

INTRODUCTION

Tokyo on the Rails and Road

Mass Transportation as Cultural and Social Vehicles

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called metaphorai. To go to work or come home, one takes a “metaphor”—a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.

—MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life*¹

COMMUTER CULTURES PRESENT AND PAST

This book explores literary, journalistic, and popular culture depictions of the ways increased use of mass transportation in Tokyo during the first four decades of the twentieth century shaped human subjectivity and artistic production, giving rise to gender roles that currently represent Japan. I argue that, through describing trains and buses, stations, transport workers, and passengers, authors responded to the contradictions they perceived in Japanese urban modernity, recorded consumer and social patterns often omitted from historical accounts, and exposed the effects of rapid change on the individual. Their stories show that short rides between destinations of home, work, and play can be opportunities for self-reflection and chance encounters with strangers. The following chapters demonstrate that prewar culture involving commuter vehicles anticipates what is fascinating and frustrating about Tokyo today and provides insight into how people try to make themselves at home in the city. I begin with a short discussion of Tokyo’s current commuter cultures and introduce important ways that early mass transportation made them possible, junctures to which I return in the chapters that follow. I then explain the significance of a methodology that employs both historical and literary analyses to interpret writings about Tokyo. Lastly, I outline the topics and arguments of *Tokyo in Transit*.

The sight of long trains rapidly snaking between skyscrapers and of commuters, especially workers in suits and students in uniforms, flooding station platforms, characterizes the allures and difficulties of Tokyo in the global imagination. The most efficient, largest, and busiest transit network in the world, Tokyo's public transportation is comprised of more than one hundred train and thirteen subway lines that carry a total of more than fourteen million passengers each day.² The system is so extensive that trains and subways are usually depicted on separate maps, as reproduced here. The dramatic array of colored lines on these JR East and Tokyo Metro maps visualizes the awe and trepidation many people feel in approaching Tokyo itself. Buses play an important but secondary role, serving locations hard to reach on rails. Partly because of the spatial design of the city, Tokyo vehicles are social and cultural spaces different from the New York subway, London Tube, Paris Metro, Mumbai railway, and other metropolitan commuter networks. They provide a more distilled means of observing the effects of urbanization than other public places afford. Behaviors and interactions not possible elsewhere occur inside passenger cars and in stations. These small gestures and encounters greatly influence the ways that individuals experience national history and describe the events of their own lives.

The Japanese government permitted the development of intra-city multi-passenger vehicles after the first national railroad, eighteen miles of tracks between Tokyo's Shimbashi Station and Yokohama, opened to the public on October 14, 1872. This stretch became the basis for the Tōkaidō Line, the most-used rail corridor in Japan, which now reaches from Tokyo to Osaka. In an official government ceremony on April 1, 1895, the route was so named after the highway that spanned the distance between Edo (the name for Tokyo before 1868) and Kyoto. Arguably, the Edo Period (1600–1868) was the time when intercity highways were most influential in Japanese literature and culture. Over subsequent decades, Tokyo transformed from a city of waterways linked to the Sumida River and roads to a metropolis dependent on rails. All train lines established before the war have been extended; none have been rerouted. Streetcars began in Tokyo in 1903. Like trains, they were signified by the term “*densha*” but were commonly called by the names of their routes. (The term “*romen densha*” was used for streetcars mostly in the postwar period.) Trolley cars and

buses that moved along overhead electric wires were available in Tokyo from the early 1950s. These vehicles, which first appeared in Kyoto and Osaka, all but died out between the mid-1960s and early 1970s. In Tokyo, only the Toden Arakawa streetcar line was left as a reminder. From the start, routes and ticket types have been color-coded, a custom perhaps imported from Russia. This practice also demarcates socioeconomic classes of passengers, as will be explained.

