

Toward a Future of Travel Writing and History: Collecting, Researching, and Reflecting on Southwestern Pacific Islanders' Experiences of the Pacific War

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Abstract

This essay follows wide definitions of travel and travelers, and explores the potential of travel writing as a medium of historical information. The travelers surveyed have acted as historians who collected and researched during and after their journeys. Yet, these accounts draw attention to two issues: the roles of interviewees, and the travelers' own development of historical consciousness. The writing on southwestern Pacific Islands shows the interviewees acted as historians and storytellers. The travel writers drew inspiration from their journeys and applied their understanding of war history to make better sense of the present and articulate ideal visions of the future.

Keywords: Japan, the Pacific War (1941–1945), Solomon Islands, New Guinea, travel writing, journalism, oral history, historical consciousness.

Introduction

This essay explores the process in which travel writers form their historical consciousness as a result of journeys to places of historical significance. In the process travel writers play the role of historians: they collect and reproduce historical information taken from numerous sources. This essay contends that travel writing can contribute to the growing literature on commemorating the Pacific War, because travel writing illuminates the dynamic between personal and inter-personal levels that render travelers into historians-in-the-making.¹ Arguably what makes travel writing distinct from other genres is the travel writers have visited the locations and absorbed the atmosphere, and even spoken with the local people who shared their memories. Travel writing shows the authors' views of the past, present and future. These views, in turn, present opportunities for the travel writers to negotiate and shape their values. This essay analyses a sample of three works of Japanese travel writing from the southwestern Pacific Island nations of Papua New Guinea (hereafter PNG) and the Solomon Islands, where Japanese fought the Allied forces in the Asia-Pacific War.² These Pacific Island nations are marginal destinations for mainstream Japanese, but have attracted veterans and families of deceased soldiers on pilgrimage.³ While the pilgrims tend not to publish their travelogues as commercial publications, the authors of commercially available travel writing tend to travel independently of veterans and bereaved families associations. Thus, travel writing has the potential to be a medium that

¹ See Seaton, 2007, for a comprehensive survey of controversy over Japan's wartime memory and commemoration.

² Until 1949 Papua New Guinea comprised two separate foreign-administered territories of Papua and New Guinea. Here I refer to Papua New Guinea as a collective term for both territories, but distinguish Papua and New Guinea where appropriate.

³ For detailed analyses of pilgrimage to Pacific Islands see Yamashita 2009.

illuminates the process where relative outsiders to war history gain an understanding of that history through the journeys they make and the process of writing.

In this essay I follow a definition of travel writing as a non-fiction genre in which the traveler's journey serves as the vehicle for meditation on various subjects including history. This definition makes travel writing a highly eclectic genre that can accommodate a wide range of authors and styles of travel.⁴ Following this definition, this essay presents case studies of three Japanese travelers who visited numerous battle sites in the southwestern region of the Pacific Islands, namely PNG and Solomon Islands: a *sarariman* (office-worker) Kawaguchi Kizuki (male), a television documentary producer Watanabe Kō (male), and a nun Shimizu Yasuko (female). The sample is deliberately small to allow for in-depth analysis. Other scholars may consult a greater number of travel writing documents and expand to other regions of the Asia-Pacific War. I chose the New Guinea campaign because its relative obscurity in today's mainstream Japanese consciousness gives rise to a sharp contrast to the excitement it generated in wartime Japan, and the intense emotions and the mythologized status the campaign has earned in Papua New Guinea and Australia. This does not, however, mean that all the Japanese chose to forget. Historian Iwamoto Hiromitsu has counted over 1,100 commercially available accounts by Japanese veterans on the New Guinea front.⁵ Thus, if used well, travel writing can shed light on aspects of war history facing the dim prospect of falling into total oblivion. Yet, no historical knowledge is without value. Here I draw on the notion of history-as-performance advocated by Pacific Island scholars Greg Denning, Christopher Ballard and Greg Dvorak. These scholars remind us about the centrality of history in human activity, even in seemingly trivial and mundane acts.⁶ This notion can help explain the roles the traveler plays regarding travel and writing. It also implies travel writing textually represents both historical knowledge and the travelers' performance of history. Travel writing tells us how the authors have gained and renegotiated their historical consciousness, and pledge to practice it in their post-journey lives.

