

VISIBLE EVIDENCE

Edited by Michael Renov, Faye Ginsburg, and Jane Gaines

Public confidence in the "real" is everywhere in decline. This series offers a forum for the in-depth consideration of the representation of the real, with books that engage issues that bear upon questions of cultural and historical representation, and that forward the work of challenging prevailing notions of the "documentary tradition" and of nonfiction culture more generally.

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VISIBLE EVIDENCE, VOLUME 5

*Feminism and
Documentary*

Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, Editors



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ANN KANEKO

[7] *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking,
Japanese Style*

In the fall of 1994, I embarked on the research for *Overstay*, a documentary about foreign migrant workers (*gaikokujin deka-segi rodosha*) in Japan. I had lived in Japan between 1986 and 1990, and when I returned to visit in 1991, I noticed a marked difference in the ethnic makeup of Tokyo. Over the past fifteen years, young men and women from other parts of Asia and Latin America have been flocking to Japan, the new Asian promised land. With the rapid growth of the Japanese economy, a shift to the service sector, and a labor shortage during the late '80s, known as the bubble years, fewer Japanese are willing to do manual labor—the “3K” work, that is, *kitsui* (hard), *kitanai* (dirty), and *kiken* (dangerous). Attracted by the strong yen, foreigners, often highly educated, have relocated to fill this labor need, working for substandard wages in urban and suburban Japan.¹

I had the good fortune of receiving a Japan Foundation Artist's Fellowship, which enabled me to finance the first leg of the project in exorbitantly expensive Japan. I began this project with great trepidation since I was not current on the situation in Japan and was uncertain as to what I would find. Would I successfully find subjects who were part of this marginalized segment of Japanese society? Would they be willing to participate in a project like this one? Would I be able to communicate with them? Would I find a focus for a film? How would I be viewed by these *gaijin*? Except for spending time during the summer of 1991 with a young Iranian man, who spoke very little English or Japanese and who was most intent on seducing me, I had had little contact with the people on whom I intended to focus. Having been away from Japan, most of my knowledge of these new foreign residents came through TV news clips and articles I had read during 1991. I also knew that the tide of foreigners that had caused so much excitement in the early '90s was waning, and with the recession

immigration authorities were cracking down. Many people had already left voluntarily or been deported.

I realize my anxieties were natural, given the ever-unfolding process of documentary filmmaking, yet somehow the stakes seemed higher since I was making a film in a foreign land about foreign people. Although I am fluent in Japanese and had already lived in Japan for more than three years, I knew that making a film would truly test my ability to artfully navigate social codes and cultural boundaries.

Given the array of circumstances I had to deal with, making the film was a very enriching and challenging process. I have tried to reflect on that process, shedding light on some of the choices I made and the circumstances under which I made them. As I comment on this film, I should mention that it is still a work-in-progress, so some of my textual analysis may pertain to sequences that may not be included in the finished film. Writing about the film while I am still editing it has made me reflect on some of the initial ideas that I had when I came to the project, and it has been an interesting process looking at how those ideas have evolved and how I have had to rethink their application in the film.

▶ **How I Am Perceived**

Although I may feel like the same person in Japan, I am not who I am in Los Angeles. In a country where categories are particularly important, I am a *gaijin* and a woman—which mean different things from what it does here. In the United States, I cannot escape the features of my face that make me “Japanese” American, but I am still an American and another granddaughter of yet another immigrant. Like most Americans, I am a hyphenate. In Japan, where the notion of being a *gaijin*, which literally means outsider, is quite strong, I am *nikkei amerika-jin*, which means the American of Japanese ancestry, but a *gaijin*, nonetheless. In a land that claims homogeneity, I am a curiosity. At least it is an excuse for my accent and brash behavior, which would certainly not be acceptable if I were a “real” Japanese woman. Of course, these labels exist everywhere whether one pays heed to them or not. However, because I was making a documentary, I was more self-conscious about them; the relationships I formed with subjects would be based on how they perceived me.

In Japan, I was neither Japanese nor a member of the recently arrived immigrant communities, neither a member of the dominant group nor the underrepresented group. But I like to think of myself as being sympathetic to the new group of foreign workers in Japan because I had experienced



Hikari Yagi, Ann Kaneko, and William Higa (left to right). Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

what it was to be a *gaijin* in Japan and because I am a grandchild of immigrants who had left the very country that was now hosting immigrants. This was my personal connection. Since I knew only one of my grandparents, I can only imagine their experiences coming to the United States years ago. But despite the passing of almost a century, somehow I felt I could get to know my grandparents through these new residents in Japan. I believed that there were common elements in the immigrant experience that I could learn about from these contemporary immigrants, bringing me closer to my grandparents. However, I was also well aware of the fact that my experience was quite different from theirs. I was visiting from a wealthy country and had chosen to come to Japan, not to work but to pursue intellectual interests. Did these considerations matter in Japan? I did not know and was curious to find some answers.

Choosing Subjects and Establishing Trust

In order to meet possible subjects and get a sense of their working and living conditions in Japan, I began by contacting various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working to better the conditions of foreigners.

Making these contacts also facilitated getting the proper introductions, so important in Japan, to other organizations and individuals. Most of the organizations were known for serving specific ethnic or religious communities, but there is much crossover in Japan because of the small sizes of immigrant communities. Consequently, all foreigners are lumped into one big *gaijin* pot, and I found more intermingling among immigrants than I do in the United States, for example, where the individual communities are large and autonomous. Despite the vast differences in culture and language between South Americans and South Asians, Southeast Asians and East Asians, they all find a common bond in being *gaijin* in Japan.

