



VOICES FROM THE CANEFIELDS

FOLKSONGS FROM JAPANESE IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN HAWAII

FRANKLIN ODO

Voices from the Cane Fields

AMERICAN MUSICSPHERES

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Harry Minoru Urata (1917–2009)

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Preface

This book focuses on folk songs from Japanese immigrant sugar plantation workers in Hawai'i. These *holehole bushi* are composed of four lines with 7, 7, 7, and 5 syllables; they are short, like traditional Japanese poetry, and are some of the songs the immigrants knew and loved. *Holehole* is the Native Hawaiian word for the withered and dying leaves of the sugar cane and hence the task of stripping them from the stalks. *Bushi* (from *fushi*) is the Japanese word for "tune" or "melody." The lyrics to these songs had been known and used, but only as embellishment for films, videos, exhibits, lectures, articles, and books. They were sexy, dramatic, and useful to drive home some points—generally to illustrate hardships suffered by the Japanese immigrants who worked on Hawaii's sugar plantations. But they were never seriously studied. Over the years of translating and considering these songs, I determined that they deserved serious consideration as primary documents bequeathed by the *issei*. The precipitating event driving this revelation was my encounter with a *nisei*, second-generation Japanese American, who was embarked upon what initially appeared to me to be a singularly quixotic mission to save, validate, and cherish the *holehole bushi*. In the late 1970s I met Harry Minoru Urata several times in his tiny, cramped music studio, where he taught voice, piano, and guitar to generations of students interested in Japanese popular music. I was then teaching a lecture course on the Japanese in Hawai'i in the Ethnic Studies Program (now Department) at the University of Hawai'i in Manoa. We routinely used *holehole bushi* lyrics to illustrate the difficult conditions faced by Japanese immigrants working on Hawaii's sugar plantations, especially during their first decades in the Islands from the 1880s into the 1930s. In 1981 Urata helped me write a modest article about the *holehole bushi*. Then, in 1984, Chris Conybeare and Joy Chong-Stannard invited Urata and me to participate in a special show about these songs in their series, *Rice and Roses*, for the Honolulu public television station, KHET. The popular ukulele performer

Herb Ohta, widely known as “Ohta-san,” accompanied Urata as he sang several lyrics on the program. Ohta was much in demand in both Hawai‘i and Japan and used *holehole bushi* in his extensive repertoire.

Harry Urata (1917–2009) was responsible for preserving and perpetuating the music for the *holehole bushi*. While dozens of lyrics circulated in various forms, no one had recorded them as they had been sung in the fields. In the 1960s he began taping interviews with aging immigrants who had sung them on rural plantations and in urban teahouses; he was a demanding interviewer, and his interviewees invariably complied. Had he not insisted, the music would have disappeared entirely. He had a treasure trove of materials on the *holehole bushi* and was determined to see that the genre be accorded the respect it deserved. He had grown to admire and appreciate the immigrants from Japan and saw the *holehole bushi* as wonderful expressions that shed considerable and unusual light on their experiences. He objected strenuously to attempts to whitewash or romanticize their gritty lives during the plantation era and wanted all people to value the wildly diverse facets of their experiences, warts and all. I agreed. In the 1980s he bequeathed his considerable collection of notes, interviews, recordings, transcriptions, and other ephemera to me to produce a published volume. It will forever haunt me that he died in December 2009, never to see this product. There is some minor comfort in the fact that before he died I was able to arrange for the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to acquire the collection and to arrange a ceremonial event to acknowledge his gift. He treasured that visit.

Holehole bushi are especially valuable as direct, unmediated expressions from the Japanese immigrants on Hawaii’s sugar plantations.¹ I believe we can extrapolate from their lyrics the beliefs, values, prejudices, dreams, and nightmares that should be accorded attention as critical elements from lived Japanese immigrant experiences on Hawaii’s sugar plantations.²

There is a tendency for ethnic historians, especially when memorializing ancestors who had paved the way or laid the foundations for later generations assimilating into the American mainstream, to craft narratives of linear, upward mobility. That mobility will often stress the extraordinary suffering and sacrifice of the immigrants who nonetheless endured the pain inflicted on them because of their race, class, and gender. And so it has been tempting to paint such a picture for Japanese Americans. For this group, there was an added indignity: the unconstitutional mass incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. The impulse to romanticize the innocence of this group, partly to dramatize the injustice, therefore became difficult to restrain. Among the historical casualties has been the near eradication of close ties between at least some issei and the rising military empire of Japan. This is a historical lacuna that has outlived its usefulness; scholars who understood the relationship elected not to highlight the fact to deflect potential critics who might have suggested that the incarceration was therefore justified. Unfortunately the image of the issei that has emerged is largely that of a generation that

suffered grievously but with great patience and humility, enduring enormous indignities in order to create better lives for their children and grandchildren and wisely deferring present gratification for future benefit. In all this it is sometimes acknowledged that issei men all too often brought with them cultural baggage, including old-world Meiji (Japan, 1868–1911) traditions, especially traditional patriarchy, which often consigned issei women to a lifetime of subservience and suffering.

