

# Overlapping Methods and Values in Critical Pacific Approaches to Making Contemporary Art

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**Abstract** This is the transcript of a *talanoa*, a non-structured, free-flowing conversation between Katerina Teaiwa and Joy Enomoto with prompts from artist and curator Yuki Kihara and curator Natalie King, June 2023. Yuki Kihara and Joy Enomoto are co-curators with Healoha Johnston for Katerina's multimedia exhibition, *Project Banaba*, originally commissioned by Carriageworks cultural precinct in Sydney and opening in 2023 at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

**Keywords** Talanoa. Multimedia exhibition. Contemporary art. Project Banaba. Pacific studies.



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## Katerina Teaiwa

Perhaps we should discuss relevant methodologies that have influenced *Project Banaba* and Yuki's *Paradise Camp*, which is the ways in which my work, Joy's and Yuki's, are similar in that we do extensive research for each project. We delve into histories, stories and archives, and we track things before we try to figure out what to do, what project to work on and what stories to tell. We had some intersecting and overlapping similarities in that a shared method is to go back into the past. Then, once you see some gaps, some issues, some challenges, some problems of injustice from the past and in the present, then you start crafting your arts practice as creative and critical responses to findings.

We have intersecting and overlapping methods, cares and concerns.

I am a Pacific Studies academic who does not care so much about western disciplinary boundaries and genealogies. I have an interdisciplinary approach and in fact, I talk a lot more about it being transdisciplinary rather than just interdisciplinary.

I studied in California and in the breaks, worked in the nascent Fiji fashion industry as a model and dancer, and in hotels and bars, doing all kinds of hustle, low-paid kind of work. In another part of the Pacific Yuki Kihara's career, also started in the fashion industry, her career as an artist starts blooming, thriving and expanding, and mine grows as an academic. We start overlapping in that space of critical and creative contemporary arts, but still very much driven by what is happening in the islands, even further than that, what is happened in the past, what has happened in history.

Yuki's practice resonated with the things I cared about and the way that I worked, especially drawing on archives and historical colonial issues and decolonising contemporary arts practice from a transdisciplinary Pacific perspective. By transdisciplinary, we are driven by transformation in the present, bringing people beyond boundaries of academy, genres, institutions and communities, into conversations where there may not have not been such dialogue before.

*Talanoa* is a critical dialogue, but not a debate or an argument where someone comes out on top. It is a conversational flow and a different way of being, knowing, and producing that guides our work. It is clear from Yuki's work that you utilise whatever different technologies, forms, materials and crews to make it effective and impactful without borders and boundaries.

I carved my way through anthropology, Pacific Island studies and the natural sciences so I could explore issues my own way. That meant incorporating the visual and performing arts into dominant, textual, forms of knowledge production.

In the academy, you've got to find the right terms, frameworks, metaphors and poetics to describe what you do. For me, one of them

is 'remix'. In the Pacific, it is particularly useful, above and beyond concepts like hybridity, which have dominated spaces like post-colonial studies and cultural studies, etc. Remix is active. It highlights the agency of those involved in the remix process. It is creative and draws on the old and the new, and gives agency to creators.

I am Banaban, from a community that essentially exists between Fiji and Kiribati, with extracted lands that have flowed across farms and fields of other, larger, colonial nations such as Australia and New Zealand. Banabans utilise remix as a form of cultural survival. You come from such a small island and you are in the diaspora as a displaced, Indigenous minority, and you are dominated by 50 other groups - you need to be able to remix as a form of critical, creative, cultural survival.

Our ancestors come from many parts of the world now. When you have this massive ancestral remix, your practice in the present becomes one of vibing with your ancestors.

Diffraction is the other metaphor that I like, which is all about the ripples and the waves, I think Donna Haraway's ideas are timeless and still very relevant in this age of COVID, pandemics and calamities.

It is this idea that an event or a thing happens, history/ people/ decisions encounter or intersect with it and then diffract the 'thing' into an array of material, social and political waves that change history's direction. It is a useful Pacific metaphor with a range of possibilities for practice or for storytelling, kind of being all things simultaneously.

