Introduction

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In 2015, Ryan Kenji Kuramitsu, a youth columnist for the Pacific Citizen, the ninety-year-old national newspaper of the Japanese American Citizens League, warned of the “danger” of maintaining and advancing a singular, grand narrative of the Japanese American historical and contemporary experience. Disrupting such a narrative requires the inclusion of a broader range of stories and viewpoints, particularly from individuals and groups who have been marginalized or rendered invisible in prevailing accounts: “We must hold space for each of our unique perspectives rather than anxiously demanding that a single story of ‘the Japanese American legacy’ be snapped, mummified and delicately retold in a crisp, acceptable way to each succeeding generation. We must insist upon greater airtime for our counter narratives—the hidden perspectives from which we often learn far more than from those stories we already know” (Kuramitsu 2015). This volume seeks to take up this challenge by presenting multiple perspectives of who Japanese Americans are, how they think about notions of community and culture, and how they engage and negotiate multiple social identities. We do so by focusing on the experiences, perspectives, and aspirations of Japanese American millennials.

Why millennials? We argue that focus on this historical generation allows us to problematize, deconstruct, and perhaps subvert the normative generational framework within Japanese American studies. While much has been written about Japanese Americans as a unique and distinctive racial and ethnic group, the existing literature overwhelmingly relies on a singular historical narrative and generational framework (Azuma 2016; Nakano
Sociohistorical accounts center on the early settlement of Japanese immigrants, the tragic episode of mass incarceration during World War II, and the presumed rapid assimilation of Japanese Americans in the postwar period. Shifts in Japanese American social identities and experiences are referenced and understood in relationship to differences between generational cohorts (e.g., issei, nisei, sansei, yonsei, gosei). These cohorts are presumed to be reflective of both genealogical distance from immigration and characteristic of specific historical periods. It is generally taken for granted in the existing literature that the experiences, identities, attitudes, and behaviors of Japanese Americans can be largely understood and explained by a generational analysis.

The generational “labeling” of Japanese Americans continues to be a profound and persistent practice in the current scholarship and in the popular imagination. Both the uniqueness and institutional embeddedness of Japanese American generational categories are evident in the race and ethnic statistics compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau. The Ancestry Code List for the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey lists 999 ancestry categories (e.g., Alsatian, Sicilian, Nicaraguan, Cayman Islander, Somali). Remarkably, the only ethnic group on the entire list that has generational labels designated for coding are Japanese: Issei (Code 741), Nisei (742), Sansei (743), Yonsei (744), and Gosei (745) (U.S. Census Bureau 2017, 19).

The continued investment in the prevailing generational paradigm, and the meanings assigned to these generational categories, is problematic. By uncritically adhering to this framework, the existing literature on Japanese Americans tends to overlook other historical periods, other subsequent waves of Japanese immigrants in the postwar era, and other ways of narrating and conceptually framing the Japanese American experience. This volume, through a focus on the experiences, perspectives, and aspirations of Japanese American millennials, addresses some of these absences in the current literature and suggests how we might alternatively study Japanese Americans as a whole.

It is not without a sense of irony that we examine and leverage a generational cohort (i.e., millennials) in order to dislodge the dominant generational framework that has come to so profoundly structure research in Japanese American studies. While our intent is to problematize this framework, we do acknowledge the persistence and analytic power of the paradigm in shaping popular conceptions of Japanese American identity and community formation. Our goal is to disrupt prevailing notions of fixed generational cohorts, stable social identities, and shared understandings of community by highlighting the contemporary diversity of the Japanese American millennial population. Examining this generation requires us to take seriously the daily negotiations undertaken by Japanese American millennials to situate themselves among multiple axes of stratification and
difference—according to generation as well as gender, sexual orientation, class, nativity, and religion—and the exponential diversity such intersections create. Such an intersectional perspective must consider the impact of different social sites, geographic spaces, and institutional contexts as they deeply affect, shape, and structure how Japanese American millennials understand themselves. Drawing upon their experiences forces us to pay attention to the ways in which Japanese American community institutions are not simply fading away—following the predictions of classical assimilation theory—but are being changed and reimagined to fit the needs of an emergent, digitally connected generation.

