



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHERRY BLOSSOM DREAMS: RACIAL ELIGIBILITY RULES, HAPAS AND JAPANESE AMERICAN BEAUTY PAGEANTS

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As I peek out from behind the curtain of the Cherry Blossom Queen Pageant stage, I can feel the noise and excitement levels rising. The queen pageant candidates giggle nervously behind me and one slips her hand into mine asking me in a whisper, "How do I look? Do I look okay?" I produce a compact mirror for her to check her "Japanese up hair do," which is thickly padded with cotton and heavily adorned with bells and birds to complement her kimono. She wets her finger and draws it carefully over the front of her hair and then her eyebrows to mat them down so they won't stick out and will look smooth and sleek. 'There!' we both say in unison and we are ready to begin the beauty pageant to see who will represent the Japanese American community as the Cherry Blossom Queen (excerpt from field notes San Francisco, 1996).¹¹⁷⁴

Introduction

Japanese American beauty pageants are prime sites of collective identification, cultural production and representation. They are interesting case studies of popular culture as they produce both symbolic racial representations of collective identities (the racialized beauty queen) and representative collective cultural meanings (what it means to be Japanese American culturally) through the symbols of the queens. But not everyone can be a queen and there are racial eligibility rules that determine who can and cannot be deemed an authentic representative of the Japanese American community. This paper explores the intersection of culture and race in Japanese American beauty pageants by focusing on the process of racial and cultural production where beauty queens are





symbols on which race/culture is inscribed as text, but also sites of and agents in the active production of race/culture. Analysis of this process reveals that notions of culture are produced that serve to naturalize race in the pageants, which can be seen in debates about the community and authenticity.

Eurasians are the Poster Children of Globalization

They are the “mixed-race chic”¹¹⁷⁵ of the East. The explosion of mixed-race models in Japan and interest in multiraciality and beauty has been analyzed in Japan primarily as a consequence of global capitalism, postcolonial racialization and patriarchy.¹¹⁷⁶ Matthews argues that the appeal, allure and persuasions of Eurasian/mixed race are as much an effect of its commodified production as a cosmopolitan figure with automatic racial, cultural and national border crossing attributes, as its capacity and potential to claim for itself a local and space of visibility.¹¹⁷⁷

Mixed-race or hapa models in Japan then are racialized and sexualized as more desirable and attractive than their monoracial counterparts in part because they are often represented as half White. But are they always in every situation considered in this way?

In this chapter, I examine mixed race representation and turn it on its head to argue that in fact, in the context of Japanese American beauty pageants (a non-white hegemonic context), mixed-race Japanese American women may NOT be deemed more attractive, chic or good representatives of the Japanese American community. As Eric Liu writes, “The blurring of race labels is neither the dawn of colorblindness nor the dusk of racism.”¹¹⁷⁸ Instead, the presence of mixed-race beauty queens within Japanese American communities may be seen as a harbinger of cultural dilution.

But what is the relationship between cultural dilution and racial mixing? To be a Japanese American beauty queen one must be racially (enforced by racial eligibility rules which require “at least 50% Japanese ancestry”) Japanese and ALSO culturally Japanese American (speak the Japanese language, be familiar with cultural values such as *gaman* (perseverance) and possibly cultural arts (such as *ikebana* flower arranging and *taiko* drumming). Pageant organizers and participants were clear that if one is racially Japanese, then one naturally has the corresponding culture. Japanese American beauty pageants in this way could be seen as an example of the Production of Culture perspective.¹¹⁷⁹





the term “cultural production” is understood as:

not simply an epiphenomenal manifestation of a pre-existing culture, but rather the product of hybrid cultural trajectories....culture is not an essence but a process of production and reception, an active social relation. Created by individuals with vested interests, cultural production is always historically situated, reflecting such social relations as crafted through the dialogic and syncretic processes of production and receptions.... Hence, the question ‘who is producing what for whom and why?’ is critical to understanding complexity of cultural production.¹¹⁸⁰

Asian American cultural production in this sense has an activist tendency to challenge racist stereotypes,¹¹⁸¹ but it can also serve as the bridge between relations of cultural production (with mainstream but also with other racial/ethnic minority groups, globalization, etc.) and the nuances of lived experiences.¹¹⁸²

In terms of race theory, the rejection of biological determinism and the focus on the social construction of race¹¹⁸³ has meant that some racialization theorists have tended to throw the body out with the biology. Some race theorists have moved away from analyzing embodied practices of racial and cultural production to focus on organizational and institutional understandings of race and racial meaning making.¹¹⁸⁴ However, racial/ethnic beauty pageants are different to other forms of cultural production precisely because the product being produced and the surface on which meanings are created and attached is a real racialized human body.¹¹⁸⁵