Travel writing draws attention to the writers' personal inner reflections and interpersonal activity. In the personal realm, the journeys travelers make and history they research and collect stimulates historical consciousness that influences their outlook on the past and the present, and their aspirations for the future. Thus, historical consciousness informs how individuals cultivate sensibilities towards the past, and how individuals shape personal and collective identities. The extent of historical consciousness is not limited to the past or present. It offers the individuals the opportunity to reflect on their historically-informed values that are dear to their identity, and enact on those values in their daily life.⁷

In the inter-personal realm, a traveler's identity and sentiment towards the war can evoke different responses from the local residents. In considering oral history in travel writing, I draw on the insight from anthropologists Marty Zelenietz and Masafumi Saito who conducted interviews with the residents of Kilenge village of New Britain, and collected their memories of the Pacific War. Zelenietz

⁴ Thompson 2011, pp. 25–27; Youngs 2013, pp. 3–4.

⁵ He counted in the late 1990s. Iwamoto 2006, p. 50. However, historian Okumura Shōji attributes the obscurity to the military ban on real-time reporting, the very few soldiers returning alive to tell their experiences, and absence of well-known battles. Okumura 1993, pp. 20–26.

⁶ Denning 1996; Ballard 2014; Dvorak 2014.

⁷ Rūsen 2012, pp. 45–47; Clark 2016, p. 12; Seixas 2006, pp. 3–24.

and Saito found that the interviewees study the interviewer and tailor the narrative to the interviewers' nationality and sentiments towards the war. The outcome thus "reflects a dialectical process between the storyteller and the listener".⁸ Zelenietz and Saito further note that the role of the storyteller thus extends to historian and educator, conveying didactic messages from war memories.⁹ If the dialectical process affects the storyteller's role as historian, then similarly the impact the travel has had on the traveler also deserves consideration.

Travelers as Oral Historians: Interviewees as Storytellers

Shimizu Yasuko (b. 1937) is a Catholic sister who joined the Japanese branch of Catholic mission, Misioneras Mercedarias de Bériz in 1961. She is a long-standing activist in raising the awareness of Japan's overseas development aid and environmental issues affecting PNG and Solomon Islands.¹⁰ Her book, *Mori to sakana to gekisenchi* (Forest, fish and battlefields) (1997) derived from her six years of travel between Japan and PNG and Solomon Islands, and her collecting of oral history from many islanders and Japanese veterans. At the outset of the book she asserts that the idea of development and international aid replaced the defunct wartime doctrine of the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Yet, it is the politicians and corporations in Japan who reap the benefit of the continual structure and practice of violence and exploitation.¹¹ Shimizu relates Islanders' testimonies of the frequent and brutal punishment by the Japanese officers for any form of complaint, disobedience and refusal, and worst of all, tipping information off to the Allied forces. She felt distressed to hear these stories and compelled to apologize to the Islanders. At the same time she wonders what elicited such cruelty in the Japanese troops.¹²

In Guadalcanal, Shimizu meets Bruno Nana, a 66-year-old village chief, through the introduction of a local environmental activist. In July 1942, the Japanese made Nana, then 15 years old, and other villagers construct an airfield. Nana recalls whipping was a common method of enforcing discipline, and the Japanese paid little regard for his welfare. He injured his foot in an accident while working, but persevered for a month. Finally he requested medical treatment but the Japanese denied it.¹³ In August 1942, the Japanese captured Nana and his friends on the way to their village after rescuing an American pilot. The Japanese tied the hands and feet of Nana and his friends and left them on the ground without food or water. On the fourth day, Nana was at his wits' end and shouted "Water!" A Japanese officer gave Nana an empty tin filled with urine. This gesture evoked in him an episode in the Bible in which Jesus, in his last days on a cross was offered wine mixed with vinegar.¹⁴ Nana drank the urine and his friends followed. Later at night, Nana found the ropes on his and his friends' wrists loosened. He does not know who loosened the ropes but considers the Japanese officer might have

⁸ Zelenietz and Saito 1989, p. 181.

