

“*Joo wa Dare? Who is the Queen?*”: Queen Contests during the Wartime Incarceration of Japanese-Americans

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Introduction

In May of 1943, the *Denson Tribune* covered the beauty pageant held in conjunction with the local carnival. According to the *Tribune*, May, Tamako, Kiyō, Bessie, Kiku, Sachi, Yoshiko, Cherry and the two sets of Marys and Kays were “shining examples of femininity.”¹ Although they were “heavenly creatures,” they were also “warmly human,” and the contestants quickly developed loyal male followings.² Competition was fierce, with 3,859 individuals (approximately 45% of the total population) casting votes for their favourite.³ Although Mary won the popular vote, it was “reserved, demure Kiku” who was crowned Queen by the judges.⁴

¹ “Queens All, But Only One Will Reign,” *Denson Tribune*/デンソン時報 (*Denson Jihō*). (Denson, Ark), May 14, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-14/ed-1/>.

² “Queens All.”

³ “Spirited Rivalry Shown in Queen Race Voting,” *Denson Tribune*/デンソン時報 (*Denson Jihō*). (Denson, Ark) May 28, 1943. The Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-21/ed-1/>.

⁴ “Kiku Nakamichi Crowned Queen,” *Denson Tribune*/デンソン時報 (*Denson Jihō*). (Denson, Ark) May 28, 1943. The Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-21/ed-1/>.

This coverage might seem expected of the local Queen contests held around the country at the time, were it not for the fact that all the contestants were second-generation Japanese-Americans, and that Kiku was crowned behind the barbed wire of Jerome War Relocation Center. This seemingly paradoxical setting was not an isolated event; over the course of the wartime incarceration of Japanese-Americans, 80% of the permanent incarceration sites would hold at least one contest, and crown their own Queens.⁵ These events were documented and endorsed by the Wartime Relocation Authority (WRA), who often participated in the selection of the winners. Although Japanese-American beauty pageants have a rich history before and after the Second World War (WWII), it was during this period that the Queen attained their most

⁵ *Denson Tribune/デンソン時報 (Denson Jihō)*. (Denson, Ark), May 14-27, 1943. Library of Congress.; *Granada Pioneer/パイオニア (Paionia)*, May 10, 1944, March 14, 1944. Donald Teruo Hata and Nadine Ishitani Hata Asian Pacific Studies Collection. California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.; *Gila News-Dispatch/比良時報 (Hira Jihō)*, October 31-November 25, 1942, May 25-July 4 1943, Ddr-densho-141-15-master-fl687cd4bd. Densho Digital Repository.; *Manzanar Free Press/マンザナー自由新聞 (Manzanā Jiyūshinbun)*, June 30-July 7, 1942, September 4-25, 1943. The Library of Congress; (Minidoka) Assorted Pictures from the Blain Family, War Relocation Authority, and National Archives and Records Administration Collections at Densho Digital Repository.; *Poston Press Bulletin*, September 29-Oct 17, 1942. Densho Digital Repository. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.; *Rohwer Outpost/朗和時報 (Rōwā Jihō)*, February 3-28, 1943, June 10, November 18-December 6, 1944. Densho Digital Repository and the Library of Congress.; *Tanforan Totalizer*, vol. 1, no. 14 (August 8, 1942). Apsc_05_344_001. Donald Teruo Hata and Nadine Ishitani Hata Asian Pacific Studies Collection. California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.; *Tulare News* Vol. I No. 19 (July 21, 1942). Tulare News Collection. Densho Digital Repository. ; *Tulean Dispatch/ツーリアンデスパッチ (Tsūrian Disupachi)*, August 21-September 9, 1942. Densho Digital Repository (Courtesy of Joe Matsuzawa), and the Library of Congress.

politized and nationalistic, and yet also deracialized and assimilated, position within the community. To examine the Queens and Queen contests produced within the camps is to explore the complex and intricate power dynamics of gender, race, resistance, and Americanization which existed in these communities of confinement. Behind barbed wire, these Japanese Queens were both American and alien, glamorous and drab, assimilated and proud.

Terminology

Although the research was conducted primarily in English, this paper does contain Japanese terms and phrases. Japanese words will be italicized on their first appearance and the characters provided when relevant. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. As this paper is about the Japanese-American Community, the terms utilized to demarcate groups will be the terms the Community tends to use themselves. As such, the Japanese diasporic community will be known as *Nikkei* (日系) or *Nikkeijin* (日系人).⁶ Within the *Nikkei*, the various generations are delineated by their degree of removal from Japan. As such, the first generation who immigrated are known as *Issei* (一世), their American-born children are *Nisei* (二世), their grandchildren are *Sansei* (三世), and their great/great-great grandchildren are *Yonsei* (四世) and *Gosei* (五世) respectively. *Nisei* who were sent by their *Issei* parents to study in Japan were known as *Kibei* (帰米). Due to the time period examined, this paper will mostly deal with *Issei*, *Nisei* and *Kibei*. White Americans were alternatively described by the community as *hakujin* (白人, lit. “white people”). Unless using Japanese characters, names will be written in the Western order, with the given name followed by the family name.

⁶ Contrasted to *Nihonjin* (日本人), or an ethnically Japanese person living in Japan.

The terminology of the site utilized by the WRA for the purpose of containing Nikkei has been a topic of much debate. As has been noted by historians Takashi Fujitani and Greg Robinson in their work on the Japanese-American Internment, to utilize the contemporary term of “Relocation Centers” is to obscure the violence and coercion which these locations served.⁷ At the same time, “Concentration Camps,” although used on occasion by Roosevelt in regard to the sites, runs the risk of becoming conflated in our modern understanding with Nazi Death Camps.⁸ As such, this paper will be deferring to Fujitani’s strategy within *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans During World War II*; referring to the locations either by their official names, or the term “camp.” The official names are not listed as an erasure of violence, but rather as means of identifying the specific internment camp referred to.⁹ As the Nikkeijin held at these camps were caged bodies under surveillance, they will be referred to as “inmates.” The camps discussed were located in the United States, and as such I will be using American spelling for their names.

Research Questions

It was the *Tribune*’s coverage of their Queen contest that first drew my interest to this topic. As a historian with a focus on material culture, I have always been intrigued as to how created objects can manipulate and influence the spaces they exist in, and in particular how clothing transforms the body on which it rests. As beauty pageants and queen contests primarily exist through the display of objects such as crowns, capes, and clothing, which “enact

⁷ Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xix; Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), viii.

⁸ Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy*, viii.

⁹ Fujitani, *Race For Empire*, xx.

glittery, feminized signposts of a position devoid of actual power,” they are a prime phenomena for an examination of material culture, and more specifically beauty culture.¹⁰ The beauty Queen is given soft power in the image she projects, and in the objects which surround and enclose her. Her body proper becomes a space to be admired and desired. What did it mean then, to be crowned a Queen in a space where people were incarcerated for their ethnic bodies? Furthermore, why were these contests continued within the camps, despite wide scale shortages in resources and the materials typically required to designate a Queen?¹¹ If, as Fujitani states, the camps were spaces in which Japanese-Americans could be both contained as a danger and safely neutralized through the implementation of facsimiles of the “best features of liberal society,” then where did the Beauty Queen fit into this imagined community?¹² Was she a representation of a liberal American government, a figure promoted to showcase the patriotic, (and therefore useful) Nikkei body? Does her glamour erase the brutal injustice of what occurred to her community, or does it highlight it? Furthermore, and perhaps most hauntingly for me, who were these women? As a Nikkei girl, I had always searched for a depiction of beauty within bodies like mine. Who were these women that the community held up as beautiful enough to be Queens?

