

Woven Flesh

Albert L Refiti

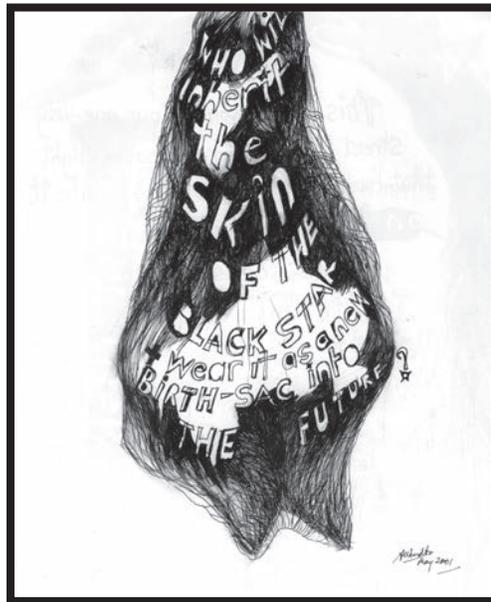


Figure 1: Albert Wendt, Who will wear the skin of the Black Star? 2001, ink on paper

Openings

A very fine line is woven between the human and the animal (Agamben, 2004), an impossibly thin separation and boundary whose appearance remains concealed to the animal and whose truth-in-total remains dead to man. The animal is blind to the true nature of world and captivated by it; man is world-forming, but hard of hearing to the world that opens towards him. Sight opens the surface of the world to us but will not penetrate the soul—to apprehend ourselves in our totality is to hear it spoken in the open.

This paper then pleads to the quality that allows man to hear the truth-in-total-that-remains-dead-to-man. In paraphrasing Heidegger, to listen to the poetic call and allow the animal a lodging in our being—and in letting the animal be—we are opened twice: to unfold space for the animal is to be folded or opened sideways in a divided symmetry of hospitality and time.

Woven Flesh, the title of this paper, is borrowed from a short passage in the Samoan poet Albert Wendt's poem "Inside Us The Dead" (Wendt, 1976):

Inside me the dead
woven into my flesh like the music
of bone flutes¹

When Albert Wendt speaks of "inside me the dead"—of the dead or unconscious woven through us, within our bodies—two things are brought together to the surface: the life-less interior and the living exterior. The po-

1. The first section of the poem is located at the end of this paper.

etic image suggests that the body is fleshed, stuffed, woven and filled out with the life-less. The poem says that this thing, “the dead” inside us, is like “sweet-honeyed tamarind pods” ready to “burst in tomorrow’s sun”, or like “plankton fossils in coral alive at full moon”. It is at the point of bursting, in readiness pulsing, pulsing ... to overcome. The poet’s voice is directed inward—becomes an inward bodily gaze of absolute flesh, full and alive with depth, abominable depth. This calling-in-the-deep is directed to both sides of the body, to the unconscious side and the conscious side. By the quality of poetic calling, the opening of the world through words will implode to reveal a depth that rests inside us. The sense of this unconscious world is made by the word, captured and taken by the language of the world. It is a language familiar to us, made to look and reflect on our present. But between the word and the image, the poet’s voice begins to crack and suspend our reality, for a moment, as it calls and mourns the present of our immediate reality while, at the same time, directing itself inwards to the gap-between-man, a vortex in the soul.

In *The Book of the Black Star* (Wendt, 2002), Wendt adds to this turn and intimates that this inward gaze is “a fathomless pool of black light that had witnessed our beginnings in Tagaloa-a-lagi’s amazing eyes”.² Wendt seems to suggest that The Black Star, or *Fetu uliuli*, is an ancestral impulse that clots the veins from the inside like a swollen vessel—a ‘spaceship’—that pushes from the gap-between-man. On the surface, The Black Star hovers in the darkness.³ The poet says that The Black Star was born from its birth-sac before the first dawn, in an offering of pain and wonder to the universe: “born before Tangaloa-a-lagi invented the Alphabet of Omens”.⁴

In his attempt to draw this poetics out, Wendt literally draws by tucking and pulling with lines that scribble, weave and tie up words. In trying to write with lines and vectors, he draws like a partially blinded man. Words are world-forming in their geometrical certainty, whereas lines only describe an intention located elsewhere. The poet’s blindness lies between lines and words and, in his uncertainty of sight, he relegates the words to Braille-like marks on the page, embossed in the darkness between lines and vectors.

