

Home as Performance: The Reproduction and Resistance of Home by Workers in the Japanese Tourist Industry
by Chris McMorran

Chapter Two: Methods

“Messy” Ethnography

Geographer Kim England once remarked, “Fieldwork is inherently confrontational in that it is the purposeful disruption of other people’s lives” (1994, 85). Fieldwork is indeed disruptive and messy, yet many publications based on ethnographic fieldwork simplify what is, in fact, a tortuous experience. Scholars often present a linear research process with a straightforward narrative of “how I did it,” as if there were a clear set of goals – “it” – set out in the beginning, that were easily accomplished through the methods described. Such stories deprive readers of the errors, luck, insights, and kindnesses that significantly contribute to turning what is often an incoherent mess of disruptions, tenuous relationships, and (eventually) data into something recognizable as a dissertation, book chapter, or journal article.

In this chapter, I discuss how issues of access and positionality affected my research, as well as how I chose the methods employed. My hope is to convey the colorful messiness of ethnography, and thereby provide the reader with a useful context from which to understand how I reached my conclusions. In doing so, I wish to complicate what others often present as a linear research process with obvious conclusions.

After finishing my fieldwork in Japan I stumbled upon Mike Crang and Ian Cook’s *Doing Ethnographies*, which celebrates the messiness of ethnography, and encourages scholars to write ethnographies that reflect their messiness to readers (2007). They complain, “the shifting, tangent-ridden, circuitous and continually reorganized nature of research” that comprises ethnography “is translated into a neat, linear, orderly, chunked up and certain argument” in the dissertation and other publications (*ibid.*, 171). Crang and Cook decry the

common reticence to admit one's failures and dead ends. Overall, this is "a deceit that's often necessary for us to be seen to be researchers" (*ibid.*, 171). They encourage others to write montage, in a non-linear and disjointed fashion that evokes the ways that the data itself was experienced and collected.

I, too, believe that it is instructive to tell the confusing and confused story of doing ethnography. Although many things went right with my research, I also encountered unexpected problems along the way that threw up roadblocks to the research that led me in new and eventually helpful directions. These moments deserve to be mentioned. Overall I feel that an extended discussion of the methods used in this dissertation will not only clarify why certain choices were made, but also admit to the complications involved in the research. I will discuss the participant observation and interviews used in this research, as well as the limitations that accompanied these choices. Thus, I locate myself in the project and point out the consequences of my methodological choices. This research was difficult. It required making many choices, and it required having some choices made for me. To not address these issues directly leaves too many questions unanswered, or worse, leaves the impression that no questions need to be asked about the research process.

I do not use the words "locate myself in the project" lightly. This is an explicitly geographical project, so the physical location of all actors in the study, including the nakai, owners, guests, and myself, is critical. In this chapter, I discuss issues of access and positionality as they relate to the research. Both of these terms have meanings related to both social ties and geographical location. Access refers to my constant negotiation with others during the research – from the larger issues of how I originally chose the research site and which ryokan I could visit, to what spaces of the workplace were off limits to me and how my association with a particular ryokan could affect access to other ryokan.

Research in a tourist destination presents far fewer initial roadblocks than research in, say, a prison, a diamond mine, or even an executive office (Mullings, 1999; Thomas, 1995). Tourist sites tend to be easily accessible and visitors are actively welcomed. However, the same qualities that seem to make tourist destinations easy to study can also create the greatest research obstacles. First of all, tourist destinations are structured specifically to welcome money-spending visitors. Even the planned display of backstage areas is done for tourists, not scholars (MacCannell, 1999). Therefore, as a researcher in tourist space, I had to constantly justify and negotiate my presence. I had to find ways to access areas typically only open to staff, while trying not to be a nuisance.

Kim England refers to positionality as “the relationship between the researcher and those being researched,” which necessarily involves complex relations of power (1994, 80). My positionality was constantly negotiated, not only by myself, but also by others, often without my knowledge. This negotiation took place before arriving in Japan in my search for an academic affiliation and a ryokan willing to host me, during the research itself through my use of personal connections to open doors to new research sites, and after the fieldwork was complete as I worked through the process of writing the final dissertation. My positionality was complicated by the fact that it depended upon my relationship with each individual in the site, as well as the duration and nature of each relationship, the effects of other actors upon each relationship, and even the time of day in which encounters occurred. The fact that the research site was a tourist destination did nothing to reduce the importance of positionality in the study. In fact, as I found, the complex power relations that shape tourist destinations, stemming primarily from land ownership and labor control, are often hidden from view precisely in order to preserve an overall harmonious effect. Indeed, the friendly smiles of workers help conceal any dissatisfaction they may have with working conditions. Therefore, my research into the human relations found in ryokan required a delicate negotiation of my

position with respect to workers and the powerful local elites who recruit and manage labor, as well as among the workers themselves.

Problems of Access

When I first formally studied the institution of the ryokan in 2001, I set out to understand the use of nostalgic rural elements to attract visitors. I attempted to read this tourist landscape to better understand contemporary Japanese culture, with a focus on an awakened longing for nostalgic places that feel both familiar and uncommon, which has been traced to the 1980s (see Ivy, 1995). My study centered on the built environment in Kurokawa Onsen and the economic relations between urban and rural Japan that helped produce destinations like it (McMorran, 2002). I focused my study on the work done by ryokan owners. Therefore, I admittedly privileged the owners' voices, while neglecting the stories and experiences of the large labor pool that actually reproduces the ryokan on a daily basis, while the owners mostly remain behind the scenes.

I later sought to rectify this omission by turning my focus to ryokan workers. My project coupled a two-page labor survey with informal interviews, which I began in 2003. However, while I had found it relatively easy to contact and schedule appointments with ryokan owners, meeting with their staff proved to be virtually impossible. I met major obstacles to free access soon after entering the first ryokan. As the reader will see, I had trouble getting past the lobby, which was necessary to meet potential research subjects. It was not my first time to enter a ryokan. I had stayed as a guest in at least half a dozen ryokan prior to that. But it was my first time entering a ryokan without relaxation, delicious meals, and a luxurious bath on my mind. And this difference was significant.

“*Irasshaimase.*” A young man in a simple dark blue uniform warmly greeted me as I stepped into the *genkan* (lobby), and I momentarily lost myself in the reassuring position of a

guest in a country renowned for its customer service. The lobby's highly polished wooden floor glowed a deep, dark brown, and the flower arrangement by the door had a rustic simplicity quite different from those I had seen in the large hotels of Osaka and Tokyo. Continuing to smile, the young man motioned toward the front counter. The clerk's friendly demeanor immediately set me at ease, and I hoped that this would translate into open reception of my research. Joining him at the counter, I offered my name card, indicating my affiliation with a well-known Japanese university, and I began to explain my research project and purpose for visiting his ryokan.

It soon became clear that since I was neither an overnight guest nor a day visitor for the bath, the clerk was unsure how to react. He interrupted my research explanation with various hesitant "ehh... 's", as he was faced with a situation for which he had received no training. Soon it was clear that not only was I unable to justify my unexpected presence in that space, but also I had become a nuisance. The telephone began ringing. Then someone came to pick up the day's laundry, and another dropped off fresh-cut flowers for the inn's vases, all while guests stopped for a bath. I wanted to ask this young man about his work experience and his relationship with the ryokan owners, but the lobby had not been designed for this tangential purpose (for a similar experience of research in a hotel, see Adler & Adler, 2004). He was prepared to play the role of front desk clerk to my role of guest. Because I did not fulfill my role, he could not fulfill his, and we struggled to communicate. I wanted to meet the dozens of other workers in the building. However, I could feel him pulling away, sealing off access both to himself and the others. In meetings with clerks at other ryokan, I again interfered with their jobs. In rare cases when a clerk was not too busy to talk, the answers felt forced. The clerk's role as a polite, welcoming individual required him or her to assist me, even if this contradicted his or her real desires. And all of this talk with front desk clerks still did not get me past the lobby.

While scholars frequently visit ryokan in this region of Kumamoto, they usually only meet with ryokan owners, to ask about the “secrets of their success.” Or they meet with tourists, to investigate their consumer choices in the hopes of recreating this region’s success elsewhere (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun Joho Senta, 2000; Matsuda, 2001; 2004; Nonaka and Katsumi, 2004). As a researcher curious to speak with employees, I was out of place, a transgressive and incomprehensible individual interfering with and complicating each clerk’s day. Needless to say, access to the rest of the ryokan was not forthcoming.

