

An army veteran and Pearl Harbor veteran salutes in the USS Arizona Memorial shrine room on May 27, 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the memorial.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL HOLSWORTH. COURTESY OF DVIDS.



By Geoffrey White

Performing the Past (and Present and Future): THE SOCIAL LIFE OF ANNIVERSARIES

For most of us, the term *anniversary* connotes something more individual and personal—a wedding anniversary or a birthday, perhaps—than a large public commemoration. As a scholar, I am interested in anniversaries that are recalled by entire communities, especially national communities that inevitably look to history to craft a sense of shared identity. That is not to say that such events are devoid of personal meaning. To the contrary, the fact that we have anniversaries that function across a spectrum of intimate/individual to societal/collective activities points to their importance as cultural practices that, at least potentially, are capable of making the collective past personal.

In this essay I examine two anniversary events to illustrate the social and political dimensions of American ceremonial practices: the one hundredth anniversary of the Hawaiian overthrow in 1993 and the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1991. In very different ways, these events were both acts of war that, when recalled in commemorative events, allowed participants to reimagine their position in larger national narratives.

In January 1993 thousands of native Hawaiians, Kanaka Maoli, gathered at the site of the former home of Hawaiian monarchs, ʻIolani Palace in central Honolulu, to participate in events marking the one hundredth anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom. Stretching out over several days and attracting participation from across the state of Hawaiʻi, the scale and intensity of these events surprised many in the non-Hawaiian community. The spectacle of several thousand Kanaka Maoli marching calmly down the central avenues of Honolulu’s urban center, followed by days of ceremonial

for their sugar trade with the United States. Known through a prolific body of songs, chants, and poems—many produced in captivity—Liliʻuokalani’s personal story has become, to some extent, a story of and for native Hawaiians intent on recovering and revalorizing a history that may have been out of sight but, for many, has remained a painful theme in family and community memory. Indeed, the name given to the anniversary, ʻOnipaʻa (“steadfast”), was taken from a song composed by the queen that took on new meaning during her confinement.

Whereas the histories invoked by the ʻOnipaʻa remain contested (or

determination invoked a longer history of dispossession and struggle. But for whom and with what effect?

The fact that the ʻOnipaʻa anniversary events largely took place at the architecturally imposing palace in central downtown Honolulu worked to authenticate the ceremonies at the same time as the ceremonies breathed new relevance into the palace. While some non-Hawaiians and tourists see the palace as a historical relic, preserved as a museum of past glories, the anniversary events and related activities scheduled every year turn it into a sacred space for bringing alive visions of a desired future. For those

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activities, speeches, songs, chants, and dramatic performances that recalled a lost Kingdom, was a stunning marker of transformations that had been underway for more than a decade and have since emerged as a sustained feature of Hawaiʻi’s public life.

The history recalled by the 1993 anniversary took on a personal cast through the commemorative focus on the deposed monarch, Queen Liliʻuokalani, a much-loved historic figure whose life took a tragic turn when she was ousted in a coup on January 17, 1893, and later imprisoned in her own palace. The coup was engineered by a group of white planters and businessmen determined to create more favorable conditions

ignored) outside the native Hawaiian community (about 20 percent of the Hawaiʻi state population self-identifies as native Hawaiian), the 1993 anniversary did much to elevate awareness of the overthrow and of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement in general. For those participating, involvement in the commemorative activities linked personal biographies to the longer arc of native Hawaiian history. The enactment of history in speeches, songs, and dramatic performances is a powerful means of giving flesh and bones, and heart, to historical narrative—whether one is performing, listening, or simply present. In this case, the performance of sentiments of loss, anger, and

who participated, the anniversary activities were more than a nostalgic recalling—they marked a kind of reoccupation. In fact, 1993 proved to be an important year for raising historical awareness of the overthrow a hundred years previous. In November that year, President Bill Clinton signed U.S. Public Law 103-150, better known as the Apology Resolution, which acknowledged the role of the United States in supporting the overthrow and implied that the Hawaiian people never relinquished their claims to sovereignty.

