

**IMMOBILITY THROUGH MOTION:
HISTORICIZING EMIGRANT REGIONALISM IN JAPANESE
PROLETARIAN LITERATURE, 1929–1939**

*Anne Giblin Gedacht
Seton Hall University*

Two classics of pre-war Japanese literature present distinct narratives. The first, *Kanikōsen*, written by Kobayashi Takiji in 1929, was a seminal work in Japan's pre-war proletarian literature movement. The second, Ishikawa Tatsuzō's 1935 *Sōbō*, became an instant classic, winning the first Akutagawa Prize in literature and vaulting Ishikawa into the annals of best Japanese fiction authors of the 1930s. These books share similarities in cast and setting: characters hail from the Tohoku region (an area in northeastern Honshu Island cast as an underdeveloped hinterland) and take "country bumpkins" out of their native place, making them mobile characters hurtling through the world. Moreover, both serve as commentary on how modern Japanese capitalism has transplanted people, uprooting them from their familiar and parochial settings and placing them in new roles that, as the stories progress, do not seem to be improvements on their previous conditions.¹

A Japanese citizen in the 1930s reading these texts together would have been left with a haunting and dystopian view of Japanese modernity, one that calls into question progress by displaying the resultant disjuncture of mobility that untethered each character from their traditional spaces, regions, and homes. However, while these two serialized novels chronicle the suffering of the common man experiencing displacement, they do not end with their characters simply submitting to their new realities. They serve as literature of resistance, books that chronicle a portable community, and regional brotherhood that triumphed over the degradations of Japan's expansionist program or the hegemony of modern capitalism. Finally, these works underscore the fundamental disjuncture between popular perceptions

¹ Author's Note: I would like to thank my fellow members of the 2019 Association for Asian Studies panel titled, "A Nation of Emigrants: New Research on Transpacific Mobilities and Identity in Imperial Japan": Eiichiro Azuma, Seth Jacobowitz, Robert Hegwood, and Sidney Xu Lu. Special thanks to Seth for his commentary that reminded me to explore further linkages between *Sōbō* and *Kanikōsen*.

of a predominantly rural region like Tohoku as a bastion of parochial immobility and the recognition that such regions provided the source of migrants, networks, and people who propelled Japan's new mobile horizons, which in turn extended the nation across borders and oceans.

Kobayashi Takiji's *Kanikōsen* (1929), Japan's premiere work of pre-war proletarian fiction, features a group of oppressed and exploited seasonal laborers on a crab cannery boat who, while nameless, bear all the regional and dialectical traits from Kobayashi's childhood home in the Tohoku region. *The Cannery Boat* highlights the abuse of these Tohoku natives as they battle the harsh realities of life away from home, working as seasonal laborers in the brutal international waters off the coast of northern Japan.² Mistreated and degraded by the "boss" Asakawa, while being told that their sacrifices are patriotic acts, these unnamed men ultimately mutiny and reclaim the ship in the name of the workers. In the end, however, the long arm of the Japanese government arrests these workers instead of the capitalist bosses who had oppressed them, displaying the complacency of the Japanese nationalist imperial project built upon exploitative capitalism.

A few years later, Ishikawa Tatsuzō published his critically acclaimed novel *Sōbō* (1935), a text about the modern process of overseas emigration to Brazil. The novel mobilizes the characters' emigrant origin in Akita Prefecture as a stand-in for the innocence lost as the protagonists undergo the dehumanizing process of transiting through the National Emigrant Center in Kobe. *Sōbō* chronicles the passage of laborers as they

² *Kanikōsen* has been translated into English as a "cannery boat," a "factory ship," and a "crab cannery boat." See Kobayashi Takiji, *The Cannery Boat and Other Japanese Short Stories*, trans. William Maxwell Bickerton (New York: International Publishers, 1933); *Factory Ship & The Absentee Landlord*, trans. Frank Motofuji (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1973); and *The Crab Cannery Ship and Other Novels of Struggle*, trans. Željko Cipriš (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013). A film adaptation, directed by So Yamamura, emerged in 1953 and SABU films remade the movie in 2009 after the books return to popularity following the global 2008 economic downturn. There is even a manga version intended to be read in just 30 minutes by university students, *Manga Kanikōsen: sanjippun de yomeru daigakusei no tame no*, released by Higashi Genza Shuppansha in 2006. Any translations of the text that are not my own are noted as being from the 1973 edition by Frank Motofuji.

wait to depart Japan's shore to set up a new life in Brazil. Their experience in the emigration centers of Kobe, although still in Japan proper, highlights how common individuals were cast to the wind because of Japan's new status as a powerful, capitalist nation. With little hope of making a decent living back in Tohoku, these uprooted emigrants undergo humiliation as they become fungible representatives of Japan's growing international push in reeducation centers intended to turn out ideal overseas settlers for the Japanese empire.

While these pieces of Japanese literature are best known as acclaimed works of fiction, they also present a historical truth about the zeitgeist of people from the Tohoku region within pre-war Japanese national histories. Both highlight the travails of those from Japan's parochial heartland, the Tohoku region, who had been whisked away from their native place only to suffer due to the vicissitudes of Japan's modern capitalism. Thus, this article argues that the lack of cognitive dissonance between painting Tohoku natives as (1) hopelessly parochial individuals, archetypical country bumpkins uprooted and abused by the shifting winds of capitalist modernity, and (2) mobile bodies traversing and seeking dignity within the international waters of the global capitalist marketplace is indicative of the entrenched division between immigrant history and emigrant space in the pre-war Japanese nation.

Through close readings of *Kanikōsen* and *Sōbō*, this article will show how popular literature of the 1930s reflected the national conception of people from the Tohoku region as parochial victims who also stood as a fierce exemplar of resistance to the inequities inherent in Tokyo's quest to achieve international stature as a modern capitalist society. Both of these widely-read works of popular literature (written by Tohoku natives) articulate the failings of capitalist modernity while prominently featuring characters from this region. But they also accomplish something more. They offer a window into the complicated relationship between mobility and immobility inherent in pre-war imaginings of Tohoku identity. The writers did not forget or exclude the realities that reflected their own experiences as mobile natives.

Nevertheless, their critiques of Japanese modernity still served to amplify assumptions of Tohoku naïveté, promote stereotypes of northeasterners' stoic endurance of hardship, and underscore the anti-modernist longing for a simpler life that no longer exists. They lauded their former homes as the site of the vanishing authentic Japan, as well as a location from which people must escape. This new perception of Tohoku

recast the mobile body as disconnected from the land even as it further entrenched assumptions of provinciality.

Modern Japan and the Mobile Japanese Body

With the rise of the Meiji government following the Boshin Civil War of 1868–1869, the confederate model of government, which unified autonomous domains, was abandoned in favor of a strong imperial-style central rule. The new government formed in the name of the Meiji Emperor, housed in the renamed capital of Tokyo, and disrupted the previous Tokugawa shogunate erstwhile policies, intended to decrease the mobility of most Japanese subjects within the nation to their respective by lifting century-old restrictions on international and domestic travel for Japanese citizens.³ While Japan had never truly been a “closed country” to all foreign visitors, unrestricted trade with foreign countries did not exist during the Tokugawa period, and the mobility of Japanese peasants was highly regulated.⁴ With the new Meiji government’s adoption of international trade due to the unequal treaty system, more Japanese subjects set their sights beyond their domanical boundaries, which fueled the growth of domestic urban centers and emigrant settlement abroad.⁵

³ David L. Howell, *Capitalism from Within: Economy, Society, and the State in a Japanese Fishery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). Howell’s third chapter is particularly useful in contextualizing the transition between the traditional independent “family fishery” to a world of overseers (*bannin*) and workers (*kasegikata*) that is taken to extremes in Ishikawa’s *Kanikōsen*.