Part of my difficulty stems from the spatial organization of the ryokan, which resembles a Japanese home. The *genkan* is considered a liminal space that can be both public and private, while the rooms beyond the entrance become increasingly private and off-limits. In many homes, a visitor can freely open an unlocked front door and step inside after saying a perfunctory *shitsureishimasu* (excuse me). Most interaction with salespeople and other non-guests occurs in this space. Only houseguests are invited to remove their shoes and actually enter the home. However, access to many spaces of the house, like the bedrooms and kitchen, is often denied to guests.¹ The ryokan’s lobby resembles a home’s *genkan*. Because the door to the ryokan usually remains open during the day, anyone can freely access the lobby. But non-guests are unlikely to be invited to proceed past the entrance. And even guests are not permitted full access to all spaces of the ryokan. They cannot enter other guests’ rooms, of course, but they are also not allowed to enter the kitchen, pantry, office, and other workspaces of the inn. None of this came as any surprise to me, but my curiosity attracted me to these spaces, since these were the spaces I needed to access in order to write about the work and worker relations in a ryokan.

¹ An exception to this rule occurs in small homes where a *tatami* room serves as the dining room (and thus a reception room for guests) in the daytime and the bedroom at night. Futons and other items used for sleeping are kept in a closet in the daytime. This is typically the case in a ryokan guestroom as well.

Positionality

Gaining access to the ryokan's workspaces relates directly to my position in the site. At issue was the fact that despite its public feel, the ryokan is private property. Thus, I was ethically required to obtain permission from the inn's owners before talking to any workers on site. I was aware of the importance of personal introductions to gaining access to information and people in Japan; however, when it came to speaking with workers, I was wary of using employers as my intermediary, for this would create a relationship in which the employer was a powerful gatekeeper to the research site (Crang & Cook, 2007, 21-22; Oakes, 2005; Mullings, 1999). A local contact suggested that I ask ryokan owners to *convince* their workers to cooperate with my study. However, I strove to avoid an experience similar to that of Beverly Mullings, who interviewed managers and workers in information processing firms in Jamaica in her study of global economic restructuring. One manager told his employees, "Go and answer the questions that the lady outside want[s] to know" (1999, 342). Needless to say, the workers in her study were reluctant to participate, and those who did often feared that Mullings would reveal their responses to management or even the government.

I wanted to ensure the voluntary participation of my research subjects; therefore, I was eager to avoid using the subtle or overt pressure of employers. The demographics and personal histories of the ryokan labor force added further concern to the problem of voluntary participation. As I stated in Chapter One, the majority of ryokan employees are *nakai*, the women who serve the evening and morning meals and clean guestrooms after checkout. The ryokan is a well-known employment option for women who are divorced, widowed, or otherwise separated from the relative economic security of marriage. In addition to the regular income, housing, uniforms, and meals provided by ryokan, some large ryokan even offer free or subsidized childcare. These conditions make work in a ryokan especially attractive to young mothers going through divorce or fleeing an abusive relationship and

other women who might otherwise find themselves homeless. Therefore, a ryokan job provides more than just a paycheck for many female employees; it is also a social and economic safety net in lieu of marriage. Since these were the people with whom I most wanted to speak, I did not wish to take advantage of their vulnerability to their employers. My questions about work histories and relations between workers and employers were very private and potentially sensitive. Thus, I had to approach them delicately. I could not simply ask employers to *make* their workers meet with me. If I did so, what kind of answers could I hope to receive? Why would workers choose to speak honestly with me?

One potential solution to these problems was to bypass permission of the ryokan owners altogether and speak with staff outside their workplaces. This promised the benefit of reducing the guest-host interaction that I had experienced with front desk clerks, in which I sensed them feeling forced to accommodate me due to their role in the space of the ryokan entrance. Meeting ryokan workers away from their workplaces would also eliminate any participation due to pressure from their employers. We would just be two people having a conversation. But this idea also had problems. How would I identify someone as a ryokan worker? Would I wait outside the employee entrance of inns and hand out business cards? Would I hang out at local bars after 10:00 pm and hope to meet a worker and hope for a snowball effect? And would workers even talk about their work experiences and relations without the permission of their employers?

While thinking about these problems, a more practical question arose: *when* would I meet workers? My prior idea of long evening talks at informants' dinner tables quickly evaporated the more I learned about the ryokan staff's demanding work schedules. In all tourist destinations workers must adapt to the needs and rhythms of guests, and this was certainly the case in ryokan, where the bulk of the labor involves preparing and serving dinner and breakfast, as well as cleaning guestrooms after checkout. Thus, most employees

(except for front desk clerks) work from approximately 7:30 am to 12:00 pm, then again from 3:00 pm to the end of the day, usually 9:00 or 10:00 pm. This long and staggered work schedule left only three hours in the middle of the day during which I could feasibly conduct interviews. However, I soon discovered that workers cherished these hours for running errands, taking walks, watching television, or most commonly, napping, a common habit amid the ten to eleven-hour workday. And most workers have only five or six days off per month, during which they catch up on laundry, visit relatives, or escape to elsewhere to shop and relax. In most cases, I could not ask workers to sacrifice this precious time.

Stuck in Neutral?

This initial attempt to study labor relations in ryokan brought a great deal of self-doubt. It also speaks to the messiness of this kind of research. It was unreasonable to spend endless days sitting in ryokan lobbies, disturbing clerks or just watching them work from across the room. The spatial organization of the ryokan and the roles expected to be performed there were incongruous with the practice of fieldwork as I had envisioned it. How could I move beyond the lobby and be physically present in a ryokan without being considered a guest? Moreover, how could I speak with ryokan workers without becoming intertwined in a complex web of power relations in which the workers potentially felt at risk of losing much more than just a job? How could I receive approval from their employers to be in ryokan space, yet avoid the coerced participation of workers? Lastly, and certainly not least, how could I convince these potentially vulnerable and mostly female workers to confide in a foreign male researcher?

Clearly, my research questions and the specific characteristics of the fieldwork site meant that there was no single, perfect methodological solution. I had to balance constraints of space and time, the “where and when” of research, with more conceptual, yet no less

critical, worries about negotiating my presence within and around various matrices of power. As a relatively young, non-Japanese male investigating mostly older Japanese women, I had to try to offset the power differential that could arise from our vast differences. I had to avoid being seen as an outside expert or a spy working for the ryokan owner. I did not want to trivialize or romanticize the work as quaintly “cultural” or “traditional.” And although I would have ultimate control over the collection and interpretation of the data, I wanted to conduct the fieldwork in a way that minimized my immediate power as much as possible. In other words, I wanted to conduct research as if a fly on the wall, without leaving any trace of my presence or becoming involved in human relationships, which always involve potential imbalances of power. In the time since, I have come to realize that my conception of fieldwork was naïve and idealistic. It was as if I imagined that I could have a scientist’s objectivity merely by spending enough time and energy acknowledging the impossibility of objectivity.

By the end of that first brief visit to the research site in 2003, I left with more questions than I began with. The survey that I had passed out to front desk clerks and later collected was of very little use. I had a response rate of around 25%, but I lacked faith in the survey. The results were several columns of numbers that gave me no feeling for what kind of people worked in the ryokan. The survey could not reveal the reasons that workers chose this line of work, how they learned the job, or how they related to their coworkers and employers. Admittedly, my visions of going “behind the scenes” to see what work in a ryokan was “really” like were romantic and naïve, akin to an ethnographic desire of going “native.” However, I felt strongly that no credible analysis of a workplace was possible without an intimate knowledge of the location and the work conducted there. This required access to the site.

The problems associated with my positionality were more difficult to overcome. I could not access a ryokan for research purposes without the owner's approval. I could have remained covert about my research intentions and applied directly for a position at a ryokan. This method has been used by several scholars studying workplaces (e.g. Crang, 1994; Ogasawara, 1998); however, I consider such "undercover" research unethical. Plus, I doubt that as a foreigner I would have been offered a job, especially since the ryokan workforce is nearly 100% Japanese. I likely would have been denied employment because as a non-Japanese, I would not have been expected to know how to do things in "the Japanese way" (*Nihon no yarikata*), an especially important notion in the purposefully Japanese space of the ryokan.

Therefore, I had no choice but to access a ryokan through its owner, and to accept the fact that I would be associated with that owner in all future relations with other people in the area. But, once given access to a ryokan, what would I do? In the past I had shadowed workers and spoken with them as they worked. However, the *nakai's* constant movement, especially when cleaning rooms or delivering food, left them literally tripping over me as they worked. It was not an effective way to make friends or conduct research. Months later Eguchi quipped, "I wondered at the time (when you were shadowing me), 'Who is this strange, noisy foreigner, and why is he following me around asking all these questions?'" Shadowing workers highlighted my privileged position as someone who, in the eyes of workers, was *not* working.

