Mobilities Amid the Production of Fixities: Labor in a Japanese Inn

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Mobilities Amid the Production of Fixities: 
Labor in a Japanese Inn

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ABSTRACT Building on recent interest in fixities within mobilities studies, this article analyzes the ‘production of fixities’ in Japanese inns, or ryokan. I describe the complex ways that different scales and regimes of mobility interact on the bodies, personal lives, careers, and aspirations of inn employees. I show how the daily grind of producing fixity for tourists engenders ambivalence toward both movement and stasis, mediated through gender, age, and other circumstances. Ultimately, I argue that mobility and fixity should not be seen as opposites, but as mutually constitutive conditions that intermingle in nuanced ways in the everyday lives of individuals.

KEY WORDS: Mobility, Fixity, Labor, Tourism, Gender, Japan

Introduction

In asserting a ‘new mobilities paradigm’, Sheller and Urry (2006, 210) emphasize the fixities, or moorings, that ‘enable the fluidities of liquid modernity.’ Concrete, steel, computer hardware and software, cables, glass, and wood coalesce into the roads, airports, ferry terminals, train stations, and communications transmitters that make possible the movement of people, goods, and ideas. In recent years, mobilities scholarship has paid increased attention to fixities by focusing on transportation hubs, or ‘key mobility nodes’ (Cresswell 2010, 28). Airports (Ady 2007), railway stations (Bissell 2009), motorways (Merriman 2007), metro lines (Butcher 2011), and petrol stations (Normark 2006) have all offered fixities in time and space from which to better understand mobility (see also Lofgren 2008).

Much of this scholarship reveals that while moorings enable mobility, they do not enable it equally among all people. Some individuals and things become slowed or stuck along the way. For instance, Bissell (2009, 174) notes that the ‘differential mobilities’ of railway travel means ‘the speed of some is premised on the slowness
of others.' Similarly, Massey (1994, 149) notes that some people ‘initiate flows and movement; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.' Finally, Elliott and Urry (2010, 3) recognize that their new ‘mobiles’ – people unable to work without ‘regular train journeys, flights, taxi rides, tourist buses, email, text, phoning, Skyping, and so on’ – require relatively immobilized others (see also Veijola and Valtonen 2007). In this work, scholars have shown that mobility not only requires the fixity of concrete and steel, but also requires and produces the relative fixity of people.

While this observation has broadened our understanding of contemporary mobility, it continues to conceptualize mobility in a limited way, treating mobility and stasis as an either/or condition. In this paper, I challenge this notion by introducing individuals who experience a simultaneous layering of mobilities and fixities that require a more nuanced understanding of mobility in contemporary society. I explain why some people choose to be immobile, and more importantly, how people’s mobility at one scale can co-exist with their immobility at another and lead to a deep ambivalence toward both mobility and stasis. In the end, I show the limitations of conceiving individuals as either mobile or not, and I describe the complex ways that different scales and regimes of mobility interact on people’s bodies, personal lives, careers, and aspirations.

To do so, I analyze an industry premised upon, and constantly reproducing, a tension between movement and stasis: tourism. I show how this tension is created in tourist accommodations, places where people stay for one or two nights, to experience a place, before moving on. I argue that while scholars and travel writers often invoke hotels solely as spaces that enable mobility, this characterization ignores the desire of accommodation owners to create a sense of place, as well as the embodied labor of service employees that makes guests feel welcome. While service employees in transport industries enable the mobility of others, employees in hotels and other tourist accommodations often have the opposite task: helping create pleasure in non-movement. Affective labor in these spaces is key to what I call the ‘production of fixities,’ which affects not only tourists, but also employees, and their relationships toward mobility.

I illustrate the production of fixities through the example of Japanese inns, or ryokan, widely regarded as symbols of a unique Japanese national identity. I then focus on two ryokan positions, nakai (female server/cleaner) and chef (male) to show how gender, age, family history, and more combine to create complex layers of im/mobility and foster ambivalences among workers toward their own mobilities and fixities. For instance, I note how some employees with ‘nowhere to go’ besides ryokan get stuck in a dead-end job, while simultaneously cherishing the freedom the ryokan provides, including freedom from domestic abuse. I contrast these employees with others who use the ryokan to develop skills and build valuable work experiences, but whose careers require a willingness to relocate quickly, often at the suggestion of others. For both sets of employees, the daily production of fixity for tourists requires a complex combination of mobilities at various scales – including robot-like repetition of bodily movements, escape from domestic problems, aging bodies that need to keep moving, sudden relocation, long commutes, and career mobility – that trigger deep ambivalence toward both movement and stasis and undermine the standard fixity/mobility duality found in most mobilities scholarship. Ultimately, I call on researchers to become more attuned to the daily reality of living between mobility and stasis that exists for so many in the world.
My knowledge of the tensions between fixity and mobility in the tourism industry stems from fieldwork in a dozen inns in rural Kumamoto prefecture, where I worked 10-h shifts, 5–6 days a week for nearly a year. I practiced ‘working while talking’ (cf. Anderson’s ‘walking whilst talking’ [2004]; McMorran 2012) with over 100 men and women aged 18–70. This method allowed me to interrogate ideas and actions both as and where they occurred, and to experience the patterns of movement and stasis of a ryokan working day. I also interviewed over 60 inn employees and owners during the initial research (2006–2007) and annually since (through 2013), talking in lobbies and back offices, employee dormitories and apartments, walking paths and hot springs, and cars and bars. I combine these experiences as if they occurred in a single inn called Yamazakura (a pseudonym, as are individual’s names), with the aim of providing a sense of the space in which people work and live. I focus on three people, not because their experiences encompass those of all workers and owners I met, nor because they represent a type within the ryokan industry, but because their stories illustrate some of the tensions between fixity and mobility experienced not only by employees in the Japanese tourism industry, but also in the global service sector in general, wherever individuals are paid to actively produce a sense of fixity for others. Their stories point to the promising insights into mobility and fixity just beginning to be explored in the lobbies, kitchens, and rooms of hotels and inns around the world (Paraskevopoulou et al. 2012).