Historiography

Although the Japanese-American community has long been a topic of scholarship for historians, Japanese-American beauty culture and Queen contests have been less so. This is not to say that there is an absence: indeed, the

¹⁰ Christine Reiko Yano, *Crowning the Nice Girl: Gender, Ethnicity, and Culture in Hawaii's Cherry Blossom Festival* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006). 14

¹¹ Valerie J. Matsumoto, *City Girls: the Nisei Social World in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 162-3.

¹² Fujitani, 182.

writings of academics like Valerie Matsumoto, Malia McAndrew, Chiyoko King O’Rian, and Christine Yano have been crucial to this paper. Although King-O’Rian and Yano’s books on contemporary Queen contests within Japanese American communities are foundational works on the intersections of beauty, gender, race, culture, and identity in this field, both works neglect to mention any war-era contests, and tend to skip from pre-war contests directly to contests held in the aftermath of WWII.¹³ Indeed, it is only McAndrew’s works that mention the existence of contests in the camps. In particular, McAndrew’s work, “Japanese American Beauty Pageants and Minstrel Shows: The Performance of Gender and Race by Nisei Youth during World War II” is the only article I was able to find explicitly centered around war-era Queen contests.¹⁴ It is thus in awareness of this vacuum of information that I attempted to contribute a small amount of knowledge to the field.

Wartime Incarceration of Nikkeijin

To form a history of Queen contests within the camps, one must first have an understanding of the historical events under which they operated. On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service bombed Pearl Harbour Naval Base, located in Hawaii.¹⁵ The subsequent entrance of the United States of America into WWII, coupled with rising anti-Japanese sentiment and pre-existing fears of Nikkei loyalty following the severance of ties with Japan, would result in Roosevelt signing

¹³ Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Rian, *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 62-64.; Yano, 23-24.

¹⁴ Malia McAndrew, "Japanese American Beauty Pageants and Minstrel Shows: The Performance of Gender and Race by Nisei Youth during World War II," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 7, no. 1 (2014): 42-64. doi:10.1353/hcy.2014.0010.

¹⁵ Robinson, 59.

Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942.¹⁶ As Robinson is clear to note, the order refrained from any explicit mention of ethnic Japanese. Rather, it gave the power for the secretary of war to create “military zones,” from which persons could be either excluded or confined.¹⁷ Regardless of the neutral terminology, Robinson is clear that “the government officials involved well understood that the order was designed solely to permit mass removal of Japanese Americans, irrespective of citizenship, from the West Coast.”¹⁸ Executive Order 9102 later created the War Relocation Authority (WRA), responsible “...for the removal, relocation, maintenance, and supervision of persons designated under Executive Order No. 9066.”¹⁹ Following their initial displacement, Nikkeijin were detained in one of fifteen temporary “assembly centers,” before being transferred to long-term “relocation centers.”²⁰ It was in this way that over 120,000 Nikkeijin were removed from their homes, two-thirds of which were American-born.²¹

Both the “assembly centers” and “relocation centers” were based off military modules, “built to disappear quickly and without a trace when their usefulness was exhausted.”²² The tarpaper barracks and utilitarian facilities were not only poor protection against the often inhospitable environments, but also served to disrupt the

¹⁶ Robinson, 92-94.

¹⁷ Robinson, 93.

¹⁸ Robinson, 93.

¹⁹ Robinson, 106.

²⁰ Robinson, 141.

²¹ Emiko Hastings. 2011. “No Longer a Silent Victim of History: Repurposing the Documents of Japanese American Internment.” *Archival Science* 11 (1), 29; “Project MUSE - Japanese American Beauty Pageants and Minstrel Shows: The Performance of Gender and Race by Nisei Youth during World War II.”

²² Kate Brown, “The Eclipse of History: Japanese America and a Treasure Chest of Forgetting,” *Popular Culture* 9(1): 87.

family structure of many Nikkei families.²³ In addition to the substandard living conditions, the incarceration of Nikkeijin was characterized by the loss of personal property experienced en masse.²⁴ Any possessions brought by families was subject to the harsh environmental conditions of the camps. Under such circumstances, why did the community crown Queens?

The History of Nikkei Beauty Pageants and Queen Contests

The transformation of women into symbolic royalty is a ritual that, according to Roberts, has its roots in “eighteenth and nineteenth century old world chivalry and fertility rituals.”²⁵ Indeed, Roberts traces their roots at least to the May Day Queens of Europe, who represented communal desire for a plentiful harvest season.²⁶ Specifically in America, Williams credits “the instigation of the American beauty contest” to P.T. Barnum in 1854.²⁷ Notably, this contest was deemed a failure, due to the apparent lack of reputable participants.²⁸ The fact that a later attempt, requiring women to submit pictures over live, public displays of their body, had significantly more

²³ Stacey Lynn Camp. “Landscapes of Japanese American Internment.” *Historical Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (2016): 169–71.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03377183>; Matsumoto, *City Girls*, 152

²⁴ Brian Masaru Hayashi, “Six. “Taking Away The Candy”: Relocation, The Twilight Of The Japanese Empire, And Japanese American Politics, 1944–1945” in *Democratizing the Enemy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 180-206, <https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1515/9781400837748.180>

²⁵ Blain Roberts. *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women : Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 108.

²⁶ Roberts, *Pageants*, 108.

²⁷ Heather A Williams. “Miss Homegrown: The Performance of Food, Festival, and Femininity in Local Queen Pageants” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University), 2009. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 51.

²⁸ Williams, “Miss Homegrown,” 51.

success reveals the key expectation of modesty required of America's feminine ideal. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the first Miss America contest was held a few months after white women were granted suffrage.²⁹ As the Miss America contest grew more and more popular, contests became divided into what are known as pyramidic structures and local structures; pyramidic, as its name suggests, represent a host of beauty pageants that, should the contestant win on the lower level, is eligible for competition at a higher level.³⁰ These pyramidic structures often culminate in national or international contests, such as Miss America and Miss Universe. Local contests, on the other hand, are self-contained, and their rules and rituals are often designated by the community from which the contestants come from.³¹ Yano notes that this leads to local contests becoming more and more specified, and as such "may adhere to more idiosyncratic criteria and insular standards of beauty" from their participants.³² It is these local contests that will be the primary focus of this paper, although O'Riain and Yano have noted how post-war Nikkei Queen contests have become increasingly international affairs.³³

Beauty pageants were not solely limited to the United States. Japanese beauty contests can be traced to the late Meiji Era, with the first 'official' amateur contest sponsored by the *Chicago Tribune* through *Jiji Shinpō* in

²⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Oakland: University of California Press 1999); Kimberly Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash" in: Watson E., Martin D. (eds) *There She Is, Miss America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2, 28, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981820_; Williams, 53.

