

# Public History and Globalization

## Ethnography at the USS Arizona Memorial

**W**orldwide, historical sites important for local and national communities are increasingly visited by people crossing national and regional boundaries. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) forecasts that the tourism sector will surpass a total of one billion international travelers by the year 2010, reaching 1.6 billion by the year 2020 (WTO, May 11, 2000). Globalization, the watchword of the present, carries important implications for history as well as for the economic and trade issues so frequently noted in today's media. Just as increasing movements of people and images across national boundaries impact the world economic order, they also affect the ways we produce and interpret history.

This essay discusses the utility of ethnographic research for understanding historical interpretation in contexts that are at once local, national, and international. One such site is the USS Arizona Memorial in Honolulu, Hawai'i, owned by the U.S. Navy and administered by the National Park Service. It memorializes those who died in the bombing attack that initiated America's entry into World War II.<sup>1</sup> It is both a sacred site of national memory and a destination for international tourism visited annually by tens

*USS Arizona Memorial.*



of thousands of foreign travelers. In such places travelers make sense of local histories in terms of their own routes of travel, their own stories and histories. How may we understand the “polyphony” of perspectives that converge in such complex spaces?

Since the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor in 1991, researchers based at the University of Hawai'i have been studying the production of historical meaning at the memorial, addressing how the stories of Pearl Harbor are told, interpreted, and understood there.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, these projects have open-ended and collaborative styles. It has long been a hallmark of ethnographic research that it is, at base, about the discovery of questions and themes that may not be well understood at the outset of the project (even if taken for granted by the “natives”—people who live, work, and transit in the settings under consideration). Such research requires close listening and the ability to “hang out.” Given the high degree of sensitivity associated with war memorials and their themes of death, suffering, and heroism, the participatory style of ethnography affords an opportunity for reading the personal and human dimensions of such sites that cannot be represented easily with survey techniques.

Ethnographic research with tourist travelers is made difficult by the fact that they are on the move; they are not accessible in the same way that members of a residential community might be accessible. The mobility of travelers has made it even more important that researchers interested in tourist experience work closely with staff and volunteers who *do* spend time at these sites. Thus, the involvement of NPS personnel in all phases of research, from conception to publication, has been an important element of all the University of Hawai'i projects.

### ***Sacred Sites/National Histories***

What is at stake at Pearl Harbor? The USS Arizona Memorial condenses highly charged stories about events that changed America and the world—a bombing attack that killed over 2,000

military personnel and civilians, sunk or damaged an entire battleship fleet, and catapulted the United States into world war. Thus, telling the stories of Pearl Harbor also becomes a way of telling stories about what it means to be American, with all the attendant emotions and politics.

Given the diversity of Americans visiting Pearl Harbor, there are innumerable ways for people to engage with the place and its stories *as* Americans. Issues of diversity and multiculturalism have been a central feature of Pearl Harbor histories from the very beginning when the unifying effects of the bombing were first recognized and incorporated in documentary accounts of the event.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the multiplicity of national stories, international travelers at the memorial are reminders that Pearl Harbor is also a Japanese story, an Asian story, and a story relevant to anyone for whom the advent of world war in 1941 is significant. By 1990, about one-third of the nearly 1.5 million visitors to the memorial were international travelers, mostly from Asia and, specifically, Japan. In the mid-1990s, the park produced a Japanese soundtrack for the film, available through rental of headphones. (Museum signs remain in English only.)

The complexity of the site, and the potential for identities and histories to collide there, is indicated by the numerous conflicts that have arisen at the site over the years—conflicts about the ways history is represented and about the ways people interact with those histories. Consider a few examples:

- As gauged by letters to Congress, the USS Arizona Memorial is the most controversial site in the national park system.
- During the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor in 1991, complaints expressed concern about the Japanese presence, including the Japanese books and videos for sale.
- Some visitors have protested references to Hiroshima in occasional talks at the memorial while others have lamented the *absence* of references to Hiroshima.<sup>4</sup>
- During the anniversary period, criticism of the documentary film shown at the USS Arizona Memorial reached a peak, with a letter writing campaign of veterans groups upset that the film rationalized Japan's "sneak" attack.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2000, a group of local Japanese Americans protested images in the documentary film that,

in their view, implied local Japanese spying for the Japanese, despite the lack of evidence.

