Introduction

In 1955, a short story by Sakae Takemune won third place in a literary contest for outstanding student writing at the University of Hawaii. The story described the dramatic improvement in the living standards of one Japanese American family in Honolulu. Only four years previous, Takemune’s family had occupied a “crude upper flat of a dilapidated two story building” on a small plantation. The house even had a hole in its roof. One day his mother announced that the family was leaving for the “mysterious metropolis of Honolulu.” As the narrator remembered, “Mother had plans—big plans” to send her children to college and purchase a new house on a twenty-five year term, complete with a front yard and modern appliances. On the surface, the family’s transition to city life appeared to be successful. Yet, “beneath the golden crust, there was a rumble of financial bickering.” The narrator could hear his mother’s voice, “Only bills today?” or “How much did you withdraw?” as he traced his family’s “progress” through their newly acquired furniture. Looking at the ceiling, he wished to see again the old roof’s spot of rust “getting bigger and bigger and bigger.”¹

In this short story, aptly titled “The Façade,” Takemune identified the financial and emotional costs that came with a rising standard of living.² For Honolulu’s Japanese Americans, this was a new perspective. Up to this point, consumption had been central to constructing their modern identity and reflected ethnic leaders’ collaborative effort to portray themselves as respectable citizens against a backdrop of persistent racial prejudice and discrimination. Prewar immigrant leadership was dominated by the first generation, or Issei, who shared a cultural affinity with rapidly changing Japan. Just as Japan’s emergence as a modern nation-state rested on proving its capacity to Westernize, Japanese immigrants bore the related burden of demonstrating Japan’s dramatic transformation through their own successful assimilation into American society. Believing that old-world customs and habits were partly responsible for their negative image, the ethnic press, local business people, and intellectuals sought to redefine that image by combining Japanese
and American ideals of cultural and physical aesthetics in a new consumer culture.³

While the immigrant press and ethnic businesses worked to portray Japanese Americans as a cultured and orderly group, in fact the Japanese American community was never as homogeneous or harmonious as its leaders made it out to be. The Issei, who spoke little English, came to represent a world foreign to the American-born generation, the Nisei. Not surprisingly, language barriers and cultural differences often resulted in generational tensions. To Nisei resentment, the first generation continued to exert considerable influence, even though by the 1930s Nisei had come to outnumber the Issei.⁴

The use of consumer culture to demonstrate one’s fitness for citizenship is akin to the concept of “performance” that Asian American scholars have employed to highlight the flexibility and theatricality of racial identity.⁵ What merits new attention is how this image-building process was also conditioned by Japanese American transnationalism. The influx of Japanese news and trade encouraged an appreciation for an eclectic mix of authentic Japanese and Western styles that helped bridge the gap between the two generations. This hybridity was at once modern and conservative. The ability to simultaneously embrace the two cultural styles became a mark of privilege, and it underscored divisions of class and gender that developed within the ethnic community. It was considered distinctly Japanese American and equal, if not superior, to a similar phenomenon among Japan’s urban middle class. Because it exploded the binary between cultural retention and assimilation, the Nisei emerges as a generation in transition by means of Honolulu’s expanding consumer culture.

The creation of Nisei identity was not just a process internal to the Japanese American community, but a part of the economic and political formation of Hawai‘i as a whole. Caught between two hegemonic powers on opposite sides of the Pacific, Japanese Americans occupied a liminal space. The Island’s agitation for statehood only raised the stakes for ethnic leaders: they had to demonstrate their assimilation as a colonized population, whose reputation also depended on Japan’s performance as a civilized country. This stage of inbetweenness is often associated with creative and imaginative powers, and it is feared for its capacity to overturn the status quo. Inherent in the rise of Nisei consumer culture were efforts to establish a transnational power base from which they might exercise local authority, though not without adopting hegemonic cultural practices of their own. By the 1950s, the Nisei in Hawai‘i had become a leading political force. Taking control of the territorial legislature and ending a century of domination by the plantation oligarchy in what has become known as the “Democratic Revolution” of 1954, Japanese
Americans fully joined the mainstream. As Nisei reaped citizenship’s material benefits, they reinforced class and racial hierarchies that had been in the making since the 1920s. This book traces the cultural “revolution” that made possible the more commonly known political success story.