³⁰ Yano, *Crowning the Nice Girl*, 15.

³¹ Yano, 15.

³² Yano, 15.

³³ O'Riain, "'The Amassadoress' Queen: Moving Authentically between Racial Communities in the United States and Japan," *Pure Beauty*; Yano, "Struggles Towards Reform," *Crowning the Nice Girl*.

1908.³⁴ The winner, Hiroko Suehiro, fit many of the Japanese beauty standards of the time, with “a round, pale face, a small mouth, and narrow eyes.”³⁵ Like the earlier American pageants, the contestant was selected from photographs, rather than exhibition of the live body.³⁶ Descriptions of Suehiro often focus on descriptions of her face; although a focus on the body as a marker of beauty still traditionally defined through her face.³⁷ Japan’s increased contact with the West during the Meiji period was also evident in changing ideas of beauty ideology. In examination of *bijin-ga* (美人画, lit. “beautiful person picture”), there is an increasing depiction of sharper features and large eyes, associated with white women.³⁸ The concept of beauty was also negotiated through clothing; Western influence and the rise in women’s education had greatly changed clothing options for middle to upper class women. The clothing, hair, and styling of female students not only challenged beauty ideals, but gender norms.³⁹ The adaptation of *hakama* (split skirt worn over kimono), *haori* (kimono jacket), and Western shoes (all objects with a masculine association), by educated women provoked considerable anxiety during a time in which women’s bodies were beginning to become criteria

³⁴ Kyō Chō and Kyoko Iriye Selden, *The Search for the Beautiful Woman: a Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 248; Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2010), 21; Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit, *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan*. 1st ed. Vol. 400. Harvard University Asia Center, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrs8z69>., 105.

³⁵ Miller, *Beauty Up*, 21.

³⁶ Miller, *Beauty Up*, 21.

³⁷ Chō, *The Search For The Beautiful Woman*, 247.

³⁸ Miller, 20-5.

³⁹ Rebecca Copeland, “Fashioning the Feminine: Images of the Modern Girl Student in Meiji Japan,” *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 30/1 (2006), University of Hawai'i Press on behalf of International Institute of Gender and Media, 20-25.

for beauty. Conversely, the adaptation of corsets and bustles by Japanese elite women in spaces like the *Romeikan* created bodies that appeared to align with Western female ideals.⁴⁰ As Copeland is clear to note, “fashion at the time was hardly inconsequential. Clothing



Fig. 1: Hiroko Suehiro, 1908. Public Domain.

was very much a topic of conversation among a variety of people- from government officials to geisha.”⁴¹ At the same time as many Issei were arriving in America, beauty and dress were becoming key symbols of societal structure.

The importance of appearance was not lost following the Issei’s arrival to America. As Sueyoshi

argues, the adoption of Western clothing was viewed as an essential

step for Issei wishing to integrate themselves into 19th century San Francisco. In comparing the actions of the community to contemporary drag performers, Sueyoshi argues that Nikkeijin attempted to use American standards of beauty and dress as a way of performing a “mindful masquerade,” offering an alternative, assimilable identity to

⁴⁰ The success of this endeavor has been up to debate, see: Elizabeth Kramer, “‘Not So Japan-Easy’: The British Reception of Japanese Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Textile History* 44, no. 1 (May 1, 2013): 3–24. doi:10.1179/0040496913Z.00000000017.

⁴¹ Copeland “Fashioning the Feminine,” 26.

white America.⁴² This is not to say that Japanese women wanted to look like fashionable white women: Sueyoshi notes that they often were photographed in conservative Victorian gowns that had since gone out of style. Rather, “dressing ‘American’ more likely meant capturing an imagined, obviously occidental aesthetic rather than keeping up with the most recent...styles.”⁴³ For the Nikkei community, clothing and beauty culture offer the potential to negotiate the appearance of their visually othered bodies, with varying degrees of success.⁴⁴

It is from these intersections of power, assimilation, gender and transformation in which the first Japanese-American beauty contest arose. Crowning Alice Wantanabe in 1935, the “Nisei Queen” contest was part of the larger Nisei Week Festival, started by Japanese businesses in Los Angeles.⁴⁵ Although created with both the intent of stimulating local business and improving public relations between Nikkeijin and white America, Kurashige argues that it must also be viewed as a key ground for the community to create a sense of identity, an “open text for members of the second generation to understand themselves and their role as the progeny of a historic admixture of Japanese and American civilizations.”⁴⁶ Nisei women were key to the success of Nisei week: although often excluded from any leadership roles, they were the visible face of the community.⁴⁷ Charlie Chaplan, attending the

⁴² Amy Sueyoshi, “Mindful Masquerades: Que(e)rying Japanese Immigrant Dress in Turn-of-the-Century San Francisco,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26, No. 3 (2005): 70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137374>.

⁴³ Sueyoshi, “Mindful Masquerades,” 81.

⁴⁴ Sueyoshi, 91.

⁴⁵ Gwen Muranaka, “Nisei Week History: A Love Letter to Little Tokyo,” <https://niseiweek.org/about/#legac>.

⁴⁶ Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002) 41.

⁴⁷ Matsumoto, *City Girls*, 60.

first Nisei Week in 1934, praised the organizers for many things, but “especially its ‘beautiful Japanese girls.’”⁴⁸ King-O’Riain is clear to note that the Nisei Queen contest was a form of race-working for the community, standardizing white American beauty “with a Japanese-American twist.” Intended to publicly appear as a symbol of the community, the Nisei Queen was hoped, through her beauty, dress, and manner, to integrate Nikkeijin as loyal Americans in the eyes of the white festival goers.⁴⁹ At the same time, the Queen contest was also intended to be a representative of the Japanese community, and thus should retain some Japanese elements. As the Rafu Shimpo wrote in 1938, the Nisei Queen must have: “the quiet charm of the Japanese wom[a]n with the more lively personality of the American girl...she must be able to wear a kimono and walk with zori [slippers] on as well as look radiant in a white evening gown.”⁵⁰ Although the Queen and her Court were crowned in a Western style Ball, she would be introduced to the public in a *furisode* (a long sleeved *kimono* for unmarried women), riding in an American made car, with the thoroughly untraditional styling of jewelry and tiara.⁵¹ Most of her interactions throughout the week would be conducted in kimono, despite its impracticality and discomfort. Indeed, Matsumoto notes how Nisei women in kimono became key intermediaries in formal Japanese-American relations, expected to promote friendship through their American mannerisms and presentation of an exotic, Japanese form of beauty.⁵² From 1936-1941, Alice Wantanabe, Renko Oyama, Clara Suski, Margaret Nishikawa, Shizue Narahara, Shizue Kobayashi, and Reiko Inouye would ‘walk Japanese’, and then ‘walk American’

⁴⁸ Kurashige, *Japanese-American Celebration and Conflict*, 42.

⁴⁹ King-O’Riain, *Pure Beauty*, 61.

⁵⁰ Kirashige, 164.

⁵¹ Queen and Court Program, “Past Queens and Courts”. Nisei Week Japanese Festival, <https://niseiweek.org/queen-court/#past-courts>.