Our intent is not only to capture and present the heterogeneity of the Japanese American millennial cohort but also to illuminate and address broad questions that continue to be central to the study of race, ethnicity, and social transformation in the United States. How might we understand the persistence or the twilight of ethnic identity over time and across generations and in relationship to other identities and social statuses? How are ethnic community institutions and practices maintained, transformed, and reimagined by generational change and group affiliation? How do mixed-race individuals and groups complicate our understanding of racial and ethnic categories, social boundaries, and identities? How are racial and ethnic consciousness, identities, and institutions shaped in transnational space? In this volume, we address these broader questions utilizing Japanese American millennials as a case study to highlight the different manifestations and expressions of Japanese American ethnicity. Acknowledging and mapping this diversity allows us to notice, comprehend, and appreciate the multiple and complex meanings of what it means to be Japanese American in the twenty-first century.

Who Are Millennials?

*Time* magazine loudly proclaims in its May 20, 2013, cover story that millennials are “The Me Me Me Generation.” Joel Stein, the author of the cover article, admits that while old people have always bitterly complained that the younger generation is lazy, selfish, self-indulgent, and entitled, he claims, “Unlike my parents, my grandparents and my great-grandparents, I have proof” (Stein 2013). According to Stein, millennials, defined as those born from 1980 to 2000, have a dramatically higher incidence of narcissistic personality disorder; they are fame obsessed; they are convinced of their own greatness; and they are lazy. Such a critique of this generation resonated in other quarters. Most notably, motivational speaker Simon Sinek’s 2016 interview about entitled millennials in the workplace went viral on social media (Gosse 2017). In a 2017 interview, Australian millionaire Tim Gurner blames millennials’ inability to invest in property on their trendy consumption of pricey avocado toast (Calfas 2017).
Although these popular depictions of the millennial generation are, of course, one-sided and unfair, millennials are not without distinction. Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000) tout millennials as a technologically savvy generation that is more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically and racially diverse than any previous cohort. Coming of age alongside the internet and the rise of social media, millennials are “digital natives” (Pew Research Center 2014). Engaged with each other on the growing number of social media platforms and mobile apps, they are the most connected generation (Pew Research Center 2014). The very name “millennial” references their embrace of and aptitude for technology, while maintaining a sense of promise and change (Howe and Strauss 2000). Millennials are often critiqued as nonjoiners, but they are also self-critical and poised to bring insight and change to the institutions they choose to engage with (Pew Research Center 2014).

In 2016, millennials became the largest living generation in the United States—surpassing the baby boomers—with a growing population of over seventy-five million individuals (Frey 2016). Howe and Strauss (2000) estimate that, inclusive of migration, the millennial generation could surpass one hundred million at its zenith, almost a third more than the height of the baby boomer generation. Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history with a nonwhite segment of the population comprising 43 percent of the total, the highest share of any existing generation (Pew Research Center 2014). While a relatively small percentage of millennials are immigrants, one in five has at least one immigrant parent and one in ten has a noncitizen parent (Howe and Strauss 2003). With regard to sexual orientation, 20 percent of millennials identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), a two-thirds increase from the previous generation (GLAAD 2017).

Despite its noteworthy size and diversity, relatively few studies have explicitly examined the millennial generation as an empirical grouping, much less within ethnic studies. Millennials are said to be a protected generation, both by their baby boomer parents and by society at large. They have been sheltered from many hardships, disappointments, and loss. Sinek asserts that millennials “were told they were special—all the time, they were told they can have anything they want in life, just because they want it” (Gosse 2017). Perhaps it may be better to understand millennials as the “most watched over generation in memory” (Howe and Strauss 2000, 18). Citing a University of Michigan study, Howe and Strauss state that from 1981 to 1997 “free” time among adolescents dropped by 37 percent. Instead, the childhood “free” time of previous generations became heavily supervised with enrollment in various and numerous extracurricular activities. Such a high level of extracurricular participation tempers the conventional portrait of millennial disenchantment and individualism and raises questions regarding
whether millennials reject or engage with existing social, cultural, political, and religious institutions.

In this volume, we draw upon the Japanese American millennial experience as a unique lens by which to understand the simultaneous participation in and seeming rejection of social institutions in a period of profound community transformation. Although Japanese American millennials share many experiences and characteristics with other millennials, the chapters presented in this volume examine how the racial and ethnic identities of Japanese American millennials find expression within the Japanese American community (and beyond it) and what that says about our notion of community itself. While previous studies have found a lack of affiliation with any political, cultural, or religious institutions among millennials, chapters in this anthology demonstrate that community institutions often serve as important mechanisms for the maintenance of ethnicity. Rather than turn their back on existing institutions, Japanese American millennials appear to be reimagining them to suit the contemporary needs and realities of the multiple social networks they affiliate with. Their experiences demonstrate fluid racial and ethnic boundary formations in local, national, and transnational contexts.

