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**Visualizing Banaba: Art and Research about a
Diffracted Pacific Island**

Katerina Martina Teaiwa

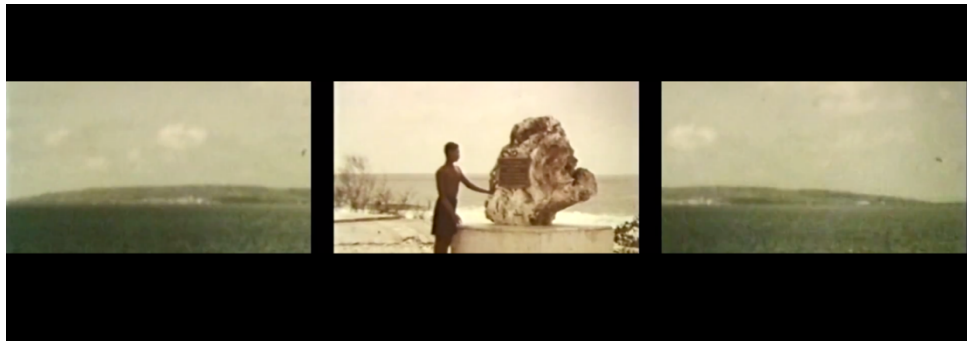


Figure 1 Screenshot from Mine Lands: for Teresia in Project Banaba by Katerina Teaiwa. Image courtesy of the author.

For over twenty years I've been imagining and producing my Pacific research and scholarship through the performing and visual arts while regularly resisting publishing about most of that process. While discussions of method are there in my 2002 PhD thesis, much of this lack of reflection on the methods is a matter of time and energy and also a resistance to the norms of scholarly discipline and career strategy—avoiding top journals, refusing to play the publishing game, while being regularly inundated with requests to contribute to publishing and editorial endeavours. However, this has left a gap in my own work on methodologies and in sharing approaches with early career scholars in Pacific studies and other fields.

My book, *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba*,¹ about the impact of British, Australian, and, New Zealand phosphate mining on one of my ancestral homelands, felt like a mission to Mars.



Figure 2 Google Map of the Pacific Highlighting the Location of Banaba in Kiribati. Image courtesy of Google, INEGI, 2002.

Prolonged sitting, writing, reading, rewriting, and editing are static embodied processes unnatural to human design. And while I'm so pleased the book has been taken up in several anthropology, history, Pacific studies, and Indigenous studies classrooms, the chapter I love most is the one that reviewers and editors had almost nothing to say about. Titled "Remix: Our Sea of Phosphate," it consists of textual and visual fragments from books, journal articles, ethnographic film, and archives.² Elsewhere, I have written about my interest in Indigenous remix and how apt it is for Banaban lands, choreographies, histories, and displacement.³ My goal has never been to produce a neat and well-synthesized master narrative of what happened to Banaba, also known as Ocean Island, but to appropriately present our two-and-a-half-square-mile (six-square-kilometer) ancestral island that was broken, crushed, dried, bagged, and hauled off in ships "in pieces." The remixed forms of research and storytelling about Banaba are in line with the multisited, multisensory, empirical, material, social, and political elements marking the interaction and mutual interference between Banaba and twentieth-century British, Australian, and New Zealand colonial, imperial, agricultural, and food security projects.

Project Banaba

My ongoing creative work on *Project Banaba* converts twenty years of ethnographic, archival, and visual research on the island into a contemporary art installation that is essentially a Banaban montage that accounts for how the island has been diffracted and remixed. It was originally commissioned in 2017 by Carriageworks cultural precinct in Sydney and then traveled to MTG gallery in Hawkes Bay, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2019. It is currently being prepared for Te Uru Waitakere contemporary gallery in Auckland for 2021 with the support of Yuki Kihara, a curator, long-term collaborator, and celebrated Samoan Japanese artist. Each of these locations is relevant to the Banaban story as historical centers of phosphate business operations or fertilizer manufacturing.

A small number of concepts have guided the research and art and continue to remain relevant: *te aba* referring to both land and people; *kainga* referring to home, the social networks and practices associated with home as a place that “feeds”; and montage, diffraction, and remix. These last three were selected less as ideas to track and unpack genealogically in various disciplines than as ways to see, experience, and construct historical and contemporary Banaban worlds, and knowledges about them.

The dispersed nature of the island through an industrial process and the many Indigenous, political, and economic stakeholders involved in the mining and associated agricultural supply chains meant that the island became different things to many different groups. British, Australian, and New Zealand political and agricultural stakeholders held and enforced power over the Pacific stakeholders, and during World War II this led to the brief involvement of devastating Japanese military powers and the eventual displacement of Banabans from their home of over two thousand years. They returned in the 1970s to occupy the island while a parallel lawsuit against the company and the Crown drew much global publicity, resulting in the end of mining operations and a small out-of-court settlement. The island, now incorporated into the Republic of Kiribati, remains unrehabilitated, the mining debris scattered across the pinnacle-riddled surface, while most of the six thousand or so Banabans live on Rabi Island in the north of Fiji and throughout a growing Pacific diaspora.

