

Chapter 10

Miss Cherry Blossom
Meets Mainstream America

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Beauty Pageants as a Popular Cultural Form

Denigrated as "low-brow" culture and antifeminist in the past, beauty pageants have been largely ignored within sociology and Asian American Studies. White feminist critiques of beauty and specifically of beauty pageants (Wolf 1991; Bordo 1993) rightly analyze the detrimental effects pageants can have on women. However, they miss some of the subtle details of cultural production, particularly among women of color (King 2001). Recently, however, interest in beauty pageants has been increasing, as they are being seen as important arenas in which diverse cultural meanings are integrated and are given tangible form in the bodies of beauty queens (Callahan 1998; Rogers 1998). Pageants are reflections of larger social forces. For example, gender as a category can be durable and omnipresent, but contextually gendered meanings are fluid and varied (Salzinger 2003). Various forms and patterns of gender can be seen in pageants. Beauty pageants give us a chance to see the place of gender (and in my case study, racial) production in varying contexts. Pageants, though, are also semiautonomous social settings where cultural productions are carried out upon women's bodies themselves and where women's bodies become a focus of community struggle.

Beauty pageants have also been studied as popular cultural realms where the creation of collective cultural meanings takes place. Within beauty pageants, beauty queens are embodied symbols on which racial, gendered, and national meanings are inscribed (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoelje

1996). I analyze Japanese American beauty queens in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Honolulu as collective representations of local Japanese American communities.¹ I examine beauty pageants historically to illustrate how local struggles over the meaning of race and gender are shaped by changing community, national, and international contexts. In this racial project pageants are also seen as semiautonomous sites of cultural production where race, gender, and citizenship are constituted. Finally, this essay chronicles the evolution of the concept of citizenship through Japanese American beauty pageants from the 1930s through the 1990s.

I collected my research data by interviewing, following, and working with pageant participants in San Francisco and accompanying them, as a queen committee member, on most of their appearances and trips, including to Los Angeles and Honolulu, from 1995 to 1996. I became interested in this site of cultural and racial production because of the racial rules governing who could participate. These racial eligibility rules fascinated and repelled me, but seemed to me to provide a window into the public, Japanese American community-based discourse about changing racial meanings that I was trying to tap into and study. This provided a case where collective negotiations of race were examinable at both the individual and the community levels. After traveling with and serving beauty queens in many ways, including chaperoning them, carrying chapsticks, hair pins, and other supplies for them, zipping zippers, and marching in parades, I considered myself to be an "almost participant"-observer of the world of Japanese American beauty pageants. They were a perfect form of popular culture through which to see larger struggles over race, gender, and nation.

*The Year 1935 to the 1950s, Internment and Beyond:
Debates about Nationalism and U.S. Citizenship*

Starting in 1935 in Los Angeles, the Nisei Week Festival added the Nisei Week Queen Pageant to draw more people into the festival. The addition of the Queen Pageant reflected the larger goals of the festival, namely, to ease the mounting economic and social tensions between Japanese Americans and the larger white community while trying to bolster the ethnic economy of Little Tokyo. Coming out of the Great Depression, Little Tokyo merchants wanted a way to bring business downtown, particularly encouraging Nisei (second-generation) Japanese Americans to shop in

and maintain ties with their ethnic community. This led to the first staging of the Nisei Week Queen contest. People voted for potential queens by means of ballots gained when they purchased merchandise in Little Tokyo establishments. This clever strategy commodified the women in the pageant to drum up business while also using them to signal to the larger white community that the Japanese American community was "not a threat."²

The Nisei Week queen pageant in Los Angeles was primarily focused on representing the Japanese American community to itself under a predominantly white hegemonic gaze. This meant that the Japanese American women in the pageant were working with white standards of beauty pageants in mind and re-creating them with a Japanese American twist. The rationale was that if Japanese Americans, symbolized by the queen, were seen to be truly American, they could claim to be good and loyal Americans.