Mobilizing the Hotel

For decades, debates about the meanings of mobility and fixity have centered on the idea of home, notably with feminist geographers (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Massey 1994; Rose 1993) challenging humanist geographers’ assertion of home as a sanctuary from the outside world (Tuan 1977). Home remains relevant to mobilities studies, since it is often considered the antithesis for mobility. However, scholars have paid less attention to how fixity is produced elsewhere, nor how such fixity enables or limits mobility.

One potentially instructive site is the hotel, a complex economic and social space at times seemingly generic due to its ubiquity, and at other times highly unique and evocative of place. Clifford (1997, 17) notes the hotel’s frequent associations with mobility both in Western scholarship and among travel writers, tourists, and global businesspeople: ‘The hotel as station, airport terminal, hospital: a place you pass through, where the encounters are fleeting, arbitrary.’ Not surprisingly, owners and employees often see the hotel differently, since it is an everyday workplace and sometimes a residence. Moreover, such depictions directly contradict the explicit goals of many hotel operators: to construct a restful space apart from the world outside, to evoke a sense of place of the surrounding area, and to encourage repeat visits. Such an attitude epitomizes the production of fixities found in the tourist industry and other industries like spas and retreats, where affective labor is a central product. As McNeill (2008), McNeill and McNamara (2012) and others (see Jakle and Sculle 2009) show, hotels share complex relationships with their immediate surroundings that fix them in place, both as businesses and workplaces for many.

Morris (1988, 2–3) notes that even the motel, that ultimate symbol of automobility and temporariness (see Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996), can engender effects of
even while seeming to ‘memorialize only movement, speed, and perpetual circulation’ for some travelers. More relevant to this study, Morris (2) argues that motels ‘fix new sites of placement for domestic, affective, and sexual labor,’ even while serving a liberating function for women, providing a safe place to stay for tourists, and as I show, for some workers, too. In a similar vein, McNeill (2008, 394) notes the ‘complex social geographies inscribed in hotel space,’ whereby employees move in and out of a hotel’s visible and invisible spaces while producing fixity for others. And while this gendered, affective labor masks the hotel’s low-paid service work, it also provides opportunities for some employees to progress beyond the hotel.

As this work shows, a hotel is not simply the end point in the movement of people and products. Nor is it only a node through which travelers pass. It is a complex social and economic space experienced in many ways by an array of people. In this way, the hotel resembles the home as a space that must be analyzed not only for how it is produced as an ideal, but also for how it is lived on a daily basis. The hotel’s usefulness in illuminating mobility comes precisely from its ongoing production of mobility’s presumed conceptual opposite, fixity.

This production of fixity is central to the product consumed in tourist accommodations and critical to understanding mobility. Here, I use the ‘production of fixities’ to complement Cresswell’s concept of the ‘production of mobilities’ (2006), through which he argues that all movement derives meaning from complex historical, political, and cultural contexts. Cresswell shows that when fixity is praised, people or things on the move are considered ‘out of place’ (see also Cresswell 1996). Similarly, Morley (2000, 202) notes how celebrations of mobility lead immobility to acquire ‘the connotation of defeat, of failure and of being left behind.’ In both cases, a production of mobility is necessarily a co-production of fixity, and vice versa, since both become meaningful through the process.

Fixing the Hotel in Place

The task of producing fixity belongs to front desk clerks, cleaners, chefs, drivers, and owners, for whom the hotel often triggers ambivalent feelings about mobility and stasis. As is the case with individuals moving through and inhabiting transportation hubs, the mobilities of hotel workers and owners are enabled and constrained in complex ways, often due to differences in age, gender, role, class, race, nationality, and disability (McNeill 2008; see also Adey 2009 on similar contrasts in airports). Some individuals become stuck, not only in the service sector, but in particular establishments, while others move smoothly through hotels, accumulating experiences and contacts that lead to greater career mobility. At the same time, for some employees being ‘stuck’ means being safe, while for others moving smoothly through hotels engenders a longing to remain in one place. These complex ambivalences and interwoven experiences of mobility and fixity are clearly demonstrated in a place like Yamazakura.

Yamazakura is one of Japan’s 50,000-plus ryokan, a form of accommodation legally distinct from the hotel due to a quirk of Japanese history in which the state established standards for accommodations immediately following WWII (Guichard-Anguis 2008). While a hotel is ‘large’ (ten-plus rooms) with ‘Western-style’ (yōfū) rooms, a ryokan is ‘small’ with ‘Japanese-style’ (wafū) rooms, in which guests sleep on a thin mattress on the floor. In general, a ryokan is a family-owned and
operated business, similar to a bed and breakfast, and can range in quality from a crumbling inn with mildewed rooms to a palatial wooden structure that hosts celebrities and emperors.

