Obituary

Bringing the Pacific to us: A tribute to Teresia Teaiwa 1968 – 2017

Teresia Teaiwa, Victoria University of Wellington[1]

'…maybe we could bring all those twenty thousand islands, and so much more, to us?'[2]

Teresia once asked, 'How does one begin to describe the enormity of the Pacific Ocean?'[3] How does one even know where to start? Reflecting on her question, one prompting us to think about our work as teachers of Pacific Studies, I realize that I could ask the same thing about her: How does one even begin to describe the enormity – the impact, the power, the legacy – of Teresia herself, a woman responsible for charting so many of the courses we now follow? How does one even know where to start? While a part of me wants to talk about every special and intimate moment spent with her – from the moment she first picked me up at the airport when I arrived in New Zealand from Hawaii, a fresh and eager PhD student; to the moment she grabbed my hand as I submitted my completed thesis; to the moments she checked in on me when I was sick or heartbroken, or when we laughed, cried, or raged together *in* and *for* our Pacific – I know that the best way to honor her would be to use this space for more than just her, and more than just me, but for something larger than the both of us, something that brought us together, and something that will always keep me near her: Pacific Studies.

As a lecturer of Pacific Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, Teresia was constantly reflecting on and writing about her teaching and she encouraged all of us, her colleagues, to do the same.[4] This short

article, therefore, is my attempt to honor her by taking up her challenge to do as she did: to reflect, to write, and to find ways to continue to bring those twenty thousand islands of the Pacific to us so that we can see them, think about them, hold them, love them, and even seek to understand a bit of their pain. As novelist, poet, and scholar Albert Wendt once said, the Pacific is 'So vast, so fabulously varied a scatter of islands, nations, cultures, mythologies and myths, so dazzling a creature … only the imagination in free flight can hope – if not to contain her – to grasp some of her shape, plumage, and pain'.[5] Teresia knew she could never contain the Pacific or know everything there is to know about it. Therefore, she moved with it instead, feeling its ebbs and flows, bringing what she could of the Pacific to her students, letting them feel the beauty and the sorrow of the region. She was a poet in the classroom, weaving stories together, captivating students. She would laugh and cry with them, but she would also hold them accountable to their work, expecting the best from them. Her classes were not easy. They were academically rigorous and often emotionally heavy, and it was the mix of these elements, with Teresia at the helm, that made them so transformative.

As a recent hire in Pacific Studies at Victoria University, I will be teaching the core Pacific Studies courses that Teresia used to teach before her untimely and tragic passing in 2017, including PASI 101: The Pacific Heritage and PASI 201: Comparative History in Polynesia. While a part of me finds the task quite daunting, especially knowing the profound impact that she had on so many students, including myself, another part of me knows that Teresia would not want me to be limited by her legacy. Instead, she would want me to bring the best of me to the classroom. Further, she would want me to continue to fiddle with her courses, as she used to do, changing them when and where necessary. Thus, I will use this space as I believe she would have; I will use it to think about and write about our work in, of, and for the region.

Situated in a journal that focuses on archives and records, and an issue intent on decolonizing them, one may wonder what place a tribute to a lecturer of Pacific Studies, and a reflection on our work, may have here. When I think about it, though, I believe Teresia would have loved the challenge an out-of-the-ordinary piece like this could pose to an established space and structure. I imagine her smiling her cheeky smile, lifting her brow, and nodding her head slightly, all signs of approval of the decision to use this space strategically, not as a memorial to her life, but as a means of honoring her by taking her work in new directions for new times.

While Teresia may not have been an archivist or a librarian herself, she used archives and libraries to bring the Pacific to her students. In PASI 201, for example, she would take students on fieldtrips to Archives New Zealand, to the Alexander Turnbull Library, and to the J.C. Beaglehole Room at Victoria University's library. Students would put on white gloves, hold small spatula-like instruments, and carefully flip through pages of history, many of them never entering – or even considering – these spaces before. When Teresia took students to the archives and to various collections, it was as if she gave them permission to be there while also being conscious of the fact that it would not always be an easy or comfortable experience. Later in the trimester, she would then require them to return to one or more of these spaces on their own. Picking a theme from the course – ranging from contact and commerce, to conversion and native missionaries, to colonial collaborations and conflicts – students would have to find four comparable primary sources, two from a Western Polynesian country and two from an Eastern Polynesian country, that related to their chosen theme. They would then have to read through their sources and later describe and briefly comment on them in an annotated bibliography.