This unsighted quest proposes two visions for The Black Star: firstly, as a continuous outward force that moves and cuts across space—across the page and across the soul; and secondly, as inward migrating lines that interweave to make the birth-sac, which returns life to its origin in threads that inwardly entangle the soul. The Black Star’s dual movements, outward and inward, are two moments in an oscillation between capture/release, between cradling/escaping, and residing/roaming. These qualities mark the differences between the two poets whose works I am theorizing here: one resides and calls to the depth of man, the other is a nomadic prophet who butchers the surface of man. Albert Wendt is of the first kind, and John Pule of the other.

Surfacing, Wendt cradles and secures the gene-archaeological matter.⁵ He draws for us the inward movements that weave us to the abominable depth of textile-like surfaces—made from bounded and tangled threads, in scribbles of soft lines woven within and without, which confuse orientation in space. His materiality of animate space is absolute flesh, at the point of bursting.

2. See Figure 2 (Wendt, 2002).

3. “Last night before dawn while the cold foraged thru’ our backyard, the Black Star hovered above Ponsonby right over our house. Yeah, it was like Close Encounters of the Third Kind and I opened my window to it, Sam said. Yeah, and opened my pores to its converting light and deep scent of space-travel, oceans without end, and God. But you don’t believe in God, I said. Now I do, he smiled.” See Figure 8 in Wendt (2002).

4. See Figure 1 (Wendt, 2002). Tangaloa-a-lagi is widely accepted as being the first God of Samoa and Polynesia.

5. In Polynesia and the Pacific, genealogical ties with family/village/community/ancestors are the foundation of the individual; thus, a person is made from gene-archaeological matter. This involves the understanding that you—your body and being—represent a line of ancestors/land/community/family, which are part of you. Your body and your make-up belongs to the ancestors, to your *fanua* (the place of birth), and to the community that shaped and cared for you. Consequently your ‘being there’ allows these ancient bodies to be present, too. This gives meaning to *va* relationships—*va* spaces, that which is in-between us that is more than you and me, what in you that is more than you. See Wendt (1999: 399-412).

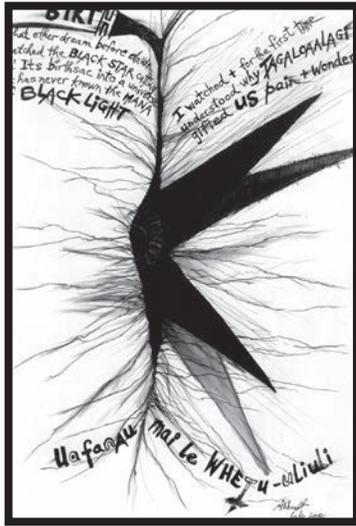


Figure 2: Albert Wendt, Ua fanau mai le Fetu Uliuli. 2001, ink on paper

Wendt intimates that Tagaloa-a-lagi's *will* is woven within this very depth *between-man*. Man's beginning follows an impulse that forces the Black Star across the surface of being, in a movement outwards to the world. Tagaloa-a-lagi is the original point of reference: the word *loa* (Pratt, 1984) in the name means 'longing' or 'to be long since'. It also refers to a family tomb built over with stones, and means 'of time and measure' when use in the plural *loaloo*. Depth of time is accumulated in and on the body, which is often dismissed when life passes. Wendt suggests that dying is not the passing of life, nor the nullity of being, but the accumulation of layers fortifying the ancient body within. Death is an inward-turning thread, weaving another layer in the abominable depth between-man which closes further the surface of the world, like a healing that leaves a scar. Therefore, the place of the dead—the tomb—is not the end of man but merely one point in the continual re-housing of man's ancestors; in the accumulation of stones upon stones, of layers upon layers.