As I met more and more people and got a sense of what stories I wanted to tell, I had to choose subjects for my film. I was looking for variations on the Japan experience. Aside from looking for different nationalities and genders, I was seeking a range of personalities and people, faced with different challenges. The subjects all have certain common attributes: they are young, have come to Japan to work and make money, and have overstayed their visas.

Under any circumstances, it is difficult to find people to be in a film because most people are not willing subjects. In fact, it might be safe to say that this reticence is even stronger among Asians because they are usually more concerned with saving face. They want to keep up appearances and often hide what they really think. Asians do not want to bad-mouth anyone and are less willing or interested in telling all or confessing than are Americans, especially if television talk shows are any indication.

The situation of my subjects is even touchier because they could face deportation if someone squeals on them. I have heard of other documentary filmmakers who conduct elaborate searches, similar to casting sessions, videotaping their prospective subjects and testing out how they express themselves and come across on camera. But given the undocumented status of my subjects, I did not feel as if this was an appropriate method; by pulling out a camera, I would probably scare away most of my prospects before asking even one question. Instead, I took a more intuitive approach. I knew that to ask people to let me into their lives to film them I had to get along with them and earn their trust. Consequently, I spent many hours hanging out with the four sets of subjects in my film. I never "tested" them on camera before I filmed them. I thought that if I found something compelling about them or their stories this would be reflected in the film. I was rewarded with amazing access to the worlds of my subjects, and I am not sure whether another approach would have granted me the same success.

As I edit the film, though, I realize the limitations of my methodology



From Ann Kaneko's *Overstay*, this is the office where illegal immigrants are detained and where some voluntarily surrender to go home. Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

in choosing my subjects because there are those who are more articulate and who have more on-camera presence than others. By virtue of their personalities, the more outgoing subjects speak more freely and clearly in front of the camera, but they have different concerns from those of the more reticent ones. For example, Ashraf, a Pakistani subject who is one of the shyer characters in the film and who clearly has the most difficulty speaking in front of the camera, is in some ways more endearing and sincere because he is able to see the positive side to his experiences. He is less critical and negative about his life in Japan and provides a good balance to some of the others. Sally, a Filipina working as a hostess in Japan, is also quite shy and does not clearly articulate details about her work because she is ashamed of it. I hope that her modesty and ambiguity do not have the opposite effect of making her appear to be a prostitute.

Because I had found all of my subjects through NGOs staffed by people with whom they already had existing relationships, I think they tended to trust me more from the outset. They knew where my sympathies lay, and in general I found they were less guarded than their vulnerable position might suggest they would or should be. Although I was from the United States, being a *gaijin* worked in my favor because in their eyes I was still a *gaijin*, who knew somewhere else and was able to see beyond the idiosyncrasies of Japanese society. Perhaps in the same way that Japanese viewed me as a curiosity, they also were amused by the Japanese-looking woman who didn't

act like a Japanese. Because of the prevalence of contracted second- and third-generation Japanese Brazilians and Japanese Peruvians working alongside other immigrant workers at factories and clubs, there was also a kind of understanding of how someone like me could exist. They could identify with me because they identified with the Japanese Brazilians and Japanese Peruvians who possess visas in Japan but are very much in the same class and vulnerable position as undocumented workers. These elements gave us a basis for forming a kind of camaraderie. And precisely because they had been living in Japan, they understood that there were those whom one could trust and those whom one could not trust regardless of nationality.

When one engages with the lives of his or her subjects, one wants to be sure that making the documentary is somehow a reciprocal arrangement. Documenting the situation of exploited individuals, I would be very distressed if power imbalances in their situation were mirrored in our filmmaker-subject relationship. Because they were giving to me, I felt it was extremely important that I somehow be able to reciprocate. This was not necessarily material or monetary. They were not interested in material remuneration, because we were friends and they would have been highly insulted had I tried to pay them. Among non-Westerners, money plays a different role and does not always settle accounts so definitively between people as it does in the West. Familial and fraternal ties are much more important than material payment, and because I was their friend and their guest, on many occasions, I had difficulty paying for anything—very different from in the West. The fact that I am a woman also made a big difference to my male subjects who came from more traditional societies, where women virtually never pay. Since I am roughly the same age as they are, in this respect also we were equals. Perhaps if I were older and richer and wielded more authority in society, this relationship might have been different. However, since I'm not and don't have any power and they knew it, they expected no more than my friendship and trust.

In light of the pressures of Japanese life and the isolation in Japanese society, I think it was enough that they could find a friend in me who was always willing to listen. I found that they were emotionally needy, and it served both of us if they confided and I listened. They had few close Japanese friends, if any at all, and their closest friends were other immigrants like themselves who spoke the same language. In the process of shooting the film, I spent hours listening to their trials and tribulations, clowning around with them, and becoming their friend. We became quite close. Because my subjects all work long hours in Japan (often ten to twelve hours a day and usually six days a week), their leisure time is limited, which also cut down the available time I could spend with them. Consequently, their

free time is very special, which privileged the time we did spend together. Indeed, I remember Mujahid mentioning at a Japanese language speech contest how everyone in Pakistan always has time to *gup shup*, or “shoot the shit,” as they say in America. At the end of his speech, he emphasized how Japanese are always working and never spend their time hanging out. Clearly, it was a pleasant change for him and the others to have someone so willing to *gup shup* with in a familiar Pakistani manner.

