MEMORY UPGRADE FOR ATTU ISLAND

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What do we have, but memory? Even the “present” is consumed immediately, and our very recognition of “now” makes it only a memory. Our personal memories shape who we are and the decisions we make. Our collective memories guide our social and political policies and form the basis for ethics and culture. Narrative is the means to review and renew memory, perhaps a means to experience or re-experience an event. Therefore, this project begins with a story: the year is 1941 and the event is World War II in the Pacific, but ultimately my story is not about warring. This story is the basis of my project, and rather than remembering battle, it is about the loss of memory and loss of dignity of the land.

Certainly many complex reasons led to the war between Japan and the United States—usually history writes that the root cause was Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor in the U.S. Territory of Hawaii. Another reason stood out during my research: Japan had invaded several of its neighbors, and in protest, the U.S. and European allies embargoed Japan’s oil supply. Oil and war, unlike oil and water, seem to mix well. Japan, with a few months’ oil left, bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Within days, Japan expanded further, occupying Guam, Indochina, and Thailand. Within months, Japan had the Philippines, Hong Kong, Manila, Singapore, Malaya, Java, Burma, Malaysia and the Solomon Islands. The West was trying to fight Japan’s expansion, but their efforts were not successful.

The next summer, on June 3-4, 1942, Japan bombed Dutch Harbor, in the eastern Aleutian Islands of the U.S. Territory of Alaska. One major reason that the news of this bombing was eclipsed was because Japan also attacked Midway Island June 4th through 7th, and lost to the U.S.—it was the first U.S. victory against Japan, and a very decisive victory. The Battle of Midway is considered the major turning point of World War II in the Pacific Theater. Another reason the news of the bombing of Dutch Harbor was “no news” is because of the

ambivalence of the U.S. government toward the usefulness and protection of Alaska:

> Until mid-1940, Alaska had never had a defense commander. When Anthony J. Dimond, Alaska's voteless delegate to the U.S. Congress, had pleaded for funds to defend the Territory, he had been shouted down with catcalls of "pork barrel" and one Congressman had asked seriously, "Why should anybody want Alaska?" (Garfield 48)

The same week as the attacks on Dutch Harbor and Midway Island, Japan invaded U.S. soil and occupied Attu Island and Kiska Island, Alaska, on June 7, 1942. About 40 native Unangan (a people of the Aleut culture), a teacher, and her husband lived on Attu; the husband was killed, and the rest taken to labor camps in Japan where half died. Ten U.S. sailors were on Kiska; all were captured as prisoners of war.

Attu, the "westernmost" land in the U.S., is actually in the eastern hemisphere, being located 7° west of the 180° longitude line. The distance from Attu to mainland Alaska is about 1,000 miles. Aircraft technology in the 1940s did not support non-stop trans-Pacific flights; a refueling stop was necessary. The "Great Circle Route" from Japan to San Francisco (the route of least distance) crosses right over the Aleutian islands. With Attu and Kiska, Japan had a foothold halfway to San Francisco, and a strategic position with which to invade the mainland U.S. Yet, from the time of Seward's folly, little was known about the Aleutians:

> Although [Attu] was an American possession, no one had bothered to map it properly, and the only map available was a Coast and Geodetic Survey chart, which showed only the land back to a thousand yards from the shoreline...Even after months of aerial photographic missions, very little was known about the harbors. The fog was so prevailing that much of the photography was useless. (Hoyt 128-129)

Stifling the news of the invasion of American soil was considered in the national interest, not to mention a national embarrassment. "In Washington, the Navy kept *silent* about the invasion of Attu for four days (Webber, Aleutian Headache 119)," reasserting, "We have no information about any Japanese on Alaskan soil (Garfield 108)."