The Nisei Week Queen Pageant and Festival marked the beginning of the genre of Japanese American beauty pageants in the United States. Nisei Week queen pageants were an important space for Japanese American women to make their own claims against hegemonic femininity. Although they were not allowed to participate in mainstream pageants such as Miss America, they could at least be Nisei Week queens. *Borrowing some elements of mainstream pageantry* such as the "question and answer" and "talent" sections from the Miss America pageant, they decided at times forgo others, such as the bathing suit competition, omitted in Honolulu and San Francisco.³ These local Japanese American pageants were a separate but parallel process (in form and in some content) of claiming the nation. As a queen from the early 1950s said:

We always had to appear dressed very dressy, in suits and stuff. I made my dress out of a yard and a half of fabric with a pattern I copied from the Sears catalogue. They gave us nothing from the committee. I was very naive. I just thought that is what you did. I joined a sorority and went to college. I wanted to be accepted and I wanted to be very Americanized.⁴

These were symbolic ways of presenting herself in order to be seen as American. Her behavior as well as her dress focused on acceptance into mainstream America, for herself and for the Japanese American community. By dressing the queen in western garb and promoting her keen and

usually native-born ability to speak English, the community highlighted the "Americanness" of Japanese Americans. Their push for citizenship and desire for inclusion in the "nation" of the United States were paramount in this era. They hoped that if the queen looked, spoke, and carried herself as an American she would be seen as such by others. This in turn would gain Japanese Americans acceptance in a cultural sphere where they had experienced rejection as "unassimilable aliens" (Takaki 1989). They too could claim to be "All American Girls" by mimicking and adopting hegemonic American cultural values such as innocence, sexual purity, honesty, and caring.

My dad always said to me, "Sit with your legs crossed and always put your best face forward. You are representing the Japanese American life if you say anything wrong, if you are rude or ungainly or sit with your legs apart, people will think poorly of us Japanese."⁵

As a symbol and representative of the Japanese American community in the wider society, this woman's behavior was subject to social control by Japanese Americans in the name of assimilation. In addition, the larger society was likely to view her as a typical Japanese American girl. Ironically, the creation of separate pageants for Japanese Americans meant that they were also separating themselves further from the mainstream culture whose acceptance they sought. This isolation may have encouraged the exoticization and objectification of Japanese American women in the minds of white America.

However, were the Nisei Week queens "typical Japanese American women"? The pageant may have overrepresented the Japanese American desire to be assimilated and "American." It naturally drew women who were more acculturated and who idealized American cultural forms of beauty, especially those that manifested themselves publicly in the local pageant. The ballot voters, on the other hand, were less assimilated than the pageant participants and were socially oriented to the Japanese American community first and foremost as residents or shoppers in Little Tokyo. The pageants claimed membership in the nation selectively at times—while it was not always necessary to wear a bathing suit in order to be American, pageants themselves were a good way to make the claim. However, these selective appropriations only reinforced the desirable innocence and virtue of "good American girls" of Japanese descent.

In the early days, before World War II, though, it was clear that the primary audience of the pageant and festival was internal to the Japanese American community:

In the beginning, they [the festival organizers] wanted everyone to come to Little Tokyo. They have always wanted people to come to Little Tokyo. It is just that there weren't a lot of non-Asians that came to Little Tokyo. Before it was all Japanese people at the pageant/festival, now it is half and half.⁶

Before World War II, Japanese Americans in the pageant tried to create a bicultural association of the United States and Japan and bring whites into Little Tokyo (Kurashige 2002). The Issei, first-generation Japanese immigrants, had been denied U.S. citizenship by the 1790 Naturalization Law, and land ownership by the Alien Land Law of 1913. What they could not gain in the legal sphere, they tried to gain culturally by mimicking and adopting American culture, including mainstream popular events such as beauty pageants. Later, after World War II and internment, Japanese Americans tried to integrate into mainstream American culture as quietly as possible; however, their integration was far from complete.

The pageants started well before the World War II internment camps, continued during internment, and started up again shortly after the end of the war. But the post-World War II stigma and the isolation of the community bore its mark on the pageant and those who participated in it. A queen from the early 1950s had this to say:

When I came out of [the internment] camp I had the same problems as many in high school and college. The la la kind of idea that we really wanted to become American and fit in. Live the American dream. You really wanted to be like a blonde haired blue-eyed kid. It is a real heartache when you think about it now. But this is what happens when you are discriminated against so much, you just want to be assimilated.⁷