⁵² Matsumoto, 59.

on the tightrope of race and nationality for their community.⁵³

Beauty Pageants in the Time of Internment

Writing on the history of Nikkei Queen contests, King-O’Riain simply states that; “...pageants were discontinued during World War II internment and started up again shortly after the end of the war....”⁵⁴ Although it is true that the official pre-war pageants were inactive during WWII, this is not to state that Queen contests ceased for the Nikkeijin. As the *Evacuazette* quipped, “...a number of assembly or relocation centres, from Puyallup to Poston, have held or are going to hold Queen contests.”⁵⁵ Of the fifteen “assembly centers” I was able to find Queen contests occurring in two of them. In the ten “relocation centers,” the number was significantly higher, with eight of the camps having Queen contests.⁵⁶ Statistically speaking,

⁵³ Muranaka, “Nisei Week History”; King-O’Riain, 63.

⁵⁴ King-O’Riain, 63

⁵⁵ “Blue Ribbon,” *Evacuazette* (North Portland, OR), July 17, 1942. Donald Teruo Hata and Nadine Ishitani Hata Asian Pacific Studies Collection, California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.

⁵⁶ *The Denson Tribune/デンソン時報 (Denson Jihō)*. (Denson, Ark), May 14-27, 1943. Library of Congress.; *Granada Pioneer/パイオニア (Paionia)*, May 10, 1944, March 14, 1944. Donald Teruo Hata and Nadine Ishitani Hata Asian Pacific Studies Collection. California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.; *Gila News-Dispatch/比良時報 (Hira Jihō)*, October 31-November 25, 1942, May 25-July 4 1943, Ddr-densho-141-15-master-fl687cd4bd. Densho Digital Repository.; *Manzanar Free Press/マンザナー自由新聞 (Manzanā Jiyūshinbun)*, June 30-July 7, 1942, September 4-25, 1943. The Library of Congress. ; (Minidoka) Assorted Pictures from the Blain Family, War Relocation Authority, and National Archives and Records Administration Collections at Densho Digital Repository.; *Poston Press Bulletin*, September 29-Oct 17, 1942. Densho Digital Repository. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.; *Rohwer Outpost/朗和時報 (Rōwā Jihō)*, February 3-28, 1943, June 10, November 18-December 6, 1944. Densho Digital Repository and the Library of Congress.;

this means that 7.5% of temporary camps, and 80% of long-term camps participated in some sort of beauty contest during the internment. Although the number from the temporary camps might seem significantly smaller than that of the long-term camps, it is notable for the fact that, despite the significantly shorter duration and derogatory conditions within these camps, there were still Queens being crowned. Combining the numbers, there appears to have been more Nikkei Queens crowned during the internment than in the prewar years. Why then, is there such little information on these Queens?

Methodology

With the general lack of literary sources, most of my research was spent within primary source material. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult, and in some cases impossible, to access certain resources, the digitization of others allowed me to continue my research. I am particularly indebted to DENSHO, The Library of Congress, and the California State University Japanese American Digitization Project, whose large archives of camp newspapers were integral to this paper. Although community newspapers such as the *Rafu Shimpo* had been shut down during the internment, most long-term camps (and some temporary ones) circulated a newspaper or bulletin.⁵⁷ Written primarily by Nisei, these newspapers

Tanforan Totalizer, vol. 1, no. 14 (August 8, 1942). Apsc_05_344_001. Donald Teruo Hata and Nadine Ishitani Hata Asian Pacific Studies Collection. California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.; *Tulare News* Vol. I No. 19 (July 21, 1942). Tulare News Collection. Densho Digital Repository.; *Tulean Dispatch/ ツーリアンヂスパッチ (Tsūrian Disupachi)*, August 21-September 9, 1942. Densho Digital Repository (Courtesy of Joe Matsuzawa), and the Library of Congress.

⁵⁷ Takeya Mizuno, "Censorship in a Different Name: Press 'Supervision' in Wartime Japanese American Camps 1942-1943," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2011): 121-41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769901108800107>.

were mainly in English. Some featured a Japanese language section at the back, mostly for Issei and Kibei.⁵⁸ It is through these newspapers that most of the information on the Queen contests, contestants, and winners can be found. Although they are invaluable, they must not be approached uncritically, and the censorship involved in these newspapers' publication will become a topic of further discussion later in this paper. A similar mindset must be used on examination of pictures of the Queens and contests; many of the pictures available were taken by photographers working in conjunction with the WRA. This is not to discount the value of the information within these objects; rather to remember that photographs can never be fully separated from the photographers who took them.⁵⁹

Another approach I took with this research was to examine the material culture within the photographs. Families were only allowed to pack a small amount of objects, and the clothing packed was often inappropriate for the extreme environments they found themselves in. Clothing could be accessed from the camp administration when available, or else from mail-order catalogues.⁶⁰ Most of the clothing provided was utilitarian, and many Nisei bemoaned the unfashionable options. Monica Sone, imprisoned at Minidoka, remembers her and her sister's horror upon viewing the woolen pea coats allotted to her family, declaring that they "...would rather freeze than lose our femininity."⁶¹ It was only when a man froze to death during a snowstorm that they relinquished their slacks and coats from back home, concluding "it was much better to

⁵⁸ Mizuno, "Censorship."

⁵⁹ Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Negative-Positive Truths," *Representations* 113 (2011): 33.

⁶⁰ Dana Ogo Shew. "Feminine Identity Confined: The Archaeology of Japanese Women at Amache, a WWII Internment Camp." MA diss., (University of Denver), 2010. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 40.

⁶¹ Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 196.

look like headless mariners than to become a block of ice and chip away slowly into nothing.”⁶² Yet, as Shew argues, clothing and fashion remained ways in which women could “construct... their individual feminine identities.”⁶³

Beauty Pageants as Oppression?

As local pageants with their own rules and criteria, the pageants held at the camps represent a specific negotiation between the caged communities holding the pageants, and the forces overseeing them. In this way, each Queen contest produced their own specific idea of a “feminine ideal,” as defined by the environment in which they were situated.⁶⁴ In the case of many of these camps, the Queen contests became intricately linked to the performance of American identity. This was explicitly evident in the Jerome Contest, where the *Denson Tribune* provided profiles of the contestants which heavily emphasized their American qualities. Mary Aoto had “a Coca Cola smile,” Kiyō Hiwano was a “triple V girl (vim, vigor, and vitality),” and Sachiye Uyemaru was nicknamed “Sylphlike Sachi.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, Mary Ikeguchi, Bessie Nakashima, and Cherry Yoshimura had previously served as Vargettes, a troupe of twelve girls who were the stars of a two day show held for men in the armed forces a few months prior. Although the Vargettes performed a number of dance routines and pageants, the “patriotic grand finale” of the night was when Bessie Nakashima, as Lady Liberty, “paraded around the dance

⁶² Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 197.

⁶³ Shew, “Feminine Identity Confined,” 147.

⁶⁴ Williams, “Miss Homegrown”, ii.

