As you read this, somewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand a Pasifika theatre maker will be crafting a performance that reflects the unique experiences borne of the artist who navigates new domain. In doing so, this act of creation illuminates the possibilities of theatre as a site for change, adaptation, reframed identity, and an enlarged sense of belonging in new locations. For any first, second, or third generation migrant culture this means necessary and direct encounters with issues of liminality, resettlement, and the evolving connections to land, family, faith, the elements, spatiality, and even life force itself within a new broader culture. Arguably, with the pace of change we encounter in 2020 and beyond, these features must be faced head-on to bring theatre to contemporary audiences anyway, but they are particularly stark for cultures with an immigrant backdrop wedded to their story. There are rich biographies to unfold by spotlighting performing artists whose roots hark from across Oceania; Fiji, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Niue, and the Cook Islands, and of course Aotearoa. Pasifika theatre in New Zealand is an active, complex, and dynamic domain that has steadily built a legacy of storytelling to become a prosperous site of evocation and diverse theatrical production in the past few decades. David O’Donnell and Lisa Warrington’s timely book *Floating Islanders: Pasifika Theatre in Aotearoa* celebrates this complex array of voices and approaches as their text charts a course through Pasifika theatre styles and forms that constitute what can be seen as a fairly recent, thirty-year account of theatre making from
1984 to 2016. The authors define Pasifika Theatre as “live performance work created in Aotearoa / New Zealand by artists of Pacific Island ancestry” (9), and within this endeavour to unearth a unique array of subjective “islands” lies the clue to the book’s success.

Voices of Pacific theatre makers are rightly at the centre of the text, since the authors have chosen to interview over thirty-four theatre practitioners in order to assimilate, elevate, and liberate key features of this relatively recent, postcolonial phenomena (from comedy, to visual theatre, to poetry, amongst others). Pasifika Theatre is now a constellation of diverse shimmering jewels anchored firmly in the mainstream South Pacific nexus of Aotearoa, “Land of the Long White Cloud.” O’Donnell and Warrington’s undertaking to let practitioners speak for themselves and subsequently find connections in organic ways that emerge from the conversations is a wise choice, particularly because the text is declared to be written by two non-Pasifika or Palagi authors (like myself).¹ It is created with care, and the generous artists at the centre of this discourse share insights with deep respect for the craft of live performance in all its forms, as well as trust in the authors.

In this sense, the book is guided by a framework “in the spirit of talanoa” (11), a Tongan / Fijian / Samoan concept of verbal storytelling that centralises the importance of devoting space and time to discussion and the ensuing exchange of ideas. I think it is important to see this book as the reflection of a longer talanoa between members of Pasifika communities of practice, between their non-Pasifika counterparts, and with a wider international audience. The book is a welcome addition to both Pasifika arts knowledge-building and a more global understanding of how the specific reverberates the universal. More broadly, it is also a significant invitation towards further conference of the Pasifika and Aotearoa performing arts canons.

At its heart, this is a story of passionate individuals like Albert Wendt, Justine and Paul Simei-Barton, John Kneubuhl, Eteuati Eti, and Nathaniel Lees who carved out a vision for Pasifika Theatre to be strong and diverse. It is a story of determination, celebration, and reclamation that speaks to the fervent power of the creative spirit, and of a maturing terrain that has seized upon brilliance in theatre forms. Of course, the specific individuals and companies germane to the evolving journey of Pasifika

¹ The proper Samoan term for Palagi is “Papalagi,” “The Sky Bursters.”
Theatre in Aotearoa are variegated, unique, and complex, and should not be referred to as a uniform group. But in a sense Pasifika Theatre makers hold parallels with other first and second-generation migrant cultures who universally navigate the multifaceted interstitial spaces of “home” and “new home,” of local and international style and form, and of the challenges that expand and reassess our assumed definitions of mind, spirit, body, and community. This interstitial quality, or “in-betweenness,” is often concerned with familiar and brutal tropes that contrast the hopes and dreams of a better life with the reality of what it actually means to be seen as a newcomer in the dominant discourse of the new domain. Reframing expectations of the self and one’s culture, and the shifting of associated, underlying, but sometimes assumed, extant identities are themes of this book, as is the impact of reality in Aotearoa. O’Donnell and Warrington navigate this terrain with sensitivity.

