

CONSUMING OCEAN ISLAND

STORIES OF PEOPLE AND PHOSPHATE
FROM BANABA



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N0522281294

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press
Office of Scholarly Publishing
Herman B Wells Library 350
1320 East 10th Street
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 USA

iupress.indiana.edu

Telephone 800-842-6796
Fax 812-855-7931

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Teaiwa, Katerina Martina.

Consuming Ocean Island : stories of people and phosphate from Banaba / Katerina Martina Teaiwa.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-253-01444-3 (cl) — ISBN 978-0-253-01452-8 (pb)
— ISBN 978-0-253-01460-3 (eb) 1. Banaba (Kiribati)—History—
20th century. 2. Phosphate mines and mining—Kiribati—
Banaba—History—20th century. 3. Banabans (I-Kiribati people)—
Relocation—History—20th century. I. Title.

DU615.T45 2014

996.81—dc23

2014009591

1 The Little Rock That Feeds

Let's-All-Be-Thankful Island

On September 20, 1919, Thomas J. McMahon, one of the most prolific journalists and photographers of the South Pacific of his time, published a story in an Australian magazine called the *Penny Pictorial*. It was replete with the usual Pacific imagery and language—paradise, romance, natives, South Seas, balmy breezes, and so forth—with one notable exception. The title of the piece proclaimed: “Let’s-all-be-thankful Island. A Little Spot in the South Pacific That Multiplies the World’s Food.” McMahon had just visited Ocean Island, indeed one of the tiniest inhabited dots in the Pacific, and produced extraordinary images of productive, orderly, brown laborers and impeccably clad white folk—men, women, and children—against a backdrop of less than tropical rock pinnacles and mining fields. Less than a year later the governments of Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom bought out the Pacific Phosphate Company and created the British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC), tasked with mining Nauru and Ocean Island in the Pacific and, later, Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean. Across the seas, the Chérifian Phosphates Board (Office Chérifian des Phosphate), today the world’s major phosphate supplier, was established in Morocco that same year.

In 1900, two of the world’s highest-grade sources of phosphate rock were identified on Nauru and the island of Banaba in what is now the Republic of Kiribati in the central Pacific. The history of Nauru has been told in a variety of forms, but that of the smallest of the phosphate islands is much less well known.¹ In this book I present a series of stories about Banaba from 1900 through the present, with a focus on the political and social impacts of phosphate mining and the displacement of both the land and the indigenous Banabans. While deeply concerned with the ethical and moral implications of unbridled resource extraction for indigenous peoples and global consumers, I also reflect on the process of tracking this multisited, multiscalar, and multivocal history and the varying ideological and ontological positions taken by what some might call the major and minor agents of change. Of central concern are the relations between people and the land, people’s relations to each other, and the relations between the past and the present. The island of Banaba is an entry point and the key motif linking these stories; we spiral through time, experiencing the island’s material development, decimation, and global consumption as well as the changing sociopolitical landscapes created across the mining enterprise. From the past we can see the future, and vice versa.

The Little Rock That Fee



“Babes in the Pinnacles” by Thomas J. McMahon.
 Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia

Banaba, mapped by Europeans in the early nineteenth century as “Ocean Island,” is a two-and-a-half-square-mile (six-and-a-half-square kilometer) island in the central Pacific.² Now in a state of relative obscurity, the island was the intense focus of British imperial agricultural desires for most of the twentieth century. Phosphate rock is the essential ingredient in phosphate fertilizers, which are crucial for the maintenance and expansion of global agriculture and therefore key to global food security. Both of these island landscapes were essentially eaten away by mining, which devastated both the land and spirit of their respective peoples while supporting thousands of Company³ employees and families and fueling agriculture in the British Antipodes for much of the twentieth century.

Nauru, once known as Pleasant Island and a former colony of Germany, eventually acquired international rights to self-determination and independence after World War II, initially as an Australian Trust Territory of the United Nations. These rights did not extend to Banaba, however, which was colonized by Britain. Nauru gained independence in 1968, and from 1970 the Nauruan government itself ran the mining industry, becoming temporarily one of the wealthiest countries in terms of income per capita. In the 1990s the Commission of Inquiry organized by the Nauruan government focused on the requirements for the environmental rehabilitation of worked-out phosphate lands. This resulted in the Nauru and Australian governments signing the Compact of Settlement, which provided for re-mining by Australian companies followed by rehabilitation of the mined-out lands.⁴

Since independence, however, a string of bad investments and dealings left Nauru in debt, reliant on Australian aid, and with a 90 percent unemployment rate and a range of challenging health issues.⁵ It is currently the smallest republic in the world with a land mass of eight square miles (twenty-one square kilometers) and approximately 9,000 people. While their culture has been heavily influenced by mining and colonialism, and Nauru is now a major and controversial center for the processing of asylum seekers who want entry into Australia, Nauruans are active in revitalizing their culture through fishing, sport, music, and dance.

There is a population of approximately 400 Banabans and I-Kiribati on Banaba today, living there as caretakers while the majority of Banabans live on Rabi in Fiji. On Banaba, where fishing grounds, homes, villages, and ritual and burial sites once existed, there are now stark limestone pinnacles, decaying processing plants, rusted storage bins, algae-congested water tanks, and a massive maritime cantilever with its giant arm crippled and submerged. The island is administered by the Rabi Council of Leaders and the Kiribati government.

Two other Pacific islands, Angaur in the Caroline Islands and Makatea in French Polynesia, are much smaller but still have been critical sources of phos-

phate. They are both sparsely populated but still of significance to their indigenous peoples. The same Company that mined Banaba and Nauru partnered with a Tahitian-based syndicate to mine Makatea. While the Pacific phosphate deposits constituted only about 8 percent of the world's annual output at their peak, they were for decades essential regional sources for Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, which were without domestic supplies and would incur great freight costs to import phosphate from the United States, Morocco, or South Africa.⁶

During almost a century of mining, shipping, and manufacturing, the rock of both Nauru and Banaba was scattered across countless fields in and beyond the British Pacific. In this period the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand all had colonies in the Pacific islands, some as a result of the post-World War I League of Nations Mandate, and others as a result of prewar imperial claims and divisions that initially included German and Japanese territories. The Pacific was yet another theater for the expression of British, American, European, Japanese, and later Indonesian martial power, as well as a strategic opportunity for securing natural resources and expanding metropolitan business interests. The development of mines and plantations was also a necessity on some islands for funding the administration of the colonies, and Banaba was no exception. Phosphate mining, even on an island as tiny as Banaba, made British, Australian, and New Zealand investors very wealthy; supplied farmers with cheap fertilizer while stimulating various chains of commodity production, distribution, and consumption; and funded the administration of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony through taxes.