I can imagine how it helped them to share their frustrations with a disinterested party like me. Because of the closeness of the community, gossip also abounds, and that can make immigrants more hesitant to share anything personal with people from the same country. Consequently, they are trapped in a difficult situation, dependent on community members, against whom they also compete for the same jobs and resources and with whom they share an insular existence. This was true for Sally. I could tell that she felt extreme pressure from her Filipina coworkers, who did not empathize with her distaste for the work. Because the work (entertaining and serving drinks to male clients and occasionally being felt up by them) was degrading, it seemed that all of the women had become anesthetized to the unsavory aspects of the job. But Sally could not forget how the rest of society viewed her work or accept her everyday world as being the norm. Therefore, she could not confide in the other Filipina women, who spoke her language and knew best what she was experiencing, without being criticized and castigated for being so attached to her self-respect. Perhaps Sally's gripes cut too close to home. The other Filipina hostesses only consoled her by telling her that it was “just a job” and that it did not reflect on her real character. They advised her to go along with the game since she was in Japan to make money. In time, Sally resigned herself to these attitudes, and I began hearing her echo the advice she was given.

Although I would eventually like to show this film to the Japanese audiences for whom it is the most directly relevant, I anticipate that it will be shown in the United States and possibly Europe before it reaches Japan. This is better for my subjects. They were willing to participate in the project because they knew that I would be returning to the United States to edit and show the film there. If I were producing the piece for Japanese television, I am sure they would have had reservations about participating and would not have spoken as openly. Everyone in the film talks candidly about remaining in Japan illegally, and I do not want to jeopardize anyone's ability to stay there. Although it is unlikely that immigration officials would actually track down people in my film, I do not intend to show the film publicly in Japan until all of the main participants have returned home or have normalized their status.



Sally Abolos, a Filipina woman who worked as a hostess at an Ito club. Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

Gender Roles

Gender played a distinct role in how I interacted with my subjects. Since there were both men and women in my film (all heterosexual, as I am), I was able to see how being a woman influenced my relationships with people of both genders. With the women, I was like a friend or a confidante. For the men, I was a love prospect, and my sexuality seemed to work as an important bait.

More than half of the foreigners working in Japan are men. In the South American, Chinese, Korean, Thai, and Filipino communities, there are almost equal numbers of women. However, in the Islamic communities, there are practically no women. Especially among these men, arranged marriages are commonplace, and one of the main attractions of Japan is the prospect of a love relationship. The reputation of Japan's sex industry has also spread to the rest of Asia, and many men had come in search of “free sex.” Consequently, there are many young foreign men on the prowl in Japan, and the loneliness of their situation also prompts them to seek women for companionship. Although things have changed radically in Japan and intermarrying is not frowned on as it had been in the past, it is only with American or European white men that it is considered moderately acceptable. It is very much an issue influenced by class and status,

and often dark-skinned Asian men, who come from Third World countries, have a difficult time finding a date unless they are willing to pay for it.

Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that I was so desirable. The reputation of American women that preceded me, thanks to Hollywood and the desirability of my citizenship, also made me a good catch. This certainly made meeting *gaijin* men easier, but it complicated the filmmaking process, to say the least. What in my mind was research for my film was for them a sexual advance. It did not take me long to realize that I was being misunderstood, and that because of the peculiarities of the circumstances of my subjects I would probably have similar experiences with whatever male subjects I chose. At one point, I seriously considered purchasing a fake wedding band to ward off some of the would-be suitors, but I decided that I could not lie to people from whom I expected the truth.

Although I was up front with everyone that I was not interested in them as they hoped, I realize that the possibility of a potential relationship seemed to have a great deal of power over them. It was obvious that they would volunteer information in hopes of getting my approval. Thus my sexuality did contribute to making me more privileged. No matter how strongly I tried to avoid manipulating them, I must acknowledge that I was taking advantage of the power I as a woman had over them in order to make them participate in my film. I do not explicitly portray these dynamics in the film, but Nasir and Mujahid, two Pakistani subjects, very candidly express their expectations of finding "girls everywhere" in Japan. Clearly, this is one of their primary concerns, so I leave room for speculation about how they view me.

With so many suitors, it was important for me to feel "safe," meaning that I was at least physically in spaces that would discourage my subjects from having the wrong idea about our relationship. I originally chose three Pakistani men living together because they also lived with a Brazilian woman when I met them. Since they lived with a woman, it made the environment safer for me, and I thought their living arrangement was unique to their experience in Japan. I avoided being with any of them alone so as not to mislead them. I never imagined that they could all get the wrong impression.

In jest, I often tell people that I could easily have made a woman's version of *Sherman's March* (1986). In that documentary, Ross McElwee sets out to make a film about General William Tecumseh Sherman's unforgettable Civil War march—destroying, pillaging, and killing—through the South, but the film becomes the story of his pursuit of romantic love after a breakup with a girlfriend. As he roams the South, he uses his camera as a means of approaching women and questioning them about love, romance,



Ashraf, Nasir, and Mujahid in their two-room flat. Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

and his own failures. Almost all of his friends and family members seem intent on rescuing him from bachelorhood and become his matchmakers, introducing him to various versions of his "ideal mate." He gets tips about his appearance and how to be passionate. He follows the advice of his sister who suggests that his camera may be a way for him to approach women, since it is at least "a conversation piece."