The racial element (primarily enforced through racial eligibility rules) in the selection of Japanese American beauty queens makes them different types of cultural objects (as living symbols of racial/cultural communities) and they concomitantly have different types of cultural production processes. Firstly, the Japanese American beauty pageants studied here do not operate within a pageant industry. There is no television coverage, no agents, no paid consultants, and they do not represent a pyramidal pageant scheme, i.e., if one wins they do not go on to the regional Miss Japanese America pageant, etc.¹¹⁸⁶ These pageants take place within a context where the culture being produced is not an object or thing (such as art work or music) but embodied—the queen herself



is produced with cultural meaning but is not just an object but a person and social agent. Finally, the beauty pageants and queens are not commodified and sold, per se, within a market to benefit producers but seen primarily as an ambassador—both agent and symbol of—ethnic/racial and cultural capital which is seen to be naturally authentic.

In the Japanese American case, antiquated versions and notions of culture are racialized and gendered in particular ways by the pageant organizers, the queens, and the judges so as to attempt to tie together, maintain, and hold onto what they deem to be authentic Japanese American culture. Linked to the homeland (Japan) through social and gift relations (the giving/receiving of *omiyage* souvenirs), common past historical experiences (World War II internment) and art forms (dance, music, flower arranging), dress (*kimono*), and cultural values (*gaman*, filial piety, and some would argue versions of retro femininity), the pageants work on the beauty queens to reinforce relationships between culture and race which essentialize and fix Japanese American culture to racial identities.

Japanese American beauty pageants are cultural productions that are also consumed (although not in a strictly economic form of consumption) as a way of creating and shaping social networks along ethnic and racial lines. The Japanese American pageants as cultural forms tend not to just be appropriated by other groups, but also by Japanese Americans themselves to bring together individual and communal level anxieties about the increasing role of mixed-race participants in the pageants and communities. But the pageants have always reflected the current issues of local Japanese American communities.

The Changing Nature of Japanese American Beauty Pageants (1935-2010)

The Nisei Week Queen Pageant was first held in 1935 in Los Angeles. Japanese Americans at the time faced increasing racial discrimination and were forbidden from participating in many mainstream popular cultural realms including mainstream pageants like Miss America or Miss California. The pageant's connection to cultural festivals served to highlight the local context of the pageants.¹¹⁸⁷ However, the audiences for different parts of the festival differed. Nisei Week in Los Angeles was founded to focus on the Nisei Japanese Americans, who were born in the U.S., and were U.S. citizens. On the eve of World War II, the festival and pageant served the dual purposes of uniting the Japanese



American community in Los Angeles and Southern California and to celebrate their American born and succeeding generations. To the *hakujin* (white mainstream) community, it was an attempt to prove the ability of Japanese Americans to assimilate and become truly American.

By the 1970s and 1980s, Japanese American pageants shifted to focus on cultural nationalism and declare that, “Japanese American is Beautiful Too.” The Asian American Power Movement following from the success of the Black Power Movement in the 1970s, embraced the “Black is Beautiful” ideal as a way to accept and reaffirm the natural beauty of minority women. The Japanese American community was not immune to this and Japanese American beauty pageants, while fairly traditional in terms of feminism, did incorporate some elements of culturally nationalist discourse on the resistance of white feminist hegemonic norms of beauty. Unlike the earlier era, the proponents of the pageants in the 1970s argued that Japanese American women could be beautiful in their own right. While transgressive perhaps in a racial challenge to white norms of beauty, the pageants maintained strong notions of Japanese American femininity.¹¹⁸⁸ Japanese American pageants shifted from being a model of assimilation to a platform to claim pride in Japanese American racial and cultural identity.

By the 1990s and 2000s, the pageants were focused on “Preserving Japanese American Culture.” During this period, the issue of the dilution of the Japanese American community, primarily through interracial marriage, was at the forefront of the minds of local Japanese American community members in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Honolulu where my research was conducted. The N2K or Nikkei 2000 “Ties that Bind” conference in San Francisco was centered on the question “Will there be a Japanese American community in the future?” As community newspapers and organizations shut down and demographic dispersion took its toll, community leaders worried about the future of the Japanese American community. With an aging population and low immigration, they focused clearly on intermarriage as a challenge, which brought to the fore debates about who was Japanese American and what that meant for cultural definitions of Japanese Americanness if the majority of the community (in places like San Francisco) became racially mixed rather than monoracial.