Other vehicles have played a role in Tokyo history. They include rickshaws and taxicabs, which were considered expensive and private modes of transport, and the *shinkansen* or “bullet trains” that link cities. None of these modes have affected urban society in the same ways as trains and buses. Subways, opened in December 1927, did not become integral to the urban infrastructure until after the 1930s. Although Japan is a leading global exporter of automobiles, its capital is not a city of cars, for it is difficult to drive and expensive to park in Tokyo. The highway system, extended during the high growth era of the 1950s through 1970s, generally follows the course of the five roads that led into the city during the Edo period. The leisurely urban stroll, or *flânerie*, to borrow a French literary term, has been a feature of Tokyo travel guides written for residents and tourists. This is epitomized by the multiple series of books and “mooks” (magazines as thick as books) of walking courses to uncover traces of old Edo in twenty-first century Tokyo.³ It is also apparent in such periodicals as *Tokyo Walker* (begun in 1990), which continue the legacy of 1920s publicity magazines for the Ginza and Shinjuku neighborhoods. Walking is a more immediate and personal way to experience urban space and the layers of history inscribed upon it than riding in trains.

Still being extended, Tokyo’s mass transportation, like that of other Japanese cities, formed as an amalgam of both nationally owned and private lines. The largest of the more than thirty transport companies in Tokyo today is the East Japan Railway Company (Higashi Nihon Ryōkaku Tetsudō kabushiki kaisha), most commonly known as JR East (Jeiāru Higashi Nihon). This conglomerate developed through the nationalization of railroads in 1906 and reached its current configuration after the system was denationalized in 1987.⁴ Starting in the first decade of the twentieth century, smaller private lines were established in collu-

sion with government interests. A prime example is the Tōbu railroad, Tokyo's second-most-profitable transport corporation. Private lines reach to the JR East arteries, especially the Yamanote loop and the Chūō line. The Yamanote, completed in 1925, is currently the world's busiest route. Signboards for the Yamanote appear on key chains, and a remix of the station stops by the DJ collective Moter Man (who have difficulty with English spelling) climbed the pop charts in 1999. The Chūō or "central" route was Tokyo's first nationalized and electrified railroad and stretched west toward the direction of prewar suburban growth. In 2000, a few books were published to celebrate the particular kinds of urban chic associated with neighborhoods along this route, including Toyonaka Koji's *Greater Chūō Line-ism (Dai Chūō-sen shugi)* and Miyoshi Risako's *Chūō Line People (Chūō-sen na hito)*, and the magazine *Tokyoite (Tokyo jin)* featured the second of its three-part series on the line's allure (*Chūō-sen no miryoku* or *Chūō Line Charm*). The Yamanote and Chūō lines show that trains have affected Tokyo in ways other than expanding its space.

Tokyo vehicles have been the subject of nostalgia and hate. In Kore'eda Hirokazu's 1998 film *After Life (Wandafuru raifu)*, an homage to the power of cinema and memory, characters are asked to select only one life experience to remember for eternity after death. One man chooses the sensation of the breeze blowing through a streetcar window during a ride to elementary school. It was in this moment that he felt truly alive, safe, and confident. On the other hand, mass transportation drives home the fact that crowded public spaces can be dangerous. This was horrifyingly evident during the morning rush of March 20, 1995, when the doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyō released toxic sarin gas on five subways encircling the city's political center. Twelve passengers were killed; thousands were traumatized.⁵ A climactic scene in the 2006 film adaptation of manga and anime *Death Note (Desu nōto)*, dir. Kaneko Shusuke) shows murder easily and anonymously committed in a passenger car and on a station platform. American visitors, including humorists Dave Barry and David Sedaris, have been amazed by Tokyo's trains and bemused by the related sensation of being lost in Tokyo. Barry joked that, during their 1991 trip to Tokyo, he, his wife, and their ten-year-old son resigned themselves to being lost most of the time, a state he imagined for much of the city's population: "[I]f something like fifteen

million people live there . . . my estimate is that, at any given moment, 14.7 million of them are lost.”⁶