A few parallels can be drawn between our experiences: McElwee was actively pursuing his women subjects in order to explore questions that he had about love, and his film was a vehicle for him to do so. People seemed to think that his marriage was long overdue. In my case, I was actively seeking out immigrant men to hear their stories for my film, and people seemed to think I was a very eligible young woman. A major difference was, of course, that McElwee was in search of a lover, and I was not. Whereas McElwee was chasing potential lovers, potential lovers were chasing me.

For both of us, our films were a means to meet and engage with people, and it is interesting to consider to what degree sexuality and the camera influenced these relationships. Each of my encounters seems to have been interpreted as a sexual advance, and my subjects were clearly more interested in me than in the camera. For Hassan, the Iranian participant in my film, I think that at times the film became an excuse for him to meet with me, but it was ultimately I he was interested in and not the film. This does

not seem to be the case for McElwee. Some people around him who thought he should be getting married looked at the camera as a tool for courtship, but I am not sure to what degree all of the women were interested in him, and they were probably more interested in him with his camera than in him without it. In McElwee's case, women either tolerated him because of the camera or were attracted to the attention it lavished on them.

Traditionally, we are conditioned to believe that in male-female courtship, the man pursues the more passive female, waiting to be swept off her feet. According to McElwee's friend, Charlene, whom we meet in *Sherman's March*, this element of passion is precisely what he lacks and what is responsible for his failure with women. Even though I might have initiated conversation with my male subjects, they were compelled to pursue me, as is traditionally the case. Having come from the West where courtship is played out differently and dealing mainly with men who come from more traditional societies, I realize that these factors also have a great influence over our relationships. However, I wonder what my experience would have been if I were a man. I would most certainly not have had the same problems avoiding male suitors (or perhaps I would have if they were gay), but I wonder if my experience would have been the same with female subjects. If I were gay or vice versa, how would the dynamic have been different? Would they have interpreted any approach as a sexual advance, especially in a more traditional society? Or would I have had mixed results, as McElwee did? A heterosexual Japanese male photographer friend who was doing a project on the Iranian community in Japan mentioned his experiences with several gay Iranian men. It seems that some of his interactions paralleled my own and that the filming process became a means for his subjects to become closer to him.

Yet I also believe that because of isolation and limited contact with women, my subjects in Japan were more likely to share things with me as they would have done with their sisters or mothers and not just with their prospective girlfriends. One of the men in my film had broken up with his Japanese girlfriend, and he told me very frankly that there were certain subjects that were easier to talk about with women than with men. He couldn't see himself having the same conversations with his male friends that he had with me. Certainly, I will never know whether this was just a ploy to gain my sympathy or whether he was, indeed, being sincere. But I would like to give him the benefit of the doubt. Obviously, nothing was ever very clear-cut, and continuously hearing so many personal stories, I felt as though I were living a soap opera.

With the women, I did not have these complications; I was just a friend. Sally was isolated by her peers and her clients, so she really had no



Hiroaki Yamamoto (soundman), Ashraf (Sunny), Mujahid, Nasir, and Ann Kaneko (left to right). Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

one to turn to. Unless she became intimate with one of her clients, it is highly unlikely that any of them would be very sympathetic or expect her to play anything but the part of the stereotypic, flirtatious, subservient Filipina woman she was hired to be. As I mentioned earlier, the other Filipina women did not empathize with her distaste for the work, and even her cousin, a former hostess, was not sympathetic. Consequently, even though I do not speak Tagalog, and her English and Japanese are not great, I sensed that she was able to confide in me more than anyone else in Japan.

There is an independently made student documentary called *Tsuma wa Filipina* (My Wife Is Filipina), which gained notice in 1993 and 1994. In the film, Yasunori Terada, the Japanese filmmaker, focuses on his relationship with his wife, Teresa, a hostess he met at a Filipina pub. The filmmaker has said that he made the film to counter the media's stereotypes of Filipina women. However, the film furthers these stereotypes more than it destroys them. The perspective is mainly that of the husband/filmmaker, whereas the wife is quite guarded about sharing her views of Japan. Moreover, Terada never deals with his own obsession with Filipina women or the question of why Japanese men, in general, have commodified Filipina women. The film is problematic, and Terada seems to be oblivious to the politics of his relationship with Teresa. He is the more dominant figure in both their personal and social relationships, and this power imbalance is paralleled on camera.

In contrast, the filmmaker-subject relationship is much more explicit in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1995), Dennis O'Rourke's film about a Thai prostitute in Bangkok. To begin the film, O'Rourke "purchases" Aoi's services for 500 baht or about US \$20 and directs her to tell the story of how she began doing this work, her trials and tribulations. O'Rourke is obviously sympathetic to his subject, yet as a viewer one cannot help but question his complicity in the system that exploits these women. He slyly acknowledges that he was no different from the five thousand other men who had come to Bangkok, only instead of purchasing Aoi's sexual services, he has "bought" her to make a film. Of course, on one level this is no different from a producer paying an actress to act in a film, but because O'Rourke's is a documentary film and Aoi a prostitute, it does raise questions about the propriety of his actions.

Hence, O'Rourke's film is in a sense about his manipulation of the client-prostitute relationship, and what makes it interesting is the filmmaker's involvement and acknowledgment of this manipulation. He includes in the film Aoi's comment about how she cannot help but distrust him and his motives and how her friends tell her that she is being manipulated. I wonder to what extent she is acting on her own accord or whether she is again pleasing her client as she must please her other male clients. She appears to be quite candid and sincere when she talks about her life, but she speaks less to the filmmaker than to herself. She uses the opportunity to confess that she has "never expressed this except to my tears." She is the most articulate and open when she speaks in Thai, which the filmmaker presumably doesn't understand.