⁴ Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁵ While Japan did have a *sakoku* policy that limited interactions between Japan and proselytizing Christian nations like Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and later the United States, it is important to reinforce that Japan was not indeed “closed” during this period. There was substantive exchange of goods, materials, and ideas from the Netherlands, Southeast Asia, China, and Korea during this time. See Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy*, and Michael R. Auslin, *Negotiating with Imperialism: The Unequal Treaties and the Culture of Japanese Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

This new mobility became intrinsically tied to the modernization efforts of the new Meiji government. Industrialization required the movement of bodies from the countryside to the cities. For the Meiji authorities, fungible Japanese peasants-cum-workers would provide the workforce necessary to achieve rapid industrialization. However, the mobility did not stop within Japan's borders in a rural-to-urban pipeline. Increased pressures to internationalize while securing Japan's new borders also sparked mobility between rural spaces. With the Meiji revolution came a new definition of Japanese boundaries, exemplified by the claiming by fiat of an island to the north of Honshu that would become Hokkaido. The government enlisted agrarian settlers to populate this new northern frontier, settlers often recruited from the former samurai class and commoners used to farming in northern climates. Drawing heavily on populations from northeastern Honshu Island, which constituted the newly formed administrative unit known as the Tohoku region, the Japanese government incentivized the colonization of Hokkaido under the banner of nation-building.

Part of the reason that Tohoku natives were so attractive as settlers in Japan's new north starting in the 1870s was that this territory had a long history of *dekasegi* labor practices. *Dekasegi*, or traveling seasonal laborers, existed even before the Meiji period in Mutsu and Dewa, the two domains that would merge into Tohoku's administrative region. This northeastern zone became the largest administrative region in the modern nation-state, covering 67,000 square kilometers of land; yet, during the pre-war period, Tohoku was home to only roughly 10 percent of the Japanese population.⁶ During the heavily regulated Tokugawa period, however, because those two domains encompassed such a large land area, the restrictions against interdomain travel were not a significant limit on mobility for migrant laborers. Therefore, for generations, Tohoku natives had a culture of travel for seasonal work, particularly important in the agrarian border areas with

⁶ The Statistical Survey Department, Statistics Bureau, and Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications reported in 1940 that the six prefectures of Tohoku had 7,165,000 people with Japan's total population numbering 73,114,000. Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku, "Showa 15nen kokusaichōsa jinkō zenkoku, dōfuken," Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics Bureau (accessed November 15, 2021, <http://www.stat.go.jp/data/jinsui/>).

harsh winters that only allowed for a single growing season. As we shall explore, this tradition of *dekasegi*, merged with the modern internationalization of oceanic spaces, set the stage for Kobayashi's *Kanikōsen*.

The colonization of national frontiers, domestic urbanization, and even seasonal migration were not the only forms of mobility that became integral to the formation of the modern Japanese nation and economy. International migration, starting with plantation workers to Hawai'i and a later diaspora to other independent nation-states, began in earnest in the 1880s, picking up speed by the turn of the century.⁷ While the Tohoku region did not send the largest numbers of emigrants abroad in the pre-war period, populations from Miyagi or Fukushima prefectures generally accounted for the third or fourth largest source of migrant populations in destinations such as Hawai'i, Canada, the Philippines, the continental US, and Brazil.⁸ For example, as reflected in the cast of Ishikawa's *Sōbō*, which we will examine in the second part of this article, migrants from the Tohoku region were not only common but made up 20 percent of the Japanese migrants on the very first boat to São Paulo in 1906.⁹

⁷ Alan Takeo Moriyama, *Imingaisha: Japanese Emigration Companies and Hawaii, 1894–1908* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985).

⁸ Depending on the recipient nation, Okinawa, Hiroshima, Okayama, Wakayama, or Yamaguchi prefectures sent the largest numbers of emigrants in the prewar period. However, Tohoku migrants from Miyagi, Fukushima, Akita, Iwate, Aomori, and Yamagata prefectures also left home in significant numbers.

⁹ Kōkoku Shokumin Kaisha, "Lista de bordo do Kasato-Maru, 1908," in *Kasato-Maru: Uma viagem pela história da imigração japonesa* (São Paulo: Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo, 2009), 51–74. The first seventy-seven émigrés listed on the official passenger list of the *Kasato maru* hailed from Fukushima, with another ten coming from Miyagi. Brazilian authorities considered "Okinawans" to be distinct from "Japanese," counting the separately, resulting in Tohoku residents comprising 20 percent of the total number of "Japanese" migrants, and outnumbered only by migrants from Kagoshima (133) and Kumamoto (108).

Emigration was an important part of the Japanese government's plan to industrialize and increase capital through remittances.¹⁰ Not only did emigration fuel the economic growth of Japan, but it also became a pillar in Tokyo's push for a uniform nationalism during the pre-war period. Starting in the 1910s and 1920s, as foreign locations controlled by white powers like the United States, Canada, and Australia began to close their borders to Japanese migrants, mobile Japanese bodies began to be redirected to "less desirable countries (e.g., South America) [...] and emigration was promoted in the name of the nation."¹¹ Stressing the need to keep relocating Japanese nationals abroad to mitigate population growth and maintain Japanese presence internationally, "overseas development" became a hallmark of expansionist policies.¹² Indeed, emigrant contribution to the economy of Japanese modernization was significant; the 98.6 million yen sent to Japan by emigrants in 1933 alone amounted to 10 percent of Japan's total trade surplus. It is also worth noting that Brazil spent US\$3.8 billion on travel to Japan alone.¹³ Thus, the mobile Japanese body, including those relocating to places like Brazil (as illustrated in *Sōbō*), was indeed part of the modernization process of pre-war Japan.

¹⁰ Ayumi Takenaka, "Japanese in Peru: History of Immigration, Settlement, and Racialization," *Latin American Perspectives* 31/3 (2004): 77–98; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Waga kokumin no kaigai hatten: iju 100-nen no ayumi* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1971); Wakatsuki Yasuo and Suzuki Joji, *Kaigai iju seisakushi-ron* (Tokyo: Fukumura Shuppan, 1975).

¹¹ Takenaka, "Japanese in Peru," 79. For more on the systematic exclusion of Japanese to "white settler" countries, see Patricia Roy, *The White Man's Province: British Columbia politicians and Chinese and Japanese immigrants, 1858–1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989); Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966); and Andrea Geiger, *Subverting Exclusion: Transpacific Encounters with Race, Caste, and Borders, 1885–1928* (Yale University Press, 2011).

¹² Eiichiro Azuma, "'Pioneers of Overseas Japanese Development': Japanese American History and the Making of Expansionist Orthodoxy in Imperial Japan," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 67/4 (2008): 1187–1226.

¹³ Takenaka, "Japanese in Peru," 79.

“Tohoku” as a Character Trope in Popular Discourses of Mobility

The texts *Sōbō* and *Kanikōsen*, written by authors from the Tohoku region, feature displaced characters from that northeastern area of Honshu Island as they traverse in-between spaces beyond their homeland. The decision to cast Tohoku natives in the leading roles of both stories carried baggage due to specific stereotypes about people from that region that had emerged following the Boshin Civil War. Before the Meiji coup, the area that would become the Tohoku region consisted of multiple domains from the areas of Mutsu and Dewa. This included the land of prominent families who held high status in the Tokugawa government.¹⁴ When the upstarts from Satsuma and Chōshū initiated their revolution that would ultimately overthrow the shogun, some of the most vocal defenders of the status quo came from these northern areas of Honshu Island.¹⁵ But their support for the Tokugawa shogunate proved unwise since, in the end, the Meiji revolutionaries won the civil war.

As argued by scholars like Michael Wert and Kawanishi Hidemichi, what followed was a concerted campaign by the victorious Meiji leadership to marginalize and reconstitute those loyalist areas as a hinterland, a political periphery.¹⁶ As newly dubbed, the Tohoku region became pigeonholed

¹⁴ Aizu domain was home to a branch family in the Tokugawa line. Sendai domain boasted one of the largest numbers of samurai in the country and had great political power in the *bakufu*. For a map of major domains in the Ōu (northeastern area of Honshu Island) districts of Japan and their worth on the eve of the Meiji Coup in 1867, see Ozaki Takeshirō, *Tōhoku no Meiji ishin: tsūkon no rekishi* (Tokyo: Seimuru shupankai, 1995), 1.

¹⁵ The anti-Satsuma/Chōshū (Satchō) alliance was not so much about a deep sense of loyalty to the Tokugawa rule itself, but instead to a shared set of interests among those opposing the revolutionaries based on self-interest. This alliance consisted of predominantly families from the Mutsu and Dewa provinces (collectively referred to as Ōu), headed by Date Yoshikuno (1825–1874) of Sendai domain and Uesugi Narinori (1820–1889) of Yonezawa domain. See Takeshi Kudō, *Ōu reppan dōmei no kiso kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwata shoin, 2002); and Hoshi Ryōichi, *Ōuetsu Reppan Dōmei: Higashi Nihon seifu juritsu no yume* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1995).