The argument followed that if a person was only half Japanese racially, they were also only half Japanese culturally and were therefore losing culture and blending into the mainstream—racial dilution was causing cultural dilution and, in turn, community





dilution. The pageants became a vehicle to preserve Japanese American culture with a focus on maintaining authentic Japanese American culture and the quest for authenticity came to re-inscribe certain notions of culture as true. One example of this was the continued use of racial eligibility rules, which were often justified based on the argument that if racial rules were eliminated, anyone could be the queen and that this, in the end, would dilute the meaning of the queen for the community. In general, organizers of the pageants argued that it would be better to do away with the pageant all together rather than open it up with no racial eligibility limitations. For people outside of the Japanese American community, the queen represented Japanese American culture as a commodity to be consumed as an exotic experience connected to the festival. The queen functioned as a public relations stunt to bring non-Japanese people into Japantown to eat and experience a little bit of Japanese American culture, but it certainly was not intended to invite them to *be* the queen.

Methods

This chapter analyzes the cultural production of racial, ethnic, and cultural meanings embodied in the selection of Japanese American beauty queens in four cities: Los Angeles (1935-present), San Francisco (1968-present), Seattle (1960-present), and Honolulu (1950-present). Sixteen months of participant-observation fieldwork was conducted in the mid 1990s, again in early 2000 and 2011, by the author as a member of the San Francisco Cherry Blossom Queen Pageant Committee. This included all visitations—to local shops to open new businesses, volunteer and public relations activities, as well as all training sessions and official visitations to the other cities. Sixty in-depth interviews were conducted with past and current court members, organizers, judges, and sponsors through purposive sampling. Gaining access to the pageant as a committee member came from volunteering to help out at the first press conference and then being put to work assisting the candidates and court. This allowed me to gain a backstage perspective and observe closed rehearsals and confidential instructions given to the candidates and queens before traveling and watching how the pageant organizers, chaperones and judges shaped behavior, deportment, and discourse. Being behind the scenes for an extended period of time allowed me to see how culture affects social action, but also the ways in which culture itself changed over time and was collectively produced.





Producing Culture, Community, and the Beauty Queen as Symbol

The pageants are a public, collective Japanese American conversation about what it means culturally *and* racially to be Japanese American across the four cities studied, but there were particularly lively debates in Los Angeles and Honolulu in the 1990s. The Japanese Americanness of the queen was deemed important. A Nisei Week Queen pageant organizer from the early 1990s explained why the queen is of such cultural importance:

The queen is really a real feeling about being Japanese, being Japanese American, I'd say. And it is the love of what our community represents and of the culture we have and this is something that we have really tried to instill, not just sending someone out because she is pretty but because she is intelligent and, as you have seen, because of the queens, who they are, being very articulate and they do these things that are very Japanese. It is more to preserve our culture and to have a representative to make it a positive thing to be a Japanese American.

Within the latter era of Japanese American beauty pageants, the multiculturalist (but particularly the multiracial) narrative threatened the authenticity of Japanese American racial and cultural claims. Some used debates about racial eligibility rules to express their worries that the community will be diluted and blended away through racial (and assumed cultural) hybridity into indistinct American culture—thus losing their unique racial and cultural identity.

Culture in the Japanese American pageants was used as a foil to thwart feminist critiques of the pageants. Pageant advocates argue that the pageants importantly function to “preserve culture,” are focused teaching about and maintaining culture, and are *not* about beauty and therefore do not objectify women like mainstream pageants do. The focus on culture is a rationale for the continuation of the patriarchal practice of annually crowning a woman as queen to represent the community.

Culture was also used in part to determine authenticity, in conjunction with race and social networks. Claims to authenticity were based on criteria such as: *racial capital* (looking Japanese





American enough to serve as the symbol of the local community), *cultural capital* (having competency in, for example, the Japanese language, Japanese arts, or Japanese ways of being) and *social capital* (Japanese American social networks and community ties that legitimate the queen as part of the Japanese American community). In fact the queen candidates reproduced this connection between notions of culture and race when they took on the task of learning more about Japanese American culture in order to be, embody, and enact a better queen as a symbol of the community. This is because, as Inglis claims:

Body techniques learned from the group tend to be experienced and enacted by the individual unconsciously rather than consciously, he or she generally feeling that the specific ways bodies move are just 'natural'. But of course these ways are not just 'natural' because they have been created by the culture of the group to which the person belongs... each social group has a distinctive lifestyle. ... Another way of saying this is that the social group instills its cultural values not just into the minds of each of its members, but into their bodies too.¹¹⁸⁹

This natural racialized cultural body is made manifest and drawn into consciousness in the pageants because the queen candidates are shown, trained and practice how to “be” Japanese American in bodily terms through the pageant. They put tremendous effort into learning to walk in *kimono*, bow, and carry themselves in a Japanese American way. Training sessions in preparation for the pageant emphasized moving in ladylike ways but also moving in racialized Japanese ways – walking with toes pointed in, gliding or shuffling and not striding, which was seen as a western way of walking in kimono. The queens wear symbols such as the *kimono*, but also work to become symbols themselves. Interestingly, the women were trained to walk in a more western way (striding, with pivot turns and using their arms more freely) during the evening gown section of the pageant where the focus was questions and answers, but not during the opening preview section of the pageant where they were dressed in kimonos where the emphasis was on “walking Japanese” and flirting with the audience through moving the neck and head and small movements with the sleeves of the kimonos.