Before completing this assignment, however, she would introduce students to the concept of 'historical agency.' Historical agency teaches students to consider the range of choices and actions possible in any given historical moment. It emphasizes the fact that our Pacific ancestors were not limited to the actions that we – as contemporary islanders with the privilege of hindsight[6] – would like them to have chosen. In other words, as Teresia notes, it is a concept that 'helps students see how colonization by Europeans might have been something facilitated by some indigenous historical actors and resisted by others'.[7] Armed with this concept, students go digging through archive materials, looking at everything from newspaper texts, to maps and photographs, to government documents and reports, to journals and diaries, and political pamphlets. And in their explorations and examinations, history gets messy. Recognizing historical agency complicates the often-desired narrative of 'good' native versus 'evil' coloniser, something that has been acknowledged and written about by other researchers as well.[8]

After first teaching PASI 201 myself as a teaching fellow in 2015, I realized that resistance often makes us, and our students, feel righteous. Students are proud when they believe, and when they have proof, that their ancestors were on what they perceive to be the 'right' side of history. When they learn, however, that some of their forbearers may have been

collaborators in the colonial process, and further, that some Europeans may have actually advocated for Pacific Islanders' equality, some of them struggle. While I never heard Teresia say it directly, I believe she saw that struggle – or that having to come to terms with the complexities of history – as necessary. Teresia did not romanticize the past. Instead, she examined it and she encouraged her students to do the same. Further, she dismantled any assumption that history can be understood in binary terms: 'good' versus 'bad', 'brown' versus 'white', 'native' versus 'foreigner.' In fact, she recognized her 'white' influences, honouring the roles they played in contributing to her genealogy of thought.[9] Therefore, I believe that her insistence on taking students to the archives and libraries was, at least in part, an exercise in intellectual agency, or in letting students know that they have the power to choose their influences, regardless of ethnicity, and that they can critique all structures and sources of power, even ones from within their own communities.[10]

In the process of taking students to the archives and library collections, Teresia also showed them that history was not something to be preserved in time, or made to be rigid and untouchable. In PASI 201, one of the first readings students are assigned is 'History "in" the Pacific' by Greg Dening. From this article they learn that 'The past is never contemporary, but history always is. History is always bound to the present in some way. History always represents the present in the ways is re-presents the past'.[11]. This is an essential precursor to their work in the archives and libraries as it empowers students to think of themselves as creators of history, or as agents who can do what our people have been doing all along, 'that is, constructing our pasts, our histories, from vast storehouses of narratives, both written and oral, to push particular agendas'.[12] Teresia encouraged students to dig into these storehouses, to think about what is contained in them, and further, to consider who did the collecting and for what reasons. Through this, many of them also come to reflect on the silences and the gaps, questioning what was not maintained, documented, recorded, or deemed worthy enough to be given space in these repositories. In the process, they create their own narratives, some of which directly challenge those often perpetuated by the archives and collection spaces themselves. And I believe that it is this work – giving our students access to archival materials and empowering them to both critique and create narratives – that can contribute to decolonizing these spaces. While this may not have been a direct aim of Teresia's, it is certainly something that I have come to see as essential in my own work.

Archives can be characterized as conduits for 'social memory' or 'how societies remember and commemorate their past through institutions and symbols that have meaning to individuals and groups'.[13] Archives New Zealand, in particular, tells New Zealanders a bit about who they are as a 'nation'. As such, it contributes quite significantly to the construction of a national identity that allows members of the 'nation' to distinguish themselves from others. When our students enter the archives, however, they are often confronted by the fact that while 'archives provide evidence of lives lived and thereby document culture,' *their* lives and *their* cultures are not always made visible in these spaces.[14] In fact, many of the stories and collective memories that they do find speak more to their colonisation and treatment *by* the nation rather than their active participation and/or challenging *of* it.