Ryokan differ from hotels by intentionally producing a Japanese space. According to the Japan Ryokan Association (2012), ryokan is ‘not just a place to stay; it is a place where you can experience the true and traditional Japan.’ Such hyperbolic language is common in ryokan advertising and among business owners who often sound as if they are providing a public service for the soul of the Japanese people. Since the 1980s, when Japan became more ‘internationalized’ through increased overseas travel by middle-class consumers and state efforts to increase cultural awareness of the outside world, many Japanese have longed for a time and space before the country was irrevocably impacted by contact with the West (Kelly 1986; Robertson 1988, 1998). This led to the consumption of nostalgic places, both iconic and generic, notably via travel to the countryside (Creighton 1997; Ivy 1995). Many rural ryokan like Yamazakura have survived or thrived thanks to tourists in search of a time and space distant from contemporary urban Japan. For some, the ryokan may be only an overnight stay on a long journey, but for others (both hosts and guests) the ryokan is a touchstone of identity, a place where one can feel Japanese again (Graburn 1995; Guichard-Anguis 2008). Therefore, ryokan epitomize what Malkki (1992) refers to as the ‘territorialization of national identity,’ albeit at a small scale and spread throughout the country. The continued popularity of ryokan can be seen in the fact that Japan’s inns host more than 135 million overnight guests each year, a number that exceeds Japan’s population by over 15 million (Doi 2009). For many Japanese, no trip to the countryside or seaside would be complete without a night at a ryokan, while for non-Japanese visitors, staying at a ryokan means experiencing the ‘real Japan.’

Ryokan like Yamazakura emphasize their links to cultural identity through architecture, food, and service that is all coded as both Japanese (national) and local (based on prefecture or municipality). However, only the smallest inn can function solely with family labor. Any busy ryokan with more than a few rooms needs staff to produce this home away from home. And the work conditions – mornings, nights, and weekends – and locations of most inns like Yamazakura – outside major urban areas – require a staff flexible enough to move in patterns like those of guests, i.e. from urban areas to the countryside.

Yamazakura is an average-sized inn, with fifteen rooms and twenty employees, over half of whom are not local but reside in a nearby dormitory. The staff consists of three male chefs, two male drivers/gardeners, four female front desk staff, two women who cook staff meals, and eight nakai. The nakai welcomes guests upon arrival, shows them to their room (often carrying their luggage), serves tea and snacks, explains the inn’s facilities (including where to find bath robes and towels, where and what time to eat), serves dinner and breakfast, lays out bedding at night, and cleans the room after check out. In short, the nakai portrays a feminine ideal associated with domestic space, a woman who assists others with practices tied to reproduction – bathing, eating, and sleeping. And like many women laboring in domestic space or doing emotional labor elsewhere, hers is an endless cycle of caring for others’ bodily and emotional needs (Hochschild 1983). As I show through the stories of two nakai, the job of producing fixity in this location and in this position lead to conflicted relationships with mobility and fixity.
Kitano: Safe, but Stuck

When I began working at Yamazakura my colleagues gave me a crash course in how to create a nostalgic, harmonious, and purposefully Japanese space for guests. This involved laying out bedding, vacuuming rooms, cleaning toilets, carrying luggage and trays of food, scrubbing baths, washing dishes, and the dozens of other tasks that maintain a busy inn. The long days in the August heat were grueling. We shuttled food, laundry, and cleaning equipment around the inn, always ready with a smile and a bow when we encountered guests. Although we chatted in spare moments during the long days, my co-workers were too exhausted to sit for an extended conversation. And our afternoon break between lunch and 3:00 pm check-in was sacrosanct. Everyone watched television or napped to conserve energy for the unpredictable evening. However, after my first month, when the pace of work slowed, one nakai, Kitano, asked about my research progress as we cleaned a guestroom. ‘You can talk with me if you like. Come see my room during the break.’

So, after lunch and some note-taking, I took the narrow path to Kitano’s room. As I gently tapped on the door, she called, ‘Come in.’ I expected her to meet me at the door, as was common in every house I had visited in Japan. However, after hearing no footsteps, I slowly slid open the door. She was seated in the center of the dimly-lit room, legs stretched out lazily under the low table. She barely acknowledged my presence, keeping her eyes on the television and taking a long drag from a cigarette. I stepped out of my shoes and onto the tatami floor, closing the door behind me. Windowless and located below the guestrooms, Kitano’s space was small and dank, with no visible sign of her cheerful personality. Breaking the awkward silence, I offered, ‘It’s cool in here, isn’t it.’ It was such a pleasant contrast to the heat outside. As my eyes adjusted to the light, however, I noticed the moldy wall behind the television. Kitano had covered it with pages from a travel agency calendar. However, the mold spread ominously beyond images of Mt. Fuji, the Sapporo Snow Festival, and an Okinawa beach.

On one side of the room lay her futon, still out from the previous night. She had no storage closet and no guests, so she had no reason to tidy up each morning. She also had nowhere to hang her futon out of the sight of guests and in the sunshine. A few items of clothing hung on a moveable rack. She shared the room, a toilet and a sink with another employee, and she could only use the inn’s bath after guests went to sleep. She had lived in this makeshift space for 6 years.