An implicit pledge that simultaneously underlines and navigates *Floating Islanders* is one of carving out new terrain. The discussions and the authors’ insights are underpinned by a deep awareness of the importance of creating a forward-facing, often disruptive discourse that is anchored in what people indigenous to New Zealand (tangata whenua or Māori) might refer to as whakapapa (lineage), both personal and professional. Theatre is, after all, distinctively aware of crystallising the triptych forces that combine from history towards aspiration to create transitory experience in a medium that employs present time. Amongst other things, this requires entering into the exciting realm of the numinous, or that which invokes spirit and connects to the soul. It draws on memory to provide present-time connection to “realise the dreams of our ancestors while honouring our own contemporary will” (181), as Pasifika artist Courtney Sina Meredith says in *Floating Islanders*. The practitioner voices in this book add to the enactment of the vision of Pasifika art that Samoan poet and writer Albert Wendt imagined in 1976:

> Our quest should not be for a revival of our past cultures but for the creation of new cultures which are free of the taint of colonisation and based firmly in our own pasts. The quest for should be for a new Oceania. (Wendt 52)

In facing forward towards a “new Oceania,” *Floating Islanders* takes its titular cue from Samoan / Aotearoa director Makerita Urale, who underlines the fluid and migrant state of Pasifika practitioners when she says, “We float – we’re not based in one place: we’re floating Islanders” (10). O’Donnell and Warrington firmly point out that this concept is
used to emphasise “the flexibility, fluidity, openness and interdisciplinarity of Pasifika theatre practitioners and companies” (11). This interstitial, threshold status of migrant artists has been noticed as a phenomenon by thinkers worldwide, and resonates with Italian director Eugenio Barba’s sense of isolation that theatre companies can face as “floating islands.” Although Barba’s isolated framework is not necessarily a state to aspire to, it is deemed as a reality of voyaging in the urban and theatrical cultures where independence is a given. Here I think of Deleuze and Guattari, whose musings on the phenomenology of art-making proposed that itineracy and its associated “nomadic tendency” is an artistic ideal, since questions of dislocation and identity are unencumbered by allegiances to a predominant orthodoxy. Thus, there is triple resonance in the hopeful cadence of being a Pasifika floating islander in Aotearoa who is relatively free to create anew, and open to connect with others to carve out a truly creative line of flight as they seek connection to wider domains, unfettered by the weight of assumed form and style. There is a unique ontological freedom that can be construed from the distinctive modes of experience of first, second, and third generation Pasifika theatre artists in Aotearoa.

Another key idea in this book is the deconstruction of assumed identities and the construction of new ones in commune with others, and these are inevitably tethered to relational states of being. In Samoan language there’s a concept called the Vā, which denotes relationship in a myriad of ways. It is the gap between one person and another, or an individual and the land, or the universe. The Vā relates to the emic relationship between an artist and their craft, an individual and their teachers, the physical or genealogical space an artist works in, or in fact between a community and more external, emic relationships such as nature, God, and faith. And the saying is, “Ia teu le vā,” meaning: “Take care of that relationship; nurture it.” This extends to Vā Tapuia (sacred space) and Vā Feloloa’i (relationship), both of which theatre encompasses. Floating Islanders speaks directly to this notion of respect, trust, and honour that has been passed down and now exists in present time in theatre. Le vā is referred to throughout the book as a benchmark idea; furthermore, it positions O’Donnell and Warrington’s text as an important relational site per se to advance the awareness and understanding of Pasifika Theatre as a platform for redemptive, regenerative, and dynamic theatre practice.

Floating Islanders chronicles the interface between theatre styles and social systems with ease. The book is beautifully produced; supported throughout by a wealth of images and a selected timeline of Pasifika
productions in the Appendix – both designed to bring the conversation to life –, it has already become a key text in secondary and tertiary educational settings. Of interest is that it studies Pasifika theatre as a kind of social history, as each chapter reveals a new layer to extend the talanoa.

The profile of Pasifika identities is complex, so O’Donnell and Warrington wisely choose to capture the range of different styles in chronological order with a chapter dedicated to each major shift in the domain. It is significant to reflect on progress through playwriting and production of work throughout the last three decades, notably marked by John Kneubuhl’s *Think of a Garden*, a play which “highlights the disturbing impact of colonisation on Samoan identity” (37). The play is based on real events of a peaceful protest that took place in 1929 in which 15 Samoan people were killed and many more injured by Police. I saw the 1995 Depot Theatre production in Wellington directed by Nathaniel Lees, and was struck by the force of this work and its reception. It was a jolt to see Samoan / Aotearoa history dramatised, to hear Samoan language spoken on a Wellington stage, and to see a new kind of talanoa developing. It felt momentous at the time. As Lees says, the impact made by the Auckland and Wellington productions – and the ensuing confidence that was created – were huge: “People were moved to tears. All the Samoan people […] got up at the end, sang for us and talked to us […]. The joy of it was hearing our language, or my language, spoken on stage” (39).

The importance of taking a professional community approach to make the work – including that of Depot (later Taki Rua) Theatre and other artists – cannot be underestimated. From here, *Floating Islanders* traverses through the development of playwriting and adaptation in companies, anchored by Fale’aiatu (traditional Samoan clowning), a familiar form in which satire is used to lampoon perceived order through comedy. Pacific Theatre Inc. in Auckland and Pacific Underground in Christchurch both reframed the Fale’aiatu trope in relation to explorations of migrant history with their benchmark productions such as *Romeo and Tusi* (a version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in the 1869 land war in Samoa), *Tusitala and the Witch Woman of the Mountain*, *Fresh off the Boat*, and *Dawn Raids*, Oscar Kightley’s particularly seminal production centred around the violent mid-1970’s Police raids of suspected Pasifika overstayer families in Auckland. Pasifika playwriting is noted as going through a major phase of activity into the 2000’s, with Kightley, David Fane, Victor Rodger, Makerita Urale, Toa Fraser, Dianna Fuemana, David Mamea, Dave Armstrong, and others creating a sophisticated canon of work, or what
the authors describe as a “rich whakapapa of Polynesian playwriting […] characterised by a sense of community and connection” (107).