The inequities in the relationship are vast, and she acknowledges that he will get far more benefit from her participation in the project than she will. She accepts these inequities but views the arrangement as being reciprocal. He no doubt is tipping her generously and promises to buy her a rice farm, which he does under the condition that she stop prostituting herself. In the epilogue of the film, he states that he returned to Bangkok a year later only to find her working in a sleazy massage parlor. She said that it was her fate to work there.

O'Rourke's blatant manipulation of the situation makes his film distasteful to me, but I credit his clarity in portraying the sordid, twisted nature of these relationships between men and female prostitutes. He also gives a voice to Aoi in his film at the same time as acknowledging his having taken advantage of her. In both Terada's and O'Rourke's films, their relationships with the women subjects are very much influenced by the inherent power inequities of being men interacting and filming women who are

exploited by men. When a woman filmmaker directs women subjects, the power configuration is intrinsically different.

It is interesting to note that O'Rourke spends a great deal of screen time showing the women, including Aoi, at work, writhing, naked and disinterestedly, to disco music. In my film, you never see Sally at the club interacting with the men and serving drinks. I show her cleaning the club and getting ready to go to work, but I do not show her hostessing. I went to the club with two other crew members to try to record sound and take some stills, but I recorded nothing of her. Knowing that most club owners are aligned with the *yakuza*, the Japanese mafia, I did not want to risk her losing her job or cause her trouble. Perhaps viewers will wish for scenes explicitly showing her hostess work, but I will probably leave it to the imagination unless I insert footage from another club.

Sally is obviously embarrassed about her job, so I don't think she would have liked to have been documented working in a club. Since it wasn't a possibility, I never really broached the subject, but it does pose interesting questions about respecting the wishes of the subject and fulfilling the needs of the filmmaker. If there had been a possibility to film her and I had asked her for permission, she may not have objected, but it would have been because she could not say no to a friend. In Asia, one is more sensitive to those unspoken boundaries of what is acceptable, and getting her participation already seemed like so much. I don't imagine that Aoi liked to be filmed working either, but she probably never had a choice. There is an interesting moment when O'Rourke films her in bed, wrapped in a towel. She is extremely vulnerable and covers her legs with a sheet, which would suggest that she felt uncomfortable.

Language

When I first went to Japan and was learning the language, many Japanese asked me whether I thought in English or Japanese. They think the true measure of fluency is whether a person actually thinks in the other language instead of going through a mental translation process. It is inconceivable to them that one may be able to formulate thoughts in a nonnative language. It is true that when one begins to learn a language, that translation process is very conscious. However, as a person becomes more fluent, one learns to express him- or herself with his or her limited vocabulary, and it simply becomes too slow to go back to the referential native language. People learn how to break down their ideas into simpler terms that they can express with the vocabulary they possess.

Language is also closely tied to culture so that our perception of the world is molded by the language we speak. When we speak another language, we adopt a little of that culture as well as bring a little of our own to the way we express ourselves in the foreign tongue. In short, we are constantly working through many filters when we communicate in other languages, and especially when we are communicating with people who are engaging in the same process.

For precisely these reasons, language played a pivotal role in our relationships. Although all of my subjects are conversational and spoke Japanese well enough to get along in daily life and at work, none of them is completely fluent in the language or can read or write it. All had learned the language by ear, using it at work. Those who do speak the language more fluently had been employed at the same small company for many years and have had long-term relationships with their employers and coworkers, which is very important in learning and practicing a language. They also watch many hours of television, which gives them immense amounts of language comprehension practice.

All of us are nonnative Japanese speakers, yet for the most part our common language is Japanese (or English, in the case of Sally). Except for the Peruvian couple, I was unable to communicate with any of them in their native language, and even in Spanish my limitations probably created more misunderstandings than I realized. Because of these language complications, there were always challenges in expressing ideas in terms we could both understand. Since I read and write Japanese, I occasionally used vocabulary that they did not know. They often did not comprehend what I could communicate by telephone to fluent Japanese or English speakers. They needed not only to hear my words but to see my body language. Consequently, I had to meet face-to-face with them regularly to keep abreast of their lives.

In documentaries, interviews are often one of the main ways of conveying information, and having people speak in English (if it is for an English-speaking audience) is usually most desirable. Although I hope that one of the audiences for this film will be English speaking, I do not want to cater solely to this audience. Actually, the main languages in the film are Japanese, Urdu, Spanish, Farsi, and Tagalog, and English only plays a minor role. For English-speaking audiences, almost the entire film will be subtitled. However, because of the number of languages in the film, I would also like to de-emphasize the spoken word and let actions speak more loudly.

I had to choose what language to conduct interviews in. Since I communicated with them in Japanese, Japanese would have been a logical

choice. A Japanese audience also would be able to understand more of the film without subtitles. Yet I decided to let them speak in their native languages because I thought they would be more comfortable and could express themselves freely and fully. Moreover, I wanted the audience to hear another language and experience what the immigrants must have experienced when they first came to Japan (although the experience is necessarily different, since the audience will be reading subtitles). This transfers the power of expression to them so that they do not need to compromise their expression in a foreign tongue.

