

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Katerina Martina Teaiwa, *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-253-01444-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-253-01452-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-253-01460-3 (ebook)

I did not know that I was consuming Banaba Island while I was consumed by ethnographic tales presented by Katerina Teaiwa. I was consumed by the soul of the island through her ethnographic narratives but I consumed the soil of the island through the phosphate that makes the book's paper and ink possible. She brings together research that challenges notions of identity and ethnicity, globalization and transnationalism, cultural heritage and post-colonial studies through stories of people from Banaba. She investigates a material component that exists all around us but many of us remain unaware of its importance environmentally, economically and politically. The book investigates the impact of the imperial phosphate mining industry in the Pacific Ocean to share the stories of displacement, loss of land, and struggles to preserve cultural heritages. Its inquiry highlights "the global stakes of the whole enterprise" of phosphate mining through history of colonization of Banaba—a six square kilometre island in the Pacific.

The book is not limited to ethnography and stories of people from the island; it also brings perspectives from recorded history and archives. Teaiwa explores documents at the National Archives of Australia to describe 80 years of phosphate mining by the British Phosphate Commission in Banaba. Her work is a strong critique of historians who present the same archival resources without "attention to any Pacific Islander actors, indigenous or otherwise" (p.7). Teaiwa has divided the book into three parts to explain the stories of "an island that travels" (p.195). She uses the metaphor of travel to address the journey of transformation and consumption of raw materials as well as the community who claims ownership of it. The

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first part demonstrates how phosphate travels from the island and makes history in its trajectory to Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Then, she concentrates on the people who travel along with the island; her attention has not remained limited to Banaban people and has included outsiders such as colonial administrators and non-Banabans. The second part of the book explores how the journey of the people of Banaba against the colonial past and loss of their land remains unfinished. The final part explains the challenges of the people of Banaba in transnational settings; she compares those challenges, which remain undetermined like the futures of phosphate.

The first chapter in Part I, “Phosphate Pasts”, presents the history of colonization and concept of land within the language and culture of Banaba. Teaiwa proposes the land as the “critical ontological unity” (p.7) of her research, bringing together: colonists, who came for resources; indigenous people, who “carefully demarcated plots” (p.9); and the author herself, who is “a woman of I-Kiribati and Banaban descent” (p.24). However, the history of land before mining remains brief and she pays more attention to the “stories of P” (p.28). Teaiwa pursues five different stories of phosphorous to highlight why indigenous Banabans need to pay attention to the science behind this compound. The stories highlight how diminishing phosphate resources give meaning to the colonial past and why indigenous people might look at their future through that past.

She seeks “the metaphorical recovery” (p.33) of a past through a microhistory of the land and its excavation for phosphate. The British Phosphate Commissioners, following the discovery of phosphate by Albert Ellis on Banaba in 1900 (p.42), sought prosperity through lands which belonged to others, and many Banabans were displaced and forced to seek their prosperity elsewhere. Teaiwa also examines collaboration in colonial practices; some Banabans became the

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agents of their own destruction, treating mining as a work opportunity. The first of the five stories traces the chemical history of phosphate rocks and their geological formation in interactions with calcium. Then, she connects it to the second story which is the genealogy of the mining of phosphate rocks and calcium to the interest of scientists who call “supplies of phosphate...‘bone bed’” (p. 32) (the name refers not only to animal bones but also to human graves and war sites). The third and fourth stories narrate how phosphate has become the common cause of the people of the island in their journey for a collective identity. And the final story connects to the cautionary tale of a diminishing compound to expose the local connections to broader global modes of consumption.

Part II, “Mine/Lands”, knits together the narratives of different people to portray the island as a multitude of forms and imaginaries. Teaiwa traces the imaginaries of those who have lived on the island or are descended from people from there. These contrasting stories reveal how the colonial-Other treated “the natives” as naïve and in need of training in culture and lifestyle. For instance, Teaiwa mentions the story of Mary Hunt, whose husband was sent to install a new sewage system. However, the story remains “ironic given that Banabans living on the island *today* are using the beach to relieve themselves” (p.67, emphasis added). She places the colonial narratives next to indigenous folk songs and past memories to reveal how power struggles emerged between different cultures over the land. Therefore, she gathers the memories of islanders to highlight organic histories of the land and exploitation. Furthermore, she explores in-depth what it means to be a Banaban islander through ethnographic narratives from displaced Banabans who were forced to give up their land and migrate to Fiji. The readers learn along with the author how “being Banaban ... [is] connected deeply to even more homelands” (p. 91). She brings together stories of displacement to indicate how Banaban diaspora has formed home

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beyond the island. The second chapter in this part of the book, “Land From the Sky”, points to how phosphorous has transformed modern day nation-states such as Australia and New Zealand. It follows the transformation of rocks into fertilizer and its impact on agriculture in the South Pacific region. Teaiwa’s refreshing approach underscores how New Zealand is a “second home” to Banaban land because their soils are blended to strengthen its agriculture industry. These discrete movements of soil and material provoke her to ask “could Banabans come to New Zealand or Australia and feel at home?” (p.110).

Teaiwa examines gradual change amongst the islanders by following the trajectory of their reactions toward the British Empire. She suggests the Banabans viewed the resident commissioner of the empire “as someone whose primary role was their welfare” (p.122). She follows their notion within the concept of “pity” that is culturally evoked and expressed in their everyday lives. However, they encountered the inherent injustice within the imperial system when they negotiated “with the company to acquire more land” (p.132). This account is a testimony to the disgrace of the fallen empire that denied justice and rights of the people of the island.

The third and final part of the book, “Between Our Islands”, puts emphasis on people of Banaba who have formed a diaspora in Fiji, on Rabi and other neighbouring islands. She argues that the 400 residents of the island are mere “caretakers” (p.5, 185): the majority of Banabans live in Fiji. Her claim is supported not only by statistics but also through her tracing of notions of home and the politics of community in transnational settings. Teaiwa underlines how blood lines matter for displaced islanders; only those who are “Banabans by blood can vote” (p.171), and even speak in affairs of the community, in transnational settings. Her picture of the Banaban community beyond the homeland stresses the *performance* of history, including the reproduction

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of cultural imaginaries through dance. Teaiwa shows how both land and body “develop personhood within the expanding social and geographical contexts” (p. 181)—dancing, for example, affirms identities lost under empire—yet Banaba remains fundamentally different because its phosphate appears in *every* material that people across the globe consume in various forms. Maybe next time, we should remember Banaba when we enjoy kiwifruit from farms in New Zealand fertilized with the island’s phosphate.

A detailed ethnography of Banaba undertaken by a researcher who hails from this “very, very small island”—made even smaller through the removal of 22 million tons of phosphate (p. 195)—is an example of reflectivity and insightful scholarship. This is not a book to be taken lightly, but rather should be suggested to anyone with an interest in material culture, globalization, and post-colonial and ecological studies.

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