While expanding populations were enjoying the agricultural benefits of intensive fertilizer application and the phosphate-hungry high-yielding crops of what USAID director William Gaud coined the "Green Revolution" in 1968, there was and continues to be little public education or awareness about humanity's reliance on phosphorus. What the Green Revolution failed to acknowledge was the reliance not just on land for agricultural development and the expansion of monocropping, but on resources that would fuel the entire chain of agricultural outputs, most significantly fertilizer. Knowledge of certain key ingredients, such as phosphate, was specialized and rarely successfully popularized, in spite of the attempts of various travel writers and journalists.

The epigraph for this part of the book was originally by Clemson University founder Thomas Clemson. His statement on the crucial link between food and phosphate was quoted in a speech by Pacific "phosphateer" Sir Albert Ellis to the Auckland Rotary Club in New Zealand in 1942: "Phosphates: Why, How and Where? . . . Why Needed? How Used? and Where Found?"⁷ Media coverage of phosphorus and phosphate issues more than seventy years later still sustains this curious tone of excited discovery, as if telling the story for the first time to an

unknowing audience. For his lay listeners, Ellis adjusted Clemson's original line, which contained the more accurate technical term "phosphoric acid," the industrial shorthand P_2O_5 for water-soluble phosphate, rather than "phosphate."

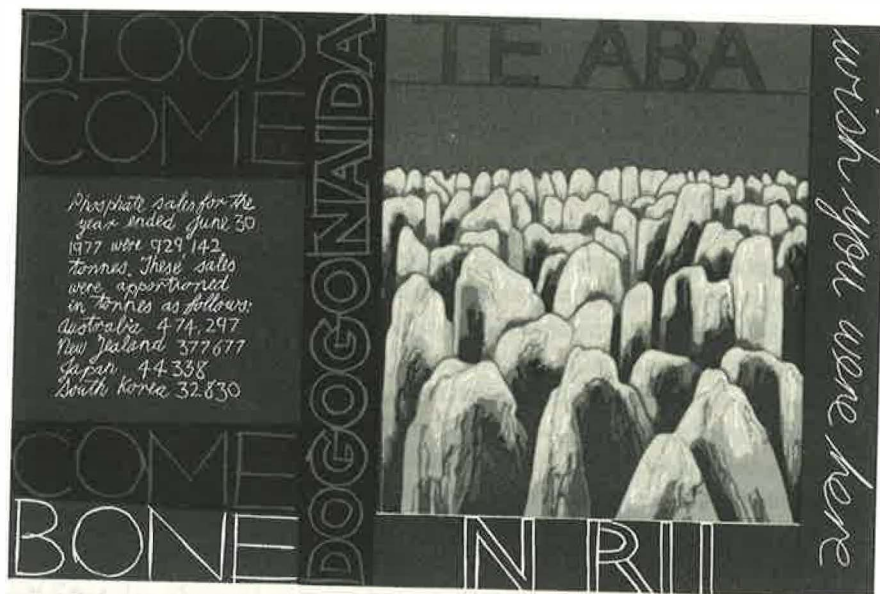
For the layperson, there is often confusion about the differences between guano and rock phosphate. Guano, from the Quechua word *wanu*, is the excrement of seabirds, bats, and seals. There were major guano sources across the Pacific and Caribbean with the largest deposit in Peru, in some cases mined by slave labor from the Pacific.⁸ Rock phosphate is the result of millions of years of sedimentation while guano, which also provides nitrogen, is younger in formation. They both yield phosphoric acid with the latter an ostensibly more "natural" fertilizer. Organic farmers, for example, prefer to use guano, and journalists and travel writers thrive on the vivid metaphors and images conjured up by humans' obsession with bird and bat shit.⁹

Maslyn Williams, Barrie Macdonald, Christopher Weeramantry, and Nancy Viviani have all produced important scholarship on the history of mining on Banaba and Nauru.¹⁰ Williams and Macdonald's celebratory account of the BPC is a careful distillation of a large collection of archival records organized into an evocative and entertaining narrative that gives a dense and temporally linear view of the economic and political stakes of this industry for the three stakeholder nations: Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia. Much less attention is given to any Pacific Islander actors, indigenous or otherwise. Their voices and experiences are muted in these political histories.

Land: Sedimentation, Traveling Rocks, and Fragments

Throughout this book I bring indigenous Banaban concepts and experiences into dialogue with competing regimes of value and the industrial processes applied to Banaban land by powerful actors and agencies from across the former British Empire. I track the phosphate, stories of life on the island, the Banabans, and various events in which they were entangled over several landscapes. Each story is an interlocking piece of the puzzle, partially sedimented, layered, and overlapping, but ultimately fragmented and diffracted in parallel with the now-dispersed phosphate landscape.

In most Pacific languages there are central concepts linking the people and the land metonymically, ontologically, and spiritually: *vanua* in Fijian, *aina* in Hawaiian, and *whenua* in Māori, for example. *Tē aba*, *kainga*, and *tē rii* in Gilbertese (the Kiribati language) refer, respectively, to the land and the people, home or hamlet, and bones. All have linguistic, human, and material forms that can be interchangeable, substituted, or used to indicate linked parts of a whole, which is the land and people together. "Tē aba" thus means both the land and the people simultaneously; there is a critical ontological unity. When speaking of land, one



"Postcards from Pleasant Island III: Te Aba n Rii," by Robin White.
Used with permission of the artist and courtesy of the National Gallery of Australia.

does not say *au aba*, "my land," but *abau*, "me-land." Te aba is thus an integrated epistemological and ontological complex linking people in deep corporeal and psychic ways to each other, to their ancestors, to their history, and to their physical environment. Sigrah and King speak of "te rii ni Banaba," the backbone of Banaba, as the spiritual wealth and well-being of a person involving three pieces of knowledge: knowledge of one's genealogy, knowledge of one's customary rights, and knowledge of one's land boundaries.¹¹ Relations to land are extremely serious. Though it might increasingly be used as such, land is not merely for exploitation or profit. Land is the very basis for relationality and for knowing and being.¹² The various facets of land and the manner in which they relate to the area's mining history are captured lucidly in New Zealand artist Robin White's *Postcard from Pleasant Island III*. She manages to evoke the land as body, blood, and rock, the mined landscape resembling a gravesite that has become te aba n rii, the land of bones.