Another way to think of this house of the ancestors is as a textile-like dwelling, a *taga* (or sac), a woven textile vessel. The poet's drawing of the intertwining lines describing the blood-clot-like birth-sac of The Black Star is an example. *Taga* (Pratt, 1984) refers to the idea of continuity, as in the expression *tagafa*, which means 'to have numerous offspring from many wives', or widely spread family connections. The ancestral sac that weaves life outwards creates people: *taga + ta*, which is the Polynesian word for people. It literally means 'a sac made in time'; *ta* is to strike time and to make time, thus *tagata* has the literal meaning of 'woven time'.

We've arrived at the surface of things, on the wave of time. According to the poet's logic, the human is woven in time and from the threads/lines of the ancestors, which reach deep into the abyss of time. The impulses are gigantic layers of presence, a gene-archaeological matter, a force that swells from the inside and through us. There is something in us that is more than you and I. My body/this body/our body is a fortuitous thing, a timely re-organization of the gene-archaeological matter. This way of thinking bears close affinity with Friedrich Nietzsche's thought; Nietzsche held that the question of man is, in the long run, irrelevant since *man* is to be overcome (see Klossowski, 2000: 34). In this overcoming we may present ourselves to the world with an understanding of truth-in-total: that our bodies, our beings, are woven flesh whose strands are ancestors, land, community, family. Because we are woven from the flesh of the others, our body belongs to the ancestors; we are a locus of an ancestral impulsive being.

Calling

woven into my flesh like the music
of bone flutes

Implicit in this silent world of the dead is a critical reflection of our present—the now. Wendt's call suggests that the music of bone flutes is not a fanciful one, but rather mournful, gathering, remaining. Bone flutes make an eerie sound not quite of this world—there is always a reverberating echo that draws away from the present. A guttural sound, it will not resonate with our immediate surrounding because, as the poet suggests, our world is a vacant one, a bony hollow shell. The ancestral is but an eerie sound, an echo bouncing between the recesses of our hollowness, and the music of bone flutes mourns us in our forgetfulness. In the music's lamenting tenor we are drawn inward, reminded that we are dead to this unconscious world of the ancestors. We are not conscious that we are a passage of the dead, destined to make a way for them.

By making us listen to the music of bone flutes, the poet's critical voice reminds us of our forgetfulness. We forget mortality and the fate of our bodies and we are oblivious, many times over, of the dead that we are. In our contemporary lives this interior world is muted and we are deaf to its call. We do not apprehend ourselves in our totality and refuse to hear the call that is spoken in the open.

A radical proposal would be that our body is *pulotu*. In Polynesia, *pulotu* is both an abyssal corridor and the abode of the dead (Pratt, 1984). As *pulotu*, we become the living-dead that straddles/houses/bridges the two sides of the truth-in-total—the inside/outside, unconscious/conscious. We stand between two sides, our selves but porous boundaries made in the present. We allow things to form through our being as thresholds, which house the dead on one side and the living on the other. As the birth of the The Black Star suggests, the dead has been a resident in our bodies since the beginning.

In Polynesian mythology, *pulotu* is always located to the west, towards the setting sun. *Pulotu* is a temporal space that relies on the setting sun for certainty of place—it follows the setting sun, always; its temporal dimension is that of the day's shadow and of the end of the day. As *Pulotuans*, we are creatures of the shadow resonating in the present. The word *pu* means a crevice or a crack in the ground, and is also the word to describe the deep hollow sound made by the conch shell; *lotu* is the word for religion and prayer. If we are the location of *pulotu*, this threshold between past and present, then we are also the prayer-wish made in the deep hollow by the ancestors, an echo shaped in the recesses of our hollowness. Therefore, we are opened up to the present by an ancestor's call "like the music of bone flutes".