It is not a coincidence that my exhibition, Project Banaba, starts in Sydney because phosphate is randomly discovered in Sydney. Commercial and colonial activities in Sydney are the catalyst for the colony. It is a catalyst for diaspora and migration and for government and so many things.

I feel like whenever you try to tell or retell a story in Sydney, you have all those historical waves, all those vibrations, all those energies coming out of the land and coming out of time and space but there is a lot of profound things and energies in that space, in that layered, concrete, super urbanised space, but it is still on the ocean. It is still on the Pacific Ocean.

There are all historical pathways and trajectories, like well-travelled roads, oceanic or otherwise, that meet in Sydney and then move out and influence everywhere else. So, Sydney is another diffractive place. If you think about that as the pathway of Paradise Camp or Project Banaba, there are significant flows and pathways that make certain kinds of profound articulations possible.

A common origin story for the island of Banaba is that it formed from things of the ocean and things of the sky such as birds and bird droppings that create the land. Dead marine life made out of

phosphate fuses together into the calcium carbonate structure, the limestone atoll base to create what then becomes Banaba.

Banabans have many old stories about land in the sky and land in the sea, but that the first land comes from the sky and falls out of the sky into the sea and then the ancestors are born. The ancestors before them are pre-human ancestors that are made out of different kinds of elements, like rock. These multi-elementals fall out of the sky, and they land in the sea.

People really do not understand how Indigenous origin stories are actually just way more condensed and fundamental narratives that actually tell the story of the histories of material substances of atoms and molecules. When you take away all these barriers and boundaries around what is human and what is not human, then other ways of thinking about who we are, where we come from and where we are going as beings becomes possible.

It is no coincidence that Banaba is the rock, seemingly very static, and it is very unchanging, but, these are dynamic rocks that fall from the sky and land in the ocean, and then become 'Ocean Island'. So, how is a rock also an ocean island simultaneously? Land is a vibrating substance. Humans are vibrating substances. Oceans are very much vibrating, big fluid masses. Once you take away all those boundaries, then the stories about land falling from the sky are not strange at all.

And then, they combined together with turtles, stingrays, sharks, clouds, thunder, lightning and porpoises to become even more of an island. Humans are the last thing to come along.

Phosphate is one of these things that is involved in what scientists have theorised as big planetary boundaries. There are a few planetary boundaries and planetary thresholds that we cannot cross. And when we cross them, humans are in trouble. One of them involves resources of phosphorus and nitrogen.

Phosphorus cannot be found in nature on its own. It has to be part of a compound. Phosphorus is very volatile. That is why you make explosives out of it, so it has to be locked away in nature. There is research that talks about these phosphate or bone beds around the world, where dinosaurs were driven into corners of the earth because of big catastrophic events, and they all perish in one place, because they could not go further, like the edge of a continent. There would have been calamitous fires and big weather events, and they would all have been trapped on a peninsula or something like that and then, they all end up perishing in that corner.

There is one in Florida, and it is called a bone bed, and it is one of the biggest sources of phosphate on the planet. The idea is that because so many animals perished in that place, their bodies were then turned into phosphate. Our bodies, our DNA have phosphate in them, or the phosphate compound is part of the DNA structure of living things. That is why it is such an important element.

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Those cataclysmic moments create the possibility of this phosphate that we now mine and consume in global agriculture and circulate back through the system. But just like fossil fuels, we are doing it too fast. We are taking all the resources. Phosphate and fossil fuels, carbon, these things are meant to move slowly through the planet, like water. That is why we are facing all of these ridiculous thresholds that we are now passing at a planetary scale along with climate change: it is all connected.

One specific geological study that has been done about Banaba that I found in the Museum of Natural History in New York, I found that phosphate islands, especially Banaba, was under the sea before it emerged in its present form. It is been above the ocean and below the ocean and then back up above the ocean. The pressure created the sedimented phosphate rock.