These *holehole bushi* will challenge this emerging master narrative and complicate our current notions of this immigrant generation. It took me years to appreciate just how valuable these *holehole bushi* could be as primary historical documents composed and sung by immigrant workers themselves, especially since many clearly came from the perspectives of women whose voices were not readily available elsewhere. And it took time to understand that these observations, in four short, pithy lines, could be analyzed to reveal nuances of life and love, labor and lust among Japanese immigrants in relatively unvarnished and gritty detail. Then it was especially inspiring to chart the *holehole bushi* as they survived in the lives and memories of the immigrants, even into their retirement. This work owes its existence to Harry Minoru Urata, and it is gratefully dedicated to his memory. I hope others will appreciate Urata's insistence that the lives of Hawaii's Japanese immigrant sugar workers are best honored when they are considered in their nuanced complexity.

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Acknowledgments

This work owes its existence to Harry Minoru Urata, to whose memory it is gratefully dedicated and for whom a tribute is appended. While I served as director of the Smithsonian Institution Asian Pacific American Program, the Smithsonian Fellowship Committee provided support for the video production that accompanies this book. I thank the Woodrow Wilson Center for a Public Policy Scholar position, which allowed me to spend undivided time contemplating and writing parts of the end product. Decades ago Bamboo Ridge Press provided support for a project on Hawaii's issei literature that included a variety of genres, among them *holehole bushi*. These folk songs upstaged all others, however, and I hope Eric Chock, Darrell Lum, Wing Tek Lum, Marie Hara, and others will forgive me for allowing these folk songs to hijack the original endeavor. Chris Conybeare steadfastly promoted the value of the *holehole bushi* ever since he and Joy Chong-Stannard produced a documentary featuring Urata and me in 1984. Public Television station KHET in Honolulu contributed critical in-kind support for a documentary on the *holehole bushi*. I thank my former colleagues in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Hawai'i Manoa for their encouragement and their modeling of excellent activist scholarship, especially Marion Kelly, Davianna McGregor, Dean Alegado, Ibrahim Aoude, Noel Kent, Gregory Mark, Ulla Hasager, and our secretary, Sandy Izawa Chock, who kept us all on track. Brian Niiya, who directed the Resource Center at the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i, was most helpful on this and former efforts. Noriko Sanefuji, my Smithsonian Institution colleague who toils in the Work and Industry Division of the National Museum of American History, contributed much by way of background research and consultation. She has been a remarkable addition to the Smithsonian staff. Richard Kurin, Undersecretary for History, Art, and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution, has been an advocate of scholarship. My former colleagues in the Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Program endured years of suspense:

“How hard could it be?” That was the mantra of the group: Gina Inocencio, Krishna and Krista Aniel, Noriko Sanefuji, Ricky Leung, Francey Lim Youngberg, Suchin Adhlakha, and Terry Hong, as well as the many interns who brought life and joy to the office. There were, in addition, volunteers who offered support and solace, notably Gale Awaya McCallum. Well, it was hard, or at least long! After I left the Smithsonian in 2010, the Library of Congress installed me as Acting Chief of the Asian Division. While I was there, the reference librarians of the Japan Team put up with regular questions, which they properly pursued on their own time; thanks to Eiichi Ito, Kiyoyo Pipher, and Mari Nakahara. Ito-san was especially helpful. Generous assistance from several people allowed me to prepare the manuscript for publication. Sandra Kim formatted the immigration tables. Christa Walsh Odo created the Excel list of lyrics and tutored me through endless edits, a major contribution. Joyce (Kim) Lee was a truly critical factor, helping to edit an unwieldy manuscript into a final product; I am immensely grateful to her. At Oxford University Press, Caelyn Cobb was consistently supportive as was her successor, Adam Cohen. Editor Suzanne Ryan helped keep the project on track. I thank the two anonymous reviewers who offered significant suggestions to eliminate errors and improve the work. Minako Waseda was a thorough reviewer who combed the entire work and helped me craft a better manuscript. Betty Kam, Charles Meyers, and Ron Cox of the Bishop Museum were generous with historical photos. Laura Kina kindly allowed Oxford University Press to consider gorgeous art for the jacket cover. Enid Odo, as always, was a gentle and astute critic. As with all my work, the defects are mine alone.