Rethinking the Dominant Narrative in Japanese American Studies

Taken as a whole, the articles in this volume describe the heterogeneity and diversity of who Japanese American millennials are. They are not only yonsei (fourth generation) or gosei (fifth generation) in terms of the prevailing generational paradigm with its emphasis on the trajectory established by pre-1924 Japanese immigrants but also immigrants arriving in the postwar era and their children, called shin-issei and shin-nisei, respectively. They are also zainichi, ethnic Koreans with roots in Japan, as well as mixed-race individuals who claim multiple racial and ethnic identities. They are individuals who view their Japanese American ethnicity as their primary social identity, as well as those for whom it is a more minor source of affiliation in contrast to other categories of identity such as gender and sexuality.

The significance of noting and mapping this diversity cannot be overstated. It constitutes an important response and challenge to much of the existing literature on Japanese Americans. Historian Eiichiro Azuma (2016) states that “racial formation in Japanese America is highly slanted in terms of generation, citizenship status, and geography” (Azuma 2016, 257) and argues that the existing literature highlights and privileges some experiences to the exclusion of others: “Nikkei [Japanese American] history is unarguably one of the most deeply probed in Asian American studies. Despite the impressive volume of scholarship, it has created—and cemented—only a particular understanding of the ethnic group and its history” (258–259). Similarly, Dana Nakano (2017) argues the oversimplified definition of generation...
and the narrow historical narrative continues to be deeply embedded in the scholarly and popular understandings of the Japanese American experience.

Certain historical moments are foregrounded in the dominant historical narrative with particular attention given to the experiences and struggles of nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans born to Japanese parents who immigrated to the United States before 1924. Most nisei were children or young adults at the outset of World War II. While enjoying expanded political rights in sharp contrast to their immigrant parents who were legally defined as aliens ineligible for citizenship, nisei faced both social and economic discrimination that were manifested in patterns of residential segregation and limited occupational mobility. In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, nisei constituted two-thirds of Japanese Americans on the West Coast who were forcibly removed and incarcerated during the war years. Much of the literature on Japanese Americans describes this traumatic period, chronicles the varied response among the nisei generation to the tragic circumstances they encountered, and the effects of the camps on subsequent generations. Attention has also been given to the immediate postwar period (1945–1965) when Japanese Americans were “reintegrated” into American life and achieved a modicum of social and economic mobility. Far less attention has been given to sansei (third generation) though accounts have examined the rise of ethnic consciousness and political mobilization among sansei in the wake of the civil rights and black power movements (Pulido 2006; Maeda 2009).

In the 1980s, attention was focused on the movement for Japanese American redress and reparations that culminated in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 being signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. Yasuko Takezawa (1995), in her ethnographic study of the redress movement in Seattle, argues that the historical memory of wartime incarceration and the later groundswell of activism in support of redress and reparations were central to Japanese American ethnic identity formation during the 1970s and 1980s. But what happens when an important chapter in Japanese American history comes to a close? What comes to serve as a rallying point for ethnic consciousness and solidarity when a defining issue that has mobilized the Japanese American community for generations is finally resolved? Japanese American millennials may offer us some clues. They constitute the first post-redress generation within the Japanese American community. Thus the ways they narrate and negotiate ethnic identity provide a revealing window into how Japanese American ethnicity is now thought about, maintained, and transformed.

Diversity within Generations

The dominant narrative in Japanese American studies has either ignored or tended to flatten diversity within generational cohorts. But exceptions do
exist that provide generative examples of how to study Japanese American millennials. Azuma’s *Between Two Empires* (2005) utilizes a transnational framework that allows for a more nuanced reading of different issei outlooks, desires, and goals. For the nisei generation, scholars, such as Tamotsu Shibutani in *The Derelicts of Company K* (1978), have illuminated forgotten and often suppressed stories to provide an alternative understanding of the nisei generation beyond the prevailing trope of the patriotic “model minority.” The eclectic experiences of sansei student activists and their roles in different social movements are illustrated both in Jere Takahashi’s *Nisei/Sansei* (1997) and Daryl Maeda’s *Chains of Babylon* (2009). Takahashi’s account also disrupts the discrete construction of generational identities by emphasizing the impact of historical context on “intragenerational tensions and diversity” and “intergenerational continuities” in terms of nisei and sansei politics (Takahashi 1997, 11–12).

In many ways, the articles in this volume draw upon and extend the insights of defining generations, exploring their historical significance and discerning their overall coherence in the face of internal diversity. Looking at the heterogeneity and corresponding diverse experiences of Japanese American millennials also prompts us to reconsider and challenge key social science paradigms of race, ethnicity, and generational change.