You know how Papua New Guinea and Australia were one continent? It was called Sahul by scientists, and it was just one landmass: Papua New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania. 10,000 years ago, people were all connected through Papua New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania. Then the ocean rose and cut off that passage between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Banaba has crossed through different major time periods, ice ages, rising tides and changing sea levels to be the 80 metres above sea level that it is today.

Such a tiny, little spot somehow keeps insisting on protruding above the ocean near the equator. Many different origin stories and legends are told about Banaba that intersect with this idea that things fall from the sky and go under, and then they come back up again, and also that there might have been an earthquake or major event where land disappeared, broke off and fell into the ocean. Banaba looks like an oyster, as if a bit of it has been cut out, like something crumpled and disappeared under the ocean.

Storytelling connects to things in deep time and way forward, into the future from where we are now, in all directions. That is when you know you are telling a story that matters and that will stand the test of time. Go find those stories. They are everywhere.

Colonialism is definitely connected to climate change. All forms of mining are definitely connected to climate change.

Banaba is a microcosm of everything that has happened even though there are only 7,000 Banabans on the planet. It only took 80 years to destroy and it had been there for thousands of years and people had thrived with very limited flora and fauna. They flourished and they were amazing expert fisherman as they had to learn to fish in the deep ocean because there is no reef on Banaba.

You have to understand what happened to the small places to think about how you fix what is happening to the big places: the micro is profoundly connected to the macro. By understanding it, you understand the big global forces.

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My work is about the land, and it is about the material details of what happened. Phosphate, concrete, steel, and these different kinds of material structures that come from the earth, but are causing a lot of problems, because they are not in harmony with the kinds of environments that we are living in. Banaba teaches us that it does not take long to destroy an entire ecosystem and make it unliveable with no drinking water and food. Imagine entire continents going through the same thing.

How did Banabans flourish and survive, laugh and play in 2023? What is the social structure going to look like and who is in charge and where do you find happiness? These are actually really, really important things that we all need to be thinking about right now but the end goal is justice for Banaba peoples and Banaban lands.

When Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain created the British Phosphate Commissioners it was the same year that Morocco solidified its hold over the Western Sahara. 1919 to 1920 was this critical moment where all the big powerful phosphate companies were formed. The Moroccan company was mining Western Sahara and displacing Indigenous Sahawari people who have been protesting ever since. Banaba and Nauru and, to a limited extent, French Polynesia where there was phosphate mining as well, and Palau.

The quality of the phosphate in the Pacific, but particularly Banaba and Nauru, were superior. Phosphoric acid is the ingredient put into industrial strength, agricultural fertiliser and has many other applications. We had high quality phosphate that was economically important from an industrial perspective. It was worth it for all the ships to come from across the planet to go and source phosphate from that very far away place in the Pacific.

That's why Morocco and Banaba are triangulated, but both displaced Indigenous people in order to access phosphate that's in the ground. There are resonances between the two spaces over phosphate displacement, they call it 'blood phosphate' in Western Sahara. That's what the Indigenous activists call their phosphate 'blood phosphate'.

## Joy Enomoto

There is so many interesting ways in which Hawai'i intersects with Banaba as a site, and the way in which extraction works. It has its roots in the 1856 *Guano Act*, which is America's entryway into empire in the truest sense, meaning the US as a nation is beginning to claim islands in the Pacific through guano extraction and declare "If there is guano on this island that we can mine, we can claim that island for the United States".

This is the gateway to what leads to this relationship to Banaba and phosphate along with slave trade sugar. The relationship between bird shit and slavery, extraction and displacement are things that island people in the Pacific know in a very specific way. And one thing that's not really being included in the Project Banaba exhibition is when the Guano Act gets put into place, Hawai'ian men are sent out into the Pacific to harvest that guano, because there is this desperate need to find guano that is not coming from Peru.