About the Website

The website accompanying *Songs from the Cane Fields* includes three segments that are referenced in various appropriate parts of the text. They are all from videotaped interviews done by Chris Conybeare and Joy Chong-Stannard. The first features Harry Minoru Urata and the ukulele player Herb Ohta (Ohta-san); the second is from an interview of Asakura Katsue, who is featured in the text; the third is a song by Urata about Japanese immigrant women favoring prostitution with Chinese immigrant clients over meager wages provided by the plantations. There are other websites that include references to *holehole bushi*, but see, especially, <http://clear.uhwo.hawaii.edu/CanefieldSongs> which includes extensive interviews, photos, versions of songs, and other materials.

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Introduction

The *Holehole Bushi* from Hawai'i's Sugar Plantations

Yuko ka Meriken yō
Kaero ka Nihon
Koko ga shian no
Hawai koku

Go on to America
Return to Japan?
This is my dilemma
Here in Hawai'i

Sanjūgosen de yō
Hanahana yori mo
Pakesan to moimoi sur'ya
Akahi mahi
(hayashi kotoba)
Sono tok'ya chat'cha de, nuinui
ameame

Why work all day for
Thirty-five cents
When I can sleep with a Chinaman
For seventy-five cents!
Lots of sexy times! ♀

Folk songs are short stories from the souls of common people.¹ Some, like Mexican *corridos* or Scottish ballads reworked in Appalachia, spin tales of heroism or tragedy. Others, like African American blues or sorrow songs, look back to the slavery era and toward a troubled future. Folk songs reflect a wide variety of styles, themes, and traditions. They have been composed, sung, and passed on from generation to generation in oral traditions by anonymous “commoners” from the lower socioeconomic rungs of society. In Hawai'i there is widespread appreciation for the various heritages honored by perhaps a dozen major ethnic groups. In addition, a celebrated local society provides an occasionally thin veneer that binds groups into a common whole. But other than modest attention to Native Hawaiian traditions, there is scant reference to folk songs that have emanated from the experiences of immigrant groups in Hawai'i. All groups, including the Japanese, have brought and perpetuated folk songs from their homelands, but the *holehole bushi* are the only such songs created, nurtured and preserved by any immigrant group.

Japanese workers on Hawaii's plantations brought many songs from traditional Japan, including children's songs, work songs, drinking songs, and songs associated with the *obon* festivals, which celebrated the return of spirits of the departed every summer. But they also created their own versions of songs from their hometowns and villages.² For many Japanese American families, Hawaii's plantation camps constituted their hometowns over several generations. These communities became their *furusato* (old village or hometown), which became a theme unifying folk songs into contemporary times.³ The *holehole bushi* "Yuko ka Meriken," which appears at the beginning of this introduction, may be among the earlier songs, among many hundreds or thousands that were spontaneously composed and sung on Hawaii's sugar plantations. Its lyrics exemplify the intersection between local work and life and the global connection which the workers clearly perceived. The term *koku*, meaning "country" or "nation" in Japanese, may indicate that composers and singers understood they were in an independent kingdom. That kingdom was overthrown by a coup d'état in 1893, and the Islands were formally annexed by the United States in 1898. The lyrics suggest the immigrants understood that their options included not only clinging to the status quo but return to Japan or remigration to North America. The first historical account of Japanese immigrants in Hawai'i, published in 1900, included the classic verse of this iconic *holehole bushi*.⁴

The *holehole bushi* exist for us to appreciate because of a singular music teacher who was critically important in rescuing these songs from descent into obscurity. Harry Urata traveled the islands to tape-record dozens of these songs from immigrants who had sung them on sugar plantations. His lifelong commitment to preserve and perpetuate them and their significance made this book possible. Like other folk songs, *holehole bushi* were anonymously composed. They were widely sung across dozens of sugar plantations on Hawaii's five major islands for better than half a century, from at least the 1890s into the 1940s. This book presents and examines songs that were composed and sung as early as the late nineteenth century. *Holehole bushi*, like traditional Japanese poetry, quickly flourished almost as soon as the issei arrived in Hawai'i. Some *holehole bushi* were still being sung by issei toward the end of the twentieth century, while a handful are being perpetuated in Hawai'i and Japan by amateur and professional entertainers. We do not know exactly how these *holehole bushi* were transmitted among plantations or from cane fields to urban tea-houses. It is likely that the general movement of workers, thus far unstudied, was significant and played a role in widespread dissemination. Anecdotal evidence from interviews of issei workers indicate that moving several times during the course of several decades was not atypical.