Diffraction, rather than refraction, as an approach to Banaban histories, works for me because of the numerous geopolitical, economic, agricultural, and Indigenous interests in an island that functioned as a major natural resource from 1900 to 1980. While refraction speaks to the change of direction when a wave meets a new medium through which it is transmitted, diffraction results in the spreading of waves because of *interference* with various patterns emerging that can reinforce or cancel out each other. Donna Haraway helped



Figure 3 Project Banaba consists of three parts. This view shows the three-screen projection Mine Lands: for Teresia and elements of the textile-based installation Body of the land, body of the people that features images and text from the archives. Another section is called Teaiwa's Kainga, a photo reef of everyday life on Rabi Island punctuated with black-and-white archival images of fertilizer production. Image courtesy of Jacqui Manning, Carriageworks, 2017.

bring this term out of physics, describing one of its effects as the recognition of heterogeneous histories and the recording of interference, interaction, reinforcement, and difference.⁴ Banaba can be viewed either as that “new medium” that causes new patterns and heterogeneous histories to emerge or as the wave itself encountering the interference of colonialism and agricultural imperialism, resulting in the dispersal of the wave in multiple directions. Banaba travels and is remixed through the fertilizer industry and spread over farms across Australia and New Zealand that produce other materials consumed by plants, animals, and humans. Those phosphate waves are still flowing through Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand ecosystems.

Project Banaba was on exhibit at MTG Hawke's Bay Tai Ahuriri gallery about five minutes down the road from the large Ravensdown fertilizer plant at the center of an ongoing controversy about the use of phosphate from Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Morocco's OCP is currently the world's largest producer of rock phosphate and was established in 1920, the same year that the British Phosphate Commissioners consolidated their interests in the Pacific. Ravensdown has manufactured a wide variety of phosphorus- and nitrogen-yielding fertilizers for decades from Pacific sources. During the exhibition launch, the chair of the Napier City Council said he was stunned about this



Figure 4 Ravensdown at Hawke's Bay, Aotearoa New Zealand. Images courtesy of Kate-rina Teaiwa.

history. He said that aside from employees most people in the region had no idea of the global and historical implications of activities at the plant. Most people did not realize that New Zealand had been consuming Nauruan and Banaban phosphate for decades, multiplying their agricultural outputs while also polluting both Pacific and New Zealand environments, and displacing the Banabans.

Yuki's co-curator for *Project Banaba* at MTG, Jess Mio, helped make a short film about the exhibition, and we attempted to get some footage near the Ravensdown phosphate plant. As we pulled up to a fairly public intersection to get a closer look at the buildings, an employee in a high-vis vest appeared out of nowhere, asking what we were doing. Jess pointed to our Napier Council vehicle, but the employee pointed at every patch of grass surrounding the intersection and said, "That belongs to Ravensdown, that belongs to Ravensdown and that belongs to Ravensdown. No filming any buildings without permission." So we crossed the road to the very public beach and took all manner of footage and pictures of Ravensdown.

Many Māori and Pacific Islanders who visited the exhibition also understood the Indigenous spiritual, material, and cultural implications of extracting Banaban land because our identities and values are deeply rooted in landscapes that are seen as sentient and ancestral. Banabans are born of the rock,



Figure 5 *Aerial Top-Dressing Stamp*, circa 1960. New Zealand Post Museum Collection, artwork by J.C. Boyd, produced by Harrison & Sons Ltd. Image courtesy of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

and our ancestors are part of those rocks. So spreading Banaba across Aotearoa is, as the Māori curator, Te Hira Henderson, proclaimed at the opening of *Project Banaba*, one of the most shameful things he's ever heard of, the worst thing you can do to Indigenous people—take their bones and spread them across other people's lands and eat them. This iconic image of a New Zealand crop duster spreading Banaban and Nauruan phosphate fertilizer across hill country was a key motif that I replicated throughout the show.

Project Banaba thus utilises visual and layered storytelling to share the historical and contemporary impacts of colonialism and extractive industries on small islands, and the long-term consequences of environmental destruction and Indigenous displacement. Any research on current or future solutions to the world's greatest environmental, climate, or pollution problems cannot ignore the role of colonialism, imperialism, and the appropriation of natural resources by powerful countries to fuel damaging and unsustainable consumption and lifestyles. Technical solutions alone cannot address unequal structures of power and historical injustices that must be faced to bring back balance between human societies and their environments. As Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin write in *The Human Planet*: "The Anthropocene began with wide-



Figure 6 Project Banaba at MTG Hawke's Bay Tai Aburiri, 2019. This view shows textile work that was added to Project Banaba when it traveled to Aotearoa New Zealand. *Land from the Sky* deconstructs the 1960 top-dressing stamp and brings it into conversation with Banaban voices and queries about where their land has gone. Image courtesy of MTG.

spread colonialism and slavery; it is a story of how people treat the environment and how people treat each other.”⁵ The stories of Banaba, now mostly buried in archives, farmlands, people’s memories, Facebook groups, and academic texts, can continue as cautionary tales of social and environmental devastation and injustice for the wider world through mediums such as public art exhibitions.

* * *

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Notes

Other versions of this essay have been presented at the *Rethinking Pollution Symposium* at the Australian National University, 2019, and Hong Kong contemporary arts gallery *Para Site's* 2019 international conference.

¹ Katerina Teaiwa, *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

² Ibid.

³ Katerina Teaiwa, "Culture Moves? The Festival of Pacific Arts and Dance Remix in Oceania," *Dance Research Aotearoa*, no. 2 (2014): 2–19. <https://doi.org/10.15663/dra.v2i1.27>.

⁴ Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203731093>.

⁵ Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene* (London: Pelican, 2018).