⁹ Zelenietz and Saito 1989, p. 182.

¹⁰ Shimizu 1994.

¹¹ Shimizu 1997, p. 15.

¹² Shimizu 1997, p. 58. I use the term 'Islander' as an umbrella term for both Papua New Guineans and Solomon Islanders.

¹³ Shimizu 1997, p. 114.

¹⁴ Matthew, 15: 23 and Mark, 27: 34 (New English Bible (NEB)).

acted out of respect for Nana swallowing his pride. Nana then loosened the ropes on his friends' wrists and feet as well and persuaded them to flee. The local activist found Nana's story astounding and asked why Nana had not told him before. Shimizu ended the chapter by stating Nana only smiled in reply.¹⁵

Nana's tales attest to the Japanese brutal treatment and punishment of the men of Guadalcanal. The narrative focus of Nana's first tale was Japanese brutality; his second tale of his escape. He then adds themes such as courage and, potentially, a rare display of humanity by the Japanese officer. The escape tale highlights the characteristics of the Kilege people's storytelling that Zelenietz and Saito identified. Nana opened his heart to Shimizu because he trusted her enough—as a mutual acquaintance of the activist. Nana's biblical reference highlights Zelenietz and Saito's points about the storyteller's multiple roles, and his ability to present his story in a biblical framework with which Shimizu is familiar.

Compare the testimonies Shimizu has collected with what a television documentary producer Watanabe Kō (b. 1965) has in the early 2000s. His book derived from his journeys in 2002. He filmed a series of documentaries featuring a novelist Shigematsu Kiyoshi. Shigematsu read out deceased soldiers' diaries at battle sites where the soldiers died, and interviewed families of those soldiers. Watanabe's book describes Shigematsu's observations; Watanabe's personal comments and Islanders' wartime history do not feature much.¹⁶ Thus, the small amount Watanabe discusses stands out in the book.

In Guadalcanal, Watanabe met two local residents. The first is Michel Bain, the 45 year old chief of a village near Honiara. Bain grew up listening to his father frequently recounting his wartime experiences. Watanabe found Bain regards himself as the torchbearer of wartime history. Bain spoke about the cruel treatment the Japanese gave local men laboring on construction work, and added that some died of starvation because the Japanese did not give food.¹⁷ Watanabe recalls Bain's forceful tone of voice and his demanding that the Japanese government pay proper compensation.¹⁸ Later Watanabe visits another village and speaks with Bruno Nana whom Shimizu had spoken to some 12 years previously. Nana, now 77 years old, tells Watanabe about working under the Japanese and recalls his involvement in building an airfield for them. He recollects receiving cigarette ration and three regular meals and Watanabe finds Nana held no bitter feelings towards the Japanese: "The Japanese are our friends. I never had any bad experience. The Japanese treated us very well."¹⁹ Watanabe believed that the testimonies by both men were "probably true" and sensed that the varied sentiments of Bain and Nana revealed "the duplicitous nature of war."²⁰

Comparing the testimonies Shimizu and Watanabe elicited, the apparent discrepancy in Nana's recollections seems to validate Zelenietz and Saito's observations. Indeed, Nana may have perceived Shimizu and Watanabe differently, and chose to trust Shimizu, a sister and an acquaintance of his

¹⁵ Shimizu 1997, pp. 114–19.

¹⁶ Shigematsu and Watanabe 2007 [2004]. Shigematsu wrote the prologue and epilogue. Watanabe wrote all other chapters. Subsequent citations to this book come from the chapters by Watanabe, and therefore cite his name only.

¹⁷ Watanabe 2007 [2004], p. 150.

¹⁸ Watanabe 2007 [2004], p. 150.

¹⁹ Watanabe 2007 [2004], p. 151.

