

Inscribing empire: Guam and the War in the Pacific National Historical Park

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Abstract

National parks form an archipelago of government-run, on-site “museums,” geographic sites of territorial and rhetorical nation-building. The War in the Pacific National Historical Park, which occupies seven parcels of land on the small island of Guam, celebrates the “freedom” that the U.S. brought to the region in World War II. But in fact, this landscape sits at the nexus of several contested territories. Guam was seized in the 1898 Spanish–American War—the final wave of American territorial expansion—and experienced 50 years of dictatorship under the U.S. Navy, despite vigorous efforts by islanders to gain citizenship and basic rights. The post-war transformation of the island by the military came at the further expense of local land rights, and the park itself later got caught up in the struggle over federal land ownership. Disagreements within the park service and between the park service and the local people added to the contests. Finally and most importantly, the park-as-text presents a discourse of American military heroism against the Japanese, at the expense of recognition of Chamorro suffering, or of any historical marker tying the indigenous history of Guam into U.S. historical memory. The contradiction between U.S. expansionism and U.S. ideals is apparent in the way the park serves as a colonial tool in this remnant of the American empire. This paper examines the park as a narrative landscape within the fields of contestation that characterize U.S. rule on Guam.

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On December 7th, 1941, Japanese aircraft launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in the U.S. Territory of Hawai'i. 2300 U.S. Military and 48 civilians were killed in what President Roosevelt called "a day that will live in infamy." Virtually unknown to Americans, however, is the attack that took place about 4 h later, on a far more remote U.S. Territory: the island of Guam. In a brief but locally well-remembered air and sea attack, Japanese troops seized control of this small American colony and began an occupation that lasted three years. Over 13,000 American subjects suffered injury, forced labor, forced march, or internment. At least 1123 died (National Park Service, n.d.).

The differences—and the similarities—of these two memories illuminate the workings of American empire. At the time, both island entities were unincorporated colonies of the U.S., and in both cases, the indigenous peoples had not been consulted regarding their acquisition by the U.S. But while the anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack receives abundant commemoration, re-showings (and re-makings) of relevant movies, the seizure of Guam and the plight of the Chamorros remain virtually unknown outside of Guam and Micronesia.

I arrived on Guam in 2001 to work with community members on an oral-based indigenous-geography project. By way of familiarizing myself with the lay of the land, I used my first day there to drive around the island. I had not traveled far out of Hagåtña¹ when I encountered a large, familiar-shaped sign announcing the War in the Pacific National Historical Park. Perhaps five minutes later, I passed another such sign. And five minutes after that, still another. The highway then ended at a T-intersection facing imposing gates with armed guards and large lettering announcing "U.S. Naval Base Guam." The highway itself is called "Marine Drive," but my naïve assumption that this reflected the road's location along the ocean was dispelled by a newer sign, in 2006, clarifying that it is "Marine Corps Drive."² Given that my own concern was to research and present an indigenous perspective on the island, I found this series of signs overwhelming (Fig. 1). Americans who know anything of Guam know that the island is host to U.S. military bases, and the route I drove was littered with symbols of the military presence (Fig. 2). The signs denoting a national park commemorating war, operating in conjunction with the large military presence, too easily mark out a narrative terrain on an island otherwise lacking in alternative narrative for most Americans.

The presence of this national landscape on Guam is an uneasy juxtaposition, and this study examines how the park sits at the nexus of several contested terrains—geographic and discursive—that characterize the relationship between the U.S. and this remote possession. The island is one of the U.S.'s remaining colonies ("unincorporated territories"), located only 14° above the equator and over 6000 miles away from North America's west coast. Conversely, Guam is about 1400 miles from either the Philippines or Tokyo. The island is officially American soil, yet American citizens need a passport to enter. Seventy-six percent of the population is of Micronesian or Asian ancestry (mostly Chamorro and Filipino)³, with only 7%

¹ The capital of Guam, widely known as Agana or Agaña, is herein designated by its Chamoru name, Hagåtña. The vowel *a* is pronounced as in *mat*, while *ã* is pronounced as in *father*.

² I am informed that Chamorro Marines petitioned for this change of name.

³ After the American takeover of Guam, and especially after World War II, much of the literature refers to Guam residents as "Guamanians." For mainland American writers, this reflected the insistence that the Chamorros were no longer a "pure race." The term was also used post-war by the indigenous population to distinguish themselves from new residents who were not native. On Guam today, Chamorros refer to themselves as "Chamorros" when referring to their ethnicity, and the term "Guamanian" is used by the local media to refer to all residents of Guam much in the same as "New Yorker" or "Californian." But given the demographic shifts post-war, one can no longer refer to the islanders as a whole as "Chamorro."

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