¹⁶ The assertion of Tohoku as a backward or provincial region has a long history. Many postwar scholars argue that following the Meiji Coup, Tohoku was an internal colony of the center. Kawanishi Hidemichi, “Tōhoku ha

administratively as a borderland-in-transition, likened by some to the “Scotland of Japan” and others as an internal colony ruled like “the British Raj.”¹⁷ As residents of a legislated site of underdevelopment within the Japanese nation, characters from Tohoku quickly became shorthand for rural, backward, and uneducated individuals.¹⁸ Yet, it is no coincidence that the unnamed cast of characters in *Kanikōsen* speaks with a Tohoku dialect, nor that Akita natives fill the leading roles in *Sōbō*. In Japanese literary writings, the dialect of individuals from this northeastern area of the country, called Tohoku-ben, was commonly used when portraying country bumpkins, slaves,

nihon no sukottorando ga,” in Hidemichi Kawanishi, Kenji Namikawa, and M. William Steele, eds., *Rōkaru hisutorī kara gurōbaru hisutorī e: tabunka no rekishigaku to chiikishi* (Tokyo: Iwata shoin, 2005): 207–225; Nathan Hopson, *Ennobling Japan’s Savage Northeast* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Kawanishi Hidemichi, *Tōhoku: Tsukurareta ikyō* (Tokyo: Chūō kōron shinsha, 2001), rereleased in English as *Tōhoku Japan’s Constructed Outland*, trans. Nanyan Guo and Raquel Hill (Leiden: Brill, 2016). See also Okada Tomohiro, *Nihon shihon shugi to nōson kaihatsu* (Kyoto: Hōritsu Bunkasha, 1989); and Akasaka Norio, Ogumi Eiji, and Yamauchi Akemi, “Tōhoku” *saisei* (Tokyo: Isuto puresu, 2011), 15.

¹⁷ “On the Secret Dispatch of Inspectors to the Ōu Region,” in Irokawa Daikichi, Gabe Masao, eds. *Meiji kenpakusho shūsei 2* (1990), 911–913. Historian Hara Katsurō (1871–1924) argued that Tohoku was an inner colony of the Japanese empire in the 1920s. Hara Katsurō, *An Introduction to the History of Japan* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), 26–27. The acclaimed diplomat Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933) argued that those from Tohoku were distinctive from the rest of the nation in multiple works over the 1910s–1920s. Nitobe Inazō, “Kitaguni no jinzai no shūkaku” and “Tōhoku Nihon,” in *Nitobe Inazō zenshū*, vol. 20. Christopher Noss, *Tōhoku, the Scotland of Japan* (Philadelphia: Board of Foreign Missions, Reformed Church of the United States, 1918).

¹⁸ Mie Hiramoto, “Slaves Speak Pseudo-Toohoku-ben: The Representations of Minorities in Japanese Translation of *Gone with the Wind*,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 13/2 (2009): 249–263; and Christopher Robins, “Revisiting Year One of Japanese National Language: Inoue Hisashi’s Literary Challenge,” *Japanese Language and Literature* 40 (2006), 47, fn24.

or fools.¹⁹ Thus, when Ishikawa and Kobayashi utilized this dialect in their writings rather than standard Japanese, they were cognizant of the implications. Historical actors at the turn of the century who ventured outside Tohoku's boundaries often chronicled their conscious decision to mask their dialect to escape stereotyping while abroad.²⁰

The placement of a Tohoku native in a story signaled to the audience that this person was parochial and unsophisticated. Setting such individuals in motion by having them traverse the liminal spaces between nation-states created expositional characters, especially characters who could relate their jarring experiences to the reader to empathize with them as they navigated the alienating displacement of modernity. However, upon further analysis, this article will argue that this was not the only use of the mobile Tohoku body that proved an effective tool in these two iconic works of proletarian literature. Dragging such vulnerable hayseeds into these in-between spaces allowed the authors to decry the loss of innocence on the one hand and challenge the abuses of capitalism on the other.

¹⁹ For example, Tohoku-ben was also used for the Fool (*dōkeyaku*) in the Japanese version of Shakespeare's "A Winter's Tale." Hiramoto (2009) has shown conclusively that Tohoku dialect was the model for translations of slaves in *Gone with the Wind*. This literary trope continues to the present, as Tohoku-ben became the dialect chosen for Hagrid in Harry Potter who, in the English version, boasted a heavy "West Country" accent synonymous with rural England.

²⁰ Anecdotally you can find this in multiple migrant narratives like in the interview of Umeno Goto by Yukiko Kimura in 1980, quoted in Kimura, *Issei: Japanese Immigrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 30. One prominent exception to this was Katsunuma Tomizō, a Hawai'ian known for expressing his love for his emigrant identity by retaining his native dialect in speaking and even his public writings. Takahashi Kanji, *Imin no chichi Katsunuma Tomizō Sensei den* (Honolulu: Bunkichi suda, 1953); Takahashi Kanji, *Fukushima iminshi Hawaii kikansha no maki* (Fukushima: Fukushima Hawaikai, 1958); Maeyama Takashi and Shibuya Shōroku, *Hawai no shinbōnin: Meiji Fukushima imin no kojinshi* (Tokyo: Ochanomizu shobō, 1986), 40–44; Hashimoto Sutegoro, "Kugatsu jūichinichi," *Fukushima Shūnjū* 2 (2004): 130–164; and Kōyama Shinkichi, ed., *Nanka Fukushima kenjinkai sōritsu hayakushūnen kinen* (Torrance, CA: Nanka Fukushima Kenjinkai of Southern California, 2008).

Yet the idea of a Tohoku native serving as a seasonal laborer or relocating abroad, as will be discussed, was not revolutionary. Indeed, the Tohoku region historically sent large numbers of people to work in Japanese urban centers, to populate Japan's frontiers like Hokkaido or later Manchuria, or to independent nations abroad.²¹ Tohoku natives, including Ishikawa and Kobayashi, were often found in motion and away from their native place. For most Japanese not born in Japan's northeast, encounters with a Tohoku native occurred anywhere but within the boundaries of Tohoku. Thus, rural areas that sourced these outflows of people became viewed as parochial and unchanging and as spaces bereft of young talent since so many had relocated beyond Tohoku's boundaries to partake in the tides of modernity.

This fundamental truth that the emigrant homeland was both the site of immobility and the source of mobile bodies is reflected in the Japanese language itself. The Japanese word *imin* can translate into two separate terms in English: "immigrant" and "emigrant." The bifurcation of this diasporic identity into distinct categories that separate the mobile body of those who have arrived in a new community from their previous identities within the communities from which they left, common in many languages, is not apparent when exploring the history of mobility within and beyond Japan's borders. Instead, in Japanese, multiple words define what kind of mobility a given Japanese individual has. *Imin*, or "migrants," were any who took part in new mobilities brought about by Japanese modernization, be it within the confines of Japan proper, within Japan's growing empire, or to sovereign

²¹ For sample numbers to Hokkaido, see Tokyo Chihō Shokugyō Shōkai Jimukyoku, "Hokkaidō nishin gyogyō rōdō jijō, 1928," in Okamoto Tatsuaki, ed., *Kindai minshū no kiroku: Gyomin*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Shinjinbutsu ōraisha, 1978), 531. For information on Tohoku farmers in Manchuria, see Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998): 307–399. For Japanese expansion in foreign, sovereign countries see works like Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Eiichiro Azuma, *In Search of our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in the Construction of Japan's Borderless Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019). In his most recent work, Azuma looks at re-migration of displaced Japanese emigrants in Japan as they relocated to other countries and/or colonies.

states abroad. But they were not simply immigrants to a new place; they were also emigrants from their home regions. *Dekasegi* workers were short-term laborers, seasonal laborers, or sojourners who were “working away from home” and would return with any profits to enrich their native place.²² *Shokumin* were settlers and colonists, individuals who left their physical home behind and rebuilt their communities abroad or in the colonies. They were sometimes interchangeable with *kaitakumin*, or “pioneers of overseas development,” as notably translated by Eiichiro Azuma.²³ In particular, terms like migrant and colonist were often used interchangeably or combined in the 1920s and 1930s with the expression *ishokumin*, carrying the connotation of Japanese nationalism shaping an individual’s resultant mobility. In contrast, the English language lexicon is rooted in the idea of leaving or arriving.

