

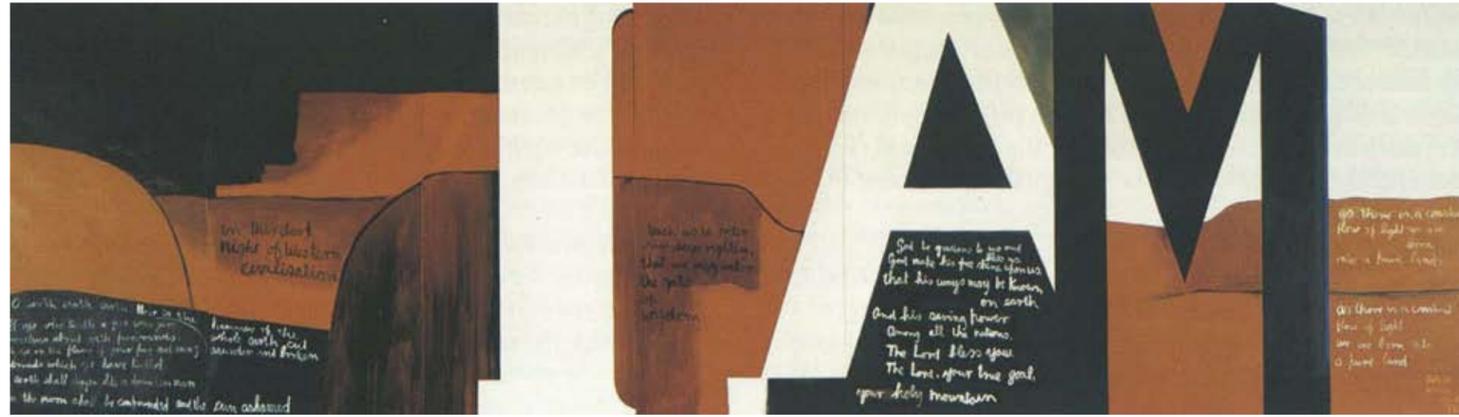
'Father, can't you see I'm burning.'
FROM SIGMUND FREUD,
THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

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HISTORY AND IMAGINATION IN THE ART OF JOHN PULE

IN 1976 ALBERT WENDT published a watershed essay for contemporary Pacific artists, and for Pacific Islanders in general, entitled 'Towards a New Oceania'.¹ Written at the height of decolonisation and national independence movements in the Pacific, the essay was a bold affirmation of the central role of the imagination – more specifically, of new art forms appearing in the region – in the realisation of this utopian ideal. Given the current burgeoning of contemporary Pacific art in all its varieties in New Zealand, New Caledonia, Fiji, Niue, the Cook Islands and elsewhere, Wendt's vision may be seen as prophetic. But what interests me in this essay is the implicit relationship between the 'new Oceania' and an 'old Oceania'. The two are inextricably related of course; there can be no new without an old, without some sense of the Oceania that is past or passing. This might seem like an obvious statement, but it is important to bear in mind the nature of the old Oceania implied in Wendt's essay. He was not referring to the Oceania of history books, museums and excavation sites, but rather to an Oceania *in us*, a subjective proposition addressed to the consciousness of modern Pacific Islanders and encapsulated in the title of his well-known poem, cited as an epigraph in the essay, 'Inside us the Dead'.² In the course of the poem, the phrase is repeated but the pronoun shifts to read 'Inside *me* the Dead'. Somehow this collective idea also bears down on an individual subjectivity.

The personal nature of this idea is further illustrated in an anecdote told by the director of the Black Grace dance company, Neil Ieremia, about his response to one of Colin McCahon's famous 'I AM' paintings called Gate III, which used to hang in the Adam Art Gallery at Victoria University of Wellington. According to Ieremia, he was contemplating the painting in the gallery and thinking about the difference between his identity as a 'New Zealand-born' son of Samoan migrants and the identity



Colin McCahon, *Gate III*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 305 x 1067.5 cm, Collection: Victoria University of Wellington.