Sawa Kurotani encountered a similar reaction in her research on the lives of Japanese housewives in the United States (Kurotani, 2005). Her research often involved chatting with groups of Japanese women during their informal afternoon meetings at each other's homes, leading the others to consider her an *asobimono*, or one who always plays. She was unable to explain that she was doing her *work*, the research, precisely during the time that the other

women considered break time. I could only avoid similar criticism by doing the same work as the staff. Otherwise, I would have no credibility and no apparent purpose in the research setting.

Eventually my local contact, a bureaucrat at city hall, put me in touch with a former classmate who worked at a ryokan's front desk. Through this connection, he asked the okami if I could work at her ryokan while conducting research. Fortunately, the informal nature of the ryokan industry meant that some obstacles, like a work visa and job contract, were never mentioned. In the end, Okami-san needed an extra body, and I needed access to a ryokan, and a deal was struck.

In deciding to conduct research by working in the research setting, I followed a long tradition of scholars who have used their own labor both as an entry point to the research and as a touchstone from which to explain the phenomena under scrutiny (Cole, 1971; Rohlen, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; Dalby, 1983; Kondo, 1990; Diamond, 1992; Allison, 1994; Roberts, 1994; Ogasawara, 1998; Broadbent, 2003; Dunn, 2004; Whitelaw, 2007). My decision was particularly influenced by Elizabeth Dunn's study of a Polish baby food factory. In Dunn's investigation of the introduction of capitalist practices into Poland, she decided it best to study those workers upon whom was placed the burden of transitioning to a new way of economic and social thought. It was obvious that the only way to study the change among workers was to witness it first hand alongside workers, to see the transitions in their language and bodily movements, and to undergo those transitions herself. Some refer to this as participant observation, noting that as a worker, a researcher can both participate in the activity and observe the work of others. For others, though, the term "participant observation" fails to fully capture the bodily and emotional experience of doing what is being studied. Part of this is due to the term's implicit objectivity. Liza Dalby argues that the term "participant observation" "implies a degree of emotional distance that only creates a false

sense of objectivity” (1983, xv). In referring to his own research conducted while working, Gavin Whitelaw most accurately describes this method as “observant participation” (2007).

Moreover, working in the ryokan placed me within a unique set of relationships of expectation and reliance, obligation and antagonism, which I simply would have missed had I not taken a position in the institution under scrutiny. All researchers in the field find themselves enmeshed in complex relations of power and obligation. But by working in the institution I multiplied those layers of complexity, for I was suddenly part of a hierarchy of workers whose pecking order was neither clear-cut nor static. I soon realized that place matters: different workers garnered more respect in different spaces of the business. No nakai questioned a front staff member while in the lobby, but no one questioned a nakai’s decision in the pantry, which was the staging area for dinner. Similarly, Okami-san expressed total confidence in the lobby, while she did her best to avoid visiting the kitchen. When she did she clearly felt out of place and was easily pushed around by the elderly women who cooked the staff meals. Physical locations empowered certain individuals, a realization that I would have missed had I not experienced the gradually building-up of confidence in those various locations that only comes with time.

Along with my coworkers, I was also able to experience the humility that comes with providing service to a wide range of guests, some of whom are kind and others who treat service staff as invisible or worse. Had I only been an observer of guest-staff interactions or the interactions between staff members, I never would have understood the constant roller coaster of emotions that are mostly hidden by the veneer of a patient smile. I would have missed the feeling of instant gratification that comes with a kind word from a guest. I would have failed to grasp how much one’s job satisfaction is directly tied to the emotions and whims of others. Being a ryokan worker greatly aided my understanding of the constant pressure to present oneself in a particular way in front of guests, to maintain a welcoming

façade that is not altogether false, but stems from a sincere desire to have those caring emotions reflected back again. Seen this way, it seems obvious that any research wishing to understand human relations in a work environment requires that the investigator subject him/herself to some of the same sources of tension as those persons being studied. One must experience the vulnerability of learning a new task and grow to be counted on to assist others in times of relative chaos. So much is lost in a workplace study that does not stem from the shared experience of work.

Positionality: Okami-san

The issue of positionality arose immediately following my move to Yamazakura. I received the access that I desired for the research by accepting a position in the inn. However, in doing so, I also accepted an unrepayable gift of *on* from the ryokan owner. An *on* gift is one that differs significantly from gifts of the *giri* and *ninjō* type, as Matthews Hamabata explains (1990). A *giri* gift is one that is obligatory to ensure the smooth continuity of positive social relations. This can take place among equals, such as friends, coworkers, or neighbors. Hamabata summarizes: “A gift given out of a sense of *giri* reflects and maintains obligatory relationships” (*ibid.*, 1990, 21). A *ninjō* gift, on the other hand, is “deeply personal” and not given out of a sense of obligation. It is given out of one individual’s feelings for another. While *giri* and *ninjō* gifts exist at opposite ends of a continuum of obligation, neither one is inherently implicated in a hierarchical relationship, unlike an *on* gift. According to Hamabata:

“An *on* relationship arises when one receives something from an *on* giver that one, as an *on* receiver, does not have. There is an expectation that this *on* will be repayed (sic). However, since one cannot repay in kind (for one did not have the resource in the first place), the gift given in repayment is qualitatively different and noncomparable; therefore, in essence one can never repay *on*, no matter how hard one tries. As an *on* receiver, one is in a hierarchical relationship, in which one is the subordinate” (*ibid.*, 18-19).

I entered into an *on* relationship with the owner by accepting a position at Yamazakura. Okami-san provided me with a resource (ryokan access) that I did not have prior to meeting her. This is a debt that I can never repay, and one that influenced the way that the research was conducted and the ways that I subsequently write about the experience. Throughout the fieldwork I felt conflicted about my relationship with Okami-san. Although I cannot deny her kindness in assisting me, Okami-san constantly used that kindness to strongly influence my behavior, as well as the behavior of others, for her own benefit.

A constant refrain from my coworkers, as well as from individuals around the resort, was how incredibly kind and generous Yamazakura's okami-san was. I had to agree, of course, for she had been kind enough to give me access to her staff and her business. However, Okami-san's kindness permitted her to make frequent demands on workers that they felt unable to refuse. Most staff members came to the ryokan industry with difficult pasts, and upon receipt of the unrepayable gift of employment, particularly when it was needed most, made them feel personally indebted to Okami-san. The workers sixty years old and above also felt indebted to Okami-san for continuing to employ them despite the fact that their bodies were slowing. Each staff member seemed to have an *on* relationship with Okami-san, and because an *on* debt can never be fully repaid, workers felt obliged to do whatever was asked of them by Okami-san.

Kawaguchi-san (65) exemplifies the sense of obligation felt by many staff members. Several months before I arrived at the inn Kawaguchi had fallen in her home and fractured her hip. Following surgery and recovery, she returned to Yamazakura, despite the fact that she now walked slowly with a limp and could no longer carry trays or do other heavy lifting. She was unable to complete all the duties of a *nakai*, but Okami-san still allowed her to work every day. It is not uncommon for older *nakai* to be fired without recourse when they are unable to keep up with other coworkers, so Kawaguchi was grateful to be able to continue

working. Because Kawaguchi felt she was a burden on the inn, and because she wanted to avoid giving Okami-san justification to fire her, she felt compelled to work whatever days and hours Okami-san requested. In fact, during the entirety of my fieldwork Kawaguchi worked day by day, never knowing if she would work the next day until Okami-san drove her home after lunch. She typically only worked until noon, being able to help with light cleaning duties that are needed in the mornings. However, during days when we served a large group at lunchtime, Okami-san would often ask Kawaguchi on the spot if she could work until 3:00 or 4:00, instead of the usual 12:30. Kawaguchi simply could not refuse, for Okami-san might take any refusal as an insult or as a hint that Kawaguchi's usefulness to the inn was limited. Only by being a maximally flexible worker could Kawaguchi repay her debt to Okami-san and justify her continued employment. Worst of all, the unpredictability of her highly flexible schedule and her willingness (and obligation) to work whenever needed prevented Kawaguchi from scheduling appointments to meet with her physical therapist, which might have led her body back to full strength and herself back to a full working schedule, or even the ability to move to another ryokan if a better opportunity arose. Instead, she was caught in a cycle that prevented her full recovery and kept her indebted to Okami-san for the few hours she worked. Occasionally, I drove Kawaguchi home after lunch, and one day I asked her about her physical therapy and her irregular schedule. Sitting next to me in her blue uniform, her knees patched multiple times, she acknowledged the difficulty of her situation. "I can't afford to take a day off to visit the doctor, since I'm only working half days. I like to work, because it keeps me active, even if I can't move as well as I used to. So whenever Okami-san needs me, I'm available. She's so nice, what else can I do? (*tottemo yasashii no de, shōganai*)."

