

Marianas Wartime Oral Histories Portal— Public-Facing Digital Archive of Island Memory

 Jennifer Craig

ABSTRACT

This article explores the creation of the Marianas Wartime Oral Histories Portal, a public-facing digital archive of island memory that presents first-hand accounts of World War II in the Mariana Islands. It highlights the creative use of public programs to gain feedback from community members on the most appropriate mechanism for accessing oral history interviews. It also details the culturally sensitive transcription and editing techniques employed by lead project partner **Guampedia**. The oral history portal and supporting programming were undertaken as part of a National Park Service Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship project. The article offers an overview of the scope of the fellowship, as well as insights into successfully blending place-based learning with public-facing digital work.

INTRODUCTION: PROJECT ORGANIZATION AND TEAM

The National Park Service (NPS) Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship's focus on digitization is a deliberate attempt to make storytelling and heritage more broadly accessible, drawing energy and structure from the spiritual and cultural resonance of oral history narratives. The **Marianas Wartime Oral Histories Portal** is a public-facing digital archive of island memory that presents first-hand accounts of World War II (WWII) in the Mariana Islands. It is both a living archive and a learning platform, inviting visitors to explore recordings, community-curated media, educational resources, and thematic exhibitions. It offers an immersive space to engage in digital storytelling as a means of cultural preservation and connection.

Available on **Guampedia.com**, the Oral Histories Portal provides access to interviews conducted by NPS staff in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s during WWII survivor community commemorations. The interviews capture moments of astonishment, survival, and resilience, as well as the strength of family and community guided by the CHamoru/Chamorro value of *inafa'maolek*—restoring harmony and mutual care. The storytellers, including Mariana Islands *mañaina* (Elders both living and ancestral) and military service members, shared deeply personal accounts of the Japanese occupation, forced marches, internment, and the eventual American return to Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. The launch of Oral Histories Portal marks the first time that descendants, students, researchers, and the public at

large have access to the recordings. Digitizing the oral histories, making them accessible on an online platform, and linking them to educational materials and live events ensures the voices of WWII survivors are heard across generations as dynamic, contextual narratives.

Planning, coordination, and launch of the Oral Histories Portal represented a key element of the Mariana Islands Wartime Experiences through Oral Histories NPS Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship, which was held by me the author. Funded by the Mellon Foundation through the National Park Foundation (NPF), and later American Conservation Experience (ACE), I offered critical technical, ethical, and project management expertise during my two-year appointment.¹ Digital humanities specialists Caitlin Johnson and Michael Faist, whose expertise was made available through the Postdoctoral Fellowship, also aided in development of the Oral Histories Portal and associated materials.

Throughout the project, I worked closely with staff at Guampedia, including Rita Pangelinan Nauta, Myracle Mugol, and Nathalie Pereda. Guampedia is an ongoing community project dedicated to preserving and giving access to the enduring journey of CHamoru/Chamorro people. Over the past two decades, Guampedia has served Guam and the Micronesia region more broadly as a trusted educational resource, offering peer-reviewed encyclopedia-style entries and accompanying media. Guampedia provides content and resources for teachers and school-