The separation of Japanese migration history from the country’s national history provides a similar conundrum for scholars of transnational Japan writing in English. How can we reunite the two halves of the Japanese migrant identity and convey the importance of the emigrant origins and the immigrant narratives? For pragmatic reasons, namely the need to limit the scope of inquiry, scholarly discussions of Japanese mobility in the pre-war era tend to fall primarily into four distinct categories: domestic migrations within Japan from rural to urban areas driven by industrialization, nation-building settlement projects, imperial mobility to Japan’s growing empire, and the vast literature on Japanese international migration to other sovereign states outside Japan, like the United States, Canada, and Brazil.²⁴ This last category of international migration can be further sub-divided into tales of

²² Taguchi Shōichirō, *Kindai Akita-ken nōgyōshi no kenkyū* (Akita-shi: Mishima shobō, 1984), 294–320.

²³ Azuma, “Pioneers of Overseas Japanese Development,” 1187–1226.

²⁴ Examples on nation building include studies like Tessa-Morris Suzuki (1999, 2008), David Howell (1983, 1995) as well as more recent contributions like Hiroko Matsuda, *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* (2019) and Sidney Xu Lu, *Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism* (2019). For more on the incorporation of imperial history into national history see Louise Young (1998) and Jun Uchida (2011). Discussions of international mobility are often found in the historiographies of the receiving countries, but that has been changing with works by Andrea Geiger (2011) and Eiichiro Azuma (2019), which integrate Japanese domestic and international history with the history of the Americas.

the *immigrant* experience, generally found in the historiography of the receiving nation, and the mechanics/politics of *emigration*, as seen in Japanese historiography.²⁵

Domestic Japanese works about migrants, like *Sōbō* and *Kanikōsen*, do not make this distinction between emigrant and immigrant identities. Character experiences are inherently linked to their native place or emigrant identity as much as their lives are identified beyond the boundaries of “home.” The push factors that drove Tohoku natives away from their birthplace in the north – poverty, underdevelopment, natural disasters, and even opportunity – all rang true as the informed reader already knew that Tohoku residents had good reasons to leave, as their homes could not provide what they needed to live well in modern Japan. In the end, however, every character is shown to inhabit spaces of modern mobility, be it in international waters in the case of *Kanikōsen* or the Kobe Emigration Center for *Sōbō*. Ultimately, they were Tohoku natives, with all the baggage that entailed transiting through the rough waters of Japan’s new international modernity.

The following sections will show how Kobayashi Takiji (1903–1933) and Ishikawa Tatsuzō (1905–1985), both born in Akita Prefecture,

²⁵ This category of historical research, within Japan Studies, must be further subdivided into literature that chronicles the granular mechanics of migration like Alan Moriyama’s *Imingaisha*, political histories concerning migration policies like Pedro Iacobelli’s *Postwar Emigration to South America from Japan and the Ryukyu Islands*. On the other hand, immigrant narratives tend to be the purview of subcategories of other national histories such as Japanese Canadian, Japanese American, or Filipino Japanese studies. Up until quite recently, the vast majority of the scholarly work on Japanese international migration did not originate in Japan Studies. Rather, it emerged in the subfields of ethnic studies or immigration history within in the historiography the receiving nation, and as such served to provide texture to the diversity of lived experience of national histories of countries other than Japan. Common themes include localized tales of immigrant success, failure, or the politics of racism. Major exceptions to this distinction are a few ground-breaking works by historians who defy the established area studies boundaries to bridge the divide between ethnic studies and Japanese history. For example, in the case of Japanese-America, Eiichiro Azuma and Takashi Fujitani, have written notable cross-over studies that will hopefully serve as models for a new generation of scholarship.

created portraits of Tohoku subjects encountering profoundly modern situations and, at the same time, offered a stinging critique of that very Japanese modernity. However, these works also paint the Tohoku region as rural and unchanging, impoverished and abandoned due to endemic poverty. While other scholars have examined these writers as examples of emerging trends in Japanese intellectual thought, particularly as evidence of indigenous criticisms of Japanese capitalism, this article focuses on examining their wider import for concepts of regionality within the Japanese nation.

Group Identities in *Kanikōsen*: Writing Region into International Waters

Kanikōsen, written by Kobayashi Takiji in 1929, encapsulated the themes of the emerging Marxist literature in Japan. Serialized over two months in the communist-leaning literary magazine *Senki*, *Kanikōsen* not only represented the author's view as a Tohoku native who had decamped to Hokkaido and then Tokyo but also came to be regarded as the premier work of Japanese fiction writ large.²⁶ *Kanikōsen* follows the story of a group of men from northern Japan who work as seasonal (*dekasegi*) laborers on a crab cannery boat trawling the seas off the coast of Kamchatka, Sakhalin, and Hokkaido. These men are following a pattern of *dekasegi* work that was common not only in the modern period but also in early modern Japan.²⁷

²⁶ For an excellent discussion that places Kobayashi in the larger trends of the 1930s, see Hamabayashi Masao, "*Kanikōsen*" *no shakaishi: Kobayashi Takiji to sono jidai* (Tokyo: Gakushū no Tomosha, 2009). This book was a revised edition of *Kiwameru me: Kobayashi Takiji to sono jidai* (Tokyo: Higashi Ginza shuppansha, 2004). Donald Keene, "Japanese Literature and Politics in the 1930s," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 2/2 (1976), 226–227. Regarding the resurgence of Kobayashi following the economic downturn of 2008, see Norma Field, *Kobayashi Takiji: 21 seiki ni do yomu ka* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 2009).

²⁷ Kaitakushi, "Tōhoku shokō hōkokusho" (1880), National Diet Library Digital Collection (accessed June 15, 2022, <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/805487>); Takeuchi Toshimi, *Shimokita no sonraku shakai: sangyō kōzō to sonraku taisei* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1968), 120–126. Howell discusses the creation of a "Seasonal Proletariat" in Hokkaido made of *dekasegi* fishermen from Tohoku, breaking down the number from Akita, Aomori, Iwate, etc. in *Capitalism from Within*, 132–147.

Throughout the text, these workers suffer extreme abuse at the hands of the only named character in the book, the superintendent Asakawa, who eventually drives the crew to rebel while in international waters. The main characteristic that identifies the group as a unit is their Tohoku dialect.

Japanese proletarian literature, or literature written to shed light on the ills that modern capitalism wrought on the social condition of workers, generally eschewed the first-person narrative that had become common in the modern Japanese “I novel.”²⁸ Thus, Kobayashi’s cast of proletariat heroes remains an unnamed group of men who rise together to act against the atrocities of their captain: the capitalist villain Asakawa. But that does not mean that the nameless workers have no identity, as Kobayashi does confer upon them the clear regional affiliation and the dialectal traits associated with the supposedly benighted Tohoku region. Therefore, Kobayashi’s classic text forgoes heroic mythologizing of the individual in favor of composite portrayals that underscore the plight of the put-upon workers and reify the stereotype of Tohoku provinciality.

Moreover, it is clear from the introductory pages that the regionalism of Japan’s north shapes the character of the community, particularly for those unnamed laborers who form the backbone of the novel. The opening pages spotlight the miserable assortment of “country bumpkins” from Akita, Aomori, and Iwate Prefectures when a recruit is shown the space that would become his new transitory home. This character addresses the various “factory” hands of most boys of fourteen or fifteen to inquire about the origins. Their answers all point to Japan’s northern territories, with some being children of the Hakodate slums, other farmers from Nanbu in Aomori or different parts of Akita, and a veteran who tells horror stories from his time working in Hokkaido’s Yūbari coal mines.²⁹ Still, the clear implication is that these men are not fishermen by choice.

Not surprisingly, for a Marxist work of fiction, much of the emphasis in this text falls on the exploitation of the poor souls on the cannery boat. Yet Kobayashi draws from Tohoku’s long history of *desakegi* mobility, locating the exploitation in that particular labor geography and describing the

²⁸ Yoshio Iwamoto, “The Changing Hero Image in Japanese Fiction of the Thirties,” *The Journal-Newsletter of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 4/1 (1966), 29.

