A preface describes how the book grew out of a project on the Politics of Tradition in the Pacific at Macquarie University. Jeff Clark’s reference to Papua New Guinea’s “weak state” also looks forward to the Australian National University’s current project on State, Society and Governance in Melanesia. The contributors show that “narratives of nation” in the South Pacific compete with other stories and do not necessarily generate popular attachment to existing states. Jeff Sissons shows how actively leaders have to work to generate such attachments. Jocelyn Linnekin’s discussion of the theme of “centeredness” in Samoan history addresses another aspect of “state-ness.” Impatience with nineteenth-century Samoan political chaos sounds remarkably like current fretting about “governance.” Margaret Jolly’s animating intelligence links these projects. The smart conclusion by Nick Thomas links the chapters to wider arguments about consumption and globalization.

John Kneubuhl’s trilogy of plays, Think of a Garden, Mele Kanikau: A Pageant, and A Play: A Play, from University of Hawai’i Press is a publishing event that must be saluted and celebrated. It makes an extraordinary achievement in dramatic writing available to theatre practitioners, to teachers and students, and to general readers.

Whereas the trilogy of Aeschylus’s Oresteia provides a logical continuity of story, event, and characters, Kneubuhl’s trilogy is idiosyncratic and, at first, seemingly lacking in coherence. Think of a Garden, the last written, comes first; Mele Kanikau, written first, is the central play; and A Play: A Play, composed between the other two, comes last. The trilogy took Kneubuhl, a professional Hollywood screenwriter for twenty years, who would have been used to writing to deadlines, more than a decade and a half to complete. None of the characters from one play appear in either of the other two. The settings are variously American Sāmoa 1929, Honolulu “mid to late twentieth century,” and Hawai’i in some indefinite present. What binds the three plays is personal (surreptitiously autobiographical), thematic (all at once, the theme of loss—historical, political, and cultural loss, private and temporal loss, and artistic and creative...
loss, and formal (shared meditations on the play of theatricality that contrive a metaphysical mirror with which to regard reality). So, \textit{Think of a Garden} has a character called The Writer, who tells his own story; in \textit{Mele Kanikau} there is a character called The Author, who tells us he was “made . . . up [by] a man called John Kneubuhl”—and \textit{A Play: A Play} has a character called James Actor, who plays a character called James Alama, who, in the play within a play, is the author of a play (which may be the play we are watching!). Both \textit{Mele Kanikau} and \textit{A Play: A Play} have “stages” for settings; that is, what they represent are places of representation. \textit{Think of a Garden} is set in “Leone, American Sāmoa,” but the real setting is The Writer’s mind. This summary might make Kneubuhl’s work sound stiflingly self-reflexive and self-referential; however, the theatrical question marks that hover over the nature of representation are cunningly integrated with personal narratives of searching for identity and political narratives of struggles for survival and independence. The nature of representation is extremely pertinent to Kneubuhl’s theme of possession, both in the sense of being in the power of a ghost or a spirit or \textit{aitu}, and the sense of being politically colonized, and to the theme of dispossession, loss of land, loss of identity, loss of language. Kneubuhl manages to create a confluence of colonized experience and modernist theatre. Loss is also both cause and subject of western modernism, which Kneubuhl would have learned directly from two masters at Yale, Hindemith in music, and Thorton Wilder in drama. Kneubuhl makes full use of the modern consciousness of the gap between art and life. Throughout the trilogy, he plays with the fact that the reenactment is less than the life it represents, and, in this way, is able to present drama as an art of loss. We, the living, are so much a diminution of those who came before us, the ineffable dead, that “they [the dead] grieve for the living” (169).

When I first read \textit{Think of a Garden}, I was struck by its naturalistic surface and felt immediately how well it would film. However, Kneubuhl makes of so-called naturalism an elaborate deceit. At the beginning, The Writer evokes the scene and then asks the audience “to think of that garden now as if it existed in your minds as truly and as beautifully as it did for me” (4). How can it exist for us except through what this character, The Writer, chooses to tell us? We rely totally on his word, as his memories take shape as scenes in which he becomes the little boy, David, he was thirty years ago. The Writer stands, in time, at the threshold of Western Samoan independence, the end of the long journey of the Mau movement, while simultaneously he narrates the drama of his own life. \textit{Think of a Garden} is, in fact, a piece of storytelling before it is a naturalistic drama. The Writer speaks a kind of literary prose that would be overwhelming if it were not in competition with other rhetorics. For instance, the play gives us the official lies of the New Zealand High Commissioner, Colonel Stephen Allen, after the murder of Tamasese in Apia by the New Zealand police; and it gives us a report of the killing from
David’s American father, Frank; and The Writer gives us his account of the news breaking in his own house and the terrible grief of his mother. The telling of stories is central to this drama. Words are what memories are made of, so this is a “wordy” play in the best sense of the word, and, when the words are handled by skillful actors, each of the six superbly drawn characters, ghosts of the writer’s mind, speaks on their own behalf and pleads their now-departed cause with chilling intensity.

