

**Between Two Empires:
Race, History, and
Transnationalism in
Japanese America**

EIICHIRO AZUMA

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To My Teachers and the Memory of Yuji Ichioka

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Note on the Translation and Transliteration of Japanese Names and Words

In this book, the names of Japanese persons are written with the family names first, followed by the given names. For the names of Japanese immigrants and their American-born children, I adopt the customary Western form (the given names first, followed by the family names), because it was the way they transliterated their names in their daily lives. The macrons for long vowel Japanese sounds are not provided in the main text in order to preserve readability. The notes and bibliography offer the complete forms of Japanese names and words with macrons for the benefit of researchers. All translations from Japanese-language sources are mine unless otherwise noted.

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Introduction

Immigrant Transnationalism between Two Empires

“East is West and West is East,” wrote Jizaemon Tateishi, a Japanese immigrant student at the University of Southern California in 1912, criticizing the bipolarities of the Orient and the Occident. “By this I do not mean that the outward manifestations of the two are similar,” he continued. “I mean if you go deep into the very heart of the people of Japan, the inner life in which we live, and move, and have our being, is essentially Anglo-Saxon.”¹ Riichiro Hoashi, another USC student, challenged the same “too broad generalizations” that failed people like Tateishi and him:

Born in Japan and educated in America, we are neither Japanese nor Americans but are Cosmopolitans; and as Cosmopolitans we may be allowed to express our opinions, freely and frankly, for nothing but Cosmopolitanism can be our ideal since we have transcended the narrow bound of nationality and race.²

Thought-provoking and even postmodern as these statements may sound, neither Tateishi nor Hoashi became a famous intellectual or a leader in the Japanese immigrant community; indeed, their lives in America are scarcely known. But their personal trajectories are not as important as what their utterances signified in the context of their time and place. In the early twentieth century, whether they lived as merchants and store clerks in the urban ghettos of “Little Tokyos,” as farmers and field hands in the remote valleys of California, or as

railroad and mine workers in the rugged mountains of the Sierra Nevada, immigrants from Japan formed a group of “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” and they were collectively under pressure to justify their presence in the United States. As college students, Tateishi and Hoashi happened to have an ability to present their shared quandary intelligibly in the public discourse and ask for reconsideration of the terms in which their American existence was understood.

Their lives form the story of how Japanese immigrants (Issei) generally made sense of the dilemma of living across the purported East-West divide and related binaries. Not only did the disavowal of bounded national and racial categories by the two students crystallize the heterodox attributes of the Issei under the established orders of the American and Japanese states, but their “cosmopolitanism” is also akin to what scholars have recently celebrated as “transnationalism.” Despite the claim to transcend the confines of nation and race, the Issei’s transnational thinking was nonetheless constantly counter-checked by orthodoxy that was closely linked to nation-building and the dominant racial politics. The psychic and political engagements that these Japanese had with white America and imperial Japan complicate the meaning of transnationalism, which necessitates a new paradigm of analysis and approach to the usual saga of immigrant struggle.

From the viewpoint of America’s racial doctrine, the “Orientals” were situated beyond the pale of nationhood, as enshrined in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling against Japanese naturalization four decades later. Accusations of Japanese immigrant communities being “outposts of [the Japanese] empire” were not uncommon in the public discourse. In 1938, a popular travelogue writer contended that even though the Issei had lived in California for years and their sons and daughters (Nisei) were born as U.S. citizens, “there is something that persists in the Japanese heart” that allegedly made them forever loyal to Japan—and, by implication, hostile to America. The blind allegiance that the two generations of Japanese Americans owed to the “Divine Emperor . . . has been there [in their racial heart] for more than two millenniums,” the writer asserted, “and it will not be stamped out in a few generations.”³ In much the same way, on the other side of the Pacific, the foreign minister of Japan declared proprietary rights to the Nisei according to that nation’s own racial ideology: “I hold their Japanese blood dear and essential. . . . To preserve their racial strength, the Japanese government must exert itself the best it can.”⁴ The hegemonic constructions of racial and national belonging or nonbelonging, emanating from both states, posed fundamental challenges to the Issei (and Nisei) in terms of how they defined their relationships to, and actually engaged with, both their adopted country and their native land.