²⁹ Kobayashi Takiji, *Kanikōsen* (Tokyo: Senkisha, 1929), 5, National Diet Library Digital Collection (accessed June 15, 2022, info:ndljp/pid/10297644).

ability of owners to exploit the fishermen on the cannery boat as stemming from Tohoku natives' inability to survive at home: "All had left home because they could not make a living there, where they started work in the fields before sunrise. They had left their eldest sons in charge and the womenfolk had to work in factories while the other sons had also to seek work elsewhere."³⁰ These laborers on the cannery boat had nowhere to turn, and the notion that the horrors of working in the cannery are better than their previous existence in Tohoku almost baffles the mind. But it also sets the stage for the realization that they have sold their bodies to be pawns of capitalist merchants once the reality of their existence on the open ocean forces them to confront the harsh facts of modern exploitation. While the sufferings they experienced before as farmers are not specified, the author depicts the brutal anguish that stems from their forced departure from Tohoku.³¹ Some of these boys are shocked by their treatment onboard which further implies that no matter what situation they escaped back home, they have previously been sheltered from such experiences.

The proletarian messages are not subtle in Kobayashi's work, but they also bear clear indicators tied to the imaginary and physical cartography of the Tohoku region within the nation-state. He invokes industrialists' concerns that labor unions from Tohoku's Aomori and Akita were "struggling desperately to get organizers in on the crab canneries," as the exposure of the terrible working conditions aboard "was the great fear of the exploiters."³² This juxtaposition between the laborers whose exploitation a reader would witness and the organizations that could help protect their rights is tied to the national space, identified as specific labor unions in Aomori and Akita prefectures. The idea of such regional activists discovering the abuses of the cannery ships, information that would allow for action within the

³⁰ Ibid., 12.

³¹ In the postwar, authors like Satō Kin'yū and Matsumura Chōta recorded oral histories of such Tohoku dekasegi fishermen who, apart from the physical and psychological abuse of working the fisheries, did acknowledge that it provided them with opportunities to earn wages not available in their native places. See Satō Kin'yū, *Hokuyō no dekasegi: Hokuhen gyōjō ni ikita kosaku nōmin no kindaiishi* (Akita: Akita bunka shuppansha, 1985), and Matsumura Chōta, *Akita no dekasegi monogatari: Gyominhen*, 3rd ed. (Akita: Akita bunka shuppansha, 1975).

³² Kobayashi, *Kanikōsen*, 13.

administrative structures of the nation-state, was the major concern of the industrialists. From such statements, historians can infer that the flagrant abuses of human dignity in the text were beyond the pale of what would have been considered acceptable back home in the Tohoku region.

But these laborers are literally and figuratively set adrift from their moorings within the nation. Removed from their native land and placed in international waters, their ties to their citizenship and identity become tethered to their distinctive regional dialect. These men are from provincial and parochial Tohoku, farmers removed from the soil. At one point in the introduction, Kobayashi refers to these cannery men as *hyakushō no gyofu* (百姓の漁夫), or “farmer fishermen.”³³ While accurate, the English rendering does not show the level of disdain reflected in such a characterization. The word *hyakushō* does indeed mean farmer, but it also has a strong connotation of “the commoners” and “peasants” rather than the skilled career farmer.³⁴ Such men, Kobayashi asserts, hoped to return home with newfound riches. Instead, they found themselves stranded in Hokkaido and forced to sell their bodies to industrialists.³⁵

Similar to other works of proletarian literature and exposés intended to reveal the gruesome inner workings of the daily life of oppressed factory workers, such as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1905), Kobayashi deploys visceral language to fully evoke the labor conditions of the men and women on the cannery boat, referencing how “the air was foul and stinking with tobacco smoke and crowded humanity” and “Sprawling in their bunks the men looked like wriggling maggots.”³⁶ Such metaphors that work in both land and ship-based spaces underscore the fisherman-farmer’s connections back home, as well as their current struggles within the new mobile space.

The implication, of course, is that the Tohoku region had been skipped in the country’s rush to western-style capitalist modernity. Due to its lack of development, residents of this area remained poor but in a traditional, agrarian way. However, with the advent of modernity, a new dimension of their poverty meant that working the land was simply not enough. Women were driven off the land to work in factories to make ends meet, while fathers

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Kobayashi Takiji, *The Cannery Boat and other Japanese Short Stories* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 9.

spent their off-seasons laboring away from home on fish canneries, like Kobayashi's fictitious boat *Hakko Maru*, and sons were left to toil behind the plow. Poverty and oppression often comprised the norm in early modern Japan, with rural families suffering abuses at the hands of absentee landlords. But in the modern iteration, there was a glimmer of promise that if they just worked harder in new industries or beyond the boundaries of their farms, they could get ahead. Nevertheless, as expressed in works like Kobayashi and others, such capitalist industrial sectors offered harsh realities of their own, rooted in exploiting workers inherent in the quest for modernity.

The marriage of capitalism to nationalism is explicit in the book. In the first address to the gathered laborers, the company industrialist reminds the erstwhile farmers turned fishermen that they are now battling the might of the Japanese empire and the Russians. Linking their project to the nation's growth, he discusses the importance of having additional food supplies to feed the rising population. Further, he warns against worker unionization, appealing to each as a cog in the machine that can create a strong Japan: "I want you all to realize," the Boss intoned, "we are serving our Empire when we risk our lives braving the stormy seas of Hokkaido. So if any one of you are imitating the Russian tactics that are popular nowadays and stir up trouble, I tell you, that man would be doing nothing short of selling his country."³⁷ Here, the Russian tactics referenced pertain to socialism and the embrace of workers' rights. Regardless, a few common refrains are loaded in this speech to justify the labor abuses emanating from Japan's capitalist modernity. Japanese citizens were expected to give themselves in service to the nation. According to the "boss" Asakawa, each individual was in a battle against Russians for supremacy of the seas. They would accomplish nothing less than solving the "Population Problem" and "Food Supply Problem" for the entire nation.³⁸

³⁷ Kobayashi, *The Cannery Boat*, 10; Kobayashi, *Kanikōsen*, 14.

³⁸ Kobayashi, *Kanikōsen*, 14. Rhetoric of the 人口問題 and 食糧問題 were both mobilized to promote Japanese overseas settlement, nation-building in Hokkaido and even underdeveloped Tohoku itself, and expansionary agendas that sparked imperial settlement efforts in Japan's formal and informal colonies. For example, in Nakayama Kōichi's self-published book on the 12 major problems in Japan, he listed the population problem and the food supply problems as the number one and two needing solutions. Nakayama

However, while industrialists loftily articulated the importance of sacrifice to the nation, there was a disconnect between the horror of the laborer's lives and the national glory embodied in the emperor. At one point, right after leaving Japanese waters for the windswept international seas, a student reacts to being belittled by Asakawa, asking, "What right does that fellow have to speak to us like that?" The response from a compatriot embodies this disconnect, as he relates that "the Emperor's above the clouds, so whatever he does doesn't hurt us, but Asakawa's here with us all the time."³⁹ Indeed, while few cannery workers would argue against the nation or the emperor, there was a clear separation between the idealized Emperor's role in their lives and the ship boss who forced them to sacrifice their dignity and even lives to reap a profit for the company.

The text also challenges who controls the lives of the men on board. On the open seas, the ship captain sometimes makes unprofitable choices to keep the boat afloat in challenging weather. However, in the early parts of *The Cannery Boat*, it becomes evident who is the master of the ship: It is not the individuals with the most experience or moral authority but the industrial capitalists. The following exchange between the captain and the "boss" Asakawa shows how profits trump human life, especially when the captain attempts to help a fellow crab cannery in distress. Asakawa starts the dialogue, saying:

"Who's ordered you to go out of your course unnecessarily?"

Who had ordered him? Wasn't he the captain? Taken aback for the moment, he became as stiff as a poker but then he soon reasserted his position. "As captain, I do it."

"Captain is it?" With his arms stretched out sideways in front of the captain, the boss raised his voice insultingly at the last word. "Look here, whose ship d'ye reckon this is? The company's chartered and paid for it. The only ones you've got any say are Mr. Sugi and me. You, you're called

Kōichi, *12 mondai kaiken no jiki* (Tokyo, 1928). Available online in the NDL Digital Collection at <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1267036>.