The military planning to recover Attu and Kiska took months and months. At first,

bombing by air was expected to be enough, but the Aleutian foggy weather prevented any substantial success. The U.S. military branches had to coordinate an invasion by sea, land, and air—an effort in cooperation for which they had little precedent. The planning suffered from "commanders who wanted more than anything to succeed but in their own way. Interservice rivalry (Webber, Silent Siege 41)." Those military who had first-hand knowledge of the Aleutians were disregarded:

> How to explain a place where neither food nor fuel was available, where the earth's crust could break under a man's weight, and a seasoned infantryman might, if he was lucky, to make as much as a mile-and-a-half in an hour? It was like trying to describe the color blue to a blind man. (Goldstein 276)

During the grinding planning stage, some troops already stationed in the desolation of Alaska lost their minds to sensory deprivation—lack of action, and nothing to do in the relentless fog, wind, snow, and ice.

Almost a year later, in May of 1943, taking back Attu was the second-bloodiest battle in the Pacific, second only to the Battle of Iwo Jima. "Total American casualties amounted to half again the number of Japanese troops on the island (Garfield 266)." Ultimately, half a million men served in the Aleutians.

U.S. troops and a few Canadians made the amphibious landing on Attu on May 11, 1943. The military command had predicted that the battle would last three days at most, but the invasion was seriously hampered by lack of maps. Bill Jones, a veteran of the campaign, said, "We advanced a few hundred yards, named a place, and sent a map back for the artillery." In the first two days, the landing forces only had advanced about two miles. After 18 days of hand-to-hand, hill-to-hill combat (with very little air support because of the weather), on May 29, 1943, the remaining Japanese killed their own wounded, charged, and those that were not killed in the charge committed mass suicide.

The weather would be the deciding factor in the Aleutians: it had prevented the Japanese from reinforcing Attu, and it twice caused cancelation of the U.S. invasion of Attu, keeping the troops cooped up on the transports on a rough sea. In the Aleutians, the Arctic air meets warm air from the south, causing the shifting fog, hurricane-force winds called “williwaws,” stinging rain, and blowing snow that packs itself so hard that it has been dubbed “snow-crete.” There are no trees on the western Aleutian islands because of the wind and weather. Yet Attu is not the “frozen North” one associates with Alaska. Its latitude is only 53° North—the same as Jasper National Park in Canada. The average daily temperature on the coast of Attu Island is over freezing. The ground is not frozen—with each step, one sinks through matted tundra, layers of moss, and into volcanic ash-mud.

Most of the U.S. invasion force had trained in the California desert. “Although sound, brave men, many had never so much as seen snow (Goldstein 275).” They did not know they were going to Alaska (and not Africa) until they were already on their ships and out of the San Francisco harbor. “To thwart any spies who might be lurking, false sailing orders were published and medical officers announced almost publicly, that talks were scheduled on ‘tropical diseases’ (Webber, Aleutian Headache 104).” Cold-weather uniform included a heavier coat, leather boots with leather soles, and strap-on canvas gaiters, but many troops went without the cold-weather gear. “I landed on Attu with the same clothes I had on when I left California (Jones).”

With an amphibious landing, the landing force got wet up to their knees. Then with the strenuousness of the slow advance by foot, their feet started to sweat. As they climbed in elevation, their feet froze. One of the three landing forces got lost in the fog. Interestingly enough, the same had happened to the Japanese when they landed on Attu: “some of them

almost starved in the snow-drifted passes before they found their way out (Garfield 87)." Thousands of troops were injured or maimed by the weather, mostly from frostbite and trenchfoot.

To make matters worse, food was scarce: "We were given one day's rations to take with us (Jones)." The supplies, heavy equipment, and jeeps were stuck in the coastal mire. "The greatest tragedy was that many American troops would undergo near starvation due to inability to move supplies. The soggy Muskeg bogged vehicles of all kinds (Webber, Aleutian Headache 106)."

The one gift the weather gave was the cover of fog while thousands of Japanese on Kiska evacuated completely undetected by the U.S. The weather, the third force in the battle, was the only force that "won."

To this day, many—perhaps most—people do not know that a World War II battle was fought on U.S. soil, a loss of information due largely to government cover-up: "...the government stubbornly kept up a barrage of press releases calculated to reassure the public, rather than instill a realistic sense of crisis and concern (Garfield 109)." The correspondents present in the Aleutians, including a writer from Time-Life, were "threatened with arrest if they ever wrote one word on the battle (Jones)."

