In 1989 I became the coordinator of a union-education project, working in nine Pacific Island countries to promote the education of local union educators and assist in the writing and production of educational materials. I was thrown into this work without any real preparation, and the Pacific, as ever, stubbornly refused to succumb to the stereotypes and preconceptions so plentifully bestowed on it by both the ill and the well intentioned. In short, I was desperate to understand what was going on around me and where it had come from. I devoured everything I could lay my hands on: histories, travel guides, ethnographers early and late, fiction by Westerners and locals, political analyses, genealogies, explorers’ journals, airline magazines, missionary memoirs, and local papers. As well, I constantly questioned my union hosts, to the extent that people would hide from me rather than be subjected to another interrogation session.

One day, in the course of this search, I came across (I think in John Quilter’s bookshop in my hometown of Wellington, New Zealand) an old copy of the first number of the first volume of *Mana Review*, went straight to a piece on a new Oceania, and learned more about how to go about how to interact in my new geographical and cultural environment than I had from any other source. It was not that I had any sense that the author wanted to help me; in fact he seemed a prickly and difficult character given to denunciation, mockery, contradiction, and scorn. But this was no great surprise, for I had read his previously published poems, short stories, and novels. What struck me was that this piece and its approach worked for me; the insights I received from it aided not just understanding but, above all, action: inside it was a kind of map that had not previously been available to me. And all this was published long before some of the associated insights of Stuart Hall and Epeli Hau‘ofa (Hall 1996; Hau‘ofa 1993, 2000a, 2000b).

And yet there was also something that made me a little uneasy about...
the author’s perspectives in this piece. After all, this was a man, apparently a materialist at least most of the time, who could also write, “Perhaps we ourselves exist only in one another’s dreams” (Wendt 1976a, 49). Later it became clearer to me that, while the piece helped me to understand something about where the Pacific I was involved in had come from, I had no idea where the essay itself had come from and, particularly, where Albert Wendt had located, in both senses, the new Oceania. Later still, and in the course of university study, I pursued these questions by combing through every related piece that I could find, and some unrelated ones, the result of which is this brief exploration.

Wendt’s “Towards a New Oceania,” first published in 1976, has been anthologized four times since then, most recently in 1996, and, modified and somewhat tempered, provided the substance of Wendt’s introduction to his 1980 anthology *Lali*. The occasion of its writing came at the conclusion of the pursuit of a personal Hawaiki: it was “a return to where I was born, or, to put it another way, it is a search for where I was born” (Wendt 1976a, 49–50). The return was from an immersion in the deadly effects of the embourgeoisement of postindependence Pacific societies: “I think I know what such a death is like: for the past few years I have watched myself (and some of the people I admire) dying that death” (Wendt 1976a, 57). This prognosis first emerged, almost verbatim, in earlier works. To understand the exact nature of the return it is necessary to take into account the original sources of the “New Oceania” essay and relate its perspectives to the particular moment of their original expression (Wendt 1975, 377).

Early in 1974, Wendt published in *New Zealand Book World* a short article entitled “Inside ‘Outsider’ Wendt” (Wendt 1974a), in which appeared, in virtually final form, much of the material that would later appear in “New Oceania,” particularly that dealing with outsiders and diversity, as well as a sketch of what would become the survey of the new Pacific writing. Later, in May, substantial elements of the *Mana Review* essay appeared in a paper delivered at the Eighth Waigani Seminar held in Port Moresby: “A Sermon on National Development, Education, and the Rot in the South Pacific” (Wendt 1975). As that title suggests, there is a heavier emphasis on national development in the Waigani paper than in the *Mana* essay, and the former’s trenchant critique of the Church and support for organized labor are not carried over. From the Waigani paper, however, the sections on education and architecture are transplanted almost directly to “New Oceania” and in the Waigani paper a number of Wendt’s later targets appear: preservation; colonial mimicry; corruption
and the betrayal of independence by elites, experts, and meddling outsiders; the tourist hotel and dog-kennel houses; and educational colonization and pacification.

But if 1974 was the year of Wendt’s return to Oceania, the precise nature of that return is far from clear. Leaving aside the question of the extent to which New Zealand is Oceanic, it would seem to refer to a return to then Western Sāmoa; but Wendt had returned to Sāmoa in 1965. While he had certainly moved to Fiji in 1974 to take up an appointment at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva, there is no sense in which that could be “a return to where I was born” (Wendt 1976a, 50). It appears, therefore, that the return was not a geographical one. This is further emphasized by the fact that when, in late 1976, tiring of exile in the USP’s “Stone Castle,” he expressed longing for a physical return, he was quite specific about the destination: “Without roots—no matter how impermanent they may be—a writer will die slowly, inevitably. I know now that I can’t live too long away from Samoa, that small collection of islands which I call home. There will always be that craving to return” (Wendt 1976b, 27).

That statement seems to leave open the possibility that he was referring to a metaphorical return in time to the ways of his forebears; but such a temporal return is specifically rejected in “New Oceania”: “I do not advocate a return to an imaginary pre-papalagi Golden Age or utopian womb” (Wendt 1976a, 53). This rejection is made more specific in the context of artistic production in the revised version of his 1978 paper to the Second International Symposium on the Arts of Oceania, “The Artist and the Reefs Breaking Open” (revised version Wendt 1983). There he attacked the quest for “authenticity” on the part of both the colonizers, who undermined the cultures in the first place, and the Pacific leaders who echo them: “The art of our forefathers was for a time past. It is not (and should not be) the art of today. Let us study it as that, and not use it to dismiss today’s art” (Wendt 1983, 198–199). This perspective prefigures and pre-dates by many years the argument of Stuart Hall’s landmark paper, “New Ethnicities”: “There can, therefore, be no simple ‘return’ or ‘recovery’ of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present” (Hall 1996, 448).