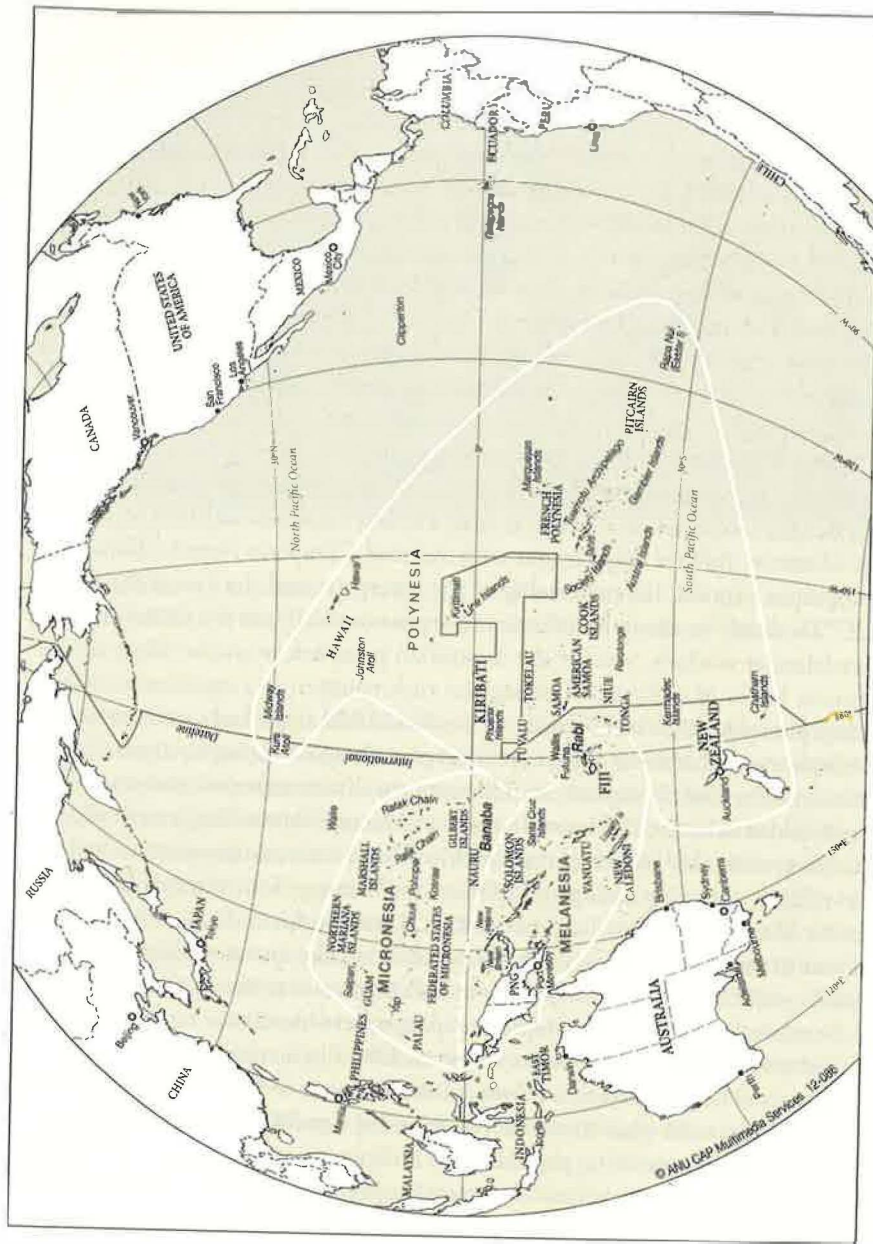
Banaba was viewed as the buto, the navel or center of the world, by Banabans, much as other islands, including Nauru and Rapa Nui, were viewed by their indigenous inhabitants.¹³ While Banaba was settled by at least three waves of migration

beginning over two thousand years ago, emplaced identities were forged and consolidated over the centuries so that personhood was shaped within a network of both kinship-based and environmental relations and connections. Most significant, on Banaba, in contrast with most Pacific societies, including in the Gilbert Islands, land was not held communally.¹⁴ Each individual, male and female, adult and child, had their own carefully demarcated plots that they could keep, exchange, or dispose of at will.¹⁵ Land was thus the ground for individual agency and efficacy within a communal system of social organization. The subsequent transformation of the land by mining and colonial regulation disrupted and unraveled the whole complex of social and material relations.¹⁶

The Banaban and Gilbertese concept of kainga refers to the local extended family unit and their place of residence.¹⁷ Kainga is "home." The people of a kainga eat and live together, sharing resources and responsibilities. But both te aba and kainga were completely transformed as mining consumed the original island, and the ideas of people, place, and home were reconstructed in new ways on a different island, Rabi, 1,600 miles (2,575 kilometers) away in Fiji.

My research began several years ago with a primary concern for the indigenous Banaban experience of betrayal, loss, displacement, and cultural revitalization. However, further engagement with archival Company records, films, and photographs exposed the materiality of the enterprise and the loss of the island itself. "The land," te aba to Banabans and *te tano* (or "soil") to the Gilbertese and Ellice Islander workers, was for the Australian prospectors and fertilizer manufacturers, layers of sedimented phosphate rock containing a significant ratio of calcium phosphate that, when subjected to sulfuric acid, unlocked a valuable source of phosphoric acid, the key ingredient of all phosphorus-bearing fertilizers. These fertilizers increased the capacity of plant roots to absorb minerals and water from the soil, added to its fertility, increased crop yields, and fostered the growth of grass fields for grazing. My contemplation of this shift in scale and perspective had the effect of both optical zooming and diffraction.¹⁸ I stopped thinking of Banaba as a Pacific island located at 0° 52' S and 169° 35' E, and began to think of it as a place that was in motion, making and breaking both human and environmental connections while it was constantly in a state of chemical transformation.

Banaban history has been represented by others in a linear manner in both text and performance, but I contend that an island in a constant state of transformation and fragmentation requires a different mode of storytelling. Moreover I am concerned with what these various forms of Banaba in place and in transit meant to the ever-expanding population of indigenous, mining, and agricultural stakeholders and their families. The interchangeable use of the terms "Banaba" and "Ocean Island" signals the competing and complex indigenous and foreign values attributed to the island. The Banabans themselves often used the English



Map of the Pacific highlighting Banaba and Rabi Islands. ANU CAP CartoGIS

name to mark the past and the period of colonialism and mining, but it is not uncommon to hear the island referred to as Ocean Island in casual Banaban conversations or for former European residents to correct themselves and call it Banaba instead of Ocean Island.

Throughout this account, I juxtapose the stories and perspectives of several communities and individuals connected to the mining venture with a fragmented and transnational biography of the phosphate rock. This results in a multisited, multivocal, and temporally disparate narrative informed by the work of anthropologists, historians, scientists, and Pacific studies scholars. A variety of both major and minor characters and events are included. There are the indigenous Banabans who lost their cultural and physical land rights; Gilbertese laborers who signed up to work in the mines on the lands of their distant Banaban relatives; the resident commissioners and representatives of the British Empire; Australian and New Zealand Company employees and their families; fertilizer manufacturers and farmers; and the Rabi Islanders, the Banabans who now live in Fiji and perform a historical dance theater every year on December 15, the anniversary of their landing in 1945.