From here, the text enters the evocative domain of image-based theatre that “originates from the body rather than the text”; theatre “where the body and striking visual images take precedence over spoken language” (138). This is the realm of theatre for social change. Samoan director Lemi Ponifasio’s work in MAU theatre company has been noted internationally for its arresting combination of intersectional qualities. Ponifasio employs Japanese butoh, light, space, and Māori and Pasifika mythologies in works like Birds with Skymirrors, Tempest: Without a Body, or Requiem, which was commissioned for the 250th anniversary of Mozart in Vienna (2006) and draws on Pacific rites of farewelling the dead, of remembrance, and of greeting the ancestors. The virtuosity of Wellington-based company The Conch is explored as “an intercultural vision” that creates theatre out of “physical theatre, mime, illusion, dance, music and lighting” (141), and this work has also received recognition on the world stage. Wellington-born Nina Nawalowalo and her English-born husband Tom McCrory are also visionary artists who continue to explore the rich domain of socially activated theatre that is brave, refined, and immediate. Nawalowalo’s Fijian father and English mother provide the backdrop for the company’s aesthetic that draws directly on both her and McCrory’s knowledge of European theatre forms, gained from their time in Europe and cultivated in the past few decades. Their work is anchored in real stories and the redemptive power of storytelling. Works like Vula, Masi, and more recently The White Guitar and A Boy Called Piano bring new meaning to theatre as a place for evocation of the real, the physical, or what matters most in the search for complete personal, social, and political identities. This is vital, refined work, and a minor gripe is that a chapter does not seem sufficient to capture the complexity of both MAU and The Conch. There are much larger stories to be told here around process, genealogy, and impact.

Comedy is a predominant theme throughout the book, so a focus on such groups as The Brownies, The Naked Samoans, and the Laughing Samoans is important. Each company overtly references the aforementioned Fale‘aitu, yet also has “a distinctive comedy philosophy and practice” (153) that over time has developed unique offshoots into television and film. If you have not seen it, seek out the hilarious animated TV series bro’Town for a taste of Pasifika humour in an Aotearoa setting. In Auckland, Vela Manusaute and Anapela Polataivao and the
Kila Kokonut Krew are noted as “creative catalysts and mentors to a new generation of Pasifika artists” (179), and this is a true reflection of their ability to use comedy to highlight questions of contemporary identity in multiple theatre forms.

Next, the book devotes a chapter to the proliferation of works by Pasifika women writers (2002–15). Tusiata Avia, Courtney Sina Meredith, Grace Taylor, Louise Tu’u, Michelle Johansson, Leilani Unasa, and Miria George are key writers and performers who have expanded the canon of performance poetry and theatre as a political platform. The text surveys this tranche of Pasifika Theatre with an earnest eye on diverse discourse, and theatre’s ability to bring to the fore contemporary concerns that propel a complex range of voices, approaches, styles, and forms. It is worth noting here the multiple roles that theatre practitioners inevitably play in Aotearoa; for example, it is common for one person to be an actor, producer, writer, director, and editor, especially in a constrained funding environment. Thus, there is a dynamic sense of interplay between individuals and companies across the sector that is driven by multiplicity and results in highly-networked practitioners with manifold skillsets.

_Floating Islanders_ concludes that the evolution of Pasifika Theatre in all its forms over three particular decades means it is now a thriving community of practitioners who have “achieved prominence as writers, directors, choreographers, actors, producers and film-makers” and who “demonstrate the ability to adapt, to be flexible, entrepreneurial, multi-skilled and interdisciplinary” (209). Most of all, Pasifika Theatre in Aotearoa is testament to “community, collaboration, and strong family relationships that extend across generations” (209). The book is an important publication that invites further discourse, and as a talanoa, it builds on previous scholarship to expand a platform for others to widen the discussion around Pasifika Theatre and performance. Like Pasifika Theatre itself, this text is a map that is navigated by the many distinctive voices, spirits, ancestors, and connections to the elements in all their guises. Aotearoa is a bicultural nation that is rich in talent, anchored by shifting postcolonial cultures and communities of practice. It is my dual hope that _Floating Islanders_ will expand the prosperous, dynamic domain of Pasifika Theatre in Aotearoa so that Pasifika artists and academics can further empower their own fields of practice, and will enable a wider international audience to understand more about the deep well of authentic work that exists in the new Oceania.
Work Cited