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Yano/Crowning the Nice Girl

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NB: Illustrations have been deleted to decrease file size.
I grew up in Hawai‘i during the mid-1950s and 1960s, a third-generation (sansei) Japanese American girl from a middle-class family. Every year my family watched the Miss America pageant on TV. We sat in our living room agog at the spectacle of Atlantic City over 5,000 miles away — the glamour, the lights, and most of all, the long-legged beauties. We studied all of them, trying to pick the winner. We were tough critics, scrutinizing teeth that weren’t even or legs that weren’t long and straight. My mother, aunts, girl cousins, even my grandmother watched the pageant together as part of what we did as females. The men in my family would rather have watched football, but for us this beauty contest was both sporting event and classroom.

We watched as avid students and connoisseurs of (white) female beauty, learning the perfect measurements (36-24-36) and perfect height (five feet, seven inches, or taller). For the most part, these were unattainable for us. Eating all the hamburgers and spinach in the world would not make our breasts grow that big, whittle our waists that small, or stretch our legs that long. Miss America became a source of racial, gendered, geopolitical desire. We were doubly removed: we watched the perfect beauties knowing that we would never be one of them; we watched knowing that even a representative of our state would hardly ever win.¹ We looked upon Miss America as a distant, unattainable ideal, and thus a litany of our deficiencies — too short, too flat-chested, too shy. We would never wear a swimsuit and heels and parade before a crowd. Instead of Miss America, we had the Cherry Blossom Festival (CBF) Queen pageant, a local beauty contest for Japanese Americans.² It was the crown made possible for the girls we could find in our mirrors.

We waited every year for the Cherry Blossom Festival poster that showed all fifteen contestants to appear on storefront windows and, when it did, we
studied it intently, memorizing the names and faces, silently picking the Queen and runners-up. Most of us would never even attend the Festival pageant, but we would all have seen the poster. That yearly poster became iconic of the entire Festival.

I learned my family’s beauty contest vocabulary. “Pretty” meant a natural-born beauty whose good looks and femininity were undeniable. “Attractive” meant one who was eye-catching, but in a slightly nonstandard, even less feminine way. She might have had to work at it. “Cute” meant one who was appealing in a particularly youthful sense, often with round eyes and face. “Pretty” would always win. “Attractive” might be a dark-horse contender. “Cute” would be a runner-up, but a crowd-pleaser, maybe even a Miss Congeniality. I learned a hierarchy of the body, a point system of merits and demerits. Negative points went to small, “single-lidded” (epicanthal fold) eyes, dark skin, crooked teeth, and any height below five feet. High points went to big, “double-lidded” (no epicanthal fold) eyes, fair skin, high cheekbones, high-bridged nose, straight teeth, dimples, and any height over five feet, four inches. Some physical attributes hardly counted at all: legs and breasts mattered little in this contest with no swimsuit portion. Here was our own turf of competition.

This Japanese American beauty contest was simultaneously a boundary of difference and a celebration of our inclusion. We, too, might don a crown, even if that crown distinguished us from other crown-holders. It was not equal footing, but a separate event that pantomimed the moves, gestures, and glory of Miss America. Our Queen would never appear on national television, but she would garner a front-page spread in the local newspapers or a motorcade through downtown Honolulu. This was all the celebrity that a local girl could ever expect or hope to approximate. What’s more, the Cherry Blossom Queen could travel — to Los Angeles, where her counterpart in the Miss Nisei Week contest was also crowned, and, even more exciting, to Japan, where she would be treated like quasi-royalty. For a girl in Hawai’i who had hardly left the Islands, this was big stuff.