The experiences of these groups are combined in this book with an ethnographic reading of phosphate records from the rich textual and visual archives of the BPC held in the National Archives of Australia and in the State Library of Victoria; documentary films, newspapers, and journals from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Kiribati, and Fiji between 1900 and 2010; and the H. E. and H. C. Maude Papers and the Arthur Grimble Papers in the Pacific Collection of the Barr-Smith Library at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. These sources are used to track both Banaba's fragmented history and the fragmented rocks across islands, cities, and archives. The goal is not to provide a neat synthesis of the phosphate enterprise, which has been done by other writers, but rather to offer what I see as an appropriately partial view, in the sense of expressing specific interests and in the sense of both an incomplete and a motivated reading of diverse Banaban sources and experiences.

The anthropologist James Clifford has written, "Thinking historically is a process of locating oneself in space and time. And a location . . . is an itinerary rather than a bounded site."¹⁹ The histories of Banaba embody the spirit of this statement. Banaba is no longer a place, an island in the middle of an ocean, but rather a flow of rocks with multiple trajectories and itineraries. And if indigenous identities were or are rooted in specific landscapes and seascapes, then Banaban land and Banaban identities have now become coordinates between islands and continents. My account thus represents one form of the multisited research theorized by George Marcus in the 1990s.²⁰ I am following not just the stories, the people, and the ideas, but the land itself and its sequelae as commodities.



Katerina Teaiwa's research itinerary, 1997–present. ANU CAP CartoGIS

Land Before Mining

The premining social organization on Banaba was significantly different from that of many other Pacific societies. On most islands, land is communally held or administered in trust for the broader community by chiefs or aristocratic families (Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa), or by male leaders of clans and tribes (the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and many parts of Papua New Guinea). In contrast, on Banaba the land, usually bearing coconut, pandanus, breadfruit, noni, mango, and almond trees, was held by individuals and was a form of currency in the sense that it could be exchanged between people according to various rules of transaction.²¹ The result was that everyone could have a connection to some other part of the is-

land in addition to the district where they lived. This gave Banabans a range of options for accessing resources, acquiring new knowledge or counsel, and receiving support in times of need. Land also provided the basis for payment or compensation for serious crimes. Maude and Maude detail several recognized categories of landholding and transactions for transferring land:

Te katautau: dividing land among children by walking with them along boundary lines, mother and father deciding which children should receive maternal or paternal lands

Te aba ni kara: land for the aged, the land set aside for parents in their old age after *te katautau*

Te aba n nati: land for adopted children

Te nenebo: the blood payment, when a murderer's lands pass to the family of the victim in two portions: *kie na* (the "mat" for the victim) and *rabuna na* (the "shroud" of the victim); the murderer's canoe would also be passed along as *bao na* (the coffin)

Te aba n rau: the land of peacemaking, passing from a man to the husband of a woman with whom he had committed adultery

Te aba ni kamaiu: the land of life giving, land given to people with food or with skill in fishing who shared their stores and knowledge with others, especially in times of famine and drought

Te aba n iein: the land of marriage, signaling the end of an engagement (if the girl ended the marriage no land would pass, but if the boy ended it he would give two plots if there had been no intercourse and four or five plots if there was)

Te aba ni butirake: land of the asking, if land had gotten into the wrong hands and needed to be returned to the rightful person

Te aba n ira: the land for theft (the thief passes land to the owner of stolen property)

Nenebo n te man: blood payment for animals if another's tame frigate bird or other animal is killed

Te aba n tara: the land for looking after, given in return for nursing during illness or old age

Te aba ni karaure: the land of farewell, in exchange for great friendship outside the kindred group

Te aba n riring: the land for bone setting, given by a patient to the bonesetter²²

Maude and Maude write, "These conveyances were the chief means by which justice and peace were maintained on the island."²³

These transactions would have helped sustain social stability and would have created avenues for the distribution of resources, though in times of drought, resources such as water, coconuts, and knowledge of fishing were held very tightly. But the introduction of Christianity in the 1880s, the arrival of the Pacific Islands

Company in 1900, the monetization of the land and the fixing of land tenure, the transformation of consumption norms, British colonial governance, and the eventual displacement of the population to Rabi brought an end to many of these indigenous cultural practices and to this system of peace and justice. Rather, the native magistrate, the police, and the *kaubure*, or village council, came into prominence. The council was usually populated by the *unimwane*, or elderly males, while male Protestant church ministers increasingly took on key political and economic roles. Women's political voices and agency were rapidly diminished in this period.

Before mining, Banaba was organized into districts with *kainga*, or hamlets, consisting of *utu*, or family households, with couples, their children (both natural and adopted), and one or both sets of parents, who might stay for a period with each of their children throughout the year. The *kainga* usually consisted of a family descended from a common ancestor, and either husband or wife would relocate upon marriage while maintaining links and rights to their original, ancestral *kainga*.

Each household consisted of a central house, a *mwenga* or *bata*; a kitchen; an *umwa n teinako*, or house for menstruating women; and a *bareaka*, or canoe shed. Young men who were ready for marriage spent most of their time in the *umwa n roronganga*, or men's house, where they learned *te kauti*, or family magic, and the important skills of catching and taming frigate birds. Each *kainga* was headed by an *unimwane*, who was consulted on all affairs of the hamlet as a whole and served as the spokesperson for the group. Each *kainga* had its own sitting place, or *boti*, in the *mwaneaba*, or meetinghouse, of the district, which was demarcated by the *oka* (roof beams) or rows of pandanus thatch on the roof. A member of the *kainga* could sit there regardless of where they were living on the island, and each had well-guarded rights and privileges. Both men and women could speak in the *mwaneaba*. The *umwa n anti*, or house of spirits, was a ceremonial meetinghouse, a sacred version of the *mwaneaba* where feasts were held, offerings were made, and spiritual rituals were conducted.

After mining commenced, all *kainga* were consolidated into four districts—Tabwewa, Uma, Tabiang, and Buakonikai—and each had specific rights to access water from certain *maniba* (wells) or *bwangabwanga* (water caves) and to terraces where young men were trained and rituals were conducted. In the early 1900s Tabwewa had eighteen *kainga*, Uma had twenty-three, and Tabiang had twenty-three, and of the two regions combined into Buakonikai, Te Aonanne had thirteen *kainga* and Toakira had ten. The head of each district could be male or female (although her eldest son or nearest male relative carried out her duties).²⁴ The head was not a chief in the hierarchical, Polynesian sense of the word.²⁵ He or she had limited powers, including the right to speak first, leading at meetings, and the expectation to have his or her opinion carry significant weight. All final decisions, however, were based on the majority's perspective and were a result of



"Tapiwa [Tabwewa] Natives—King's village—Ocean Island." Nei Teinemakin, the "old queen," is second from right, seated. Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia

extensive consultation and discussion. There were also key roles for district leaders that involved the welcoming of visitors and negotiating terms of trade, which Europeans would interpret incorrectly as binding for all villages. The photograph captioned by the Company as the "King's village," for example, was one such elevation of key representatives to the status of supreme authority.

