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# Haiku's Reception and Practice in Contemporary North American Poetry

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## Haiku's Reception and Practice in Contemporary North American Poetry

Ayako Takahashi and Judy Halebsky

### Part 1: The Translation and Reception of Haiku

In the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the Meiji government implemented a wealth and military strength policy. This policy invited employed foreigners from western countries to Japan in order to modernize the nation by importing western laws, technologies and systems. Through these employed foreigners, Japanese literacy and literature were abruptly introduced into western countries. The translation of haiku in French influenced Symbolist poets and the translation in English also greatly influenced Imagist poets in England and the United States. The term haiku, it has been used since Shiki Masaoka. Before him, the words of *haikai* and *hokku* were brought into use in western countries. The term *haikai* comes from a form of collaborative poetry called *haikai renga* or in shortened form, simply *renga*. A *renga* that is thirty-six verses long is called a *kasen*. Matsuo Basho developed *haikai renga* and made the first verse, *hokku* independent and highly established. Later, haiku was established as the Japanese fixed form of verse which contains 5-7-5 syllables and a *kigo* season marker. Shirane Haruo begins his book titled *Traces of Dreams*, "Interest in Matsuo Basho (1644-94), perhaps the best known Japanese poet in both Japan and the West, is driven by a large population," and "the translation of Basho's poems and travel literature, especially *Narrow Road to the Interior* (*Oku no hosomichi*) have been repeatedly translated into English." (Shirane 1) Shirane writes about Basho further.

His popularity is such that a book containing a hundred different English translations of the frog poem has been translated. For many American school children, haiku—or some English variant of it—is their first exposure to poetry, if not to creative composition. In this global age, haiku may in fact be Japan's

most significant literary export. (Shirane 1)

As Shirane points out, there are many translations of Basho and in today's schools American children bravely and freshly write haiku. Haiku went across the ocean more than one hundred years ago and it can be considered, "Japan's most significant literary export."

This article traces the chronological development of haiku translation, which includes Imagism and haiku, the transitional period around the 1950's, the emergence of English Haiku and contemporary haiku practice. To examine the influence of haiku in contemporary American poetry, the discussion includes west coast free verse poets whose work draws from Basho's haiku in different ways.

As Shirane points "The western reception of haiku and of Basho's poetry, which has been deeply influenced by modern Japanese approaches to haiku, has been even more deeply colored by subjective/ objective critical discourse, particularly as a result of the Imagists, who appeared in the 1910s, and the North American haiku movement, which emerged in the 1960s." (Shirane 41) The Imagists were a small group of English and American poets—Richard Aldington, H.D. Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, D.H.Lawrence, John Gould Fletcher, F.S.Flint, William Carlos Williams and others. In March of 1913, F.S. Flint advocates the rules of Imagism in his, "Doctrine of the Image."

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. (Johns 129)

"Doctrine of the Image" seems to relate with the rules of haiku. "Direct treatment of the 'thing'" evokes or connects to the fresh images in haiku. "To compose in sequence of the musical phrase" also indicates a breaking of the rules of western fixed form verse and moves into the free verse. At the same time, this is reminiscent of 5-7-5 syllable structure. The doctrine suggests stressing both "concentration,

directness, precision” and “visual, dominant image or succession of related images.” (Shirane 42) The next quotation is the short poem by Pound based on the poem of Moritake Arakida, “In a station of the Metro.”

#### In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Pound 95)

The relationship between this poem and Moritake’s has already been discussed so I will not mention it here. The poem is divided into two parts. One part is “an abstract or at least relatively visualized statement.” (Miner 173) The second part is “petals on a wet, black bough.” In this simple form two images are overlapped. As Minor points out, this creates “discordia concors” which is a unity achieved through combining disparate or conflicting elements. Pound uses the super-pository technique. Donald Keene writes about Japanese poetry in his book titled *Japanese literature: An Introduction for Western Readers* and briefly explains how the two elements are combined.

the *haiku*, for all its extreme brevity, must contain two elements, usually divided by a break marked by what the Japanese call a “cutting word” (*kireji*). One of the elements may be the general condition—the end of autumn, the stillness of the temple grounds, the darkening sea—and the other the momentary perception. The nature of the elements varies, but there should be the two electric poles between which the spark will leap for the *haiku* to be effective; otherwise it is no more than a brief statement. That is the point which has been missed by such Western imitators of the haiku form as Amy Lowell, who saw in the haiku its brevity and suggestion, but did not understand the methods by which the effects were achieved. (Keene 40-41)