This book examines the development of transnational ideas, practices, and

politics among Japanese immigrants in the American West prior to the Pacific War. Specialists in European immigration history and African American history have already produced an array of such works that have led to the development of “transatlantic studies” and “African diaspora studies.” In the early 1990s, historian Sucheng Chan issued a call to Asian American scholars for a new international paradigm, but it is still uncommon in historical studies of the Asian American experience.⁵ To date, most scholars have kept Japanese American history within the confines of the American domestic narrative, treating the subject only as a national(ist) story and disregarding significant parts of the Japanese American experience, which actually extended beyond the boundaries of a single polity.⁶ In order to truly appreciate the Issei’s insistence on cosmopolitanism, historians need to confront the bounded meanings of nation and race through close analysis of the discursive strategies and everyday practices that the immigrants adopted and deployed relative to the different hegemonic powers.

To present a more complete picture of the Issei’s transnational past, I employ what can be termed “an inter-National perspective”—one that stresses the interstitial (not transcendental) nature of their lives between the two nation-states. The findings of this study reveal that Japanese immigrants generally accepted the legitimacy of the meanings and categories upheld by the dominant ideologies of both the United States and Japan. The Issei operated under the tight grips and the clashing influences of these state powers, each of which promoted its respective project of nation-building, racial supremacy, and colonial expansion. Although they constantly traversed, often blurred, and frequently disrupted the varied definitions of race, nation, and culture, Issei were able neither to act as free-floating cosmopolitans nor to enjoy a postmodern condition above and beyond the hegemonic structures of state control. Their strategies of assimilation, adaptation, and ethnic survival took shape through the (re)interpretation, but not repudiation, of the bounded identity constructs that had their origins in the ideological imperatives of each state.⁷ My analysis primarily focuses on the basic integrity and potency of the two national hegemonies and modernities, which jointly helped to mold the perceptions of Japanese immigrants, as well as the range of their social practices, in their daily lives.

Though a version of the transnational approach, the inter-National perspective is not limited to viewing the Japanese American experience as one extending across the two nation-states, societies, and cultures. Like other theoretical formulations, transnationalism has acquired different definitions and orientations.⁸ *Culturalist-oriented transnationalism* tends to highlight the heterogeneity, hybridity, and creolization of cultural objects and meanings in the context of a diaspora.⁹ Its advocates, such as cultural theorists and postcolonial

literary critics, stress the constant movements of “transmigrants,” the fluidity and multiplicity of their identities, and their simultaneous positioning in a politicocultural sphere inclusive of two or more nation-states. Influenced by Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems perspective, *structural-based transnationalism* focuses more on the process by which migrants emerge out of contradictions in international capitalism, and how they move, work, and construct new forms of social relationships within the network of a global economic system.¹⁰ These sets of transnational contexts constitute equally important components of this study’s conceptual framework, but in light of the interstitial nature of Japanese immigrant experience, the term *transnational*—when casually used—can be quite misleading, for it may connote something “deterritorialized” or someone “denationalized.” In order to avoid such inferences, I specifically define my approach as *inter-National*.

Since the consciousness of Japanese immigrants was wedged firmly between the established categories of Japan and the United States, the relationships that they developed and maintained in the interstices were ambivalent, unsettled, and elusive. Because they were always faced with the need to reconcile simultaneous national belongings as citizen-subjects of one state and yet resident-members (denizens) of another, the Issei refused to make a unilateral choice, electing instead to take an eclectic approach to the presumed contradiction between things Japanese and American. Japanese immigrant identities, too, moved across and between the bounded meanings and binaries of race and nation that each regime imposed upon them, rejecting exclusive judgments by either. As such, their ideas and practices were situational, elastic, and even inconsistent at times, but always dualistic at the core. The analysis of Japanese immigrant eclecticism illuminates the intricate agency of these historical actors, who selectively took in and fused elements of nationalist arguments, modernist assumptions, and racist thinking from both imperial Japan and white America.¹¹ This is the process by which the Issei tried to transform themselves into quasi whites, despite their ancestry, in an effort to present themselves as quintessential Americans.

Notwithstanding its transnational framework, this study highlights the embeddedness of Japanese immigrants within one national order, and hence the limits of their cosmopolitanism. Despite the dynamic interactions that the immigrants and their descendants had with Japan and the United States, their daily physical existence was under the sovereign power of the latter. In other words, while they were caught between the conflicting ideological and often repressive apparatuses of the two nation-states, their bodies were anchored in America, their interests rooted in its socioeconomic structure, and their activities disciplined by its politicolegal system. Giving primacy to the actual physical

location of Japanese immigrants, this study pays special attention to the domestic aspect of the otherwise transnational subject.