Christian and Colonial Transformations

Important meetings were conducted in the *mwaneaba*, which also served as a space for performance, rest, and leisure. Songs and dances were important vehicles for preserving and transmitting knowledge as well as being modes of creative expression and entertainment. Many aspects of this culture and its associated practices changed after the adoption of Christianity, a process that began in 1885 and was cemented by the cultural, material, and economic changes brought by the mining industry in 1900 and by the establishment of a British colonial government. Gilbertese was established as the official language of the colony, and while Banabans already spoke a combination of Gilbertese and a more ancient Banaban language, this regulation further challenged the transmission of Banaban cultural knowledge and practices.²⁶

Christianity arrived in 1885 in the persons of the Reverend Alfred Charles Walkup and a Tabiteuean Islander, Kinta, of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). Kinta had been trained by another Tabiteuean, Aberaam, who in turn had been trained by a powerful Hawaiian missionary, aptly named Kapu, on the island.²⁷ Temaka Benaia writes that the Banaban ancestral goddess, Nei Tituabine, alerted the Banabans that “a most powerful God which she could see as a ‘fire’ approaching the island, was about to arrive.” It is claimed she encouraged the Banabans to abandon their ancestral gods and to worship the new, most truly powerful god. Walkup’s mission lasted until 1907, and Benaia asserts that by 1903 “Christianity was completely accepted by the Banabans.”²⁸ Eventually the London Missionary Society (LMS) took over the missionary work, and after their relocation to Rabi in 1945 most Banabans joined the Methodist Church of Fiji with a smaller number converting to Catholicism. The training of Protestant teachers and pastors was the primary vehicle for Banaban education and thus their modes of leadership and resistance regularly took on a Christian tone and fervor.

Religious, cultural, and linguistic matters were of some concern for the resident commissioners who worked on Banaba, but they were of little priority for the Company. Ocean Island’s global strategic value was clear to phosphate mining prospectors and investors, and matters related to the island were often raised and debated in the British Parliament. In the beginning, the venture was managed by the Pacific Islands Company (PIC), and then by the Pacific Phosphate Company (PPC) as one of many risky but often profitable European businesses in Oceania. An independent multinational body, the British Phosphate Commissioners, combining British, Australian, and New Zealand economic and political interests, took over the industry from 1920 to 1981.²⁹

Displaced for the Good of Mankind

The Banabans protested mining and questioned the distribution of profits from phosphate sales early in the venture and for most of the twentieth century. Their efforts were futile: the resource was too valuable and even up until the 1980s Australian scientists were writing of the “magical” powers of superphosphate.³⁰ The following 1912 article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* well illustrates the debate as it played out in Australia:

Ocean Islanders: To Go or Not to Go? Bad Outlook for Natives

An acute situation over the land question has been created at Ocean Island, and probably never before have the interests of mining and agriculture so decisively clashed.

It has resolved itself into a fight for the survival or extinction of the phosphate quarrying industry at the island, either the phosphate industry has to

go, or the whole of the population of the island, some 500, must be found some other abode.

The position of affairs at the island just now is unique in history.

The matter has an especial interest for the Commonwealth States, by reason of the fact that a good deal of the phosphate obtained from Ocean Island is converted into manure, which enter[s] largely into the economy of Australian agriculture, superphosphate being largely used in connection with wheat growing. The phosphate deposits at this island are enormous.

Effect of the Phosphate Industry

The phosphate can be found so frequently on the island that to get it out will altogether disturb the whole of the surface conditions of the place, and the natives are objecting to the inroads of the quarrying industry, realising that it means disturbing their possession.

A humane proposal is afoot to transplant the natives to another island in the Pacific, suitable for the purpose, in order that the valuable phosphate industry may go on unchecked, to the advantage of those industrially engaged in it, and of the people on the land in various parts of the world.

After Twelve Years

For some twelve years the phosphate deposit on Ocean Island has been worked, and exported to practically all parts of the world, and to Australia in particular. In the beginning, phosphate lands were bought very cheaply from the native owners; but some years after, when the owners of the land became dimly conscious of the value of their property, a higher rate was asked. When refused this higher price, the natives only sold their land under pressing need.

The Ocean Islander saw his lands and only means of existence gradually disappearing, leaving, instead of his palm and pandanus groves, worked out quarries. Foreseeing the inevitable end, the natives some time ago definitely refused to sell any more lands. A public meeting was called to discuss the matter with the native owners. The natives unanimously refused to sell any more land, declaring that the lands, and the palm and pandanus trees thereon were all they had, and they asked what they should do when the big steamers had carried away all their habitable land. There the matter stands awaiting adjustment at home.

Naturally some think the native owners are right, yet it is inconceivable that less than 500 Ocean Island-born natives can be allowed to prevent the mining and export of a product of such immense value to all the rest of mankind. The question is under the authorities’ consideration at present, and the outcome is uncertain.

Suggested Remedy

The advisability of buying a small island, in the Gilbert Group and transplanting the Ocean Islanders has been discussed. The island—Kuria—even if it could be bought, is too small. To some the best way of solving the problem seems to be the purchase of a sufficiently large area of the best Crown lands avail-

able in the British Solomon Islands at a fair rate for the Ocean Island natives, on the understanding that when the advance of mining makes moving necessary (say in another generation) the natives are to emigrate to their new lands. Any native wishing to visit the land should be allowed to do so. The phosphate lands (some persons contend) should be bought at a fair price, and a fair royalty, fixed by Act of Parliament, paid the natives until the deposit is worked out.

As the annual payment of the character is almost nil, and the profit immense beyond most things in trade, it is thought that it should in no wise [sic] inconvenience the company, and would give the natives reasonable benefit from their property.³¹

The story reduces the Banabans' complex connection to their land to basic economics, and clearly the mining was not just for the good of "mankind" but for the profits of the investors. What kind of profit was the PPC making at this time? Macdonald writes that in 1906 and 1907 dividends of 30 percent and 50 percent, respectively, were paid to shareholders on a capitalization of £125,000. In 1908–1909 profits amounted to 455 percent on the 1907 capital, and dividends of 35 percent were paid. Between 1900 and 1913 the Company made profits in excess of £1.75 million and in the same period paid to the Banabans for land, trees, and phosphate less than £10,000.³² The colonial administrators later established a trust fund for Banaban phosphate royalties, which they controlled and distributed, not in terms of individual landholdings but for the community's welfare as a homogeneous whole.

The clearly lucrative phosphate deposits, the highly developed mining infrastructure, and the Company town later made the island a target for Japanese occupation during World War II. Many Banabans and Gilbertese and Ellice Islander workers died under occupation, and the community was dispersed to prisoner-of-war camps in Kosrae, Nauru, and the Gilbert Islands. When the war ended, the *Triona*, one of four creatively named and lavishly outfitted Company flagships, collected all the Banabans and moved them to Rabi in Fiji. Rabi, or Rabe in Fijian, is an island that was lost to its Fijian settlers in a regional war involving the Tongan chief Ma'afu several decades prior to the Banaban settlement. The island was sold to the Australian Lever Brothers Company in the late 1800s, and Lever Brothers subsequently sold it to the Banabans. All transactions were conducted by the colonial administration, which paid for the purchase from the Banabans' trust fund, the earnings from mining managed by the British resident commissioner.