Another choice I made was not to show the translation process explicitly or involve viewers in it as *Shoah* (1985) so brilliantly did. When Claude Lanzmann revisits the Polish sites of the Holocaust and interviews local residents who recall the past, he speaks through an interpreter who translates what the Polish speakers say to Lanzmann. Lanzmann then asks his questions in French, and these questions are again translated. For an English-speaking audience only the French is subtitled, and the viewer must experience the laborious translation process along with Lanzmann.

My system had its limitations. My subjects roughly translated what they had said, but I was not able to understand exactly what they were saying at that moment. Consequently, I could not question them on specific points nor could I engage them in a conversation to make them more at ease. Essentially, I could not direct them. This was a gamble because I am supposed to be in control of the film. I was relinquishing my power in favor of giving them more control over their expression. I decided to take this risk and trust what I was understanding through a second language and a different set of codes about who they are and what they were saying.

For Hassan, this system was clearly limited. Having had his dialogue translated, I have found that he was extremely incoherent. He continually interrupts himself, trying desperately to sound educated and never finding the appropriate words. Fortunately with editing, I have made him coherent, but I cannot show him on camera because of the numerous cuts. He also comes across as being very dry. Because he was nervous, I am not sure what I could have done at the time of the interview. If I could speak Farsi, however, I might have been able to coach him better, making him more at ease. Still, if Hassan had been asked to speak Japanese, he would not have been able to convey his more complex intellectual ideas. I don't think I had ever clearly understood what he was trying to say about working in Japan until I read his translated interviews. For all of his incoherence in Farsi, his limitations in Japanese clearly curtailed his ability to express himself, which would have made interviewing him in Japanese a less viable option. As I edit and see how the film will take shape and how my viewers will

experience it, I realize that language defines context. Since I know them in Japanese, I almost feel as though I do not know them when they speak in their own languages. Hearing them struggle in Japanese creates a filter that makes me more sympathetic to them regardless of the limitations of their remarks or the ambiguity of what they mean. When they speak in their own language, this filter is gone, and they become outsiders to Japan and that experience.

I have been editing the film with various friends who speak the native languages of my subjects. From this process, I get a glimpse of how the subjects are viewed by their countrymen and women. Nothing that they say surprises me, but the speed at which my friends are able to pick up on their personality types does amaze me. What took me a few meetings to figure out is immediately apparent to those who understand the spoken languages. Class, educational background, and personality are instantly revealed. Realizing that my audience will not necessarily speak the languages in the film, I am concerned about how apparent these details will be to them or whether they will be lost. The translations in the subtitles will be very important and will probably be one of the only ways to convey the subtle differences in the usage of language as well as when subjects are speaking in Japanese or in their native language.

Interviews

One of the great challenges of interviewing is getting people to reveal what they think and feel on camera. Often, subjects are willing to share many of their insecurities and problems with you off-camera, but the minute the camera goes on, they fall silent. The person they "hated" a minute ago becomes someone with whom they "share differences." It is amazing how diplomatic they become. In contrast, some subjects get so caught up in performing for the camera or using it as a means of catharsis, that what they say does not ring true. For dramatic purposes, the juicy, candid, "true" confession is the payoff we look for, but it is rare that people are so revealing. Getting to know someone is to know the sum of his or her actions and words. Because of time constraints, interviews, voice-over, and narration are technically more efficient means of revealing and structuring information. For the most part, they are taken at face value—what is said is the "truth." However, people often tell a director what they believe she or he wants to hear and not what they really think or feel. Therefore, there are variations of this truth, and it often lies somewhere in the gray area between what they say, what they do, and what they think given the circumstances.

I decided to try to incorporate these considerations into my interviews. I thought it was important to conduct more formal interviews with my subjects filmed in 16 mm so that I could hear their responses to questions that they had had time to consider. Because the crew, lights, and equipment required by film as opposed to video are more intimidating, my subjects were stiffer. They were different from the people with whom I normally interacted. This is contrary to what one wants to achieve in interviews; one hopes that the subjects will feel comfortable with the camera, revealing their innermost secrets. Still, I could tell by their body language that they were expressing the same ideas, in much more serious terms, that I usually heard them joke about.

However, since I wasn't exactly sure what they were saying (because of the language difference) or how it was coming across in that language, I felt uneasy; on the other hand, I actually liked the tension that was created and hoped that the seriousness and deliberateness of their responses would balance the informal videocamera footage that I had also been shooting all along. Now that I have had their interviews translated, I find many of their responses quite truthful at the same time as being diplomatic. Since I know them well, I realize what is not being said, and that there is almost more conveyed in their silences and in the ways they have expressed their responses. I am trying to use these punctuated silences and their truncated responses to speak more about what is not being said, almost the antithesis of the way interviews are normally used in documentary. Yet I am uncertain as to whether I will be able to convey such subtleties in limited time and space.

One example of this occurred when I asked Sally on camera whether she feels close to her cousin. In fact, I already knew the answer: that although she got along with her cousin, she did not feel particularly close to her. She avoided my question, saving face, choosing not to say anything bad about her cousin. In the film interview, I also asked Sally if she could marry a Japanese, and she emphatically answered that she could never marry a Japanese. In this indirect way, she expressed what she thinks about her cousin, who married a Japanese client.

Two of my other subjects also have difficulty with their status, since one of them is really a political refugee and the other is in Japan using an alias. I asked Hikari to comment on her countrymen and women who must purchase false documents to work in Japan and I asked Hassan to give his views on political exiles. Although Hikari never admits that she did the same, nor does Hassan admit to his situation, discerning viewers will probably understand that they are talking about themselves.