Peru had the highest quality guano at the time. Peru was a key player in black birding. They began kidnapping people from Rapa Nui for Peruvian guano mining, which leads to a very fast population collapse along with disease for Rapa Nui. And so, because there is this competition for phosphate, and it is not really so much guano and phosphate for fertiliser, for food, as much as it is for weapons in the US context, because they were in the middle of the Civil War. There is this need to build up ammunitions that also ties it to America's need for Hawai'i, America's need for these military sites everywhere.

That is the intersection of American planters wanting a very distinct source of its own guano or its own phosphate to build up industries to improve their capitalism, to improve their wealth, with no consideration for island peoples, and even more so less concern for the lives of the birds that produce guano.

They are more than willing to devastate entire ecosystems for this source of material, for this thing that has taken millennia to create, as Kati always points out, and one of the most horrifying things that Kati always shares is it took 80 years to basically destroy Banaba and 80 years is the time from King Kamehameha to the overthrow in Hawai'i. This is our relationship to time. Taking processes that take millennia to create, for ecosystems to evolve and develop and exist in a very particular way so that other lives can survive. And within less than a century, that can all be undone based on greed.

Banaba was also militarised: it was important for the Japanese and the Americans to militarise all of the phosphate mines of Banaba to feed and protect their empires. All of these connections to this one substance, among the 100s of extractions that have occurred in the Pacific. Imperialists have the audacity to talk about security while they literally devastate the things that make us secure. There is a

constant threat or destruction of waterways, water pathways, rivers, bays, and estuaries. The US, Britain, Australia, and other large nations have the nerve to talk about security when freshwater is our ultimate security, and they do not care about displacing people.

When the Marshallese were bombed, the US displaced 90,000 people - during this last Red Hill spill in 2021, 93,000 people were poisoned. They do not care. That is just collateral damage to them. It is inconvenient. People do not want to think that they would do that to Hawai'i, but I do not know why they think they would not. What an inconvenience Hawai'ians have been to them for centuries.

We definitely acknowledge that this is not America, consistently. We are a constant thorn in their side. What easier way to get rid of that thorn in your side than to contaminate our water permanently? The same issue is occurring in Okinawa. The same issue is happening in Guam. All of which have strong resistance movements. There is a tremendous threat to their only aquifer on Guam, the largest aquifer in their northern lands. They would remove the entire Chamorro population, and that would mean nothing to them just to have that base.

This is the kind of mindset that we are dealing with when we talk about phosphate extraction - and all of this is tied to a mineral. All of this is tied to resources that we need to live. We actually need water to live.

With Project Banaba, I always think about that connection that the United States Military and Government has no consciousness - and Australia as well - because they are partners in this - they are partners in crime and they can use natural resources to remove us as that source of nuisance.

## **Katerina Teaiwa**

It is even more than an economic incentive. I do think it is quite ideological and cultural. We are ruled by cultures who are driven by a patriarchal and hyper masculinist way of thinking about everything. It is this fascinating, dangerous, crazy, really illogical and very unpragmatic human drive, colonial - colonising drive, extractive drive. There is an Isaac Asimov sci-fi novel about how in the future, we have run out of everything, so they are putting the bodies in the chimneys to get phosphate because one common, historical source of phosphate is human bones. I include this in one of the chapters of my book *Consuming Ocean Island* (2015). It is a chapter on remix.



## Joy Enomoto

Solomon Enos is a master of remix. His Polyfantastica series is very much along a Hawai'ian futurist lens and even Kamaoli Kuwada is interested in Hawai'ian futurism literature. Hawai'ians are shapeshifters and people who had to figure something out very quickly.

Kamehameha in 1810, he is like "I need to control the harbours. It is not just that I need to control that. It is not that I just need to bring all of the islands into one thing". He took sandalwood to China. The port fees for the ship were ten times higher, were more than the sandalwood.

He starts charging fees to foreign vessels. He adapts to a shifting of world of trade and a rising globalism. He understands the concept of power at a time when, quite frankly, the European and Americans did not quite know what to do. They went from being impressed to threatened and then, of course, then we had to be savage. And then, we are navigating eugenics.

Hawai'ians managed to somehow survive this major genocide with a population collapse of 95%. And then there is the Hawai'ian Renaissance. They had almost convinced us that we did not like ourselves.