Seen as a strategy for assimilation, the pageant was a way to "mimic" mainstream America and to show how "American" Japanese Americans were. The pageants became a site where Japanese Americanness was collectively produced. However, one outcome of the pageant was that Japanese Americans created their own images of beauty and deportment, such as "walking Japanese" with small steps while in kimono, which competed with mainstream ones such as "walking American" in an evening

gown with long wide strides and pivot turns. The pageants therefore combined Japanese and American cultural forms, although white American culture clearly dominated. The women in the pageant were supposed to master both forms, though the emphasis was on the evening gown portion and speaking in good, unaccented English. The covers of the program booklets that advertised the pageant/festival and its activities bore pictures of the queen in western garb, usually in an evening dress with a crown, sash, and smile in tow. The covers were glossy and colorful, much like the *Life* magazine covers of the time. Bouffant hairstyles and clumpy false eyelashes reflected some of the mainstream beauty standards of the era.

Nisei Week was different from other city pageants, because of Los Angeles's geographic dispersion, the Los Angeles riots (in 1992), and the pageant's proximity to the Hollywood entertainment industry. Nisei Week was described as a flashier (or more "Hollywood") style of pageant than the others. It had big "Hollywood" style dance numbers, hip, celebrity-designed outfits and gowns, celebrity judges, a "golden circle" of beautiful people, and an audience which could afford to pay more, all of which mirrored the academy awards. Because there were satellite Japanese enclaves for food and goods and it was considered dangerous after the riots to go downtown, outdoor downtown events like the parade had relatively low attendance rates.

The 1970s–1980s: The Battle over Feminism

In the 1970s, Japanese American beauty pageants became an arena in which larger battles in mainstream society were fought and contested. In this era, Japanese American pageants responded to widening awareness of feminist values in liberal cities like San Francisco by omitting bathing suit or fitness competitions and not stating the body measurements of candidates in the program. They also eliminated many of the "beauty"-related judging criteria. The San Francisco pageant, which was started in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was able to sidestep elements of the 1950s patriarchy which had shaped Nisei Week. A Nisei Week queen from Los Angeles in the late 1980s stated:

I would never have become involved if they had had bathing suits. I think half my court would not have become involved had there been bathing

suits. I think they did away with it the year that Lisa Yamamoto won. Lynn Nakamura—she was the one that is credited with being the vocal spokesperson in getting rid of the bathing suits. I don't know what year that was. It must have been the late 70s, early 80s. The whole women's movement happened in the early 70s in the rest of the United States and we sort of came along later. You also have to look at who was in charge then—mostly middle-aged men . . . bathing suits was their favorite part.⁸

Interestingly, the largest and most serious challenge for change, in terms of actually affecting the pageant, came from within the pageant set. Often the participants themselves were the most vocal about not wanting bathing suits, measurements, or anything to encourage objectification by what the girls called the "skebe" (dirty old) men who were organizing or judging it. The interviewee quoted above recognized the Japanese American patriarchy that these "old men" represented, but the women themselves are credited with being strong enough to stand up to them and "get rid of" the bathing suit section of the pageant as unnecessary and sexist. This also reflects the small, community-based, nature of the pageant so that participants were able to mobilize and apply pressure on the organizers to change. Notice, though, that they did not want to get rid of the pageant altogether. Perhaps they saw the pageant as an important outlet allowing Japanese American women to speak out on behalf of other women in their community, as it was one of the few public platforms available to them.

In 1968, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, the Northern California Cherry Blossom Queen Pageant was started to choose a queen to reign over the Cherry Blossom Festival held each April in San Francisco's Japantown. Japantown (Nihonmachi) had just been modernized and converted into a commercial rather than residential area, and the festival was created to bring people in so they could patronize the businesses there. The pageant also gave Japanese American women the chance to claim that "Japanese American Is Beautiful," following upon the civil rights theme of "black is beautiful," which claimed that women of color should be found beautiful in their own right without being compared to white standards of beauty. The original organizers saw this as a way to increase business in Japantown as well as a way to share Japanese culture not only with one another but with the larger society as well. It was decided that a queen should be chosen to reign over the parade and festivities and to make visits to other cities representing the Japanese American community of northern California. The queen became a focal center of the festival.

She drew raffle tickets, walked through Japantown in kimono, and greeted important visitors from Japan.