Kitano invited me to sit, and we half-heartedly watched a women’s marathon for a few minutes. Sensing her disinterest in the race, I asked about her ryokan work history. ‘I grew up in a small town, so after graduating from high school, I moved to Osaka. I soon found work as a bar hostess.’ Kitano was in her late-fifties, with graying hair and fine wrinkles that accentuated her beauty, which she admitted brought her attention in her youth. ‘A lot of people didn’t like the job, but I really enjoyed it!’ Her eyes lit up as she recalled the fashionable clothes and the gifts from customers. ‘Every night I met people who paid attention to me. I was young and attractive!’ She was paid to pour drinks, joke with male customers, and look beautiful. As a hostess, she learned soft skills that still serve her well, like her quick wit and ribald sense of humor, and she earned a good living.

‘That was where I met my husband.’ Some of the excitement left her voice as she mentioned him, but she recalled their courtship with a hesitant smile. ‘He was kind and persistent. He came to see me nearly every day. Eventually, I gave in.’
They married and moved into his parents’ house, far from the excitement of the city. Kitano ‘retired’ from paid employment to devote herself to her role as wife, and someday, mother. Like many others of her generation she became what anthropologist Kurotani (2005, 127) calls ‘the ideal of Japanese womanhood as full-time domestic manager and cultural reproducer.’ Although she wanted to keep working, social pressures of the 1960s convinced her that her place was in the home.

Kitano paused to light a cigarette. Then she resumed in a quieter voice. After several years and the birth of two sons, problems began. ‘My husband often came home drunk and started chasing other women.’ Looking away, she continued, ‘He also began to hit me.’ Feeling unsafe, she decided to leave. But she struggled on where to go. He would find her at her parents’ house, and she could think of no other options. She felt trapped. Finally, a friend suggested finding a job in one of the many ryokan and ryokan-hotels in the tourist resorts near Tokyo. Working there would provide a daily wage, plus a uniform, housing, meals, and due to the number of women in similar circumstances, even childcare. Kitano could escape her husband’s violence and regain her economic independence. In addition, she needed no prior experience. ‘I only needed to be a woman.’

So in the middle of the night, she fled. She left her oldest son with her parents and boarded a bus with her two-year-old son. ‘I had no experience,’ she recalled, but the job was ‘exactly what I’d done as a housewife’: serve food and clean rooms. At the ryokan-hotel, a large hotel with Japanese-style rooms and meals, she worked with over 50 women, many of whom shared her situation. ‘None of them were from the area. They had run from husbands in Hokkaido, northern Honshu, and many other places. There were all sorts of women. Some had escaped terrible things.’ Then confidence returned to her voice as she looked up and concluded, ‘The ryokan is a refuge (kakekomidera) for women. One can go there and immediately have meals and a place to live. You don’t have to worry about anything.’ An awkward silence hung in the room. I eventually suggested that her life had been difficult. She assured me that hers was not unusual, nor so difficult. In her nearly 20 years working in ryokan around the country she had met many women who had been through worse.

For Kitano and others, the ryokan is more than a workplace. Significantly, she equates ryokan with kakekomidera, literally a ‘refuge-temple,’ a place to which female commoners fled during the Tokugawa Period (1600–1868) to request assistance in initiating a divorce, since they had no legal right to do so (Wright 1997). The term still connotes a location of escape, like the ryokan for Kitano today, and reveals how mobility and fixity intermingle in the ryokan, where women not only escape, but also get ‘stuck,’ as I explain in the next section.

Maeda: Embodying Place

Most inns have an experienced lead nakai who trains new employees, helps decide the work schedule and the daily responsibilities, and shuttles information between staff in the front and back of the inn. At Yamazakura, this person is Maeda. After floating around the ryokan world for about five years she came to Yamazakura. Now a relative veteran of ten years, she has been around long enough to embody the owners’ desired service, an unpretentious ‘rural/homey’ (inaka-fū) style that
gives a sense of fixity in time and space. Owners say they want the natural surroundings, wholesome food, and welcoming smiles to remind guests of visiting grandmother’s home in the countryside as a child, when travel was worry-free and comforting. Like affective laborers elsewhere (Hochschild 1983; Negishi 2012), the tools of Maeda’s trade include a range of intangibles like a warm smile, a quick laugh, and a constant eagerness to help guests ‘heal’ (iyasu). Just as she adjusts her personality to fit each inn, Maeda adjusts to fit the needs of each night’s guests. She can be grandmotherly to a young couple with a child, sisterly to a group of women searching for the perfect dessert café, or flirtatious to a group of middle-aged salarymen. She skillfully produces the environment most appropriate to her charges, which will make them feel welcome and want to return. As one of the faces of the inn, she takes her role seriously, and through her emotional and bodily work she helps produce the inn’s fixity.

Like Kitano, Maeda moved into and through the ryokan industry less by choice than by necessity. One afternoon she reminisced about her youth as we walked around the village. ‘After high school I became an accountant for a large company. I was good at my job; the first person trained to use a calculator. It was a huge, complex machine, and I calculated the monthly payroll.’ She beamed at the memory. ‘I was the only woman in an office of around 100 men who treated me like a younger sister. When I announced I would marry, they were upset. They wanted me to stay.’ She was in her early 20s and loved her work. However, like Kitano, Maeda felt she had no choice but to quit like ‘everyone else did.’

She filed for divorce a few years later because of her husband’s gambling. ‘My parents warned me he was the wrong man. They were right. I always regret giving up that job and marrying him.’ Following custom, Maeda’s husband remained in his ancestral home, while she was set adrift with their two children. She worked a series of part-time jobs and relied on state assistance until the children finished school. Then she found full-time work as a golf caddy, before the heavy bags and constant walking forced her into the ryokan industry. She was nearly 50 at the time, and in some ways, her caddy experience prepared her for nakai work. She is still on her feet all day, carrying food instead of golf clubs.