of other Samoans, in particular his father. At the time Jeremia was working on a new dance work called 'Surface', inspired partly by a recent trip to Samoa with his father, who, after a lifetime of raising his children in New Zealand, and at the age of sixty-four, went back to be tattooed with a traditional Samoan *pe'a* (a body tattoo from the waist to the bottom of the knees). Contemplating the McCahon and thinking about his identity, Jeremia recalls feeling tempted to graffiti the word 'NOT' on the painting so that it read: 'I AM ... NOT'.³ Jeremia's negation of the divine ur-statement of identity is not simply asserting his difference from other identities: his father's, Samoan-born Samoans, Australians, Palagi New Zealanders, whoever – as if identities could be lined up like flags on poles and you are the one that is not the others. Rather, I suggest, what the 'NOT' negates in the affirmation of identity is *him*. I *am* what I am *not*. I am the dead, the past, the old, the father' inside me.

Jeremia's existential insight resonates with a theoretical account given by F.R. Ankersmit of what he calls 'sublime historical experience'. According to Ankersmit, this is the apprehension by an individual consciousness or collectivity (a 'me' or an 'us') of a new historical identity whose main characteristic is that it is constituted by the trauma of the loss of a former identity – precisely this is its main content, and that this is the ineluctable truth announces itself in the realisation (agonising, resigned, or otherwise) that this loss is permanent and can never be undone.⁴ As he puts it in a capsule formulation: 'We are what we are no longer.'⁵

Ankersmit is an historical theorist who coins this notion of 'sublime historical experience' while adumbrating four paradigms in which 'identity' struggles with the tensions between forgetting and remembering.⁶ The first paradigm is relatively straightforward and is the rationale underlying most histories, which are written or recorded on the assumption that we *are* our past, and the past must not be forgotten lest we lose ourselves. In this view, we cannot get enough of history. The second paradigm complicates the first by suggesting that sometimes it is necessary to forget the past in order to act effectively in the world or to summon the creativity, will or imagination necessary to live in the present or build a future. One might think here of the rhetorical iconoclasm of early twentieth-century avant-garde movements: Malevich's *Black Square* or the call by the Futurists to destroy all libraries and museums. The third and fourth paradigms complicate the relationship in a different way. In both, radical historical change or profound historical events shatter identity to its core so that there is a traumatic sense of loss and/or forgetting in which the relationship between present consciousness and the past becomes problematic. Ankersmit gives several examples, among them the case of Germany after World War II where the Holocaust was so painful a memory that for a long time it was forgotten or repressed (and not only in Germany). He also expounds on the dilemma of European culture after the French Revolution, when there arose a passionate desire to return to or otherwise conserve what it *was*, though Europe could not ignore the fact

that its culture had suffered a traumatic historical change that would always complicate its relationship to the past. In elaborating the third and fourth paradigms, Ankersmit defines the former by its desire to 'reconcile' experience and identity. In the third paradigm, 'closure of the trauma is possible'. This may be so 'only at the price of the greatest effort and of a most painful descent into the past of an individual or of a collectivity – but it *can* be done.'⁷ In the fourth paradigm however – and this is what he means by 'sublime historical experience' – it *can't*, and the trauma of the loss feels permanent. 'And what loss could possibly be greater – for is this not as close to death as one may come?'⁸

In this essay on the work of John Pule, another Pacific artist whose personal and family history spans two great transformations of recent Oceanic history (decolonisation and urban migration), I want to suggest that the significance of his work derives from the way it explores the gamut of possibilities for historical consciousness outlined by Ankersmit: from the imperative to remember the past to the painful confrontation with the irrevocable nature of history. I want to do this by examining four examples from the wide range of his work: first, a sampling of paintings from the 1990s and 2000s; then an epic poem entitled *The Bond of Time*, written in 1983 when Pule was twenty-one years old; then an autobiographical novel called *The Shark That Ate the Sun*, published in 1992; and finally, what we might call a 'readymade', a suit given to the artist by his father on the occasion of his baptism as a young boy.