- Native Hawaiians, many of whom are active in movements to reclaim land and political status lost during colonial history, seek to recognize the significance of the Pearl Harbor area as native land once replete with burial sites, walled fish ponds, and ancestral shrines.
- The arrival of USS *Missouri* in 1998, moored within eyesight of the USS Arizona Memorial, raised concerns among some Pearl Harbor survivors and Park Service personnel that it would overshadow and distort the atmosphere of the memorial and its shrine room.
- Disney's production of the new Hollywood film, *Pearl Harbor*, raises the specter of the "Disneyfication" of Pearl Harbor history.<sup>6</sup>

These conflicts over the nature of Pearl Harbor memory marks identities that intersect at the memorial. Reviewing the list, it is possible to see that arguments over historical representation are nested in broader social relations of various kinds, especially national, racial, and generational identities.

If it was not already obvious, these vignettes show that the meaning and value of Pearl Harbor stories vary across audiences. In other words, national, ethnic, and generational identities are associated with distinctive ways of understanding and feeling Pearl Harbor history. These "communities of understanding" are rooted in specific cultural and historical experiences.

### **Nationality**

Many American visitors to the USS Arizona Memorial express surprise and curiosity about Japanese visitors there. Studies have documented a diverse array of backgrounds and motives among Japanese who come to the memorial. Younger Japanese often have little prior knowledge of Pearl Harbor and come out of curiosity or as part of pre-programmed holiday packages. In contrast, older Japanese visitors generally already know of Pearl Harbor and come deliberately to see a place that has personal meaning, sometimes with a sense of "healing" past wrongs. In the latter case, it is possible to see some commonality between older Americans and Japanese, who may have been on different sides of the war, but who share the experience as a formative event in their lives.

Indeed, this shared experience has provided the basis for a limited number of contacts



*Hiroya Sugano pays his respects as part of the "sister rose" ceremony at the USS Arizona Memorial, June 1995.*

between American and Japanese veterans of the Pacific War. One of the most remarkable recent developments has been a series of exchanges between Japanese and American war veterans. The memorial has been a catalyst for these exchanges, first bringing Japanese veterans to participate in a symposium marking the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, and then facilitating ceremonial events aimed at expressing reconciliation among former enemies.

Twice, in 1995 and 2000, an organization of Japanese navy veterans has visited Honolulu to participate unofficially in December 7th anniversary events.<sup>7</sup> Usually ignored or scorned in their own country, Japanese veterans seem to find a degree of dignity and personal significance in a place dedicated to remembering the sacrifices of those who fought for their country. They also find recognition of the value of military service and a sense of identification with the United States as a strong military power and ally of Japan. In doing so, they find satisfaction in the ability to be involved, however marginally, in U.S. celebrations of war history.

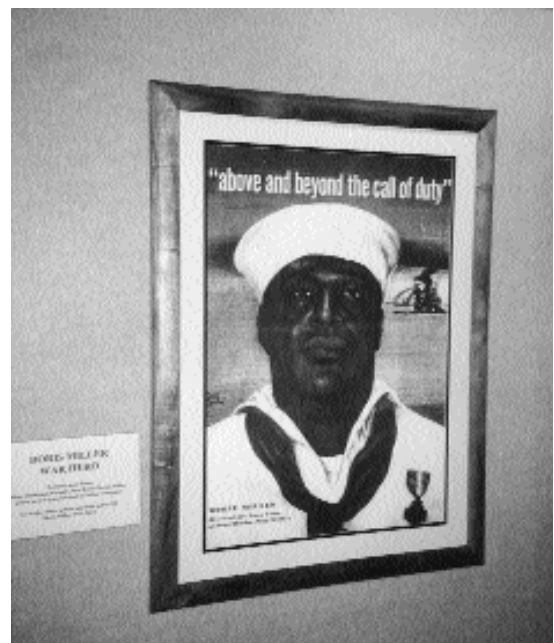
### **Ethnicity**

Throughout its 40-year history, the USS Arizona Memorial has evolved in ways that take account of a widening circle of human stories entangled with the bombing of December 7, 1941. Constructing a history of memory of Pearl Harbor—of the ways Pearl Harbor has been memorialized through time—also provides a history of race relations in America, up to the present. Initially only a memorial to military personnel, the memorial brought civilian casualties into the orbit of official commemoration in the 1990s.