In considering Japanese immigrant transnationalism, it is essential to ask why and how Japan really mattered. It was in the realms of knowledge production, and of the social practices which the ideas accompanied, that Japan mattered most to the Issei. Their native country—another hegemonic power to which they continued to belong due to the denial of naturalization rights in the United States—strove to control them from afar, but it had fewer apparatuses to achieve that goal. In negotiating their relationships with the homeland, Japanese immigrants were afforded a smaller degree of material nexus than with American society. Ironically, this distance allowed many Issei to use “Japan” as a resource to fight the challenges surrounding their racial standing in the United States and as a point of reference to make sense of their restricted existence there. The command that Japan and the United States exercised over the Issei, albeit unevenly, as well as the mooring of their everyday lives to the American political economy that defined the terms of their engagement with the homeland, form twin themes of the inter-National paradigm.¹²

In dissecting and narrating the transnational history of Japanese immigrants, this book’s domestic focus carefully considers the processes of racial formation, by which the combined effects of structural and representational control homogenize the experience of members of a minority group in a given “racial project.”¹³ The case of Japanese immigrants offers no exception. In terms of class background, the Issei population was diverse, ranging from wealthy entrepreneurs to migrant laborers, educated urbanites to rural farmers, but their racial position and image in American society were so undifferentiated that varied classes of Japanese immigrants came to share a similar, if not identical, collective racial experience. Inasmuch as Issei came to be treated like pariahs in American society, class diversity among them was effectively inconsequential.¹⁴

While race was central to structuring and representing their overall social world, gender also played a role in the processes of racial formation for the Issei. In Japanese immigrant history, the intersectionality of race and gender was manifested in ways that attached gendered meanings and nuances to the prevailing condition of the Issei’s subordination to white America, as well as their reactions to it.¹⁵ In the United States, race inscribed “inferiority” in the identity and positionality of all Japanese, but because it was so cardinal and arbitrary, Issei were quick to learn the politics of manipulating and transforming race for the purpose of their survival in the American West. In this general context of racial formation and transformation, gender ubiquitously prescribed the sexual division of labor and societal roles. In Japanese America, immigrant women concentrated on the construction of ideal domesticity commensurate

with the middle-class white model, while their husbands tackled the more public dimension of racial politics, like propaganda, court battles, and economic struggles. By analyzing the interplay of race, class, and gender in Issei lives, this study elucidates the essentially American underpinning of Japanese immigrant transnationalism.

The Issei's embeddedness in the political economy of the United States does not mean that they lived a homogeneous American experience, however. This book often examines the local context—the patterns of social relations and practices within varied regional confines—as opposed to a uniform national context. Recently, the question of the local versus the global has attracted much interest from theorists of transnationalism, who attempt to understand the ambiguous positioning of the Asian American subject in society, economy, nation, culture, and history. This study emphasizes the preponderance of everyday experiences and reality in the immediate surroundings, interpreting identity formation and behavior as “a matter not of ethnic destiny, but of political choice” in the microlevel entanglements of power.¹⁶ As much as Japanese immigrants were situated in the transnational space as a result of their crisscrossing the Pacific Ocean, they also negotiated their in-betweenness through politics that grounded their concerns and agendas in the welfare of each local community dotting the American West. Against the context of international, domestic, and local social locations, Japanese immigrants projected manifold, regionally divergent identities upon their collective self as an American minority that was, at the same time, part of the Japanese nation-state.

This study holds the Issei accountable for their actions and inaction, their choices and judgments, and their complicity and resistance. It scrupulously considers the multiplicity of social positions, which helped to mold habits of mind and behavior among Japanese immigrants.¹⁷ Because intraethnic, interethnic, and international social relations prescribed how they understood and lived their lives, Issei always vied with one another for power within each local Japanese community, clashed with other minority groups for survival under white ascendancy, and tried to rival their homeland compatriots in nationalist contributions. And when reevaluated in this context, Tateishi's reworking of Rudyard Kipling's binarism and Hoashi's rejection of the “narrow bound of nationality and race” reveal more than just academic critiquing. Despite their college educations, the two men probably lived among their countrymen and women of more humble backgrounds in an ethnic ghetto. And like other Issei, Tateishi and Hoashi were accused of posing a threat to the white civilization even though they came to this land to embrace it. Drawing from such real-life experiences, which all “Orientals” shared in early twentieth-century America, their pronouncements of Japanese-white likeness, East-West parallelism, and immigrant cosmopolitanism constituted a radical act of social maneuvering.