through the emphasis on racial appearance and racial eligibility rules. Even with a focus on the commonality of Japanese culture across local Japanese American communities, racial meanings mattered highly in the context of the pageants studied here. In Los Angeles in the 1980s, a heated debate was sparked within the community by the selection of a mixed-race queen. The main argument was that mixed-race queens did not represent the community *because* they were mixed.¹¹⁹⁰

In Hawai'i, the Japanese American community continued to insist on maintaining a rule that Cherry Blossom Queen contestants must be "100% racially Japanese" until 1998. Even in 2008, after many mixed-race women had been named Cherry Blossom Queen, there was still a sense of nostalgia for when the queen was racially pure in Hawai'i and a continuing pride in being the last to change the racial eligibility rules to 50%.

Racial eligibility rules defining who was eligible to run in the pageant and hence who could represent the local Japanese American community are not just specific to Japanese American pageants, but in fact, exist in many ethnic pageants more generally (e.g., Miss Chinatown must be at least 25% Chinese, the Narcissus Queen in Hawai'i must be "nearly 50% Chinese," and Miss Asian American must be of 25% Asian ancestry). In the contemporary era, these racial rules usually exist NOT in mainstream pageants but primarily in racial/ethnic pageants concerned with maintaining and celebrating authentic ethnic culture and legitimating who can represent them. Most mainstream pageants have very strict rules around marriage and motherhood (which are not allowed) but few around race or ancestry, which might be deemed illegal.

But how do these racial rules play out in cultural practice? In the pageants studied here, many people were trying to impose racial definitions on candidates for Cherry Blossom Queen in San Francisco in asking, "Are you Japanese?" Mixed candidates responded to these racial challenges with cultural symbols such as using Japanese names, the Japanese language, or Japanese cultural arts to demonstrate their legitimacy as Japanese American community members and therefore authentic representatives as queen. They deployed certain cultural repertoires that they thought would be authenticated as truly Japanese American in order to improve their chances of winning.¹¹⁹¹

There was an ever-present process of racial assignation in the pageants for example, when one is seen as "not White" by the mainstream, but not Japanese American by Japanese Americans in bodily/beauty terms in the pageants.





Such racial projects highlight the importance of 'culture' in terms of the intangible but very real markers of language, dress, demeanor, and cultural capital that in addition to phenotype, make race so pervasive in everyday life.¹¹⁹²

In fact, in the Japanese American pageants that I observed, there was a downplaying of competition because they were not beauty pageants, per se, but cultural pageants. The implication was that by moving away from physical beauty as a criterion for judging, that somehow looks didn't matter.

But appearances clearly mattered in the pageants. The exterior presentation of self was constantly enacted in a bodily manner and was an important way to relay information visually to others – in order to be effective, the cultural strategies of the candidates had to take on an embodied form. Craig illustrates this when she argues that race is an embodied identity—one is a member of a cultural group in part because of one's body.¹¹⁹³ She writes,

Since race is constructed as an embodiment identity, challenges to racist hierarchies are often expressed as contests over the representation of racialized bodies ... images of beauty practices can serve as a focal point for viewing the complex project of racial articulation.¹¹⁹⁴

Bodies in the context of the pageants were seen as natural and racialized. Certain parts/characteristics of the body (skin color, hair color, nape of the neck, etc.) were emphasized as part and parcel of the authenticating process in the pageants. The judges, who were mainly Japanese American community insiders, read and reinforced bodily cues, including racialized cues, to select the candidates who were the "nice girls."¹¹⁹⁵

Japanese American beauty pageants, while for the most part not televised, were similar to a television production in two respects. They were highly controlled by the producers/organizers, and they were also often loosely linked to the commodification of Japanese American culture through the selling of Japanese culture to outsiders by, for example, encouraging them to come into Japantown during the pageant/festival to shop, wearing a sash with a company logo embossed on it as advertisement, and so on.





However, the sponsors were not commercial entities but tended to be local Japanese American churches (Buddhist and Christian), the Nikkei Lions Club (or VFW), or local Japanese American community groups. There were a few local Japanese American owned businesses (e.g., Benihana restaurant) who sponsored queen candidates in San Francisco, but they were only involved with the pageant for the month before the pageant and the sash with the sponsor's name was discarded after the pageant took place and once the queen candidates had earned their titles (such as Cherry Blossom Queen, Princess, Miss Tomodachi).