*Museum exhibit of recruiting poster of African-American war hero Doris Miller, USS Arizona Memorial museum.*

And, even though the heroic acts of a black sailor, Doris (Dorie) Miller, were widely publicized during the war, minority sailors have only recently received attention in memorial activities. For example, as part of last year's December 7th anniversary events, a special commemorative ceremony read out the names of all minority service personnel on duty during the Pearl Harbor attack and reflected on their experiences with both war and racism.

For Americans of Japanese ancestry, Pearl Harbor not only marked the beginning of the Pacific War, it marked the advent of intensified public suspicions, discrimination, and appropriation of property. While elements of this story do emerge in the course of interpretation (as in presentations by a Japanese-American veteran volunteer, who was himself interned in California), in general the memorial does not address this aspect of war history. The absence contributed to the recent controversy in which local Japanese Americans objected to the depiction of Japanese Americans in the documentary film, leading to modification of offending parts of the film. The newer film, like the one it replaced, only referred to Japanese Americans in the context of the U.S. commanders' mistaken assumption that large numbers of local Japanese were potential spies and saboteurs. It disregards the experiences of local Japanese Americans, many of whom worked on the bases and rallied to the defense of the island during the panicky days after the attack. The relative absence of local stories may be one



reason that few residents of Honolulu, Japanese American or otherwise, visit the memorial (only about 5% of visitors are “local”).

### Generation

The phrase “remember Pearl Harbor” takes on new meanings as World War II veterans decline in number, 60 years after the conflict began. For war-era Americans, the words “Pearl Harbor” will always have special meaning—a kind of “flash-bulb memory.” Indeed, Park Service personnel have noted that war-generation audiences exhibit a higher degree of awareness, attentiveness, and emotional response. We have found support for this impression in research on emotional responses to the documentary film shown there which revealed that war-generation Americans report more intense emotional responses to the film than do younger viewers.<sup>8</sup> This survey also documented a longer historical trend in Americans’ memories of Pearl Harbor, with emotions of sadness (and pride) replacing emotions of anger.

If Pearl Harbor memory is becoming less emotional with the passing of generations, it is also being transformed by ongoing representations of Pearl Harbor history in contexts of tourism and popular culture. When USS *Missouri* was towed into Pearl Harbor in June 1998, it added a spectacular tourist attraction that visually dwarfs the sleek, low-profile memorial nearby. USS *Missouri* is both a technological wonder and a historic artifact (where MacArthur signed the surrender documents ending the war with Japan). USS *Arizona* is also a historic artifact. But it is underwater, almost invisible. Although the two ships were conceived of by some as “bookends” for the Pacific War, the visually-dominant USS *Missouri* has the potential to redefine the cultural space of the memorial with its triumphal narrative of victory in the Pacific, especially as plans take shape for the development of the surrounding area with further amenities and even a Pacific War museum.

### Conclusion

Cultural and historic sites are all about the production of meaning. But whose meaning? Toward what end? As audiences become more diverse and varied (and especially as marginalized or silenced groups find a hearing in today’s public spaces), meaning also becomes more complicated and contested.

Diverse histories are likely to be particularly acute at sites of war memory that, by definition,

memorialize lethal conflicts. Conceptually, war museums and memorials are located along the fault zones of national and international conflicts. How is it possible to produce national stories of war without reproducing the same sentiments that engendered the conflicts in the first place? What kind of national histories will “make sense” when they quickly circulate to multicultural and multinational audiences? And, more fundamentally, what histories are *not* told when dominant stories of such spectacular events rivet our attention? At Pearl Harbor, for example, the events of December 7th that provide the USS *Arizona* Memorial with its *raison d’être* also further obscure the longer history of Native Hawaiians—in many instances literally buried in the ground, covered over by the development of the largest naval base in the Pacific.