**Cultural Compatibility, Assimilation, and Symbolic Ethnicity**

From 1947 to 1950, an interdisciplinary research team from the University of Chicago studied the social adjustment of some twenty thousand Japanese Americans who had arrived in Chicago from the wartime incarceration camps. The researchers were struck by the rapid social mobility and popular acceptance of this group as they settled and adapted to their lives in the city. William Caudill and George De Vos (1956) argued that such quick integration was attributable to overlaps between Japanese and American middle-class culture: “The Japanese Americans provide us, then, with the case of a group who, despite racial visibility and a culture traditionally thought of as alien, achieved a remarkable adjustment to middle-class American life because certain compatibilities in the value systems of the immigrant and host cultures operated strongly enough to override the obvious difficulties” (1117).

In his influential essay and subsequent book, demographer William Petersen (1966, 1971) extended this cultural compatibility argument, observing how Japanese Americans “could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion in part because of their meaningful attachment with an alien culture” (43). Representing Japanese Americans as a “model minority” did have a dark side. In the midst of the tumultuous race relations of the 1960s, the model minority image was strategically evoked to suggest that
institutional racism was not the cause of persistent inequalities, the problem was that certain groups simply lacked the right “cultural stuff” to assimilate.

In contrast to these allegedly culturally deficient groups, Japanese Americans became the poster child for the dominant social science framework of assimilation. The assimilationist paradigm sees each succeeding generation of an immigrant-origin group shedding their ethnic distinctiveness through socioeconomic upward mobility and integration into the mainstream of American social and cultural life (Gordon 1964). In their recent revival of straight-line assimilation theory, Richard D. Alba and Victor Nee (2003) utilize later-generation Japanese Americans’ ability to cross, indeed transcend, the color line as proof of assimilation’s continued theoretical validity. Through a detailed analysis of aggregate, quantitative data, Alba and Nee demonstrate that Japanese Americans have achieved high scores on all the traditional markers of assimilation success (i.e., English as a primary language, acculturation, nativity, education, income, residential integration, interracial marriage), often times surpassing that of native-born whites. Becoming assimilated also entails the declining salience of ethnic consciousness and identity and their impact on shaping one’s social location and daily life. Herbert J. Gans’s (1979) concept of symbolic ethnicity has described the nominal and symbolic way ethnic identification persists among later-generation white ethnics. Symbolic ethnicity is a private and voluntary practice—nostalgic, intermittent, and optional (Gans 1979; Alba 1985, 1990; Waters 1990; Tuan 1999)—with little impact on life chances and everyday behaviors.

Assimilation theory not only predicts the eventual diminishment of ethnic salience but also suggests the gradual blurring of racial boundaries. As Gans (2005) also asserts, assimilation is a process of social whitening. In its most extreme formulation, the concept has been employed to suggest that Japanese Americans might become “white” under a broader definition of “whiteness.” Michael Omi (2016) argues that just as previous “outsiders” (e.g., the Irish, Jews) have been historically incorporated into our notions of who is white, speculation now increasingly centers on whether Asian Americans are following a trajectory of inclusion under a more expansive understanding of “whiteness.” Political scientist Andrew Hacker (1992), for example, argues that the racial category of white is an elastic one. The question is not “who is white,” Hacker asserts, but “who can be considered white.” With this in mind, he believes that Asian Americans are “merging” into the white category.

Assimilation theory also predicts the blurring of racial boundaries through intermarriage. The theory presumes that intermarriage rates serve as an important indicator of reduced social distance between racial groups. Thus, a crucial indicator of a group’s assimilation is the rate of outmarriage,
particularly with whites. As a group, Japanese Americans have high rates of outmarriage, 53 percent among native-born Japanese Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). The high rates of outmarriage have led to a dramatic rise in the number of multiracial Japanese Americans, with 40 percent of Japanese Americans identifying with more than one race or ethnicity (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Assimilation scholars posit that multiracial individuals complicate racial boundaries and structures. In particular, Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean (2007) argue, “Based on patterns of multiracial identification, Asians and Latinos may be the next in line to be white, with multiracial Asian-whites and Latino-whites at the head of the queue” (579). As multiracial Asian Americans are more likely to identify as “white” in comparison to multiracial blacks (Lee and Bean 2007), they demonstrate the blurring of racial boundaries and the prospect of impending whiteness.