I have recounted my sansei dreams evoked by the CBF in order to position myself within this research on gender, race/ethnicity, and public culture. My childhood dreams were embedded within a specific geopolitical order that includes the relationship between Japan and the United States, the place of Hawai’i within the United States, the racial politics in Hawai’i, and the role of women within the local Japanese American community. I argue that the CBF must be seen as both product and player of these changing racial and ethnic relations, gender hierarchies, and global flows of people and commerce. In this work I shift between the macroforces of histories, institutions, and communities and the microelements of people’s experiences. I place histories in “her-
stories,” in the words and lives of several women who have worn the Cherry Blossom Queen crown. Conversely, I embed herstories within organizational stories, especially those of the Honolulu Japanese Junior Chamber of Commerce (HJJCC), the volunteer organization that has put on the annual event since 1953. The HJJCC itself must be contextualized within the national and international Jaycee movement of the early twentieth century with its focus on
commerce, men, and Christianity. Tacking back and forth between different scales and points of view works toward developing multiple perspectives on a complex event that frames issues of gender within race/ethnicity, community, and culture over time.

Some Conceptual Apparatus: Race/Ethnicity, “Nice Girl,” Emplacement, Banality

I have chosen to connect race and ethnicity into a race/ethnicity formulation in this work primarily because the distinctions between the two are typically blurred among those involved in the CBF and the general public in Hawai‘i (as well as by many academics). If race is the biologization of group boundaries as “perceived physical differences” and ethnicity is relegated to “putative common descent, claims of shared history, and symbols of peoplehood” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:35), then in Hawai‘i (as elsewhere), the two are often combined. The resultant race/ethnicity category of differences includes physical features of skin color, hair, and shape of eyes, as well as cultural features of values, ethos, language, food, and religion legitimized through assumptions of longstanding, naturalized common ancestry.

Central to this work is the concept of the “nice girl.” An event such as the CBF establishes its own related but separate set of standards of judging. While not ignoring physical attributes, I contend that a Japanese American contest such as the CBF places high values upon the “nice girl” — that is, a young, middle-class woman who exemplifies what are often considered Japanese cultural and gendered values of humility, self-effacement, empathy, helpfulness, gratitude, and courtesy in a de-eroticized, depoliticized manner. The “nice girl” places others before herself, respects her elders, and, as a representative of the community, presents herself well, especially in terms of public speaking. The CBF incorporates these culturally defined notions of middle-class femininity, some of which stand in contrast to those dominant in Euro-America, but in accord with local values in Hawai‘i. The girl-next-door ideal of the CBF rewards humility over ambition, self-effacement over self-aggrandizement, and blending in over standing out. These are ideals that gloss over the modicum of ambition needed of one who would even consider competing in a beauty contest, the willingness to parade on stage, and the outstanding physical attractions of one who would be crowned queen. Even though some of the particulars of the model have changed over the years, including the emphasis upon careers for women in the CBF’s later years, the core principles remain the same. The ideal also remains an ideal; not all CBF Queens have necessarily been “nice” by these gendered, cul-
tural definitions. Nevertheless, niceness — more specifically, the performance of niceness — remains, rewarded yearly in the contest’s crowning.

The public spectacle of a beauty pageant places a spotlight upon gender, representation, and identity. A beauty pageant by and for a particular racial/ethnic group adds the critical elements of race and ethnicity to the mix. A beauty pageant in Hawai‘i further embeds these identity issues within the particular geographies of national-cultural margins and the commercial terrain of global tourism. As Sarah Banet-Weiser points out, participating in a beauty pageant “is a critical element to the production of ‘appropriately gendered’ women and importantly functions as . . . an introduction to the knowledge and social relations that are expected” of a community icon (1999:64). This leads to the following questions that animate my discussion of niceness: what kinds of idealized citizens are imagined on the beauty pageant stage of the CBF in terms of gender and culture? And if niceness is the broad answer, then how can we embed this idealization and its practices within social and political histories of Japanese Americans in Hawai‘i? In fact, niceness is an important part of the model minority myth, and thus a critical component to the public proof of assimilation.