Lever Brothers was a large British company with significant copra trading and planting interests in the Pacific. It began as a grocery business, moved into soap manufacture, and then set up a vegetable oil mill and a soap factory in Australia in the late 1890s.³³ William Lever was a close acquaintance of the Pacific Islands Company founder John T. Arundel. At a critical juncture he had invested £25,000 in the PIC and bought its coconut plantations for the same price. This

needed capital allowed the Company to improve its operations at Ocean Island significantly. Thus the later sale of Rabi by his company to the Banabans, brokered by the British government and the phosphate company, was no coincidence. The colonial administration, businesses, and missionaries were a labyrinth of intersecting political and economic interests and agendas. Many of the descendants of the Fijian Rabeans, who lost their island, live on islands surrounding Rabi and have maintained strong ancestral links to their home island. This has made for some very awkward interactions between Banabans and Fijians, and Rabi is thus a still-contested place with two displaced populations who call it home.

Relocating the Banabans to Rabi allowed the BPC unfettered access to all phosphate deposits, some of which were under villages, homes, and burial sites. On both Banaba and Rabi, the Banabans came to rely upon phosphate royalties and imported water, rice, canned goods, and other products, many of which were manufactured in Australia or New Zealand using the chain of agricultural commodities enabled by the phosphate fertilizer generated from their island. From the 1940s, by necessity, the community on Rabi slowly began to revive their traditional fishing skills and cultivated copra, kava, taro, and cassava.

Partial and Personal Truths

When I, a woman of Banaban heritage, began my research on Banaba in 1997 I was intent on writing about the injustices of the mining industry, as illustrated by the *Sydney Morning Herald* story, and about the effects of the displacement of Banabans to Fiji. Like many Banabans I was angry about this history for many years, and this was clearly reflected in my writing, which highlighted the *rawata*, or burden, and *kawa*, or pity, of Banaban history.³⁴ While anthropologists and historians have intensively tracked the histories of products, such as sugar, cotton, and bottled water, in our everyday lives we still rarely consider the labor, social upheaval, and loss supporting our consumption, needs, and desires.³⁵ Certainly few of us consider the phosphorus stories behind the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the milk we drink, or the grass beneath our feet.

However, while I combed through the archives of the BPC, it became clear to me that there were multiple, layered, and diverse experiences of the mining venture and the island itself. Banaba meant different things to different stakeholders, and the Banabans I found in the archives emerged not just as victims, but at times as agents of their own displacement. The stakeholders included not just indigenous Banabans, but the British administrators, the Australian and New Zealand company managers and investors, politicians in all three countries, Gilbertese, Ellice Islanders, Japanese and Chinese laborers, Scandinavian ship captains, the Australian wheat industry, the New Zealand dairy and beef industry, and a global fertilizer industry—and the list goes on. The fertilizer industry and most of the farmers frankly did not care where the phosphate came from. Their uni-

verse was governed by the price of both the raw materials and the manufactured superphosphate. The Antipodean exploitation and decimation of Banaba was now no less compelling to me, but the complexity of the story and the global significance of the phosphate rock were greater than I had imagined.

All this gave me pause and forced me to reconsider non-indigenous perspectives and experiences. Kirin Narayan's discussion of "how native is a native anthropologist?" particularly shaped my thinking at this stage. In her much-cited essay, Narayan argues that each anthropologist, native or otherwise, might be viewed in terms of their "shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations."³⁶ My initial engagement with the archival records had involved a search for "facts": What lands were surveyed? How many tons were shipped from where, on what day, and by which vessel? However the form and content of the archival records eventually adjusted my initial desire to just gather facts. Borrowing Donna Haraway's optical metaphor, I began to "diffract" texts and images.³⁷ In the field of physics, diffraction occurs when a wave of light encounters and bends around a small obstacle or when it has to pass through a small opening, resulting in a spreading of the wave. The nature of the diffracting object, too small to be seen by the naked eye, is illuminated by an observation of the ensuing diffraction patterns.

If we take a particle of lost phosphate as "the object," the stories or representations of it—published texts, memoirs, photographs, films, Company letters, colonial pamphlets—are analogous to the waves of light. The nature of their diversity, their scope or limit, and the major and minor characters they feature constitute the patterns to be observed or the pathways to follow. These are the patterns that tell us something about the diffracting object. So while I cannot directly track a single granule of Ocean Island, I can say something about the narratives, images, materials, and events that have emerged from its existence. Furthermore, just as the various stories constitute diffraction patterns, so too is the island itself diffracted across time and space. This Banaba could be mined forever, in more ways than one.

In my research I took this optical metaphor and visual approach quite seriously, and in the islands I produced fifty hours of digital video footage rather than a collection of fieldnotes. My notes came instead from archival readings, which were then set against the meticulously collected Company photographs that are now available through the National Library of Australia's search engine TROVE. The gaps between my observations in the islands, historical fragments from the archives, and the intensive visual collection resulted in an explosion of meaning and an eventual presentation of some of this diverse material in a constructivist fashion as a visual montage.³⁸ The montage drew attention to the connections and disjunctures between the multisited and multilayered Banaba stories.

In "Many Paths to Partial Truths," Elisabeth Kaplan challenges what she views as the isolation of archival practice from the broader intellectual landscape in which issues of representation, objectivity, and power are being debated:

Anthropologists (just like archivists) have traditionally viewed themselves as disinterested selectors, collectors, and assemblers of facts from a transparent reality. But both actually serve as intermediaries between a subject and its later interpreters, a function/role that is one of interpretation itself. That translates into power over the record and how it is interpreted; and it points to where power is negotiated and exercised. This power over the evidence of representation, and the power over access to it, endows us with some measure of power over history, memory, and the past. While archivists and anthropologists may raise an eyebrow at the thought of their professions as powerful, the fact is that both are so deeply embedded in political institutions and societal frameworks that any residual claims of innocence and objectivity are completely unfounded.³⁹

Kaplan's concerns resonate with those of indigenous communities, which often view library, archival, and museum collections with ambivalence. When I first began my research I would check out books on Banaba from the library of the University of the South Pacific, where dozens of Banabans have studied. I found the margins of library books about Banaba littered with responses from Banaban students. Harry Maude's, Arthur Grumble's, and Pearl Binder's texts displayed comments like "!!," "rubbish!," "no chiefs in Banaba or Kings!," and "Grumble refused to find lawyer for Banabans." By contrast, there were no comments in Martin Silverman's 1971 ethnographic study, *Disconcerting Issue: Meaning and Struggle in a Resettled Pacific Community*. This I interpreted to mean that either his prose and symbolic anthropological approach were inaccessible (it took me several years to comprehend it) and/or Banabans liked Silverman.