Lemi Ponifasio has suggested that the fate of the body is bound by a particular constitution: *Mau a le Tino* (Mau Dance Theatre, 2000). *Mau* is the sense of holding or clasp something between.⁶ In context of the motto *Mau a le tino*, there is also a reading which suggests the 'holding of the self in-between'. *Tino* (Pratt, 1984) is the word for flesh, or the body, which bonds the self to the surface of the world. This 'holding of the self in-between' refers to the space-between of the *va*: the temporal space that opens up the world and tends to the relational activities of Polyne-

sian culture (Refiti, 2002: 209).⁷ If, as the locus of *pulotu*, we are a threshold for the dead, then our body is the ultimate *va*—a porous boundary between the ancestor and the world. Our bodies, both as *va* (space-between) and *pulotu* (abode of the dead), allow the past and future to arrive in the present.

Residing

A very different quality is heard in the poetic call of the Niuean artist/poet John Pule. If one hears the gentle rolling surface of the ocean in Albert Wendt's voice, then Pule speaks with a cyclonic voice that wants to force the world. Wendt's call is to the depth residing in man, a depth that remains captivated by the woven flesh-upon-flesh, which binds man to the gene-archaeological matter. With Pule, the poetic call arrives in a dazzle of multiple realities that strike the surface of man—breaking up his habitual cloak and making him scream. A passage from *The shark that ate the sun* bears witness to this:

The Black god tore my chest open like lovers do, and the first thing he grabbed hold of was the state house he tore from the earth, and blew the windows out, opened the door and sucked out the sad mothers of Polynesia, the sad men, the sad children. (Pule, 1992: 9)

In these multiple attacks on the body, Pule attempts to pierce the flesh and unfurl the abominable monsters in man's depth to collide with our world. Pule's poetics is a 'forcing apart' that creates openings in the ancestral flesh, allowing us to pry into these hidden interior worlds. They are littered with creatures half animal and half human, devouring each other in a continual spiral that returns to itself. Animals roam and lodge themselves in our flesh while defecating on shoulders of other animals (see Plate 1).

Echoing the fictional world of his writing, Pule's paintings and drawings also show the savagery dealt to the body: its surface is sliced open and the canvas-like flesh of ancestral depth is hung on the gallery walls for inspection. This is the art of the savage cut, of the fresh kill hung from hooks arranged in a butcher's display window. It is visceral stuff, without niceties about the outside world or respect for the internal depth of man. What a contrast to the poetics of Wendt, which mourns and calls to man's forgetfulness of the ancestral flesh that is woven through us!

In the drawing suite titled 'Death of a God' (in the exhibition *People Get Ready*, held at the Auckland Art Gallery in 2000), Pule subjects our eyes to the kerfuffle and noisy montage of woven flesh between man/God/animal/plant, and in our fascination we are riveted to its unseemly sight which solicits our own monstrous depth to break forth and feast on the living. We are drawn to the fanfare of Pule's world as carnival of the dead. The entrails that lie flailing on the surface bear the truth of man—his overcoming. This overcoming, according to Deleuze, is only possible in Nietzsche's Dionysian *Superman*. The superman's qualities, "impersonal individuations" and "pre-individual singularity" (Deleuze, 2004: 139), are rendered discernible on Pule's slaughter table.⁸

6. Thus, when one is constipated there is a holding in place between inside and outside and the body becomes conflicted, because it is caught in-between.

7. It gives everyday life the continuity of affects that are inherent in each individual of the community. The *va* is the law that does not sit still in one place, but is rather a law continually activated when bodies are gathered in a particular space, such as the space of rituals. Each body's *va* becomes activated by the ritual in a collective willing that rules the community.

8. It is worth noting that Pule, in laying bare the flesh of the dead on the operating table of consumption (the white-washed gallery walls), tries to literally prop up the scenario for us to see. It is not enough to rip open the body and lay it on the table for inspection. The poet wants to present it to us on scaffolding, a carefully constructed architecture that props up woven flesh.

9. In his works between 1993 and 2000, pre-stretched canvases were often hung on walls like raw flesh. This is a period when Pule used the grid format of Niuean and Tongan tapa cloth designs.

10. "The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth's population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell." (Heidegger, 1975: 16)

Pule constructs image-fragments in sequences that are sometimes held within *tapa*-like frames; sometimes they resemble pictographic scenarios ruled by lines and drawn from *tapa*.⁹ In the works of 2001-2003, especially the drawings of the poem "Death of a God" (Pule, 2000), the lines constructing the images are literally drawn-out, pulled and tugged away from the written words and lyrics of the poem—no longer illustrations of the narrative but creatures fleeing from it, littering the pages, and either containing dead bodies or having been butchered themselves.