Authenticity

In the Japanese American beauty pageants, racial and gender appearance were worked at and worked on in order to make the claim to authenticity and the right to speak and represent the community as the queen ambassadress. Culture was used to justify racial rules and assignation but the pageant itself was also justified as a way for the Japanese American community to define itself in cultural terms.

For example, although not an official requirement, speaking Japanese was often seen by the judges as an advantage to the queen in her selection and duties (visiting Japan, dealing with Japanese businessmen, etc.). One former Cherry Blossom Queen pageant judge in San Francisco from the 1990s told me:

I heard a story that one of the Japanese dance teachers was a judge. She asked someone if they spoke Japanese. They said, "No." Then she said, "We have nothing else to say to each other." I don't know how much of that is fact and how much myth. We get candidates who say, "I don't speak Japanese," and are really apologetic.

Language was a cultural tool used to make cultural claims to authenticity within the pageant. Others used their Japanese middle or last names to emphasize their Japaneseness in hopes that it would help them win. One Nisei Week Queen in Los Angeles in the early 1980s recounted:

Queens who change or use Japanese names must see an advantage to doing that. They think, "Right. I am going to manipulate these factors





and get every single one on my side that I can. I can't change my hair color or my eyes, but I can change my name." One girl, she changed her name. The story was that her father was Japanese but he changed his name because he married into a Chinese family and was going into the family business. Some people said they made that up ... they are Chinese and they want to run in the pageant. Other people said, "it makes sense to me." Other people said, "Who cares? If she wants that badly, let her run."

Cultural authenticity in the pageant was decided by a shifting group of judges who brought to the stage different notions of what type of culture they were looking for. In the name of preserving culture and being a positive role model for Japanese American women, certain notions of ethnic Japaneseness (competent in the Japanese language, connected to the local Japanese American community, etc.) and certain notions of gender (articulate, well spoken, intelligent, but also pretty) were selected and reproduced by the judges, audience, and organizers each year in the pageant. When there was disagreement between the judges and audience about who should win, dissent was known almost immediately through the process of booing the titleholders.

In order to control for this, the pageant committee organizers conduct subtle orientations or training of the judges each year to shape the criteria (both formal and informal) that are used to select a winner. The scorecard is carefully explained to the judging panel before the pageant begins and concepts such as poise and confidence are explained, often in cultural terms. In 2000, when I sat in on the judging panel, the chairman of the pageant explained poise in strictly cultural terms, saying, "we wanted a queen who would represent us well, who is calm, classy, carries herself well, and isn't too outspoken." This closely mirrored a Japanese American cultural preference for silence over verbosity, and conformity over uniqueness part of a philosophy that the "protruding nail gets hammered down." There was no need to articulate this to the local Japanese American youth community worker or the Japanese dance teacher on the judging panel, who both began nodding in agreement almost from the moment he spoke. Only the non-Japanese American judge asked for clarification as to how to determine poise on the scorecard.





pageants in order to claim and authenticate *racial* identities. One Cherry Blossom Queen from Honolulu in the 1990s explains,

The queen appears in *kimono* a number of times in public. I think when you hear the public ask for the queen, a lot of people want you to be in *kimono*. It is the whole flavor of the Japanese American community. You can look very awkward in *kimono* if you don't walk correctly, if you don't handle yourself nicely. I think they are just worried. The person who donates the *kimono* – that is a very large gift. He would just cringe if he saw people crossing their legs in it or waving their arms around, wiping their mouths on their sleeve. I think a lot of it is just the traditional look.

The correctness of the *kimono* matters because to violate a cultural norm and appear rude in it would make the committee and by association the local Japanese American community look bad. Not knowing culturally appropriate behavior is naturalized as “something we should just know” in the *kimono* segment. There was also intense social gendered and cultural control of the queens, which was often rationalized as “think what the community will think.” The women’s behavior as representative of the community was tightly controlled and there were strict rules about not drinking in *kimono*, appearing in revealing clothing, not getting pregnant etc.

Gender was also used in the context of the pageants as a rationale for maintaining culture, but also at the same time maintaining control over Japanese American women’s bodies via the queen selection and pageant. The queen candidates were closely controlled by a chairperson, usually a man, who dictated and defined (through the training of the judges) appropriate femininity and womanhood that the queen was intended to represent. There were conflicts between the queens and the chaperones who tried to enforce rules around appropriate femininity (no smoking in *kimono*, no drinking with the tiara and sash on, etc.). Within this effort to control the behavior and appearance of the queens, it was difficult for the chaperones to regulate something that was supposed to be natural. In this instance, beauty culture was:

o resource used by collectivities and individuals





to claim worth, yet it is an unstable good, whose association with women and with sex, and its dependence upon ever-changing systems of representation, put its bearer at constant risk of seeing the value of her inherent beauty or beauty work evaporate. If beauty is ever capital, it is a somewhat stigmatized capital. It must appear unearned if it is to be authentic, as opposed to purchased, beauty.¹¹⁹⁶