To date, histories of American consumer culture have mainly focused on the experience of the black and white communities; the roles and examples of Japanese American as consumers, never mind proprietors, have gone largely unnoticed. There are cases, however, where the historiographical tradition offers guidance. In her study of Asian American women’s public culture, historian Shirley Lim has explored the significance of beauty pageants and sorority events as avenues to claim and prove Americanness in the face of exclusionary immigration laws.⁶ Asian American displays of modernity characteristically involve the broadly construed notion of “fashion,” including apparel, aesthetic judgment, and social conduct. As the social theorist Georg Simmel observed, fashion “signifies union with those in the same class, the uniformity of a circle characterized by it, and uno actu, the exclusion of all other groups.”⁷ In other words, fashion at once encourages equalization and differentiation among varying class and racial groups. Since these processes entail a common understanding of the symbols and values represented by fashion, the focus here must be the second generation, whose American schooling and appearance could help them counteract residual stereotypes and prejudices. Beginning in the 1920s, the Issei-dominated press and businesses encouraged Nisei youth to adopt prevailing American aesthetic values not only to promote assimilation but also for profit. As with many minorities, modern American standards of health and personal hygiene became important criteria in Japanese American ideas of beauty, and this advanced their acceptance in American society. Like African American attempts to convince white-run companies to recognize their community’s buying power, the ethnic press and businesses on Hawai‘i urged mainland manufacturers to invest in the Nisei consumer market.⁸ Nisei consumption of American goods, it was hoped, would boost advertising revenue while removing the stigma of disloyalty. Nisei youth, in turn, embraced consumption to both express their individuality and build self-esteem. Some Nisei themselves became owners of local businesses that catered to a Nisei clientele in the emerging consumer market.

On the other hand, the focus on “whiteness” in Nisei consumer culture—most evident in advertisements for cosmetics and soap in the ethnic press—challenges the received black/white dichotomy of consumer society by giving it a transnational dimension. Japanese Americans’ identification with whiteness was in part an extension of their status-conscious heritage.
Up until the Second World War, the ethnic business community imported Japanese-manufactured beauty and personal hygiene products for the Japanese American consumer market, thereby perpetuating specifically Japanese perceptions about skin color. Reference to “whiteness” (shiroi) was limited to the pages of the ethnic press and revealed, in the words of historian Yong Chen, “what white Americans were unable and unwilling to see,” that is, an ethnic concern with complexion outside the Anglo ethnic usage of “white” and its interpretation. Yet the word shiroi in Japanese American advertising conjured up images of whiteness that cannot simply be understood literally. As early as 1922, Takao Ozawa, a Japanese citizen who had lived in the United States for twenty-six years, challenged the Naturalization Act of 1790, which limited American citizenship to “free white persons.” Citing the Dred Scott case, the plaintiff’s attorney argued that Ozawa was “a person without negro blood” and attested to Ozawa’s eligibility for citizenship by highlighting his American education and use of English at home. The Supreme Court rejected this reasoning and identified whiteness with “what is popularly known as the Caucasian race,” regardless of color or complexion. It is worth noting that Ozawa was living in Hawai‘i when the case was brought to the high court. Having achieved little success at claiming whiteness through naturalization laws, Japanese Americans developed their own racial currency, one that gave rise to the Island’s social hierarchy. As whiteness became associated with concepts of “modernity,” “abundance,” and “urbanity,” the meaning of shiroi evolved from mere physical distinction to a cultural marker that the Nisei themselves defined. The idea of whiteness as a source of pride and power was shared by Japanese elites in the homeland and in the United States.

This had special significance for women. Judging from the nature of advertised products, the language of whiteness affected women and men in different ways. While the new consumer culture encouraged Nisei men to appear well groomed and ready for the workplace, it prepared Nisei women for a life in the home. Fashionable clothing and cosmetics granted Nisei women temporary independence from their families, but the prospect of marriage and motherhood underlay the assumptions of Japanese and American beauty culture. The language of whiteness inflected with modernity accorded well with the emerging middle class so long as women’s roles and expectations remained uncompromised.