 JENNIFER CRAIG, drjennifercraig@outlook.com

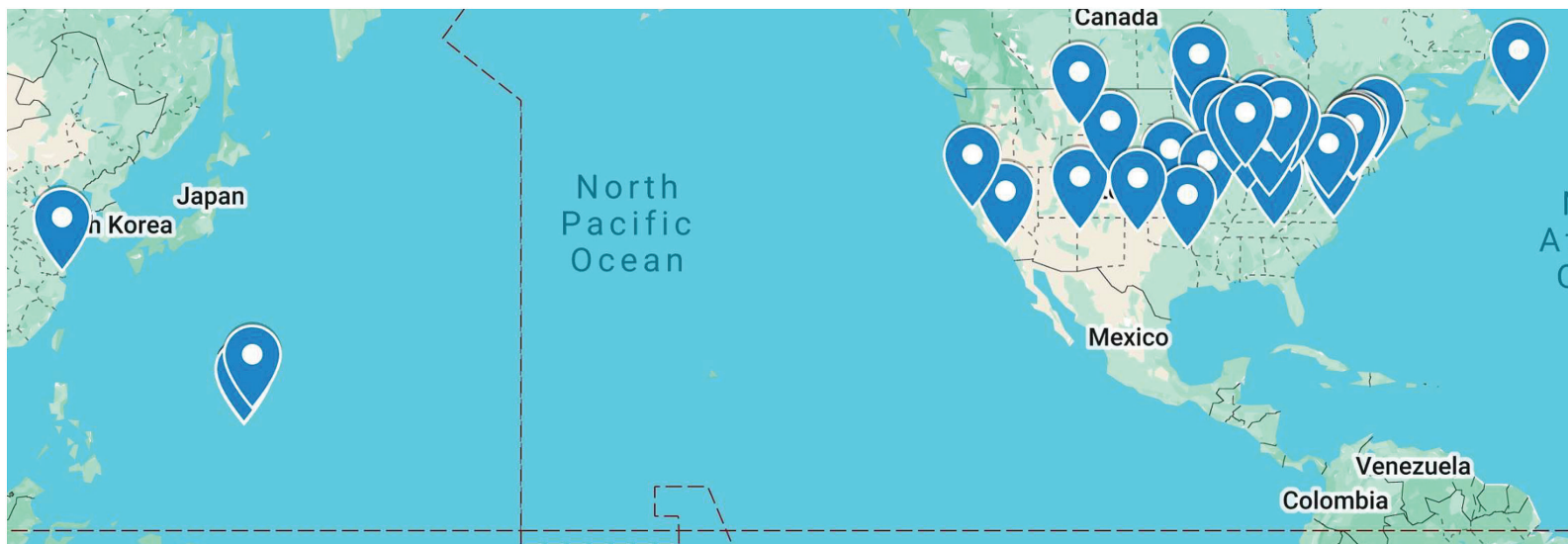


FIGURE 1. Map of narrators' origins. Multiple people may be from the same location. The Marianas Islands are located east of the Shanghai, China, location in the Pacific Ocean. The islands' proximity to Japan was favorable for American tactics in World War II. These islands are lush with jungle, fresh fruit, and water; the temperatures are tropical with high humidity.

children in the Marianas, CHamoru/Chamorros living away from home, visitors to the islands, and others seeking a deeper understanding of the archipelago and its people.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION AND REVIEW

Project team members honor the belief that “these stories choose us,” a deep conviction rooted in *inafa’maolek*. Elders, ancestors, and *taotaomo’na* (ancestral spirits) guided this work, bringing stories to light when the timing was right. In other words, stories showed up and became available when it made the most sense to do so.

During their interviews, most of the storytellers explained that a primary reason for their participation was the desire to recognize the atrocities of war, in the hopes that such actions would never happen again. Now, as military installations grow and expand in the Marianas, the sense of urgency and worry regarding war is real (Hirayama 2025). Given this reality, borrowing from the knowledge of Elders and educating youth on the past is ever more important.

To create the Oral Histories Portal, our team began with DVD (video) and CD (audio-only) recordings of interviews conducted by NPS staff over the past five decades with CHamoru/Chamorro WWII survivors. The team processed the CD interviews using Audacity, an open-source program, and then saved them in .mp3 format. The DVD interviews required more extensive expertise in video production and specialized software. The most time-consuming portion of the work, however, was Guampedia’s cultural review of the transcripts. This step necessitated local knowledge of place names designated by CHamoru/Chamorro, Japanese, and Americans. Future interpretation would benefit from more detailed knowledge of WWII military operations.

After initial editing, the project team crafted contextual audio descriptions, which captured information on speakers as well as the visuals being shown on screen, such as clothing, background elements, and shifts in camera focus. Each description required 1.5–2 hours per video, ensuring audio fidelity and narrative depth.

All transcripts were edited to adjust video timestamps. As needed, Guampedia cultural reviewers then integrated time codes and corrected place and family names, with reviews taking 1.5–10 hours per segment, depending on complexity. This step preserved authenticity and visibility for the storytellers.