Their formulations not only contested the norms of American race relations that kept the Issei socially subordinate but also attempted to debunk the “Yellow Peril” fear, which alienated them from the society in which they wished to claim a place. The idea of cosmopolitanism sought to redefine their relationships with the two nation-states to which they were connected as the consequence of their migration. “East is West, West is East” is an intriguing proposition, indeed, but a full appreciation of its layered meanings requires an analysis of the convoluted immigrant world that developed in the interstices of the divided spheres of civilizations, nation-states, and races. Only by measuring the Issei’s agency against the multifaceted relations, interests, and struggles in a transnational space that linked the two sides of the Pacific Ocean can we truly understand the totality of Japanese immigrant experience, which was moved by complex motives and desires, some of which were contradictory and nonsensical at times.¹⁸

Focusing on the American West, this book chronicles the Japanese immigrant experience from 1885 to 1941. Scholars have divided the prewar history of Japanese Americans into two major phases: the migration of the first generation and the transition to the emergence of all-American Nisei patriots. According to this scheme, Japanese immigration between 1885 and 1908 ushered in the influx of single male laborers—“birds of passage”—who intended to “sojourn” in Hawaii and the continental United States, a practice commonly known as *dekasegi*. Then, around 1908, with the rise of anti-Japanese agitation, the Gentlemen’s Agreement between Tokyo and Washington abruptly put a halt to labor migration across the Pacific. Since bona fide residents could still bring their family members from Japan to the United States, immigrants after the bilateral agreement were predominantly women—mostly wives of male Issei residents—whose arrival accelerated the formation of Japanese families and the increase of American-born Nisei in the American West. Meanwhile, the peril of institutionalized racism continued to haunt Japanese immigrants, stripping them of various politicoeconomic rights and relegating them to the status of perpetual foreigners. In 1924, the enactment of the National Origins Act, which prohibited the entry of immigrants from Japan altogether, ended the first migration phase. In the historical literature on this phase, racism and labor have been the two central analytical themes for understanding the Japanese in the United States.¹⁹

This study incorporates the consequences of nation-building and imperialism into the analysis of the Issei’s migration experience and adaptation to American society between the 1880s and the 1910s. Understanding Japanese immigrant history from the inter-National perspective requires close attention to the timing of their departure from Japan and entry into the United States.

Their premigrant experiences were shaped, first, by the emergence of a modern nation-state on the Japanese archipelago that rudely invaded their familiar social world, and, second, by the rise of the two major expansionistic powers in the Pacific.

Though a majority were of working-class origin, Japanese emigrants were still very diverse in their social and intellectual backgrounds.²⁰ Corresponding to the process of nation/empire-building in Japan, the convoluted nature of Japanese emigration chiefly mirrored how inconsistently various segments of the Issei population were nationalized or “modernized.” Because distinct classes of emigrants identified with the Japanese state in different ways, tensions, rather than congruencies, characterized the relationships of Issei with their native country. While the Japanese state attempted to fit the emigrants into the mold of the ideal imperial subject, many Issei interpreted preconceived national categories differently, often blending them with hegemonic “American” meanings posed by white exclusionists and deploying them in defense of their diasporic community.

The American West constituted a borderland where America’s westward expansionism met Japanese imperialism around the question of immigration from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.²¹ It was also where different national ideals and ideologies clashed, became intertwined, and fused through the interplay of the nativist push for racial exclusion and the immigrant struggle against it. The turn of the twentieth century marked the consolidation of a Euro-American regime on the “frontier,” in which a rigid racial hierarchy was established over the growing “alien” populations of Asian and Mexican origins.²² Not only did the geopolitical context of the borderland fashion the form of exclusionist and assimilationist politics there, but it also promoted the appropriation of Japanese and American colonial thinking by many Issei, as they fought the Orientalist charges of unassimilability and justified their rightful place in the frontier land. As advocates of the new Western history show, the American West has always been a meeting place of various ideas, interests, and powers; Japanese at this site of cross-cultural mixing must likewise be seen as players in an entanglement and contestation across multiple national spaces.²³ Adopting the concept of the borderland, this book tackles the interconnect-edness of the colonialism, migration, and racial struggle that unfolded in the complex social space of the American West.