⁶⁵ “More on Center Contest Candidates,” *Denson Tribune*/デンソン時報 (*Denson Jihō*). (Denson, Ark), May 14, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-14/ed-1/>.

floor waving the American flag, followed by the Vargrettes carrying red, white, and blue streamers."⁶⁶

Not only were these girls patriotic Americans, but they also lacked Japanese traits: Georgia Sugimoto, the *Tribune* is clear to note, "is not afflicted with a physical distortion in which too many nisei women are victims of-- 'daikon ashi.'"⁶⁷ *Daikon ashi* (lit. white radish legs), refers to the stocky, short legs common in Japanese women.⁶⁸ Daikon ashi were compared negatively in comparison to the long, slender legs found on images of American pinup girls.⁶⁹ Indeed, in his glossary on Nikkei language, Suzuki defines daikon ashi as the "shapeless legs of a girl."⁷⁰ If, as Susan Bordo argued, bodies are a "cultural plastic" from which identity may be molded, then the Americanized body of the Nisei girl was a medium through which hakujin views of Nikkeijin could be negotiated with the community.⁷¹ This was especially important during WWII, as McAndrews argues. Under "total war" every aspect of a nation's citizens became mobilized to bolster the nation's global power. In this time, the bodies of white American

⁶⁶"Vargrettes Featured In Two-Night Stand: Patriotic Grand Finale Climaxes Weekend Show," *Denson Tribune/デンソン時報 (Denson Jihō)*. (Denson, Ark), May 2, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-02/ed-1/>.

⁶⁷"Mystery Girl Enters The Race," *Denson Tribune/デンソン時報 (Denson Jihō)*. (Denson, Ark), May 18, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-18/ed-1/>.

⁶⁸Kayoko Yokoyama, "The Double Binds of Our Bodies: Multiculturally-Informed Feminist Therapy Considerations for Body Image and Eating Disorders Among Asian American Women," *Women & Therapy* 30, no. 3-4 (2007): 177-92. https://doi.org/10.1300/J015v30n03_13. 179.

⁶⁹Yokoyama, "The Double Binds," 179.

⁷⁰Peter T.Suzuki, "The Ethnolinguistics of Japanese Americans in the Wartime Camps." *Anthropological Linguistics* 18, no. 9 (1976): 416-27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30027590>.

⁷¹Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).



Fig. 2: Queen contest voting signs at Tule Lake. Courtesy UC Berkley, via the Online Archive of California
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft2h4nb0sz/?or der=2&brand=oac4>

women became symbols, not only of American superiority over the grotesque, chartered bodies of their enemies, but indeed provided a justification for their troops, with pinup girls providing morale boosters.⁷² In this way, the display of female bodies and beauty culture became strongly

linked to patriotism.

This is highly reminiscent of Foucault's theories of biopower. In *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II*, Fujitani directly links the total war regime with Americanization efforts of Nikkei bodies, arguing that Nikkeijin incarcerated in camps became viewed as worthy of "life, education, health, and even to some degree happiness," because their bodies became useful to "the regime's survival, prosperity,

⁷² Jennifer Malia McAndrew. "All-American Beauty: The Experiences of African American, European American, and Japanese American Women with Beauty Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century United States." Phd diss. University of Maryland (2008) ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

and even victory in war.”⁷³ In a manner not dissimilar to the Nisei Week Queens, the camp Queens could become visible representatives of American assimilation.

The image of the Queen as a representative of the Nikkei community towards the white-normative structure is especially apparent in the coronation of the Queens. In nearly every contest examined during this research, the Queens were crowned by heads of the bureaucratic administration of the camp, all of whom were middle-aged white men.⁷⁴ These men often had the privilege of escorting the queen and having the first dance with her. Furthermore, in the case of Jerome, Rohwer, Poston, and Manzanar, members of the WRA administration were part of the judging committee.⁷⁵ The judging committee sometimes had the final say in selection of the Queen, as was the case

⁷³ Fujitani, 26.

⁷⁴ Kiku Nakamichi Crowned Queen”; ““Meet Her Majesty, Queen Nellie” *Poston Press Bulletin* Vol. V No. 11 (Poston, Arizona) October 17, 1942, via DENSHO; “Queen Coronations Tonight: Royal Ceremony Highlights Ball” *Gila News-Dispatch/比良時報 (Hira Jihō)*, November 25, 1942.; “Miss Shegeko Nakano Chosen Center Queen” *Rohwer Outpost/朗和時報 (Rōwā Jihō)*, February 28, 1942; “Meet Her Majesty, Queen Nellie”. *Poston Press Bulletin*, October 17, 1942.; “Folk Festival”, *The Tanforan Totalizer*; “Tamaki Elected Queen”, *Tulean Dispatch/ツーリアンヂスパッチ (Tsūrian Disupachi)*, September 1942; “Dave Rogers, after crowning Hido [Hideko] Maeyama from Camp #2 Harvest Festival Queen, dances with her. ; Photographer: Stewart, Francis ; Rivers, Arizona.” November 26, ?, WRA no. D-683, War Relocation Authority Photographs of Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement, UC Berkeley; “Queen of Hunt High School”, May 7, 1943. National Archives and Records Administration Collection.; “Picnics, Games, Dances, Beauty Contest Feature Fourth of July” *Manzanar Free Press/マンザナー自由新聞 (Manzanā Jiyūshinbun)* (Manzanar, Calif.), July 7, 1942, via DENSHO

⁷⁵ “Kiku Nakamichi Crowned Queen”; “Meet Her Majesty, Queen Nellie” *Poston Press Bulletin* Vol. V No. 11 (Poston, Arizona) October 17, 1942, via DENSHO; “Picnics, Games, Dances, Beauty Contest Feature Fourth of July” *Manzanar Free Press/マンザナー自由新聞 (Manzanā Jiyūshinbun)* (Manzanar, Calif.), July 7, 1942, via DENSHO

in Jerome, where Mary Ikeguchi won the popular vote, but Kiku Nakamichi won the contest.⁷⁶ Even the ostensibly democratic campaigns run by Nisei boys to select their representative Queen could be overturned by the judges. In Francis Stewart's photographs of the Tule Lake Coronation, a crowd of mostly boys and young men watch as the Project Director, Elmer Shirrell, escorts Shizuka "Shiz" Tamaki to the coronation stage.⁷⁷ At Gila River, Stewart photographed Dave Rogers dancing with Hideko "Hido" Maeyama following her coronation (Fig. 3). Rogers faces the camera, with Maeyama's permed hair and crown her most notable features. It is clear that, despite this being Maeyama's coronation, Rogers is the centerpoint of the photograph.⁷⁸ In the aftermath of the Jerome Queen Contest, Roy Kawamoto noted in the *Tribune* that it would have made more sense for a former Nisei Queen to crown Nakamichi, rather than the Project Director. Indeed, Renko Abe (née Oyama) the Nisei Week Queen in 1937, was living in block 7.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the crowning of the Camp Queens remained a predominantly white male affair.

It was clear that the Queen was meant to be a symbol, but, as the *Tribune* dryly remarked at the beginning of their contest, "we wonder if it will really be a

⁷⁶ "Kiku Nakamichi Crowned Queen."