Creating the digital versions thus required more than simply expertise in technical archiving—it also demanded understanding and attention to the infrastructure of live storytelling. Across every technical and archival step, from digitizing and editing oral histories to attaching transcripts and metadata, the Postdoctoral Fellowship team anchored their work in a care-first ethos. Inspired by Métis Indigenous, feminist, and community-centered approaches first described by Kisha Supernant in her work on the missing and murdered children of Canada’s Indian Boarding Schools (Supernant 2023; Craig 2024), I guided colleagues with practices in heart-centered archaeology, grounded in relationality, emotion, care, and rigor. This practice calls for honoring both the living and the departed by integrating cultural empathy with methodological precision (Supernant et al. 2020). The project’s methods wove Pacific Islander oral history concepts with broader means of communication and being (Topping, Ogo and Dungca 1975; Hau’ofa 2008; Flores and Aguon 2009; Oliveira and Wright 2016; Mahuika 2019; Wilson-Hokowhitu 2019; Mahuika, McGregor, and Tengan 2024).

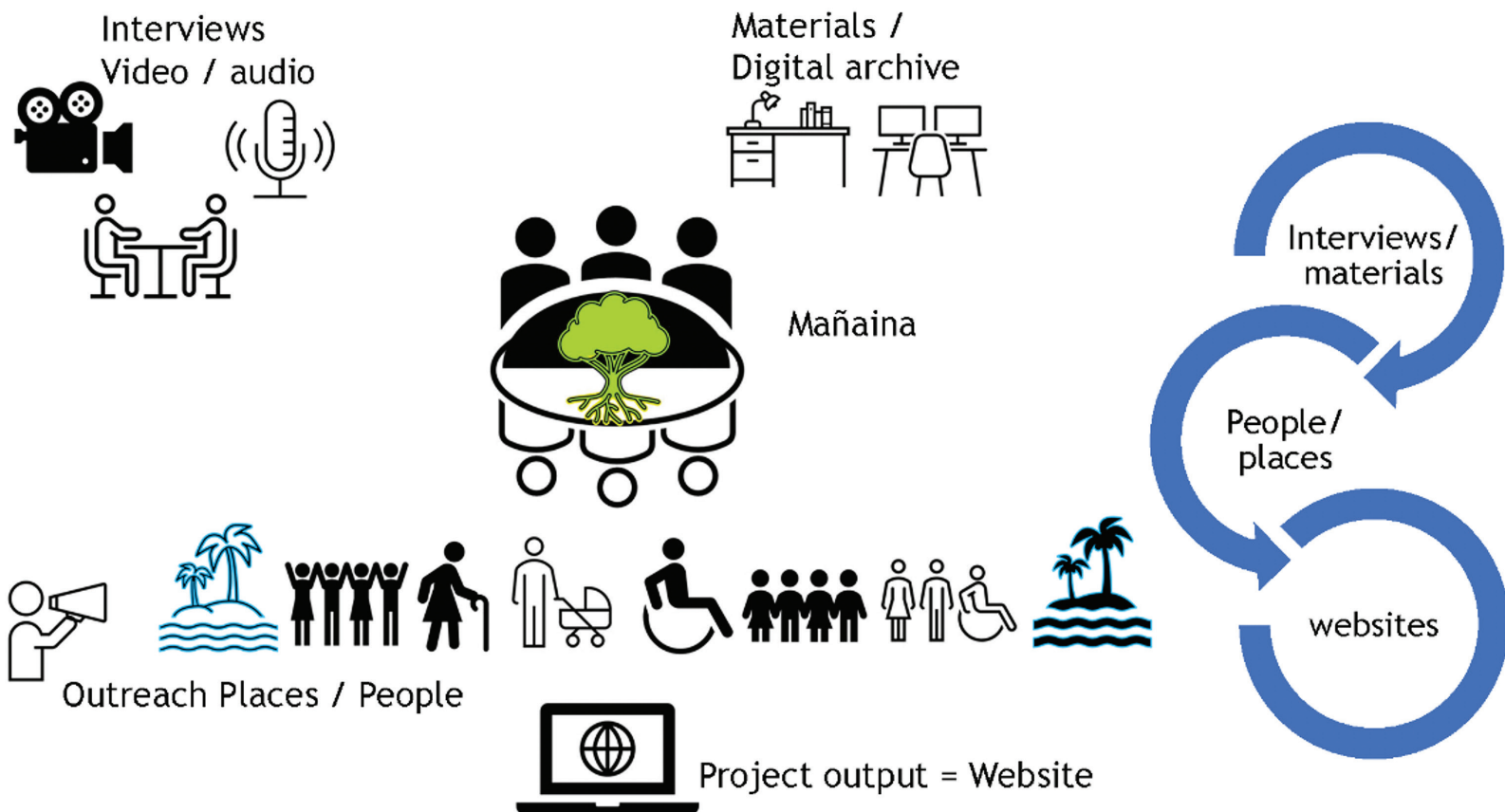


FIGURE 2. Diagram of methodology created by the author: Collections-based research with heart-centered and relational practices. (Craig 2025)

Moreover, the project team wove trauma-informed approaches into its workflows to ensure emotional safety, recognize past suffering, and prevent re-traumatization (Huang et al. 2014; Office of Risk Management Wellness & Resilience Branch n.d.), principles widely recognized across oral history, archival, and heritage sectors (resources of these best practices provided by the Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, *Learn the Theory and Practice of Oral History*). In this light, the technical processes of digitization become more than infrastructure. They become a respectful framework for preserving stories with dignity, ensuring that end products remain both a vessel of memory and a cradle of cultural care.

OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Beginning in August 2023, project partners worked with community members on Guam and Saipan to offer ongoing public programming with the aim of introducing diverse public audiences (students, teachers, historians, and families) to the development of the Oral Histories Portal. An important goal of these sessions was to gather input from attendees on their preferred approaches for accessing the interviews once they had been digitized. The events, which included the *Marianas Storytelling: Land & Lineage* series as well as the *Voices of Guåhan* series, featured a powerful blend of live storytelling,

short films or still photos, and discussion. Attendance for each event ranged from 40 to 200 people representing a variety of ages, including children, babies, teenagers, adults, and Elders. The *Voices of Guåhan* events drew all varieties of these audiences. *Marianas Storytelling* events drew primarily adults, nearly all of whom were descendants of CHamoru/Chamorro and Carolinian heritage, with a few non-Indigenous families.

We created the *Marianas Storytelling* series between 2024–2025, bringing the voices of the Mariana Islands into public spaces where memory, culture, and history intersect. At the heart of five of these programs were the WWII oral histories originally collected by NPS. The NPS staff at War in the Pacific National Historical Park also organized three launches at Fonte Plateau, Sumai, and Asan to celebrate the *Voices of Guåhan* self-guided tour application and offer instruction on its use. *Voices of Guåhan* is an audio tour that incorporates excerpts from the audio oral history interviews. It is available via the **NPS.gov** app. *Voices of Guåhan* highlights different locations within War in the Pacific National Historical Park where personal experiences from the oral histories are shared by storytellers. For context, the audio tour also includes information on the location’s significance, along with written historical research about the area, and hyperlinks to the full-length oral histories.