²⁰ Watanabe 2007 [2004], p. 151.

friend, more than a television documentary producer. While Nana may have reconciled his grievances in the intervening twelve years, it is possible that he may have played a diplomat in front of Watanabe. Unwittingly, Nana's amicable recollection contrasts to the resentment Bain inherited from his father. Bain may have regarded the interview with Watanabe as an opportunity to air the grievance of his father's generation. Watanabe is sensitive enough to notice the divergent experiences and memories the war left in Guadalcanal. While the testimonies make useful historical information, these examples underline the kaleidoscopic nature of oral history, and demand a more nuanced reading into the 'dialectic process' between the traveler and the local informants.

From Curiosity to Serious Interest

The third travel writer, a *sararīman* (office-worker) Kawaguchi Kizuki (b. 1958), has developed a keen interest in New Guineans' wartime experience quite coincidentally. Kawaguchi travelled to PNG for the first time in January 1993 to satisfy his wanderlust. In PNG he became aware of the prominence of memories of the Japanese occupation among New Guineans. He met senior citizens who spoke broken Japanese they learnt while working under the Japanese. Kawaguchi saw war museums which displayed disused military vehicles and ordnance on village greens. Kawaguchi quickly realized PNG had more to teach him than the exotic culture, and he repeatedly urges the reader to learn more about the war.

Kawaguchi's interest takes another turn when he visits a Japanese memorial in Rabaul, on New Britain Island. He lingered at the memorial at twilight and cast his eye down at the ocean. He found himself putting his hands together in prayer and imagined how this foreign climate and scenery might have made soldiers feel alienated, anxious, scared and averse to fighting in a war.²¹ His thoughts stretched beyond the Japanese soldiers and he urges the reader to imagine how the local residents would have felt toward the succession of foreigners: the German and Australian colonialists, and the Japanese troops.²² He quotes the memorial inscription that reads: "We commemorate the deaths of those who died in battles on Southern Pacific Islands and the adjacent seas in the Second World War. We erect this monument with the hope for peace."²³ Kawaguchi found the memorial text lacking in sensitivity to the suffering inflicted on the local population. Such disregard, to him, represents "the imperialist tradition that does not care for the others."²⁴ Kawaguchi's critique departs from the discourse which focuses on Japanese suffering, and instead places the Japanese as one of the imperialist nations that reduced New Guineans to playing unwitting hosts to occupying troops.

Kawaguchi's reflection marks a transition from an ignorant traveler to a concerned citizen. This realization propelled him to research the Japanese military campaign in PNG. He relates an episode about a chief named Karao who acted on his sympathy for starving Japanese soldiers. After the war, the Australians, who resumed civil administration of PNG, sentenced him to death for assisting

²¹ Kawaguchi 1996, p. 134.

²² Kawaguchi 1996, p. 134.

²³ Kawaguchi 1996, p. 133. This is my translation of the Japanese text. Kawaguchi noted that the inscription was written in two other languages: English and Pidgin, but has not offered the translations. さきの大戦において南太平洋諸島及び海戦で戦没した人々をしのび平和への思いをこめてこの碑を建立する。

²⁴ Kawaguchi 1996, p. 134.

the enemy combatants, and executed his wife and two sons. Karao was released three years later on account of his ill health. Karao's poignant "life of regret" made Kawaguchi realize how little modern history, especially war history, was taught in Japanese schools. He stresses the Japanese should learn more history of wartime aggression as well as victimhood.²⁵ Kawaguchi assumes the role of a historian who reminds the readers of the little-known episodes of war history. This fulfills his wish for his readers while redeeming his own ignorance. However, the Karao episode may backfire as it highlights the cruelty of the Australians and can assuage the sense of responsibility the Japanese should have towards him and many others who suffered under the Japanese. Such a reading misplaces Kawaguchi's intention and replicates "the imperial tradition that does not care for the others." Rather, Karao represents the unnecessary irony that for Karao and many more Islanders, the nationality of the perpetrators was a less significant concern.

Developing Historical Consciousness

Each writer articulates how their understanding of the past informed historical consciousness and personal values. For instance, Watanabe finds how his personal and professional lives coalesce. Kawaguchi and Shimizu resolve to engage in volunteering to rectify the imbalance of power they perceive as rooted in history.