Keene mentions that there are two elements: “the general condition” and the

“momentary perception.” He emphasizes that “there should be the two electric poles between which the spark will leap for the *haiku* to be effective.” Keene also cites Lowell’s “A Lover” and “To a Husband.” Lowell read and found inspiration in Lafcadio P. Hearn’s stories. She wrote haiku based on some of his stories. Keene criticizes Lowell’s poem arguing that “the words are poetic, but the verses do not have the quality of haiku.” As the Imagists popularized haiku, some Western poets imitated the haiku form but it was difficult to follow the haiku rules and write their own haiku.

Next, I will discuss the other example of an Imagist poet, Williams. He advocated for a concept of images that corresponds with haiku as, “no ideas but in things.” This concept still informs contemporary American poets. Williams was influenced by pictures, wrote his poems like pictures and went on to advocate for objectivist poetry.

#### THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens. (Williams 277)

“THE RED WHEELBARROW” is a short free verse without a 5-7-5 syllable count that has a contrast of the colors of red and white. In keeping with Keene’s guidelines, the general condition is “a red wheel barrow” and “beside the white chickens” and the momentary perception is “gazed with rain water.” The relationship between “a red wheel barrow” and “gazed with rain water” is so momentary that it

evokes the haiku form. However, Williams only depicts the objects directly as what he saw and does not address cultural elements such as Zen. Interestingly, Williams' approach to images is similar to Shiki's technique of sketching. Next, I'd like to examine how haiku is translated after the Imagists.

After the Imagist movement, Kenneth Yasuda, Harold G. Henderson, and R.H. Blyth bring haiku into a phase referred to as the transitional period, which leads to the starting of English haiku. Yasuda handed in his dissertation about haiku to Tokyo University in 1955 and published later *The Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature, Histories, and Possibilities in English, with Selected Examples*. In his book Yasuda asks, "Do the English-speaking people understand haiku?", "Do they write haiku in English?", "Do the English haiku have any form?" He answers and writes "[M]y purpose, then is to try to see and explore the possibilities of haiku in English by analyzing its nature and its unifying aesthetic principles so that we can understand it (Yasuda xvi) Yasuda's great achievement is the definition of the haiku moment, "A haiku moment is a kind of aesthetic moment—a moment in which the words which created the experience and the experience itself can become one. The nature of a haiku moment is anti-temporal and its quality is eternal, for in this state man and his environment are one unified whole, in which there is no sense of time." (Yasuda 24-25) Understanding the haiku moment allows English-speaking people to write haiku by stressing both related images and awareness of "momentary perception." Blyth's accomplishment is to introduce the English-speaking writers with a basic knowledge of haiku to more sophisticated aspects of haiku. Through Blyth's four-volume *Haiku*, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder, who are considered part of the Beat Generation of the 1950's and the 1960's learned haiku. Blyth teaches haiku as Zen and the Beat poets all read his books. With the popularity of Zen in the United States, Blyth's books were considered to be the "bible" for haiku lovers. The following is quoted from Blyth's *Haiku Volume 1*.

Haiku are to be understood from a Zen point of view. What this is may be gathered more or less directly from this volume, and perfectly because indirectly from the verses themselves. (Blyth iii)

This quotation allows us to understand haiku from Zen and shows that Blyth's Haiku "brings the classical traditions of haiku and Zen to the West." (*Haiku Volume 1*, xii) Haiku reaches the West coast poets through Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder, who learned Zen from D.T.Suzuki. Kerouac is said to be a pioneer of the American Haiku movement. He wrote more than one hundred haikus in his notes from 1956 to 1966. Kerouac made the term haiku plural in English. The characteristic of his haiku is clear images because he corresponds haiku to pictures. Wishing to write correct haikus, he writes his novel, *The Dharma Bums* dedicated to Han Shan (寒山). In his novel there is the scene that Japhy Ryder reads haiku. Japhy personifies Gary Snyder and "a new hero of American culture." (*The Dharma Bums* 29) Japhy quotes Shiki's "The Sparrow hops along the veranda, with wet feet." This novel was read not only in the United States but also all over the world. The American haiku movement gained attention because of this novel. Kerouac writes the following symbolic haiku:

In the chair  
I decided to call Haiku  
By the name of Pop (*Book of Haikus*, xxxii)

This symbolic haiku does not follow the rules of kigo and 5-7-5 syllables. Kerouac writes haiku freely and as a parody mixed haiku and senryu. His symbolic haiku above is evidence that Japanese traditional culture was received as a "pop" or popular culture in North America. Though this was also called Beat Generation Haiku later, Kerouac's "pop" points to the counter culture that arose in the 1960's in the United States.