And then this global movement in the 70s that woke everybody up. I feel like we are hitting that again in this moment of rising fascism. The rhythm and remix in the dance is always a marker of what is going on historically. We have railroad hulas. We have whaling hulas. We have these different things that are telling the narratives, and you see this throughout the Pacific. When war comes, there is a hula, there are these marching dances.

If you listen to pidgin, it is actually a Hawai'ian construct. The way the words flow are actually in Hawai'ian order, but the words are taken from Chinese, from Japanese, from Portuguese, that trade language. I always see this as a very important remix that has a very Hawai'ian structure.

It was a Hawai'ian baseline with different notes placed on top, because what do you do with the edge? What do you do with the contact point to communicate? Well, you form a pidgin, you form a Creole, you form this trade language, and that is what is needed to survive in these estuaries, in these rich nutrient zones that cannot quite be defined.

What Pacific person is not remixing? Our land is also very much remixed as well. There was a constant extraction of our sand to other islands or to other places, or Waikiki. Our hotels cannot handle the erosion, so they bring in sand from another island or from some other part of the ocean, which has nothing to do with our natural processes. As our trees and our plants are dying, they are dropping new seeds from all over the world.

That is why Hawai'i looks the way that it does. I worked on an archive of one of the head curators of the Natural History Museum of

Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. He took thousands of shells from Hawai'i and sent it to that museum. Somebody else is benefiting from the taking of us and then we have to absorb whatever they bring in, whether that is a foreign bird, whether that is a foreign plant, whether that is a foreign animal like cattle or whatever.

When I think about New Zealand and the whole changing of the landscape through cattle and sheep, that same scaping occurred in Hawai'i, the constant re-scaping of our lands is a constant remix. And much of our soil has been used because our soil is nutrient-rich, and it is taken to feed other people. You notice it when there is a change in the birdsong, you notice it when there are certain plants that cannot bloom, because the bird that is needed for that is no longer there. That relationship, that deep understanding that Hawai'ians always had of "This is growing on the land when this is happening in the ocean", we knew that. But when you remove this thing, you take that tree off the landscape, and you do not know that there are sharks mating right now, somebody's going to die.

Tourists get bitten by sharks because they are on vacation. They do not know how to read the landscape. But we had to remix, because we needed to understand our landscape and the processes of the world, as we knew it, were removed. We had to figure out another way to embody how to survive in a landscape that has been completely devastated. Even if it is in the smallest ways, it made huge shifts to our psyche and to our need for survival. In that sense, we have had to do multiple remixes.

Right now, the army leases are up for renewal in 2029, and they have received thousands of acres of land for \$1 in 1964 for 65 years, and there are other leases that are coming up in 2030. There is imagining that these lands will be returned, but then what is needed for those lands to be returned? What are we imagining on those lands? Is it food? Is it cleanup? How much level of cleanup does it need? Is it a fish pond? Is it a bird sanctuary? What needs to be returned there?

Being able to envision life post-military, post-cleanup, because I am in no way worried about the earth. The earth actually is going to do whatever it needs to do. It will remix plastic and figure out a way to exist long after we have gone. We need the Earth. We need the earth and in some degrees, it needs us for certain things, but very little. The earth is remixing and about to spit us out. We are really on the verge of collapse, so I have to imagine what life post-military is going to be, because I feel like the earth is actually going to create conditions where the military will not be able to function.

We just saw in typhoon Mawar, the military did not even know what to do. That there are natural forces that could remove the military and render it incapable of functioning. These are the acts of desperate men, in which case, our embodied memory, our embodied knowledge, will be the things that save us, but we have to be able

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to imagine a post-military world and a post-cleanup world, because they are fine to leave us with contaminated lands.

So, who has always been the one to figure out how to actually clean things? Pacific Islanders, Indigenous people, Pacific people. More importantly, Pacific women. When I think about a post-military remix, it is awakening our imaginations in ways that we have not allowed ourselves to imagine for a very long time.