Take these with you when you leave, 1998, is one of the more explicitly autobiographical paintings in Pule's work (plate 30) and features numerous iconographic motifs that make reference to the autobiographical narrative told in his novel. The painting is structured by a rough grid, filled with a medley of improvised patterns, symbols, signs and pictorial narrative vignettes, some of them smudged and smeared into the surface of the canvas. In one compartment to the upper left, we can see various silhouettes and outline drawings which can be decoded biographically. There is the silhouette of the *Maui Pomare*, the ship that ferried Niueans, including Pule's family and other Pacific Islanders, to New Zealand in the 1940s and '50s. At the bottom of the same compartment is his Aunt Mocca's old Humber – the first Niuean woman to hold a license and drive a car', as her proud father

boasted (in *The Shark That Ate the Sun*). To the right of the *Maui Pomare* are a spade and a young plant with its roots wrapped in a bundle of soil: a reference to Pule's father's vegetable garden planted on the front lawn of their suburban house in Otara, filled with corn and cabbages and other vegetables, including favourites brought over from Niue. Below them is a jug the artist used to carry water back and forth to his dying uncle while tending the old man as a boy. In the upper right corner of the painting, similar autobiographical motifs can be found: his father's guitar, with which the old man sang sad songs of Niue; the two-storey state house with its four concrete steps where the artist grew up in Otara (among other places); a pen to write letters and stories with, and to draw; and his New Zealand passport, the official stamp of his new national identity.

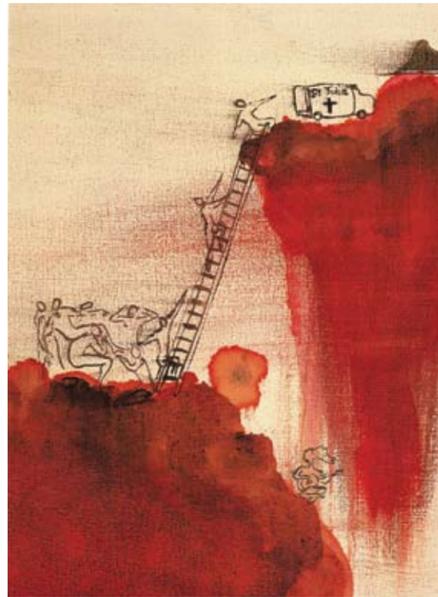
But the readability of the painting in terms of a coherent autobiographical narrative – or indeed any kind of narrative – begins to break down in other sections. Most people will recognise the sign of a Christian church and the scene of the 'lamentation for the dead Christ' in the compartment below. They are part of 'our' general cultural knowledge, although needless to say, not everyone's. But this scene is composed as if to emphasise its strangeness: it is set in an island landscape and observed from afar by two figures in the foreground and a 'face' inscribed into the scene's framing edge. And the rest of the painting becomes entirely cryptic, as if memory had shifted into another register, unmoored from personal experience, family stories, and familiar cultural narratives. Symbols, patterns and diagrams are evocative of meanings that elude us, whose meaning may be precisely that we do not know their meaning, as if their legibility belonged to a world we have forgotten.

This enigmatic iconography is writ large in the massive canvas – over four metres wide – *Episode AA-940035 Tukulagi haaku*, (1994, plate 17), which is composed of a spectacular but bewildering array of patterns and symbols appropriated from tapa cloth, tattooing and jewellery designs, and interspersed with other strange symbols and narrative vignettes. The whole thing is like an ancient cosmological codex or a cryptic Polynesian memory chart. But suggestive as it is, no code or common narrative orders their temporal sequence into a decipherable story or meaningful hierarchy, although the feeling of the painting is: *there was one. Tukulagi haaku* – meaning 'mine forever' – also has an autobiographical basis. It was painted after the death of the artist's daughter Zaiya (whose birth date



It is not yet dusk, 2006, detail. Oil, ink and enamel on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, Private collection.

Tapuakianga, 2001, detail. Oil and ink on canvas, 200 x 180 cm, Private collection.



– 24.8.92 – is inscribed to the right of the painting's bottom tier) while its odd title cites the reference number of a CAT scan report during her illness. So the pain of loss is at the emotional core of the work. But the painting's title, its maps, directional markers, compass motifs and strange hieroglyphs only redouble its pathos, since they are directed towards someone who is dear but gone.