Japanese railroads have inspired a variety of fan cultures. This is evident in the Local Kitty (Gotochi Kitty) collector series of cell-phone straps, towels, stationery goods, and stickers, which began in 1998 with Lavender Kitty, marketed only in Hokkaido, and increased in number of offerings from around 2001. The Sanrio character Hello Kitty dresses in the uniforms of workers for several train and bus lines or poses on passenger cars. She memorializes jobs that no longer exist, such as the female bus conductors analyzed in Chapter 4. Sanrio began marketing bullet train souvenir goods in 1999. The monthly magazine *Railfan* (*Tetsudō fan*) has been a bible for serious train watchers in Japan since 1961. There was a spate of articles about and guidebooks for female train enthusiasts (affectionately called “*tetsuko*” or “*tecchan*,” the counterpart to male “*tetsuo*”) when the Japanese TBS television network aired a serialized drama about the topic, *Tanaka Express Number Three* (*Tokkyū Tanaka san go*, watched by an average of only 9 percent of the national audience) on Friday nights in the spring of 2007.⁷ A subculture obsessively follows timetables (*jikokuhyō*), perhaps using the predictable nature of trains as a means to find stability and comfort. This hobby is used to murderous ends in detective writer Matsumoto Seichō’s 1957 crime novel *Points and Lines* (*Ten to sen*). Some fans attempt to complete the “*kanjō*,” or the “perfect ride,” through all of the lines owned by one railroad. Before denationalization, the Japan National Railways ran campaigns enticing passengers to travel the entirety of their more than 20,000 kilometers of tracks across country, a challenge that inspired books and television programs.⁸

Mass transit vehicles and stations are spaces that symbolize the regimentation of Japanese society and its detrimental psychological effects. For example, punctuality, a primary value of Japanese society, has been the source of several major train accidents, including the April 25, 2005, derailment of a West Japan Railways train in Hyogo Prefecture that killed the driver and 107 passengers and injured more than 540 others.⁹ The driver was speeding to make up ninety lost seconds. When trains are late, passengers can receive tardy slips to give employers or school officials, showing that railway companies take responsibility for their tardiness.

The perceived need for trains to run on time is more cheerfully depicted in the popular video game *Densha de Go! (Go by Train!)*, created for arcades by Taito in 1996 and later available for PlayStation 2 and Nintendo Wii. The object is to drive a commuter or bullet train so that it arrives at stations exactly on, if not one second ahead of, schedule, and stops precisely at the designated places along the platform. Suicides on the rails, which became a social problem around 1907 (as will be explained in Chapter 2), are almost a daily occurrence and cause breaks in train schedules. Since the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese railway companies have sought to stop suicides, primarily to prevent train delays rather than to save lives.

Trains today run on similar schedules to those in the past; service starts around 5:00 A.M. and stops after 1:00 A.M. The times of trains, in addition to the places they travel, delineate social class, for passengers holding white-collar jobs and those going to school ride at different hours than do laborers, whose workdays often start earlier. Beginning in 1916, the final streetcars and trains of the night, along with the passengers who rode them, were nicknamed “red trains” (*aka densha*), after the colored headlights that distinguished them. The term, now used only for vehicles, has since been replaced by “*shūden*,” short for “*shūdensha*” (literally, “last train”). Because buses stop running and taxis are expensive, missing the last train or subway usually means waiting at a coffee shop, manga café, family restaurant, or another of the city’s few all-night establishments. The approximately four-hour hiatus in mass transportation has facilitated literary plots. For example, Natsume Sōseki’s fictional Sanshirō, analyzed in Chapter 2, is forced to stop in Nagoya before continuing his journey to Tokyo and spends an uncomfortable night with a woman, an event that proves his cowardice. Sanshirō later witnesses a woman killed by a late-night train. The wait for trains to resume is also a literary theme used by Murakami Haruki in his 2004 novella *After Dark (Afutā dāku)*, partly set in a Denny’s. It is in the hours when trains rest that the city sleeps.

