

# Pure Beauty



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With a low rate of immigration and a high rate of interracial marriage, Japanese Americans today compose the Asian ethnic group with the largest proportion of mixed-race members. Within Japanese American communities, increased participation by mixed-race members, along with concerns about overassimilation, has led to a search for cultural authenticity, giving new answers to the question, Who is Japanese American? In *Pure Beauty*, Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain tackles this question by studying a cultural institution: Japanese American community beauty pageants in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Honolulu. King-O'Riain employs rich ethnographic fieldwork to discover how these pageants seek to maintain racial and ethnic purity amid shifting notions of cultural identity. She uses revealing in-depth interviews with candidates, queens, and community members, her experiences as a pageant committee member, and archival research--including Japanese and English newspapers, museum collections, private photo albums, and mementos--to establish both the importance and impossibility of racial purity. King-O'Riain examines racial eligibility rules and tests, which encompass not only ancestry but also residency, community service, and culture, and traces the history of pageants throughout the United States. *Pure Beauty* shows how racial and gendered meanings are enacted through the pageants, and reveals their impact on Japanese American men, women,

and children. King-O'Riain concludes that the mixed-race challenge to racial understandings of Japanese Americanness does not necessarily mean an end to race as we know it and asserts that race is work--created and re-created in a social context. Ultimately, she determines that the concept of race, fragile though it may be, is still one of the categories by which Japanese Americans are judged. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain is lecturer in sociology at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

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