Panel 11: Modern Literary Expression from Tōhoku to Kyūshū (October 13: 5:00 p.m. - 6:50 p.m.)

Louise Young, University of Wisconsin-Madison
“Tokyo-centrism, the Literati, and Provincial Culture”

Abstract: From their perches in provincial cities and in the metropolis, writers and artists wielded enormous power to shape the epistemology of Japan’s modernity. Moving through circuits of exchange laid down by the higher educational system and the publishing industry, intellectuals traversed a social and cultural geography organized in terms of centers and peripheries. With its concentration of universities and mass-circulation newspapers, the capital city of Tokyo stood at the apex of this structure, a magnet for ambitious writers and artists. With their concentrations of middle and higher schools and strong local newspapers, prefectural capitals like Kanazawa and Okayama occupied a second rung in the national hierarchy and stood at the center of regional networks of towns and villages. Intellectuals were the products of this environment, but their actions and their artistic production also helped create the inequalities that characterized it. This paper examines ideas about metropitan and regional cultures in literary space, comparing the use of such ideologically charged metaphors of kokyō (hometown) and jōkyō (ascending to Tokyo) by Tokyo- and second city-based writers. In both cases, the distinction between the capital and the provinces became a defining feature of urban subjectivity and identity. Just as Tokyo’s metropolitan identity was constructed against a monolithic rural that subsumed provincial cities, Tokyo provided the Other against which local cities forged their own identities.

Mika Endo, Bard College
“Modern Education in the Peripheries: Writing Childhood in Tōhoku”

Abstract: The Ministry of Education maintained central control over the content of primary education in prewar Japan, making the curriculum ostensibly uniform across the country for all school-aged children. Yet, there was a single subject in the prewar curriculum for which there was no official textbook: the subject known as itazurikata, or composition. Critical as the site where students learned to model good writing, itazurikata in the 1920s became a school subject with an increasingly porous relationship to the cultural realm, as a result of the active promotion of new models of creative writing by professional writers and cultural figures, most notably the writer and children’s magazine editor, Suzuki Miekichi (1882-1936). This paper examines how the Tokyo-centered interest in children’s creative expression was adapted by a collective of primary schoolteachers in the Tōhoku area who built a highly regionalized literary culture intended to be authored and read by school-aged youth. In a largely rural region facing extreme material deprivations, this school-based literary culture privileged forms of creative expression such as tanka, free verse poetry, and prose essays which were collected and circulated primarily within bunshū (classroom anthologies) and selectively circulated within the Tōhoku prefectures and beyond. In my presentation, I will be examining the ways in which this Tōhoku-based literary culture was infused with regional color by way of content (descriptions of daily life in Tōhoku), language (use of dialect), and modes of circulation.

Steve Ridgely, University of Wisconsin-Madison
“The Arrow of Time Won't Let Me Return to Aomori: Terayama Shuji”

Abstract: Terayama Shūji (1935-1983) left Aomori for Tokyo in 1954 and didn’t look back, until 1962. That year would see the first two installments of a series of works titled “Den’en ni shisu” (Death in the country), the most famous of which were his last tanka collection from 1965, and a major ATG co-produced film from 1974 that competed at Cannes. The poems, and the film script in particular, track a failed return to the Aomori of Terayama’s childhood, a place that no longer exists and which turns circus-like the more he tries to recreate it. Intermixed with Terayama’s memories of childhood in Aomori are tourism campaigns from intervening years, reports from archeological digs, even the shape of the prefecture itself. But the melancholia of the Den’en ni shisu series is targeted not at sorrow over the loss of one’s hometown, but rather at the persistent social impulse to mourn that very loss. Terayama ultimately revisits Aomori to demonstrate the impossibility of “returning” itself, that the time-embedded nature of places prevents us from going back to them. Time-embeddedness, however, also enables us to move forward into familiar locations with fresh eyes. In this presentation I will look closely at some tropes from the Den’en ni shisu project to gain a clearer understanding of Terayama’s move from a historical to a geographical orientation.

Nathen Clerici, University of British Columbia
“Yumeno Kyūsaku, Kyūshū and the Native in the Modern”

Abstract: Yumeno Kyūsaku (1889-1936) is known primarily as a writer of mystery fiction who, despite achieving modest popular success in the late 1920s and early 1930s, was largely forgotten until his writing was revived in the context of 1960s sub- and counter-culture. A key aspect of Kyūsaku’s reception in the 1960s was his association with dochaku, a term that signifies native place, but which also came to signify ‘indigenous’ in the sense of a premodern – and pre-Western – set of values in the context of postwar politics. Dochaku connoted marginality, both in terms of class status and in its perceived distance from modernity and city life. Although dochaku was not used by contemporaries to describe Kyūsaku’s writing in the 1920s and 1930s, I believe that a similar sensibility – a ‘dochaku affect’ – helped position him as a subcultural figure in the prewar period, too. A Fukuoka native who remained based there throughout his career, Kyūsaku frequently used local settings, motifs and dialect. He developed an air of mystique even amongst fellow mystery writers because of his geographical distance, but also because of his enigmatic writing style. In this talk I will consider both the textual content and long-term reception for two works, Inugami hakase (Professor Dog God, 1931-1932) and Kinsei kaijin (A Biography of Merry Fellows from the Early Modern Period, 1935) in order to see how they present a dochaku-inflected look at national identity and Japan’s narrative of modernization.