> *Time* criticized the Navy's "drum-tight censorship" and pointed out caustically that the only news from the Aleutians was coming from Radio Tokyo...*Life* assailed the military for its dribbles of "hints and half-news," and tried unsuccessfully to clear its reporters into the Alaska theater. (Garfield 108)

Thus, the first major authors of the history of World War II left out the Alaska battle, for example, the widely-collected Time-Life series. This subterfuge brings to mind Rothko's comment that "the constant repetition of falsehood is more convincing than the representation of truth (2)." The consciousness of a nation suffered a forced loss of memory—not even a

contrived memory, but a non-memory of sorts—memory that "plays such a crucial determining role in the construction of power and the social adjudication of responsibility (Green 59)."

The U.S. never let the Unangan return to Attu—a few settled on another island 500 miles away. They lost their homes. A navy base and an army base were established on Attu, with at most 30,000 people living on Attu. By 1953, the army and navy had left, and all that remains today is the U.S. Coast Guard with about 20 people stationed on the island at a time. This installation maintained a strategic radar defense by monitoring the Soviets during the Cold War. The Coast Guard station continues to serve as a critical navigational tool for mariners. However, according to Commander Peter Bower stationed on Attu, the Coast Guard is planning to close its station there in a couple of years. Then Attu will be without human presence for the first time in 10,000 years.

After the Battle of Attu, the U.S. bulldozed acres of trash and war materiel out into the ocean. Yet the battle sites to this day are still littered with wreckage, machinery, unexploded bombs and hand grenades, and leaking oil drums sinking into the tundra. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has Attu on its cleanup "master list" under the "Formerly Used Military Sites" program, but they have a mandate to clean up inhabited places first, and it is uncertain when or if any will occur on Attu (USACE). Parts of Attu and Kiska were designated National Historic Landmarks in 1985, affording some federal protection to archaeological artifacts, but not the blanket protection of war artifacts afforded to a National Battlefield, as adjured by a member of the Coast Guard once stationed on Attu:

> This island is a World War II relic. They can't clean up the place because it's a national monument; it's a national battlefield. So everything that's here will stay here. The debris that was left by the war and the occupation of the island when U.S. forces was [sic] here—lots and lots of rusty metal, fuel tanks, old buildings that have collapsed—you name it, we've got it out here. (Jantz)

How ironic that the U.S. prevented the natives from re-settling on Attu, and now that the island is considered uninhabited, its cleanup has no priority. In addition, last year a new classification as a "heritage resource area" administered by the Aleutians National Wildlife Refuge will ensure that "cleanup must be planned and conducted in ways that will not impact the landscape and battlefields," according to Debbie Corbett, the Cultural Resources Manager for the Aleutians National Wildlife Refuge. Also how ironic that we preserve historic pollution under the same organization that preserves wildlife. Not only has our nation lost a crucial memory, Attu has lost its people and its dignity. "In under a century human beings have devastated the landscape, the sea and the air above us for short-term gain (Ede 162)."

Recently the Japanese have been traveling to Attu to retrieve remains of soldiers and artifacts. In 2007, a Coast Guard member accidentally discovered two Japanese boots, unmatched, but both still containing foot bones. That incident sparked a two-week Japanese mission in 2008 to find more remains, digging with hand tools only, and yielding (only) two well-preserved skeletons (D'Oro). Additional exhumation forays are being planned soon (Bower), somewhat to the consternation of the Army Corps of Engineers, who is responsible for overseeing the archaeology of the site (USACE).

The lack of cold-weather gear, including boots, and the Japanese boots recently found made me think: what footprints are we leaving on this earth, physically, historically, and metaphorically? My desire to call attention to the losses suffered by soldiers, by the U.S. consciousness, by a forgotten native people, and a once-beautiful land gave rise to the desire for a memorial of sorts, yet the vision of another refulgent war memorial was counterintuitive to the yearning for removing metal from the land. The Japanese had already installed a large titanium "peace memorial" on the Attu battlefield in 1984. How much attention would a

"typical" war memorial on the island draw to my story? Although Mark Rothko said "art is a type of communication, and when it enters the environment it produces its effects just as any other form of action does (10)," the current remoteness of Attu and the government-restricted travel to the island would render an in situ memorial just as forgotten as its referents.