"*Shōganai*" (nothing can be done) was a common response when I asked workers about situations that seemed unfair to them. For example, when the driver Nishida (57)

frequently complained about his long working days (as many as seventeen hours a day with no breaks), which frequently involved picking up guests from nearby bus stations during what was supposed to be his scheduled break. At the end of each long day we used to bathe together in the large men-only bath. We would recap our days, and he would always conclude his laundry list of complaints by sighing deeply, throwing up his hands, and saying “*shōganai*.” “I only need this job for ten more years, when my daughter will turn twenty years old and become a legal adult. Then my parental responsibility will officially end, and I’ll be able to quit this job and farm full-time.” For the time being, though, he has no choice but to continue to do as he is asked, even when it threatens his safety and violates labor laws, because he must make himself indispensable to the ryokan.

I, too, felt the coercive power of Okami-san’s kindness. For the first four months of my fieldwork, I worked the same schedule as a full-time worker, twelve hours a day, twenty-five days a month. In order to understand the basis of the others’ complaints I had to experience the same unrelenting cycle of ryokan work. These first few months took me through the process of learning the all-important “way” of Yamazakura and to the point where I was a valuable and reliable member of the ryokan team. Only when I was indispensable did I understand the feeling of obligation that pervaded relations within the ryokan. The experience provided incredible first-hand knowledge of the work and relations that constitute the ryokan, as well as hundreds of hours for informal interviews with staff. However, this schedule was physically and mentally demanding and gave me little time to write about the experience. On days that I worked, I spent most of my afternoon break writing fieldnotes or napping, leaving me no time to walk around the resort to meet other possible contributors. I arrived home each day at 10:00 or 10:30 pm, ate a late snack, then wrote for a few more hours, finally stopping in mid-thought to sleep, then rise again 6:00 am and return to work. At this pace of roughly four hours of writing for every twelve hours of

fieldwork, I could not possibly keep up with all of my observations and ideas. I tried to catch up on my days off, but like my coworkers, I, too, used these days to shop, visit family and friends, and catch up on sleep. Clearly, I needed to work fewer hours in order to properly conduct my research. But Okami-san constantly needed me, and I owed her. How could I say no? This became a constant concern, and I was eventually forced to negotiate a more flexible work schedule. However, this change compromised my relations with the rest of the staff, which offered another source of concern about positionality.

Positionality: Coworkers

Accepting a position at Yamazakura led to an ethical question that remains unresolved in my mind to this day. My position as a worker essentially forced others to work with me. Even those who might not have wanted to participate in any ethnographic research suddenly found themselves washing dishes and laying out futons with me. On day one, I introduced myself, described the purpose of my study, and assured all that I would maintain their anonymity and use my observations solely for academic purposes. I passed out copies of my release form, and all staff members read it quickly and verbally agreed to it. But did they really have a choice? To refuse participation would have been difficult in front of their peers and in front of me, especially since I was still considered a guest at that point. And because the inn was incredibly busy, many of them did not care about the research. They were just happy to have a helping hand.

By accepting a position as a worker, I tried to enter relationships with the staff that would offset the differentials of power felt by many scholars in the field. To be sure, I was still an oddity to my coworkers, a foreign man among mostly Japanese women. But as a novice worker, I entered into a significant *sempai-kōhai* (senior-junior) relationship with the others. I was the humble junior relying on my seniors for instruction and advice. Many of

my coworkers, nakai, believe that their poor educational backgrounds mean that they have no knowledge worth sharing. However, I was able to turn any education-based power imbalance on its head, since my advanced degrees were useless in the ryokan. Kim England refers to this as the “researcher-as-suppliant,” which is “predicated upon an unequivocal acceptance that the knowledge of the person being researched (at least regarding the particular questions being asked) is greater than that of the researcher” (1994, 82). While researchers interviewing powerful elites may need to exaggerate their intelligence or importance to gain respect (Mullings, 1999; Schoenberger, 1991), I found that the less I knew about the job but was eager to learn, the more willing the nakai were to both teach me and subsequently open up to me. Although nakai often told me that the job required no skills—“It’s not difficult, anyone can do it”; “This is just what I did as a housewife for twenty years”—my initial ignorance of the proper way to fold a futon or the importance of turning around a guest’s slippers in a doorway showed the nakai that their knowledge trumped institutional learning.

As a relatively short, unthreatening white male, who is married to a Japanese woman and nearly fluent in Japanese, I many things seemed to work in my favor. Had I been larger, I may have found it difficult to maneuver my body in the confined spaces of the ryokan, such as the narrow doorways and staircases and the small busy kitchen. As a white male, I was also given some freedom to make mistakes, particularly with language, that others, particularly second-generation Japanese-Americans, might not have. Looking at me, no Japanese person would expect me to speak Japanese fluently or to understand all of the social cues necessary for true cultural fluency. In fact, my foreignness afforded me just the opposite benefit, permitting me to be measured against a less rigorous model that sometimes felt downright condescending. In the beginning, my coworkers treated any knowledge of Japanese language and culture as an amazing feat, and even at the end of the year of intensive fieldwork, coworkers would occasionally comment on my deftness at using chopsticks at

lunch. It made no difference how many times I explained that I had lived in Japan for over five years or that chopstick use was common among young people overseas. I could not escape my visible foreignness and the accumulated expectations of an entire society. Plus, I had to compete against the occasional visit by a foreign guest who could not use chopsticks or speak Japanese.

Because my study centered on the particularly Japanese economic and cultural space of the ryokan, any initial ignorance of the work necessary to reproduce it and my desire to learn what workers called “*Nihon no yarikata*” (the Japanese way) of domestic tasks minimized any possible power imbalance based on being a foreigner. I had no designs on imposing Western management practices on a Japanese business, and I had no illusions of instructing women in their fifties and sixties how to do domestic tasks that they had performed throughout their adult lives. And as a man in a predominantly women’s world, my eagerness to learn tasks explicitly called “*onna no shigoto*” (women’s work) – cleaning rooms, setting tables, washing dishes, doing laundry – helped diminish any possible power difference due to sex. I was reminded daily of my differences, such as when the nakai praised my ability to launder the ryokan’s towels and joked, “You do nice work. You should be a woman!” However, purposefully placing myself in a position subordinate to the workers enabled me to gain my coworkers’ trust and observe their interactions (England, 1994).

From day one, my coworkers took advantage of my subordinate position. They frequently assigned me the least desirable jobs, in a form of training that each of them went through and cited as *ijime*, or bullying. In fact, many nakai admitted that they would rather remain at a ryokan where they were treated poorly than become the newest member of another ryokan and lose their seniority, just to avoid this training again. For instance, the nakai commonly assigned me to vacuum, everyone’s least favorite task in cleaning the guestrooms. The vacuums were old and heavy, and one had to permanently stoop to use

them, leading to endless complaints by nakai. As the newest worker, though, I was not permitted to complain. I had to do my duty to the best of my ability, which would teach me to endure the difficulties of the work and respect those who had done so before me.

I also pre-rinsed the dishes, the most physically demanding and disgusting job in the kitchen. The task involved standing in one place for up to an hour at a time, rinsing each dirty dish so that the uneaten food dropped into a plastic sieve, before placing each dish in the sink for another person to wash. Bent over a tray of dirty dishes, swiveling at the torso, I was a machine working as fast as possible, cleaning the constant flow of dishes that left and then reentered the kitchen. Pre-rinsing mimicked the emotionless factory work of my past. Trays full of dirty dishes got in everyone's way, so I had to rinse them as quickly as possible. And the constant shortage of trays meant that the actual washing could wait, but pre-rinsing could not, or the kitchen would come to a screeching halt.

We collected all of the uneaten food (about fifty pounds a day) in a garbage can, to be later processed in a food waste system. Unfortunately, I did not know that the can must contain only food scraps. One night I threw out several fish that had been decoratively contorted into plating position with daikon rashes and toothpicks. Only later did I realize that the toothpicks could not be thrown out, meaning I had to rummage through the can full of scraps to find ten toothpicks. On other occasions I had to handle used diapers, clean toilets, pick used condoms out of linens, and scrub semen off the bathroom floors. These minor inconveniences were simply part of the job. They were best handled quickly and tactfully. Thinking about them too long only frustrated me and made me imagine that I was wasting my research time. Prior to working at the ryokan I imagined emotional engagement with guests to comprise most ryokan work. I was shocked to find that the majority of my hours were instead spent cleaning, and that time spent with guests offered rare opportunities to relax and enjoy the working day.