While acknowledging the blurring or malleability of racial boundaries, it is equally important to recognize that an ever-expanding white category is not inevitable nor is it the only potential outcome. Lee and Bean’s (2007) assertion hinges upon the visual recognition and “passing” of mixed-race Japanese Americans as white. But multiracials may not have the necessary physical characteristics or be otherwise reluctant to pass. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain (2006, 21), in her study of Japanese American beauty pageants, demonstrates that both monoracial and multiracial individuals undertake “race work” that problematizes the alignment between phenotypically based notions of race and ideas about cultural authenticity. Multiracial pageant contestants, for example, put significant effort into maintaining their connection with other Japanese Americans and legitimizing such connections in cultural and racial terms. Furthermore, as visually cued racial distinctions are bestowed importance through complex processes of social construction, it is also possible that blurred boundaries can be reorganized into new hierarchies that continue to disadvantage darker-skinned individuals and communities (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Glenn 2009).

In our assessment, we deem the core tenets of assimilation theory to be flawed, misleading, or at the very least, insufficient in its ability capture and narrate the full breadth of the historical and contemporary experiences of Japanese Americans. Behind assimilation theory is a deep teleological assumption—one that assumes a natural progression for select “outsiders” to eventually achieve integration through the shedding of racial and ethnic difference. Rather than undergo a process of ethnic attenuation, the articles in this anthology demonstrate the continued persistence of ethnic identity and engagement with ethnic institutions among Japanese American millennials. But the specific ways that identity, history, and community are thought about, expressed, organized, and lived by this generation are varied, diverse, and intersectional.
Intersectionality and the Japanese American Millennial Generation

Ethnic identity and community continue to play significant roles in shaping the everyday behaviors, social networks, and practices of Japanese American millennials. Surveying this generation serves as an opportunity to not only highlight the limitations of the prevailing narratives of Japanese American assimilation but also to advance a counternarrative that better captures the diversity of their experiences. An explicit focus on millennials as an historical generation serves to disrupt the conventional organizing and separation of Japanese Americans by immigrant generation—issei, nisei, sansei, yonsei, shin-issei, shin-nisei. As we shall see, millennial experiences are not neatly divided and categorized by such generational terms. While the focus remains on ethnic identity, Japanese American millennials are more readily conversant in asserting and explaining their experiences in the language of intersectionality—“the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015, 2).

Intersectionality has, of course, always constituted a lived reality for all Japanese Americans. But the millennial generation possesses a consciousness and vocabulary that is more apt to acknowledge and reflect on how the cohort’s internal diversity is illuminated and shaped by multiple axes of social stratification and difference. Their identities as Japanese Americans are clearly acknowledged to be complexly interwoven with other identities and social cleavages organized along the lines of gender, sexual orientation, class, geography, religiosity, and indeed, race. The chapters gathered in this collection capture and reflect on the ways the intersectional—and persistently racialized—identities of millennials confront, challenge, and refashion existing ethnic institutions and identities.

Such a reading stands in sharp contrast to an analysis of generational change that subscribes to a linear trajectory of assimilation and the presumption of increasing ethnic attenuation. The Japanese American millennials profiled within this book pursue different and varied paths, define their identities in constant negotiation with multiple systems of stratification, and find distinct social spaces by which to assert and live out their identities.

Themes and Chapter Descriptions

The chapters in this volume present and critically reflect on the varied experiences and identities of Japanese American millennials in different social spaces, geographic locales, and institutional contexts. We have clustered the essays under five broad rubrics while being fully cognizant that aggregating the essays in this manner is somewhat arbitrary. Many of the essays could
have been grouped differently and situated under more than one of the five rubrics. What this reflects are the ways that the individual essays presented in this volume directly engage each other and address the multiple and overlapping dimensions of what it means to be a Japanese American millennial.

Part I, “Sustaining Community,” focuses on how Japanese American millennials experience long-standing ethnic institutions and how they work to maintain and, in many instances, to transform active ethnic community ties. In the face of profound demographic change in the Japanese American community, what are the social spaces and institutional contexts in which ethnic identity finds expression? And, how does ethnicity continue to shape the social interactions and institutional affiliations of millennial Japanese Americans? In “‘We’ve Got Team Spirit!’: Ethnic Community Building and Japanese American Youth Basketball Leagues,” Christina B. Chin looks at the role of co-ethnic basketball leagues in shaping the ethnic identities of Japanese American youth. She argues that even among highly assimilated Japanese Americans, the leagues serve as an active space for constructing and preserving a sense of connection to ethnic community. Lisa Hirai Tsuchitani, in “Millennial Understandings of Nikkei Seishin in San Jose Japantown,” illustrates the impact of a Japanese American summer cultural program on its millennial-age student graduates. She highlights how student understandings of Japanese American identity and community have been profoundly shaped by participation in these heritage school programs. Dana Y. Nakano, in “To Be Yonsei in Southern California: Persistent Community as Postsuburban Minority Culture of Mobility,” provides a critique of spatial assimilation theory by focusing on community-building practices among dispersed, suburban Japanese Americans. The millennial youth in Nakano’s sample not only travel to ethnic institutions in urban and postsuburban locales to build and sustain social relations, but also actively seek out other Japanese Americans in traditionally non-ethnic spaces.