Naturalizing Culture

Race then was seen as natural and authentic beauty in the pageants, but it also was a social force and clearly played a role in naturalizing culture. If one was monoracially Japanese, it was assumed that by definition one had more culture. If one was mixed race, there was an assumption that one would have less Japanese American cultural knowledge or understanding. Race allowed some to make claims about culture and in doing so naturalized culture as something one has instead of something one does. Mixed-race beauty queens were under particular strain because without full racial credentials, their culture was suspect. This was in part because “Performers without this full [racial] pedigree ... have to do special authenticity work to gain acceptance.”¹¹⁹⁷

Ironically, many of the mixed-race contestants had mothers from Japan (generationally quite close to Japan) and spoke Japanese and many monoracial candidates were often third, fourth or fifth-generation Japanese Americans with no Japanese language and little familiarity with Japanese American culture.¹¹⁹⁸ One monoracial former Nisei Week Queen from the 1980s in Los Angeles explains,

We have had some girls who are half Japanese and half various other things. Some of them have been more trained to the Japanese culture, more exposed to the Japanese culture than some of the girls who are biologically all Japanese American. Tami, she was bilingual but half Caucasian. Are they more Japanese than me because they speak Japanese or are they less because both my parents are Japanese American? I think her mom is from Japan. The current queen (1996) is only half Japanese but she does *taiko*





(Japanese drumming) and works in Little Tokyo. She is definitely a part of the Japanese American community. I think she is an ideal representative, she knows the community. She is a part of the community.

Even though the queen in 1996 was half Japanese in terms of ancestry (race), she was a deserving queen in the eyes of this former queen because she participates in Japanese culture (*taiko*) and is connected to the ethnic enclave/network community in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles. Cultural practice and social capital help her to overcome racial deficiency. In both Los Angeles and San Francisco, efforts to impose strict racial and biological thinking were fairly unsuccessful because others argued for community inclusion based on culture rather than race. On a group level, many mixed queens appealed to the idea of community over the idea of race. When they successfully made the argument that they were a part of the community despite their mixed racial make-up, they exploded the racial basis of membership. They in fact, went a step farther to argue that they were trying to save the community by participating in it, and in the process taking the existing meaning of community, and changing the basis of it by removing race as the sole criterion. They argued that they were the “face of the future” in the community and they were ultimately successful because they used family connections (my mother is Japanese American, how can they say I am not?), culture (I know *odori* - Japanese cultural dance), and language (I speak Japanese) to legitimate their claims to represent the community. In fact, their ethnic claims posed problems for some monoracial candidates whose Japanese cultural practices were quite minimal – they had race, but no culture. However, even those candidates with impeccable racial credentials were under pressure to prove themselves ethnically because the assumed link between race and culture had been broken. This apparent struggle between ethnicity-based community and race-based community seems to be particularly obvious in Los Angeles and San Francisco where the community is on the demographic cusp of becoming a predominantly mixed community.

Likewise, if one of the queens was not behaving in a way that was considered Japanese American, if that queen couldn't back it up with the cultural characteristics attributed to Japanese Americanness, they were not considered to be authentically Japanese American. One monoracial *Sansei* (third generation) San Francisco Cherry Blossom Princess from the mid 1990s explained:





I think some of the candidates do Japanese talents because they can't speak Japanese. They think, let's stick something in there that is something to do with Japanese or they will say I don't have any aspects of Japanese culture in my whole presentation. I think that has something to do with it. The candidates that are half Japanese--the only differences are visual in some cases. Someone who is full Japanese ancestry, whose culture is American, I think they kind of have to strive to prove that too, but maybe they don't have to prove it as much as someone who doesn't look Japanese American.

The work that the half Japanese American has to do to unhitch race from cultural practices (Japanese talents) is more of a burden because they don't look Japanese. They then deploy these cultural presentations as a ploy or tactic to convince the judges of their Japaneseness.

One mixed-race contestant from San Francisco in the mid 1990s describes how she dyed her hair darker and did her eye make up to make her eyes look "more Japanese." When I asked why she did this, she replied that she felt that she needed her face to "look more Japanese" in order to do well in the pageant.