Building Respect

In the long run, however, these small humiliating moments paid large dividends in gaining the trust of my coworkers. I accepted my place as lowest in the staff hierarchy. Therefore I had to do the disgusting and unwanted jobs as well. As I was reminded, “everyone had to do it” (*minna shinakya*). Refusing to do any of these tasks would have been a loud statement of my privileged position as an outsider. These minor humiliations were never mentioned when I asked nakai from other ryokan what they didn’t like about their jobs. Could this mean that they didn’t mind doing them? Possibly, but all of the nakai at Yamazakura bristled at these tasks, admitting *in the moment* that it was awful (*taihen*), filthy (*kitanai*), or “the worst” (*sai aku*). It seems these are the things that nakai deal with but choose not to talk about, something I would have never discovered had I not worked in a ryokan.

While I accepted my lot as the junior member of the staff and my duty to do all tasks when necessary, I was also instructed early on to resist doing other people’s work when possible. Ishida-san (55), who eventually became my closest friend in the ryokan, advised me to stand up for myself when something was clearly not my job. She firmly believed in a division of labor within the ryokan: she did her work, cooking staff meals and washing dishes, and let others do theirs. She refused to serve meals or drinks like a nakai, and she never answered the telephone when she visited the front office, even when it rang repeatedly. In this way, she seemed to question the Japanese ideal of cooperative labor, as well as Okami-san’s idealistic notion of the ryokan as a harmonious family. I soon found that she was not alone. Staff members often talked about the importance of working as a group, but did so only when it served their individual interests or when rebuking others for not providing assistance when they needed it.

For instance, each nakai preps three rooms a day. She gathers the dirty towels and

sheets, removes the garbage (bottles and cans, toothbrushes, ashtrays), puts on pillow cases, leaves clean *yukata* (cotton robes) of the appropriate number and color (yellow for female guests, green for male), cleans the tea set, replaces the flowers, wipes the vanity, scrubs the toilet, dusts, and vacuums. Each room takes about forty minutes, so each *nakai* finishes her three rooms in about two hours, between 10:00 and 12:00. Of course, this duration depends on the state of the room. When rooms start tidy, a *nakai* can finish in much less time. On the other hand, if guests leave a pile of empty beer cans, spill tea across the table, neglect to throw their garbage in the receptacle, or leave bath towels draped throughout the room, cleaning can require much more time.

Invariably, when rooms were tidy and required very little preparation, each *nakai* purposefully slowed the pace of her work to reduce her workload to fill the entire two hours. Eguchi was masterful at this. She found ways to carefully arrange the flowers or stack the towels in the closet in order to take more time than necessary. She also enjoyed long chats in the pantry with other *nakai* or the foreign researcher. She claimed that this slower pace was required to meticulously prepare the room for the day's guests. "Every day should be like this, so that we can do our best. When we run around working too quickly (*bata-bata shite iru*), we're more likely to make mistakes." Only with adequate time could one properly prepare the room so that it felt like home. With this justification, Eguchi never finished as soon as possible in order to help other *nakai*. She was not alone. No one ever quickened his or her pace in order to help another worker. Yet, when a *nakai* had a particularly difficult room, she always hinted that others could finish their rooms quickly and assist. A *nakai* who found her rooms in disastrous shape passed the news through Ishida, who collected the bath towels from every room. Hearing the news, Eguchi turned back to her tea set or her towels without hurrying her pace. Like the others, she feigned busy-ness, apologized and said she would come later if she could. "I'm very busy here. I'll help later if I have some time

(isogashii yo, dekireba tetsudau, ato de).” Finally, after dragging her feet to fill the time until 12:00, Eguchi would enter the kitchen for lunch. However, not wanting to be rude and eat before the others, she would then help whatever nakai was not yet finished. These daily struggles to separate the work of the individual from the work of the group show how staff members worked against the idea of the ryokan as home, as well as how they invoked the idea when it served their interests.

The Illusion of Researcher Neutrality

Early on, Ishida encouraged me to refuse being pressured into doing other people’s jobs. I still vividly recall my first attempt at refusing to do whatever I was told by my coworkers. On August 12, just before the rush of Obon, I was busy rinsing dishes in the kitchen when I noticed a hot water pot sitting on the floor halfway between the dining room and me. I had not seen who placed it there or why, and I was too busy to worry about it. A minute later, Kami-san, a relatively younger nakai (58) walked past it and asked to anyone listening, “Why is this pot here?”

Suzuki, who was looking at the day’s guest list and checking her make up in the mirror answered, “I don’t know. Maybe somebody put it there to use later. Just leave it.”

About five minutes later, I was standing next to the pot, pulling some garbage from the dumbwaiter, when Kami walked past, and seeing the pot again said, “Take that pot back with the others.” Because I was busy and did not realize immediately that she was talking to me, she repeated, “Kurusu (Chris), take that pot to the back.”

“I didn’t put it there,” I replied, noticing that her hands were empty, and she was heading in the same direction. “Someone may have put it there on purpose, and I don’t want to move it,” I continued.

Staring at me for a moment, she finally picked up the pot and carried it away,

grumbling under her breath as she went. Suzuki, who had witnessed our encounter, winked at me. When I returned to the sink to wash more dishes, Ishida smiled at me, “That pot is not your responsibility. That’s the nakai’s job, not ours.” I felt slightly liberated in that moment, and I realized later that it was a significant turning point, for I had stood my ground and announced my presence as a fellow worker.

Crang and Cook write that many social scientists imagine that the ideal stance for conducting research is to be “an intelligent, sympathetic, and non-judgmental listener,” an uncommitted observer to the social relations they analyze (Cassell, 1988, cited in Crang & Cook, 2007, 46). In fact, most researchers argue that their credibility as scholars depends on this belief of neutral objectivity. But what kind of person is this neutral observer? According to Crang and Cook, the study’s participants will likely perceive a “neutral” observer as an oddity, or even a non-person. They cite Jacqueline Wade, who argues: “To present oneself as an unalterably ‘neutral’ character in the course of the subjects’ life events courts an impression that that the (researcher) is gullible, amateurish, inane, or uncommitted (or some combination of these) and, thus, unworthy of subjects’ attention and time” (Wade 1984, cited in Crang & Cook, 2007, 46).

Had I been content to be pushed around by my coworkers in order to maintain some delusion of neutral objectivity, I would have lost their respect. I would have simply been a tool to be used at everyone’s whim, instead of an individual with ideas, feelings, and questions worth answering. Therefore, this encounter helped define my positionality. In refusing to be bullied into compromising the ryokan’s internal division of labor, I suddenly had an identity that could be comprehended and respected.

Some researchers imagine themselves to be outside the social relations they study. I argue that this is impossible. Everyone has some position within a given social space, and one’s positionality in the research site can be impacted by any number of factors, from one’s

physical factors like age, sex, nationality, even height and weight, to more subtle, yet important factors, like: Who introduced the researcher to the group? Who has the power to ask questions in the group? Does the researcher pay for people's participation? What prompts participants to assist? All of these questions must be answered in qualitative research in order to provide context for the final analysis.

Shifting Positionality

Working in the ryokan meant sacrificing some freedoms enjoyed by other researchers in the field. I did not have a flexible time schedule that would have allowed me to meet with people at anytime. I could not spend hours each day exploring alleyways and chatting with passersby. However, as I made clear above, flexibility of neither time nor physical movement would have granted me access to backstage areas of ryokan. Also, I found that the mobility often afforded a researcher in the field greatly contrasted the often-restrictive embeddedness of the people I wanted to study (on the researcher's embeddedness, see Kondo, 1990). Therefore, I willingly sacrificed some freedom in order to gain a clearer understanding of the impacts of ryokan work on people's lives. It was only when I tried to recover some of those freedoms that I threatened to undermine my previous gains.

As I stated above, after four months of full-time work, I requested a more flexible schedule from Okami-san. I asked to leave work at 6:00 pm, instead of closing time of 9:30 or later, a schedule similar to that of two kitchen staff. I would work through the afternoon break, making a continuous ten and a half-hour workday, but I would no longer arrive home so late and would be able to write and conduct interviews in the evenings. Okami-san understood my reasoning and eventually adjusted my schedule accordingly. However, this change threatened to jeopardize my standing with the nakai, since I proposed working fewer hours. As long as I remained at the ryokan even part-time, Okami-san had no incentive to

hire a new employee, and my reduction in hours promised only to burden the nakai with extra work. Several days after altering my schedule, I encountered hostility toward my shifting position. One morning I rode in the company van as usual, but instead of working, I used a staff break room as a quiet place to write. That day I planned to write for a few hours, then walk around the resort at midday while staff at other ryokan were on break. This would allow me to meet people I would otherwise have difficulty encountering in the resort. After writing for several hours, I joined the nakai at their usual morning break at 9:45. I wanted some tea and to say hello to these people that I considered my friends.

