The Navy Generation Documentary Project is a film in progress about the experience of a minority group the Japanese refer to as Ōbeikei (“Westerner Islanders”), who live on Chichijima in the Ogasawara/Bonin Islands about 1000 km (625 mi) south of Tokyo in the Pacific Ocean. These latter day descendants of the settlers, sailors, explorers, and shipwrecked men and women from Europe, America, and various islands across the Pacific who, in 1830, settled on what had previously been uninhabited islands claimed by Japan, Great Britain, and the United States bear physical features that attest to their multiethnic lineage.

Fig. 1. A screen shot from “The Navy Generation”.

The Navy Generation takes its name from the U.S. Naval Occupation of the islands, which began together with that of Okinawa immediately after World War II and continued until 1968, when the islands were suddenly and with very little warning returned to Japan. Unlike the better known Okinawa, the Ogasawaran civilians were not allowed to remain on the islands. First the Japanese military forced most of them to the Japanese mainland in 1944, and then the Americans refused to allow them to return after the armistice – with the
exception of the Ōbeikei. Living for twenty-two years under the American flag, the Navy Generation would grow up with English as their educational language base and American culture as the backbone of their small island community. A year now in the making, our film attempts to capture the Navy Generation and their history in their own words. It is a story of identity formation in a confusing time, of struggles against discrimination, and of constantly changing linguistic identification. The film provides a first-hand introduction to a minority group’s tumultuous political and cultural history, and is a testament to their perseverance through the opposing tug-of-war pulls of the huge nation-states of Japan and the United States.

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS AT THE WORKSHOP

Ohmae:
I was in the islands in 1983, almost 30 years ago. I was a reporter doing a cover in the islands and I stayed a week there. I only covered the story about the family of Savory, then, I later found that his son was working in Tokyo area as a captain of a boat in Tokyo bay. So, your depths of interviewing or visiting people and collecting their old stories, from a viewpoint of an ex-journalist, that’s very nice. I’m very sure collecting those facts or those interviews must have been hard… It’s a dying generation, but having these very objective interviews, it will last history. I think you can probably add a little wider perspective for at this moment you’ve just focused on the American or the English speaking people. Maybe another aspect would give more depth to this film. I really appreciate your work.

Murotani:
One thing I want to say is, as I was telling Ohmae-san before, these people who agreed to be on camera really did agree to be on camera, but there are many who won’t and never will. Which is too bad, but we can sympathize with them because there’s been a lot of press coverage, and at this point people are kind of skeptical of a lot of journalists and it doesn’t matter whether you’re from NHK or whether like us who are unattached and unaffiliated. So, in the interviews we got, I think we really appreciate the amount of depth that we got. At the same time, it’s a very difficult process, a tremendously time-consuming process, and it’s very, very difficult for people to open up especially in front of a video camera.

Ohmae:
Are there any initiatives inside of the island to try to make records?
**Murotani:**
Jonathan Savory has recorded history. Also Rocky, who’s been interviewed, I believe he has some film from the navy time. He has one of the only pieces of film that’s available from that time. He also collects pictures as well as writes down histories. Other than that, I don’t know. There might be a lot of record. I know NHK has a very big collection. They have done about four or five documentaries on the island. Not all on the Navy Generation but some on the Navy Generation. They have an archive somewhere but I don’t think they share it that often. So it’s very difficult to get your hands on any sort of recorded history. But I like it when the islanders themselves record the history because I feel like there’s always kind of a distance, kind of a barrier, between outsiders and insiders, but when the islanders themselves record it, it has a lot of purpose.

