

The Fantasy of *Hawaii*

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English 323

How many times have people from Hawai'i been asked if they live in grass huts, have electricity, heard jokes about the weather always being beautiful, and ditching work to go to the beach? These cliché ideas are almost just as popular now as they were in the 1950s. Myths have been born out and perpetuated throughout literature since before Statehood. Stereotypes are especially prevalent in western cultures that have been brainwashed by authors such as James Michener with books like *Hawaii*. Repeatedly, this book presents an idea of a "Golden Man" (Michener 902), an idealistic non-white person assimilating to American culture perfectly. Since the Talk Story Conference in the 1970s authors have pushed back this notion with their own versions of what it really is to grow up and live in Hawai'i.

Postwar America was looking to romanticize the veterans that were coming home from their far-off travels. James Michener took advantage of this and wrote stories of "Golden" Men with Shigeo "Shig" Sakagawa as one of his products. Shigeo Sakagawa is shipped off to Europe as part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. This group of soldiers were all Japanese Nisei (first generation Americans whose parents immigrated from Japan) and shipped as far away from the Pacific battle as possible, just in case they were harboring sympathies for their ancestral homeland. These men fought with valor, in some of the harshest war zones in Europe. The men of the 442nd felt they had something to prove, that they were Americans - Americans of Japanese Ancestry. The soldiers of this unit in Michener's eyes are his "Golden" Men. They have properly assimilated to America by giving up their ancestral ties - by dying for their country. A parade in Honolulu is thrown in their honor in *Hawaii* with Shig smiling and waving his U.S. flag. He "felt completely American. He had proved his courage, he had been accepted by Honolulu, and now he was wanted by someone... he reveled in his newly won Americanism..." (Michener 903). At no point did this Nisei ever challenge the government of the United States to help Japan. Shig was born here in the United

States, he is a citizen, and America is the only home he knows. He is American, and Michener has completely cheapened who he is and what he represents. Michener paints Shig's war journey as a fairy tale, which is why Milton Murayama, a Nisei himself, decides to end his story before the men are shipped off to war.

A Hawai'i born Japanese writer, Milton Murayama painted a very different picture of Nisei on Maui. He knew that another story should be told; an authentic voice should be added to this narrative. In the book, *All I asking for is my body*, Murayama depicts a family of immigrant parents and Nisei children just before the United States enters World War II. Life as an immigrant is not some fairy tale that Michener would have readers believe. The central character, Kiyoshi is speaking with his mother and she laments, "I did not know what work was until I came to Hawaii" (Murayama 17). Plantation workers were taken advantage of and worked until they broke. The plantation owners, also known as the Big Five in Hawai'i, were cruel in their presentation of working for fair wages. Every penny employees earn would be spent in the plantation store: "'We have a very large debt,' she [Kiyoshi's mother] said weakly. 'We owe Aoki store about \$2,000, then Chatani Fish Market, hmmm, maybe about the same, Tanabe Store about \$400, Saito Store about \$200...'" (16). On and on the list grows to six thousand dollars. The plantation workers earned but a few dollars a day and they had to eat. They had to buy food from the very places they were already indebted to, further compounding the issue. They were never going to get out from the cycle that the plantation had put them into. Murayama saw this hypocrisy and could not keep silent.

Life on Kiyoshi's plantation was not only hard because of this cycle of poverty, but it was also used to strengthen the cultural divides among the other workers. The Japanese camp was higher up the hill than the Filipino camp. In turn, the Japanese were downslope from the bosses. This hierarchy was not only symbolic in its literal sense where the higher someone is the more important they are, but it also meant that they did not have to be bothered with the sewage that inevitably flowed downslope:

...according to the plantation pyramid. Mr.

Nelson was the top shit on the highest slope, then there were the Portuguese, Spanish and *ni-sei lunas* with their indoor toilets, which flushed into the same ditches, then Japanese Camp, and Filipino Camp. Everything was over organized. There were sports to keep you busy and happy in your spare time. Even the churches seemed part of the scheme to keep you contented. Mr. Nelson knew each of us by first name... He acted like a father, and he looked after you and cared for you provided you didn't disobey. Union talk was disobedience and treason, and if you were caught talking it or organizing, you were fired and your family and your belongings dumped on the "government" road. (96)

This harsh truth of plantation life is what Kiyoshi had to grow up and endure. There was a plantation school, but many of the children left at a young age as they saw no real hope of ever ending the cycle of suppression and oppression. This is the reality of growing up as Kyoshi, as Shigeo Sakagawa, as Milton Murayama. He ends this book just when Kiyoshi is leaving to join the army and inevitably become a member of the 442nd. If Murayama wrote Kiyoshi's story, he would not come back the "Golden Man" as Michener contends. Kiyoshi would come back broken and angry as the two veterans did in Chris McKinney's novel *The Tattoo*.

