

# Remaking culture in 'Project Banaba'

Katerina Teaiwa in conversation  
with Michael Fitzgerald

Spring had sprung in Canberra when we first met up to discuss 'Project Banaba'. We were on Katerina Teaiwa's 'other' home turf as Associate Professor of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University. The project's curator, internationally acclaimed artist Yuki Kihara, was also at hand – soon to fly back to Auckland, and eventually Apia, where she is based, and Oceania was definitely on our minds. But one coral island in particular: Banaba, formerly known as Ocean Island, which is 300 kilometres east of Nauru in the Republic of Kiribati in the central Pacific Ocean. The following conversation took place over email on the eve of the project's unveiling at Sydney's Carriageworks in November 2017.

**Michael Fitzgerald (MF):** I wanted to begin with the history – your history – which has inspired 'Project Banaba', namely the environmental destruction of Banaba through phosphate mining, and the relocation of the Banabans some 2600 kilometres away to Rabi in Fiji. It is a history that seems so little-known here in Australia and surprising even for me (having long held an interest in the Pacific). I remember growing up in Melbourne and seeing the phosphate rock monuments at Nauru House in Collins Street and not really understanding what they were or what they meant – the materiality of them. Do you hope this multimedia event at Carriageworks will make this history 'materially present' for Australian audiences?

**Katerina Teaiwa (KT):** Absolutely. Collins Street in Melbourne is so iconic in Pacific phosphate history because of the former presence at both 515 and 465 Collins Street of phosphate mining company headquarters. I have read hundreds of letters and others kinds of correspondence that were generated there. Materialising history is very much a goal of my work. What most captured my attention in archives were the hundreds of images of industry on Banaba, and of manufacturing and distributing phosphate back in Australia. While scholars often focus on the words, actions and movements of people, the archives inspired me to think of the chemical and physical nature and movement of the island itself. Images of farming and life on the land are seen as very iconic of Australian history and identity, but people don't always go further to think about the raw materials and other inputs that make farming possible. Those inputs have come from somewhere, and Banaban and Nauruan lives and livelihoods were irrevocably transformed for Australian and New Zealand prosperity and food security.

**MF:** You have a mixed background – would you say interdisciplinary? – as an artist, combining anthropology, dance and

Pacific studies. I am interested to see how with 'Project Banaba' this will interface with the visual arts? Has this been a particular challenge, and how has Yuki Kihara (as curator) helped you with some of the conceptual layers of the show?

**KT:** Yuki generously encouraged me to take on the role of visual artist for this project rather than give my work to others to reinterpret as I had done in the past. We imagined many exciting ways to tell this story, and in the end I went with approaches that were extensions of my scholarship. I think I would call my background transdisciplinary, which for me combines interdisciplinarity with attempts to move beyond disciplines and academia into public and community spaces. While this opportunity from Carriageworks has been a bit daunting, Yuki, project assistant Kirsten Farrell, and an excellent network of practitioners, helped me recall that I have always been a visual person and often prioritise visual form and structure over content and meaning. I spent half my life drawing, but there were far more opportunities for performing arts in Fiji. I think the biggest influence of my dance background in this exhibition is the prevalent use of montage which has a choreographic effect. I felt compelled to condense, speed-up and fragment the 80 years of mining on Banaba because it was an intense period that changed Banaban culture and broke the island into tiny pieces. This is compared with the millions of years it took the earth to build up the phosphate rock, and the 2000 years Banabans had inhabited the island.

**MF:** In your article on diaspora I was interested to read how your research (which underpins the show) was transformed by the British Phosphate Commission's photographic collection that you saw in Melbourne. I was struck by your description of how you witnessed 'the images as frozen stills of bodies and places that were once animated, breathing, shifting, decaying, fertile, interactive worlds'.<sup>1</sup> Was it then that you saw the potential to bring these bodies and places back to life?

**KT:** Yes, absolutely. My initial research on Banaba became visual because of the great number of images I found in the archives along with old company footage. Consequently I did far more filming than I did writing. The video camera was an extension of my right arm and I always imagined and hoped multimedia exhibitions and performances would be a major outcome of my work. In the archives I would look at the static images of men working in the dusty fields, children going to school on the island, colonial officials in their impeccable suits, Banabans staring down the camera, and ask myself how they



Ocean Island in September 1910; image courtesy the National Archives of Australia, Canberra



Photo from the archives of the British Phosphate Commission; image courtesy the National Archives of Australia, Canberra

felt, how everything smelled, what the industrial environment sounded like. I tried to animate the static images in order to experience the past. In ‘Project Banaba’ I attempt to do this through a three-screen video projection featuring Banaba over a 100-year period, and through textiles that function as a timeline of key events alongside images of ancestral Banabans.

**MF:** With its various strands and layers threading through the past and present, how does ‘Project Banaba’ connect with your interest in ‘the remix’, especially in regards to Pacific dance studies? Here I am thinking of Erin Reilly’s comment that ‘to develop a remix, the creator must first consider how the original source is related to a new context’.<sup>2</sup>

**KT:** ‘Project Banaba’ is the ultimate remix of my work, but I definitely try to invoke the quality or sentiment of the original sources. I have been interested in montage, remix, critical juxtapositions and all manner of cut-and-paste or constructivist methods for years. In many ways it has been the reason why anthropology has sometimes been an awkward disciplinary home for me. Classical anthropology is predicated on hanging out for a long time in a specific ‘local’ space. Banabans are a multi-sited people with a dispersed home island, and this is further extended for the Teaiwa family because our mother is African–American. She was the first student in Miss Therrell Smith’s ballet school for black children that began in 1948 in Washington D.C. So that was another interesting cultural juxtaposition in our household – ballet alongside all the Pacific dances we learned from many Pacific cultures including Fijian, Banaban and other Kiribati forms at the community events our father regularly took us to. So our heritage is mixed and our lives are mixed and multi-sited. Remix just makes sense to me.