In Pule's work from the 2000s – the so-called 'cloud' paintings – the emotional tone shifts from the elegiac mood of the 'tapa' paintings to something more violent and apocalyptic, a terrifying vision of what the German philosopher Hegel called the 'slaughter bench' of History.⁹ These paintings put the high stakes of cultural memory in the perspective of history, which they view from the small end of the emotional telescope. Here, as graphic marginalia to amorphous 'cloud worlds', Pule renders scene after scene of Herculean efforts to transfer various embodiments of cultural and religious meaning across the empty space between one floating 'cloud world' and another in a modern cosmos of ceaseless violence, suffering and disaster (in, for example, *I will carry anything that you want*, 2006, plate 71). Pule here is the great Hieronymus Bosch of postcolonial modernity. But the task is doubly fraught because these 'gods' and 'cultural treasures' are already violated or broken and there is no redemptive master narrative overriding the horrors, as there is in Bosch. In one vignette from *It is not yet dusk*, 2006, a helicopter hovers in the sky, menaced by a voracious mouth, while a band of rescuers attempt to carry a severed head to safety (top left). In another from *Tapuakianga*, 2001, an ambulance labelled 'St John' – a pun on the artist's role in this world historical drama – assists in the rescue of a dying Christ, while a bearded old man plays his 'soul guitar' on the 'cloud world' below (left). In yet another from *I will carry anything that you want*, 2006, a line of workers with ropes and pulleys attempt to transport an ailing sea god to a 'new world' above, where, depressingly, the Sisyphean task only continues (opposite). Will they succeed in their efforts? Can broken gods from former 'worlds' be rescued and revived to sustain once more the lives of their lovers and would-be redeemers? Like many of the 'tapa' paintings, the titles of these works – *I will carry anything that you want*, *There will be another time*, *I wish I was with you*, and so on – return us to the 'inside' of these tragic morality plays, to the feelings of anguish and hope, love and desperation that accompany them.

If the trauma of personal and historical loss is at the core of Pule's work, their paradox is their

Promethean inventiveness, their extraordinary graphic and imagistic fecundity. Images abound in Pule's work, a quality that is inseparable from a broader, postcolonial preoccupation with issues of memory and remembering. In modernism a blot was a blot, not an invitation to free associate. In Pule's paintings, the reverse is the case. Blots, smudges, drips and stains serve precisely to conjure images into being and to unlock the realms of memory and imagination. Drips turn into 'tears of blood' encircled by climbing vines; blobs of viscous paint are 'clouds' sprouting strange creatures, symbols and buildings; smudges and smears are the very 'atmosphere' in which images proliferate and figures act out enigmatic stories. 'I sit by streams and chance the muse/to overcome me with imagination', Pule writes in a line from his epic poem *The Bond of Time*, itself a prolific outpouring of images. This same imagistic fecundity characterises Pule's novels as well. On the one hand, they are autobiographical and historical, recounting real experiences and events set in the broad history of colonial Niue and its postcolonial migrations to New Zealand. On the other hand, they are continually breaking into lyrical fables and poetic reveries. Or they veer from historical narrative and descriptive social realism into mythical parables and sudden flights of metaphor. Despite their preoccupation with grand historical themes – migration and cultural loss; colonialism and Christianity; war and terrorism – the outstanding feature of his art may be its verbal and graphic minutiae, the sheer cascading quantity of images and incidents that fill the spaces of his canvases or feed the lyrical rhythm of his prose or poetry. Whatever might be said about the grand themes of Pule's art, there is something clearly important in the *saying*, in the temporal utterance of poetic language (whether by voice or pen) or the deliberate making of patterns or figures on a two-dimensional surface. The best word for this protean quality about Pule's imagination may be 'Oceanic'. For water pervades his work, recurring in images of waves, clouds, rain, currents, hurricanes, canoes, sea creatures, and so on. Water is the agency by which 'the first man' comes into being, according to a myth recounted in *The Shark That Ate the Sun*. Pule as a toddler is continually running to the sea, as noted in the same novel. But besides these images of water in his work, water is also, more importantly, an image of *imagining*. In its ceaseless movement and transformation, its elemental power to generate new life in a multitude of forms, its protean shapelessness yet ability to assume every possible shape, to fill all negative spaces, water is the metaphor *par excellence*



I will carry anything that you want, 2006 (plate 71), detail.

