil, and a backward past, the "black abyss into which one was too afraid to fall" (108).

Yet the old man's anguish belies his reassurances, and according to the story of his early life that is passed around Malaelua, it is the failure of just this colonial education that has caused his "madness." Far from illiterate, he was apparently once, like Mose, a prodigious student. Brought up by adoptive English missionary parents and instructed in Samoan, English, and German, he was sent abroad as a young man to study theology. Returning after years of religious service, he suffered some kind of breakdown, marching around in a German military uniform

before accusing the Church “and his dead parents of having stolen his soul and replaced it with the crippled soul of a papalagi [European]” (111). From here he set off wandering from village to village, “trying,” as he would tell his hosts, “to find his true soul” (112).

With this background in mind, it is no wonder that the old man is unable to maintain his faith in the “magic of the written word.” This contradiction gives meaning to his otherwise oblique prophecy to Faleasa: “But how much longer will the word be able to contain, describe, and exorcise the horror being born out of the world’s collective memory? How much time is left before the light is sucked up by the bleeding ground and the air without the word drives us into silence?” (105). The old man’s distraught question suggests an ideological slippage, his partial awareness that the teleological assurance of progress and civilization—introduced by the colonizer, and retained after Independence through the narrative of Christian redemption—is at odds with the experience of Samoan modernity.⁶

Faleasa explicitly claims “silence” as his “weapon” (10) at the start of the novel, to be used against the social institutions of Samoan modernity. His epiphanic recollection of the old man in chapter 10 exposes the inadequacy of this technique: “Where then is the escape, the meaning to your life? In madness or silence like the old man?” (113–14). Crucially, Faleasa expands the old man’s cryptic comments into a full historical vision:

You suddenly remember 1914, the year the First World War erupted, and you understand for the first time the old man’s prophetic question: How much longer will the word be able to contain, describe, and exorcise the horror being born out of the world’s collective memory? And then you remember the Second World War and you understand his final question also: “How much time is left before the light is sucked up by the bleeding ground and the air without the word drives us into silence.” (113)

We have moved here from silence as an individual act of volition, to silence as a symbol for the social effects of European colonization, to silence as the aftermath of global war. Following the militarization of the Pacific during the Second World War, the United States brought horror to the region, detonating scores of atomic and hydrogen bombs in and around the Micronesian Bikini atoll between 1946 and 1958 (Weissgall 3). Britain followed, as did France, conducting its own nuclear testing in Moruroa between 1966 and 1996; within days of the first test, radioactive fallout was detected in Samoa (Pistol 23; see also Maclellan and Chesneau). The old man’s apocalyptic vision of the “light [. . .] sucked up by the bleeding ground and the air without the word” surely registers these atrocities, and Faleasa, who himself worked at the American airbase in Faleolo (55), recognizes in his second-person epiphany that the horrors of modernity are not a distant threat, but a local reality: “During all your comfortable life, isolated in your tiny islands, in your safe village, in your cocoon of power, you have never really experienced the depths of terror or understand the bestiality that was born (and is still being born)” (113).⁷

The failure of the “the word”—its inability to “contain” or account for the “horror being born”—is symbolized by the old man’s anguished silence, which inverts Faleasa’s active defiance in the novel’s opening chapters. The old man is first found gazing into the “fierce light” (with all of the colonial connotations that phrase carries), “screaming in terrifying soundless pain” (98). When he tries to voice colonial reassurances about the salvation of literacy and “the word,” he is left “[w]eeping soundlessly” (105). And after his “betrayal” by Faleasa, he reverts again to silence, “his head thrown back, his mouth uttering that soundless scream, unable to bear the world’s pain any longer” (113). The story of Mose suggests that a certain kind of colonial literacy spells death to Samoan identity. The story of the old man clarifies the symbolism, connecting the two modes of expression—oral and written—to their respective social modes. A traditional, communal and open-ended orality, which gave expression and therefore meaning to pre-colonial Samoan culture, is silenced by the imposition of a fixed written mode that encodes colonial authority.⁸ And while the story of Mose remains a basically standalone vignette, the story of the old man unlocks the social dimensions of Faleasa’s ostensibly self-centered drama: so, in the novel’s circular conclusion, Faleasa too is left broken and bereaved on the steps of the church, “his arms outstretched to the dazzling sky, his mouth fixed in soundless scream” (144).

Betrayal, corruption and madness: these are the keynotes of *Pouliuli*. Yet if Faleasa’s bid for freedom is shown to be misguided in aim, and unsuccessful in effect, and if the social and psychological effects of colonialism are shown to be already too pervasive for the characters of the novel to elude, these pessimisms of plot and character are offset by the creative potentials of form and style. With Mose, the old man, and Faleasa, it seems as though the Samoan worldview has been fatally disfigured by the colonial imposition: these characters are consigned to madness, silence, and death. Yet as we have seen, elements of an earlier oral mode—communal, open-ended, contestable—are inscribed at a narrative level, and thus proposed as a more appropriate expression of the contemporary Samoan experience. And while there is of course some irony in the fact that this alternative is presented textually, it is just this complication that constitutes the political complexity of Wendt’s early fiction. He recognizes that there is no going back, that there can be no absolute rejection of Samoan modernity, and that it is the responsibility of the artist to help translate and retain the central principles of a Samoan tradition in the very constitution of this modernity.