The Visiting Queen and Claims to Authenticity Through Japanese American Culture

Culture was also used in the pageants as a tool to increase social capital through the queen's visitations to other Japanese American communities. These visits were taken as confirmation of the queen's authenticity but also allowed the four local Japanese American communities to gain support from each other in the face of continued minoritization in the U.S. In the pageants, physical attractiveness mattered and significant time was spent on physical appearance issues, but culture was deemed more important by the pageant organizers, chaperones, and judges¹⁹⁹ than beauty or racial appearance, because the queen's main role was as a symbolic link to the other Japanese American communities. By collectively saying, "This is our queen," and by clarifying who she is, the pageants produced definitions of culture designed to reassure the Japanese American community both locally and afar that this is who 'we' are.





Potts et al. found that the production and consumption of creative products (like computer games) are often constituted by social networks.¹²⁰⁰ Pageants, like the creative culture Potts describes, are also produced and constituted by social networks defined by racial and cultural criteria. The key aspects of the courtesy visitations by the queen as a representative and ambadress were: 1) to strengthen ties between the local Japanese American communities in the four cities, 2) to reinforce notions of authentic and common culture and the power of the queen to claim authenticity, and 3) to legitimize the local pageant's claim to the right to produce and select the queen each year.

The visit the queen makes between the cities actually builds the social ties between the cities. While the pageant winners making the visits are different each year, the pageant organizers in the cities remain fairly consistent and the same people organize and facilitate the visits between the cities each year. In fact, the obligations incurred by past visits motivate reciprocating visits with each other. During field work, I observed much emphasis on the gifts that would be given to the visiting courts (chosen by the organizers, not the queen and court) and being sure to raise enough money to host (i.e., pay for the dinners and event fees for the visitors), because, in the past, their local queen and court had been similarly hosted when visiting the other cities.

This on-going social network was dense and strong friendships developed between the organizers, so, for example, the chief organizer of the visit in Hawai'i was the best man at the wedding of the second-in-command in San Francisco. Both were Japanese American men in their late 20s and early 30s at the time and both had served as judges for the other's pageant. The visits were about much more than the queen and the cities becoming sister organizations and pageants to each other. In fieldwork, the chaperones often used a family metaphor, arguing that the cities were sisters, as were the pageant organizers and queens. At social events, the queen and her court often formed 'court circles' protected by chaperones, to thwart unwanted social attention by drunk older men at receptions and the like. The cross-pageant relationships were often described as analogous to ancestral family ties that were to be cultivated and respected. This was done primarily through the use of Japanese American culture to reinforce notions of authenticity surrounding the pageants. There were in-depth discussions throughout watching each other's pageants (often the visitations were timed to have the visiting royalty make an appearance at the local Japanese American pageant) and about the level of authentic Japanese American culture in each pageant.





While doing fieldwork in Hawai'i, I was told by the San Francisco queen and court that I must note in my field notes that the Hawai'i pageants, while in *kimono*, did not wear the traditional *zori* (wooden flip flops) that they do in San Francisco. Rather than note that the *zori* are expensive and difficult to walk in, they queen and her princesses felt that the absence of the *zori* made the Hawai'i *kimono* segment less authentic than the San Francisco one. The Hawai'i court countered with the fact that they don't just receive training in walking, make up and *kimono*, but instead also take classes on Japanese arts and culture such as *taiko* drumming, *ikebana* (flower arranging), and Japanese singing. These contests of localized ethnic authenticity ran consistently throughout the pageants. They argued that the costuming was more real or authentic to Japanese culture or that the cultural training was more in depth and therefore authentic. The reference, however, was not to contemporary Japanese American culture, but to an antiquated notion of Japanese culture. Ironically, this linked culture to appearance in strong ways and the wearing of the *kimono*, while present in all the pageants and discussed as something a "true Japanese woman would wear," in fact was increasingly infrequent in contemporary Japanese culture. In contemporary Japan, the *kimono* is not worn very often (only for weddings and similarly formal occasions) and Japanese women also have to learn how to wear it and walk in it, as few own one to wear in the first place. Most Japanese women rent a *kimono* for their wedding or special occasion. However, when pageant participants were dressed (and they were literally dressed by elderly Japanese women who spoke little English and found it difficult to communicate with the queen, but who were experts in tying the *obi* (sash) in *kimono*) they talked about feeling like they were "putting on the layers" of Japanese history and felt like "real Japanese women." They didn't complain about the heavy, tight layers of material wrapped around them, but instead discussed how great it felt. The beauty and culture in wearing the *kimono*, while meant to appear effortless and culturally authentic in the pageant, in fact, was highly produced, learned, and put on (literally) by others and enacted in an antiquated notion of culture by the queens thus naturalizing culture on the body.