My video interview with Sally took place upon her arrival at the

apartment where she would be living to work at a new hostessing job in Yokohama. She talks about her utter hatred of the job and the men, and so on. I do not ask questions, and she volunteers her comments between cigarette puffs. The silences are long and tense. She is very different on film as opposed to tape, and she contradicts herself in the two interviews. On video, she says that she has never told her family about what she does, and on film she says that she keeps no secrets from her family. I realize that her responses could vary because they were shot at different times and that she might have disclosed more to her family after the first video interview and before the film interview. I find this contradiction very interesting and meaningful. It points to a truth that is dependent on the circumstances. I am sure she has reservations sharing her experiences with her family because she does not want them to be ashamed of her, but at the same time in the formal interview she does not want to say that she has kept secrets from her family, particularly her mother. Because it will possibly confuse the audience, however, I will probably not include this in the film.

With my two women subjects, I conducted video interviews as well as film interviews, and I found them to be much more candid and animated on video. Without a film crew and the large 16-mm film camera, they felt much more at ease. In each case, it was just the two of us and we were speaking the same language. These interviews were more like conversations.

With the Pakistani guys, I did a group session but did not conduct any individual interviews on video. Although the intimacy might have made for some juicier footage, I didn't feel safe alone with them and a camera. It is interesting to note that both McElwee and O'Rourke documented without a crew (although O'Rourke credits a few Thai soundpeople at the end). It is probably the intimacy of filming one-on-one that made their films more candid.

▶ The Video Diary

When I began researching this project, I was determined to not overshoot. Contrary to the notion that docs are made entirely in the cutting room, I believe that many decisions and choices are made in the conceptualization of a project. I wanted to limit the amount of footage that I shot so that I would spend less time cutting. Therefore, I gave myself plenty of time to think about what it was that I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. However, after I had chosen my subjects, I realized that their lives evolved, whether I shot them or not, and that in this form of documentary, there are no second shooting chances. Consequently, I began shooting a kind of video

diary. I was not always sure what would be useful or pertinent until later, so I shot everything I found vaguely interesting. I accumulated hours of footage and realized that it was not going to be easy to limit it. In retrospect, I realize that it would have been ideal to do the interviews earlier so that I could structure the piece around them, but I was forced to work backward because of the constraints on the availability of 16 mm equipment.

Shooting on Hi-8 was ideal for many reasons. It was cheap, small, and portable. Since I did not have the luxury of a crew, I could carry my equipment on public transportation (albeit with very sore shoulders) and shoot on my own. People also tend to be more accustomed to camcorders, which allowed me to be less obtrusive, and they saw the camera as my appendage. Subjects were much less self-conscious in front of a small camera. As a home videographer, I found that my camera was often a participant in the activities—people ignored the camera and would carry on conversations with me despite its presence. This is different from the way most news photography is shot because the cameraperson is supposed to be invisible.

As a cameraperson, I realized that my footage was very messy. Things were not very well composed. There tended to be a lot of movement because of the light weight of the camera, and I was not very disciplined in the way I shot many events because I was not sure what I would be using. Sound quality also was not good because I did not have a separate soundperson. I depended heavily on the videocamera's ability to shoot under low-light conditions, and much of the footage is not flattering or well lit. Usually, I could hardly concentrate on shooting when I was as much a part of what was happening as the people in my film. But I trusted that the footage would be read as a reflection of the way things unfolded and of my relationships with the subjects and would not be judged technically. In fact, my subjects do appear very natural and unaware of the camera, and in many ways, this footage is more candid and revealing.

Since video does not compare in resolution to film, I aim to use the juxtaposition of the two types of footage to help make a formal distinction. Hopefully, this will resonate with the distinction between how people behave and what they do or don't reveal in front of each respective camera. I am experimenting with intercutting between film interviews and video vérité scenes to contrast the formality and the candidness of the two shooting formats. Although Hassan is stiff in his interview, he becomes much more likeable and human when you see him singing karaoke horribly. Nasir and Mujahid talk about going out with women, and then you see them going to a festival with their Japanese girlfriends. My intent to visually show these differences may not be so apparent in the final cut, because much of the interview material has become a voice-over with the video footage, but

hopefully the spirit of juxtaposing these formal statements with their actions will still exist.

Honne To Tatemae

When Western students of Japanese culture are indoctrinated with its mysteriousness, they are introduced to the concept of *honne to tatemae*. This term describes the contradiction between *honne*, which is what people really think or feel, and *tatemae*, which is the rule and what people say. It literally means "to stand in front." Of course, these kinds of contradictions exist to varying degrees everywhere. But in the so-called land of ambiguity, this contradiction has become integral to the culture. The notion is fairly universal throughout Asia, and Westerners generally find this behavior to be perplexing and duplicitous.

I am trying to apply this idea of *honne to tatemae* to my film on several levels: in terms of public policy and practice, what Japanese society openly says but really thinks about *gaijin*; and what the subjects, themselves, say and do. As in the United States so in Japan the contradictions between public policy and practice are great, especially with regard to an issue like immigration. For example, the police are part of the Ministry of Justice and are supposed to enforce immigration policy, but they rarely deport anyone unless they suspect him or her of some other crime. Although all of my subjects (except William, Hikari's *nikkei* Peruvian boyfriend) are without visas and therefore at risk of deportation, they boldly lie about their status to police and apologize profusely if stopped, and they get away with it every time. The police generally know who is overstaying his or her visa, but if the person acts like a "good" *gaijin*, is respectful, and does not embarrass the police, they will let him or her go.