Clearly, much of the passion of those participating in the ʻOnipaʻa was motivated by a desire to challenge

dominant American narratives for Hawai'i as America's fiftieth state. In so far as the events of 1993 (and later events modeled on them) are an example of a people using commemorative practice to unsettle and reimagine national history, they are hardly typical of national anniversaries written into the annual calendar of federal or regional holidays. The contrasts are useful in considering the social life of anniversaries as events that are themselves of a time and always in motion, and, as a result, reflect shifts in the present-day meaning of historical events.

The example of the 'Onipa'a is a reminder that anniversaries are never all-encompassing or uniform in representing the views of communities involved. National holidays elicit a variety of observances and counter-observances, and the 'Onipa'a commemorated by many in the Hawaiian community—but not all. Other Hawaiians during that time were likely more involved in activities such as Memorial Day or Veterans Day that emphasize commitment to American ideals.

The predicament for the most well-known and celebrated national anniversaries is that their very routinization often implies a certain hollowing out of personal significance for individuals who and communities that may feel little connection. As

many scholars of memory have noted, routinization is the enemy of remembering and, more specifically, of emotional meaning. The big, recurrent anniversaries that are part of the American calendar of commemorative events are more often an occasion for holidays and shopping than historical reflection. For any anniversary there are usually particular constituencies that feel a sense of connection to them (for example, veterans organizations for Veterans Day, labor organizations for Labor Day, civil rights and African American organizations for Martin Luther King Jr. Day). The problem for nation states is translating that relevance to an entire national population—a process that is always partial and tentative at best.

The question of meaning for national anniversary events is a specific version of the more general problem of nationalism: How is it possible for an imagined community to engender a feeling of belonging across generations, genders, races, and regions? Beyond the role of educational institutions that teach history as emblematic of national community, what kind of practices might represent the past as collectively significant and personally relevant?

As occasions for ceremonies, celebrations, and commemorations, anniversaries provide a means for publicly signifying what parts of

history matter, or are supposed to matter, for those who participate. As a result, attending to the social and political organization of commemorative practices is one way of tracing the social contours and boundaries of (national) communities: who is in, who is out; who gets to speak, who gets to listen; who cares, who doesn't care. Seen in this way, anniversary moments, and the attention they receive in schools, commemorations, and communications media, are a barometer of the scope and depth of community—a map that changes through time as the things that matter change and transform.

The relevance of anniversaries for national identities, then, is obvious. If national subjectivity, by which I mean a felt sense of identification with an imagined national community, requires stories of shared experience, we might ask: What kinds of events (and anniversary commemorations of such events) succeed in mobilizing a sense of participation in shared experience across the breadth and diversity of a national population? One theme looms large: war. National wars stand out as almost uniquely relevant as a point of intersection between individual and family histories on the one hand and the broad sweep of national history on the other. Given that major wars recruit citizens from across the socioeconomic and geographic spectrum, they also create a national imaginary that has a wide reach, at least for a certain generational (and gendered) stratum of the national population.

At the same time that many Native Hawaiians were recalling the history of dispossession, the United States, along with most



At a December 7, 2008, internment ceremony honoring Charles Guerin Jr. at the USS *Arizona* Memorial, Guerin's widow, Margaret Guerin, is presented with a U.S. flag. Charles Guerin Jr. was stationed on the USS *Arizona* on December 7, 1941, but he survived the Japanese attack. Photo by Jay C. Pugh.

nation states around the world, was commemorating a series of fifty-year anniversaries of World War II events. The connection between these two kinds of anniversaries—on the surface very different—is more than coincidental. The dispossession of native Hawaiians recalled in the Hawai'i 'Onipa'a begins with an 1887 reciprocity treaty that ceded Pearl Harbor to the United States for the development of a naval port. The ritual practices that commemorate the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor as an attack on the United States effectively elide the fact that Hawai'i in 1941 was still a colony (a "territory" of the United States), and usually focus on the losses and heroic response of the American military personnel who bore the brunt of the attack. The fifty-year anniversaries of the beginning and end of American involvement in World War II were both occasions for presidential visits to Hawai'i (George H. W. Bush in 1991 and Bill Clinton in 1995). The organizers of the Pearl Harbor fiftieth anniversary commemoration in 1991 said that the event attracted more media coverage than did Operation Desert Storm earlier that year (as measured by registered press agents and television coverage).