⁷⁷ "A crowd watches the Labor Day queen go by at the coronation ceremony which was part of the Labor Day celebration at this relocation center. Note the wide eyes and open mouths of the interested spectators. ; Photographer: Stewart, Francis ; Newell, C" September 7, 1942. WRA no. D-283, War Relocation Authority Photographs of Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement, UC Berkeley.

⁷⁸ "Dave Rogers, after crowning Hido [Hideko] Maeyama."

⁷⁹ Roy Kuwamoto, "Potpourri," *Denson Tribune/デenson時報* (*Denson Jihō*). (Denson, Ark), June 1, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-06-01/ed-1/>.



Fig. 3: Hido Maeyama dances with Dave Rogers at her coronation. Courtesy UC Berkeley via the Online Archive of California.

representative vote.”⁸⁰ Of key interest in determining the intent of the contests lay in delineating their intended demographics. Of the copious amounts of articles written about the Queen Contests throughout the Camps, few were in Japanese. When they did exist, they normally feature basic information, under the headline “*joō wa dare??*”(女王は誰?, who is the Queen?).⁸¹ Although some of the articles feature information about the contestants, including current popularity rankings, they tend to lack information on how to actually vote and participate in the contest,

⁸⁰ Paul Yokoto, “At Random,” *Denson Tribune/デンソン時報 (Denson Jihō)*. (Denson, Ark), May 14, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-14/ed-1/>.

⁸¹ “Today’s Feature: Who will be the Queen?” (“今日の呼物: 女王は誰??”/Tōjitsu no yobimono: Joō wa dare??”) *The Denson Tribune/デンソン時報 (Denson Jihō)*. (Denson, Ark), May 18, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-18/ed-1/>.

unlike the English articles.⁸² Furthermore, the coronations are treated with considerably less fanfare in Japanese, with often a few sentences devoted to naming the queen and where she was crowned.⁸³ Although this can be attributed to the smaller space allocated to the Japanese language portions of Camp magazines, it can also be interpreted as its main readership of Issei and Kibei being less involved in the contests, in comparison to the English speaking Nisei. In this sense, the Queen contests can be viewed as a thoroughly American affair.

Photographs and drawings of the Queens also offer an interpretation of the Queen contests as a vehicle for Americanizing the Nikkei body. As Shew has shown, presentations of beauty was a way for women in Camps to assert agency over how they would be viewed.⁸⁴ While some women choose to resist the injustice of incarceration through embracing Japanese beauty ideals and practises, others attempt to prove their citizenship through emulating a white, middle class ideal.⁸⁵ These attitudes were especially marked between generations: whereas Issei women tended to wear more simple waved hairstyles and avoid makeup, Nisei girls placed great importance in the

⁸² “Today’s Feature: Who will be the Queen?” (“當日の呼物: 女王は誰??”) / *Tōjitsu no yobimono: Joō wa dare??*); “Queen Competition Becomes White-Hot” (“白熱化する女王 競争”) / *Hakunetsu-ka seru joō kyōsō* *Rohwer Outpost/朗和時報 (Rōwā Jihō)* (McGehee, Arkansas), December 17, 1943. Donald Teruo Hata and Nadine Ishitani Hata Asian Pacific Studies Collection, California State University Japanese American Digitization Project

⁸³ “Tomorrow will be Grand!! Miss Kiku Nakamichi is the Queen!!” (“今明日盛大に!! 女王は中道きく嬢”) *Ima ashita seidai ni!! Joō wa Nakamichi Kiku jō!!*. *Denson Tribune/デンソン時報 (Denson Jihō)*. (Denson, Ark), May 28, 1943. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016475/1943-05-28/ed-1/>.

⁸⁴ Shew, “Feminine Identity Confined,” 55.

⁸⁵ Shew, 55.

voluminous perms and makeup, endorsed by the nation as a patriotic gesture.⁸⁶



Fig 4. Shiz Tamaki as a Queen Candidate (left), at her coronation (centre), and announced as Queen (right). Courtesy the Library of Congress and UC Berkeley via the Online Archive of California, 4a:

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84025954/1942-09-05/ed-1/?sp=3&r=->

When viewing photographs of the queens, they appear to embody the white beauty ideals promoted throughout the country. In some cases, illustrated depictions appear to further present them as representatives of white normative beauty: when Shiz Tamaki was crowned Labour Day Queen at Tule Lake, the *Tulean Dispatch*'s illustration made her features significantly more prominent, compared to her previous caricature and photographs of the coronation (Fig. 4). In the drawing, her chin, nose, cheekbones and eyebrows are sharply defined, in keeping with white standards of beauty. Although her pose in both caricatures from the *Dispatch* are identical, "Queen Shiz, the first" appears to be significantly more glamorous and American than Shiz Tamaki. Perhaps even more striking is the illustration that the *Rohwer Outpost* paired with their article on the coronation ball; larger than life, and facing away from the camp barracks, the Queen's prominent brow bone, sharp nose, and light coloured hair

⁸⁶ Shew, 144.

are significantly more in line with white features than Japanese (Fig. 5). This image was subsequently reprinted in *Lil' Daniel: One Year in A Relocation Center*, a commemorative booklet created by former inmates in 1989, describing the contest as “one of the social highlights of the year.”⁸⁷ Being unable to locate a picture of the Queen, Shigeko Nakano, I am unable to say how true to life the illustration was, nor if her coronation outfit matched the evening gown the image wore.⁸⁸

In her pivotal work on performance and memory at Manzanar, Colborn-Roxworthy examines the clear intent of

the government to use community activities as a vehicle for positive press relations. In publicizing the “recreational and aesthetic wonders” viewed at the camp, the dominant narrative could “overshadow and otherwise distort the injustice taking place at Manzanar.”⁸⁹ Beauty



Fig. 5: Image of the Queen, as drawn in the Rohwer Outpost. Courtesy Library of Congress, via DENSHO. <https://cdm16855.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16855coll4>.

⁸⁷ George Akimoto, “Lil Dan'l: one year in a relocation center” *Rohwer Outpost* (McGehee, Arkansas), August 1989. ike_02_04_001. Henry Y. Ikemoto Collection, California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.

⁸⁸ In some cases, the Queen and court received evening gowns as part of their prize: “Queen Contest”, *Poston City News* (Colorado River, Arizona), September 29, 1942. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

⁸⁹ Emily Colborn-Roxworthy, “Manzanar, the Eyes of the World Are upon You,” *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma*, 2008, pp. 120-147, <https://doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824832209.003.0005>, 192.

pageants were included by Colborn-Roxworthy as part of the “unmistakably American” performances undertaken at Manzanar.⁹⁰ These performances were crucial not only in providing a public image of America’s internment camps as an antithesis of Nazi death camps, but in refashioning the image of the camps to appear “as replicas of liberal democratic societies.”⁹¹ As Fujitani has traced in his examinations of Nisei soldiers, the utilization of Nisei bodies as part of the national war machine relied on a delicate balance of delineating which Nikkei bodies were “Japanese” and which were “American.”⁹² Assimilation must therefore exist outside of the boundaries of “vulgar” racism: instead biological race, culture, religion, political ideology, and material objects would be viewed as “measure[s] of assimilability into the national community.”⁹³ In maintaining the American elements of the pre-war contests (coronation balls, interactions with powerful white men) whilst discontinuing the Japanese (kimono, *odori* performances), the Queen had stepped off the tightrope her prewar counterpoint had walked. She was no longer representative of both cultures, but rather a Japanese body who “walked American”; patriotic, glamorous, and happy.⁹⁴

Beauty Pageants as Resistance?