Part II, “Spiritualities,” examines the role of religion and spirituality in the lives and identities of Japanese American millennials. Among other questions, how does religious affiliation shape and structure understandings of ethnicity and ethnic community? Dean Ryuta Adachi, in “Redefining ‘Camp’ in Japanese America,” presents the long history of Japanese American Christian youth camps to situate the contemporary experiences of millennial summer camp participants. Adachi argues that the camps provide a unique version of Protestant Christianity that serves to provide a common identity among an increasingly heterogeneous Japanese American millennial population. Drawing upon survey data, Brett J. Esaki, in “Religious Nones? Increasing Unaffiliated and Christian Religiosity among Japanese American Millennials,” examines whether Japanese Americans are following the broader sociological trend of millennial nonreligious affiliation. While affirming this trend, Esaki gestures to the notion that a nonspecific
spirituality has enabled Japanese Americans to cultivate multiple religious traditions. Chenxing Han highlights how religious and cultural identity are intertwined for many Japanese American Shin Buddhists in “‘I Am Trailblazing’: Young Adult Japanese American Shin Buddhists Negotiating Complex Identities.” The respondents in her study adopt an open and flexible approach to their spiritual lives that help them negotiate the multiplicity of cultural and religious identities they embrace.

Part III, “Redefining Ethnicity,” examines how new immigrants complicate our existing notions of Japanese American identity and community. How does the influx and settlement of new Japanese immigrants revise our collective understanding of who Japanese American are? Are these new groups absorbed into the broader existing Japanese American community or do they remain a distinct and separate community? Kyung Hee Ha, in “Of Transgression: Zainichi Korean Immigrants’ Search for Home(s) and Belonging,” examines the ways ethnic Korean immigrants from Japan articulate and confront their sense of displacement in the United States. Ha finds that her respondents negotiate and maneuver between different nationality and immigration laws in order preserve their legal status in multiple nation-states. Aki Yamada explores three major shin-issei groups in her essay “Millennial Shin-Issei Identity Politics in Los Angeles.” Among other findings, Yamada argues that shin-issei imagine their homes and community as Japanese spaces within the United States and resist social and cultural assimilation into the mainstream of American life.

Part IV, “Intersecting Identities,” explores the multiple and overlapping nature of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and generation in the Japanese American millennial experience. How are identities shaped in reference to important axes of stratification and difference and how might they reflect generational change? In “Mixed-Race Japanese American Millennials: Millennials or Japanese Americans?” Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain situates mixed-race individuals with reference to millennials as a whole, to other Asian Americans, and to previous generations of Japanese Americans. Arguing against prevailing assumptions regarding the dissolution of the ethnic community, King-O’Riain illustrates how the Japanese American mixed-race population is transforming our understanding of Japanese American culture, identity, and community. Takeyuki Tsuda’s chapter, “The New Second Generation: Biculturalism and Transnational Identities among Japanese American Shin-Nisei,” disrupts the predominate focus on pre–World War II nisei by looking at the children of Japanese who immigrated to the United States after 1965. In studying this group, Tsuda argues that the experiences of the shin-nisei are best understood through the concept of biculturalism rather than the assimilationist concepts that were applied to prewar nisei. Amy Sueyoshi presents a compelling interview with a Japanese American millennial individual in “Techie, Gender Queer, and Lesbian: Interview with
Shin-Nisei Mioi Hanaoka.” In this conversation, the intersectionality of identities is made clearly evident and gives us a sense of how an individual negotiates the demands of being in very different social spaces—including the immigrant family, the church, and the Japanese American community more broadly.