As Emily S. Rosenberg describes in her study of Pearl Harbor memory in America (*A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory*, 2003), the representation of the Pearl Harbor attack, even for Americans, has never been singular or static. The sinking of the battleships of the U.S. Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbor on December 7 became, first, a battle cry, a core image in mobilizing support and sacrifice for a long and costly war. Once the war was over, however, December 7 no longer carried the same urgency. It would take twenty years before a memorial monument was constructed over the sunken battleship USS *Arizona*. Annual ceremonies were largely a U.S. Navy affair to honor those who died or served. During the Cold War, a time of ground wars in Korea and Vietnam, the Pearl Harbor motto "be prepared" was again deployed in support of a strong and ready military force. By the time of

the fiftieth anniversary in 1991, the call to "remember Pearl Harbor" was made with a different urgency, concerned as much with the worry that it might fade into irrelevance as anything else. And then came September 11, 2001. Suddenly Pearl Harbor was in the headlines again, invoked by journalists and politicians searching for a model to explain terror attacks and establish a framework for responding.

The speeches, ceremonies, and media coverage of the Pearl Harbor anniversary each year illustrate well the "work" of anniversary events as tools for influencing the ways people think about (and feel about) the nation. Rather than look at anniversaries as moments for "remembering" (the idiom in which they are most often framed), we might rather see them first as performances of the present—performances by people who see the relevance of past events for their own lives. And those performances are often done for a larger, unseen audience: an imagined community of others who may or may not share the same sense of personal involvement.

One of the reasons that wars constitute significant markers in national histories is that they touch a large portion of national populations, leaving traces in personal and local memory—traces that may materialize in acts of participation that turn imagined community into enacted community. National Park Service staff at the USS *Arizona* Memorial recall that during the 1990s the first people in line each morning tended to be gray-haired Americans who expressed a certain somber engagement with the history represented there. For Americans alive at the time of the attack, Pearl Harbor became what psychologists call a flashbulb memory—a moment of such significance that nearly everyone alive would later be able to recall where they were when they heard the news.

Early attempts to explain the phenomenon of flashbulb memories focused on physiological explanations, speculating about perceptual imprinting that might occur during moments of heightened stress. Other, more persuasive, theories look to

the power of storytelling as a kind of calculus of the self that seeks to locate subjective experience in relation to seismic changes in the social landscape. Whatever the case, personal connections to history are limited by time and are bound by generational experience. Each generation has its own flashbulb memories that come to represent its historical landmarks—landmarks that will inevitably have a different significance for future generations. September 11 is such a moment for anyone who heard or saw the events of that day. And just as the meaning of the Pearl Harbor bombing has evolved during the decades since World War II, so each anniversary of September 11 tells a somewhat different story about the significance of the attacks. Even as September 11 commemorations center on those killed in the attacks, the narrative of terror that gives the attacks a broader historical meaning for Americans will only become more complex with time.

In this year's anniversary of September 11, the thirteenth anniversary of the attacks, reports of the commemoration at the World Trade Center and other attack sites were accompanied by news articles about President Barack Obama's announcement of renewed engagement in the Middle East by committing U.S. forces to combat the emergent Islamic State, the new face of militant Islam in Syria and Iraq. For many readers, the two stories, one about commemorative events, the other about a new deployment of U.S. troops in the Middle East, were not only juxtaposed in news headlines—they were two parts of the same story. Such is the work of anniversaries, particularly war anniversaries (of which September 11 is surely one), reminding us of William Faulkner's adage, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Scholars of history and memory would do well to ask why some events remain alive and present while others do not, or why events remain alive in some communities but not others. By asking such questions we might begin to trace the genealogies of memory as it travels different routes to the present, and into the future. ■■■