Banabans are always interested in knowledge of their culture and history, and while few elect to do studies in the social sciences or humanities, they are always engaged in some form of interpretation of their past whether in the critical vandalism of library texts, storytelling around a kava bowl, creative choreography and performance, or the anniversaries of their December 15 arrival on Rabi. One clan spokesperson, Ken Sigrah, who eventually relocated to the Gold Coast of Queensland, joined forces with Stacey King, a descendant of Australian phosphate mining managers, to support the material and digital collection and dissemination of both historical and contemporary records of Banaba and Rabi.⁴⁰ I was inspired by my father, John Tabakitoa Teaiwa's, childhood stories of life on Rabi, my elder sister Teresia Teaiwa's initial research, poetry, and writing on Banaban politics and history,⁴¹ and other stories overheard or performed at Banaban and I-Kiribati cultural events to similarly explore Banaban histories, in an institutional context.

I did most of my research in the era of Pacific studies “decolonization,” when natives were writing back and challenging non-indigenous scholars and frameworks for their (mis)understanding of native histories and cultures.⁴² This context also inspired a closer examination of land in the physical sense, since relations to place form the cornerstone of indigenous Pacific decolonization discourse. I asked: If, ontologically, land and people are the same in the indigenous sense, then what happens when *both* the people and the land are removed?

In addition to bringing the experiences of diverse mining stakeholders back into focus, the primary visual material in the archives also compelled me to pay more attention to the two-and-a-half-square-mile island itself. The Company had so meticulously chronicled, photographed, or filmed every centimeter of its industrial development that the records appeared cinematic. I had a fairly clear visual sense of the rise and fall of modernity on this tiny island in the very center of the vast Pacific.

“Development,” of the economic and human variety, has been the most dominant framework shaping and transforming Pacific lives since their countries gained independence. With the current widespread acceptance of international development indicators, such as the Millennium Development Goals, it is even more so in the present. But as Arturo Escobar and other post-development critics have warned, the price of so-called development is often impoverishment or death, especially where the selling and degrading of natural resources are involved. Escobar writes of progress and planning in the developmentalist mode: “perhaps no other concept has been so insidious, no other idea gone so unchallenged.”⁴³ The Banaban story shows clearly that economic growth and infrastructural development on an island are often devastating when shaped by foreign agendas and priorities.

Despite their historical centrality to global agriculture, Banaba and Nauru are not part of the well-researched cultural areas of Melanesia and Polynesia, which continue to capture the imaginations of anthropologists, historians, political scientists, writers, and literary critics. While culturally included, for geopolitical reasons they are usually omitted from the central and northwestern Pacific region described under the term popularized by Dumont d’Urville in the 1830s as Micronesia, or “small islands,” in contrast to the “many islands” of Polynesia in the east and the “black islands” of Melanesia in the southwest. Transformed into an arena for the Pacific battles of World War II, most of Micronesia is currently dominated by the United States and is the focus of ongoing research on the impact of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, among other concerns, including environmental and heritage issues in Palau; the revival of navigation and sailing practices in Guam, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia; and migration studies exploring the flow of Micronesian communities to the United States.⁴⁴

Kiribati has recently become a focus of international research, popular media, aid, and foreign policy because of climate change. While parts of Banaba are over seventy meters above sea level, all other islands in Kiribati lie at just two meters above the ocean. Both Kiribati and Tuvalu are now seen, along with the Maldives and the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea, as being at the forefront of the global warming and sea-level rise debates. Kiribati, for example, has made moves to buy land in the northern part of Fiji to develop and potentially settle climate-change migrants. This development has of course raised questions about the need for I-Kiribati to learn from the Banaban experience.⁴⁵ This book thus contributes to a still small but expanding body of research and writing on the central Pacific islands and particularly the formerly British Micronesia, but I approach the area with a perspective very different from that of traditional anthropological studies.

Most of my father’s family lives on Rabi in Fiji, not too far from the land the Kiribati government plans to purchase. Banaba was the home island of my paternal great-grandfather Tenamo and his mother, Kieuea. Tenamo had two children, Teaiwa and Aoniba. As is customary, Teaiwa was adopted out to relatives on Tabiteuea Meang (North) in the Gilbert Islands, where he lived in Utiroa village and married a woman named Takeua from Eita village. He was apparently unaware of his Banaban roots until he was recruited by the BPC to work in the mines on Banaba in the early 1940s. He was quickly identified on the island as kin and chose to stay with his Banaban family and cease working for the Company. Teaiwa and Takeua had a son named Tabakitoa, and he was adopted as a grandchild by Tebwerewa and Tebikeiti on Tabiteuea. In 1947 Teaiwa asked the couple to send Tabakitoa to join his family in Fiji, the new home of the Banabans who had been gathered up from Japanese war camps and moved to the South Pacific. My father, Tabakitoa, whose English name is John (a dual naming practice common at the time), then came to live on Rabi Island and was eventually the first Banaban to obtain a Fiji government scholarship to, ironically, study agriculture at the East-West Center and at the University of Hawai‘i in Honolulu. There he met my mother, Joan Martin, who is of African American descent and the eldest daughter of Colonel John Thomas and Hestlene Martin of Washington, D.C.

Tabakitoa had nine brothers and sisters, and as the eldest and most educated he has been involved for much of his life with the welfare of Teaiwa’s kainga, which now consists of over sixty children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, many of whom live at Tabona just outside the village of Tabiang on Rabi. At one time, phosphate royalties, distributed as annuities, helped to support the family but these were intermittent and quickly used up; most Banabans today face many basic economic challenges. After thirty years serving in the Fiji civil service, primarily as the permanent secretary (equivalent to a CEO) in the Ministry of Agriculture, from 1997 to 2000 my father was also both the chair of the Rabi Council of Leaders and the Banaban representative in the Kiribati Parliament. This pro-

vided me with my first opportunity to visit the now-remote and generally inaccessible “homeland.”

