



Christine R. Yano

*Airborne Dreams:  
'Nisei' Stewardesses  
and Pan American World Airways*

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reviewed by [Rebecca Farber](#)

1. Between 1955 and 1972, Pan Am World Airways hired women of Asian ancestry (mostly second generation Japanese American) whom they called 'Nisei.' In *Airborne Dreams: 'Nisei' Stewardesses and Pan American World Airways*, Christine R. Yano shows how Japanese immigrant, or 'Nisei,' stewardesses represented Pan Am's globalised corporate achievement in forging new cultural, geographic and symbolic boundaries during the Jet Age. Yano is deliberate in terminology, careful to use 'Nisei' in quotations to demonstrate its cultural and historical constructedness rather than taking for granted its fixed identity. Yano conceptualises Pan Am as a frontier that conquered national boundaries and built a cosmopolitan image of global dominance by deliberately using 'Nisei' women as key symbols in their workforce. In this book, Yano has woven together archival research, personal interviews and sociocultural analysis to demonstrate how Pan Am's corporate practices in hiring and training 'Nisei' women enacted a soft form of empire-building, while also shaping the lives and dreams of the women.
2. Yano builds on the concept of frontier to elucidate how 'Nisei' flight attendants helped Pan Am project 'an American vision of progress, growth, and empire' (p. 5). 'Nisei' women were trained to learn the Japanese language and nonverbal Japanese social relations, appealing to the airline's Japanese clientele. They became instrumental to Pan Am's global image because of their performance of Japanese identity and upper-middle-class habits, serving as the 'Oriental face' of the airline (p. 63). Pan Am's corporate practices constructed 'Nisei' women as 'domesticated, model-minority exotics,' as their foreignness was simultaneously overcome through corporate training and practices (p. 73).
3. The work and identity formation of 'Nisei' stewardesses was imbued with hierarchies of race, gender, class, sexuality and nation. This includes the image of the geisha, which falsely represents the Asian woman as subservient. Yano argues: 'Gender and racial stereotypes reinforce one another in the 'Nisei' stewardess, the loyal, empathetic, sincere, industrious, uncomplaining workhorse of in-flight hostess duties' (p. 106). In addition to class and gender norms, Yano describes how Pan Am trained 'Nisei' women to serve as 'homemakers,' embodying heterosexual ideals (p. 137).
4. Pan Am flaunted its 'pioneering efforts in both technological and human engineering,' using the 'Nisei' stewardesses as symbols of its corporate and cultural dominance (p. 39). Company speeches

and pamphlets reveal how Pan Am incorporated frontier idioms to brand the company, with the acculturation of 'Nisei' stewardesses standing in for Pan Am's global dominance. News reports also highlighted 'Nisei' stewardesses' transformation from 'east to west,' featuring before-and-after images of the women in kimonos and Pan Am uniforms. 'Nisei' stewardesses were thus a 'corporate and national spectacle' that represented the exoticism of air travel and the conquering of culture (p. 41).

5. In a nuanced weaving of micro and macro analyses, Yano describes how Pan Am's corporate practices shaped 'Nisei' stewardesses' bodies and subjectivities against the political backdrop of US globalism post-World War II. In a chapter entitled 'Becoming Pan Am: Bodies, Emotions, Subjectivity,' Yano details how Pan Am regulated 'Nisei' stewardesses' bodies and psyches within the context of Japanese American acculturation. For instance, the company's grooming guide for trainees suggested 'hand slimnastics,' or exercises to increase circulation and wrist flexibility, as Yano argues that hands were 'windows into social class,' (p. 132). Pan Am also regulated stewardesses' weight as part of job performance evaluations, with the girdle being a vital component of the Pan Am uniform. Throughout the analysis, Yano includes quotes from 'Nisei' flight attendants who offer their perspectives on what it meant to 'become' Pan Am.
6. The intersections of race, class and nation are especially salient when Yano discusses how 'Nisei' stewardesses gained significant cultural capital through their work. In interviews with 'Nisei' stewardesses and through a close reading of their personal scrapbooks, Yano shows how their roles at Pan Am afforded them cosmopolitan luxuries and access to material and symbolic capital they were proud to obtain. 'Nisei' women gained friendships (and in some cases marriages) with elite passengers, learning from passengers in the 'classroom in the air' (p. 121). Although Pan Am did not hire African American stewardesses until 1965, Yano includes an intersectional analysis of race throughout the text. For instance, the model minority status of 'Nisei' women contrasted with the 'devastating' stereotyping of women of color such as Hispanics and African Americans (p. 25). 'Nisei' hiring was therefore not indicative of broader minority hiring practices but reflected specific aims and stereotypes related to Japanese American women.
7. Pan Am's rules and standardised training created the 'industrial product' of 'Nisei' stewardesses, and through this multifaceted research Yano shows how the women became corporate products that Pan Am used to bolster its exceptional status in conquering world terrain (p. 131). The company drew upon and constructed a particularly raced and classed femininity while occluding all other non-white populations. Yano is careful not to flatten the identities of 'Nisei' stewardesses, acknowledging their ranges of experiences and forms of agency and resistance to Pan Am corporate structures and passengers. In one example, Yano describes how 'Nisei' stewardesses overcame challenges of loneliness and racial and sexual discrimination—'they refused to be geishaed,' for instance by not peeling grapes—and they formed friendships with customers and each other for social capital and support (p. 115).
8. Yano includes rich vignettes throughout the text, adding multidimensional perspectives and archiving 'Nisei' women's voices. Yano also describes in rich detail how 'Nisei' stewardesses' corporate identities bled into their lives off duty, demonstrating the interplay between economic and intimate lives. Yano includes close readings of 'Nisei' women's personal scrapbooks, which included mementos such as letters of promotion, photographs of travel, and newspaper clippings. Yano argues that these scrapbooks demonstrate a 'life built around Pan Am' (p. 149).
9. Scholars across various disciplines will appreciate Yano's highly intersectional and historically-specific analysis. Her multiple methodologies and sources will inspire scholars and students to dig deeper and triangulate across forms of evidence. Yano's analysis is theoretically rich, expanding

notions of globalism, multiculturalism, frontier and postcolonial cosmopolitanism. The text raises productive questions about the construction of gendered and racialised subjectivities within global development. By archiving and analysing the lived experiences of a group of women whose livelihoods and identities were shaped through Pan Am's corporate practices, Yano shows how 'Nisei' women, in turn, altered the trajectory of a global company by redefining race, gender and class.

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