At a recent gathering of our two families in Tokyo we marvelled at the diversity in the room. There was Cheena, a woman from Hokkaido, who had lived in Mexico and California. Her sister-in-law Ann, came from Kenya five years ago after marrying her brother Taiji, who was studying at the University of Nairobi and working for Mitsubishi. There was Toshiko, who grew up in Tokyo, married an American and lived in Massachusetts for fifty years before settling into a lifestyle of spring and fall in Japan and summer and winter in the U.S. Her son Stephen was born in Japan, grew up in the U.S. and returned to Tokyo to become a national university professor and a naturalized citizen. His children, Sho and Gen, are second-generation mixes of Japanese and Irish ancestry and bearers of multiple passports who attend local public schools. David’s sons, Jeffrey and Luke, attended Japanese public elementary and junior high schools before moving to the U.S. for high school and college. Luke has returned to Japan and now works in Tokyo. Ironically, David, the one who is commonly identified by others as American, has spent more years in Japan than anyone else in the room.

Like our families, the people who comprise Japanese society are an increasingly diverse group who continually redefine what the boundaries are of the supposedly stable category of “Japanese.” The identity assertions of these people reveal an expanding sense of what it means to be Japanese. They challenge stereotypes and create cognitive dissonance in the minds of many mainstream Japanese. This does not mean, however, that their identities are always validated by others. They often encounter doubters who claim that they cannot be Japanese if they have or don’t have a certain appearance, speak Japanese imperfectly or speak English perfectly, act in a particular way, or have a name that doesn’t sound typically Japanese. Still, their acts of self-definition create new meanings for what it is to be Japanese today.

Japan is undergoing a remarkable transformation that began in its cultural borderlands and is now spreading throughout the country. The
number of those who hold passports other than Japanese has more than doubled since 1990 to over two million in June 2006. Sojourners, immigrants, and long-term residents who are “Others” are now integral parts of the fabric of Japanese society. More and more residents, with or without Japanese passports, neither “look Japanese” nor “act Japanese.” Some have names that sound foreign and speak with impeccable English or equally fluent Japanese. More than 15,000 persons now naturalize each year and become part of Japan’s citizenry. There are Japanese citizens who are Others (Ainu, Burakumin, Returnees are some examples), too, and Others who are Japanese citizens (such as Koreans who have naturalized). For all of these individuals, questions of identity and place are common, as their lives in the cultural borderlands and transnational crossroads of Japan reveal the dynamic contradictions, complex textures, and multiple levels of reality found in contemporary society.

New and complex contexts reveal a transcultural world overlooked in our preoccupation with conceptual dichotomies and dialectical oppositions. Rather than stable, bounded cultural wholes, transformations and innovative cultural formations are now occurring which create constellations of fluid and shifting social relationships (Crehan 2002). Instead of simply seeing those people who are different as separate ethnic communities, we now understand that the people on the margins bear tremendous significance for the mainstream. In a rapidly changing Japan, “the Japanese” themselves are being transformed as they confront a new range of diversity in their midst. The struggles of on-going multiculturalism in Japan can be seen in multiple and diverse narratives of personal and larger social change of Others who are both being changed by and who are changing Japan.

1. Globalization and Borderlands

This is an historic moment in Japanese history as globalization and changing demographics bring great changes to Japanese society. The Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry announced the first decline in the Japanese population in October 2005, as the population of 126.76 million decreased by 20,000 (Yoshida 2005). In December of the same year, the government declared that unless something is done soon, Japan’s population would be cut in half in less than a century (The New York Times 2006). The rapidly ageing population and a post-