³⁹ Kobayashi, *The Cannery Boat*, 15.

the captain and you think yourself bloody important but you don't count any more than a scrap of stinking fish."⁴⁰

In this example, the capitalist Asakawa reprimands the captain for seeking to maintain an ethical code that demands fishermen at sea to help distressed boats. Ultimately, the neighboring boat with 425 souls goes down without aid from the *Hakko Maru*. In essence, capitalism triumphs over human life and the ties that bind humanity.

Asakawa's abandonment of human decency is in direct contrast to a narrative of foreign kindness some crew members experience. The factory fishermen go off course during a storm only to be rescued by the Soviets before returning to the ship. When they return to the *Hakko Maru*, these men share their tale, highlighting how the Soviets had stressed that Japanese capitalism was heartless and dehumanizing but that the Japanese proletariat could turn away from that to become once again righteous individuals. All they needed to do was to join the international communist movement.

The decision to include such an encounter with the Soviets raises an obvious comparison between the misery on the ship and the humanity of the foreign and communist "other." It questions the notion that allegiances should be tied to the nation, a concept repeatedly pushed by the capitalist Asakawa, arguing instead that the people of Tohoku should be true to the global proletariat, thereby contributing to this new imaginary of the communist international. Ultimately, *Kanikōsen* offers a critique of the presumed geographical boundaries of Japan as coterminous with nationalism, with the revolt taking place in unclaimed oceanic spaces. These Tohoku natives are suddenly "Japanese" through the presence of representatives of the Soviet Union. That this all takes place in a legal no man's land shows the portability of Japanese capitalist modernity, a modernity that has essentially enslaved and immiserated these Tohoku natives but also questions the necessity of that enslavement.

While the book about nameless Tohoku natives ultimately became an international success, matters did not end well for the author, Akita-native Kobayashi. With their anti-capitalist themes and criticisms of Imperial Japanese governmental policies, *Kanikōsen* and his other writings garnered the attention of the authorities, marking Kobayashi for surveillance by the Tokubetsu Kōtō Keisatsu (Tokkō or Special Higher Police). After the Peace Preservation Law of 1924, this newly empowered Special Higher Police

⁴⁰ Ibid., 17.

sought out those who would threaten the *kokutai*, or national body, following the mandate of Article 1:

Anyone who organizes a group for the purpose of changing the national polity (*kokutai*) or of denying the private property system, or anyone who knowingly participates in said group, shall be sentenced to penal servitude or imprisonment not exceeding ten years. An offense not actually carried out shall also be subject to punishment.⁴¹

Ultimately, Kobayashi's work with the Japanese Communist Party in general, and his writings in *Kanikōsen* in particular, provided grounds for *lèse-majesté* charges in 1930. The government banned the novel in Japan, but not until 15,000 uncensored copies were already in circulation.⁴² The uncensored part that most offended the government and put Kobayashi on the wanted list was one of the fishermen's declarations noting how he hopes the Emperor chokes on the crabmeat they are canning.⁴³ In the end, Kobayashi was brought to the Tsukiji Police Station in Tokyo on February 20, 1933, tortured and beaten to death. According to the eminent literary scholar Donald Keene, "the killing of Kobayashi was an act not only of extreme brutality but also extreme stupidity... Kobayashi became a martyr, to be remembered if not emulated."⁴⁴

The author, Kobayashi, embodied a mobile Tohoku subject, a man living in Tokyo who had left his native place in Akita. Much like his characters, he met a tragic end. As literary scholar Bert Scraggs indicates, a common theme in proletarian literature is how the police and the military do not serve the people but the capitalist system.⁴⁵ While Kobayashi would die

⁴¹ "Peace Preservation Law, April 22, 1925," *Asahi Shimbunsha, Shiryō Meiji Kyakunen*, 466–467. Translated in David Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc, 1997), 397.

⁴² Donald Keene, *A History of Japanese Literature, Vol. 3: Dawn to the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 616–618.

⁴³ Heather Bowen-Struyk, "Why a Boom in Proletarian Literature in Japan? The Kobayashi Takiji Memorial and the Factory Ship," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 7/26.1 (2009), 1–7 (accessed June 11, 2021, <https://apjif.org/-Heather-Bowen-Struyk/3180/article.html>).

⁴⁴ Keene, "Japanese Literature and Politics," 227.

⁴⁵ Bert Mitchell Scraggs, "Class Consciousness, Fictive Space, and the Colonial Proletariat," *Translingual Narration: Colonial and Postcolonial Taiwanese*

of a heart attack during interrogation by the Special Higher Police, his characters four years earlier were arrested by the Japanese Imperial Navy at the end of *Kanikōsen*. “Indeed,” writes Schruggs, “after enduring weeks of abuse under a cruel company superintendent, men on a crab-processing ship in the waters off Sakhalin go on strike. But it is the workers, not the superintendent, who are taken away by bayoneted-rifle-toting sailors when a destroyer later comes aside the factory ship.”⁴⁶

Translocation in *Sōbō*: Exploring Emigrant Regionalism in Kobe’s Emigration Center

In contrast to *Kanikōsen*’s narrative of temporary workers on a boat at the periphery of state power, Ishikawa Tatsuzō’s celebrated 1935 novel, *Sōbō*, chronicles the experiences of a group of Japanese emigrants from Akita bound for Brazil just before they disembark in Kobe’s National Emigrant Center. This book, featuring Tohoku and its inhabitants, would receive considerable acclaim and earn the first-ever Akutagawa Prize in literature. As with *Kanikōsen*, we see in this text how the place of emigrant origin in Akita Prefecture becomes the primary identifier for the protagonists as they undergo the dehumanizing process of preparing to relocate to Brazil within Japan’s National Emigrant Center in Kobe. Ishikawa’s narrative of the struggle of emigrants from his home region departing for Brazil reflected his own experiences. After dropping out of university at twenty-five years old, Ishikawa received a government subsidy that gave him free passage to Brazil as an assistant supervisor of Japanese emigrants. Once he arrived in South America, he worked for a month on a coffee plantation in Santo Rosa, near São Paulo, then spent a month in the city before returning to Japan to get married.⁴⁷ Thus, in some ways, *Sōbō* is an example of Ishikawa writing about his personal experiences. He portrayed his protagonists as displaced individuals from his home district of Japan, Akita Prefecture, desperately seeking a better life abroad.

While several scholars have examined *Sōbō* as a paradigmatic example of the outflux of Japanese migrants to Brazil, far fewer have

Fiction and Film (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), 66 (accessed June 11, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvn83q.7>).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 57–87.

⁴⁷ The plantation’s name was the Fazenda Santo Antonio. See Reiko Tachibana, “Loss and Renewal in Three Narratives of the Nikkei Brazilian Diaspora,” *Japan Review* 29 (2016), 146.

considered the significance of the region from which many of these sojourners departed. Indeed, the title of Ishikawa's work implies a specific positionality of the author and his readers, one of a decidedly domestic Japanese perspective, a story of the forging of emigrant identities that starts before leaving Japan proper. The title of the work sets the tone for this exploration, with literary scholar Reiko Tachibana arguing that the title could be translated as "All People" or as "Dispersed People," signaling Ishikawa's intention to evoke "translocation through its use of uncommon Chinese characters...implying such transitory individuals as nomads and migrants."⁴⁸ An English translation in the journal titled *The East*, published in serial form between 1985–1986, rendered it "The Emigrants." In many ways, these possible English translations prove the generally accepted interpretation that Ishikawa's work offers a scathing critique of Imperial Japan's project of promoting emigration to Brazil as disingenuous and full of false promises. As Tachibana argues in her 2016 article, "the title suggests the author's empathy with and sympathy for people and ignorant emigrants who, like grass, are repeatedly trodden down, yet were resilient enough to survive."⁴⁹ However, only some critics consider the particular "where" from which these individuals emigrated, not merely from Japan, but from areas of biographical importance to Ishikawa, like the Tohoku region in general and the Akita prefecture in particular. The choice of "*Sōbō*" as a title for this story of emigrant translocation can thus provide insight into the distinctive perspective Ishikawa wished to articulate in his work: dispersal, displacement, and ignorance.