Maeda excels at her job. Repeat guests request her services and send letters, photographs, and gifts, thanking her for making their stay special. However, like most nakai, who tend to be non-permanent employees, Maeda knows her position depends on the inn’s success and that she can be let go at any time for any reason. Any sense of job security comes from confidence that she produces fixity better than most. Guests remember her. She provides the human touch that fixes the ryokan in their memories.

Although she is not from the area, Maeda is responsible for sharing knowledge about the village and its surroundings, recommending local places to guests. She enjoys this part of the job, calling it ‘self-study.’ However, she longs for her first job, and would like to work in accounting again. ‘But I have been away too long,’ she admits. ‘I have no skills. I am embarrassed to say I don’t even know how to use a computer.’ She echoes the words of many other nakai: ‘This is the only job I am qualified to do.’ Like Kitano, Maeda is stuck in the ryokan.

While her lifetime of domestic chores qualifies her to be nakai, Maeda knows that her age will soon be a burden. Ten to twelve hours a day on her feet is exhausting, and Maeda insists her nightly soak in the inn’s hot springs is the only
thing keeping her moving. She worries what she will do when she can no longer carry the trays of food, navigate the narrow staircase to the second floor, operate the cumbersome vacuum cleaner, and maintain the energy required to serve guests with a smile. For now, like many nakai, Maeda claims that while exhausting, the job keeps her physically and mentally active. ‘My daughter is single and wants me to move in with her,’ she explains. ‘She says I work too hard and should retire, but once I quit what will I do all day? If I stop moving, my body and mind might stop working.’

This leads to another fascinating ambivalence regarding mobility in the ryokan. Co-workers constantly worried about how to avoid weakened joints, broken bones, and dementia, and they praised the job for keeping these at bay. They cited former colleagues and relatives who rapidly lost their capacities once they no longer had things to do and people to interact with. ‘Without work I would go crazy.’ ‘Once you stop working, the body and mind will go.’ ‘You need to get out of the house and keep busy.’ Even financially sound nakai continue to work, arguing that physically strenuous ryokan work keeps them healthy.

Komura (67) epitomizes the strong belief among nakai that physical mobility enables continued physical mobility. She was widowed in her 20s and left with two children and a small pension from her husband’s company. She worked as a cleaner for the municipal government until retirement at age 62. She owns her home, receives a pension, and has access to Japan’s comprehensive national healthcare system. However, she fears that suddenly doing nothing will shorten her life and reduce its quality. So, she works at Yamazakura 24 days a month as a ‘part-timer.’ After several years on the job, she still grumbles about the hours and heavy lifting, but as she commented one afternoon, ‘I cannot imagine life without work,’ continuing under her breath, ‘I would work here without pay if asked.’ She dreads the day when her body can no longer keep up and the owner asks her to leave. For Komura, Maeda, and many other nakai, bodily mobility is a constant concern not only for the daily production of fixity at the ryokan, but also for their short- and long-term physical and mental health.

There is no retirement age for a nakai. She works until she is no longer able, or until the owner no longer needs her. When that day comes, her boss need only say, ‘Don’t come in tomorrow.’ Even veterans of specific inns know that their loyalty is meaningless if they cannot climb stairs and deliver food. In early 2012, Maeda suffered her first fall at work. She returned following minor surgery, but each day is painful. ‘I just cannot move like I used to,’ she admitted while rubbing her knees. ‘But I’ll keep working as long as the owners will have me.’ She fears what comes next. Being unable to move swiftly through the spaces of the ryokan will mean losing more than a job. It will mean losing a livelihood, and for most nakai, personal independence. Maeda is grateful that her daughter will take her in, but she knows that the move will narrow her world. Instead of meeting new people and tackling new challenges every day, she will cook, clean, and care only for her daughter. Kitano, on the other hand, does not know where she will go. She avoids the topic of post-ryokan life, sometimes joking that she will die while serving dinner. As these women know, the same mobility that provides safety from a violent home or gives them the freedom to survive without a man may eventually become a burden. The sad truth is that unlike the travelers they help feel at home, many nakai lack a final destination.
A Domestic Trap

Many nakai like Kitano and Maeda fall into a domestic trap. Succumbing to the ideology that a woman’s primary place is in the home, they left paid employment as young women in the 1960s and failed to learn marketable skills that would have served them when they left their husbands and the domestic sphere. Of course, leaving home liberates many nakai from its dangers and restrictive fixities; however, these women’s sense of emancipation is tempered by their lack of options. The ryokan offers a safe haven (Kitano’s kakekomidera) when they have ‘no place to go.’ It is better than homelessness or imposing on an adult child or distant relative. However, the position is devalued because of its association with the domestic sphere. Because domestic labor is considered unskilled ‘women’s work’, nakai lack a sense of professionalization and imagine no potential for career advancement. As small family businesses, most ryokan do not need managers, so there is no job mobility beyond nakai. Maeda’s seniority does not mean a pay increase, annual bonus, job title, or anything beyond what all nakai receive. The only benefits are intangibles like the owners’ trust and an established position in the workers’ social hierarchy. Moving elsewhere would mean the same pay and conditions, as well as a demotion to the bottom of the pecking order and pressure to prove oneself. Under these circumstances, the daily practice of producing fixity for tourists also fixes the nakai in place. Nakai become stuck, partially by choice through a desire to remain in one inn, and partially beyond their power, especially due to society’s devaluation of their labor.