Popular reactions to Tokyo vehicles have also been mobilized as political statements. An original reason for railroads in Tokyo, as elsewhere in Japan, was to further militarism and imperialism in Asia. Thus, destruction of streetcars and trains became a form of extreme public rebellion, a

spectacle incorporated into political protests and labor strikes throughout the twentieth century. There have been two dramatic examples: first, in Hibiya Park near the Imperial Palace on September 6, 1905, streetcars were burned to dispute both the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the Russo-Japanese War, and a proposed fare hike on the then city-owned streetcar system. Second, train cars were destroyed in Shinjuku Station during the October 21, 1968 International Anti-War Day to protest the Japanese national railways' involvement in the Vietnam War by carrying freight for the U.S. military. In the later riot, 574 people, mostly university students, were arrested.¹⁰ Municipal decisions have not only determined the course of Tokyo vehicles but have been made on them. For example, the Tokyo Sky Tree, a 610-meter television broadcast tower that recently replaced the 333-meter Tokyo Tower (completed in 1959) as a major landmark, was named through a spring 2008 contest advertised on Tōbu line trains, one of the sponsors of its construction.¹¹

In addition, Tokyo residents both give directions and find their way about the city in terms of train stations. On weekdays in 2008, an average of 3.64 million people, out of a total urban population of approximately thirty-five million, passed through Shinjuku Station, a stop on both the Yamanote and Chūō as well as at least eight other lines, making this terminal the busiest in the world. Ikebukuro Station, just a few Yamanote stops away, is second globally in terms of passengers (1.2 million a day); Tokyo Station, constructed to be the city's central node in 1914, currently ranks seventh.¹² Nagoya Station is the largest in terms of floor area. Over the twentieth century, conventions developed for buying tickets, putting them through the gates, and standing on platforms. Before electronic gates became the norm, attendants punched tickets with awls that left marks specific to their stations. Each station has its own short warning song, played when train doors are about to close.

Waiting for family, dates, and friends in train stations is a common sight and cultural theme, and major terminals have also become places to shop. Prewar crowds gathered around the large chalkboards strategically placed in waiting areas for passengers to write messages. One of the most popular meeting places from the 1930s through the present has been the statue erected honoring the loyal dog Hachikō (1923–1935) at Shibuya

Station in 1934. Starting in 1924, Hachikō waited there each afternoon for his master, Ueno Hidesaburō, an agriculture professor at the University of Tokyo, to come home from work. Even after Ueno suddenly died of a stroke at the university, the dog frequently returned to Shibuya Station to look for him. This Akita was promoted as an exemplar of loyalty in wartime propaganda and was memorialized in the 1987 film *Story of Hachikō* (*Hachikō monogatari*, dir. Kōyama Seijirō) and its 2009 American remake *Hachi: A Dog's Story* (dir. Lasse Hallström). The original Hachikō statue was melted to make armaments during the war but was replaced in 1947. In 1935, another, lesser-known Hachikō statue was placed in front of the Japan Railways Ōdate Station (Akita Prefecture) and was also sacrificed for wartime metal. It was resurrected in 1987.

The phenomenon of the commercial underground in stations—inside and outside wickets—is significant and speaks to historical connection between trains and shopping explored in Chapter 3. As part of their “Station Renaissance” program to further the association of trains and consumer culture, JR East has created expansive malls of fashionable food and souvenir stalls inside areas only accessible to ticket passengers in major terminals. These include Tokyo Station’s posh “Gura Suta” (2007) and the “Ecute” plazas in Omiya (2005, a Saitama Prefecture commuter hub to Tokyo), Shinagawa (2005), and Tachikawa (2008). The name “ecute,” pronounced “e-kyoot,” is an acronym comprised of the first letters of the Japanese term for station “*eki*” and the English words Center, Universal, Together, and Enjoy.¹³ “Gura Suta” for “Grand Station” follows the common Japanese practice of abbreviating foreign buzzwords and brands into their initial syllables. (The coffee chain Starbucks is affectionately known as “Sutaba.”) These underground shops are reminiscent of roofed arcades that used to be fixtures of Japanese towns and cities. The first advertisements on Tokyo vehicles appeared on Ginza streetcars in 1916, the same year as “red trains” started in this neighborhood. Advertisements were printed on the back of one-way tickets from 1922 and multi-ride tickets from 1924, but they were not regularly printed on nationalized train tickets until 1927. Mass transport vehicles are full of advertisements today, including those that stream on small televisions set into the walls of trains, a practice begun on the Yamanote line in 2002.