In addition, by reinforcing notions of authentic culture in the pageants, queens on the visitations also used other pageants to authenticate their own pageant's cultural productions and practices. Again, when the San Francisco Queen traveled to Hawai'i for their pageant, they were struck by how quiet, slow and traditional the *kimono* segment of the Hawai'i pageant was and they noted the fact that it was narrated in both Japanese and





English. They argued that because San Francisco also had a similar *kimono* segment, that it was proof that in fact their own pageant was authentic. They argued that “If they do it and we do it”, it must be authentic Japanese American culture. There were also contemporary examples of this as when the San Francisco court were given gifts of t-shirts which had 12 different types of Spam *musubi* (Spam rice balls) printed on them. The San Francisco court immediately recognized the food as Japanese American and the humor in the portrayal of the different ways to prepare it as an inside cultural joke. This move of reinforcing and even poking fun at oneself and one’s culture allowed them to recuperate Japanese American culture through food even in a time of increasing anxiety about the loss of culture.

However, as a collective symbol, the queen sometimes found it difficult to represent many different cultural versions of Japanese Americanness. One Cherry Blossom Queen from Honolulu in the late 1990s said:

No matter what you do, someone is always unhappy. The Japanese businessmen will complain, or the young people will complain, or the sponsors. When we get candidates, we always tell them “remember, this is a volunteer organization; no two years are ever the same.” If you look at how the queens are chosen and who the judges are, I think you begin to see a pattern. When you have celebrity judges or people who are involved in movies or TV, you usually get a more glamorous looking queen. When you get judges who are more of a local personality you are going to get someone who has been involved in the community. It is natural that their personal biases are going to become involved.

Finally, the pageants also used the presence of the visiting queens to local pageants as a way to legitimize the local pageants’ right to produce the queen using racial and cultural criteria. The use of racial eligibility rules was often compared from city to city; Hawai’i had a 100% rule until the late 1990s and the others had 50% rules, with the rule being most loosely enforced in Seattle. This can be seen again through social networks, as the judges in the local pageants often were either past queens or organizers from





other cities who knew who they should choose, and which criteria they should use almost without being told – including racial and cultural criteria which were often tacitly implied. For example, in the 1990s in San Francisco, one of the candidates clearly ran in the pageant to create career opportunities for herself in the local media (she was an aspiring reporter) and not to “further the cause of the local Japanese American community” or “spread interest in Japanese American culture.” One of the judges who came from the Seattle pageant organizing committee commented afterwards that he didn’t give her high marks, because he felt that culturally it wasn’t very “Japanese American of her” to be promoting herself and not the community—his interpretation, perhaps, of a longstanding Japanese American ideal of the importance of the group over the individual. Ironically, in the pageant, one had to be unique and individual enough to stand out from the rest of the candidates, while also manifesting the narrative of putting community first in order to win and be the queen.

The symbolic role of the queen in representing community in international ties was clarified in this way by one former 1980s Nisei Week Queen upon her trip to Brazil to the Miss Nikkei International Pageant:

I would think there is a sense of trying to feel connected amongst the communities. The queens are just a visible link. We are the link. Everywhere I went, people are looking for “do you know so and so and are you related to X?” We are each a Japanese community, but we are all Japanese American. Even going to Brazil, we are all very different. I did feel that. More in Brazil than anywhere else. We were so different. There were the Portuguese-speaking girls; there were girls from Argentina and Mexico. The North American girls, Canada and all over the U.S. When you don’t speak each other’s languages you have to resort to bad Japanese and you don’t speak any. You are third and fourth generation. That is what you have in common. There is something you have in common – Japanese culture. All of a sudden you felt it!





pageants. By connecting with others and in trying to preserve the cultural traditions (however antiquated), the pageants have served as a focal point for Japanese American cultural production through bodily not linguistic recognition of Japanese culture.

Conclusion

Japanese American pageant organizers and queens practice and enact their own conception of race as lived cultural experiences and in doing so produce both racial and cultural meanings. The Japanese American beauty queen is a site where social actors authenticate and naturalize race to make race look like a natural cultural attribute rather than a production.

The pageants also highlight the cultural strategies used to make claims to authenticity (using language, names, and Japanese talents) that are then judged by others within the pageants. Culture is also a basis of social capital, linking Japanese American communities in various locations together through recognition of cultural similarities. Cultural similarity serves as a basis for ethnic networks and the “ties that bind” Japanese American diasporic communities in California, Hawai’i, and further afield in Japan and Brazil. The ambassador queen is chosen as a representative of the local Japanese American community in order to solidify ethnic ties, and to celebrate, perpetuate, and produce cultural meanings. Ultimately, the cultural production of the pageants naturalizes notions of culture (as something one has naturally) and links them inextricably to race. Many mixed-race queens deploy cultural repertoires in racial strategies in order to convince audiences of their authenticity. Finally, culture serves as a source of strategic action when it is mobilized to connect the queen to other Japanese American communities. The body, race, and culture are inextricably linked through social interaction, which serves, in this instance, to naturalize culture through an assumed connection with race and appearance.