While many of the essays in this volume touch upon the theme of transnationalism, the chapters in Part V, “Crossing and Bridging Boundaries,” centrally focus on the transnational dimension of millennial Japanese American experiences and identities. In “Japanese American Millennials in Contemporary Japan,” Jane H. Yamashiro draws upon the experience of millennials who have migrated to Japan and find themselves falling between the established social categories of “Japanese” and “foreign” in Japanese society. Yamashiro finds that millennial experiences with the social and cultural structures and practices in Japan highlight the ways in which ethnic, racial, and regional identities—Japaneseness, Okinawanness, and Hawai‘i Japaneseness—are negotiated and renegotiated across various regional and national contexts of Japan, Hawai‘i, and the U.S. mainland. Wesley Iwao Ueunten, in “Questioning the ‘World’: Millennial Generation Okinawan American Identity Matters,” explores “Uchinanchu” identity formation among millennium Okinawan Americans within the context of the World Youth Uchinanchu Association (WYUA) formed in 2011. Ueunten reveals how the discourse of identity for Okinawan American youth has been shaped in dramatic engagement with youth from Okinawa and the broader Okinawan diaspora. Lori Kido Lopez, in “United Hapas: The Global Communities of Mixed-Race Nikkei on YouTube,” presents a textual analysis of YouTube videos that focus on the mixed-race Japanese American millennial experience and identity in globally dispersed, but virtually connected, spaces. Lopez argues that these millennials operate within a diasporic universe rather than relying on the nation or locality as a site for ethnic belonging, identification, and community.

Noting the Limitations

Though this anthology presents and examines the understudied voices and experiences of Japanese American millennials, we recognize several limitations of the volume as a whole—geographical considerations, political engagement, and socioeconomic class. With respect to the geographical contours of millennial Japanese America, the chapters in the anthology largely focus on the diversity within an Asia-Pacific realm—Japan, Hawai‘i, and California. Japanese American millennials do exist outside of this zone, such as locales in Chicago and New York City. In the larger field of Asian American studies, Asian American scholars have pushed the analytic to examine Asian American experiences located beyond the West Coast and into
spaces “East of California” (Sumida 1998). While we acknowledge this important turn in the scholarly field, we hope that the current chapters illuminate the fact that thinking through the spaces of Japan, Hawai‘i, and California is a large undertaking in itself. However, we remain hopeful and excited to see future scholars address the issues and perspectives that Japanese American millennials face and experience in spaces and contexts residing “East of California.”

While chapters in this volume explore the ways Japanese American millennials engage social institutions, explicit discussions of political engagement are absent. Millennials as a whole are a difficult generation to pin down with respect to politics. In 2012, eighteen- to twenty-nine-year olds constituted over 21 percent of the eligible voting population, but only 50 percent of them voted (Gilman and Stokes 2014, 57). Many millennials eschew traditional party labels and party affiliation. Roughly 44 percent of millennial registered voters describe themselves as independent compared with 32 percent of boomers (Pew Research Center 2018, 8). While their electoral participation is mixed, millennials do tend to volunteer at higher rates than other generations, and 44 percent of them use social networking sites to promote political issues, post thoughts on these issues, and encourage others to act and organize (Gilman and Stokes 2014, 58).

Race is highly correlated with political attitudes and social identities, and the millennial generation is no exception. A 2017 survey of a nationally representative sample of over 1,750 millennials found that 82 percent of African Americans, 74 percent of Latino/as, 71 percent of Asian Americans, and 60 percent of whites think that racism remains a major problem in the United States (Cohen et al. 2017, 7). When asked what identities have had the most impact on their life in terms of defining their lived experience, 81 percent of African Americans, 80 percent of Asian Americans, 59 percent of Latino/as, and 40 percent of whites responded, “race/ethnicity” (30). A crucial aspect of millennial identity, race shapes, in profound ways, identity and consciousness.

We surmise that Japanese American millennials continue to “live” race and that it provides a continuing backdrop to their experiences, interactions, forms of affiliation, and political attitudes and civic engagement. Interestingly, when millennials were asked about their top-three strategies for making racial progress in our society, no racial/ethnic group listed voting in federal elections as a preferred strategy for change (Cohen et al., 38). Most millennials were drawn to local politics beginning with their immediate communities. Such a focus on communities is expressed throughout this volume and can be seen as a form of civic engagement by which Japanese American millennials are expressing their political beliefs, values, and concerns.

Lastly, this anthology often seems to leave the impact of socioeconomic class unexamined. While some chapters make references to the class
diversity among Japanese American millennials (see Chapters 7 and 8, by Ha and Yamada, respectively), most contributions focus on seemingly (upper-) middle-class formations. One reason for this homogenous treatment is that the Japanese American population is fairly homogenous in terms of socio-economic class. Only 8.4 percent of Japanese Americans live below the poverty line, compared with 12.1 percent of Asian Americans and 15.1 percent of all Americans. Nearly 50 percent of all Japanese Americans have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 30 percent of all Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Nevertheless, class diversity does exist among Japanese Americans, millennials or otherwise. The lack of explicit examination of working-class Japanese Americans is certainly a shortcoming of this anthology. This absence, however, does not mean that the chapters in this anthology fail to take a class analysis seriously. To the contrary, many of the contributions consider the distinct impact of middle-class status on ethnic identity and community formation (in particular, see Chapter 3 by Nakano). Furthermore, this seemingly homogenous middle-class reality provides the context and launchpad for multiple diverse formations, evidenced throughout this anthology. Transnational movement, suburban settings, technological savvy, youth sports leagues, and summer camps are often accessed through and predicated upon middle-class status.

