

'Hawaii, Hawaii/ Like a dream/ So I came/ But my tears/ Are flowing now/In the canefields': Beauty's Price in Philip Kan Gotanda's Ballad of Yachiyo

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Abstract: Oftentimes popular culture depicts Hawaii as an ideal paradise, represented by images of '[p]alm trees, a distant mountain (frequently a smoking volcano), and a hula maiden, all surmounted by a splendid full moon' (Brown 1994). Such a picture clearly contrasts with the labour song quoted in the title of this article, which reflects the exploitation, mainly of Asian workers, in the sugar-cane plantation system—the original basis for (white) American prosperity in the islands since the mid-nineteenth century.

Philip Kan Gotanda's play, *Ballad of Yachiyo*, which premiered at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 1995, takes place within a Japanese community in early twentieth-century Hawaii. It is loosely based on the silenced story of the playwright's aunt who committed suicide for bringing shame to the family as a result of an extra-marital pregnancy. Gotanda considers that this particular work is not so much about politics, but about 'a tone' and a 'kind of beautiful sadness' (1997). Despite the author's words, *Ballad of Yachiyo* inevitably has embedded within a political message insofar as it makes references, for example, to working conditions in the sugar plantations, the formation of the first inter-ethnic (Japanese/Filipino) trade unions and the expectations of Japanese immigrants in search of the mythical paradise Hawaii was meant to be. That is, by recovering what was once a lost voice, Gotanda reconstructs part of his family's memory as forming part of Hawaii's recent history.

Keywords: Hawaii, American imperialism, *Ballad of Yachiyo*

The title of this article cites a plantation work song of a Japanese labourer in the sugar canefields of Hawaii at the beginning of the twentieth century. This song, by itself, demystifies the dominant, conventional image of the Hawaiian islands as a tropical Eden, particularly in the U.S. imaginary. As Crystal Parikh points out:

Conceived of in tourist fantasy as America's 'first strange place' and, alternatively, as a coordinate in the still-emergent Asia-Pacific marketplace, Hawaii functions as an object of contestation between the discourses of transnational capitalism and globalization on the one hand and, on the other hand, as an ahistorical site for the recreational pleasures and military needs of the nation-state (2002).

The construction of Hawaii's myth as a paradise, in the Western popular imaginary, contrasts clearly with the economic and political Anglo-American domination of the islands prior to their annexation by the United States in 1898, becoming formally a U.S. territory two years later with the passing of the Organic Act in 1900. Since the European discovery of the islands by Captain Cook in 1778, Hawaii's destiny inevitably was marked, firstly, by European colonial enterprises, and later, by U.S. imperial interests in the Pacific basin due to the islands' strategic geographical position. This is exemplified by debates in the U.S. Congress on the nation's interests over Hawaii, such as the Majority Report of the House Committee on Ways and Means which, in 1876, proclaimed the following:

The Pacific Ocean is an American ocean, destined to hold a far higher place in the future history of the world than the Atlantic. It is the future great highway between ourselves and the hundreds of millions of Asiatics who look to us for commerce, civilization, and Christianity. These islands rest midway between us and them as the necessary point provided by the Great Ruler of the universe as points of observation, rest, supply, military strategy, and command, to enable each other to unite in protecting both hemispheres from European assault, aggression, and avarice (quoted in La Croix and Grandy 1997).

Supplying ships travelling from America to the Far East and the Antipodes, especially whaling vessels, as well as hiring new crew, became the main source of income for businesses in Hawaii (Oliver 2003; La Croix and Grandy 1997). Moreover, the discovery of sandalwood in the late eighteenth century gave rise to an important trading industry which ended around 1830 when supplies of the precious wood were practically exhausted. However, it was the sugar industry which was to cause the greatest and deepest transformation of the islands.

From the mid 1830s, mostly U.S. and British settlers began to establish the first sugarcane plantations (Oliver 2003). In fact, it was an American firm, Ladd and Company, the one to establish the first profitable sugar plantation on the island of Kauai in 1835 (La Croix and Grandy 1997). Part of the Hawaiian landscape underwent great transformations as a result of the land reform and system of property based on the Western model. Unsurprisingly, the best agricultural, residential and profitable land ended up in the hands of Caucasians. This meant that by the end of the nineteenth century Westerners possessed four times as much land as Native Hawaiians (Oliver 2003).

Sugarcane plantations required an amount of manual labour which Native Hawaiians were not particularly keen to provide. Besides, its population, as a direct result of contact with Europeans, had been drastically reduced. According to Asian Pacific American historian Ronald Takaki, in the mid-nineteenth century full-blooded and part Hawaiians constituted 97 percent of the total population, whereas by the early 1920s it had dropped to only 16.3 percent. These demographic changes were also due to the introduction of Asian indentured labour which would supply the necessary workforce

for making sugar production Hawaii's most important industry. It has been calculated that during the same period, about 300,000 Asians arrived on the islands, a fact that accounts for Hawaii's particular ethnic diversity, up to the present day. By 1920, Asians (mainly Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and Filipinos) constituted 62 percent of the population (1989).