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of metaphorisation, which is the driving mechanism of Pule's poetic imagination. And yet, there may be limits to this capacity for endless imagining. Or rather, I would argue, imagining originates in and ceaselessly circles back to the hard core of 'sublime historical experience', which signifies irreparable change. The tension can be found in Pule's poem *The Bond of Time*, subtitled *An Epic Love Poem*.



The Bond of Time is a sprawling, youthful poem written in the early 1980s. It is composed as a lyrical address by a lover to his beloved in which the former expatiates at length on the subject of the hapless character of their 'great sad love'. As the poem unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the beloved, is not simply the object of his love but his counterpart in grief, his melancholy muse, his narcissistic double; while the object of their dual lament is nothing less than the entire world and everything in it, including, fundamentally, the lover himself, who feels that he, too, is like the dead he grieves:

*I feel lonely, as if a great misfortune,
of dead children, and netted birds were
part of me; all things that surround
me symbolised objects of horror,
all the beauty that lived in tears.*

The lover conjures memories of happier times through the powers of imagination, but only to spiral back to the inescapable fact that those times are no more:

*When that murmur on the mountain
fresh with dew, the leaves fell and
rained love; that morning of laughter,
happiness: should I look more
into the past that is here no more?*

But if the poem is a lament for what is lost, what is impressive is how productive that sadness is, as the lover spins the wide world into endless metaphors of the beloved, who is addressed among other things as ‘my dictionary’ and ‘my woman of combinations.’ The lament can feel interminable; the poem consists of 400 five-line stanzas! But length (or time) is an important aspect of the poem; for grief must run its course, even if it is an endless fiction.

However, there is a turning point in the poem, a shift in its emotional tone. And the shift is indicated by the paradoxical appearance of images of the *unimaginable* and the *unchangeable* in a poem that seems otherwise about the infinity of imagining and change:

*... What can never be
depicted is the burial of the great
sadness that chars our sad love. [My emphasis]*
...

*... And I am waking to
unchangeable things, complete with
what poets dream of and die for. [My emphasis]*

Note too *what* is said to be *undepictable* in these lines: it is not the ‘sadness’ of their ‘sad love’; the whole poem is depicting that. What ‘can never be depicted’ is the ‘burial’ of that sadness. And that passage through something like death to something on its other side is what has clearly transpired by the last verses of the poem, where there is a subtle but unmistakable change in both its mood and in the nature of the lover/beloved relationship. In the last verses, the lover takes his *distance* from the beloved’s melancholy:

*I stand away from your unreachable parts,
stand away from your heart that bounces
into nature hills of love and beauty.*

And ‘our great sad love’, which has dominated the imagery of the poem, becomes ‘your sad life’ in a later verse, which is to say he breaks the narcissistic bond that has bound him to her. It is not a full break-up. The sadness is still there and will never go away, and the poem continues to pile up images of lamentation in her name. She is still the muse and the ‘bond of time’ binds him to her. But he now contemplates her from a distance and through a sense of tranquillity that is new to the poem:

*It’s nights like this when I can watch
you without disturbing the waves.*

In the final stanza, the change in mood is unequivocal, as is the change in temporal outlook. Invoking the theological concept of eschatology (dealing with end times and the direction of history), the lovers for the first time contemplate the present and the future:

*Then something called Eschatology
changed our emotions and colour of
our hearts, as we stood one misty
morning near the ocean, the desire
the solitude gone, gone forever.*

Two more things need to be said about this ending. One is to reiterate the fundamental nature of the transformation – ‘our emotions and the colour of our hearts’ – and the fact that it does not come without a painful price, which is like a passage through death (a burial that can never be depicted). The second is an ambiguity about where the lovers stand in the final stanza. We should not assume it is a ‘happy ending’. It is true that a profound change has occurred; their hearts have been transformed and ‘the desire/the solitude’ is ‘gone forever’. But the eschatological vision they invoke is ambiguous in what it portends. It might be Christian redemption. But it might equally be ‘cloud worlds’ in an historical cosmos of endless violence, anguish and terror.