While Watanabe is usually reticent in making personal comments, in the epilogue he relates how his historical consciousness evolved: "I thought that I knew a few things about the war. But the small amount of time in New Guinea taught me that there was a big wall that I cannot climb."²⁶ Watanabe admits to his limitations in empathizing with the soldiers' sentiments. However, this awareness does not deter him from trying; he has made new documentaries in 2004 and 2005 in which he interviewed members of a veterans' association. He travels to the southwestern Pacific with them to film the memorial services and their search for their comrades' remains. Watanabe's second book details those two journeys and reveals more of his own impressions than his first. He reflects he initially understood the war as history. Only after he saw the bones on these two later trips did his "vague imagination turn into sharp horror."²⁷

Watanabe's journeys with the veterans developed his determination to never be in a position in which he has to kill someone or to have someone kill him.²⁸ His found his pacifist desire extending to others in a moment he least expected. One day the sight of his three-year old daughter playing made him swear, "no matter how difficult it is, we must keep on saying 'no' to war."²⁹ He concedes that his answer is too idealistic, as he acknowledges that human history is replete with wars—a subtle reference to the invasion of Iraq by 'Coalition of the Willing' in March 2003 and subsequent armed conflict raging at the time of Watanabe's writing. His pledge underlines self-awareness that his domestic bliss is both precious and fragile. In 2015 he reflected on more than a decade of war-related work,

²⁵ Kawaguchi 1996, p. 200. Kawaguchi lists a number of sources he consulted. Two of them discuss Karao: Okumura 1993, p.142, and Ogawa, 2002 [1993], p. 232.

²⁶ Watanabe 2007 [2004], p. 216.

²⁷ Watanabe 2007 [2004], p. 262.

²⁸ Watanabe 2007 [2004], p. 263.

²⁹ Watanabe 2005, p. 262.

concluding that many soldiers privately do not agree with the virtue of a war the nation extolled. He hopes to convey this message saying, “an individual who hopes Japan to be a good country.”³⁰ Watanabe’s long-term commitment has shaped him into a travelling journalist-cum-historian. He gained a powerful realization that his personal and professional lives are inseparable, just as the past, the present and the future are enmeshed.

Shimizu’s understanding of history leads her to place the contemporary fishery and forestry industries in PNG and Solomon Islands on a continuum dating back to the wartime. She observes that the Japanese benefited from exploitation of natural resources and the local people.³¹ She asserts, “Before tanks; now bulldozers. We the Japanese keep on invading their forests. This is very embarrassing.”³² One question that stimulated Shimizu’s historical vision came from an Islander: “Why are there so many Komatsu bulldozers? Japanese and Malaysian logging companies use Komatsu.”³³ Though she was unable to answer immediately, she later learnt that companies such as Komatsu and Mitsubishi supplied military vehicles and ammunition during the war. She realized that tanks and bulldozers share the same principles in design and technology: both tanks and bulldozers use the caterpillar chassis. One simple question triggered Shimizu to probe the contemporary Japanese defense industry in which the Japanese government uses tax funds and national bonds to award contracts to manufacturers of military apparatus and equipment. Shimizu states she does not want to pay taxes towards such ends. She then quotes a Japanese veteran who has criticized Japanese industrial conglomerates (*zaibatsu*) who have benefitted from successive wars and from postwar economic recovery, without being held responsible for their involvement in the wars. Together with the veteran’s words and her own research, Shimizu perceives a complementary relationship between war and military industry. This connection continues to this day in the allegiance between the manufacturers of defense equipment and Japanese corporations’ international presence.³⁴

Her empathy towards the Islanders and criticism of the Japanese corporations and government takes a firm stand against portraying the Islanders as passive victims and the Japanese as the sole author of the exploitation. She identifies a neo-colonial mechanism in which the male-dominated local political clique pursued their self-interest and neglected the welfare of the majority.³⁵ Shimizu has supported the causes of the Islander women, and dedicated herself to a non-governmental organization that calls for the conservation of the forest in PNG and Solomon Islands.³⁶ However, Shimizu’s empathetic treatment can highlight a murky boundary between history and politics and can invite criticism for sensationalizing the Japanese exploitation and cruelty. One could read more into Shimizu’s ‘performance’ as a chronicler of oral history and the Islanders’ reciprocal performance as

³⁰ Watanabe 2015, p. 338.