In more recent work, Pule suspends image-fragments inside clouds that are buried deep inside the earth, or inside a body. The clouds are smeared with blood: not at all the elevated clouds of heaven. They are shown to us in a sectional cut taken through the ground as body of the ancestors, revealing frenzied and dazzling worlds in archaeological layers twined together by vines and roots. Almost cinematic, this architecture of poetic images consists of montages that collapse the space of the narrative and image-words onto a single surface. In this architectural making, the plan of the building and the actual object are allowed to exist together in the same space.

In his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1975), Heidegger suggested that since man has lost the ability to dwell, architecture and other attempts at the housing of man are futile endeavours.¹⁰ Perhaps only in poetry can man begin to reside again in a meaningful relationship with the world. Pule's attempt at architecture is certainly not a project to recover this quality in a poetic calling. Far from it, his architecture is an apparatus that is absolutely destructive to the condition of 'saving' or 'of letting be'. He attempts to murder any attempt at reaching redemption in our depth, and wants to overcome man and all his efforts to place himself at the pinnacle of thought. Thus, Pule pins man to the surface of our desires and invites us to feast on him, to become animal.

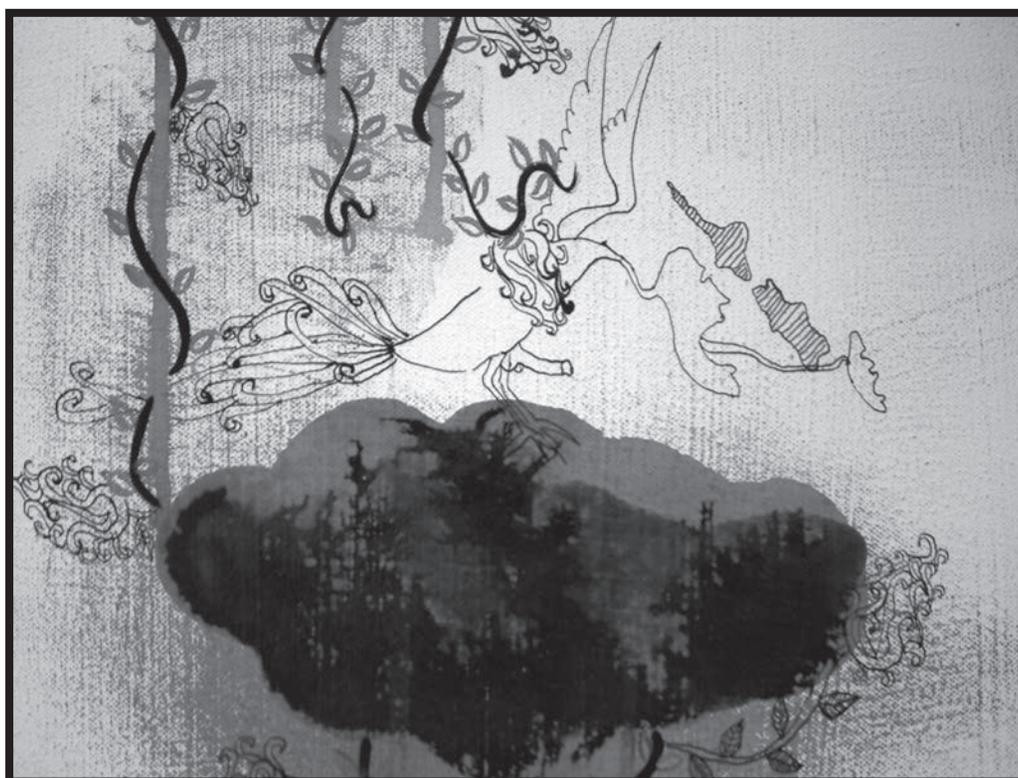


Figure 3: John Pule, Niniko Lalolagi - Dazzling World (Detail), 2004, oil and ink on canvas.