The subjective structure of *The Bond of Time* is also echoed in Pule’s novel, *The Shark That Ate the Sun*, whose narrative transpires between two main characters: Puhia and his son Fisi. Both are written primarily in the first person; which is to say, they are equally parts of the autobiographical ‘I’. Furthermore, its ‘me’ story is also an ‘us’ story. For the personal narrative of Puhia’s and Fisi’s individual experience of migration from Niue to New Zealand in the context of their immediate family resonates with the collective experience of Niuean and other Polynesian migrations to the metropolises of New Zealand and other parts of the world in the decades following the end of World War II. As Pule’s novel shows, that migration was no picnic. It was driven by a sense of historical necessity, by the dismantling of New Zealand colonial administrative structures, by the dearth of livelihood options for Niueans on the island, by the pull of the material and social promises of New Zealand as the best future, and by the momentum of migrating numbers. And it was felt as a matter of historical necessity: ‘Of course I am afraid,’ says Puhia, ‘but if I have to go to New Zealand with my family I will, it is a powerful force and unstoppable.’ (45)

Puhia feels the historical magnitude of migration and the profound changes it implies for a way of life in Niue. During his first stay in New Zealand with his sister Mocca in the 1940s, Puhia is arrested for lying supine and drunk in the middle of ‘K-road’ in central Auckland – a kind of symbolic offering of his body to the ‘gods’ of modernity and the unstoppable future. He is then deported. Other relatives emigrate one by one over a twenty-year period until almost no one is left. Finally, Puhia petitions his sister to help him immigrate once more, but with a sense of fatality that is undiminished. On the eve of his second and permanent departure, he writes to his sister:

*It is like the beginning of the end for something good
that I saw briefly as a child, and when I look out
onto the village I see sadness, not only for now but
for tomorrow, and the years faraway. What is it,
Mocca, what is it that my mind is searching for in
this soil. The air is not the same, even the ocean is
silent. (51–2)*

Mocca understands her brother’s pain but also recognises that in order to survive their physical, cultural and spiritual uprooting from Niue and adapt to life in New Zealand, he must let the past go. In a sense, he must forget it:

My dear brother

*I am crying because you are so sad at these events
that haunt you. All I can say is, pray to the God to
comfort you, leave the past where it belongs, there
is no change if you change everything. Some things
must remain the same.*

Come to NZ and start a new life here. (52)

Mocca’s wise advice anticipates the radical nature of Puhia’s intemperate life in New Zealand, where, in the pain of his loss, he believes that Niue must be ripped from memory like pages from a book and discarded. As he flings himself into a profligate life, his private mantra is to forget: ‘forget Niue, forget home, forget the dusty roads, forget the plantations, the melon fields, the coconuts ... forget everything from the past.’ (55–6) But this is precisely what Puhia cannot do. In reminding himself to forget, he is bound to remember, and he is therefore stuck between the spiritual meaninglessness of the life he indulges in in New Zealand – alcohol, womanising, child abuse, family neglect, unpredictable violence and the zombie-like rituals of work and payday – and a melancholic fixation on a lost or passing world he cannot forget. The novel traces his downward spiral, from the fateful gesture on K-road to his final demise after falling down the stairs of his Otara home, his brain awash with alcohol and memories of Niue.

But if Puhia’s identification with ‘old Niue’ acts out a kind of death, ultimately his literal death, a few things run counter to this descent. One is the garden he planted in the front yard of the family home in Otara, full of corn, radishes, cabbages and other vegetables, including vegetables like taro brought over from Niue. The garden, Fisi remembers, was sacrosanct in the household’s comings and goings. Pule cites this garden and the family’s practice of replanting shoots carried in bundles of soil from one house to another in their endless moves through the suburbs of Auckland, or brought over by relatives from Niue, as a metaphor of his artistic practice. Art is a way of ‘making soil to stand on,’ establishing a ground, ‘maintaining’ roots to home¹⁰ – an imagery that acknowledges the reality of a new land, new plantings and a new way of life, while carrying over precious threads from a former way of life that makes the new one both endurable and possible.