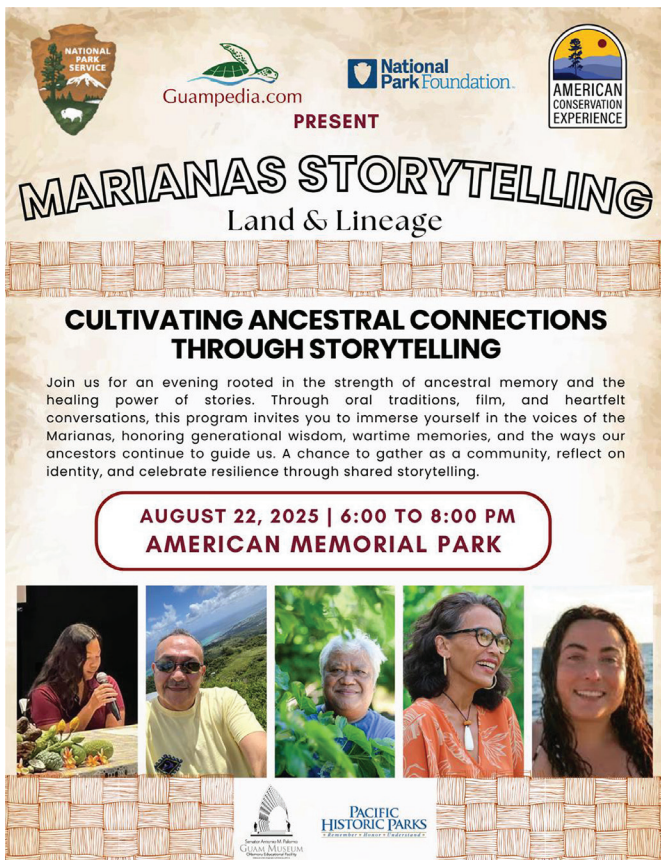


FIGURE 3. Flyer created for the final *Marianas Storytelling* session. Similar flyers were created for each session and shared on social media.

In addition to sharing information about the Oral Histories Portal, the programming aimed to democratize knowledge and center Indigenous experiences in educational spaces. The event series demonstrates how digital humanities platforms can support community-based research and participatory storytelling, along with intergenerational learning rooted in place-based knowledge, collaborative programming across island institutions, and archival visibility for marginalized narratives.

ACCESSING THE RECORDINGS

In response to feedback received during the public sessions, Guampedia, with my input, created the Oral Histories Portal’s digital architecture. At the top of the **landing page** is a photographic carousel of storytellers. Site visitors can click on an image, which includes a storyteller’s name and title, and then, in a new tab, be redirected to an associated page on <https://npgallery.nps.gov>. NPGallery is a digital asset management system maintained by NPS. It serves as a comprehensive library of NPS images, video, audio, maps, presentations, documents, and more. In addition to the oral history interviews, NPGallery hosts a wide variety of materials associated with WWII in the Pacific.

Each oral history interview has a unique identifier within the NPGallery system as well as a unique webpage address. Once a visitor has reached the associated page within NPGallery they have access to a full-length digitized oral history video for viewing on any device that supports files in .mp4 format. In addition, each NPGallery asset contains the metadata on the video and the full-length written transcript. As visitors scroll the page, they will also come across related assets, including transcripts of the video interviews, which include the storyteller’s verbal consent.² This is in addition to written consent, still archived with the NPS WAPA collection.

The Oral Histories Portal landing page also includes audio-only interviews. Highlighted in a separate section, each interview is represented by a card, reminiscent of a library card catalog. When visitors click the card, they are redirected to an associated page on <https://npgallery.nps.gov>. This page provides the full-length digitized oral history for listening on any device that supports files in .mp3 format, the audio metadata, associated photos (where possible), and a full-length transcript.

Under a documents tab, visitors to the Oral Histories Portal can also access a pamphlet that lists the names of all the people who recorded their oral histories with NPS, including those whose stories are not accessible through the Portal.³ Additional research on these individuals is ongoing, and project staff encourage families that see their loved one’s name on the list to reach out and learn more about the initiative. Additionally, the brochure includes QR codes that link to the **Voices of Guåhan** tour.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Inspired by the leadership of NPS Director Charles F. “Chuck” Sams III, who emphasized psychological safety during his tenure (2021–2025), the Oral Histories Portal development team employed a heart-centered archaeology approach.⁴ This involved, in particular, deep listening and meaningful community engagement and care for those of us working on the project. In order to cultivate connections with the ancestors and their storytelling, while also maintaining health and well-being, I created an asynchronous training on Trauma-Informed Approaches to Difficult Histories for Pacific Historic Parks and NPS Staff. This session took place towards the end of the public programming, as I noticed the staff experiencing distress (including myself) caused by listening to these traumatic stories and the revisiting of them with the public. This training covered the full breadth of oral history work with particular emphasis on interpretation. Most NPS staff working at War in the Pacific National Historical Park and

American Memorial Park are CHamoru/Chamorro and Carolinian descendants of war survivors. Culminating in a two-day in-person workshop, co-led with Rita Pangelinan Nauta (CHamoru), participants were re-sensitized to the work they perform and how their bodies, mind, and souls need care and kindness to recuperate and reconnect.