Native place and domestic spaces constitute underlying themes in this work, with Ishikawa characterizing the Emigrant Center in Kobe as a transitional space from domestic Japan. In turn, authentic geographic places become de-territorialized and re-inscribed as these mobile sojourners prepare to become official "emigrants." Indeed, the first words spoken by officials to these migrants are the terse query "Who are you?" followed by the phrase "*Doko da?* [from where?]" The emigrant's reply is confusing, so the official presses further by asking, "Where...What prefecture?" Finally understanding

⁴⁸ Tachibana, "Loss and Renewal," 149. Tachibana is building on the linguistic analysis of the title done by Iwaya Daishi, "Ishikawa Tatsuzō, Hito to sakuhin," *Showa bungaku zenshū*, vol. 11 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1988), 1064.

⁴⁹ Tachibana, "Loss and Renewal," 149.

the question, the man, Ōizumi Shinnosuke, emphasizes his emigrant identity. He affirms that he is from Akita, replying with exaggerated politeness and revealing his local dialect.⁵⁰

This classification becomes crucial in the ordeal that follows, as officials summon each family in an order based on their prefecture of origin, beginning with Hokkaido and moving south to Aomori, Akita, Iwate, et cetera.⁵¹ These categories sort migrants into not just prefectures but also regions, allowing them to traverse the dehumanizing process of medical inspection and admittance to the Center. Moreover, they provide an effective connection to home amidst the sterile realities of celluloid bags containing meal tickets hung around their necks and sleeping quarters filled with rows of beds.

While Ōizumi Shinnosuke's outward answer to the Japanese government official's question is succinct and obsequious, a few paragraphs later, Ishikawa provides readers a window into his internal musings about the home he has left behind. Watching the endless arrival of nameless migrants at the center, Ōizumi recalls the mountains and rivers of his hometown where he had "left a leaning house, a medium-sized farm whose ripe wheat lay under a blanket of snow, and the memory of a long struggle."⁵² He had said farewell to his ancestral home, made offerings at the graves that held his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, and sold his house and farm. For Ōizumi, his native place means a long ancestry buried in the soil of Akita and its geography of territorial markers of mountains and rivers. However, despite the comfort of traveling in a group that he expected to include his next-door neighbors, he stands cheek and jowl with strangers. All they have in common is that they depart Japan for the same place (or, at least, so it appears to him initially). However, it does not take long for him to discover commonality with some of his fellow travelers: a commonality again tied to his newly portable native place affiliation.

As they come to terms with their transit space, the question of "where" grows in importance since the emigrants' first disorienting night in

⁵⁰ Ishikawa Tatsuzō, *Sōbō* (Akita: Akita Sakigake shinposha, 2014), 8. For example, he used *shi* instead of *su* at the end of verbs, a common feature of the dialect of Akita prefecture.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 9. Translation from Ishikawa Tatsuzō, "The Emigrants 1," *The East* 21/3 (1985), 63.

the center. Conversations between roommates start with the question of “where are you from,” and those who share an emigrant native place regard their common origins as the basis of friendships based on that obvious connection:

“You are from Akita Prefecture, aren’t you?” “I’m from Yuzawa”...“I’m from Tazawa.” A friendly conversation began as smoothly as thread unwinding from a spool. Unlike intellectuals meeting for the first time, they enjoyed a conversation free of vanity, investigation, caution and contempt, and soon became friends. Besides, they were all there for the same reason. Having despaired a livelihood in Japan, they all harbored the common sorrow born of the necessity to migrate to some place where they could begin again.⁵³

This marking of place that resulted in camaraderie, in turn, entailed a deeper and more ominous meaning for Ishikawa, the severing of attachments necessary not by choice but owing to the realities of the 1930s Akita experience:

That they were soon on good terms was attributable to their common sorrow. While chatting good-naturedly with one another, they began to feel for the first time encouraged and relieved of the various tribulations of the past several days: they had been busy disposing of their household effects, taking care of miscellaneous affairs, bidding farewell to farms whose cultivation had consumed all of their energy, making preparations for the trip. They could not help but associate their departure with death, and so they hesitated to depart, and felt oppressed, gloomy, and dejected.”⁵⁴

Thereby removed from their homes in Akita, the identity of these migrants becomes transportable across the “transnational village” of Tohoku. The safe harbor in this storm of displacement is the common history of being “from” the same place: Akita.

⁵³ Ishikawa, *Sōbō*, 17. Translation from “The Emigrants 1” *The East*, 66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Ishikawa's text criticizes the Japanese government during the turbulent 1930s. He explicitly gestures to a host of push factors that motivate these common Japanese subjects to uproot their lives and set sail for Brazil. During the first years of the Great Depression, an economic downturn that only exacerbated the difficult conditions in Japan's rural northeast, *Sōbō* starkly discusses how these emigrants lacked anything to tie them to Japan.⁵⁵ The depression began in the 1930s and would be essentially over by 1935 when Ishikawa published *Sōbō*.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, during those five years, this economic crisis proved devastating for rural areas like Akita, spreading across many aspects of daily life: Rice and silk prices plummeted; the urban-industrial economy collapsed simultaneously, amplifying the harm to rural communities; and farm families struggled under persistent rural debt that inhibited their ability to balance income and expenditure.⁵⁷ According to the historian Kerry Smith, rapid urbanization resulted in rural areas losing population to the city for its vibrant urban culture, which many rural observers viewed as distasteful frivolity and decadence.⁵⁸

Even so, the most significant change for regionalism in Brazilian emigration projects stemmed from rural advocates who grew in strength and numbers starting in the 1920s. After 1931, as Sandra Wilson has argued, some of these activists looked to emigration to Greater Japan as a valve to relieve the pressures of rural life, only to receive a lukewarm response from farmers.⁵⁹ Before the invasion of Manchuria and the creation of a puppet state there, many of these advocates argued for the relocation of rural poor to other sovereign nation-states, yet the options had been severely reduced following the racially-motivated immigration legislation restricting Japanese migration that swept through the United States, Canada, and Australia. For many,

⁵⁵ For more on the impacts of the global depression on Japan in general and Tohoku in particular, see Kerry Smith's *A Time of Crisis: Japan, the Great Depression, and Rural Revitalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁵⁶ Smith, *A Time of Crisis*, 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Sandra Wilson, "Securing Prosperity and Serving the Nation: Japanese Farmers and Manchuria, 1931–33," in Ann Waswo and Nishida Yoshiaki, eds., *Farmers and Village Life in Twentieth-century Japan* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003): 169–171.

therefore, the answer lay in Brazil. In Jeffrey Lesser's foundational work *Negotiating National Identity*, for example, he recounts nationalist fears among Brazilians that their country would be "forced to kowtow to an expanding and imperialist 'Shin Nippon' (New Japan)."⁶⁰ This concern arose from the creation of Japan's Overseas Emigration Federation in 1927, establishing the *Brasil Takushoku Kumiai* (Brazil Colonialization Corporation, BRATAC). By 1929, BRATAC had acquired four large tracts of land near São Paulo and provided millions of yen to create a system where any Japanese migrant could make a down payment in order to receive passage to Brazil, complete with a 25-hectare lot upon which to settle.⁶¹

Ishikawa asserts, however, in his "typically straightforward Tohoku-style prose," as identified by the Akita City library director in a 2009 pamphlet, that these migrants did not embrace the government's entreaty to set forth as an act of patriotism.⁶² Instead, they sought to flee deplorable conditions: a Japan mired in scandal and poverty in which they no longer thrived but struggled to survive. While the main characters speak about the poverty of Akita prefecture, other characters expand that commentary to encompass other regions. One example is the dialog from Katsuta-san, a man identified as hailing from Shinshū in Nagano prefecture, who declares how "all things considered, Japanese agriculture is – well, I think – hopeless...What's worse is that the situation seems to be deteriorating year by year. I concluded I should not remain in Japan and had better make a new start as soon as possible...That's why I'm going to Brazil."⁶³ These people

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 101.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Hōjō, Tsunagu, "Ishikawa Tatsuzō no bungaku" [Literature of Ishikawa Tatsuzō], Ishikawa Tatsuzō Memorial Room pamphlet, Akita City Central Library's Local Literature Room (*kyōdo bungakukan*).