As I slid open the door to the large dining room I could hear the nakai complaining about the current staff shortage. “Good morning,” I said as I stepped into the room. “Good morning,” several people replied with little energy. Three nakai sat at the low table. One poured everyone green tea, while another handed out souvenirs cookies she had received as left as a tip from departing guests. Three other staff, one nakai and two members from the kitchen, laid on the floor, resting their eyes while waiting for their daily tea and sweets. As I sat down in my usual place at the far corner of the low table, I received a cup of tea from Eguchi. We had ridden the morning bus together, so she was aware of my plan for the day. “How is the studying?” she inquired. I smiled and told her it was coming along well.

Komura (64), a short woman with a round face and a toothy grin, looked up from the day’s schedule and breathed a sigh of relief. “Ahh, Kurisu-san, I’m glad you’re here. You can clean the second floor with me.” Then she looked closely at me and added, “Ehh, where’s your uniform?”

“Actually,” I slowly replied with a tinge of guilt in my voice, “I’m not here to work today. I’m studying in the break room.”

Komura was visibly upset by my response, and she snapped, “What? Why are you here if you’re not working? If you’re not working, I don’t want to see you here. You

shouldn't be here. That's rude," she concluded. As she said this, she rose from the table and left the room, even though the morning break did not conclude for another ten minutes.

I was shocked and speechless. Komura and I had talked at length numerous times. She had shared personal stories of her life as a widow, of her uncomfortable relationship with her daughter-in-law, of her work history and her opinions of Yamazakura and the rest of the staff. But she was suddenly upset with me, simply because I was at the ryokan but not working. I realized in this moment that to her, my position in the ryokan was contingent on my labor. Research *while* working was fine, but when I was not working, I should not be in the workplace. I had shifted roles and I did not belong here.

This incident revealed a belief common among my coworkers that I had to negotiate from the beginning: in the ryokan there are workers and there are guests, but there is no one in between. A non-working individual in the ryokan's workspace is a body out of place. My transgression was being a student at a workers' break, or even more accurately, a non-working worker at a workers' break. My presence personally offended Komura, and possibly others as well. Especially given the overwhelming feeling of insufficient bodies to complete the work, it was as if I were parading my unavailable labor in front of others by visiting them during their break. In this moment I understood that the ryokan was first and foremost a workplace, and not a home, for the employees, despite what Okami-san might say or wish. In the days and weeks that followed, I walked on eggshells around Komura. I went out of my way to assist her, and through my actions, to try to apologize for my transgression. I never mentioned the break time in question again, nor did I openly apologize to her, but she eventually forgave me, for we were soon laughing in the hallways again.

Over time, the rest of the staff became accustomed to my reduced working hours, although the change was cause for endless teasing in the months that followed. Any time I took off more than two days in a row, I was always greeted in the morning van with mock-

surprised wisecracks – “Huh, who is this?”; “Do I know you?”; “Driver, who is this foreigner?” – from Hayashi, Kawaguchi, and Eguchi. They found it endlessly humorous to ask my name and where I was from, as if we had met for the first time. Although these comments were made in jest, they carried a more serious, normative implication just under the surface. My extended absences burdened the other staff, and they could no longer rely on me to help them in busy situations or to cover for them in times of illness or family emergencies. My change to shorter working hours and fewer working days created a gulf between us. Even though they understood that my original reason for working at the ryokan was to conduct research, they could not help but feel personally impacted by my bodily absence, which led to increased work for their own bodies.

By the ninth month of working at Yamazakura, I was working only when needed, usually twice a week and on especially busy days. I felt increasingly distant from many of the nakai, and their jokes became less heartfelt. This change saddened me, and made me briefly consider returning to a full-time schedule. But the demands of the research trumped my emotional comfort, as I turned my attention to more one-day site visits of other ryokan, interviews, and writing. I could not be all things to all people, and I had to emphasize my role of researcher over my role of worker.

“Informal” Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I also collected data through one-on-one interviews with workers, owners, and other residents and visitors to the region. While working with nakai at Yamazakura and elsewhere, I conducted what I refer to as “informal interviews,” in which we workers would chat to fill the time. I never felt restricted in my questions, and these were often the most revealing moments of each day. These informal interviews were necessary because of the reticence most nakai had to participating in an

actual “interview,” or *intabyū* in Japanese. *Intabyū* has a loaded connotation as something that occurs between educated and important people. *Intabyū* is something that is usually recorded or videotaped, and it can be controversial, such as *intabyū* on the evening news or in newspapers. My coworkers were always willing to talk, but whenever I mentioned the word *intabyū*, they waved off the idea, encouraging me to interview the ryokan owner, the Okami-san, or maybe someone at city hall. Again, we see the issue of positionality come to the surface. The nakai I met did not consider themselves influential or experts on any topic, so they could not imagine themselves sitting for an interview. They repeatedly told me, “I don’t know anything” (*nani mo shiranai*) when asked to sit and talk one-on-one about their experiences working in the ryokan industry.

Therefore, I avoided using the word “interview” whenever possible, and instead just asked to “talk” with ryokan staff. Since most of what I wanted to learn could be gleaned from everyday conversation, it was sufficient to simply chat while working. Any time was a good time to talk about relations within the ryokan, worker’s personal histories, or gripes about the workplace. One particularly productive time for talking came each morning while the guests ate breakfast. Between 8:00 and 8:45, nearly all guests eat breakfast in the dining room, giving the nakai time to put away bedding and tidy rooms. This clears space in the room, so that guests can more easily prepare to check out by 10:00. We work in pairs in each area of the ryokan, waiting for the sound of a sliding door and the jingle of keys. Then one of us steps into view and asks a member of the party in our most polite voice, “Are you going to eat?” (*shokuji ni ikaremasuka*). If the guest answers yes, then we ask, “May we put away your futons?” (*o-futon agete mo yoroshii desuka*). With an affirmative reply, we smile and wish them well.

Once the guests are out of sight, we rush into the room with the master key, quickly strip the sheets and pillow cases, fold up the bottom futons, put new covers on the top futons,

place everything back in the closet, and remove any garbage. The only challenge is remembering the number of guests for the next night, which determines how many futon covers are to be prepared, and deciding whether or not to touch the guests' belongings when straightening up the room. Cell phones on top of pillows must be moved onto the table. If there is money on the table, the table is not to be moved. We tend to stay on the side of caution, although sometimes a guest's bag or purse is directly in front of the closet, in which case we have little choice but to move it in order to put away the bedding. One morning a woman's arsenal of makeup was strewn next to her futon, in front of the closet. Takahashi impatiently pushed it all aside, calling young people more selfish and clueless than ever. The next room, also occupied by young people, was perfectly tidy. Because no conversation is necessary to carry out these tasks, nakai are able to fill the time with talk about family members, troublesome coworkers, the weather, management mistakes, memorable encounters with guests, and any other topic of interest.

One beautiful clear morning in late September, I had a conversation that typified my disjointed, yet empirically-rich discussions with nakai. On this day, I worked with Takahashi and Eguchi in an area with six rooms. We put away the futons in the first five rooms in only thirty minutes. However, the guests in the final room, a pair of young women, remained in their room until nearly 8:45, leaving us without a task but essentially on call for fifteen minutes. We had to watch for the moment they left, in order to clean the room as soon as possible and return to our other jobs; however, we could not knock on their door or ask them to leave their room early. Waiting in the hallway, Takahashi looked out the window at the autumn foliage and described the gorgeous flowers she had seen the previous day while returning from Aso, a mountainous town located about 30 minutes south of Yamazakura. Eguchi replied that she hoped the famous politician staying in a few days would take the same road and thus see the flowers. The subject of the immanent visit of the politician led

both nakai to complain about Okami's planning of the event and the vast expenditures of money for new doors, *tatami* mats, roof tiles, stepping stones, and new wooden siding.

"No annual bonus again this year," Eguchi offered.

"Of course not," Takahashi replied. "Why has Okami-san not met with us even once to explain our roles during this upcoming visit?"

"Probably because she doesn't know what she's doing herself," Eguchi responded, stimulating our laughter.

"I'm tired of hearing news from Shimada and Kami," Takahashi continued. "Every day they go to the front office and return with conflicting information. Okami-san should tell us herself exactly what is happening."