The San Francisco pageant also reflected its more liberal community. The first and only attempt to try to ban pageants altogether occurred in 1988, because the chair of the festival felt it was outdated and sexist. But there was such an outcry from the community that it returned in 1989 in a new format—no beauty judging criteria, career goals as part of the candidates' biographical statements, and no height, weight, or body measurements. Due to increasing awareness of feminism both inside and outside the Japanese American community, the focus had shifted to community and professional service and away from beauty per se as a criterion for the selection of the queen.

The impact of feminism on the pageant in San Francisco was clear from the pageant's decision not to have bathing suits, its attempts to get rid of beauty criteria in the late 1980s, and the cancellation of the pageant itself in 1988. These challenges to the pageant showed that Japanese American women didn't just regurgitate white, mainstream, feminist views. Many felt that feminists were too "out there" and demanding, and too culturally insensitive to be considered Japanese American. They referred to feminism as the "f" word and wanted to "act like feminists" but not be feminists—because ugly feminists were white. As Japanese American women, pageant candidates racialized feminism and gender roles. In their minds, to be Japanese American meant something very different, and less outspoken than white feminists might like.

Of course, some of the most offensive aspects of beauty pageants—such as the bathing suit competition—never played a big part in Japanese American pageants. In this sense, the pageants may have ironically been receptive to the development of feminism while also being influenced by larger feminist debates. The pageant gave Japanese American women a networking opportunity and the short dinner reception gave them a chance to be heard and rub elbows with dignitaries from Japan, politicians, and high-level businesspeople as well as the media and the entertainment industry. These networks helped them to present their ideas and further their professional careers.

Thus the pageants promoted a form of liberal Japanese American feminism which built on the long history of Japanese American women in athletics and politics. But in the pageants it took on a new and more public form. The women spoke outspokenly to push their issues as women to the forefront within the community and refused to toe the "racial" line in

order to work for Japanese American progress. Pageant participants now aspired to attend law school and business school, embark on political careers, and speak publicly in support of social and Japanese American causes. Many pageant participants from this era describe the pageant as a platform which centered Japanese American women, allowing them to speak out publicly (thereby going against the Japanese American ethic of modesty) and to appear in public (which some considered very embarrassing or immodest [*hazukashii*], especially if one didn't win). A new type of Japanese American woman was evolving both within the pageant and outside. Again, it was a blend of Japanese American cultural values and practices in a western, some would say uniquely American, kind of beauty pageant.

Many Japanese Americans observers of the pageant were, and still are, strongly critical of the message that Japanese American pageants send to the rest of society and to the young Japanese American women who participate in them. This criticism was strongest in San Francisco and Hawaii. In Hawaii, Terri-Ann Shiroma of Moanalua High School wrote about pageants for a high school journalism contest. The *Hawaii Star-Bulletin* quoted from her winning essay as follows:

Beauty contests continue to erode years of progress toward achieving sexual equality. Providing pageant winners as standards for young women to emulate and admire encourages them to focus on outward appearances rather than inward cultivation. Eradicating pageants would serve as a momentous step toward ensuring the future health and success of all America's women. (Chang 1996: 1)

Diane Yukihiro Chang of the *Hawaii Star-Bulletin* added, "Contestants are rewarded for pleasing via talents and interview responses deemed to be appropriately feminine. In short, they are reduced to actresses portraying an expected role" (Chang 1996: 1).

In San Francisco too, some members of the Japanese American community criticized the pageants. Mei Nakano and the Women's Concerns Committee (WCC) in San Francisco lobbied hard in the 1980s to get the Japanese American Citizen's League (JACL) to stop sponsoring pageant candidates. Their argument was that as a civil rights organization, the JACL should have a more progressive view not only of race, but of gender as well. But the WCC's campaign to end support for the pageants was un-

successful as other community members emphasized their importance as a place where Japanese American women could honor alternative models of beauty (Kurashige 2002). Even if Japanese American women could not be Miss America, they could still be honored here. It was a chance to celebrate the beauty and accomplishments of Japanese American women.