**MF:** When we recently met in Canberra with Yuki, you spoke of an earlier New Zealand iteration of ‘Project Banaba’ – was that Brett Graham’s work *Kainga Tabi Kainga Rua* (2003)? How do you see the project continuing on after Sydney, with further iterations in the future?

**KT:** The last version of this will be somewhere in the United Kingdom. I don’t know how, but we need to go back to the imperial source of both mining and colonialism in Oceania. Three countries owned the phosphate mining company, and it makes sense that each of these locations inform and support different artistic ‘remixes’ of the Banaban story. Artists and institutions in New Zealand were the first to respond to the invitation to acknowledge Banaban sacrifices for their agricultural prosperity. Brett Graham did some brilliant sculptures interpreting this history, and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa created a long-term installation based on my research. I am grateful that an Australian cultural institution has now supported the project because it is an important, if somewhat dishonourable dimension of Australian history. My next goal is to find a British institution which will support another exhibition and help complete this journey of reminding imperial countries of their exploitation of Pacific islands and islanders. There are lessons in this history that will help us think through future population displacement, including as a result of climate change.

**MF:** I wanted to ask you about the influence of your late sister Teresia (1968 – 2017), who was not only a groundbreaking teacher and academic in Pacific studies but also an important poet. How did her ideas help conceptually shape this production?

**KT:** Teresia had hoped to do research on Banaban gender issues when she first began her PhD at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She shared these plans with Harry Maude, the former Native Lands and Resident Commissioner who became a scholar in Pacific History at the Australian National University (ANU). He sent back a disheartening and dismissive letter stating that her unusual ‘miscegenated ancestry’ was causing her to ask personal and political questions that were not objective or scholarly. My sister changed her research topic but wrote some powerful poems and essays about Banaba that I read many times before deciding to pursue a PhD myself at



Katerina Teaiwa, *Project Banaba*, exhibition detail from *Teaiwa's Kainga*; image courtesy the artist; photo: Katerina Teaiwa

the ANU. She wrote a poem called 'Mine Lands' which directly informs the three-screen video projection in 'Project Banaba.' Her 1995 essay 'Yaqona/yagoqu: Routes and roots of a displaced native' was written as a treatment for a film project, and that pretty much inspired all my Banaba scholarship, my book, and video work. Her passing at such a young age is a great loss to our family, her husband and children, and to the thousands she inspired through her teaching and research.

**MF:** In the interview between the two of you, I think it was Teresia who posed the question: 'If we lose an island what does everyone else gain and was it worth the sacrifice?'<sup>3</sup> Do you think with 'Project Banaba' you are closer to answering that fundamental question?

**KT:** The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a story in 1912 saying that Banabans who were refusing to lease more land could not prevent the 'mining and export of a product of such immense value to all the rest of mankind'. Australian photojournalist Thomas J. McMahon wrote a piece for the *Penny Pictorial Magazine* in 1919 titled 'Let's-all-be-thankful island: A little spot in the South Pacific that multiplies the world's food'. In 1976 the *Canberra Times* ran a story by Crispin Hull titled 'Banabans get law, not justice, in island dispute'. There is no doubt that Australian and New Zealand agriculture and farming exports grew exponentially in parallel with the import and application of Banaban and Nauruan phosphate to farmlands. Land was the entire basis of the Banaban economy and social identities prior to mining, and the relatively low monetary payments for leases and royalties hardly compensated for the great loss of physical land that ensued. So Banabans sacrificed their homeland for British, Australian and New Zealand prosperity and, today, many live in relative poverty in Fiji and Kiribati. Most Australians and New Zealanders are unaware of this history, and Banaban elders might say it wasn't worth the sacrifice. They took the company to the British High Court and lost. However, young Banabans today feel very much connected

to two home countries and two islands (Banaba and Rabi), and are remaking culture in innovative ways.

**MF:** It seems that with these 'new' Pacific histories now being told, we are ready to start moving away from Dumont d'Urville's 'mapping' of the Pacific towards something that is more reflective of the diasporic lives of the Pacific peoples in our region. Would you say that is true?

**KT:** Yes, for sure. The outlines of d'Urville's Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia are these weighty looking zones on a Pacific map, but lots of Micronesians live in Polynesia, Polynesians in Melanesia, and populations from all three regions around the Pacific Rim and beyond. Pacific Islanders have always been on the move. We have cultural practices, kinship networks and identities that are both rooted in and routed through ancestral and other lands. This movement doesn't negate connections to place; it expands networks of relations. This contributes to a resilience that is underappreciated by most leaders and policymakers, including our own.

1. Katerina Teaiwa, 'Our sea of phosphate: The diaspora of Ocean Island', in Graham Harvey and Charles D. Thompson Jr (eds), *Indigenous Diasporas and Dislocations*, 2005, Routledge, Abingdon, p. 175.
2. Erin Reilly, 'Remix culture: Digital music and video remix opportunities for creative production', in Jessica Parker (ed.), *Teaching Tech-savvy Kids: Bringing Digital Media into the Classroom, Grades 5–12*, Corwin Press, California, 2010, p. 143.
3. See [microwoman.wordpress.com/2015/03/06/microwoman-interviews-dr-katerina-teaiwa-author-of-consuming-ocean-island-2015/comment-page-1/](http://microwoman.wordpress.com/2015/03/06/microwoman-interviews-dr-katerina-teaiwa-author-of-consuming-ocean-island-2015/comment-page-1/), accessed 12 November 2017.

Curated by Yuki Kihara, Katerina Teaiwa's 'Project Banaba' is being presented at Carriageworks, Sydney, until 17 December 2017.