In the past few years, there has been an increasing interest in the artwork and material culture created by inmates of the various Camps.⁹⁵ In stark contrast to

⁹⁰ Colborn-Roxworthy, “Manzanar”, 197.

⁹¹ Colborn-Roxworthy, 193; Fujitani, 140.

⁹² Fujitani, 100.

⁹³ Fujitani, 128.

⁹⁴ King O’Riain, 63.

⁹⁵ Jane E. Dusselier, “Artful Identifications: Crafting Survival in Japanese-American Concentration Camps,” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2005); Delphine Hirasuna and Kit Hinrichs, *The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment*

previous work, which tended to attribute artist output to an increase in leisure time and a focus on beauty as an obstruction of injustice, recent works by Dusslier and Hirasuna argue that the beauty created by incarcerated Nikkeijin can be viewed as resistance.⁹⁶ In the words of Dusslier, "...art aided internees in repositioning or relocating themselves as active agents, attaining visibilities and voices that incorporated heterogeneity and resisted exploitive racialization."⁹⁷ The same argument may be applied to Queen contests.

Many women in the camps attempted to preserve a sense of normalcy where possible, in an increasingly disrupted world.⁹⁸ For Nisei girls, Matsumoto has noted that community activities were a key part of this endeavor, as girl's clubs had been a key aspect of the urban Nisei girl's pre-war social life in major communities like Los Angeles.⁹⁹ This is not to say that the Queen contests were a replication of Nisei girl's leadership: as is the case with the prewar pageants, the committees in charge of the contests appear to have been mostly male.¹⁰⁰ Rather, one of the

Camps, 1942-1946 (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2005).

⁹⁶ Dusslier, "Artful Identifications", 2.

⁹⁷ Dusslieler, 1.

⁹⁸ Nicole Louise Branton, "Drawing the Line: Places of Power in the Japanese-American Internment Landscape," Phd. diss., University of Arizona (2004); Matsumoto, 159-62.; Williams, 19.

⁹⁹ For further information see Matsumoto, "The Social World of the Urban Nisei," and "Nisei Women's Roles in Family and Community during World War II" in *Nisei Girls*.

¹⁰⁰ Matsumoto, 60; "Queen Contest Begins Monday," *Gila News-Dispatch/比良時報 (Hira Jihō)* October 31, 1942.; "Race for Popularity Queen Gets Under Way", *Rohwer Outpost/朗和時報 (Rōwā Jihō)*, February 3, 1943; "Festival King and Queen Contest Starts Next Week" RO, June 10 1944; "Asano Kasai Crowned Queen at JR-SR Prom." *Granada Pioneer/パイオニア (Paionia)*, May 10, 1944; "Lucy Nakano Reigns as '45 Annual Queen", *Granada Pioneer/パイオニア (Paionia)*, March 14, 1945; "'Miss Poston' To Be Chosen by Residents; Huge Campaign Planned" Poston Press Bulletin Sept 29, 1942.

manners in which Nisei girls created “spaces of resistance” was in beauty culture, of which Queen contests played an important part. In her work on resistance within Camps, Branton draws heavily on material culture, noting that examination of material objects can allow the researcher to move beyond the strict dichotomies of assimilation and cultural assertion, and rather examine how cultural identity can continue to exist under a climate of domination. This approach “emphasizes boundary maintenance and the use of material culture as signals of belonging.”¹⁰¹

Indeed, beauty objects and beauty culture was one of the key categories examined by Shew in her research on archeology at Amanche. Deciding one’s appearance was an individual choice that could be made about identity, during

a time when the very appearance of Nisei girl’s bodies was political. Bottles of nail polish, tubes of lipstick, and hair barrettes uncovered at Amanche represent a clear desire from some women in the camp to follow national beauty trends.¹⁰² Of particular importance was hair: permanent “perms” were extremely popular among



Fig. 6: Tule Lake Nisei Fashion, as designed by Martha Mizuguchi for the *Tulean Dispatch*, 1942. Courtesy the Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85040043/1942-08-01/ed-1/?sp=6&r=0.111,0.067,1.11,0.575,0>

¹⁰¹ Branton, “Drawing the Line,” 95.

¹⁰² Shew, 137.

Nisei girls at the Camps, despite the upkeep and maintenance required. In addition to the beauty salons located at many camps, Shew's work at Amanche uncovered metal rollers which could be used either in maintenance or a home-permanent.¹⁰³ In a temporary camp, Sumi Sone continued to curl her hair at night, despite the complaints of the neighbors, who could view her through the partitions.¹⁰⁴ In the continued attempts to engage in beauty culture, Shew argues that; "women

were able to exercise agency through the consumer choices they made when purchasing from these catalogues. The products that women choose to buy and use can be directly related to their attempts to create and express their identities."¹⁰⁵

If the public image of the pre-war Nisei girl had been a predominantly exotic one dressed in kimono, Queens like Shiz Tamaki, with her permed hair, dark painted nails, and lipstick, could be arguably more in line with the "modern American femininity Nisei women sought to claim."¹⁰⁶ Although to promote the Nisei body as one that coincided with American beauty norms could be viewed as a means of assimilation into the racial hierarchy of the nation, it can also be seen as a means of resisting the predominant narrative of the Japanese body as unattractive and bestial, as seen in propaganda.¹⁰⁷ In this manner, the Queen contest created spaces in which Japanese bodies could too be considered beautiful and be celebrated.

The Queen contests, as with other forms of performance in the Camps, became important sites for the negotiation of community identity. As a program targeted predominantly at Nisei, the Queen contests are often

¹⁰³ McAndrews, 130; Shew 143.

¹⁰⁴ Sone, 176.

¹⁰⁵ Shew, 135.

¹⁰⁶ Matsumoto, 50.

¹⁰⁷ McAndrews, 104

grouped by researchers into the “American” performances that took place, compared to “Japanese” performances such as *odori* (traditional dance), *go* (a Japanese board game), and *sumo* (wrestling). At the same time, the Queen contests derived from the Nisei Week Queens, and as such represented a distinctly Nikkei connection. As had been the case during Nisei Week, the Queens often were symbols of a greater discussion on how the communities they came from wished to be viewed by the white public. Within my research, I noticed a correlation between camp newspapers with the greatest coverage of Queen Contests and camps with overt acts of resistance; Tule Lake, Manzanar, and Poston all had documented instances of mass resistance against the WRA administration, and Jerome had the highest rate of negative or qualified answers to question 28 on the loyalty questionnaire.¹⁰⁸ Rohwer and Jerome also had the lowest rate of Nisei enlistment, at 2.4%.¹⁰⁹ This correlation becomes particularly interesting in regard to West and Colburn-Roxworthy’s work on performance in the camps. To West, camp performances (including Queen contests) are useful as a sort of auto-ethnography, as “the type and frequency...charted the escalating tensions within the camps.”¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the copious amounts of

¹⁰⁸ Question 28 asked participants if they would “swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attacks by foreign and domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or disobedience to the Japanese Emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization,” which prompted great concerns on the nature of citizenship. People who answered ‘no’ to questions 27 and 28 were known as “no-no boys.” This colloquial term gained international preeminence following the 1957 publication of John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy*; please see Brian Niiya, “Jerome” *Densho Encyclopedia*, October 16, 2020, DENSHO. <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Jerome>; Robinson, 164.