The CBF is a spectacle of what I call “emplacement” — that is, the process of situating oneself within the larger mainstream community. Emplacement overlaps with the concept of assimilation in referencing efforts to blend in, but emphasizes the particularities and strong sense of “place.” Whereas the end result of assimilation is an erasure of difference, emplacement acknowledges differences, fitting them into a larger social fabric. Moreover, processes of emplacement never occur in a vacuum, but always within the context of particular “places” that are not only geographical sites, but also rich, shifting sociocultural settings enmeshed within power structures. Emplacement frames the CBF as a case study in social and political processes of race/ethnicity, gender, globalism, culture, and community.

I use “banality” in a number of interrelated ways. For one, banality suggests the ordinary, the quotidian, the everyday, the commonplace. Banality points to things running in perfect working order. It thereby suggests the mainstream, especially in terms of structures and hierarchies. A celebration of banality implies a celebration of the status quo. In the case of the CBF, celebrating banality extols the historical “making it” of Japanese Americans in Hawai‘i in the 1950s and 1960s — the achievement of the American dream, the rise to political and economic power, the populating of bureaucracies. Banality is here akin to emplacement. It also speaks to the continuous “making it” of Japanese Americans in contemporary Hawai‘i half a century later as they sustain their position as members of the mainstream.
Second, banality suggests routinization. It implies repetition, stasis, things unchanging, looking backward, a general conservative orientation. Banality is part of the tyranny of the “unmarked” (Phelan 1993). More neutrally, banality may be linked to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus — that is, the unreflexive, bodily imprinting of repetition (1990). I am not suggesting that the CBF is a kind of habitus; rather, I argue that it shares with the theoretical concept its own routine habitualness. Routinization arises not only from repetition, but also from doing things in the absence of independent critical thought. In this, Hannah Arendt’s work on the “banality of evil” in Nazi Germany shows the normalization of everyday horrific crimes, specifically when critical thought is suspended (1963). The CBF shares little with the “evil” of Nazi Germany, but it does rest on a similar absence of independent critical thought, especially in its later years. As Arendt argues: “Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence” (1978:4). Banality in the CBF thus rests in the repetition and redundancy of “protecting us against reality,” by self-exoticization, performing the ethnic stereotype in a public setting, and making a cliché of oneself. It rests on people toeing the line, constantly concerned with the eyes of others upon them. It rests on image and image-making and on the superficiality of going through the motions. It rests in pageant themes that dwell in stock phrases.

Third, banality implies critique shared with overlapping concepts of triteness, triviality, and mundaneness. Meaghan Morris points out that the word took a censorious turn only in the late eighteenth century as part of an elitist critique of common taste and value (1996:165). My choice of banality in this analysis is an attempt to broaden its usage while retaining some of the critical lens implied by the term. As Michael Billig is careful to emphasize, “Banal does not imply benign” (1995:6). Thus the politics of banality are embedded within the reproduction of structures of power. Here I want to make clear that my theoretical framework of banality does not mean that I am dismissive of the CBF. Far from it, I am entirely awed by the many individuals who have sincerely devoted countless hours to the event, including generously helping with this research. My inclusion of herstories testifies to the personal achievements enabled by the CBF. I see in these volunteer efforts a poetics of daily life that have helped shape community. But by framing the CBF within banality, I intend to embrace both the politics and poetics laid bare by its commonness.

Lastly, banality suggests a kind of ennui. It accrues in the disconnect between a yearly event and people’s lives, as well as sometimes the disconnect within people’s lives. The pejorative of banality rests in this break in signifi-
cance, devolving into the trite, the trivial, and the superficial. This break can come about by locking the event into a form that resists the change of shifting generations, conditions, and contexts, particularly by holding on to old blood-quantum rules long after the community includes persons of mixed ancestry. It can come about as a community’s boundaries dissolve over time to the point where the group lacks cohesiveness. It can come about as other identities supersede that which the event is supposed to symbolize.

A 1980 examination of racial/ethnic stereotypes in Hawai‘i lists the following as positive attributes that Japanese Americans like to portray about themselves: orderly behavior, stoicism, hard work, thriftiness, group (family, village, country) orientation, loyalty, obedience, personal cleanliness, humility, awareness and acceptance of hierarchy (Rogers and Izutsu 1980:82 – 83). These positive self-stereotypings correspond directly to the issues that I raise here of niceness, emplacement, and banality.