Kitano and Maeda are paid to create a home away from home for tourists, to produce fixity via a timeless location for tourists to escape to. A critical aspect of this production involves their performance of a particular gendered identity. Like the figure of the wife/mother in portrayals of the home as static and safe, they play the hostess who cares for the physical and emotional needs of others (Massey 1994; Rose 1993). Hungry? They bring food. Cold? They bring an extra blanket. Confused by shifting meanings of national and gender identity caused by globalization? Nakai exemplify what a Japanese woman should look and act like, as well as where she should be: fixed in time and space and adhering to a powerful ‘sedentary metaphysics’ (Malkki 1992) in Japan that places the woman in domestic space.

The lives of Kitano and Maeda illustrate the words of Blunt and Dowling, who question the simplistic idea of home as a safe and comfortable place (2008, 16): ‘The notion of home as haven, as a sanctuary from society into which one retreats, may describe the lives of men for whom home is a refuge from work, but certainly doesn’t describe the lives of women for whom home is a workplace.’ Kitano and Maeda and many other nakai I met and worked with do not consider the home a sanctuary. Instead, the home is a site of work and sometimes of violence. Paradoxically, these women’s almost complete lack of job mobility means the only position they can find involves producing an idealized version of home that is the ryokan; a sanctuary from the complex world outside only made possible by a sense of fixity produced through women’s affective labor.

Kitano and Maeda resemble workers in airports, train stations, and other mobility nodes, who are constantly on their feet, moving about the workplace. However, in this case nakai movement enables not only the movement of others through tourist space, but also their fixity. Nakai labor allows tourists to feel grounded in a Japanese time and space, and it allows businesses to remain in rural areas vulnerable to
depopulation, aging, and other socioeconomic problems that threaten many Japanese villages and towns (Matanle and Sato 2010). As long as tourists desire a sense of comfort promised in the domesticity of the ryokan, these businesses will need the flexible labor of women like Kitano and Maeda.

Of course, nakai like Kitano and Maeda need their positions, too. Nakai vulnerability leads many to feel a strong sense of obligation to their bosses, typically the female co-owner of the ryokan. It is she who answered the nakai’s phone call in the middle of the night or met her at the door, interviewed her, and provided a job and a place to live in a time of need. Thus, it is difficult to imagine leaving. ‘I would never work elsewhere,’ says Kitano. ‘This owner is like a god to me (kami-sama mitai). She has done so much. I have returned to my husband several times, but every time he treats me badly and I come back. I simply call and she invites me back to work.’ This complex calculus of obligation reveals another production of fixity in the ryokan, in leading a nakai to feel stuck in a particular establishment.

Out of this milieu emerges a complex paradox of mobility and stasis: the business aims to produce fixity, to give guests a second home to remember and return to; however, the business utilizes a labor pool that is incredibly mobile – unbound by spatial constraints that women of their age typically experience. I met dozens of women like Kitano and Maeda who entered the ryokan industry to escape dangerous or otherwise unacceptable domestic lives. In fact, on one of my first visits to the area, the driver of my otherwise empty bus said the only people who ride it are the local elderly who cannot drive and the nakai who are running from something. This act of running away highlights a tension between fixity and mobility shared by Kitano and Maeda. While they may be paid to do domestic tasks and feel obligated to remain at one inn for lack of other opportunities, they are not restricted by family, friends, neighbors, or any of the other obligations that keep most women their age in place. Therefore, nakai labor flips the insights of Hanson and Pratt (1995) on the spatial impacts of home location and familial networks on women’s labor market opportunities. Kitano and Maeda have chosen their profession precisely because it is not near their home and family. Instead of being spatially bound to the home, they spatially exclude themselves from a zone around it. In some ways then, Kitano and Maeda are among contemporary Japan’s most mobile individuals. Either woman could pack her few belongings and leave at a moment’s notice, thus undermining Japan’s cultural fixity of women in place. In fact, some inn owners have complained to me about nakai who run in the middle of the night, usually without leaving even a forwarding address. However, nakai typically keep working because they have nowhere else to go, further producing their own fixity.

**Tanaka: Preparing Fixity on the Move**

Discussion of gendered labor in the ryokan and its relationship to ambivalence toward mobility and stasis is incomplete without mentioning masculinity and ryokan chefs. In addition to nostalgic architecture in the countryside and the feminine labor of nakai, chefs fix the inn in time and space through cuisine. Ryokan pride themselves on serving locally-sourced, seasonal foods, which tourists expect to eat as part of their overall consumption of place (Oakes 1999). Each ryokan meal is an artistic cornucopia of local fare served at its seasonal best, with nakai serving one or two dishes at a time for over an hour while pointing out the ingredients, from wild roots and herbs gathered nearby (e.g. bamboo shoots, sansai) to meat
and seafood raised or caught locally (e.g. crab in northern Japan in winter). Most inns in Kumamoto serve ‘Higo’ beef, using the prefecture’s early modern name to indicate locally-raised meat; mustard-filled lotus root (karashi renkon); and raw horse meat (basashi), all dishes rarely found elsewhere in Japan.