We both nodded in agreement, as this had been an ongoing concern for everyone. The politician's visit had already required our unpaid labor in several training workshops, and the day of the event promised to be long and demanding for everyone. The energy and conviction of the nakai for this conversation surprised me and made me start thinking that the nakai might collect their concerns and express them to Okami-san. Maybe the staff could request a meeting about the politician's upcoming visit, which would then settle everyone's concerns. However, just as quickly as the window of opportunity opened, Eguchi quickly changed the subject to talk about the cosmos flowers that were in full bloom around the ryokan. And just like that, a moment of potential action was lost. A door slid open behind us and out walked the two young ladies we had been waiting on. We all smiled and wished them a good morning, then tidied their room.

Conversations like this took place everyday, in which complaints about working conditions and management mingled with stories of work histories and talk of the weather. These "informal interviews" were highly instructive moments that provided me with a more complete perspective of the workplace than would have been possible in a standard

interview. Coworkers did not always stay on topic, but I found that remaining on topic was less important than establishing trust and building knowledge of the workplace over time. This informal interviewing strategy also reduced the difficulties often associated with scheduling an appropriate time and place for interviews. No one was ever late to a meeting, and no one ever got lost. Three minutes in the kitchen between dishes, ten minutes during the morning break, five minutes while cleaning tea sets in the pantry – these were all ideal locations for conversations that added up to an incredible set of longitudinal interviews carried out over twelve months.

Before working at a *ryokan*, I had difficulty accessing workers and scheduling meetings with them. The most important benefit of using work as a method was that it allowed hours of unpressured time with workers, where conversations about their work histories and relations with guests and management could be removed from the power-laden concept of the interview, and instead be seen simply as the small talk that speeds the workday. My coworkers imagined interviews to be in-depth and potentially confrontational interactions that were only appropriate for people in powerful positions. They preferred the informality of chatting while working, with its stops and starts and its emphasis on flowing conversation.

Another set of encounters shows the usefulness of informal interviews, particularly among individuals who shy from an actual one-on-one interview. Like most *nakai*, Eguchi repeatedly refused to participate in an interview from day one. However, she often invited me to join her for a walk during our afternoon break. For around an hour the two of us would hunt for chestnuts or enjoy the latest flowers in bloom. At these times she spoke candidly about single-handedly raising two children, earning a meager living as a seamstress, then once her children had grown and moved away, eventually accepting a job as a *nakai*. She relayed her ambivalent feelings about her company and her coworkers, and she shared dozens

of poignant stories of the ryokan that would likely have been left out of any single interview. Near the end of my stay, I jokingly asked Eguchi again for an interview, to which she laughingly replied, “No. Anyway, I already told you everything.” In fact, she probably had.

In “informal interviews,” I inquired about staff members’ work histories and their relations with management and other workers. I also allowed them to ask me questions, too, for I recognized the importance of being vulnerable and putting myself in the position of interviewee. After the first few days, everyone knew most of the particulars of my life, either directly or through the grapevine. And over time, my coworkers asked increasingly private questions about my sex life, my financial situation, my marriage to a Japanese national, and even our lack of children. This was a recurrent topic of interest to all nakai with children. “Hurry up and have kids. What are you waiting for?” they asked.

I also spoke of my family history, sharing my childhood experience of my parents’ divorce and my father’s sudden diagnosis of cancer, which occurred during my fieldwork. Often, a nakai who had been through divorce would open up after realizing that we shared this experience. My vulnerability and willingness to reveal information about my life showed my coworkers that I was not simply mining their lives for information from a safe distance, which encouraged them to share the stories of their lives with me. I was a person in place, wanting to do more than merely scrutinize the lives of others from afar.

“Formal” Interviews

Whenever possible, I asked coworkers and personnel of other ryokan, as well as okami and ryokan owners, to sit for extended one-on-one conversations. Some people refused outright or subtly with excuses of other appointments or, more commonly, no special insights for a foreign researcher. Overall, I conducted one-on-one interviews with over sixty individuals outside of working hours, which I consider “formal” interviews. All told, I met

with seventeen okami, three government officials, five ryokan owners, over twenty-five ryokan employees, and ten other community residents involved in the tourism industry.

The location of interviews is a critical and yet largely overlooked aspect of qualitative research (Elwood & Martin, 2000). Especially when “in the field,” one may be unable to secure a good interview location; a place that is public enough to be deemed safe (especially critical when a man interviews a woman), yet quiet enough for an extended discussion with minimal distractions. The place must also be comfortable for both participants. For instance, an office with many books may intimidate a subject with little formal education. Location may be an afterthought when interviewing politicians, academics, business managers, or others who have the luxury of an office. When it came to meeting with okami, for instance, they invited me to their office or a dining area of the ryokan after hours. However, I found few locations in which to have a long, uninterrupted conversation with nakai. I thought it would be ideal to conduct interviews in the dormitory rooms of nakai, since I would be able to see how they lived, especially compared to the guests. I imagined this contrast would provide a striking example of the radical differences between the performance of home for tourists and the mundane living spaces of workers. However, I found that many dormitories forbade men to enter, and that many women (understandably) felt uncomfortable inviting a man into their rooms, no matter who he may be.

At several ryokan, the okami supported my research and encouraged workers to meet with me. Such okami always offered a space – an empty dining room or an on-site café – at the ryokan in which I could meet with employees. While I thanked each okami for this generous offer, and, I was conscious of the fact that workers might be reluctant to reveal feelings and complaints about the company in a space in which a coworker or supervisor could enter the room at any moment. For instance, I conducted one interview with a veteran nakai in her ryokan’s dining room. Just as I asked what she liked and disliked about her

current employer, the owner poked his head into the room, looking for his wife. Needless to say, if the nakai had any negative feelings toward the inn or her boss, she would have felt uncomfortable expressing them with the owner lurking in the hallway.

Nakai spend much of the day in the public eye, working in front of tourists. Therefore, they tend not to want to be seen in public during their breaks. This made interviews in cafés or restaurants possible, but also problematic. In the end, I conducted some interviews with nakai at their workplaces, some in their dormitories or homes, and some in a local café. None of these locations was ideal, but in each case the location was suggested by the nakai; therefore, I felt that she was comfortable with the interview site.

Interviews with okami, on the other hand, almost always took place in the ryokan lobby or office, either in the early afternoon or late in the evening when we will not disturb any guests. Because the inn is also her home, each okami was visibly comfortable there. Oftentimes, she would provide a tour of the facilities as we talked. During interviews with okami I asked about hiring and training practices, methods for resolving labor disputes (typically talking with or firing a single troublesome employee) and their own personal journeys to reach this position, usually via marriage. In these interviews I learned of the importance of the metaphor of *ie* (home) to describe the ryokan both to guests and to workers. The ryokan was a home to the okami, even though interviews and interactions with workers revealed that this feeling was far from universal.

Why do I bother to mention where these interviews occurred? When it comes to revealing the context for interviews, I concur with Robert Stoller, who argues that most studies based on interview data imagine that words alone are sufficient data for later analysis (Stoller, 1991). But as any researcher who has conducted an interview will acknowledge, non-verbal cues and circumstances of any interview are critical details that greatly affect the researcher's impression of the interview.

Stoller finds that much is missing in the description and interpretation of interviews that readers should be able to access. He suggests a range of questions that should be asked (and answered) whenever human subjects are used as informants. He argues that while some researchers feel that the subjectivity of the informants and researchers both interfere with the actual data, as a psychoanalyst he disagrees. For him, subjectivity is all of the critical details that do more than just provide perspective for a random quote. I quote at length in order to show the questions that Stoller argues come into play in an interview:

It is obvious that if you want to know why people do something, it can help to ask them; that the statements people give us (whether we are ethnographers, psychoanalysts, behaviorists, pollsters, employees, spouses, torturers, neighbors, teachers, waiters, or scientists) depend on how they perceive us, how we perceive them, the time of day, the setting, our choice of words and inflections and hairstyle, the way we dress, their age and ours, whether we or they are standing or sitting—anything; that if you rely on (not simply use) informants, you had better know well who they are, and if I am your reader, you had better let me know precisely who your informant was, including what the relationship was between the two of you in regard to such factors as your personalities, how you established your relationship, whether you the researcher are paying (and if so, how much and in what form), what else you want to get from your informants and the informants from you, how the informants are perceived by their own people and which people say what ...; that translators do not just translate but also interpret, gloss, reverse meanings because of their own psychic state, forget, drop out words or sentences; ... that to study a culture, a practice, a preference, an act, and not use the subjectivity of individuals, is to deny yourself essential data (*ibid.*, 3-4).

Stoller concludes, “Perhaps we should some day demand of those who write reports on human encounter and claim to be scientists (or even just honest reporters) that they reveal who they were during the moments when the data mentioned were formed” (*ibid.*, 4).