³¹ Shimizu 1997, p. 48, p. 141, p. 246, p. 257.

³² Shimizu 1997, p. 157.

³³ Shimizu 1997, p. 50.

³⁴ Shimizu 1997, p. 51. In 1996 Komatsu ranked 9th out of 20 largest military contractors. Komatsu has consistently ranked in the top ten contractors to the defense ministry’s manufacturing orders. Asagumo Shinbunsha Shuppan Gyōmubu 2015, p. 513.

³⁵ Shimizu 1997, p. 156.

³⁶ PNG Forest 2016. Shimizu’s name appears as a committee member.

storytellers. Their interaction and the intertextuality between written and oral history can illuminate the potential contribution travel writing can make toward historical scholarship.

In a similar vein, Kawaguchi draws on history to raise concerns about the state of the contemporary Japan–PNG relationship. He finds it disturbing that postwar Japanese businesses regard PNG as a territory of natural resources for the Japanese to exploit. He contends this attitude stemmed from the Japanese wartime occupation of PNG, and political and economic ties Japan cultivated with PNG in the postwar era. He feels it is a “duty” for the Japanese to learn about the Japanese wartime involvement in PNG in order to think about it differently.³⁷ His historical consciousness has compelled him to join a non-governmental organization, ‘Friends of PNG in Japan,’ which aims to foster greater connections with and understanding of PNG. Kawaguchi paid another visit to PNG in August 1997 to a housing project that the NGO coordinated.³⁸ Kawaguchi’s first journey to PNG had such a profound impact; his words and deeds reflect his strong awareness about the iniquitous relationship between PNG and Japan, which he strongly identified as rooted in history.

All three travel writers developed aspirations for the future, spurred by their understanding of wartime history, gathered from their journeys and the process of writing. Shimizu understands that the relationship between Japan and the southwestern Pacific Islands shares the common attribute of exploitation and violence even though the methods have changed over the decades. Her awareness of historical continuity has consolidated her commitment to environmental issues. Kawaguchi’s realization of his ignorance is so profound that he joined a non-governmental organization and wrote a book that, among other things, reveals the perils that historical amnesia brings to the contemporary relationship between PNG and Japan. Watanabe is the subtlest of the three, perhaps because he may have chosen to withhold his opinions. However, his long-term commitment to war-themed journalistic work testifies to his having found a *raison d’être* that forms his visions as a journalist, a citizen and also a father of a young child.

Conclusions

This essay has shown the role travel writers play as historians-in-the-making. Despite the small number of sampled works, the writing exhibits diversity in purpose and styles of travel, the histories collected and researched. More crucially, the writing exhibits different ways in which travel writers develop their historical consciousness and self-reflexivity. Travel writing has much to tell us about how travelers’ performance of history aids in making sense of the past and the present, and forming a vision for the future. The small sample of Japanese travel writing from the southwestern Pacific Islands has given voice to the Islanders’ experiences and shared this with a Japanese audience. These samples show us how their journeys inspired the travelers.

We have seen travelers acting as historians and obtaining oral history from the Islanders. The Islanders spoke about violence the Japanese inflicted upon them. That the Islanders still recall these events is testament to the psychological wounds they carry. However, in appraising oral history, we need to be mindful of multiple roles the interviewees play vis-à-vis the interviewer. We can achieve

³⁷ Kawaguchi 1996, p. 201.

³⁸ Kawaguchi 2000, pp. 7–8.

greater appreciation of travel writers' roles as historians when we consider extraneous matters such as the identity of the traveler and the ways the traveler appeared to the interviewees and interacted with them. Bruno Nana's varying statements offer the most arresting example of contrasting effects on the eventual presentation of history. Historical accounts that the traveler researches and writes after the journey can also reflect the process in which the traveler develops and articulates their historical consciousness which influenced their values and subsequent actions.

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