In feudal Japan, even peasants took vacations to visit tourist spots or make pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist or Shinto sites. They often returned with popular songs picked up along the way or at their destinations. Perhaps more important were the various types of itinerant entertainers and vendors who visited all but the most isolated of villages. Among the

wandering minstrels, akin to the troubadours of medieval Europe, were the *goze*, blind female balladeers.⁵ Japan also had the *komusō*, wandering mendicant musicians who were officially part of a Zen Buddhist sect. They evidently played what has been described as “meditative solo” pieces that might not have appealed to broad audiences. Hawai‘i was either visited by *komusō* from Japan or had its own version of these groups, although little is known about them. While the *komusō* did not transmit folk songs, they did represent the fluidity of cultural exchange throughout both Japan and Hawai‘i. The movement of issei plantation workers among various plantations, then, could account for the rapid diffusion of *holehole bushi* throughout the Islands.

Inexplicably, issei folk song traditions survive only in Hawai‘i, despite the existence of similarly thriving communities on the West Coast of the United States as well as in parts of Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and Peru. In these diasporic societies, Japanese immigrants formed their own intact groups, some of them populated by people who had left the same regions in rural Japan.⁶ These communities shared the immigrant penchant for practicing traditional culture: poetry, dance, cuisine, alcohol, gambling, sports, and education. But somehow the creation and perpetuation of folk songs was unique to Hawai‘i. One reason might have been the sheer numbers and concentrations of Japanese men and women on Hawaiian sugar plantations, unlike in other areas which included smaller communities more geographically separated. Soon after the beginning of their large-scale importation as contract workers in 1885, laborers from Japan quickly



Figure 0.1 Japanese immigrant traveling musicians, *komusō*, at Camp 5 in Puunene, Island of Maui, ca. 1908. It is possible that this was a group from Japan. Photographer unknown.

became the majority of sugar workers in Hawaiʻi.⁷ By the turn of the twentieth century, more than sixty thousand Japanese workers constituted about 40 percent of the sugar workforce; they and their children made up more than one-third of the total population of the Hawaiian Islands. This may have constituted a critical mass for the *holehole bushi* to flourish and proliferate.⁸

In Hawaiʻi in the early 1900s there were over seventy plantations, many with multiple camps, often identifiable by their ethnically unified inhabitants. By then the United States had annexed the islands after having supported a military coup removing Queen Liliʻuokalani, the last reigning monarch of the Hawaiian Kingdom. For better and worse, Japanese Americans became the most populous ethnic group in Hawaiʻi for most of the coming century. Because folk songs require constant renewal through praxis—singing to keep the tunes and lyrics alive—the populations needed to be relatively secure and stable. This worked for villages in traditional Japan and, in some cases, still works in folk song bars and among professional or community-organized groups in cities and towns in contemporary Japan. Or the difference between Hawaii’s immigrant folk songs and their absence in other diasporas may lie in the fact that the *holehole bushi* were rescued from oblivion, whereas folk songs elsewhere did in fact die with their issei creators. Unlike the folk songs, however, there are many examples of poetry clubs (*haiku*, *tanka*, and *senryū*) and traditional singing or chanting (*shigin* and *naniwabushi*) among the issei in North and South America as well as in Hawaiʻi.⁹ Indeed the oldest existing haiku club in the world, including Japan, was the Shō-u-kai Haiku Club in Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaiʻi. Founded in 1904, this “Banana leaf–Rain” Haiku Club was active at least into the 1990s.¹⁰ Japanese communities throughout the diaspora created cultural groups of many varieties, but the practice of adapting and maintaining folk songs was unique to Hawaiʻi.

Similar to the *haiku*, *tanka*, and *senryū*, the short poems favored in Japanese tradition, *holehole bushi* began as alternative lyrics (*kaeuta*) for familiar melodies. That is, immigrant workers used familiar tunes but replaced a few words or lines or entire lyrics to suit their new environs.¹¹ Like these poetic forms, they have no meter, rhyme, assonance, or repeated consonant sounds, but those familiar with the language recognize a rhythmic beat.¹² *Holehole bushi* are composed of four lines of 7, 7, 7, 5 syllables like many traditional Japanese folk songs, especially those called *dodoitsu* and sometimes translated, disparagingly, as limericks.¹³ These four lines of lyrics are sometimes followed by *kakegoe*, “rhythmic but non-melodious shouts crucial to a song’s feelings,” or *hayashi kotoba*, which function in a similar fashion. Harry Urata traces the classic *hayashi kotoba*, accompanying some *holehole bushi*, to a particular folk song from Edajima, in Aki-gun, Hiroshima Prefecture: “ara sono wake chat’cha.”¹⁴ Toma Misa, one of the issei who had actually sung *holehole bushi* in the cane fields, reported that she used *hayashi kotoba* so that other workers could join in.¹⁵ As will be seen, some of the *hayashi kotoba* and *kakegoe* contain very brief messages in addition to performing musical functions.