Another countervailing theme is Fisi himself. The same letter that confides Puhia’s sense of foreboding to his sister about coming to New Zealand also announces the birth of his last son, named after

his father and great-grandfather, Puhiaatau Falani Fisipalima Pulehetau, born in the timala pit during the great hurricane. The novel is full of omens, auguries and portentous allegories surrounding the birth of Fisi, the last of the family to leave Niue, and the one who completes their entire uprooting from the kainga, the homeland. His forced transplantation at the age of two means that his life spans the divide between the home his family misses and the new life they face in New Zealand. But it also spans the arc of consciousness from the preconscious of birth and babyhood to the formation of memory and self-awareness, in which the former is forever beyond conscious recollection. As Pule writes in 'Clouds and Water', published in this book (page 170), 'I was made in New Zealand, but I was born elsewhere.' And that slash through his individual identity is also the slash that separates him as a migrant child from the life of Niue. It is a mistake to assume that Pule's art is based on personal memories of Niue. Niue exists for him, as for Fisi in the novel, as the *absent* referent in a swirl of signs and language around him: letters, photographs, Christmas cards, packages, radio broadcasts, newspaper articles and endless stories and conversations overheard around the kitchen table and in the family milieu.

Fisi's autobiographical 'I' is bound to that of his father's and, as in *The Bond of Time*, the novel traces his enthrallment to his father's terrifying melancholy and his eventual distancing. The second part of the novel tracks the making of Fisi's childhood and adolescent 'identity' as he negotiates his way through the disarray and rich mayhem of his family's situation. In the process, the novel renders an extraordinary social portrait – the best we have – of migrant Auckland from the late 1940s to the 1980s, when the novel ends. Fisi's consciousness is forged in and of that city, through the prejudices and generousities of its population, through the urban geography of its racial and social classes, through its institutions and bureaucracies, and his family's struggles to make their way through it all. There is a brilliance in the way the novel weaves these social realities into a greater, mythological cosmos. But the journey, finally, is also a spiralling descent. The turning point comes, as in *The Bond of Time*, for no adequate rhyme or reason, by virtue of a chance encounter with an Englishman named 'George', a workmate who happens one day to notice that he has artistic talent and asks him: 'Have you thought about what you're going to do in the future, about your life?' (288) The question is like a gust of wind from a suddenly opened door to a world

that was always there, but never really seen. For the first time, Fisi is able to think about the future.

But the turning point towards a new identity is defined by its paradoxical recognition of what it has lost or forgotten. This paradox is captured in an earlier episode when Fisi is about three or four years old. One night, instead of his father's usual pattern of absence or distraction, the 'old man' sits down with him on the 'tiny ridiculous couch full of fleas and holes' and tells him a story. It is a moment of rare intimacy in their relationship and Fisi is spellbound. In contrast to the chaotic immediacy of his everyday life, the story miraculously seems to hold the world together: fabulous events unfold as if connected by some inner temporal logic. Moreover, the moment reactivates, we are told, Puhia's former role in Niue as a village storyteller, which was also the role of his father before him. The moment therefore links Fisi (a storyteller to be) in the discontinuity of his life in New Zealand to another precious thread of continuity with the generations before him.

Puhia's story is a mythic allegory set in a place before historical time called Motu Tu Vao, and concerns the birth of the 'first Man' to a woman named Fanaki. Fanaki is pregnant with 'Mountain' but cannot give birth because she is 'too small'. Eventually, Mountain tells her to ask 'Water', who facilitates her giving birth while simultaneously transforming 'Mountain' into 'Man'. Then, inexplicably, 'Man' turns on his mother, denies his origin from her womb, and cruelly banishes her to oblivion: 'go back to where you belong, to the night, to the sky.' Fanaki is deeply hurt but accepts her fate. As she is about to leave, she turns to her son and says:

Well look after me, she said, because – in the future men in your form will want to kill you, and they will turn against me and slowly kill me. Already I am sad. She dived into the sea, took one last look at the man she gave birth to, and then Fanaki was gone from the earth, from Motu Tu Vao, Tupua he Po, he Aho, he Lalolagi, he Matua, he Tagata, moe tau tama he laKau, ffine he uba, ua liu mai, fano tukulangi. ... (102)

In short, she is gone utterly and forever. The novel then cuts back to the living-room in the family home. Fisi, having fallen asleep, wakes up to find Puhia is gone and the house is empty. Morning shines through the window. Fisi climbs the kitchen sink and sees his mother outside hanging up the washing. Perplexed,

his mind swims between sleep and waking, between a dreamed imaginary world, and the one he is bumping into. Did he miss something? What happened next? Did he actually hear the story or did he dream it? Is the story in his head the one he remembers his father telling him or one he imagines?

Fanaki's injunction to 'Man' to 'look after [her]' encapsulates the dilemma of 'sublime historical experience' because his birth as 'Man' is contingent on her disappearance, which he himself brings about. When Fisi wakes up, he is already, like 'Man', gazing at the sea into which Fanaki has vanished, desperate to know what he has missed. Pule's art and poetry are born in the predicament of this moment.



My final example reiterates this paradoxical theme. This is what I am calling a 'readymade', the suit which Pule's father gave him on the occasion of his baptism into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints when he was a young boy, and which today hangs in the studio like an ironic reminder of what he is all about. The baptism itself was of no religious importance for Pule, then or since, but the metaphor of the ritual in which an 'old self' is 'buried' in the water and washed away and a 'new self' is brought out of it 'reborn', is at the heart of the identity transformation at issue in Pule's work. Moreover, the suit adds another layer to that transformation. Purchased from Hugh Wrights, a chain store which undertook to 'dress every man and boy in New Zealand', the suit bears a label on its inside collar with the words 'Young Sir/Made in NZ'. It symbolises, one could argue, the new identity he has assumed.

But the matter is not so simple. In 'Clouds and Water', Pule comments on the significance of the suit and his baptism through a characteristic mix of history and imagination. Both symbolise an interpellation of new identity. Gazing at his reflection in a mirror when he first tried the suit on, with his father beside him, he acknowledges: 'Along with my passport this was my first true bonding with New Zealand.' On the other hand, he says in a later passage: 'That day when I first tried the suit on I felt the early stages of infinite struggles.' The source of those 'infinite struggles' occurs in the moment of a look, when Pule turns to agree with his father who has given him the suit with its symbolic tag, but sees instead 'him staring into a faraway time, depositing memories into a warehouse for safe keeping ...'. The tensions of this moment have a kind of



The suit, 'Young Sir/Made in NZ'.

shattering effect on the artist, they 'liquidate' his being and plunge him into a surreal, mythic, metaphorical mode of being that is the signature character of the artist's work. The significance of this liquidation is at least twofold. It does not, I would argue, deny that he has assumed a new identity in New Zealand. Pule *was* 'made in New Zealand' – but by the *experience* recounted in *The Shark That Ate the Sun* in all its complexities of living, imagining and remembering, *not* by the label of a branded commodity or the official stamp of a government document. Pule's liquidation slips these moulds and he thereby becomes a kind of poet-critic of all symbolic 'ideals' – of all the 'cloud worlds' that attempt to govern and control who we are. Yet there is another sense in which this mythic, poetic mode of being arises in the *aftermath* of a storm of history, which has changed him and his 'world' (and 'us' and 'our world') irrevocably. The mythic fills the hole of what has gone. And for all its 'infinite' imaginings, myth too is the sign of History and the finitude of human identity in time. But the fact that the past has gone brings with it in Pule's work an ethical obligation to remember what has been forgotten, for it is in him and part of him. In that sense, he responds to the injunction of Fanaki to 'look after me':

*... I try again to
Close my eyes, and see a way into your night.
I will arrive with a drawing of a starry sky,*

*And before the sun-sets try to install these planets
Between my mouth and your mouth, so you know
My tongue will never be exhausted from waiting.*