Conclusion

With a few recent notable exceptions (Tsuda 2016; Yamashiro 2017; Hirabayashi 2016), little has been written about the contemporary experiences of Japanese Americans. At least two factors account for this absence in the literature. First is the sustained scholarly and popular interest on the wartime relocation and incarceration of Japanese Americans. Such a focus is quite understandable given how historical experiences continue to shape—indeed haunt—the present. “Days of Remembrance” events that commemorate the signing of Executive Order 9066 over seventy-five years ago still draw large audiences and serve as forums to discuss the consequences of displacement and dispossession, the legacy of intergenerational trauma, and the fragility of civil liberties. If anything, the recent wave of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States has heightened interest in the wartime experience of Japanese Americans, given the obvious and disturbing parallels that are easily evoked. Indeed, many Japanese Americans have drawn upon this experience to mobilize in defense of immigrant, refugee, and Muslim civil rights (Stop Repeating History! 2018).

The second factor that accounts for the dearth of materials on the contemporary experiences of Japanese Americans is the assimilationist paradigm itself. As noted in the beginning of our introduction, scholars have regarded the assimilation of Japanese Americans, both culturally and
structurally, as complete. From this perspective, there is no longer much to be gleaned from a survey and analysis of how a once-despised racial and ethnic group became successfully integrated into the mainstream of American life. The trajectory of their incorporation has been sufficiently studied and mapped, and their very distinctiveness as a racial and ethnic group is now regarded as highly questionable.

But if we are not witnessing the “twilight of ethnicity,” if assimilation is never a done deal, what questions can be asked about contemporary Japanese American ethnic identity, consciousness, and community? The essays in this volume pose these questions and offer some answers. They address them by considering varied and different social actors, by examining institutions in transition, and by engaging and critiquing prevailing narratives of incorporation and difference.

Several broad themes are apparent in this collection of essays. First, a great deal of diversity exists within the category of those whom we glibly refer to as “Japanese American millennials.” They constitute a somewhat amorphous group who defy easy classification, given differences in social composition such as immigrant status and generation. Indeed, Japanese American millennial identity is itself forged and filtered through other social identities of difference including gender and sexuality, mixed-race identity, religious affiliation, and generation. Second, contrary to the prevailing literature, ethnicity is more than simply “symbolic” for many Japanese American millennials. Both continuity and change are evident in the multiple expressions of ethnic consciousness, identity, and affiliation. Japanese American millennials continue to retain a connection to the Japanese American community through both established ethnic institutions and new forms of social media that create and sustain virtual communities. Through their engagement, Japanese American millennials are dramatically transforming the very nature of Japanese American community institutions and practices. Lastly, Japanese American millennial identity is increasing shaped in a transnational context and space. New Japanese immigrants and short-term migrants to Japan learn to navigate and negotiate multiple identities in different national settings. Transnational social and cultural identities have emerged from diasporic convenings and networks that rearticulate the very meaning of ethnicity. These broad themes are by no means an exhaustive list of what is conveyed in this collection of essays, but they do serve to flag and highlight future areas of inquiry.

Consider this volume a call for the revitalization of Japanese American studies. Kuramitsu, in the Pacific Citizen youth column cited at the beginning of this introduction, asks us not to succumb to the ease, simplicity, and comfort of a single story, but to seek out and embrace multiple stories of Japanese Americans: “For Nikkei, not all members of the Japanese American community fit neatly into the concentration/loyalty/liberty model of history.
as we have grown used to telling it. We are the descendants of both draft resisters and go-for-brokers, Nisei and Japanese nationals. We are of multi-racial and monoracial ancestry, and we inhabit a vast spectrum of genders and sexual orientations, all of which should encourage us to push back against our flattening into a single story” (2015).

Agreed. What is required is a rethinking of the field—its dominant conceptual frames and narratives, its familiar sites and modes of inquiry, and its understanding of how Japanese Americans are situated within the broader scholarship on race and ethnicity. With an emphasis on generation and generational change, consider this volume a step in that direction.

REFERENCES