Mele Kanikau satirizes the rhetoric of the Hawaiian pageant mounted for tourists. What stands behind this debased language of the pageant is not some better way of saying it in English, but another language, Hawaiian. The ghost of the Hawaiian language haunts this play, and, as so often in drama, it is the ghosts who are the most memorable characters, more powerful and fascinating than the living. Ghost is the word Kneubuhl uses in Think of a Garden. Presumably it was the English word used at the time of the play (late 1920s) and, even though now it may seem a little old-fashioned, one should remember how powerfully it lingers in a word such as “ghostwrite,” an idea Kneubuhl would surely have related to. In Think of a Garden there is a ghost, the boy, Veni, whose existence is only manifested through the voice of The Writer speaking in Samoan. In Mele Kanikau the dead are present on stage, but we, the living, the audience, cannot distinguish them from the living until the play reveals the fact to us. This powerful theatrical trope is central to the play’s impact. But there is also a child that never was, the offspring that might have been, of Noa and Frances (or of haole Georgina and her Samoan man, or of Laupi’o and Kea, who are characters in a story that may or may not exist). This lost (unborn) child, so teasingly reminiscent of the child in Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, is restored via The Author, who tells us: “I became that little boy: Years later, remembering her, thinking of her loss that was now mine as well, trying to put the murmuring of her voice into words, asking over and over, ‘What was it? What flew away, out of our lives?’ I could only think of . . . o’o . . . mano . . . i’iwi . . . o’u . . . A mele kanikau of birds’ names” (164).

Loss can only be made sense of by shifting speech into the other language, which becomes the language of loss. In her informative “Afterword: A Portrait of John Kneubuhl,” Jackie Pualani Johnson explains that Mele Kanikau translates into English as “anthem of lamentation.” And Johnson quotes Kneubuhl’s directive: “Young people . . . learn one Polynesian language that is dying” (266).

English translations of Hawaiian and Samoan are provided (usefully placed at the foot of the page on which the original appears) and only once, in the crucial, repeated, and final words of Mele Kanikau—“Ha’ina ‘ia mai ana ka puana”—does the translation—“The summary refrain is being told”—seem inadequate to the task.

The trilogy concludes with the comedy, A Play: A Play, the final line of which, “Well—? How do you like my new play?” uttered perhaps with
“the ghost” of a smile, wittily turns the trilogy back on itself. But, even in this mazelike series of scenes, where we become more and more confused as to what is real and what is pretend, the ancient figure of Pele is able to bring a resonance that is uncanny and disturbing in its implications: a feather is a real object that might fall from a bird, but, in the realm of sign-making known as drama, it can also be a word in the mouth of an actor or a feather-catching gesture made by an actor. This sense of doubleness pervades Kneubuhl’s dramas, no more so than in the way “spirits” are both the powerful presences of the dead and also the tongue-loosening liquors that come in bottles and saturate all three plays in the trilogy.

It is impossible to consider adequately the achievement of this trilogy in a short review. The worry must be that Kneubuhl’s work will fall between various cracks and not be sufficiently read or staged. A contemporary, commercial theatre could regard his dramatic writing as too wordy, yet he is no more so than, say, Brian Friel, whose plays in recent years have been staged on the mainstream drama circuit of the English-speaking world. And, though all comparisons are unfair and invidious, Kneubuhl’s writing, which deals with some of the same themes as Friel’s, seems to me much subtler and richer. But, because of Kneubuhl’s cultural particularity, he is much less likely to be noticed. I hope this book begins a process whereby his plays become more widely known. The presentation of the text is clear and uncluttered. The editor’s note, along with the afterword, the glossary, and the delightful photo of Kneubuhl in his garden, make this an attractive publication.

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Where We Once Belonged, a first novel by Samoan writer Sia Figiel, is a work of great courage and power. Winner of a Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Best First Book (Southeast Asia–South Pacific region), the novel has stirred some controversy among Samoans and other students of cultural politics in Polynesia. When I taught Figiel’s work in university literature courses in Sāmoa, emotions inevitably ran high among both my students, who typically loved it, and colleagues, who often found it troubling at best and reprehensible at worst. One fellow lecturer illustrated her own revulsion from the work by describing the sight of a close friend (and fundamentalist minister) literally trashing the book after reading the first line. In an interview Figiel herself reports being challenged by a local “cultural expert”