The adoption of class-based notions of whiteness as a standard of feminine beauty was both empowering and limiting for Japanese Americans. It was empowering because it allowed their elites to challenge the racial superiority of the dominant class and limiting because it subordinated class and gender equality to the racial articulation of power. For instance, the sophistication
and refinement advocated in beauty columns and advertisements addressed to Nisei women in the ethnic press were far removed from the life of the average plantation worker. By essentializing the meaning of gender, the ethnic press maintained and reinforced the illusion of Japanese American whiteness, which was empowering vis-à-vis the mainstream culture, but limiting for Nisei women who were thus stereotyped in a middle-class ideal.

A similar thing might be said of Japanese American relationships with other minority groups. The Nisei’s insistence on their own whiteness at the exclusion of others must be understood within contemporary racial and national dynamics that prompted advocates of ethnic uplift to identify with the dominant culture even as they resisted its racist and elitist implications. In 1920 Honolulu was home to the native Hawaiians, who constituted 20 percent of the Territory’s urban population, followed by the Chinese (15 percent), Caucasians (14 percent), Portuguese (13 percent), and Filipinos (3 percent). The Japanese constituted the largest ethnic group (31 percent). Its sizable immigrant community and the city’s complex race relations prompted Japanese Americans to use whiteness to demarcate ethnic differences and to position themselves between whites and other non-Caucasian groups. Doing so meant embracing the criteria for material success and racial progress held out by the dominant culture. The cultural preparation for economic and political rule was thus already underway in the years before the Second World War.

The presence of multiple ethnic groups in Honolulu may have taken the focus off divisions of class and labor, but it did not entirely preclude cultural antagonism within the Japanese American community. Consider the case of the Naichi and Okinawans. Since being forced into tributary relations with Satsuma (now Kagoshima prefecture) during the Tokugawa period and incorporated into the Japanese empire under the Meiji government, Okinawans had been considered culturally inferior to the inhabitants of Naichi (the four main islands of Japan). Coming from a rapidly modernizing nation, most Issei continued to look down upon Okinawan immigrants in Hawai‘i. It comes as no surprise that the second generation inherited some of these attitudes, although not all Nisei shared the Issei’s prejudice against the Okinawans.

Focusing on these tensions in the context of urbanization is a natural outgrowth of the questions posed by this study. In Hawai‘i “urban” instantly means Honolulu. The interwar period was a demographic watershed not only in terms of generational change, but also in terms of migration to the city. Although the Immigration Act of 1924 halted Japanese immigration to the United States, Japanese immigrants remained geographically mobile, particularly as they left the plantations. Between 1900 and 1920, the Japanese percentage of the Territory’s urban population doubled. In the next ten years,
there was a twofold increase in Honolulu's Japanese population. That being said, the city's population within the ethnic group was still only 34 percent, and this led to urban-rural cleavages and widespread use of those differences to explain other socio-economic disparities. As advocates of ethnic uplift increasingly associated themselves with urban middle-class ideals through habits of consumption and leisure, they distanced themselves from the poor and disadvantaged among their fellows, especially in the countryside.

Honolulu was central to the Nisei experience in the interwar years because of its flourishing ethnic business community. For establishments with low capital investment, employment and patronage are equally key to survival. Although small in number, Japanese businessmen were powerful community figures, mediating consumer demands and the expectations of the immigrant and native-born generations. A notable characteristic of Honolulu's Japanese merchants was the balance of cooperation and competition between the four influential business districts (rengeō) in downtown Honolulu that sustained the community's economic stability. Honolulu Ginza, the area between King and River Streets, consisted of several dry goods stores and gift shops, a toy store, a pet shop, and a clockmaker. Musashiya, one of the most popular dry goods stores among haole (Hawaiian-born whites) and Japanese customers, was located in this area. A'ala Rengō included larger niche establishments such as Asahi Furniture, Heiwa-do Jewelry Store, Sato Clothiers, Lion Shoe Store, Hawaii Importing Company, and Akahoshi Drug Store. According to the Jitsugyo-no-Hawaii, Hawai‘i's monthly Japanese business magazine, A'ala Rengō constituted a tight-knit merchant enclave and functioned as the ethnic community's department store. Chūō Rengō (Central Business District) served the residential districts of Fort and Nuuanu Streets and the neighborhood stores in the Palama area catered to the residents’ daily necessities.