This food is prepared almost exclusively by men, indicating the strict gendered division of labor found throughout the ryokan industry. Women wait on guests and clean rooms, while men prepare meals. Women are the ‘face’ of the inn (ryokan no kao), embodying it through their labor, while men produce its ‘flavor’ (ryokan no aji). Both groups are essential ingredients in the production of fixity for tourists; however, they experience mobility and stasis in vastly different ways, most notably with job mobility. Nakai have little incentive to shift between inns; however, chefs gain valuable skills and build networks by moving around culinary networks. And while nakai relocation is entirely self-motivated, young male chefs are usually directed to move by senior chefs with whom they develop apprentice-like relationships. This leads chefs to feel tremendous ambivalence toward mobility. Professional development requires movement; however, constant movement negatively impacts their personal lives, often encouraging a desire to settle down.

Tanaka, who started at Yamazakura six months before I arrived, illustrates this conundrum. At 25, he was the youngest staff member by half, so when I joined the staff we quickly became friends. One afternoon I visited his Spartan dormitory room and listened to his story over canned coffee. After completing a two-year cooking course in Kumamoto, he moved to Kyoto to initiate his career at a sushi restaurant. There he quickly developed his knife skills and quick hands, becoming adept at the stationary, repetitive bodily movements characteristic of his profession. Soon he realized that he needed to learn Japanese cuisine beyond sushi in order to realize his dream of eventually opening a restaurant near his hometown in Kumamoto. ‘After work one night, I was drinking with my boss, and I told him my dream. He contacted one of his sempai (seniors), and within a few days, I had a job offer at a ryokan. I had to move quickly. But I got a pay raise.’ This was Tanaka’s entrance to the ryokan world. By the time I met him, he had already proven himself at two different inns, mastering difficult techniques and dishes. Tanaka explained, ‘If you want to learn how to make the best chawanmushi (savory egg custard) or nimono (stewed foods), you have to learn from the best. Once you master something and the chef has taught you all he can, he will find you a place to learn something else.’

Postings last from a few months to a few years, depending on how well a chef adapts to a new kitchen, how quickly he learns the ryokan’s signature dishes, and what labor needs emerge within the networks that shuttle people around the country. However, turnover is high among new chefs. Some tire of the monotony and lose hope of advancement, particularly if they are not trusted with more responsibility or taught new skills. According to Tanaka, ‘Many young guys quit. The days are long, and the work is hard and boring. You stand in one place for a long time cutting one thing until you do it right. Plus, there is no time for a social life.’ Here Tanaka highlights a complex layer of fixity and mobility at work in the ryokan. Nakai bodies move great distances within the space of the inn, yet get stuck in one establishment. On the other hand, chef work is largely stationary and repetitive, which makes it incredibly tedious and unappealing for many new employees. However, chefs who show promise can move around the country, increasing their pay and benefits and developing their skills.
This illustrates another major difference between the labor of chefs and nakai. Because of its association with the home, nakai labor is devalued and seen as unprofessional. On the other hand, the chef’s labor is skilled and professional. Of course, like the salaryman, the chef is expected to sacrifice himself (including his personal life) for his work, which is considered the norm for Japanese men, and thus not worthy of mention (Dasgupta 2012). All along he must trust that his career will progress and he will achieve his goals. Contrast this with the nakai, who works as long or longer each day, but who enjoys no career progress. Complicating Tanaka’s career mobility, however, is the fact that unlike the salaryman ideal, chefs rarely spend a career with one company. Advancement requires moving from one establishment to another, often at the suggestion of others and against one’s wishes.

A successful young chef must take advantage of each new workplace and focus on a distant goal. ‘I want to have a small restaurant,’ Tanaka says, ‘with a staff of three or four, where customers sit at the counter, and I can see their faces as they eat.’ However, before he opens a place, he must remain on the move. He must establish a reputation and gain contacts among chefs and distributors of the produce, fish, and other ingredients essential to his trade. As another chef explained, ‘Before you open a place you have to show your face (kao wo dasu, or ‘become known’).’ Tanaka agreed. ‘First you need to work in the city and a tourist area, to expose yourself to other people’s ideas and become known. This will be critical in the future so people will recommend your restaurant.’ The road to becoming a restaurant owner-chef is arduous, and one needs more than a good reputation. However, Tanaka believes that he can achieve the dream with hard work. Again, this starkly contrasts with the dead-end nature of the position of nakai and highlights the role gender plays in limiting or expanding the job mobility of different ryokan workers.

The self-sacrifice at the heart of the masculine work ethic, which for chefs translates into being moved around the country, takes a toll on his personal relations, with some married chefs living months or years at a time separate from their families and similar situations for unmarried chefs. A few months into my research Tanaka began dating Akiko, a nakai around his age employed at another inn. They rarely shared a day off, but met in her dormitory room a few nights a week after work. In the months that followed they grew closer, and Tanaka eventually introduced her to his parents. However, his personal and professional goals soon clashed. Two months into the relationship and one year after coming to Yamazakura, he became frustrated that the head chef could not teach him anything more. It was time to move on, but the head chef could not find a replacement for Tanaka. After hesitating another two months Tanaka could wait no longer. He called a colleague from a previous ryokan for advice. The man contacted an acquaintance and arranged a job interview a few days later at a highly-regarded ryokan in neighboring Oita prefecture.

Tanaka jumped at the opportunity since the head chef was well-regarded. Plus, Akiko would be only 90 min away. The interview with the head chef and the inn owners was a formality. The head chef explained his cooking philosophy while Tanaka listened. Then the ryokan owners presented a contract. Again, the job change brought a pay increase. However, he soon joked that he did not need the money, explaining over the phone, ‘I have less time now than I did before.’