This book commences by placing Issei migration and their settlement in the contexts of Japan’s transpacific expansion and America’s continuous conquest of the frontier at the turn of the twentieth century. The massive exodus of labor migrants from Japan, coinciding with the empire’s inception, paralleled the development of a major branch of Japanese imperialist thought—“eastward expansionism”—that viewed the Western Hemisphere as its own “frontier.”

This impulse was confronted by the westward manifest destiny of white America—one that effected the acquisition of Hawaii, the Philippines, and Guam in 1898. Unearthing this neglected imperialist rivalry, chapter 1 explores Japan's major discourses on emigration, which helped to produce heterogeneous groups of Issei. As various forms of expansionist thought clashed with the pragmatism of *dekasegi* laborers, ethnic solidarity or common identity barely existed among Japanese immigrants at the outset. The first chapter sets the stage for the tumultuous beginning of Issei society and its history in America.

Chapters 2 and 3 trace the contentious processes of community formation. From the turn of the century through the 1910s, a unified leadership of elite immigrants took shape in tandem with the rise of anti-Japanese agitation in California. In partnership with members of the Japanese diplomatic corps, self-proclaimed Issei leaders—mostly urban, entrepreneurial, and educated—institutionalized an immigrant control mechanism in the form of the Japanese association network that crisscrossed the American West. Envisioned as a key solution to racial exclusion, the apparatus of social disciplining sought to transform the masses of laboring men and women into imperial subjects, who could simultaneously partake fully of American life and citizenship. Akin to the mainstream Progressive movement, this project of racial uplift attempted to inscribe onto ordinary Issei a bourgeois middle-class understanding of civility, morality, and womanhood, which underscored the “whiteness” of Japanese immigrants in the language of universal modernity. Central to immigrant moral reform were modernist assumptions of race and nationhood that subsumed classist and gendered expectations. Not only embraced by Japan's elite and immigrant leaders but also vociferously propagated by California exclusionists—albeit against Japanese—in their vision of a Eurocentric America, those assumptions formed a field of accommodation between incoming Japanese and receiving whites in the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 therefore looks at the curious convergence of ideas and practices relative to respective nation-building among the educated elements of Issei men and women, Tokyo's diplomats, and white Californians. The chapter also sheds light on their divergence from ordinary Japanese immigrants, who never seriously heeded the elite vision of ideal citizen-subjects.

Another force, however, simultaneously served to construct the collectivity of a “race” out of Japanese immigrants of all classes and all ideological persuasions on the borderland. Instead of racial uplift, racial subordination was the organizing grammar of this social formation. Chapter 3 deals with the overarching impact on the Issei of American racism, which contributed to the development of a distinct racial identity among them in relation to other borderland residents as well as the people of Japan. This process occurred at the level of their daily struggle as a racial(ized) minority—self-consciously identified

as “the Japanese in America [*zaibei doho*]”—on the basis of shared interests in and concerns with power relations in the American West. Examining the critical linkages between white exclusionist politics and immigrant counterstruggles, this chapter explores the grassroots level of community formation, which coincided with the partial consolidation of immigrant leadership during the first two decades of the century.

Situated between the heavily studied subjects of the Japanese exclusion movement and wartime incarceration, the interwar period (1924–1941) is a largely forgotten phase of Japanese American history. The orthodox historical narrative treated the decades of the 1920s and the 1930s as a mere transitional moment in the evolution of two generations of Japanese Americans from “foreign” immigrants to full-fledged Americans. What can be termed the “immigrant paradigm” of Japanese American history has helped to buoy the myth of American exceptionalism, which celebrates the incorporation of foreigners as symbolizing the promise and triumph of American democracy.²⁴ A part of liberal assimilationist ideology, the paradigm dismisses the Old World traits of immigrants as a major roadblock to national inclusion. As the first generation symbolizes “foreign” in that scheme, the second generation represents the “marginal man,” estranged from both the immigrant past and American society. In Japanese American history, the interwar years, especially the 1930s, are generally posited as the time when the Nisei began to grapple, under the obstinate influences of their Issei parents, with the challenges that all marginal men were supposed to encounter along the universal path to becoming Americans.²⁵ In recent years, revisionist scholarship has complicated that master narrative, instead highlighting the unique “bicultural” or “dual” nature of Japanese American history before the Pacific War.²⁶ The new studies remind us of the fallacy of seeing Japanese American lives from the standpoint of polarized national/cultural identities and allegiances—the Japan-versus-America binary that has obfuscated the nuanced experiences of Issei and Nisei in a transnational politicocultural space. Japanese Americans’ politics of dualism indeed provides a crucial context for a more sensible understanding of the internment years, although this book only suggests certain aspects of the continuities and discontinuities between prewar and wartime Japanese America.²⁷