Thus, Hawaii's demography is related to another prevailing image of the islands: a picture of racial and ethnic harmony, which has been incorporated into its world-wide idealized representation as a kind of 'exotic/erotic fantasy', an 'Eden space of escape', to use Parikh's words (2002). However, this (supposedly) ethnic harmony was founded upon a strict hierarchical system of control according to race and, simultaneously, linking race to class. In the plantations, for example, jobs—and salaries—were structured according to ethnic origin. Positions requiring specific skills or those of a supervisory nature (such as clerical work or *lunas*, the Hawaiian term for foremen), were mainly taken up by Caucasians. Unsurprisingly, most of the field labourers were Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos (Takaki 1989).

The sugar industry particularly flourished after the preferential trade agreement between the Kingdom of Hawaii and the United States in 1876 (the Reciprocity Treaty). The increased wealth of the sugar planters—Hawaii's new (white) aristocracy—the islands' pleasant climate, the beauty of the landscape, together with improvements in transport, led to the birth of an incipient tourist industry at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. As a means of attracting visitors, the Hawaiian Promotion Committee was founded in 1902. This committee, which became known as the Tourist Bureau during the 1920s and 1930s, contributed to the construction of Hawaii as a Pacific Eden to which, at the time, was only accessible to a glamorous élite. Thus, in a booklet published in 1938, the bureau provided the following description of the islands:

Hawaii is magic! Just the name is “[open] sesame” to a vividly gorgeous kaleidoscope of thought. Your mind drifts into gay imaginings...you seem to catch a whiff of fragrant jasmine, or ginger, swirling in sea-cooled zephyrs...mental vagabonding...cutting through the waves of an enchanted sea...gloriously emancipated from those old city-bred inhibitions...And there...just across that shimmering horizon...those fabulous islands of the South Seas...yours for the taking. And why not take them? ...Why those wistful fantasies when all things conspire to conjure fantasy into fact? Surely, actual knowledge of the brief time required, the comfort, the luxury, and low cost of modern travel to the land of Aloha...will bring Hawaii temptingly near, nearer than ever before (quoted in Brown 1994).

This kind of imagery was also enhanced by visual artefacts highlighting the exotic and erotic aspects of the islands and its inhabitants, particularly women. As DeSoto Brown points out, 'Artwork played a part in creating the public's Hawaiian image. Palm trees, a distant mountain (frequently a smoking volcano), and a hula maiden, all surmounted by a splendid full moon, usually summed up the ideal' (1994). These images of Native Hawaiian women, of the beaches and the volcanic landscape clearly contrast with the harsh reality of plantation life. As a former female Korean labourer described:

The sugar cane fields were endless and the stalks were twice the height of myself. [...] Now that I look back, I thank goodness for the height, for if I had seen how far the fields stretched, I probably would have fainted from knowing how much work was ahead. My waistline got slimmer and my back ached from bending over all the time to cut the sugar cane (quoted in Takaki 1989).

With the advancement of tourism and the direct and indirect support from advertising and other popular artefacts such as Hollywood film and popular fiction, 'Hawaii's fantasy image' as 'Beautiful and Romantic', using Brown's words, became the dominant picture, obliterating the socio-economic exploitation and political invisibility of the greater part of the population upon which the wealth of the islands was sustained. Scholars such as Crystal Parikh argue that contemporary Asian Pacific American literature is particularly interested in undermining such an ever-pervasive picture attempting, in such a manner, to 'decreate' the American Pacific (2002).

For the purpose I will refer to a play by the Japanese American author Philip Kan Gotanda, *Ballad of Yachiyo*, which premièred at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 1995. The story takes place in 1919 within a Japanese community in Hawaii. The play is loosely based on the silenced story of the playwright's aunt, Yachiyo, who committed suicide for bringing shame to the family as a result of a love affair with a married man and her subsequent out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Gotanda considers that this particular work, unlike most of his theatrical production, is not so much a political statement but rather the expression of a 'kind of beautiful sadness' (1997). However, *Ballad of Yachiyo* has embedded within a political message insofar as it makes references to the working and living conditions in the sugar plantations, the formation of the first interethnic (Japanese and Filipino) trade unions and the expectations of Japanese immigrants in search of the mythical paradise Hawaii was meant to be. That is, by recovering what was once a lost voice, Gotanda reconstructs part of his family's memory and, in the process, part of Hawaii's history.