Another example is an African-American novelist, Richard Wright, who wrote 817 haikus late in his life. After his death, *Haiku: This Other World* was published. Surprisingly, Wright keeps to the rules of haiku and writes haiku with 5-7-5 syllables and kigo.

In the silent forest  
A woodpecker hammers at

The sound of silence. (Wright 316)

As with many of Wright's haiku, this haiku exhibits his precise observation and his exquisite sensitivity. It also evokes Basho's frog poem. Hakutani writes "Wright depicted nature in his haiku is point of view he had acquired from Buddhism." (Hakutani 110) Wright was interested in Japanese culture and came to understand the similarity between African religion and Zen.

An American poet, Robert Hass inquires about why the interest in haiku has so far corresponded with an interest in Zen. The next quotation is related to the problem of aligning the reception of haiku with the practice of haiku.

My personal theory, not especially well-informed, about *kigo*, is that their origin is shamanic, animist, and ritualistic, that the words for 'winter blast' and 'spring blossoms' and 'summer shower' were intended at one time to call forth the living spirits manifested in those natural phenomena. American poets began to take interest in haiku around the same time at which they became interested in the translation of Native American songs, and the similarity between them was often noted. I think the reason is that they bear the traces of a similar function. (Hass 306)

For Hass, the function of *kigo* relates to spirits in the natural world. He points out that while poets were looking toward haiku for inspiration they were also looking toward Native American traditions. This was in the 1950's and 1960's. Many of the Beat poets looked outside of their cultural heritage for philosophical and creative nourishment. One example of this span of influences is Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* which incorporates aspects of Buddhism and Native American traditions. Drawing from Native American traditions was later criticized as controlling representations of native communities. Snyder and other Beats, such as Allen Ginsburg went on to become serious practitioners of Buddhism although they were raised in Judeo Christian communities. Hass' comments reflect the spiritual and natural world connection of *kigo* and the forces that translated and interpreted haiku



in North America particularly modernism and multiculturalism.

After the transitional period, the next stage for haiku is contemporary haiku practice. Cor Van Den Heuvel encountered haiku through Blyth and Snyder in 1958 and he then brought haiku into contemporary practice. In 1971, he joined the American haiku Association established by Harold G. Henderson and Leroy Canterman and worked on editing anthologies of haiku for a long time. Finally in 1978 he became president of American Haiku Association and in 2002 received Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Award. Heuvel argues "The Imagists did bring the ideals of concision and clarity into English-language poetry as a result of their partial knowledge of haiku, but the birth of real haiku in English had to wait until the second half of the century." He further points out that "Most early translators were in fact baffled by haiku's brevity and padded out their translations with too many words, trying to explain the haiku instead of just translating it." (*Baseball Haiku*, xxvii) He concludes that it took more than 50 years to give birth to English Haiku. He notices the difficulties and problems of translating haiku into English specially putting it into seventeen syllables. On the whole, he is doubtful of haiku's earlier translation. For Heuvel, one of the accomplishments of contemporary haiku is creating the new genre, "baseball haiku". The anthology *Baseball Haiku* includes haiku concerning baseball both for the Americans and the Japanese. For example, Shiki and contemporary haiku poet, Arima Haruo. With its distance from the appreciation of Zen, the birth of baseball haiku is an example of haiku's Americanization.

The Imagists brought haiku to English-speaking and French-speaking people focusing on short poems, related images and super-pository technique. Imagist poets imitate haiku without following the rules of haiku. Some of Williams poems resonant objective sketching that Shiki and his disciple Takahama Kyoshi practiced. Their poems do not contain cultural criteria such as Zen. According to Blyth's four volume books, haiku comes to be understood by Zen. Blyth's view influenced the Beat poets and the haiku of the Beat Generation. Through the practices of Kerouac and Wright, haiku goes into this new stage; haiku is integrated with popular culture in the United States which leads to haiku's Americanization.