The Japanese establishments concentrated in four major business districts coexisted with merchants of other ethnic groups and served a larger clientele than is generally assumed. In A'ala, for example, the Japanese operated restaurants and candy stores in the same block as pool halls and barbershops frequented by Filipino immigrants. A Japanese taxi service brought customers from outlying plantations and Japanese-owned hotels offered places to stay. The Oahu Railway and Land train depot was located on King Street, and A'ala was “the first stop for people coming into town and the last stop for late shopping before heading home.” In 1930 the Japanese American phone directory began to include haole establishments and encouraged business transactions between different groups. Although economic recession and generational change added to the ebb and flow of Japanese American business, the
larger Japanese merchants weathered the Great Depression by building their customer base among haoles as well as among Nisei youths.¹⁵

Yet Honolulu was also the setting for campaigns initiated by haole elites to reverse movement to the city and keep the Japanese on the plantations. Historians Eileen Tamura and Gary Okihiro have written extensively on the Americanization campaign as well as the “back to the plantations” movement. In doing so, they have challenged the predominant Chicago School view of Hawai‘i as the “paradise of the Pacific,” where different race groups lived harmoniously. As Tamura has explained, efforts to educate Nisei in Christian values and American standards of speech and culture grew from haole anxiety over the future control of Hawai‘i. Since the Japanese constituted the largest ethnic group, Americanizers feared that the Territory would become “Japanized” under sway of the Issei’s deep-rooted racial pride, customs, and language. Labor-management conflicts and outright racism contributed to anti-Japanese sentiment, but the primary motive behind the Americanization campaign was to ensure the Nisei’s undivided loyalty to the United States. In urging the Nisei to be patriotic Americans, Americanizers sought to destroy the Japanese press and strive to abolish Japanese-language schools altogether.¹⁶

Hawai‘i’s Americanization crusade reflected the contradictions of U.S.-Japan relations. Japan’s military victories over China and Russia at the turn of the century helped shape U.S. policy-making toward Japan and, by extension, Japanese immigration. Impressed by Japan’s emergence as a leading power in Asia, yet suspicious of Japan’s aggressive foreign policy, the American government both protected and restricted Japanese immigration. Diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Japan worked in favor of Japanese Americans and permitted family reunification through the Gentleman’s Agreement of 1907, but denied the first generation of immigrants U.S. citizenship.¹⁷ In this environment, Japan’s desperate attempts to catch up with the West became as much a political liability as an advantage. Americanizers responded to Nisei social mobility with similar inconsistency. They encouraged the Nisei to adopt American customs and speak standard English, but their resentment grew as Nisei sought to achieve the middle-class ideal. Attempts to induce the Nisei to take up farming as docile plantation laborers grew out of this social anxiety.¹⁸

Somewhat paradoxically, Americanizers also saw in the Nisei a potential market for American manufactured goods, and they were happy to capitalize on the Nisei’s desire for acceptance in American society. At the public schools, students were repeatedly advised that to enter the job market they
needed to be well groomed; this was also intended to underscore their difference from Issei parents, who had worked mainly in agriculture. Most importantly, by hewing to mainstream expectations, the Nisei could prove that they were deserving of full U.S. citizenship.¹⁹

In the late 1930s, the public schools made health education and vocational training their main agenda; this included promoting Western eating habits and hygienic practices. These two topics enjoyed wide coverage in student newspapers and were the backdrop to the rise of campus beauty contests. It helps to point out that “beautiful” and “clean” are denoted by the same Japanese word, *kirei*, suggesting that these were already overlapping concepts in Japanese cultural thinking. By additionally linking beauty to etiquette, the matter of addressing one’s perceived shortcomings became a social responsibility. Ever conscious of maintaining the “family image,” the Japanese American focus on social manners encouraged Nisei students to buy into American models of health, hygiene, and personal appearance.²⁰ The Nisei, in turn, used these aesthetic standards to associate or dissociate themselves from students of different class and ethnic backgrounds. As a result, the Nisei came to identify with haole culture even as they sought to challenge haole authority. Given that haole merchants controlled the distribution of American products in the Islands, it is not surprising that the promotion of beauty eventually took on a markedly commercial, materialistic character.²¹