Feminism also had an impact on Nisei Week in Los Angeles. The bathing suit portion of the pageant was removed in the 1970s and the impact of white feminist understandings led to a decline in pageant participation. A past participant explained,

Feminist criticisms of the pageants have made it more difficult to get candidates to run. Fewer women are interested in doing this. A lot of times they are reacting to what they think it is rather than what they will find out it really is. They don't know. And they aren't going to find out because there is a stigma attached to the word pageant. You think of a bubble headed ditzy actress wanna be. Some people said to me "I'm surprised you are interested in that sort of thing." "You are Phi Beta Kappa so why are you running in this pageant?" What does that have to do with anything? I think if someone thinks it is going to help them, it is worth pursuing. For me, my goals were to meet more people in the community and develop more poise and grace. I asked my department chair who was a woman, I asked, "If I participate in this pageant will people question my academic integrity?" and she said, "Not if they are smart. Other people are involved with their church or sports groups. What is the difference?" It is an interest of mine, but it isn't my life.⁹

Feminist criticism was also evident in this story told me by a Nisei Week queen from the 1980s:

I was with a group of Asian American actresses and they started teasing me about it. "Is it just thrilling to be Nisei Week Queen? Is it everything you've ever dreamed of?" and I was like, "Excuse me?" They were all laughing, they thought they were so funny. I said, "No, it was something I got involved with because I thought it was interesting and it has been." Then they said, "You must have had so much fun going to all those parties and wearing your crown," and I thought you all are really rude, what gives you the right to judge. Like I am not smart enough to know that they were being facetious. That was a pretty negative experience.¹⁰

Feminism created tension within the pageants and Japanese American communities at large. While the pageants became a logical target of feminist attack, ironically they also gave rise to a Japanese American feminist ideology. The act of participating in the pageant could be framed as in the above quote, as "bucking the trend," that is, by making a bold, and some would say feminist, move to stand up and participate in the face of strong pressure not to do so.

In the end, both the women in the pageant and the pageant organizers racialized gender roles and feminism simultaneously. These women saw themselves as standing up to change community norms around public space, but they did so in a forum deeply shaped by hegemonic gender ideologies. It is important to remember, though, that with the possible exception of Los Angeles, these beauty pageants were less commodified and provided better access to community networks than mainstream pageants. The participants also had a greater role in shaping the pageants. The Japanese American community was a small pond where the participants became big, publicly known, fish. They spoke publicly and made contacts with many elite members of their community.

The 1990s: Multiculturalism, Multiracialism, and Globalization

In the post-civil rights era of race relations, the certainties of ethnic identity gave way to new concerns in the 1990s. The attacks on multiculturalism as the foundation of ethnic identity politics were reflected in debates about the increasing number of multiethnic queens and their "authenticity" or "legitimacy" as representatives of their local Japanese American communities. This was the era in which debates abounded about the declining significance of race (Wilson 1978), the "overrepresentation" of Asian Americans in higher education (Takagi 1992), racial privacy laws (Millard 2002), and multiple racial responses on the 2000 Census (King 2000). The debates in the community pageants focused primarily on the racial eligibility rules, which limited participation to women who were of 50 percent or more Japanese ancestry in San Francisco and Los Angeles and 100 percent in Hawaii until the 1970s. The increasing incorporation of mixed-race queens resulted in mounting anxiety in the Japanese American community about its "loss of culture."

In the 1980s and 1990s, the pageants became a central venue for debates over "loss of culture" and overassimilation to mainstream culture by the

Japanese American community. With low immigration, an increasingly elderly population, high out-marriage, and an increase in "mixed-race" members, the Japanese American community is currently wrestling with complex issues. The community has shrunk relative to other Asian American communities (Chinese Americans have larger populations in two of the three areas that I studied—Los Angeles and San Francisco) and the larger society (Asians made up less than 15 percent of the total population in the United States in 2000). In 2000, in Los Angeles County the Asian American population was 11.9 percent, and in Orange County it was 13.6 percent. In San Francisco County, the Asian American population was 30.8 percent and predominantly Chinese. And in Hawaii, the entire state was 41.6 percent Asian American, and 9.4 percent Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian.¹¹ Mixed-race people have started to make up a bigger part of the Japanese American community, which has changed the dynamics of community membership and understandings of race and ethnicity. Multiracial women embody this tension between shifting Japanese American identities and the norm of whiteness and have sparked heated debate over racial eligibility rules for pageant participants.