“THE CREATION OF NEW CULTURES”: WRITING SAMOAN MODERNITY

It is in this broad political context that we may now return to the intertextuality of *Pouliuli*. The old man is supposed to have come to Malaelua in 1914, “the year the First World War erupted” (113), but his “prophecy” clearly recalls another prophetic text, though this was not written until after the war. His vision of the

"bestiality that was *born* [...] out of the brutal *nightmare* swamp" echoes, of course, Yeats's "The Second Coming":

[T]wenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to *nightmare* by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough *beast*, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be *born*? (21–2; emphases added)

Yet Wendt also interweaves the Yeatsian lines with other intertextual threads. The old man's description of the past as a "brutal nightmare swamp" recalls not only Yeats's famous poem, but also Stephen Dedalus's famous aphorism in *Ulysses*: "History [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (2.377). Although it is *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* that is often treated as Wendt's major historical novel, his use of an elderly protagonist in *Pouliuli* allows him to cover much of the same historical range: born in 1900, Faleasa functions at a certain level as an allegorical figure, with key moments of his life corresponding to key moments in Samoan and world history.⁹ With its complex historical vision, *Pouliuli* reflects upon the ways in which a monolithic written mode, imposed largely through an imperial education system, conditions the colonial worldview, and thus contains the transformative potentials of alternative ways of knowing.

Wendt was greatly preoccupied with these ideas at the time he was writing *Pouliuli*. In a paper he gave on the colonial education system, Wendt echoed Stephen Dedalus in his description of the past as a "colonial nightmare" ("A Sermon" 376). Himself a trained historian, Wendt elsewhere rejected the "nonsense" written in historical accounts of the Pacific Islands, asserting that the "real 'histories' of our region have yet to be written. We must write them" ("Samoa's Albert Wendt" 45). Crucially, he suggests that these histories must not be limited to the positivist mode, which so easily conceals an imperial bias, and encodes teleological assumptions of progress and modernization: if these corrective histories are to take the form of "poetry or drama or novels," he writes, "all to the good" (46).¹⁰

If *Pouliuli* sets out in part to defend an oral principle, it may seem paradoxical that Wendt would enlist supremely literary writers such as Yeats and Joyce to his cause. Of course, this apparent contradiction only mirrors Wendt's more general problem of defending an oral mode through a written text—a problem that is itself still more generally part of the broader dilemma, whereby the postcolonial writer is left to challenge the misprisions and misrepresentations of the colonizer through the very media the colonizer introduced. From this point of view, Wendt's depiction of the old man, with his misguided faith in colonial literacy as the means of his deliverance, may appear as a distorted picture of the author himself, and in fact Wendt was around this time describing his own writing in similarly fraught terms, lamenting its waning power "to control—if not exorcise—the *aitu* [evil spirits] that haunt me" ("In a Stone Castle" 29).

Yet from another point of view, Wendt's intertextual engagements may be seen as a kind of oralizing of the written form, injecting into the written text

some of the elements associated with the oral mode that he sets out to depict. As Bakhtin implied, and Kristeva asserted, intertextuality can serve to destabilize the fixity, the illusory self-enclosure of the written text, and to call in a polyphonic range of voices. In contemporary addresses and essays, culminating in his now-classic manifesto, "Towards a New Oceania" (1976), Wendt was asserting that this polyphony—the "dissent" that is "essential to the healthy survival, development and sanity of any nation"—were already part of "our pre-papalagi cultures" (52). These comments help us to understand the intertextuality of Wendt's early work, particularly that subtle, equivocal intertextuality at work in *Pouliuli*. Against the authoritarianism of the Christian and colonial Word, *Pouliuli* presents a narrative principle that is decentralized, multiple, open, contestable, and therefore fundamentally communal.

Worded in this way, the novel sounds typically postmodern, which is how Wendt's work is very often read. However, such a positioning—particularly when predicated on apparent lines of European influence—risks giving priority to the writers, modes and forms of the Global North, and thereby implying that even Wendt's postcolonial drive is a colonial gift. This would be a particularly grave error in the context of Pacific literary studies, where, as Steven Winduo has observed, "outsider" critics continue to commit "epistemic violence on the Pacific people" through the unreflective assertion of their own critical norms and values over Pacific texts (601)—compounded, as Vilsoni Hereniko and Sig Schwarz point out, through a failure to attend to the "social, cultural, and political contexts of the work under discussion" (56). It is therefore crucial to point out that Wendt himself attributes his inheritance of these sensibilities not to Yeats or Joyce, nor to Bakhtin, but to the indigenous Samoan storytelling forms he experienced even before learning to read and write.