Female Spectatorship: Gazing at Beauty Pageants

The females in my family were not alone in studying beauty contests so closely. We joined millions of other females gazing upon each other and learning in the process what it means to perform as a woman. Viewing a beauty pageant became for female spectators such as ourselves (and, I might add, male transvestites) a textbook of gendered images, a how-to on the production of those images, and a lesson in hierarchies, rewards, and competition. Jackie Stacey, writing about British female fans of Hollywood stars, asks the same questions that inform this research: “How are feminine identities produced and reproduced in relation to idealised feminine images?” (1994:224) and “What pleasures can they [women] gain from the feminine images produced for the male gaze?” (ibid.:11). Stacey connects issues of gender and power with the pleasures of same-sex looking. In the case of sansei Japanese American females like myself, feminine identities and images were caught up not only in issues of gender, but also in processes of race and ethnicity, as well as our parents’ emergence into middle-class life at the geopolitical margins of the United States.

Female spectatorship, sansei or otherwise, must be embedded within the histories of its making as these histories and processes of spectatorship form female subjectivity. As Christine Gledhill argues:

“Femininity” is not simply an abstract textual position; . . . what women’s history tells us about femininity lived as a socio-culturally, as well as a psychically differentiated category, must have consequences for our understanding of the formation of feminine subjectivity, of the feminine textual spectator and the viewing/reading of female audiences. (1988:67)
Spectatorship is part of subject formation — that is, the creation of the self as a self — not as an uncritical acceptance of what one sees, but as a negotiation between what one sees, the active production of that “text,” and the equally active meaning-making of viewers. Gledhill continues: “The value of ‘negotiation’ . . . as an analytical concept is that it allows space to the subjectivities, identities and pleasures of audiences” (ibid.:72). It is the complex nature of this negotiation taking place amid particular sociopolitical contexts that I would like to foreground in my examination of the CBF. This research situates my sansei dreams as well as those of others in the Japanese American community as points deeply embedded within specific cultural and historical locations. One of these locations is the rise to political and economic power of Japanese Americans within Hawai‘i that generated the cultural capital of premier events such as the CBF.

In this, I do not want to lose sight of pleasure. Female members of my family and I took obvious and continual pleasure in watching the Miss America pageant on television every year. The pleasure arose in the sociality of watching together. The pleasure also arose in watching the glamorous spectacle of pretty women parading on stage, the drama of competition, and the excitement of crowning a queen, “the most beautiful girl in the world” (Banet-Weiser 1999). We found pleasure in the stunning gowns, immaculate makeup, and perfect hair, not unlike the enjoyment of thumbing through a fashion magazine. At the time we felt a small rush of pleasure: we were coeval participants with the rest of the country in this American ritual, the distance of geography, race, and culture temporarily erased. These were not the guilty pleasures expressed by current feminists, peeking at the soap operas and romance novels of their research subjects. For us, this was the unadulterated pleasure of communally watching a glittery fairy tale.

I am not the same girl who watched the Miss America pageant or stared at the Cherry Blossom poster of contestants several decades ago. And yet, when I see the poster reappear in late January, I take a second look out of habit. I know that changes in judging have theoretically eliminated “beauty” from the competition, yet looking at the poster I automatically rule out the ones that I think could never make it on the basis of appearance. The challenges of feminism have shaped me into a different kind of spectator — one who is even conducting research on the processes of her own earlier spectatorship — and yet I recognize the interpellated self of my earlier undeniable pleasures. I make no apologies for them, as I make no apologies for other former selves that I have inhabited, but I suggest that knowing that former self gives me empathetic insight into the world of the CBF.
Challenges of Fieldwork at Home