While originally sung by immigrant workers in the fields, the precise musical origins of *holehole bushi* are uncertain. Urata firmly believed they are based on the rice-hulling songs (*tō-usuhiki uta* or *momizuri uta*) or the Hiroshima boatmen's songs (*sendō uta*). The journalist Kawazoe Kenpu explored the origins of the *holehole bushi* and included them in a collection of his essays, *Imin hyakunen no nenrin* (A Century of Japanese Immigration, 1968). In this piece, Kawazoe embarked on an excavation of potential *holehole bushi* origins. He listed, among them, songs from Hiroshima seaweed gatherers, peasant songs from the Yatsushiro region in Kumamoto Prefecture, and silk-spinning songs from the Hiroshima/Yamaguchi border. Kawazoe explained that a folk song expert from Japan thought the *momizuri uta* (rice-hulling song) from Hiroshima was the most persuasive candidate.¹⁶

Kawazoe cites a very early book, published in 1901, *Taiheigaku* (Songs of the Pacific), in which songs known as *kurebushi* were featured. *Kurebushi* were precursors to the *holehole bushi*, but it is not clear whether they were part of the Japanese tradition. One particular *kurebushi* was an early version of the classic *holehole bushi* that opens this volume:¹⁷

<i>Yuko ka Amerika yō</i>	<i>Shall I go on to America</i>
<i>Kaero ka Nihon</i>	<i>Or return to Japan</i>
<i>Koko ga shian no</i>	<i>This is my dilemma</i>
<i>Maui shima</i>	<i>On the Island of Maui</i>

The only difference between this early version and the one at the beginning of this introduction, which has become the iconic *holehole bushi*, is that the last line of the latter is “Hawai koku” or “Here in Hawai’i.” The Japanese term *koku* is explained later in greater detail as meaning a country or nation, thus possibly reflecting a period prior to forcible annexation by the United States.

One immigrant interviewed by Urata thought that the songs were more closely related to another form of boatmen’s songs, *rokogi uta* (sculling), which is also traced to Hiroshima.¹⁸ Since a large number of immigrants came from that prefecture, it would not be surprising to locate the origins of the *holehole bushi* in Hiroshima. To this day, many Hawai’i residents of Japanese descent, including those now seven or eight generations removed, trace their origins to the Hiroshima Prefecture. Many others arrived from Yamaguchi, Fukuoka, and Kumamoto prefectures as well as Okinawa, which had been an independent kingdom until forced into the Japanese Empire in 1879. Urata believed that sometime in the first decades of the twentieth century, these songs were brought into the tea-houses of the urbanizing Japanese community, where they acquired a more leisurely rhythm, ideally suited to the sake-drinking men and their geisha hostesses.

The *holehole bushi* were among many songs tracing their origins to the folk traditions of rural Japan. Japanese immigrants to Hawai’i came largely from rural backgrounds, where these traditional songs were

regularly sung. The *holehole bushi* are unique, however, as folk songs with a living tradition of development from the 1880s into the present. As in Japan, the issei toyed with the lyrics to reflect their direct experiences; hence many *holehole bushi* reflect on lives in the diaspora and were Hawai'i-based. Many immigrants also sang songs from their own villages that were identical or very similar to the lyrics in Japan.¹⁹ Part of the new, modern Japan, the issei arrived with relatively greater degrees of schooling, in contrast to other newcomers not only from peasant backgrounds in Asia but also from eastern and southern Europe. Due to the Meiji government's imposition of a universal and compulsory public education system in 1872, the Japanese who emigrated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were relatively educated working-class folks. As a result, there was a modest degree of literacy among most immigrants. Moreover, because poetry was routinely practiced by merchants, artisans, and some peasants, there were individual issei accustomed to this genre.

Japanese contract workers maintained strong ties to their homeland and families. Many lyrics lament the singers' decision to leave their villages and express longing for their contracts to end, allowing them to return. But these songs also reflect a rapid adaptation to a new society in which other ethnic groups were arranged in untidy hierarchical order—the origins of a unique multicultural society. In Hawai'i a small but powerful oligarchy of white planters and their families largely controlled the economy and society. Unlike many colonial powers, this white (*haole* in Native Hawaiian) ruling group sometimes intermarried with Natives from high-ranking families, the *alii*, with title to considerable landholdings. Other Native Hawaiians, the commoners, the *makaainana*, lived and worked in closer contact with the immigrants, including the Japanese as well as Portuguese, Chinese, Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, and Koreans. These newcomers, from areas beyond the “traditional” sending countries of western Europe, beginning with the Chinese in the 1840s and 1850s, elicited strong anti-immigrant sentiment both in the United States and in Hawai'i. Nativist whites were, by the turn of the twentieth century, clamoring for the United States to shut the door on immigration. Then, part of a long-term pattern, the urge for a “return” to more pristine white racial contours conflicted with demands for cheap labor. In Hawai'i the economy was supported by a booming sugar industry, and Japanese immigrants became the logical source for a stable workforce. The Japanese Meiji government negotiated the inclusion of women among these workers—approximately one in five—to avoid the problems incurred by the overwhelmingly male societies created by Chinese immigrants on the U.S. West Coast. But the unintended consequences included fierce competition for the women among the bachelors and a notable degree of autonomy among the women, who could select from a variety of suitors.