In the five chapters dedicated to the interwar period, this book systematically revisits the historical omissions that have rendered Japanese immigrants as perpetual foreigners in our historical knowledge. Instead of a natural progression or historical inevitability, a politics of social negotiation played a principal role in Japanese Americans’ adaptation to the exigencies of the new reality after racial exclusion in the American West. The interwar chapters, like the earlier chapters, draw upon a wide range of primary source documents in both English and Japanese. Because this book probes the interstices of hegemonic

meanings and categories wherein the Issei lived and struggled, it is imperative, first and foremost, to apprehend *their* interpretation and appropriation of orthodox ideas, as well as their motives for the actions and inaction that stemmed from them. In an effort to salvage the unarticulated voices and mundane behaviors of Japanese immigrants, this study examines rarely consulted personal and organizational papers, vernacular newspapers, immigrant publications, state records, and government reports scattered in both the United States and Japan.²⁸

Chapters 4 through 6 explicate the new thinking and practice that emerged in the community of “the Japanese in America.” Bringing together the histories of migration, popular culture, and historiography, the fourth chapter shows how Japanese immigrants placed their collective past within narratives of the American frontier and Japanese expansionism in their relentless pursuit of national inclusion. Between 1924 and 1941, Issei historians writing for a popular audience borrowed from Japanese and American ideologies to draw a parallel between Euro-American frontier settlers and Issei “pioneers,” while creating internal aliens among the working-class bachelors unfit for that image. Setting apart *dekasegi* laborers from Japanese American citizen-subjects, this historical vision enabled Issei family men to proclaim themselves archetypal Americans by virtue of their *Japanese* traits despite their unnaturalizable status. During the 1930s, immigrant leaders and parents also engaged in projects of social engineering on the basis of their dual national identity. The making of an ideal racial future for the Nisei involved manipulating their vocational preferences and demographics, advocating the “Japanese spirit” and moral lifestyle, and participating in transnational educational programs that took thousands of the American-born generation to their ancestral land. While expressed in the language of progress, national authenticity, and racial uplift, the visions and practices of Issei transnationalism that those projects embodied reified their overall marginality in American society, as well as added to the pressure experienced by this minority group, which had to constantly defend even the diminutive “ethnic” space it was allowed to hold.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine the intricate meanings of Japanese immigrant nationalism. Uniting ostensibly incommensurate ideas and acts—like their homeland ties and Americanism—is an indispensable step toward gaining a sense of how the world actually looked in the eyes of these immigrant Americans. In the context of racial subordination, the culture of Issei nationalism did not simply assert ethnic pride, cultural superiority, or aspiration toward collective liberation or ascent. Under the spell of nationalist consciousness, Japanese immigrants actually sought peaceful relations with propertied whites for stability and survival. At the same time, without the constraints of hierarchical imperatives in the interethnic relations, Issei nationalism precipitated confron-

tations with their Asian competitors just as imperial Japan fought and conquered their countries of origin. Finally, this form of nationalism suppressed internal diversity, thrusting heterodox lives, acts, and ideas into the rubric of middle-class citizenry that it strove to construct in the ethnic collectivity. Rather than repelling white supremacy with nationalist indignation, leading immigrants forged an identity of being “honorary whites” around the notion of proper “Japanese” thinking and conduct, and they successfully persuaded the rest of the community to acquiesce to it. Thus, even in the pro-Japan activities of the Issei can be seen a deep-seated desire for inclusion in America. Viewed from this standpoint, the idea of divided loyalties, which the immigrant paradigm presupposes in the problem of immigrant nationalism, simply does not hold up.