But haole authority was never complete. In reality, Japanese Americans viewed Americanization in a more nuanced light than did the dominant culture. They learned to manipulate the meaning and use of received ideals of “beauty” even as the ethnic press and ethnic business pursued their agendas in this area. In so doing, the ethnic community developed their own standards of beauty in line with the immigrant experience. One might even argue that Nisei strategies of cultural hybridization modify or defy Simmel’s trickle-down theory of fashion, in which he assumed lower-class clothing, social conduct, and amusements to be mere imitations of the dominant culture.²² As liminal subjects who existed outside the boundaries of the American nation-state, the Nisei used their symbolic and material ties to Japan to pursue multiple dimensions of belonging. Simultaneously they managed to reconfigure America’s cultural, racial, and territorial borders by the time Hawai‘i became the fiftieth state.

To gain insight into this historical era, I have drawn on a wide range of sources, including school papers, yearbooks, Japanese American periodicals, and newspapers. Two major Japanese-language newspapers, *Nippu Jiji* and *Hawaii Hochi*, provided readers with news from the homeland as well as the ethnic community. In the 1920s these papers added an English-language sec-
tion to their daily editions and became an influential bilingual news source for the Nisei generation.

In addition, I refer to a sociological study conducted by Chicago School sociologist William Carlson Smith in 1926–1927 as a part of a larger survey on race relations in Hawai‘i and the American West Coast. The racial composition of the Islands made Hawai‘i an ideal site for Smith to conduct his study on the intermingling of cultures. Much of Smith’s study was conducted in a classroom setting, in which students were asked to write their life histories as an English class assignment. Based on a mimeographed questionnaire, students gave detailed accounts of their early home life, their material desires, future aspirations, and their attitudes toward other race groups on the Islands. The nature of the assignment allowed Smith to secure a vivid narrative, in first person, from more than a thousand students attending the ten public and private high schools on the Islands, the Territorial Normal and Training School, and the University of Hawaii.

While the Smith survey is a valuable resource for understanding the lives of the respondents, the questions left little room for creativity. Under the constraints of the project, students recorded the sequence of events that spelled progress, making it almost impossible to get beyond a teleological view of their life histories. Their narratives had a tendency to belittle the culture of their parents as timeworn, reducing most discussions of generational difference to who and what was more modern or old-fashioned. As a result, cultural tensions that probably stemmed from class and geographical differences were identified as generational conflicts. Smith’s own assumptions about “Oriental” culture were partly to blame for the survey’s East-West binary. As historian Henry Yu has explained, sociologists trained in the Chicago School tradition considered areas of Oriental concentration to be an exotic space defined by their stark contrast to white society.

This book recognizes the importance of age-based hierarchies, but places more emphasis on class relations within Hawai‘i’s racial situation. It examines how specific patterns of leisure and consumption allowed the Nisei to deliberately act out their whiteness, thereby enabling them to further their economic and political goals. For example, one of the participating institutions in the Smith survey, McKinley High School, became the setting of a variety of schoolwide campaigns in which some Nisei students attempted to “uplift” themselves by promoting mainstream values among other students. Since only half of the Nisei of high school age attended school in 1930, they constituted the best and brightest of the generation. In their ability to sway public opinion within and beyond the school environment, Nisei students played a critical role as advocates of ethnic uplift. These future leaders even attempted
to regulate the consumer behavior of lower-class youth by designating certain aspects of Nisei consumer culture undesirable. Student expenditure surveys and sociological studies conducted by Nisei scholars contributed to debates about the intrusion of consumerism into Nisei youth life.

In the chapters that follow, it will become clear that Nisei students, along with the ethnic press and business community, played a pivotal role in recasting the image of their generation. Nisei consumer culture demands examination because consumption was so much a part of the privilege-making process that spilled over into Hawai‘i’s public life. For ethnic merchants, it was also a matter of survival. While their commercial gimmicks were economically motivated, they would support the next generation of Japanese merchants and secure the future of the Nisei consumer market. Far from its image as a static society, the Japanese American community was constantly reinventing itself to meet changing consumer demands and social expectations. Building on recent scholarship that considers ethnic communities within a trans-Pacific context, this book highlights ethnic fluidity as a strategy for success and solace.²⁷ By focusing on the marketing of whiteness that linked the old world and new, it explores the dynamic commercial and cultural environment that underwrote the rise of the Nisei to prominence and preeminence in Hawai‘i.