Still, a memorial, an artifice designed to spark the memory, is an appropriate tool for my message of loss. "Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority (Said 242)." Searching for a non-invasive memorial made me re-examine the works of Andy Goldsworthy. I am impressed with the haunting, earthy, and subtle ecological messages he delivers while leaving no negative effect on the land. Furthermore, his works contain a feeling of tristesse, appropriate for my memorial about loss of memory and loss of dignity: "Goldsworthy's interventions are poignant...indeed, they are almost as much works in memoriam as in celebration (Ede 165)."

I also turned to the works of Maya Lin, obviously for her stunningly contemporary Vietnam Veterans Memorial—not a statue, not metal, but with a sense of place. In Lin's writing, she states gently and eloquently the goals I wish to achieve: "an incorporation of history, always a reliance on time, memory, a passage or journey (2:03)."

My memorial will be transient and unaffecting of the land, like the work of Goldsworthy, and tenderly reflective, like the work of Lin. I propose installing a few hundred boots made of ice on Attu, photographing and videotaping them as they melt. The boots are symbolic of the footprints we humans leave on the ground, the hideous un-met need for protective gear for the men who served on Attu, and the one-way journey of the Attuan natives. The ice is symbolic of the way we perceive Alaska, the wet weather and the ocean, and the chilling revelation of the governmental cover-up of action in the Aleutians.

The melting is symbolic of several things: the collective fading memory of the battle as the remaining few veterans die, the closing of the bases and the Coast Guard station on Attu, and the loss of home and culture because indigenous people were not allowed to return to their lands.

The videography and photography would provide a record of the original installation and would be displayed in subsequent installations in interested galleries and museums. These new installations would include additional boots melting over a glass aquarium that contained pieces of the junk left on Attu (or facsimiles thereof) and some discretely placed dry ice to prevent too rapid a melt. Visitors would be encouraged to touch the boots, adding a tactile sensation to the exhibit and feeling of active contribution. Documentation on the surrounding walls would include historical texts and photographs. The sounds of the wind and sea would add an aural dimension, with the audio track being a few hours long so that it would not be annoyingly repetitive. Videotaping the melting boots in the gallery setting might offer additional information to seed other installations. Thus dying memories become growth and new catalysts for a call to clean up after ourselves.

Life-sized boots of ice can be frozen in molds, rather than individually sculpted. Each set would require approximately 1.6875 gallons of water and weigh 13.5 pounds (exclusive of the mold). Multiple one-piece silicone molds would make production fairly simple, if carried out at a commercial manufacturer of frozen products.

Transportation issues have a considerable impact on the feasibility of my project. Transportation of the commercially frozen boots to Attu would involve contracting with a maritime shipper willing and capable of frozen transport, whether by ocean or air. Depending on the size and draft of the vessel, shipping by ocean would require unloading the cargo by

hand onto the pier or tendering the cargo to shore. Shipping by air has its own problem: the landing field on Attu is short and cannot handle jet traffic. Planes typically leave from Anchorage or Kodiak, Alaska, and often make a stop at Adak or Shemya island for re-fueling. The Attu airfield has no instrumentation, so planes land by visual reconnaissance alone, and often must turn back because of heavy fog, leaving the frozen cargo at risk of melting. Furthermore, chartering a commercial airplane for a round-trip one-day visit to Attu costs approximately $35,000 (Bower).

Freezing the ice in the molds on Attu, itself, would considerably limit the number of boots available for the installation. The only freezer on the island is installed in the U.S. Coast Guard station, and does not have much spare space. Transporting a second freezer to the station would allow for six to eight sets of boots to be frozen at once. After the completion of the project, the Coast Guard might accept the freezer as a gift.

The U.S. government restricts access to Attu, and application for permission would have to be made to several agencies, including the National Park Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As ironic as it might seem, installing the ice sculptures on Attu Island requires government oversight to ensure the project does not disturb or damage the land.

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