The play opens with the projection on a screen upstage of photographs about life on Kauai island at the beginning of the twentieth century. Simultaneously, as indicated by the stage directions, '*we hear the haunting strains of a Japanese plantation work song*' (Gotanda 1997). This series of projections ends up with a real photograph of Yachiyo, and then '*the actress playing Yachiyo moves in front of the slide, the image's large face superimposed on her body*' (1997). The actress, in fact, represents Yachiyo's ghost who, from the afterlife, begins to tell her story, her narration functioning as stage directions for the players who make their appearance on the boards. Such an opening, with the image of the real Yachiyo superimposing the body of the actress, and the Yachiyo on stage directing the actions of the other actors, represents the interconnections between past and present, between the recovery of memory and history. As Gotanda states:

I've always felt people's lives, no matter how brief, no matter how seemingly uneventful on the surface, make a kind of ripple in their historical

time, sending into motion a series of connected disturbances, interrelated emotions and intentions that seed the universe, eventually branching out to become its fruit—never lost, never really seen, but always present (1996).

In connection to Gotanda's words, it is interesting to notice that ghosts or haunting figures in theatre play a particular role in relation to history and its implications in the present. As theatre scholar David Savran proclaims:

If history is understood as a chronicle of struggles among nations, peoples and classes, then the theatrical ghost is also a historical figure. For it is the product not only of personal memory, but also of an interplay of social, political and economic forces. The ghost may not be that of a celebrated public figure, but it nonetheless serves as a representative and reminder of the skirmishes that constitute history [...] (1999).

Sixteen-year-old Yachiyo Matsumoto moves to the Takamura home, a childless couple, in order to acquire an education from Mrs. Takamura which, according to her mother, Takayo, will enable her to make a good marriage. However, her mother's idea of a proper education is inadequate for the life in the plantation camp since it consists of learning Tea Ceremony and, if possible, *Ikebana*—flower arrangement—and *koto*—a traditional Japanese string instrument. These are highly aestheticized activities which, back in Japan, young women should be accomplished in so as to entertain their husbands and hosts. But these arts are unsuitable for life in the sugar plantation camps. As Yachiyo's father, Hisao, says: 'That's all crap. You don't need those kinds of things here. You have too much refinement here it makes you weak. People step all over you' (Gotanda 1997).

With these words, Hisao Matsumoto is also referring to himself. Having married against the will of his family, he decided to leave for Hawaii to start anew, calling his wife to join him. A learned man who used to write *tanka*, a form of traditional Japanese poetry, his body soon becomes unfit for work in the canefields. In a way, Matsumoto foresees his daughter's downfall for desiring beautiful objects and, above all, what they represent—a better life denied to non-Caucasians.

The possibility of creating and having access to beautiful artefacts is therefore linked to social class. Hiro Takamura, the man for whom Yachiyo works in exchange for Tea Ceremony lessons given by his wife, is the son of a master of pottery in Japan. Forced to leave the family home due to his ill-behaviour, Takamura is obsessed with living up to his father's mastery, but constantly fails to produce the right mixture of clay or the right type of kiln for *yunomi*, the teacups for which his father is famous. His frustration is reflected in his contempt for his fellow countrymen and countrywomen, mostly from rural Japan. When his wife places on the table before him a *sake* bottle and cups, he scornfully chides her. She then brings a wooden bowl, and Takamura replies:

There, that's better. What really should be here is this...a crude wooden bowl. That's what belongs on this table. It's more in keeping with the aesthetics sense of the people here in this town. They don't want fine

pottery in their everyday lives. They want wooden bowls that they can knock on the floor and not break when they're screwing their wives on the kitchen table. [...] That's what peasants like. Not finite beauty with the inherent fragility of human nature... [...] but crude, pedestrian substitutions (Gotanda 1997).

Takamura's verbal abuse of his wife and, initially, of Yachiyo, his infidelity, his love for alcohol and gambling reflect his sense of emasculation for having failed as a master of pottery, despite the price he had to pay: to become a *yoshi*. In Japanese culture, a *yoshi* is a man who gives up his family name and adopts that of his wife. Takamura's purpose with such a move was to receive financial support from his father-in-law in his attempt to become an artist. In the long run, he succeeds. His appreciation of beauty attracts the young Yachiyo, and he manipulates her enthusiasm and love for him as he manipulates the clay for producing, eventually, beautiful pots. Part of his final success is the result of the young girl's warmth and effort, working for him mixing the different clays and preparing the right fire for the kilns. In a way, Takamura's use of Yachiyo parallels that of the sugar planters and businessmen in relation to the Native Hawaiian and immigrant population. Ultimately, her suicide and her return as a ghost on stage represent, in David Savran words:

[T]he occasion for the transformation of memory into history, the individual into the collective and the particular into the universal. It demonstrates that what is memory for some is history for others. For as we watch other people remembering, the struggles in which they participate and the society in which they are forced to play their parts are illuminated and clarified. We see their defeats reimaged, if not exactly as victories, at least as spurs to rethink and reclaim their losses. We see memory itself become a kind of phantom, the illusion produced by individual consciousness in thrall to History (1999).

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