Probably the clearest example in my film of this kind of contradiction between public policy and its application is when the police appear at a gathering of Iranians (most of whom have no visa) to report a hit-and-run accident in which one of them was involved. The police arrive at a raucous (by Japanese standards) party of Iranians to discuss the matter with the legal owners of the vehicle, the Japanese employers of two Iranian brothers. When the Iranians begin dancing, the police leave, surprisingly, without checking anyone's documentation. Everyone knew that only a week before, more than twenty people had been deported from that town, and that officially the police are supposed to report anyone who is undocumented to the immigration authorities. But the policy is not enforced, and although immigration officials do not publicly condone people overstaying their

visas, in practice the *honne*, the real message, is that undocumented foreigners can stay as long as they don't cause problems. The police in Japan generally do not want to function as fetching boys for immigration authorities, because they must maintain relations with the community. Arresting and deporting foreign employees would be unpopular with small-sector businesses that employ foreigners. Instead, the police closely survey where all foreigners work and dwell so that they can quickly locate a person if someone falls out of line.

I also juxtapose Sunny's *honne* to that of his employer's. (Sunny is Ashraf's nickname.) Sunny's boss frankly tells me that he is sure that Sunny has suffered a great deal but that Sunny would never complain to him because Sunny would not want to jeopardize his position by making waves. His boss acknowledges the boundaries of their relationship and knows that Sunny is silenced because of his vulnerable position in Japanese society, that is, having no visa. In Sunny's interview, he admits that he has had to struggle over the years but that he has had no choice, because he was there to make money. Consequently, both acknowledge the difficulty of Sunny's position in Japan, a fact that neither would admit to each other face-to-face.

Mujahid contradicts what he says about his boss, so we get a sense of his relationship to his employers. In his formal interview on film, Mujahid states how his employer has always treated him well and how the company is like a family. However, in a discussion I had with Nasir, Sunny, and him after the police had been chasing them in a nerve-racking case of mistaken identity, Mujahid reveals his *honne*: he emphasizes how his employer doesn't do anything when there are problems with immigration and expresses his disillusionment with his boss when he failed to visit a Pakistani coworker who had been detained for deportation.

In the above situation I was shooting video, so I hope that the tell-it-like-it-is video footage (*honne*) juxtaposed against the film footage (*tatemae*) formally underscores the differences between *honne* and *tatemae*. Another example of this contradiction occurs in Sally's interview, when she smiles and says that her work is just a job and that Japanese men are no worse than men anywhere else. Yet in the video interview, it is clear from her body language how much she detests her work as a hostess and her resentment for having to serve Japanese men. In another instance, Hikari states in her interview how insincere Japanese people are, but on video we see her interacting with a close, older Japanese woman friend.

Hence, my film is fraught with contradictions—immigrants contradicting themselves, contradicting what other foreigners say, what Japanese say about them; Japanese authorities contradicting their own policies; Japanese contradicting foreigners, and so on. I do not mean to show how

duplicitous and chaotic Japanese society is but, rather, how complex this system of boundaries and protocols can be.

As I continue to view and shoot documentary films directed by other people, I always wonder about the intrinsic differences between my process and theirs. Recently, I was shooting second-unit camera on a documentary pilot about relationships. I had been hired because they wanted a mixed-gender crew. They anticipated that women subjects would not feel comfortable baring their souls to a room full of men. (How perceptive!) We interviewed ten couples. The director was a man, and I kept thinking what different questions I would ask and how differently I would ask them. The sound mixer (who also was a man) made a passing remark about how the director should be a woman because "she would know how to ask the questions better." I don't completely agree with him, because it also depends on the individual, but I couldn't help thinking that most women I know would have had a very different approach to interviewing the couples. The director's concept of relationships seemed almost foreign to me, and his questions heavily reflected his own biases. He did not seem very respectful of certain emotional boundaries. For example, he kept asking a reforming alcoholic, "Why not drink if you hide it so well?" and to the lover of someone with AIDS, "What will you do when he is dead?" He was extremely manipulative psychologically, almost abusing his power as filmmaker/therapist "Dr. Love." For me, this experience confirmed that there definitely are differences in a feminist approach to documentary.

When I began this project, I never anticipated dealing with the range of issues and situations that I have been forced to face. In a sense, the finished film will be only a glance at the many bridges that had to be crossed in order to produce this film. Since the film still has not been completed, I leave viewers the chance to speculate on how the ideas outlined above have been incorporated into the film and what significance they have in the context of the finished piece. It has been very challenging to write about the process of making a film that is still evolving. I have found that editing is about making clear the application of the ideas that had been incubating throughout the process of making the film, and because of the pure mechanics of conveying information to audiences sometimes these ideas must be abandoned. However, I hope that my experiences with the twists and turns caused by culture, language, and the gender of filmmakers and subjects provide insight and an opportunity to reflect on documentary process in comparative contexts.

NOTE

1. I might note that the economic climate in Japan has changed since the bulk of this essay was written. Japan's economy has been reeling from the effects of the Asian economic crisis, and the situation of foreign mi-

grant workers has also changed. Now they are more vulnerable than ever and the gravity of their experiences is even more apparent, making many of the issues that this film raises extremely relevant.