One of the primary effects of phosphate mining has been the profound unraveling of kinship between Banabans and Gilbertese, today known as I-Kiribati.⁴⁶ As someone who is of both Banaban and Tabiteuean descent, I sometimes find myself in an awkward political position, seeking to spotlight the injustices of this history while still honoring my Gilbertese roots. While I strive to foreground historical complexity as signaled in or narrated by diverse sources, and to stimulate reflection on the relations between seemingly remote and insignificant islands and global agriculture, my position as a woman of I-Kiribati and Banaban descent inevitably has shaped the form and content of this book. I have been at times confused and exhausted by the far-reaching and never-ending nature of this phosphate story. In many ways I myself have been “consumed” by Ocean Island. Indeed, consumption is not just a central theme but an emotional ethos and motif in this work. A dictionary defines the word thus:

Consume

1. eat, drink, or ingest (food or drink): *people consume a good deal of sugar in drinks*; (of a fire) completely destroy: *the fire spread rapidly, consuming many homes*;
use up (a resource): *this process consumes enormous amounts of energy*;
2. buy (goods or services);
3. (of a feeling) completely fill the mind of (someone): *Carolyn was consumed with guilt*. Origin: late Middle English: from Latin *consumere*, from *con-* “altogether” + *sumere* “take up”; reinforced by French *consumer*.⁴⁷

The Structure of This Book

Aside from my own and others’ obsessions with the island, in these chapters I explore the manner in which Banaba was fetishized, commodified, and consumed through a variety of interlinked and overlapping stories. The architecture of the book is shaped by one mode of storytelling from Rabi. Like most people in Fiji, Banabans tell many stories around the kava bowl. While still a ceremonial Fijian practice marking, for example, significant life events, the welcoming of and saying farewell to guests, and rituals for mending social rifts, kava is now consumed casually by many non-Fijians across the islands and especially by Banabans, who grow and sell their own Rabi brand. In many Pacific contexts, including in Kiribati, storytelling occurs with an audience of listeners patiently following the teller through his or her version of events. Around a kava bowl on Rabi, however, someone might start telling a story and then another person will interject with his or her version. Yet another person will jump in and very soon the story, after many twists and turns and jumping across time and space, will be claimed by many people, who often agree on the big picture but might disagree on the finer

details with no satisfactory conclusion. They call this *tau boro*, meaning to take over someone else’s conversation, or *anai boro*, stealing the ball or, literally, “give me the ball,” as in the game of rugby when the ball swiftly moves through the hands of different players. For Banabans on Rabi, one story moves through the voices and perspectives of many people, and sometimes it is hard to pin down what really happened. Multiple perspectives are in circulation and up for debate without evacuating the weight and meaning of an event for those whose lives have been transformed by it.

The book is divided into three parts interrupted by ethnographic interludes reflecting on and recollecting key moments during my research process. Chapter 2, “Stories of P,” describes the broader chemical and agricultural context, focusing on the effects of diminishing sources of phosphorus on global consumption and food security. In “Land from the Sea” and “Remembering Ocean Island,” I explore Banaba’s physical and conceptual consumption: the way it was mined, how it provided work for many, and the way it was a site of curiosity and entertainment for visitors and short-term residents. The stories of Banaba as depicted in a BPC film and the memories of white families and Gilbertese miners parallel the story of agriculture in Australia and New Zealand in “Land from the Sky” and the difficulties faced in “*E Kawa Te Aba: The Trials of the Banabans*.” As Banaba has become a desiccated field of coral pinnacles, agriculture in Australia and New Zealand has thrived.

“*E Kawa Te Aba*” pays homage to Pearl Binder’s passionately researched *Treasure Islands: The Trials of the Banabans* (1978). Here I explore the serious concerns raised by the Banabans as they began to realize they were not just losing their land and sense of efficacy, but losing out on the immense profits made from the mining. I delve into the dramas of the BPC and the colonial administration before and after World War II, ending with the well-publicized trial of the Banabans in Britain from 1971 to 1976. The documentary *Go Tell It to the Judge* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Foreign Correspondent* serve as critical resources for gaining a sense of the political and emotional atmosphere of that period. The Banabans were consumed with gaining independence from Britain and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony, and securing compensation for and rehabilitation of the devastated landscape, but while they gained global attention, they inevitably lost their cause.

“Remix: Our Sea of Phosphate” is a visual essay and play on the late prominent Pacific scholar Epeli Hau’ofa’s “Our Sea of Islands,” which reimagined the smallness of islands in terms of the vast ocean and flow of water that connects islands, peoples, and continents.⁴⁸ This chapter tracks the story as a remix of quotes, some of which appear in other parts of the book, and images highlighting the flow of phosphate into Victoria, Australia, through stunning photography, particularly by Wolfgang Sievers, exploring a Geelong processing plant owned by the Phos-

phate Co-operative Company. This visual essay was inspired by responses to the Banaban story presented at the “Media in Transition 5” conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2007. In a gathering both celebrating and questioning the concept of appropriation and cultural remixing in cyberspace, conference rapporteur Suzanne de Castell responded to my presentation linking Banaban histories with those of empire, global economies, race, land, and oppression:

Teaiwa’s presentation on the physical removal of aboriginal islander land rich in phosphate which was “appropriated,” [is] the most profound example of remixing I have ever encountered: where a two and a half mile island was stripped, the very grounds of a people’s existence removed and relocated, to fertilize the grasslands of both New Zealand and Australia, to grow its lush, green pastures for other people’s animal and food production. What I think we learn here is that we have to be very careful not to unthinkingly import to our attempts to rethink these new foundational ideas, assumptions, ideologies, conceptualizations, ways that continue to privilege world views and practices which have devastated other people in other places.

She continued:

If we don’t want a literal and superficial and enduringly oppressive epistemology of remix . . . , we need to go to the borders, limits, and edges to ideas whose deep roots challenge us to hold firm to our contexts and communities. We need these challenges from the borders and margins so an agenda of radical inclusion is in my view the most generative agenda for the future.⁴⁹

“Coming Home to Fiji” is the interlude that disrupts this intensive focus on Banaba, an account of the period before a civilian coup in 2000 led by the self-proclaimed nationalist Fijian leader George Speight. This sets up the story of the Banabans living in the uncertain Fiji political context, where questions of citizenship and belonging, particularly for minorities, are challenging and stressful. In “Between Rabi and Banaba,” the ruins of the home island continue to confound, inspire, and frame Banaban life as it unfolds in Fiji. Banabans’ relations with I-Kiribati are constantly fraught and still in need of healing. This chapter is in many ways about Banaba’s spiritual consumption, the way it functions as a sacred idea for many displaced Banabans, who cling to the dream of a distant homeland they can rightly claim. I interviewed Banaban teenagers in 2012, and in response to my question “What is your identity?” they were clear: “We are Banabans and we are Rabi Islanders. We are proud to be from Fiji but Banaba is also our home.” I end this chapter with an exploration of my own family kainga in 2000, a hundred years after mining commenced on Banaba, and how the descendants of my Banaban great-great-grandmother Kieuea continue to carve out a creative existence on Rabi.

The images, maps, and diagrams accompanying the chapters are not meant to merely supplement and be subordinate to the text but rather should be read as an integral part of these diverse stories. The photographs provide critical views of dispersed but deeply connected sites linked through the phosphate industry and the chain of commodities that result from the mining of phosphate rock. Ultimately this book reconstructs and reframes Banaban histories by bringing the dispersed material of phosphate rock, and the home and landscape that once existed in the central Pacific, back into a dialogue with the people, their stories, and their experiences, and to situate all of that within the broader global context of agriculture and phosphorus security.