This is why I will continue to take Teresia's lead and insist on introducing my students to the archives. They must be made aware of what has been collected about them and their ancestors so that they can begin to construct their own stories, and with any hope, change the direction of archival and library collections in the future. As indigenous educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, 'The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope'.[15] It does our students no good to simply label national repositories as colonial spaces. It does no good to avoid them for this reason either. Instead, it serves our students to make them aware of the potential biases – of the fact that their stories may not be adequately represented, and that what memories are recorded may serve an imperialist agenda – and then to release them into those spaces so that they can transform them in their own ways, even if that transformation begins first with questioning and critiquing them. This is part of my own personal teaching pedagogy which aims at building a sense of hope underpinned by the idea that students can always, even if in the smallest ways, make a difference. It is about fostering a sense of radical hope, radical in the sense that they may not know if their work will lead to any real systemic change, and hopeful in the sense that they are motivated to do it anyway for the chance that it just might.

When I think about my new role as a lecturer in Pacific Studies, and perhaps more importantly, the responsibility I now have to carry the courses that Teresia developed, I am both excited and a bit terrified. How will I begin to explain the enormity of our ocean to my students? How will I bring the Pacific to them so that they can see our sea of

islands and feel it in ways that add meaning to their lives? While I am sure that my answers to these questions will shift and evolve in the years to come, I can say confidently that I will always endeavour to make learning personal. When I first arrived in New Zealand, Teresia invited me to attend one of her PASI 201 lectures. So inspired by her teaching, I attended every single lecture that trimester, and in the process, reflected on my own personal understandings of the Pacific. I knew it was large and vast. I knew it was varied and layered. I knew it was complicated. Rather than be overwhelmed by the complexities of our region, however, Teresia showed me how to bring the Pacific to me, one story at a time. And with each story I learned, I felt more and more connected to an ocean that continues to humble and fascinate me. Therefore, while it pains me to know that Teresia is no longer here to teach her courses, I am comforted by the fact that her story – her work, her reflections, and her challenges to us all – will be part of every class I teach. My students will know of the fiery, passionate, and dedicated woman who brought the islands to us. They will know of her beauty and of her pain. And through her, they will be inspired to both love our islands and construct them meaningfully.

Emalani Case

Endnotes

1. Victoria University of Wellington. "Scholarship fund to launch in memory of Teresia Teaiwa". Retrieved 2018 from https://www.victoria.ac.nz/news/2017/09/scholarship-fund-to-launch-in-memory-of-teresia-teaiwa
2. Teresia Teaiwa, "Charting Pacific (Studies) Waters: Evidence of Teaching and Learning," *The Contemporary Pacific* 29, no. 2 (2017): 267.
3. Teaiwa, 265.
4. See Teresia Teaiwa, "Preparation for Deep Learning," *The Journal of Pacific History* 46, no. 2 (2011): 214–20.; Teaiwa, "The Ancestors We Get to Choose: White Influences I Won't Deny"; and Teaiwa, "Charting Pacific (Studies) Waters: Evidence of Teaching and Learning."
5. Wendt, "Towards a New Oceania," 71.
6. Greg Dening, "Empowering Imaginations," *The Contemporary Pacific* 9, no. 2 (1997): 423.
7. Teaiwa, "Charting Pacific (Studies) Waters: Evidence of Teaching and Learning," 269.
8. Lachy Paterson, *Colonial Discourses: Niupepa Māori* 1855-1863 (Otago: Otago University Press, 2006), 12.
9. Teaiwa, "The Ancestors We Get to Choose: White Influences I Won't Deny," 53.
10. Teaiwa, "Charting Pacific (Studies) Waters: Evidence of Teaching and Learning," 269.
11. Greg Dening, "History 'in' the Pacific," *The Contemporary Pacific* 1, no. 1&2 (1989): 134.
12. Epeli Hau'ofa, "Pasts to Remember," in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 61.
13. Helena Barwick, *Archives New Zealand's Contribution to National Identity* (Wellington: Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga Archives New Zealand, 2007), 12.
14. Barwick, 11.
15. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999), 4.