This debate over racial rules began most publicly in Los Angeles in the local Japanese-English newspaper, the *Refu Shimpō*, which discussed "half" Nisei Week queens in 1982. One participant from that era told me,

We've had some girls who are half Japanese and half various other things, some of them have been more exposed to Japanese culture than some of the girls who are biologically all Japanese. The Posey sisters are both bilingual, but they are half Caucasian. Are they more Japanese than me because they speak Japanese or are they less because both my parents are Japanese? Their mom is from Japan and I am third generation.¹²

Like many, this interviewee questioned how definitions of Japanese American authenticity are being shaped by the relationship between ancestry (race) and culture (ethnicity). The presence of multiracial queens like the Posey sisters highlights the question of who has the right to represent the community as queen. This question had never been asked before because the number of multiracial participants was small. With the increase in multiracial participants, people's attention was drawn to the issue of who, racially, could claim to speak for or represent the community as a whole. The assumption of the link between culture and ancestry was questioned and challenged, if not broken, by the increasing presence of multiracial

queens. However, it also took an effort to maintain the race:culture nexus in the pageant setting. If a majority of the community became multiracial, it would be more acceptable for the queen to be multiracial because she would look like the average Japanese American. One participant from the 1980s said,

They were saying in the papers, "Are we choosing queens based on a western standard of beauty?" and that whole thing. I don't know if it is ethnic integrity or sour grapes.¹³

The racial appearance of the queen was highly correlated in this interviewee's mind with ethnic integrity and authenticity. This debate about mixed-race pageant candidates illustrates the community's growing anxiety about Japanese American assimilation and cultural preservation.

Ironically, community concerns have come full circle from the 1930s. At that time the pageants were a strategy for assimilation, whereas in the 1990s Japanese Americans were asking whether assimilation had gone too far and how they could ensure cultural preservation. This argument was based on a race equals culture equation, meaning that to be a member of the community one must be 100 percent racially Japanese and the culture will follow. However, multiracial participants challenged the either/or dichotomy. They developed their own strategies and conduct as well as identification, thereby problematizing the race-culture nexus. A Cherry Blossom queen from San Francisco in the 1990s said:

I think if the community wants to survive it's going to have to learn to take in people that maybe it would not have previously. They have to be flexible. A lot of people who are biologically Japanese don't care to be a part of what we call the Japanese American community. They don't attend a Japanese church. They don't shop in J-town. They don't eat Japanese food, the whole bit. There are people who are half or a quarter Japanese, not even Japanese, and they want to be part of that. I think you have to be a little less ethnocentric and say if you are interested, we are interested in having you participate.¹⁴

And in Los Angeles, a 1990s Nisei Week queen said,

I think they would shut down Nisei Week first though before they would let just someone of any race be queen. Not even thinking that they were being

racist or anything. It would be like "Oh, darn, we ran out of candidates. We faded away." Maybe that would be the time for the pageant to fade away.¹⁵

The shape of the community changes when borders are opened and the criteria for authenticity is challenged and changed.

Akira "Sunshine" Fukunaga of Honolulu was visiting a buddy in Los Angeles in 1949 when he attended his first Nisei Week Festival. Thinking the festival was a great idea, he returned to Honolulu to start planning the first Cherry Blossom Festival in Hawaii. Sunshine was the first vice president of the Honolulu Japanese Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees) in 1949, and thought Cherry Blossom would be a good project for the Jaycees. "Sunshine explained that this festival could help to perpetuate and promote the Japanese culture in Hawaii, as well as provide members with the opportunity to gain valuable leadership skills."¹⁶ Following the assimilationist tendencies of Nisei Week, Fukunaga adapted the queen pageant to reflect the growing economic and political power of Japanese Americans in Hawaii, which many saw as evidence of their increasing assimilation, this time to a Japanese American elite. Reflecting its sponsorship by the Japanese Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Hawaii pageant is the largest and the best marketed of them all. But due to its geographic closeness to Japan and dependence on Japanese capital, it tends to emphasize traditional Japanese cultural dress and values.