⁶³ Ishikawa, "Emigrants 1," *The East*, 69. Ishikawa's choice to write about migration to Brazil itself also reflects a growing hostility toward "white settler" countries that counter to the overarching Malthusian-inspired rationale for overseas migration: that migration was one of the only viable outlets for Japanese population pressures. Brazil was an outlet for the internal push factors of the global depression and rural poverty on the one hand and

departed less for the opportunity that Brazil might provide than for the lack of such in Japan.

Beyond the general economic and agricultural climate of particular significance to emigrants from Japan's rural northeast, *Sōbō* invokes numerous domestic scandals surrounding corrupt officials and what many considered the international diplomatic debacle of the London Naval Conference of 1930.⁶⁴ At this conference, widely covered in Japan and directly referenced through the eyes of multiple emigrants in Ishikawa's work, Japanese officials agreed to expand on the already unequal limitations of a 5:5:3 ratio that allowed the British and Americans to deploy five tons of naval warships on the Pacific but limited the Japanese to only three tons.⁶⁵ The allusion to the London Naval Conference in Ishikawa's work on Japanese emigration signals a growing discontent with the domestic as well as international politics that appeared to institutionalize the international perceptions of Japanese racial inferiority.⁶⁶

the external pressures of a growing pattern of institutionalized diplomatic racism on the other.

⁶⁴ This treaty expanded the definitions of regulated classes of vessels to include a number of previously unlimited classes, such as submarines, all classes that the Japanese navy during the previous decade had worked hard to develop to guard against the Pacific becoming an "American lake." Adding insult to injury, while the Washington Conference had merely limited shipbuilding to maintain the extant ratios after WWI, the London Conference effectively stopped the Japanese from producing any new heavy cruisers that reduced Japan's strength vis-à-vis the other powers. For more, see David Evans and Mark Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Navy*, especially 237.

⁶⁵ The 5:5:3 ratio outlined in the Five-Power Treaty (Washington Naval Treaty) of 1922–1923 placed limits on the most powerful weapon then in existence, the construction of battleships, battlecruisers, and aircraft carriers. It was based on a ratio of tonnage that granted the UK and US five tons of carriers each while limiting Japan to three tons. The other signatories, Italy and France, agreed to limit their naval arms limitations to 1.67 tons each.

⁶⁶ Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient*, 181–182. While Japan did get a seat at the table as one of the Big Five powers after WWI, Japanese diplomats failed to get the statement of racial equality into the preamble to the covenant of the

The musings one Brazil veteran in the Emigration Center shares with new emigrants display this frustration with modernity's impacts on Japan's national and international prestige. A man toiling for four years on a coffee plantation stands for the voice of a realist who does not see Brazil as paradise but rather as a land where all that is good in Japan can be transplanted into exotic soil. Indeed, he reflects on Brazil as almost an escape, a place where life might be challenging, but the day-to-day turmoil associated with modernity does not prevail. He argues that, while life in Brazil is difficult, he appreciated not knowing about the events in the outside world beyond his small Brazilian village. For him, ignorance was bliss. However, after returning to Japan months before, even while he stayed with family in an out-of-the-way place in Okayama Prefecture (outside of Tohoku), the realities of modern Japan could not be ignored. Every corner of Japan was connected, rendering ignorance of the daily news virtually impossible. Reflecting on the influx of bad news he had learned over the past months, such as government officials taking bribes, economic conglomerates that "unpatriotically" profited from Japan's economic downturn, accusations of violating election law, companies laying off large numbers of employees, and prosecution of possible communist organizers. He considers that they all "reflected the corruption of the political and financial worlds."⁶⁷ For him, the news of each event extinguished his "hopes for Japan and made him despair for its future, which he believed was dim. He wished he had been ignorant of those events. He felt nothing for Japan. Indeed, he was waiting for the day of his departure with the feeling of escape."⁶⁸

Ishikawa's work does not paint life in Akita prefecture in the 1920s–1930s in a positive light. In the 1985–1986 translations of *Sōbō* in the journal *The East*, the introduction highlights how this work merits particular note and a translation because of "its graphic illustration of the actual conditions of Japanese emigrants at a time when Japan's farming villages were abysmal pockets of poverty."⁶⁹ While the individuals emigrating from such rural areas in his literature have great nostalgia for the family and ancestry left behind,

League of Nations and rising immigration problems in many white settler nations proved that the negatives of modernity overshadowed the positives.

⁶⁷ Ishikawa, "The Emigrants 1," *The East*, 70.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

their commentary demonstrates a realization that staying in their native places in Tohoku would have robbed them of a future and the chance to thrive.

Interestingly, despite these opposing views on Akita expressed in his famous work on pre-war Brazil migration, Ishikawa has enjoyed a revival in contemporary, twenty-first-century Japan, and local history enthusiasts residing in Akita today revere him as a local hero. Organizations like Akita city's Youth Action Group have celebrated Ishikawa in campaigns to promote Akita during its "*furusato* [native place] movement."⁷⁰ Today, he has an entire exhibition dedicated to his life at the Akita City library titled "Furusato and Literature 2016: *Ishikawa Tatsuzō's Akita*" that features not only his work on Brazil but also his groundbreaking writings on the Pacific War, sketches, personal letters, and documents relating to his youth in Akita. In the brief biography written by Akita City Central Library's Hōjō Tsunagu, Ishikawa is remembered as a man of "unassuming moral courage" who deeply loved Akita prefecture thanks to his deep bloodlines.⁷¹ According to Hōjō, this manifested not only in the content of his works but also in his writing style that constructed "sturdily built, Tohoku-like" narratives.⁷²

The Immobile Emigrant Adrift: Viewing Modernity in the In-Betweens

This article has shown how regional stereotypes proved integral to the character development in two of Japan's most acclaimed works of fiction of the 1930s. Both *Kanikōsen* and *Sōbō* relied on assumed understandings of seemingly contradictory realities embodied in the mobile Tohoku body: first, that they comprised a significant part of the Japanese diaspora, and second, that the space they were leaving embodied a parochial site of immobility. By the Taisho period (1912–1926), writers, politicians, and ordinary people increasingly imagined Japan's Tohoku region – and indeed much of rural Japan – as the site of authenticity and tradition, often linked to a naïve but persistent belief in folk superstitions that defied the rationality demanded by western modernity.⁷³ By the 1910s, the internal and international acceptance

⁷⁰ Pamphlet for the Ishikawa Exhibit at the Akita City Library, collected in summer 2018. The Akita City's Youth Action Group is my translation for 秋田市動合青年会.

⁷¹ Hojo, "Ishikawa Tatsuzō no bungaku."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ For more on Japanese encounter with modernity and quest to preserve the rapidly disappearing subcultures by establishing tradition, see Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago:

of Japan as a modern nation-state resulted in a kind of domestic backlash, with key thinkers in Japan proper searching for articulations of “tradition” to combat the alienation that accompanied modernity.

The transformation of rural Tohoku into a synecdoche for tradition, paradoxically, required the division of “immigrant” and “emigrant” histories as well as the occlusion of networks of “mobile Tohoku.” Empirically, people might leave the region, but in so doing, they left Tohoku history not just by proximity but also by becoming exposed to modernity. According to Tokyo intellectuals like Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) and members of the *Minzokugaku* movement he spearheaded, it was precisely those who stayed in Tohoku who should be seen as representative of authentic Japanese-ness, an authenticity defined by a lack of modernity only achieved through immobility.

There is great significance in how both Kobayashi and Ishikawa were born in Akita prefecture and spent their childhood in Japan’s north. Depicting their characters as authentic but also as prisoners of geographic fate who could not make ends meet in their native places, each author vividly portrayed how these men and women are simply struggling to survive in the modern world while being exploited by their fellow citizens. But overlooked in analyses of these famous authors (or infamous, depending on the era) is the omnipresent portrayal of the mobile Tohoku body. Seeing their characters as in transit in spaces away from their home but between state boundaries allow English-speaking scholars to experience each character existing as both emigrant and immigrant. Kobayashi and Ishikawa express great sympathy for the exploited residents of Tohoku; however, they still utilize characters as an avatar of Japanese rustics, as provincial people shocked upon their first encounter with the dystopic modern. As such, they reify the stereotype of Tohoku as the homeland for mobile and immobile Japanese subjects.

University of Chicago Press, 1995). An excellent work discussing the way that Tohoku fit into various movements related to preserving folk traditions in the modern period, see Kim Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).