Without calling it positionality, Stoller argues that researchers must be explicit in describing their relationship to the interviewee, as well as the other details about the encounter, if these remarks are to be of any use to the reader. Whenever possible in the pages that follow, I provide as much detail as possible to contextualize the words of those upon whom I rely to understand and explain relations within the ryokan.

Forms of Data

In all, I spent thirteen months “in the field,” living and working in Minami-Oguni and Oguni towns from August 2006 to August 2007. During this time, I worked over 1300 hours at Yamazakura and seven other ryokan in Kurokawa Onsen, Ta no Hara Onsen, and Tsuetate Onsen. This experience not only provided me a first-hand view of ryokan labor, but also afforded me hundreds of hours of “informal” interview time with individuals and in locations that would have otherwise been nearly impossible to access.² Overall I “informally” interviewed over sixty individuals, with whom I spoke as we washed dishes, scrubbed baths, and changed sheets together. I also conducted over sixty interviews of various lengths (thirty minutes to three hours), which I call “formal.” In this case, each interview followed a general script, which I frequently adjusted to fit the situation. I digitally recorded thirty-six of these interviews, and a graduate student assistant, Mika Kumagai of Osaka City University, later transcribed them. I conducted nearly all the interviews, both formal and informal, in Japanese. The only exceptions to this were an interview with Jeanie Fuji, a woman born and raised in the United States who married into a ryokan family in Yamagata Prefecture and is now the okami, and a nakai in Kurokawa Onsen who studied and lived in the United States for several years and wished to practice her English.³ Finally, I attended eight staff professionalization workshops (*kenshū*, discussed in Chapter Six), organized by individual

² This total is calculated as follows: 120 days at Yamazakura, plus ten days combined at the other seven ryokan (130 days x ten hours per day = 1300 hours). I must note that while I worked only for my meals at the other ryokan, the owners of Yamazakura paid me a daily wage. In my original research proposal, I made an agreement with Yamazakura’s owners that I would receive room and board in lieu of pay. However, when I arrived, Yamazakura no longer had any space in its dormitory, and I was forced to find other accommodations. Until the end of the first month I still believed that I would receive no pay; however, on the last day of the month Okami-san stopped me on my way out the door and handed me an envelope containing cash. She insisted that I take the money, and although I repeatedly refused, she argued that if I did not accept the money, she could no longer ask me to do the difficult and dirty jobs (*kitsui*, *kitanai* – two of the three K’s of manual labor, the other one being *kiken*, dangerous) required at the inn. In the end, the pay I received equaled the costs of my independently-arranged room at another location.

³ Fuji is a minor celebrity in Japan, having been featured in television advertisements and a variety of television programs. She also authored two books (in Japanese) on Japanese identity and Japanese hospitality—*Nihonjin wa Nihon ga tarinai*, or roughly, *Japanese are not Japanese enough*, and *Amerikajin okami ga mananda Nihon no omoitenashi kokorojō*, or *The book of knowledge about Japanese hospitality learned from the American okami*. I interviewed Fuji in December 2006 in her newly-rebuilt ryokan in Yamagata Prefecture. I discuss Fuji later on pp. 69-70 and p. 120.

ryokan and the Kurokawa Onsen inn owners' guild. Each *kenshū* lasted two to three hours and allowed me to contact workers outside Yamazakura. In several instances, these connections led to one- or two-day working opportunities at other ryokan.

Conclusion

I faced two major challenges in conducting research: gaining access to the research site and establishing a position in the ryokan that acknowledged my unique positionality, yet earned the trust of others and made them feel comfortable enough to speak with me. By using work as a form of participant observation I was able to negotiate a meaningful role for myself and legitimate my presence in tourist space. I was able to move past the entrance and beyond the freighted role of guest.

By working the same long hours and dealing with the same everyday problems of the workplace as the others, I was better able to understand their complaints about the absence of pay raises or bonuses, the long hours, the constant employee shortage, and management's tightfisted and inefficient practices. I firmly believe that these are not the kinds of comments that I would have heard from a front desk clerk while standing in the lobby as a guest, nor the comments that anyone would write on a survey administered by an unknown scholar. Even in a formal interview, people rarely speak with such candor. By subjecting myself to many of the same matrices of power experienced by workers, I was able to share the workers' experiences and understand some of their complaints, as well as their powerlessness to ask for better conditions.

Finally, using work as a form of participant observation provided a level of ongoing contact with the location and study population that would have been impossible with any other method. One of the frustrations of an interview is that it ends. On the other hand, working in a ryokan resembled a yearlong interview with a fascinating group of people who

normally feel that their stories and opinions are unworthy of discussion. Everyday interactions and situations provided rich material to unravel through multiple conversations. And while there may be no ideal place to interview a *nakai*, the physical layout of the ryokan enabled hundreds of impromptu micro-interviews that, when pieced together, reveal a colorful mosaic of everyday working life in a tourist destination.

Research funding was generously provided by the Japan Foundation and the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Award #0602711.

WORKS CITED

- Adler, P. A. & Adler, P. (2004). *Paradise laborers : hotel work in the global economy*. Ithaca [N.Y.]: ILR Press.
- Allison, A. (1994). *Nightwork : sexuality, pleasure, and corporate masculinity in a Tokyo hostess club*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Broadbent, K. (2003). *Women's employment in Japan : the experience of part-time workers*. London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Burawoy, M. (1979). *Manufacturing consent : changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cole, R. E. (1971). *Japanese blue collar; the changing tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crang, M. & Cook, I. (2007). *Doing ethnographies*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Crang, P. (1994). It's showtime: on the workplace geographies of display in a restaurant in Southeast England. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 12(6), 675-704.
- Dalby, L. C. (1983). *Geisha*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Diamond, T. (1992). *Making gray gold : narratives of nursing home care*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dunn, E. C. (2004). *Privatizing Poland : baby food, big business, and the remaking of labor*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- England, K. (1994). Getting personal: reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *Professional Geographer*, 46(1), 80-89.
- Fuji, J. (2003). *Nihonjin wa Nihon ga tarinai*. Tokyo: Nihonbungeisha.
- Fuji, J. (2004). *Amerikajin okami ga mananda Nihon no omotenashi kokorojō*. Tokyo: Gentosha.
- Hamabata, M. M. (1990). *Crested kimono : power and love in the Japanese business family*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press.
- Ivy, M. (1995). *Discourses of the vanishing : modernity, phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kondo, D. K. (1990). *Crafting selves : power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun Joho Senta (Kumamoto Nichinichi Newspaper Information Center) (2000). *Kurokawa Onsen "kyūseichō" wo yomu, (Reading Kurokawa Onsen's Rapid Growth)*. Kumamoto, Japan: Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbunsha.

- Kurotani, S. (2005). *Home away from home : Japanese corporate wives in the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- MacCannell, D. (1999). *The tourist : a new theory of the leisure class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Matsuda, T. (2004). *Kenshō Kurokawa to Yufuin--Kyushū ga, Nihon no onsen wo kaeta!!* Kumamoto, Japan: Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbunsha.
- Matsuda, T. (2001). *Onsen shugi*. Tokyo: Kumazasa Shuppansha.
- McMorran, C. (2002). *Inventing place in Kurokawa Onsen, Japan*. M.A. Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO.
- Mullings, B. (1999). Insider or outsider, both or neither: some dilemmas of interviewing in a cross-cultural setting. *Geoforum*, 30(4), 337-350.
- Nonaka, I. & Katsumi, A. (2004). *Inobeeshon no honshitsu (The essence of innovation)*. Tokyo: Nikkei BP Sha.
- Oakes, T. (2005). The story of Secretary Wang: Hero, savior, liar, scoundrel. *University of California International and Area Studies. Global Field Notes, Paper 5*.
- Ogasawara, Y. (1998). *Office ladies and salaried men : power, gender, and work in Japanese companies*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.
- Roberts, G. S. (1994). *Staying on the line : blue-collar women in contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Rohlen, T. P. (1974). *For harmony and strength : Japanese white-collar organization in anthropological perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schoenberger, E. (1991). The corporate interview as a research method in economic geography. *Professional Geographer*, 43(2), 180-189.
- Stoller, R. J. (1991). *Porn : myths for the twentieth century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Thomas, R. (1995). Interviewing important people in big companies. In R. Hertz & J. B. Imber (Eds.), *Studying elites using qualitative methods*. (pp. 3-17). Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Whitelaw, G. (2007). *Convenience stores in contemporary Japan: An ethnography of modern service, local familiarity, and global transformation*. Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Yale University.