

The Okinawa Memory Initiative
Okinawa, Japan
International House of New York
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The Okinawa Memory Initiative is a new international dialogue project committed to understanding and amplifying the lessons from the ongoing struggle over the U.S. military occupation of Okinawa, Japan. The Initiative, via 360 degrees of oral history interviews and capacity-building with people from all sides of the conflict, serves as point of mediation and debate over this archipelago's keystone role in global geopolitics, and how we balance local voices and international security politics in defining peace in the twenty-first century.

The Okinawa Memory Initiative, funded through the generous support of Davis Projects for Peace and the in-kind donation of time, resources, and material of our inaugural partners (Professor Alan Christy and the Center for the Study of Pacific War Memories and Professor Ikue Kina of the International Institute for Okinawan Studies) started in June 2016. Through the targeted collection of oral history interviews and initiation of capacity-building workshops, we made significant progress on the initial goals outlined in our proposal.

While some of our ultimate objectives (establishing an archive, applying materials in educational events and settings, and generating a report on the current situation in Okinawa) remain in an earlier stage of progress, we productively focused our energy on an unanticipated and exciting prospect that unfolded on the ground: long-term viability and impact for the project through enthusiastic response and support. Paradoxically, this development happened in spite of some early logistical challenges. For one, due to budgetary constraints, the anticipated shared June visit with University of California, Santa Cruz students did not come to fruition as hoped. As a result, since I did not have the on-the-ground support and partnership team that had been envisioned, I dedicated myself to outreach and building a network of local partners. Practically speaking, this meant the focus of this Project for Peace was not on launching and sunsetting a self-contained endeavor with a pre-established team, but instead laying foundations for an ongoing collaboration with a diverse coalition of support.

Within days of landing and setting up my base in the prefectural capital of Naha, I redesigned the project as a pilot phase, emphasizing foundational objectives of eliciting a demographically diverse spread of interviews and photographic documentation, and building the local relationships necessary for the Initiative's long term health. I conceived of these audio and visual materials not as a complete archive, but as an initial portfolio that touches on major themes in order to secure further interest and support, which I am seeking through public and private funders to launch the next phase of the project.

The response to this approach was inspiring. By my second week, I had given an interview on the project to a major Japanese newspaper, pitched the Initiative to student audiences and a series of scholars and thinkers in Okinawa, strengthened my relationship with the prefectural university, and elicited stories from across the island. At the gates of Marine Camp Schwab, I met an 86-year old woman who was injured by an American flamethrower in the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, and now protests a proposed base expansion daily. In the American Village tourist attraction, I shared a meal with a local military recruiter married to an American serviceman, who made a case for the positive economic and social impact of the bases. In the rural north, I was a guest at a peace village founded by a young man who left his job on a base behind to dedicate himself to building a community where international guests will visit to exchange ideas about conflict resolution and articulate new strategies for peace action. And by end of my visit, I secured a meeting with the former governor of the island, who has long been a core figure in the peace movement. The governor expressed his support for the project and interest in engaging with it further as it expands.

The fact that the project resonated so strongly with so many – from the highest office in the prefecture to the people who live with the reality of the bases day-in day-out – arose from several factors. The first was generational: the number of people who can remember the 1945 battle and the entire history of military presence since are dwindling rapidly, and with them go crucial memories and resources about the change in cultural and social life from the pre to postwar worlds. I encountered people of all generations who articulated a need to further documenting these essential perspectives.

Second, while the conflict over the bases is omnipresent there and the island's significance for geopolitics is of global relevance, the conflict is marginalized in Japan and is virtually unknown in the United States. Over and over, Okinawans told me that they wished people in Japan and America would care or question how their national security policies have transformed life in Okinawa. I was inspired by

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the people who saw the dialogic potential in my project, and then committed themselves to connecting me with friends and colleagues. With their support, the project network expanded exponentially fast. In some cases, a single person would generate many new introductions, from local politicians to religious leaders.

And third, in between the time of my January Davis proposal to the time of my June 22 arrival, the island experienced its greatest wave of protests and unrest in twenty years. A U.S. military contractor and veteran sexually assaulted and murdered a young Okinawan woman, and there were parallel incidents involving the criminal acts of American service people. I arrived only days after 65,000 people gathered to rally in the capital against these crimes, and tensions on island – both between bases and protestors and between Okinawans on different sides of the issue – were escalating rapidly. These tragic events and the emotional and political response they engendered affirmed that the use of the island for American and mainland Japanese military interests remains a fundamentally unresolved legacy of WWII, and an open wound here in Okinawa. The timing of my visit with these charged events heightened the immediacy and purpose of the Initiative as an intercultural endeavor.

The project now has individual and institutional partnerships in Okinawa, California, Hawai'i (the site of a major Okinawan diasporic population), New York, mainland Japan, and Australia. Major politicians, leading scholars, Battle survivors, students, military veterans, peace activists, and people from many other backgrounds have all found common ground in supporting the Initiative as ongoing resources. Having established this truly global network through the generosity of Davis Projects for Peace, our task now is to mobilize it to expand collection and open up new loci of project impact. For instance, we are forming an advisory team to more closely connect the Initiative to the young people of Okinawa, and train and equip this emerging generation with the tools to practice oral history in their own households and communities, and then submit these interviews to radically expand our collection. In this way, the project functions both as a documentary effort and as a social venture, understanding that an emphasis on intergenerational transmission gives the project an impact not only on general knowledge about Okinawa, but on how young people there can realize themselves as informed participants in their communities and as actors in ongoing debate over peace in their homeland.

Okinawa offers an articulation of peace that closely connects present-day action with remembrance, cultural continuity, and the experience of ancestors. Through this attention to the complexity of memory and the past – tombs and graveyards are common sights in Okinawa, and the traditional reverence for the dead remains a strong element in culture – comes a debate about how to carry forward that legacy in terms of land and environmental use, Okinawan identity, and the base struggle. This discussion and debate has occurred not only on picket lines but in restaurants, in legislative bodies, and in classrooms. It is central in the prefecture's main WWII memorial, the Cornerstone of Peace, where the names of the battle dead from all sides are inscribed in the same site. But even in that setting some argued to me that the horrors Okinawans endured in the past teach that peace can be realized only through trenchant opposition to militarization and the bases, while others maintained these painful experiences teach that peace is secured through the local and international security brought by the bases.

So when we talk peace in Okinawa, we face a troubled and unresolved past, and the realization that this conflict is not just an Okinawan problem, but also an American and Japanese problem. A single event can have many meanings, many truths, and different calls for action. Learning from the many people who have so generously shared their stories with me, I've sought to maintain an open table approach, so as not to merely lionize one story or cultural perspective over another but to seek to a critical, even contradictory, array of stories. The idea becomes to develop the space between these stories not as a gulf of difference, but as ground for dialogue.

The project's ongoing target is to connect more people in Okinawa to the stories of those on the other side of the base issue, and to provide a resource for Americans and Japanese to learn how their peace at home comes at the cost of ongoing conflict for the people of Okinawa. Now, as tensions climb in these islands and in the greater East Asia region, it is clear that peace is a story that has not yet been told, and that in order for peace to be realized in the future, we must develop new and critical methods to listen to the presence of the past.



With Eiko and Taeko Matayoshi, soba noodle shop proprietors and project supporters.

Photo Credit: Yoshiyuki Kashima



With former Governor Masahide Ota
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Marines at a ceremony commemorating the American dead from the Battle of Okinawa