Some of the lyrics were obviously created by women workers, although men clearly composed and sang many of them. Many male interviewees in the 1960s, by then elderly retirees, enthusiastically belted out their versions of “Sleeping with the Chinaman” (at the top of this Introduction).

But a number of lyrics are so clearly from women's perspectives that they have become important expressions of gendered observations. To some extent, this became true because traditional folk songs in Japan, *min'yō*, were unusually free from gender restrictions; that is, both sexes were free to sing most songs. Most other performing art forms were and are bound by gender protocols, including Noh, Kabuki, and the world of *minzoku geinō*, or the more ritualized folk performing arts.²⁰ Women composed and sang lyrics while performing *holehole* work. Like many work songs, rhythmic singing allowed workers to share the weary hours of physical strain and numbing boredom.

Holehole work was an unpleasant task useful for maximizing sugar production; stripping dead or dying leaves directed more energy to the cane stalks to produce more juice and also provided fertilizer for the growing plants. *Holehole* work was more than demanding; it required workers to be in the hot fields for ten hours a day, six and a half days every week. Photos of the women doing *holehole* work show them covered from head to toe to protect against the blazing sun, against long sharp leaves with irritating hair that penetrated clothing and skin, and from hordes of stinging wasps (yellow jackets), centipedes, and scorpions. *Holehole* work was often assigned to women because, although demanding and nasty, it was considered less arduous than other tasks. There were more physically demanding jobs on the plantations, including cutting the cane (*kachiken*) and carrying (*hapaiko*) the heavy stalks to carts, trains, or flumes for transport to the mills. *Holehole* work fell into the category of relatively manageable labor, including weeding the fields (*hō hana*, *hana* being Hawaiian for "work"); irrigation (*hanawai*), on the other hand, required males, sometimes couples, who could tolerate lengthy stays in distant areas linked to springs, streams, or ditches and the physical ability to move heavy gates and wheels as well as the mounds of dirt controlling water flow to individual furrows. *Holehole bushi* are especially valuable since they are so direct and because they complement existing Japanese immigrant literature and documentation, which survive largely through the observations and perspectives of males.

As will be seen, women composed and sang these songs relatively free of the ideological constraints being imposed on their counterparts back in Japan. As Barbara Sato observed, by the turn of the twenty-first century, changing scholarship on Japanese women had begun to focus on "topics like the 'good wife and wise mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*) ideology, home, and family."²¹ And while the Meiji elite was focused on creating a "rich nation and strong military" (*fukoku kyōhei*), partly by indoctrinating females with the new national duty to serve, collectively and uniformly, as good wives and wise mothers, the women themselves, including the immigrants in Hawai'i, were acting in different, sometimes contrary ways. This was a moment in history when immigrant women could pay no heed to official Japanese "lessons" of obedience, humility, and chastity. Japanese immigrant women, thousands of miles from the homeland and living in different countries, were at a relatively safe distance from the growing power of national patriarchy in Japan.

I follow traditional usage in writing the Japanese names of most immigrant issei: family name followed by given name, for example, Kawazoe Kenpu or the Japanese government official Andō Tarō. Second-generation nisei have given names followed by family names, such as Harry Urata. I use macrons for long vowels, such as in *kurō* (suffering), but omit them in familiar words such as *shoyu* (soy sauce), place-names like Tokyo, and terms that have become familiar in Japanese American history, such as *bango*, the numbers assigned by plantations to their workers. Macrons are used for names of Japanese officials and visitors but not for names of the immigrants. Foreign terms like *obon* are italicized, but some words—such as anime, manga, geisha, and sake—are now sufficiently entrenched in the English language that they are not.

I have elected to use the following for Native Hawaiian words: Hawaiʻi includes the *okina*, which functions as a glottal stop. However, I delete the *okina* in *Hawaii's* and *Hawaiian*. The only other use of the *okina* is for the name of Hawaii's last monarch, the revered Queen Liliʻuokalani.