The return, then, is neither geographical nor temporal; its nature is, in fact, revealed in the activities to which Wendt had turned in 1974, the year...
of the first recorded emergence of the essay’s major concerns. On arrival in Suva in that year, he became involved with the South Pacific Creative Arts Society (the publishers of *Mana Review*, later *Mana*, which he helped to produce), ran writers’ workshops for the USP Extension Services, edited new poetry anthologies from the then New Hebrides and Western Sāmoa and Fiji, and began editing a series of collections of the works of individual Pacific poets (Sharrad 2003, xv, 14). This suggests that the return may have been facilitated by his heavy involvement in the wave of new Oceanic writing appearing in the early 1970s: the occasion is not an imaginary return, but a turn to another imaginary, that of such figures as his grandmother, Mele Tuaopepe, to whom Wendt first paid tribute in his 1974 *Book World* article, and regularly thereafter (1974a, 6; 1976b, 30; 1991). The return is across the chasm of colonization, a tightrope walk across “the remembered cord that stretches across the abyss of all that we’ve forgotten” (Wendt 1986, 144), exemplified in much of the new writing.

The return is also a search, because it necessarily unfolds in a present that is always in the process of becoming, of being written: “The only valid culture worth having is the one being lived out now. . . . The present is all we have and we should live it out as creatively as possible” (Wendt 1976a, 53). This, too, is paralleled in that same preoccupation with memory and remembering that runs throughout Wendt’s work from “Inside Us the Dead” (the title poem of the 1976 volume) to *Black Rainbow* (1992) and “Nei,” his mythic poem sequence in *Photographs* (1995), and whose close connection with imagination is identified in an interview with Antonella Sarti (1998, 208–209). The year of the return, 1974, was, after all, also the year of the first appearance of the maxim that encapsulates that preoccupation and regularly reappears: “We are what we remember: the actions we lived through or should have lived out and which we have chosen to remember” (Wendt 1974b, 67). Like history (Wendt 1987, 84), memory and remembering always and only take place in the present and this, in turn, is the source of Wendt’s emphasis, here, on renewal and his rejection of both preservation and revival: “usage determines authenticity” (1976a, 52). At the same time, memory is a prerequisite for living fully in the present.

Hence the repeated emphasis on “the new”—the word itself appearing some dozen times in “New Oceania,” always in a positive sense: “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 colonialism and based firmly on our own pasts. The quest should be for a new Oceania.” The imported
architecture is not “new”; it is an “aping of colonial ways,” an obliteration rather than a recreation of culture. If revival is out of the question, so too is preservation: “No culture is ever static and can be preserved . . . like a stuffed gorilla in a museum.” As well as being a vehicle for the deceptions of both colonizers and romantic elites, preservation also serves as one of the sources of the chill of racism. Another such source is the related cul-de-sac, the call to traditional identity, “too fervent or paranoid an identification with one’s culture” (Wendt 1976a, 53, 57, 52, 53).

Wendt’s declaration that “our countries, cultures, nations, planets are what we imagine them to be” is an early insight that would be extended and developed in Benedict Anderson’s later work on nations as imagined communities (Wendt 1976a, 49; Anderson 1991). The return to an Oceanic imaginary displaces the fruitless pursuit of preservation, revival, and traditional identity. Where the acquisition of identity is essentially an individual act—a withdrawal in both senses from the collective pool, and a diminution of it—resorting to the imaginary is an act of creation, an immersion in that pool in the present, and an augmentation of it: “The quest for the self is eventually determined by the quest for the group. The self can only be whole and strong when linked to others and defined in relation to others” (Sarti 1998, 208).

“Towards a New Oceania” is a record of an exhilarating moment in Pacific creativity and one full of promise for the future. That the moment would pass is indicated by the pessimism and despair of the “Stone Castle” in late 1976 (Wendt 1976b, 27–29), and the comparative decline in artistic production throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s as many of the former poets morphed into politicians and bureaucrats, and capital in the form of “economic rationalism” went on the attack after the oil shock of 1973, extending, thereby, the reach of globalization. “New Oceania” is also a foundation text for Pacific studies, particularly the Pacific studies we were attempting to pursue at Albert Wendt’s alma mater, the Victoria University of Wellington, with its emphasis on interdisciplinarity, comparativity, and, especially, indigenous location. And it is foundational above all for its insistence that, while we draw deeply on memory and rememberings, we are not in the business of preservation or sterile revival, least of all of the recreation of some ideal traditional identity. Our task, that essay reminds us, is to live as creatively as possible in the present, walking the tightrope between memory and the future, the new. In this it provides us with the basic materials for a map of that present at least as
potent and as oriented toward action as was the map it provided for me twenty years ago.

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Abstract

Albert Wendt described the occasion of the writing of his groundbreaking and still influential 1976 essay, “Towards a New Oceania,” as the conclusion of “a return to where I was born.” It is clear that the return is from an immersion in some of the moribund elements of the postindependence Pacific, but the form of the return itself is by no means clear from a casual reading. Drawing on a variety of texts written before and after 1976, this brief investigation seeks to discover the location and, more importantly, the nature of that return. Discarding the possibility of the return being to then-Western Sāmoa or, indeed to any geographical location, or even of it being in any sense a temporal or traditional one, I turn to the possibility that the return is a metaphorical one to an Oceanic imagination originally encountered in the storytelling of Wendt’s grandmother and reemerging in the new Pacific writing of the 1970s.

Keywords: Albert Wendt, Oceania, Pacific, Mana, imaginary