This study is based primarily on field research including participant observation and interviews. I acted as a consultant to the fiftieth anniversary CBF pageant in 2002, attending meetings of the pageant committee, observing training sessions of contestants, producing a short film on the CBF that was shown at the Festival ball, and writing an essay for the pageant souvenir book (Yano 2002a, b). I conducted fifty taped interviews, primarily with former Cherry Blossom Queens, as well as past and present organizers, contestants, and the general public. I also analyzed all pageant souvenir books, noting changes in activities, sponsorship, official greetings, and layout. The information from these books was extremely useful in charting the development of the pageant. Archival research included media coverage of the pageant in Japanese and English newspapers, library research on other ethnic beauty pageants in Hawai‘i, and web-based research on Jaycee organizations.

As an anthropologist, I looked forward to this project as an opportunity to do fieldwork on my home turf. This is my community of family, friends, and organizations. These are my dreams that I explore. As I conducted the research and wrote this book, I used the dreams as reference points to keep these subjects near. It was not difficult, since the field often drew me in even as I sometimes preferred to keep my distance.

Conducting research on one’s own community is, at first glance, easy: I know the shortcuts to resources, people, practices, and emotions. I also know too well the pitfalls of local rivalries, longstanding antagonisms, and competing obligations (cf. Hau‘ofa 1982). I maneuver through the community as one of its daughters. What I write has immediate repercussions not only for myself, but for my family and friends. I cannot even pretend to be a detached observer.

The question arises, how to balance celebration and critique? How to assert distance in a community that is not only my own, but that frequently positions me as one of its spokespersons? How to be a true participant and true observer? As I move from interviews to writing, my position becomes less comfortable. I am well aware that the words I write and speak will be read and heard by many of the people to whom I am indebted and who have entrusted their thoughts and memories with me. I am also aware of the privileged position of those words in Hawai‘i, given the racial hierarchy that places Japanese Americans numerically at the top in many white-collar professions, especially politics and education.

Shouldering my responsibility to this community while maintaining the integrity of my position as researcher is nothing less than a delicate ethical tight-
rope. In most cases, where I have debated the inclusion of sensitive material, I have favored the community of my subjects (and myself) and upheld my obligations to them. These are real lives and feelings of people to whom I have longstanding ties. Thus, certain stories that have been told to me will never grace these pages (ethical dilemmas all field researchers face). And yet, I have attempted to carve out sufficient space for critique so that this work does not devolve into congratulatory acclaim of the good deeds of the community. Indeed, I am sympathetic and highly respectful of members of this my community, but these people and their activities are fallible. So, too, am I, both as a participant and as an observer. My solution is to carve a winding path between the celebratory and the critical, between intimacy and distance, between participant and observer.

As anthropology moves increasingly toward native/indigenous anthropology, conducting research on topics close to home, and giving people in communities near and far the tools of research and opportunities for their voices to be heard — toward, in effect, decolonization — my research and ethical dilemmas will become more and more common. It is structured into the positions of empowerment that we advocate for the field of anthropology (Marcus and Fischer 1986). The earlier “dividing practices” of the discipline — hierarchies between outside anthropologists and inside indigenes, between Western self and non-Western others — are being blurred by research such as this (Abu-Lughod 1991:143).

How will others chart their own winding paths? Will anthropology move inevitably closer to uncritical, celebratory renderings? Will native anthropologists feel free to assert a critical stance, moving beyond the us versus them of postcolonial power inequities, to include internal ironies, struggles, conflicts, and hegemonies within the communities of which they are a part? Writing up close and often within the particularities and contradictions “against culture” (Abu-Lughod 1991:138), do we run the risk of shying away not only from critique but also generalization? Does generalization become politicized as another form of essentialization — especially of ourselves? These challenges face those of us who choose to write about our own. They may not be unique: any anthropologist who comes to know the field well, as the field comes to know her well, is to some degree an insider and faces many of these same dilemmas. As Kirin Narayan argues:

Instead of the paradigm emphasizing a dichotomy between outsider/insider or observer/observed, I propose that at this historical moment we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. (1993:671)
The categories of native/insider anthropologist and non-native/outsider anthropologist, according to Narayan, are overblown.