In the Crocombe interview, Wendt explained that his early fascination with oral literature originated with his experience of his grandmother's *fagogo* [folktale, myth, legend]. Interweaving traditional Samoan tales with stories from the Bible, Aesop, and the brothers Grimm, this is a truly intertextual form, which draws heterogeneous sources into new stories that Wendt describes as "better than the originals" (45).¹¹ The *fagogo* is also an interactive form, calling for regular responses from the audience. It is not such a stretch to think of Wendt's intertextuality in a similar way, setting up regular cues that call for the reader's participation in identifying and working through these allusions. Dunlop too emphasizes the ongoing significance of the *fagogo* form to modern Samoan literature, which she goes so far as to describe as "the search for a written *fagogo*" (42). Tracing indigenous traditions in contemporary Pacific texts can best be—can perhaps only be—conducted by indigenous scholars; the outsider is all too likely to overgeneralize, misidentify, project, and essentialize. Still, there is no reason to doubt the author's own explanation for his aesthetic, or the confirmation given by his early Samoan commentator, and in concluding it is important to follow through on this important shift of focus. Moving the starting point away from Yeats and Joyce, away from the novel as a European form, and away from a postmodern lens that

increasingly appears to have been unduly extrapolated from a specific cultural moment, Wendt's intertextuality emerges as a distinctly Samoan technique.

The phrase "infinite possibilities of true mythology" opens out beyond its specific context in *Pouliuli* to describe a newly forged narrative mode, which draws on traditional Samoan forms in order to write Samoan modernity. In the introduction to *Nuanua*, Wendt points out that "we have indigenised much that was colonial or foreign to suit ourselves, creating new blends and forms. We have even indigenised Western art forms, including the novel" (3). This art of adaptation involves negotiating the claims of the old and the new, as Wendt asserts in the often-quoted passage from "Towards a New Oceania": it is the role of regional writers and artists to forge a modernity that is "built on the traditions of the past" while "rejecting the poison of colonialism" (53). Yet he makes clear that this is not a straightforward "revival of our past cultures" but "the creation of new cultures": the changes brought by colonialism, literacy included, are not to be thought away, for they are inextricably part of Samoan modernity. For all its apparent pessimism, *Pouliuli* suggests ways in which the more "poisonous" aspects—the fixing of meaning, the silencing of dissent—can be worked away in the telling of new stories, adapting from a precolonial heritage aspects of an indigenous oral principle. And as we have seen, part of this adaptation may be what we call intertextuality, the invocation of all manner of voices, from all manner of sources, to unsettle and open the otherwise closed written text.

Notes

1. "Osovae" is the given name, "Faleasa" the family name, treated as a title upon accession to head of the family. Wendt uses the two names distinctly, to distinguish flashbacks to the protagonist's early life from descriptions of events in the present. For simplicity's sake, I refer to the character throughout this article as "Faleasa."
2. For incidental commentary on *Pouliuli*'s intertextuality, see Sharrad, *Albert Wendt* 105–22. On Wendt's early interest in Camus, see Wendt, "Discovering *The Outsider*"; for more detailed investigations of the connections between the two authors, see Auva'a, Ellerman, and Keown. For an early account of Wendt's adaptation of myth, see Subramani, especially 117–50.
3. All Samoan definitions are taken from Milner. In line with Wendt's contemporary usage, macrons and glottal stops have been omitted.
4. As with Faleasa, Wendt alternates between the given name "Lemigao" and the family title "Laaumatua" to distinguish between this character's early and later life. Again, I use only the latter in this article, although this is technically inaccurate for descriptions of Lemigao's younger days.
5. On Wendt's interweaving of myth, legend and fable, see Subramani.
6. Chadwick observes that the old man "allegorizes the psychic and cultural contradictions that literacy—and the freight of Western values and practices that accompany it in this context—poses for this oral culture" (157).
7. On nuclear colonialism in the Pacific, see Teaiwa, "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans" and "Globalizing and Gendered Forces." On French nuclear colonialism in particular, see also Maclellan and Chesneaux. For a brief discussion of Wendt's writing in this context, see Huggan and Tiffin 57–8.

8. On the openness of particular Pacific oral storytelling forms as distinct from the fixity of the written text, see Hereniko; also Manoa, "From Orality to Literacy" and "From Story to Text." For a brief discussion of the potentials and pitfalls of oral knowledge in Wendt's literature, see Sharrad, "Albert Wendt and the Problem of History" 111–12.
9. Isernhagen describes *Pouliuli* as "the condensation of all history into one old man's life" (43).
10. On Wendt's challenge to colonial historicism, see Sharrad, "Albert Wendt and the Problem of History." On the potential of an orally driven "cultural memory" as distinct from the European concept of history, see Poumau.
11. See also Ioane for a brief description of the *fagogo* "mixing the old and the new" (66).

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