Lodgings

In John Pule's pictographic/poetic world, all types of animals are lodgers inside bodies. *There is the shark*, from whose skeletal frame our flesh is made to hang in *The Shark That Ate the Sun*. And there are birds that lodge themselves inside the throat of poets and prophets. For the most part in this book, the poet wanders the street and alleys of the modern world, on a journey to reconcile his restless ancestral being of family/land/community in Niue with the modern world of migration and poverty in the streets of Auckland. The poet is planted with seeds in his throat so as to lure birds to feed and lodge themselves there.

My family could plant a seed in the bird's beak, spreading my words, because I am a giant in a small world and I have to be heard. (Pule, 1992: 14)¹¹

The animal that lodges in the throat of the poet gives him the power to speak with the voice of a cyclone. The gift tempers the body and opens up a space from which visions can grow. The event transforms the poet and, at first, he is confused and stunned by the visions:

What does the poet save from the thousand glimmering stars up there in the heavens, every single fire a god's eye or animals migrating into the dark? Desperately I try to hold the golden grain, the seed, iridescent mineral, deep-sea fish, dolphins, looking for answers ... I open the area that is temporarily closed by a dream, and inside a festival of dancers throw laughter at me, covering my eyes ...

I, the one stepping into the dark, my days full of the world, go out of the one to find the voice ... Afraid to dwell, as subconscious hope has lost reason, so we cling to violent energy which takes on the appearances of beautiful haloes. (Pule, 1998: 27)

As spectators of Pule's journey as an uprooted prophet, we may have difficulties in fixing exactly where the voice and visions of the poet originate from and to whom the text is addressed. Double-edged words and images run amok in this vision; tension and suspense run in opposite directions *and* parallel to each other at the same time, and overload the senses. The poet's tongue twists, overwhelms and breaks words. Something is always let loose, drawn out, pulled apart and frayed at the edges.

In Pule's work, the animals that inhabit our bodies remain within us as temporary lodgers—when the body passes away from the world they will depart from us in trails. When poets and prophets are about to die, little critters literally pull the threads of life from their bodies as they unravel being from the depth. The poets' woven flesh is scattered to the earth: they do not return to an abominable depth. Because poets and prophets possess the gift of vision they are only allowed to live in myths. Pule intimates that the animal escapes us when the dead is no longer living, while it will become our lodger when the dead is within us. He also suggests that the poetic voice emerges only when the dead is made to speak through the animal that lodges itself in the throat.

11. Or, elsewhere: "My great grandfather Pa ... saw the *kulukulu* leave my mouth, which was an omen of song. Salona and Pa talked incessantly through the first night of my cries, interpreting movement of certain birds that coincided with my sighs and pauses." (Pule, 1998: 9)

Prologue (Wendt, 1976)

Inside us the dead, / like sweet-honeyed tamarind pods / That will burst in tomorrow's sun, / or plankton fossils in coral / alive at full moon dragging virile tides over coy reefs / into yesterday's lagoons. / 1. Polynesians / Inside me the dead / woven into my flesh like the music / of bone flutes:

my polynesian fathers / who escaped the sun's wars, seeking / these islands by prophetic stars, emerged / from the sea's eye like turtles / scuttling to beach their eggs in fecund sand, smelling / of the seas—the stench of dead / anemone and starfish, eyes / bare of the original vision, burnt / out by storm and paddles slapping the hurricane waves on, blisters / bursting blood hibiscus / to gangrened wounds salt-stung. These islands rising at wave's edge— / blue myth brooding in orchid, / fern, and banyan; fearful gods / awaiting birth from blood clot / into stone image and chant— to bind their wounds, bury / their journey's dead, as I / watching from shadow root, ready / for birth generations after they / dug the first house-posts and to forget, beside complacent fires / the wild yam harvest safe in store houses— / the reason why they pierced the muscle / of the hurricane into reef's retina, / beyond it the sky's impregnable shell; / and slept, sleep waking to nightmare / 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 the self's cell— / coral lacerating the promise, / self-inflicted wounds at the altar / of power will not heal.

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