Such questions point to the need for more nuanced readings of the rhetorics and politics of history, especially public histories in today’s “contact zones” of international travel. In his book on Holocaust memorials, *Texture of Memory*, James Young writes of the potential for public sites of memory to enable awareness of multiple forms of experience:

Public Holocaust memorials in America will increasingly be asked to invite many different occasionally competing groups of Americans into their spaces. African Americans and Korean Americans, Native Americans and Jews will necessarily come to share common spaces of memory, if not common memory itself. In this, the most ideal of American visions, every group in America may eventually come to recall its past in light of another group’s historical memory, each coming to know more about their compatriot’s experiences in light of their own remembered past.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the lessons from the USS *Arizona* Memorial suggest that the “coalition of consciousness” Young foresees may also be extended across national boundaries. It is a hopeful vision.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jim Adams, “World War II Battlefields and National Parks in the Pacific,” *CRM* 19:3 (1996): 57-61; Michael Slackman, *Remembering Pearl Harbor: The Story of the USS Arizona Memorial* (Honolulu: Arizona Memorial Museum Association, 1986); Edward T. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlegrounds*. Rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993);
- <sup>2</sup> Phyllis Turnbull, “Remembering Pearl Harbor: The Semiotics of the Arizona Memorial,” in *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities*, ed. Hayward Alker Jr. and Michael Shapiro

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 407-433; Marjorie Kelly, "Enshrining History: The Visitor Experience at Pearl Harbor's USS Arizona Memorial," *Museum Anthropology* 20:3 (1996): 45-57.

Patricia Masters has carried out research with Japanese visitors to Pearl Harbor (Another Way of Seeing: Pearl Harbor as Memory. Paper read at East-West Center conference on Public Histories and National Identities, 1992); and Marie Thorsten is researching Japanese veterans ceremonies (see *Treading the Tiger's Tail: Reflections on a Decade of Reunions between American and Japanese Pearl Harbor Veterans*. Paper delivered at annual meetings of the Asian Studies Association. Chicago, IL. March 25, 2001).

- 3 Geoffrey White and Jane Yi, "December 7th: Race and Nation in Wartime Documentary," in *Classic Whiteness: Race and the Hollywood Studio System*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- 4 Geoffrey White, "Moving History: The Pearl Harbor Film(s)," *Positions: East-Asia Cultural Critique* 5, no. 3 (1997): 709-744.
- 5 James Rusbridger and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor: How Churchill Lured Roosevelt into WWII* (New York: Summit Books, 1991). Cited in Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 235-236.
- 6 Mike Wallace, "Disney's America," in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 159-174.

- 7 Marie Thorsten's research on this topic has benefited from advice and cooperation from John DeVirgilio, historian of the Pearl Harbor attack who has done extensive research with Japanese veterans.
- 8 Geoffrey M. White, "Mythic History and National Memory: The Pearl Harbor Anniversary," *Culture and Psychology*, Special Issue edited by James Wertsch 3, no. 1 (1997): 63-88, p. 70.
- 9 Cited in Lucy Lippard, *On the Beaten Track* (New York: The New Press, 1999), p. 129.

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Gretchen Schafft

# Displaying Discrediting History in Public Sites

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Perpetrators and their descendants often do not want public commemorations to be built that remind people of the horrors that relate to their personal or family histories. Even victims may be ambivalent about the value of displaying their pasts, believing that they are either too painful or impossible to adequately envision in a less terror-filled time. However, such displays often are built because enough people, or strong enough lobbies, encourage citizens to face the past and learn from it. In general, however, displays reflecting discrediting histories are scarce and often inaccurate in their representations of the past. There is a kind of civic denial that assists people in avoiding discomfiting and disturbing histories by avoiding straightforward, public displays of times in which terrible events occurred.

My experience as a cultural anthropologist has been primarily with concentration camp memorials in Germany and central Europe. These memorials have been erected on the historical sites where during World War II, hundreds of thousands of prisoners were incarcerated, used as a source of slave labor or for medical experimentation, or merely held until they were exterminated. It is estimated that Germany alone had more than 1,300 concentration camps during the period 1933-1945.

At the end of the war, Germany was divided into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The FRG was restructured based on a western democratic model and the GDR was restructured upon a communist model, developed and closely sanctioned by the U.S.S.R. Memorials built to com-