Tanaka struggled with the transition. While Yamazakura’s menu changed every three months with a new season, the new ryokan’s menu changed each month. In
the kitchen hierarchy, he went from number two in a kitchen of three, to number two in a kitchen of six. With so many new dishes to learn and so many staff to coordinate with, he felt more stress and gained five kilograms in the first month. When we spoke a few months later, he had lost the weight and remained optimistic about his career. ‘I am learning a lot. I am glad I moved here. The inn is more expensive, we have more guests, and the food is amazing.’ Unfortunately, he and Akiko only saw each other a few times after the move and soon separated. He expressed regret, but concluded, ‘Nothing can be done about it (shōganai).’

Six months after he left our ryokan, several young friends rented a cabin for an overnight gathering and invited Tanaka as guest of honor. Unfortunately, at the last minute he could not attend. We settled for a phone call, passing the cell around the table and toasting his health and future. ‘Sorry I couldn’t make it tonight,’ he said, sounding exhausted. ‘I work from 6 am to 10 pm with almost no break, and tonight I had to stay later than normal. I might fall asleep during the drive [if I were to meet you tonight].’ Inspired by his dream, Tanaka sacrificed his personal relationships. He was so busy producing fixity for others that he lacked the time and energy to experience it himself. After one year at the new inn, Tanaka moved again. This time he was sent to a ryokan operated by the same owners but located in the resort of Beppu; farther from his parents and friends. The decision was out of his control. If he wanted to progress he had to move.

Now 32 years old, Tanaka has already worked in a half a dozen restaurants and inns around Western Japan. He still hopes to run a restaurant and speaks optimistically of an uncle with some land who wants to start a business. Tanaka says he is tired of moving; however, he does not feel ready to run a restaurant on his own. In fact, he has contemplated working overseas for a few years, possibly in Southeast Asia. He appears to be following the footsteps of the head chef at his first job, the sushi restaurant in Kyoto. Early in his career that chef worked several years in a Japanese restaurant in Bangkok. Tanaka and I last communicated via instant messaging, just as he was preparing to switch jobs again, this time a smaller ryokan whose owner/chef grows most of the produce on the menu. Tanaka complained about the 45-min commute, but he looked forward to using the time to listen to English language lessons. ‘I wonder how much English I have to know [to work in a Japanese restaurant overseas],’ he wrote, aware that in a restaurant abroad the staff would not be Japanese. Always striving to develop skills and have experiences that will help him reach his goal, Tanaka assured me, ‘I’m really going to study!’

Tanaka illustrates the ambivalence among male chefs toward their own mobility. Despite his desire to settle down, he feels compelled to keep moving.

**Conclusion**

It may seem counterintuitive to claim that in order to better understand mobility, one should study the production of fixity. However, as this study shows, the mutual constitution of mobility and fixity are revealed through the processes of producing fixity, from large-scale ideological work envisioning the ryokan and the countryside as ‘Japanese spaces,’ to the embodied creative acts of nakai or robotic acts of chefs doing their jobs. Mobilities studies in general will benefit from further exploration of fixities, not in the usual locations associated with mobility, but in those places purposefully aiming to provide respite from movement.
Kitano, Maeda, and Tanaka engage in the production of fixity through their labor, which combines to evoke a place distinctly Japanese that domestic and foreign visitors long to experience. Both nakai and chef work long, physically demanding days to produce fixity in the ryokan, engendering positive effects of place for guests. However, the workers’ own relationships with fixity and mobility are complex. One of my aims has been to emphasize a disunity of experiences of fixity and mobility, even among workers in the same industry, and to highlight the ambivalences that arise among employees. Nakai often use the ryokan to escape that ultimate symbol of fixity, the home, and they become incredibly mobile figures, free from the geographical constraints associated with domestic responsibilities felt by most women. Yet, they are not entirely comfortable with their mobility. Their position and personal circumstances require them to be pliant employees, stuck in one inn with no chance of advancement and no future beyond the ryokan. They seem to choose immobility, in the form of a dead-end job. However, the position provides escape from domestic life and requires nearly non-stop physical labor. Are nakai immobile or mobile? Clearly, the answer is both, in complex and nuanced ways.

In contrast, chefs like Tanaka have immense job mobility, but their potential depends entirely on their ability to master stationary tasks and their willingness to relocate at a moment’s notice. Buffeted by the desires and recommendations of others, chefs sacrifice personal relationships for their careers. However, their movement is a sign of success. While the ‘women’s work’ of nakai precludes vertical job mobility, chefs like Tanaka rise in a professional hierarchy, learning new skills, receiving pay increases, making valuable contacts, and accepting new responsibilities, all while desiring to eventually settle and open their own place.

For individuals in both positions, the daily production of fixity reveals their ambivalences toward their own mobility and fixity. One might go further and say that beyond ambivalence, these three individuals show how the categories mobility and fixity cease to be opposites; instead, they collapse on one another and become inseparable. Indeed, any attempt to pull at the threads of the lives of Kitano, Maeda, and Tanaka to determine which circumstances make them mobile and which make them immobile becomes moot.

Although mobilities scholarship has rightly highlighted how the mobilities of some are premised on, or even produce, the immobilities of others, the production of fixity in the ryokan begs the question: what happens when these conditions describe the same person? Indeed, the complex mobilities at work in the lives of these three people – corporeal mobility amid aging, stationary repetitive knife work, escape from domestic abuse, commuting mobility, sudden promotion and relocation, career mobility enabled, or constrained by gender – complicate any either/or understanding of mobility and suggest the need for a more nuanced appreciation of how multiple mobilities and fixities intertwine in the same person.

References