This study raises questions and unravels assumptions about race, nation, migration, and history that have misled many scholars into thinking in terms of bounded definitions and essentialized categories. Much of human experience resists being framed into the confines of national histories, and that is most true of immigrants—including Japanese—whose lives unfold somewhere long before they actually immigrate. Although challenging national histories and nationalist historiographies from the Issei’s transnational perspective, this study nevertheless does not conclude with an emancipatory vision of escape from, or an inspiring story of opposition to, the tyranny of the national.²⁹ The most prevalent version of Japanese immigrant transnationalism articulated their profound anxieties about being excluded from white America, being marginalized in the society in which they lived, and being subordinated as the consequence of racist legislation. Unlike black “double consciousness,” for example, the Issei’s politics of dualism did not stem from ambivalence about the singular nationality of a racist regime and a diasporic self-understanding that aspired to transcend it.³⁰ Transnationalism instead allowed Japanese immigrants to strategize new terms of national belonging through their claims to their imperial Japanese heritage. Rather than seeking to overcome the constraints of the American state with cosmopolitanism, the Issei spun the meanings of racial authenticity and cultural respectability only to the extent that they did not subvert the integrity of the nation or disrupt the racial order of U.S. society. This paradox—the potency of the national in transnationalism—is the central theme of Japanese immigrant history before the Pacific War.

Part I

Multiple Beginnings

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I

Mercantilists, Colonialists, and Laborers

Heterogeneous Origins of Japanese America

Emigrants (*imin*) and colonialists (*shokumin*), just like the phenomena of emigration (*imin*) and colonization (*shokumin*), are often confounded. . . . Colonialists embark as imperial subjects with a pioneer spirit under the aegis of our national flag for state territorial expansion; emigrants act merely on an individual basis, leaving homeland as a matter of personal choice without the backing of sovereign power.¹

In 1910, a Japanese immigrant (Issei) journalist commented on the prevailing “confusion” over those conceptual categories. Not only were the people of Japan guilty of this, the writer asserted, but his compatriots in California also erroneously identified themselves as “colonialists” not “immigrants.”² This confusion characterized the historical trajectory of Japanese emigration to the United States, as well as the heterogeneous nature of the early Issei society. Specifically, the weaving of colonialism into labor migration, or vice versa, formed a crucial backdrop against which thorny relations developed among Issei, between them and white residents, and between the expatriate Japanese community and their home state. The transnational history of Japanese immigrants in the American West therefore must begin with an analysis of the ideas and practices that underlay those confusions and contradictions.

Popularized after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, “emigration” and “colonization” were new concepts borrowed from the West, which the Japanese

political elite and intellectual class came to use interchangeably in their discussion of the most pressing national tasks: national formation and expansion.³ The dissemination of these ideas to the emergent citizenry through the press, political organizations, and academia was central in the making of a modern empire in Japan. The very notion of emigration or colonization had not even existed under the closed-door policy of the Tokugawa feudal regime. The exodus of various classes of Japanese for Hawaii and the mainland United States after the 1880s prompted the intelligentsia for the first time to seriously contemplate the meaning of popular emigration in tandem with the nascent ideas of national expansion.

In order to explain the nature of early Japanese expansionism with which the practice of emigration was tightly intertwined, it is necessary to delve into three interrelated contexts: geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan's incorporation into the international network of capitalist economies, and the formation of the modern nation-state. First, Meiji Japan's entry into modernity coincided with the era in which Western powers had been engaged in fierce colonialist competitions in East Asia and the Pacific Basin. During the 1880s, a new style of imperialism became the vogue as the West sought direct control of overseas territories, replacing the emphasis on hegemonic control in trade to link the metropolis and its colonies. In Southeast Asia, the French took over Indochina, and the British established footholds in Burma, while both powers scrambled for Africa. The Pacific and northeastern Asia subsequently emerged as another sphere of imperialist competition. During and after the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States acquired Hawaii, the Philippines, and Guam, while the Germans took over the hitherto-neglected Spanish possessions of Pacific island chains in Micronesia and Melanesia. In the meantime, since the mid-1800s, China had become a major battlefield for Christian missionaries and merchants from Europe and the United States.

Meiji Japan, a latecomer, joined this international scramble for new territories and export markets, not only because its leaders felt that the "civilized" had to accept manifest destiny to partake in the practice of colonization, but also because they believed that proactive expansionist endeavors would be imperative in defense of Japan's fragile security.⁴ The nation had been on the receiving end of Western imperialism, when it had been forced to open to international commerce in 1854 by U.S. warships under Commodore Matthew Perry, but Japan had diverged from other Asian nations because of its quick "success" in acclimating to the geopolitical environment. No sooner had Emperor Meiji formed a new government in 1868 than imperial expansionism began internally and externally, resulting in the colonization of Hokkaido (1869) and Okinawa (1879); the seizures of Taiwan (1894), south Sakhalin (1905), and Kwantung Province (1905) in northern China; and then the annexation of