¹⁰⁹ Niiya, “Jerome.”

¹¹⁰ Ron West, “Captive Audience: Theatre and Performance in the Japanese American Internment Camps,” *New England Theatre Journal*; 2006: 17, Performing Arts Periodicals Database, 81.

coverage the contests received (especially in comparison to Japanese activities), has been linked by Colburn-Roxworthy with strategies taken by the *Manzanar Free Press* to create a “spectacle-archive,” and thus assert some control over their public image, in resistance to the “spectacularization” performed by the WRA and outside media.¹¹¹ Although the Camp newspapers were subjected to both overt and covert censorship, to dismiss them as sources of information would be to deny any agency the writers may have exerted, and cast Nikkeijin yet again as accepting victims.¹¹² Rather, in documenting their own images of “American” performances, internees could show “artificial arrangements of an internment camp pretending to be a tourist destination,” a poor imitation of liberal American society.¹¹³

Queens and Identities

Before I began research for this paper, I had a brief conversation with Fujitani in regards to Foucauldian power dynamics within the American Camps. As an aside, he mentioned seeing an image of a beauty Queen in Manzanar during his research, but had decided not to include it in his book, *Race for Empire*. In a series of emails, he generously provided further clarification on his reasonings. The image of Margie Midori Shimizu is a famous one; many of the articles cited in this paper have mentioned it. To Fujitani, the image invoked “sadness and pain,” Shimizu’s cardboard tiara a reminder that “that life in the camp could only be a pathetic copy of life outside.”¹¹⁴ At the same time, there was also the possibility that Shimizu had joined

¹¹¹ Colburn-Roxworthy, 200-3.

¹¹² Colburn-Roxworthy, 200-3.

¹¹³ Colburn-Roxworthy, 202; Fujitani, 82.

¹¹⁴ Takashi Fujitani (author, *Race For Empire*; Dr. David Chu Professor in Asia-Pacific Studies at the University of Toronto) in discussion with Bailey Irene Midori Hoy, April 2021.

the competition as “one of the events that could bring joy out of a sad situation.”¹¹⁵ Crucially, although the photograph is public record, Fujitani could find no evidence that Shimizu had consented to the photograph being taken or distributed.¹¹⁶

This lack of information is a crucial theme I have found within my research on these Queens. In the photographs taken by the WRA, the name of the Queen is rarely mentioned, although the identity of the white male administrative figure is always explained in detail. In order to identify Queens I was required to cross reference dates, festivals, and WRA employee names with the coverage in camps newspapers. Furthermore, despite the rich amount of oral history available for my use, I was unable to find any first hand accounts by any Queens, or any further information on their identities and lives beyond their participation in these contests. A particularly poignant reminder of all the information that is unknown to me was found in two objects related to Kiku Nakamichi, Jerome’s Queen. In a photograph of her coronation, taken by Atsushi “Art” Ishida, Nakamichi can be seen with Ikeguchi and Nakashima, all three wearing dark day dresses (Fig. 6). Assistant Project Director William O. Melton stands over Nakamichi, having awarded all three women with commemorative wooden plaques.¹¹⁷ On the surface, this image would not seem different from the photographs taken by the WRA at Tule Lake or Gila River. Yet, the back of the photograph tells a different story: in black ink, Ishida labeled the photograph “May 27 1943 at Hosptol [sic] Jerome R.C. Queen.”¹¹⁸ Under this caption, Ishida, a Kibei,

¹¹⁵ Fujitani, discussion.

¹¹⁶ Fujitani, discussion.

¹¹⁷ Atsushi Art Ishida, Photograph of “Jerome R. C. Queen”, May 13, 1944. Ats_03_071_001. Atsushi Art Ishida Collection, California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.

¹¹⁸ Ishida, “Jerome R.C. Queen.”

identified the women as “池口 マリー”, “中道 菊” and “中島 ベシー”, the Japanese transliteration of their names.¹¹⁹ Ikeguchi and Nakashima’s names are consistent with their spelling in the Japanese coverage of the contest, whilst Nakamichi’s first name has been written using the kanji for chrysanthemum. Although it is unknown whether that was the proper kanji for her name (or indeed, if Nakamichi had a kanji spelling of her name), Ishida’s picture contains a distinctly different flavour from the labeling of the WRA photographs. Another object of interest is the commemorative plaque, visible in Nakamichi’s arms. The plaque, currently housed at the Japanese-American National Museum, was constructed by the woodshop at which she worked as a secretary.¹²⁰ The back is signed with copious signatures from woodshop workers and friends, wishing her, among other things, “loads of luck and happiness.”¹²¹ These signatures are a reminder that, regardless of whatever politics and mechanisms they may have existed under, these Queens were real women, who lived lives outside of the symbols for which they are remembered. It is for this reason that I have attempted, wherever possible, to list the names of the Queens mentioned in this paper. Before their bodies were Japanese, American, politicized and caged, these bodies belonged to these women, and their names should not be forgotten.

Conclusion

On her first fourth of July since being incarcerated at Merced, and then Amanche, Michi Tashiro wondered if her life would ever return to ‘normal’: “Will we ever again see any of our friends we have lost touch with? What is

¹¹⁹ Ishida, “Jerome R.C. Queen.”

¹²⁰ Japanese American National Museum, “Queen of Denson,” Collections, News, and Announcements, May 22, 2020. <https://blog.janm.org/2020/05/22/queen-of-denson/>.

¹²¹ Japanese American National Museum, “Queen of Denson.”

Betty doing tonight? Will I ever be queen again? Will Mama ever become an American citizen?”¹²² Although Tashiro was speaking of a Queen contest held before the war, her brief reign is clearly conflated with her American identity. To be a beauty Queen, and to be a Nisei Queen, was to exist within the intersections of multiple competing forces that were shaping history on a global and national



Fig. 7: Mary Ikeguchi, Kiku Nakamichi, and Bessie Nakashima at their coronation. Courtesy CSU Dominguez Hills Department of Archives and Special Collections via the California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.

scale. It is tempting to try and box the Queen into an easily definable figure of Asian-American history. And yet, that would be to further remove any agency from the women discussed. In highlighting injustice against the community,

¹²² Brian Komei Dempster and Michi Tashiro, “Michi Tashiro,” in *Making Home from War: Stories of Japanese American Exile and Resettlement* (La Vergne: Heyday, 2013), 172-90.

we should take care to avoid inflicting further injustice by speaking for voices under the justification of academic scholarship and modern perspective. In searching for the Nisei Queen, her image, like the power she wielded, becomes intangible.