McKinney presents a father and son duo as war damaged men. Readers follow Kenji (Ken), a Japanese boy growing up on Oahu. His "Grandpa, the World War II veteran, the member of the Go for Broke 442nd..." is everything that a grandfather is to his grandson (McKinney 29). He takes Ken to the Honolulu Zoo, the movies, and even for long drives just to get shave ice. This picture-perfect family does not exist to Ken's father: "'Hey,' my father asked, 'so what? Grandpa went spoil you plenty?' I shrugged. 'Shit, you should've seen when he was raising me. Da faka used to beat me like one drum.' I didn't believe him" (32). Ken's grandfather is everything Kyoshi and Shigeo were before they left. This is how those soldiers came back: suffering from everything they had seen. The death that tore through their unit, bombs that dismembered and maimed their comrades are enough to scar these men for the rest of their lives.

They were never taught how to communicate and process these horrific scenes. Instead, they stayed angry and turned to alcohol. They did not come back war heroes, they came back to beat their boys into men. They came back to be Americans and claim their piece of the American Dream on the new plantation - the construction lot.

This is exactly where Ken's father ends up. He is a Vietnam veteran that perpetuates the same anger and abuse his father took out on him. He has no coping skills, so he turns to alcohol to numb the effects of his past. To dull the memories of his now dead wife and war buddies. To escape the thoughts that torment his nights, alone and depressed. In one of these intense moments, Ken finds him: "naked, crouching low to the ground and mumbling to himself. I squinted to focus in the darkness and saw something shiny protruding from his clenched fingers. It was the barrel of a handgun, and it was resting on the tip of his nose... 'Fuckin' gooks... Fuckin' gooks... C'mon, you fakas... take my wife, you fakas? C'mon you fuckin gooks...'" (35). This is the reality of Shigeo. Ken's father is not just physically naked. He is broken and laid bare that night, drunk and on the brink of complete annihilation. His wife's recent death bleeds into his past war trauma taints his present with hallucinations and deep-seated anger. Ken's father's cycle of abuse continues onto Ken himself. Ken receives no relief, just as his father did not learn from his father's mistakes. After an intense evening where Ken's best friend is now dead, Ken comes home to a trashed house and his pregnant girlfriend on the floor screaming and crying:

[She] called me one fuckin' Jap. I no give a fuck who you are, you call me one Jap, I goin' fuckin' whack you'... 'You are one fuckin' Jap.' 'You dumb fuckin' kid,' he said. 'I was killing fakas befo' you was even born.' Then he hit me. (214)

Ken neither goes to war nor perpetuates the cycle of violence. Instead, he goes to prison for his father's murder and cuts himself off from his son. Shigeo Sakagawa's grandson ends up in jail and his son dead. This is what really happened to the "Golden Man" Michener glorified. His children, his grandchildren, destroyed.

James Michener took people out of their lives

and made fantasies. These fantasy stories have been sold the world over time and again. They sit in book shops and airports, telling of the kindness and beauty of Hawai'i. Where that utopian dream sits on the surface for sunburned tourists in tacky, wannabe aloha wear to escape to, the real stories of local people should be heard as well. Sitting alongside *Hawaii* on the airport bookshelf should be *The Tattoo* or *All I asking for is my body*. With these books placed in tandem, a more well-rounded view of the place these people imagine can be envisioned. There are a myriad of books written by local authors that can serve the same purpose as these two books do. They give voice to those that are not being listened to. They give voice to those that are screaming for help. They give voice to the voiceless that need you to know that there is so much more to Hawai'i than what Michener would have you believe.

Works Cited

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- McKinney, Chris. *The Tattoo*. Soho Press, 2007.
- Murayama, Milton, and Franklin S. Odo. *All I asking for is my body*. University of Hawaii Press, 2009.