**Fox:**
Danny Long who has long been associated with the Bonin Islands, and I happened to meet on the boat on the way down. I had an interest in the Bonin Islands only because the poet I did my PhD dissertation on was Kitahara Hakushu, who spent three months on the island in 1914. So I had always thought it wasn’t that important for Hakushu but I needed to go down and see the islands. I happened to meet up with Danny. He’s long had this desire, precisely for the reason you said, to get this down on film because these people are in their fifties and sixties. They’re not going to be around that much longer and here is a precious piece of history that is being lost. Not only lost, Americans don’t even know that the Bonin Islands were under American administration at any time. Japanese are forgetting it. My students come in to Ritsumei and they don’t know a thing about it. It’s like John Washington was saying, people don’t believe that they were the original islanders. It’s really interesting. So one of the things we want to follow up on if we can – actually, there are three areas we’d like to cover. One would be those who moved away from the islands to the states. There are a number of those and we have one interview set up for April with somebody living in Colorado. We’re going to go, actually it’s one of the Savory’s. We’d also like to talk to a number of the islanders who moved to Japan so that we could get that side as well. And then, though we don’t want to do too much of the talking-head scholar thing, there are scholars who have specialized in this history, and it’d be nice if we had one from the Japanese side of
the language barrier and one from the English side of the language barrier. We’ve got two possible candidates for that. One of them has agreed and the other we’re still talking to. It’d be nice to get that. It will really fill out the story. But as much as possible, Masahiko really wants to keep it just the islanders. It’s the islanders’ story, which is really what we need to do.

**Murotani:**
I think what Ohmae-san said was right. Right now the focus is a little slanted and I think it needs a fuller picture. Talking to the Japanese community would be something invaluable. Also, there is this whole other side because the navy was there, there is the navy’s prospective. But the problem is we’re operating in Japan and none of them are in Japan anymore. They are all over the United States. Some are on the east coast, some in Nevada, the west coast, they’re all over. So, to be able to objectively, as objectively as possible, cover the stories is a tremendous task, one that I don’t even know if we can accomplish at all.

**Fox:**
It’s just the funding problem right away. We’re doing this all on our own dime essentially, with some help from Danny. Also I’m using the research funds that Ritsumei makes available to me, but there isn’t much. And so we’re just trying to move ahead. I’ve applied for grants, but it’s funny - the grant agencies don’t consider this research. These are research grants I’m applying for and they don’t think its research. They tend to kick it out and say why don’t you associate with this film institute or something. They are totally missing the point. In one sense, this is not research. This is primary material, that’s what it is. It’s very important. It’s the thing on which research can and should be based. So we really want to get this down.

**Shikida:** Did you interview the people around the Navy Generation? I just want to know what the people around them thought about their presence.

**Murotani:** We did but we didn’t use it in the film. At this point, we felt that it wasn’t relevant to the topic that was discussed in 38 minutes. In the future, we may use it but we don’t know. It’s a sticky issue if you’re talking about other people trying to comment on the group of people. We don’t usually go there but other than that we’ve
interviewed some people who are not really that related to the navy generation. Namely, there is a population of people coming in the last few years, particularly young people, and we interviewed one person like that and her take on the navy generation was that she needed to find more information. What would be interesting for me is to get more people like the Japanese teacher that you saw who lived post reversion and to get people more of her generation who are Japanese and who worked and lived with the navy generation to get their opinion. So far we only have her. The problem is a lot of the people who lived at that time we’re not in touch with them, also a lot of them are not there so it’s kind of a difficult process. But you are right. I do think it’s needed for a much deeper, fuller prospect.

**Fox:** Also, there are generations in the people around the navy generation. We have the Old Islanders and New Old Islanders and New Islanders and so on, and from very earlier on in their history they were suddenly a very small minority. Once the Japanese came in the 1870, by the 1890 they were a tiny minority already. That happened again, the whole history was repeated in the immediate reversion era. In fact, the Japanese government prevented any old Islander from coming back for a year beyond. They tried to get the navy generation up to learn Japanese before they came back. The take of people who came in back then knew who the navy generations were but a lot of the newer people, the younger people who have come in the last teen years are not even aware of them. It’s a very difficult question to ask them and we are not really sure how to ask them.