In 1998, Hawaii, the last bastion of racial purity, changed its racial eligibility rules from 100 percent Japanese ancestry to 50 percent. Keith Kamisugi (the president of the Honolulu Japanese Junior Chamber of Commerce, known as the Jaycees) was much criticized for doing so, but he responded:

First and foremost, it was the right thing to do. We always promoted the festival as a representation of Hawaii's Japanese American community, yet the rules barred queen contestants who were not of full Japanese ancestry. It was disturbing that a hapa-Japanese woman could not represent her ethnic community through the festival. At the point where we were close to finalizing the contest rule change, a few people asked if we would still require a Japanese surname, based on the false notion that the queen and court visit to Japanese would be less than ideal if the queen had a *haole* [white] last name. [A few individuals really said this to me.] Absolutely not. A Japanese American woman named Toth is no less or more Japanese than a woman named Matsumoto. Pride in our Japanese heritage does not

come from our birth certificate. It comes from our family, our community and our experiences as participants in that culture. I'm gratified that the Cherry Blossom Festival has achieved such diversity in the queen contest. It is a true reflection of our Japanese American community. (Kamisiugi 2001: 1)

The issue of authenticity in terms of race and culture continued in Hawaii, as in 1999 there was a part-Chinese participant, in 2001 a multi-ethnic queen with a non-Japanese surname was crowned for the first time, and in 2002 the first part-Native Hawaiian queen was crowned.

Conclusion

In the twentieth century, Japanese American beauty pageants neither "mimicked" mainstream culture nor created a totally new cultural form. Japanese Americans appropriated a mainstream form and adapted it in response to influences from both within and without their community. Fundamentally, Japanese American pageants illustrate Japanese American community struggles from 1935 to the present over national citizenship, gender, and race.

	Struggle	Strategy
1950s	Ethnocentric/racist exclusion vs. citizenship (assimilation by mimicry)	Selective appropriation of the "Nation"
1970s	Patriarchy vs. feminism	Claiming public space for women within patriarchal constraints
1980s-1990s	Racial purity vs. porous definition of community/multiculturalism	Problematising the race-culture nexus

As this table illustrates, the struggles of the early era, both before World War II and directly after it, focused on moving away from the experience of ethnocentric and racist exclusion to trying to claim membership as "Americans." By looking like Americans (whites) in cultural forms such as beauty pageants, Japanese Americans selectively appropriated "American-ness" to further their own inclusion in the nation. Doing so, though, meant embracing western dress, English and mimicking some, though not all, of the components of mainstream "American" pageants. The queens in this era served as symbols of Japanese Americans' ability to assimilate into white America.

In the 1970s, the struggle facing Japanese American communities was how to integrate feminism, particularly mainstream feminism, into a heavily patriarchal society, as evidenced by the mere existence of beauty pageants. I argue that even in this patriarchal cultural form there was room for some women to make feminist claims despite the limitations imposed by the pageant. In fact it was their exposure to feminism, together with their strong commitment to the Japanese American community, that made them stay within the pageant, but assert new feminist notions of womanhood within it.

Finally, the struggle in the most recent era has been over racial purity rules and who constitutes an "authentic" member of the community and therefore a worthy symbol. This debate has created more porous community definitions of membership and with it of community boundaries. Conceptually, it also prompted the community to deal with changing racial demographics by recognizing that the race equals culture nexus must be questioned and challenged. All these issues have been debated in the pageants, thus proving that they are semi-autonomous spaces for strategic action and cultural production. While pageants are a restrictive kind of public space, they can be a venue for a vigorous public discourse about the nature of the nation, gender, and race.

NOTES

1. This research is based on documentary analysis, a year and a half of ethnographic fieldwork in the late 1990s, and sixty in-depth interviews with pageant organizers and participants in Los Angeles and San Francisco, California, Honolulu, Hawaii, and Seattle, Washington.
2. For an excellent and more detailed historical analysis of the context of Nisei Week, see Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1995*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2002).
3. The bathing suit competitions in Los Angeles were discontinued in the 1970s.
4. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, March 26, 1996.
5. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, March 26, 1996
6. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, March 18, 1996.
7. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, March 26, 1996.
8. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, March 18, 1996.

9. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, April 8, 1996.
10. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, April 1, 1996.
11. This data comes from the 2000 Census at http://factfinder.census.gov/bfl_lang=en_vt_name=DEC_2000_PL_U_QTPL_geo_id=04000US15.html.
12. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, April 1, 1996.
13. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, March 12, 1996.
14. Interview with author, San Francisco, California, March 1, 1996.
15. Interview with author, Los Angeles, California, March 12, 1996.
16. "History of the Cherry Blossom Festival," from 44th Cherry Blossom Festival booklet (Honolulu, Hawaii), page 16.

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