The interpretive framework for presenting the histories draws on the collections-based heart-centered archaeology methodology (Figure 2) I developed, which, as previously noted, is inspired by Métis Indigenous, feminist, and community-centered approaches first described by Kisha Supernant in her work on the missing and murdered children of Canada's Indian Boarding Schools. This methodology recognizes that historical storytelling is both intellectual and emotional work, and needs to be guided by care, empathy, and reciprocity.

In practice, this approach means we contextualize narratives in community programs with historical background that enriches the oral histories without overshadowing the storytellers' voices. For example, place-based excerpts from the oral history collection were featured in the *Marianas Storytelling* series that recognized the war occurred right where we were, bringing another level of place-based learning to the contextualizing of a multiple-component program. By honoring place-based memory, we linked stories of *mañaina* to villages, concentration camps, and sacred landscapes where *taotaomo'na* remain. Of utmost importance is to prioritize cultural respect and intergenerational access, presenting these materials in ways that uphold the dignity of the storytellers.

CONCLUSION

By digitizing, contextualizing, and sharing these oral histories, Guampedia and its Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship partners ensure that the voices of the Mariana Islands during WWII endure as a living resource, connecting *pa'go* (today) to *para mo'na* (tomorrow). This collection stands as both a historical record and a tribute to the resilience, memory, and cultural heritage of the islands.

Ensuring that the voices of the Mariana Islands are heard across generations, the project provides public access to oral histories, maintaining the stories' rich emotional and historical resonance. By digitizing and interpreting the collection, the Postdoctoral Fellowship transformed a set of recorded memories into a living body of knowledge, which continues to educate and honor the island communities and veterans, inviting future generations to engage with and reflect on their past.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ENDNOTES

1. In 2025 our Marianas Storytelling Program coincided with and incorporated the inaugural War Survivors Day, June 28. The period of June 28 to July 21 is now the Remembrance Season, when WWII survivors are commemorated at each island village memorial leading up to Liberation Day July 21. The program ended shortly after the Remembrance Season.
2. In all oral histories included in this project, consent from the storytellers is also recorded on NPS release form documentation and archived in hard-copy (paper) in the collections and digitally on the server of War in the Pacific National Historical Park.
3. The pamphlet lists everyone who has recorded oral histories deposited in the War in the Pacific National Historical Park archives. In cases where an asterisk is next to a name, family members of such persons were encouraged to reach out to me for the duration of my Fellowship, then later directly to NPS staff, to discuss consent. This information was included in the final slide shown at the *Marianas Storytelling* and *Voices of Guåhan* events, and left up on the screen after the presentation to encourage attendees to come forward. This way of doing things was very well received by audiences and in several cases led to families discussing with me and rangers their family involvement and sharing other oral history repositories.
4. "Psychological safety" is defined as "anti-harassment of all forms; implicit bias; diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility; and actions needed to create workplaces that are Respectful, Inclusive, Safe, and Engaged." *NPS Reference Manual 50B, Occupational Safety and Health Program*, Chapter 1 Addendum: Annual Safety, Health, and Wellness Stand Downs (Washington, DC: NPS, 2023); https://home.nps.gov/subjects/policy/upload/RM-50B_Chp1_Addendum_Safety_Health_Wellness_Stand_Downs.pdf.

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- Triton Films, “**Spirits of the Voyage**,” [YouTube](#)
- “The Incredible Sail of Lamotrek,” [YouTube](#)
- Lola Quan Bautista, “Promesa,” documentary that explores connection between Chamorro/CHamoru prayer traditions and ancestry
- Mighty Island Productions, “Tradewinds,” celebrates Guam cultural heritage through music
- Galvin Guerrero and Mount Carmel School (Saipan), “We Drank Our Tears”
- PBS (Public Broadcasting System) Guam, “War for Guam,” [YouTube](#)
- Guampedia and Simon Sanchez III (producers), “WWII Marianas True History” reel
- Davianna Pōmaika’i McGregor (University of Hawai’i Mānoa), and Ty Kāwika Tengan (University of Hawai’i Mānoa, Oral History in the Pacific 2024, episodes on Oceania Currents Podcast, hosted by Nepia Mahuika (Massey University):
 - Oral History in the Pacific, Part 1: Storytelling in Aotearoa and Hawai’i, [Oceania Currents | iHeart](#)
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