This project assembled every *holehole bushi* still available at the end of the twentieth century. I hope the lists of lyrics, alphabetically arranged both in English and Japanese and with the chapters in which they appear in this book, will be useful to readers who wish to learn more about specific songs. In some cases, as in chapter 6, songs can be traced to a specific composer, but the vast majority, and all the lyrics dating back to the plantation experience, are anonymous. I translated over two hundred songs and considered the historical contexts of these rich primary sources of immigrant experiences. The translation process was challenging. Many songs are multilingual, including a few that are almost entirely comprised of words in Hawaiian. Others make liberal use of English or English-inspired terms, including the then-emerging category of Hawaiian Creole English, which is called “pidgin” in modern and contemporary Hawaiʻi. Occasionally words from other immigrant languages, such as Portuguese, come into play. References to specific historical persons or events require substantial knowledge of Hawaii's history, especially its rich sugar and working class experiences. In the Japanese poetic tradition, some lyrics reference other meanings through puns or other word play. These problems are especially vexing when dealing with risqué or bawdy lyrics. Because they are so pithy, they are difficult to translate.²² I have tried to be as literal as possible, even to the line, but with an eye and ear to the aesthetic and ironic.²³ The results were sometimes surprising: the range of sentiments articulated in the lyrics is extremely broad, with some reflecting changes in the conditions in which the issei lived, from the squalid setting of early nineteenth-century plantation life and work to the respectable and relatively comfortable retirement circumstances of the post-World War II era.

Holehole bushi lyrics cover many aspects of issei lives: leaving Japan, arrival in Hawaiʻi, work and play, families and communities, love and lust, despair and defiance, cynicism and satire, satisfaction and regret. The chapters in this book are organized around these themes.

Chapter 1, “Japan to Hawai‘i,” places the history of the *holehole bushi* within the context of the global movements of Japan and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. The issei left Japan during the Meiji Era (1868–1912) and arrived on the sugar cane plantations of Hawai‘i just as their homeland’s military regime was expanding rapidly in Asia. The United States was also, simultaneously, increasing its power in the Pacific, including in Hawai‘i. As a result, the issei were caught in the racial animosities that arose from these global tensions. Influenced by Japan’s successful military efforts, issei could be arrogant toward non-Japanese plantation workers and simultaneously resentful of the humiliation they suffered at the hands of the white *haole* elite. The former included Chinese, Filipino, Puerto Rican, and even Okinawans who were not accepted as “authentic” Japanese by many immigrants from the “main” islands.²⁴

Chapter 2, “World of Work,” discusses the critical value of work songs in Japanese culture. Since *holehole bushi* originated in the cane fields, most of the lyrics about work comment on the nature of those particular tasks and not in the mills. Here I describe the work on the sugar plantations and the themes arising in lyrics of the *holehole bushi*. Just getting by was one major theme. When the work became too onerous or tedious, issei workers considered moving away or moving on. In addition to returning to Japan, they considered new opportunities on other sugar or pineapple plantations or a variety of other jobs, including as entrepreneurs or laborers. Many issei planned to work for three years, as stipulated by early contracts, before returning to their villages. The lyrics reflect issei pondering their options, sometimes listing specific plantations or islands as potential destinations. While some issei stayed in one location, many others moved to other plantations on the same or different islands. At times they moved together with spouses or lovers. Others escaped or deserted on their own.

Chapter 3, “Despair and Defiance,” delves into the brutish conditions of living and working on the plantations and the various ways workers coped with harsh realities. While many immigrants resolved to make the best of difficult situations, others resorted to escape in the form of traditional male excesses: sake, *onna*, and *bakuchi* (alcohol, women, and gambling). This largely male-dominated world was one in which issei spent most of their time toiling in the cane fields under the oppressive supervision of their field overseers, usually referred to by their Native Hawaiian titles, *luna*. Finding no relief from the plantation justice system or from the Japanese government, which turned a deaf ear to their pleas to secure better treatment and pay, many men turned to alcohol, prostitutes, and gambling, all of which were encouraged, or at least not actively discouraged, by plantation management as well as their police systems. Issei resistance to the degradation of the plantations was expressed at different levels, from passive acts faking sickness, for example, by drinking soy sauce to induce fever, to physical acts of retaliation toward the *luna* overseers or destruction of property, as well as organized strikes protesting low pay or unfair work conditions.

Importantly, many lyrics were composed by women who endured hardships both as wives and workers on the plantation. Some lyrics, however, demonstrate independence and defiance; women divorced or abandoned their husbands with some regularity in order to join gangs, escape with lovers, or simply leave unsatisfactory relationships.