For those of us who are inevitable natives/insiders, however, researching our own comes with an automatic set of responsibilities, obligations, and pitfalls, as well as privileges and pleasures. As we increase in numbers, our challenges and the paths we map will play a part in charting the discipline.

I begin Chapter 1 with the subject of beauty pageants in general, interrogating the issues they raise, embedding them within their histories, and in particular examining them as part of global culture that has taken its model from the Miss America contest. I then proceed to the more specific topic of Asian American beauty pageants, looking at ways in which their confluence of race, ethnicity, minority status, and immigration histories makes them a wonderful lens for examining these particular issues within the context of popular culture, media, and gender.

Chapter 2 weaves a complex picture of the specific historical and contemporary contexts of the early days of the Cherry Blossom Festival Queen pageant. I embrace the complexity of multiple subject positions by approaching the CBF from different perspectives. I turn first to the organizers, the HJJCC, recounting the founding of their association. Then I discuss the Jaycee movement in the United States and abroad as part of the organizational context in which this beauty pageant — as many other beauty pageants in the United States — exists. Finally, I look at the context of ethnic beauty pageants in Hawai‘i, historically down to the level of high schools and the University of Hawai‘i, and contemporaneously with other individual Asian American pageants in the state.

Chapter 3 examines the founding and early development of the CBF in the 1950s and 1960s, its glory years. This account pays close attention to the place of CBF within various contexts: the internal divisions of the Japanese American community, interethnic relations in Hawai‘i, tourism, nikkei (persons of Japanese ancestry) communities in the continental United States, and relations with Japan. Each of these contexts provides a different audience for the CBF. While Japanese American women are spotlighted on stage, the focus is simultaneously on the men who have placed them there. Femininity in this way performs a racially deflected lens to showcase the achievements of the American dream for Japanese Americans in Hawai‘i in terms of citizenship, class, and masculinity.

I follow the discussion of each time period in Chapters 3, 5, and 7 respectively with a series of CBF Queen herstories — extensive narratives drawn from interviews with CBF Queens — in Chapters 4, 6, and 8. These herstories in-fill...
personal back stories to the larger processes I discuss in each historical chapter. I precede each Queen’s herstory narrative with commentary, pointing up the themes of the interview, focusing on the changing place of Japanese American women and the CBF in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and identity. I use the herstories as touchstones to comment on ways in which these women’s individuated experiences provide the grist for larger, historically situated issues. Within the herstories I let the women speak for themselves, noting that their stories do not exist in a social vacuum, but arise out of the interaction of our conversation.

Chapters 5 and 6 follow the CBF through the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s, addressing the question of its waning audience and disconnect from the lives of many Japanese Americans. By the 1990s, the CBF could be thought of as a beauty pageant in search of an audience, “all dressed up with nowhere to go.” What kinds of implications did this have for the Japanese American community in Hawai’i? Was this waning interest in part the result of a waning community? These questions are ones that Jaycees asked themselves as they continued to invest countless hours of effort into an event with a shrinking audience.

Organizers of the 1999 pageant decided to address these questions head-on, radically changing the rules and practices of the CBF in the latter months of 1998. Foremost among these modifications was a change in the blood-quantum rule to allow women of 50 percent Japanese ancestry to compete in the CBF pageant. Chapters 7 and 8 address these changes and their implications. What challenges do mixed-race contestants and Queens pose for the community, especially with the CBF as a metonym for one kind of negotiation of race/ethnicity?

Chapter 9 concludes this book by framing issues of race, ethnicity, spectacle, and community within the intertwined themes of niceness and banality. I examine the specific ways in which banality addresses the ordinariness, routinization, cliché-making, triteness, and ennui that arise from a disconnect between an event and its community. I conclude with a discussion of both the politics and poetics of banality, suggesting ways in which the CBF engages a web of positions and relationships, as well as finds meaning in individuated practices.