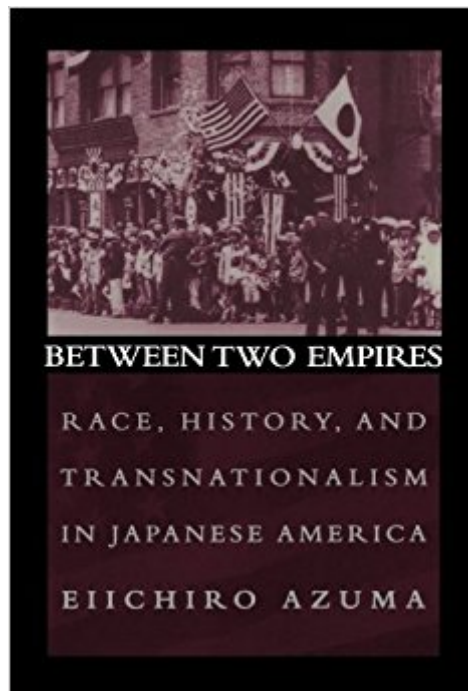




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# Between Two Empires: Race, History, And Transnationalism In Japanese America



## Synopsis

The incarceration of Japanese Americans has been discredited as a major blemish in American democratic tradition. Accompanying this view is the assumption that the ethnic group help unqualified allegiance to the United States. *Between Two Empires* probes the complexities of prewar Japanese America to show how Japanese in America held an in-between space between the United States and the empire of Japan, between American nationality and Japanese racial identity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Firmly grounded in empirical evidence and theoretically sophisticated, *Between Two Empires* tells the complex story of Japanese immigration into the United States within the twin contexts of Japanese and U.S. empire-building and the development of transnational identities among the immigrants themselves. Azuma's prose is fluid; his analysis is supple, nuanced, and elegant. This is an exemplary work of enduring significance."--Sucheng Chan, University of California, Santa Barbara "...a wonderfully nuanced account of Japanese-Americans' efforts to find a place for themselves between their ancestral country and their country of residence, often in the face of hostility from both.... anyone interested in the genuine complexity of Japanese-American history should take the plunge."--Asahi "While aspiring to a cosmopolitan vision, building bridges across the Pacific, the Japanese in America could not escape the clutching hands of the state--indeed two states. In response to the difficult situation, Japanese immigrants developed alternative narratives of

their experiences, but a particularly persistent narrative incorporated the American vocabulary of the frontier, reform, family values, and race purity. With this thorough and sophisticated study, so filled with fascinating data and insights, it is not surprising that transnational history is emerging as an imaginative approach to the history of the modern world."--Akira Iriye, Harvard University

Eiichiro Azuma is an Assistant Professor of History and Asian American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Azuma explores the unique way in which cultural identity has formed for Japanese Americans beginning after the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882 created a vacuum for immigrants from other Asian countries to make their way to the United States. Following from that to 1930's, Azuma explores what it means to be a Japanese American in a way that only a true bilingual is able - by accessing both English and Japanese language documents from the eras and using both to form a complete narrative. Nevertheless, while I would agree with other reviewers' opinions of the content of Azuma's book as relevant, well-conceived, and well-researched, the simple fact is that it reads as if it has never crossed the desk of an editor. This might be acceptable in the academically inbred environment for which it was intended, but as someone who is not an academic historian, I find the book ponderous and even a bit pretentious at times. The use of language is often clumsy, preferring phrases that give the appearance of deep meaning without demonstrating it. Such errors invite fatigue and frustration while reading, which diminishes the impact and educational value of the work in a way that can only be found among academic papers. For example, much of the book is based on the following, taken from the introduction: "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. "Was the introduction of the neologism "inter-National " necessary (or even constructive)? What, specifically, does it mean to stress the "interstitial" over the "transcendental"? He never discusses this. Why mention it at all? Is there any danger that the book's arguments might not be understood without a full apprehension of the difference, or is it just intellectual jeu d'esprit? Do you see how including an obscure term didn't serve my point, regardless of its appropriateness? Azuma lacks this sense. What's more, he often uses a complex phrase to say virtually nothing at all. In referring to the "zaibei doho", a cultural subgroup that Azuma discusses, he says: "A shared notion of being zaibei doho did not emanate out of a single, monolithic racial experience; it stemmed from an amalgam of experiences and understandings that varied in separate locations and for different classes of people..." All he has said is that members of this group

weren't carbon copies of one another. Having made an observation about a group of people that is true for virtually all populations from nuclear families to world powers, and in all periods, Azuma has wasted the reader's time with a tautology. This is a common theme throughout the book. Azuma repeatedly makes observations that are widely applicable to humans in general, and fails to explain why the observation is especially pertinent or necessary here. Despite these flaws, all of which could easily be fixed by a good editor, Azuma's work holds up well as a work because it is unique. Professional quality works that study the topic written by true bicultural biliguals are rare. But if its saving grace is only a lack of competition, it cannot get full points.

In his book, Professor Azuma develops his analysis of the transnational ideas and practices among Japanese immigrants from 1885 to 1941 focusing on the American West. He begins with his examination of the Issei (the first generation of Japanese immigrants)'s transnational identities, and in doing so, he employs "an inter-National perspective" (p5) to pay a special attention to the Issei's "interstitial" nature of their lives between their motherland and the U.S. According to Azuma's explanation, it is the Issei's shared experience of being a "racial Other in America" which "revealed the futility of the modernist belief that the Japanese should be able to become honorary whites through acculturation" (p61-2). With such a reality, Issei constructed their pioneer thesis with the elements of the racial ideologies from Anglo-American manifest destiny and imperial Japanese expansionism. What attracts my interest most strongly in this book is the author's detailed research on the transnational education of the Nisei (the second generation) in Japan which was given to them for the purpose of inculcating Japanese spirit upon them. With the rise of the concept of "Pacific Civilization" after World War I, Japanese educators came to believe that the center of the world was moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Amid such social trend, the Nisei, the American citizens with Japanese heritage, were forced to be educated as a "transpacific bridge" (p145) between Japan and the U.S. in the 1930s. Because they knew about America well and spoke English fluently, Nisei were given the propagandist mission and were used as valuable resources in propagating the fascism for Japan while, at the same time, they were also detested as "the public enemies inimical to national security" (p153) by their countrymen of their ancestral land. I am also impressed with Azuma's use of various types of cultural materials including newspaper article, illustration, picture, statistic data, true story of murder case, the Japanese immigrants' writings (poetry, essay, composition), and so on. Beginning his book by showing a Japanese immigrant student's essay which appeared on a yearbook published by the Japanese Student Association of the University of Southern California in 1912, Azuma draws his readers into the fascinating

panorama of the lived experiences of Japanese immigrants. As I am a Japanese international student who has been studying in California, Professor Azuma's focus on the borderland of the American West (mostly California) is especially interesting for me. I strongly recommend this book.

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