Chapter 4, “Love and Lust,” explores the formation of lasting bonds and families as well as lawless promiscuity under frontier conditions. The *holehole bushi* discussed in this chapter undercut standard narratives describing the issei generation as diligent, hard-working, patient, self-sacrificing, and law-abiding. The lyrics reveal a more realistic range of human qualities than these stereotypical images. Love and lust were important aspects of issei life in the difficult world of the plantations. These workers, after all, were largely in their late teens into their late thirties. During years of lonely struggle on the plantations, many bachelors saved their money or borrowed funds to arrange for marriages with women in Japan. Disappointment and fraud were inevitable in some of these picture-bride arrangements conducted through the exchange of letters and photographs. This process emerged from the Gentlemen’s Agreement (1907–8) between the United States and Japan, which ended the relatively free flow of Japanese laborers into the United States. The Agreement did, however, permit the entry of immediate family members, including spouses. The new system closely mimicked the traditional arranged marriage system customary in Japan. And, as in Japan, it seems that there was an inverse relationship between class and women’s rights: the higher the status, the more the women were constrained by family and social restrictions. As a result, women from working and peasant classes found, at least in conjugal relations, a greater degree of autonomy. Sham marriages, affairs, desertion (usually by the wife), and wife stealing (*kakeochi*) apparently were not rare. The skewed male-to-female ratio was certainly an underlying factor in these behaviors. The bawdy nature of some of the lyrics reflects the background of the issei who came from villages with long traditions of earthy and direct expressions of sexuality. Ultimately these *holehole bushi* represent significant, albeit less visible and more pungent, elements of Japanese American heritage.

Chapter 5, “Reflections,” focuses on *holehole bushi* expressing reactions to life in Hawai‘i, from feelings of regret to thoughts on life and its paradoxes. Many lyrics lament unfortunate decisions or bad fortune. Others celebrate good fortune at the end of a good harvest or after lifetimes of struggle. The initial goal of most issei was to make enough money to return to their villages in glory and live out their lives in relative security, if not prosperity. Some succeeded but many were never able to fulfill this dream; instead, they worked for decades on Hawai‘i’s plantations. Too many succumbed to the harsh conditions, an unfortunate end described in some songs. A few lyrics in this work were directly from traditional Japan; the issei simply modifying their versions (*kaeuta*) to suit the new plantation setting. Other *holehole bushi* expressed a sense of accomplishment, or, at the very least, some degree of satisfaction in the field or in plantation life.

The issei who survived the hardships were grateful for tranquil retirements and established families. They reflected upon comrades who had come to a tragic end: buried as “fertilizer” or “dirt” and metaphorically enhancing the sugar yield. Some simply looked back upon decades of work, waxing nostalgic for a homeland they were destined never again to see.

Chapter Six, “A Last Hurrah,” is devoted entirely to issei submission of *holehole bushi* in response to a contest sponsored by the Japanese language newspaper, the *Hawaii Times* in September 1960. Several hundred responses were submitted by an aging immigrant generation reflecting upon its stormy past and contemplating its place in the intertwined histories of Hawai‘i, Japan, and the world. The lyrics of the submissions demonstrate a strong sense of collective identity, forged through shared experiences. The songs also represent the ongoing cultural vitality of this diasporic community. Taking stock of their lives, these issei expressed nostalgia regarding the homeland and family, recalled oppression and defiance, lamented lovers lost to circumstance or unscrupulous rivals. Among the most poetic were *holehole bushi* remembering comrades who never survived plantation life. Most songs were bittersweet recollections of difficult times capped by relief and satisfaction toward the end of their lives. The *Hawaii Times* contest thus provides us with a snapshot in time, 1960, a rare glimpse into the collective psyche of an aging generation of immigrants.

Chapter 7, “Renaissance of the *Holehole Bushi*,” discusses the unlikely recuperation of this genre from almost certain oblivion. While *holehole bushi* were considered interesting and entertaining by plantation workers, everyone assumed the songs would not survive. But there is a traceable genealogy. Some of the songs in this chapter respond to the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, which for the first time permitted Japanese immigrants to become naturalized U.S. citizens. By the 1960s Harry Urata was playing a decisive role through his pursuit of issei who had actually sung *holehole bushi* in the cane fields. He taped interviews and songs across the island chain. As a result, we have various versions of the songs as they were sung by the immigrants. Otherwise the melodies would have gone missing. He inspired the production of the award-winning film *Picture Bride*, featuring two young women who worked on sugar plantations. The filmmaker Kayo Hatta acknowledges Urata and his collection of *holehole bushi* as central to her film treatment. At the same time, Urata was sowing the seeds of a remarkable renaissance with his teaching. One of his students, Allison Arakawa, eventually won the 2000 NHK song contest conducted in Honolulu, resulting in wider audience exposure of *holehole bushi*.

While the focus here is on the *holehole bushi* lyrics themselves, the book also relies on family histories, oral histories, and accounts from the prolific Japanese-language press. Scholars and students can use this work in comparative migration history, women’s history, labor history, and ethnic/racial movements within national and international contexts. Asian Americans will discover some unique characteristics of this early immigrant generation as well, hopefully, as the universal traits of communities living