Hawaiian Plantation Haiku Series

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Hawaii Plantation Haiku Series

TYLER A. LAU

ITE 440 (Curriculum Implications of Multicultural Education)
Mentor: Dr. Patricia Halago

My name is Tyler Lau and I am a student at the University of Hawaii Post-Baccalaureate Certification in Secondary Education focusing in Japanese. Originally these haiku were for a reading response assignment for ITE 440: Curriculum Implications of Multicultural Education, a course taught by Dr. Patricia Espiritu Halagao. The assignment was to do a poem, drawing, or song response to a book by Milton Murayama and a chapter from a book by Ronald Takaki. Both authors describe the racially-based harsh treatment and working conditions of plantation workers in Hawaii. Takaki talked about the history of sugar cane plantations in Hawaii and the life and working conditions of plantation workers from different countries. Murayama’s work is fictional but accurately depicts plantation life from a Japanese plantation worker’s view, utilizing local pidgin to narrate the story. Because of that I decided to do the haiku poems in the standard 5-7-5-syllable format, while putting myself in the shoes of a Japanese plantation worker. I referred to Murayama’s book for the Japanese and pidgin language usage and Takaki’s book for historical background and details. Like my teacher and classmates, I hope you will enjoy these haiku and maybe learn, laugh, or even cry.

Back from the cane fields
My “Tadaima” to Mom
A red dirt shirt soup
(Ta-da-i-ma <“I’m home”> Japanese)

A quarter a ton
A cut down to twenty two
Shikata ga nai
(Shi-ka-ta-ga-na-i
<“There is no helping it”> Japanese)

I am currently a student at the University of Hawaii Post-Baccalaureate Certification in Secondary Education focusing in Japanese. My goal is to earn my certification, to get a Master’s degree, and to teach Japanese at a high school. These haiku were originally for ITE 440: Curriculum Implications of Multicultural Education, a course taught by Dr. Patricia Espiritu Halagao, who suggested that I submit my work to Mānoa Horizons. It was difficult to make these haiku socially and historically accurate and relevant, but I enjoyed writing them while also learning a lot about the history of plantations in Hawai’i and how that history influenced what Hawai’i is today.

Working like the wind
Is like fooling with a king
Three to one fifty ($3–$1.50)

One language at home
One at school and one at work
Is my tongue twisting
When one guy has beef
Best to give it to a friend
And not a Luna
(Luna <overseer>)

As I hoe the weeds
"Yosh! Kakkate koi!"
The voice in my head
(Yo-shi-Ka-kka-te-ko-i
<"Right! Come at me!">
Japanese)

Though I have a blade
Though I cut down many cane
I end up bloody

A red mist comes up
I think of chocolate dust
Though it not be sweet
(When cutting the cane, the dust from the red dirt flies out from the cane, looking like chocolate dust)

The burn of the sun
The heat of soulless machines
A vision of hell

The boss cultivates
Loyalty and discipline
Least he has a chair

The kings have kindness
But behind their kind actions
Is a mosquito

Today, we work hard
Today, we will cut down cane
Like puppets on strings

Five bucks to gamble
In Japan or in China
To the Philippines
(Gambling was not allowed in the Japanese and Chinese Plantation Camps)

The blade of cane leaves
The sharp bite of a black snake
A prison of pain

One needs food to live
But can you call it living
If you owe the bank

Though I may earn more
While the others earn much less
I cannot climb up

I hear the whistle
At the beginning and end
The pain and relief

Though tired I run
To the furo to bocha
So I don’t turn red
(fu-ro <bath> Japanese, bo-cha <bathe> Japanese)

Though I have a name
It seems I have another
My own bango
(ba-n-go <number> Japanese.
Rather than calling the plantation workers by their names, the plantation bosses and overseers called them by the number tag, the bango, given to them.)

Around the fire
We tell our many stories
The pain goes away

Like a can of fish
We sleep shoulder to shoulder
Waking to be fried

A doctor wears white
But they should wear a black cloak
With a scythe in hand

I will bet on cocks
Though I don’t bet on talking
When I hoe the weeds
Though try as I might
A strong cane samurai
Life is not a film
(sa-mu-ra-i <Japanese warrior>)

“Emperor Banzai!”
Cried out the Japanese camp
Until Pearl Harbor

When I eat my lunch
My own ume musubi
Is salting the pain
(u-me <plum> Japanese, mu-su-bi <rice ball> Japanese)

Lunch is a bento
Musubi with good bagoong
A fusion of tastes
(ba-goong <Filipino fish paste> Tagalog)

Though far away home
We have brought both our baggage
And our home culture

When talking at work
The bagga don’t understand
Takusan words
(bag-ga <person> Hawaiian Creole English, ta-ku-sa-n <many> Japanese)

Backs in constant pain
As we hoe weeds endlessly
Least we have baseball

I kotsun cane
Day after day, after day
Kotsun again
(ko-tsu-n <Japanese onomatopoeia for the sound of hitting something hard>)

Cutting sugar cane
Though I can look above it
I dare not try to

The Kaminari-san The Luna’s whip
The sound of thunder
(Ka-mi-na-ri-san <Mr. Lightning> Japanese)

After cutting cane
I return looking like a
Red chorinbo
(cho-ri-n-bo <bum> Japanese. Plantation workers in the cane fields would be covered in red dirt by the end of the work.)

Bibliography

Murayama, Milton. All I asking for is my body. University of Hawaii Press, 1988, Honolulu.