## Part 2: Basho's Haiku in Contemporary North American Poetry

Basho's writings and the tradition of haiku are widely known in a simplified way within contemporary North American literary circles. Specialized groups of haiku writers have a more nuanced understanding of Basho, his writings, and the tradition of haiku. However, conversations and flows of knowledge among haiku poets in North America are somewhat separate from conversations on haiku among free verse poets. The 2013 publication of *Haiku in English: The First One Hundred Years* from Norton, a major publisher, celebrates the lineage of haiku in English from Ezra Pound and the early Imagists up to poets writing today. The volume includes Jim Kacian's essay, *An Overview of Haiku in English* that traces the development of English haiku. Kacian names free verse poets as "outliers" to the lineage of English Haiku:

*Haiku has also profited from the work of writers who have secured their primary reputations in other forms.... this interest in and contribution to the genre by mainstream poets has continued into the present. Although oftentimes their unfamiliarity with what has been done in the past half-century marks their work as outdated or heavy-handed...(346-7)*

The outlier writers that Kacian is naming include what he calls 'mainstream poets' who while writing haiku-inspired work are known largely as free verse poets. Jack Kerouac and Richard Wright are two major writers whose work shows a complex understanding of haiku. They are best known as fiction writers. Their work was not as influential among free verse poets as it might have been had they been best known as poets.

Among free-verse poets, the haiku tradition is interpreted in a variety of ways that include the practice of Buddhism, the study of haiku within Japanese literature, a connection to Japanese culture through travel or family members, and haiku influences through Imagist and Beat poets. Jane Hirshfield comes to Basho's work through a study of Japanese literature and Zen Buddhism. Roy Kiyooka's work is influenced by Wallace Stevens and the Imagist movement as well as travel to Japan and Japanese language skills as a Nisei heritage speaker of Japanese. Giovanni Singleton draws on haiku, Alice Coltrane's music and Tibetan Buddhism to write innovative,

free verse poems. The work of these poets connects to the practice of haiku in different ways.

Jane Hirshfield (1953-) is a preeminent contemporary poet. As an undergraduate, she studied Japanese Literature with *noh* and *kyogen* scholar Karen Brazell. After graduation, Hirshfield trained extensively in Zen at the San Francisco Zen Center (Harris p 199). Bringing together these experiences, she has written many celebrated volumes of poetry, translated court poetry with Mariko Aratani, and published numerous essays. Evidence of her interest in haiku is found throughout her writings and is particularly evident in her 2011 extended essay, "The Heart of Haiku". Reading translations of haiku and essays on haiku are ways to gain an intellectual knowledge of haiku and Japanese literature. Hirshfield, however, stands out because she has brought this knowledge into her practice of poetry. Her training in Zen has enabled her to embody a creative process informed by the practice of haiku.

In Hirshfield's free verse poems, the influence of haiku is evident. Her poems, precise and spare, often move from exterior image to interior realization. Her 2011 book, *Come, Thief*, has a series of short poems titled "Fifteen Pebbles." One poem in these series is called "Opening the Hands Between Here and Here". The poem reads:

On the dark road, only the weight of the rope.  
Yet the horse is there. (Hirshfield 70)

This is a quiet, haunting poem that mixes the image of dark night with the tactile sense the resistance on a rope leading a horse. These simple, straightforward details, allude to a larger situation. The poem evokes the burdens that we carry and the limits of our human perception. In the dark night are things we cannot see. The weight on the rope offers a sensory awareness of the unknown and the mysterious. This largely suggestive poem functions in ways similar to a haiku; it is concise yet expansive and shares insights about our human condition.

For the most part, Hirshfield writes single, short poems that achieve a resonate poetic moment or insight. This reflects writing as a Zen practice in that the poems

are brief moments of experience in the here and now. Hirshfield is a standout example of an American poet who embodies the aesthetics and sensibilities of haiku voiced through free verse poetry. In contact, Kiyooka's work translates other aspects of haiku practice.

Roy Kiyooka (1926-1994) was a painter and poet born in Canada to Japanese parents. He is most well-known as a painter prominent in the 1970s. With an established reputation, and despite having limited formal education, he landed a job teaching fine arts. As soon as painting was his paid job, he quit painting and focused on writing poetry. He wrote numerous books, many of which have visual and graphic qualities. In contrast to Hirshfield's work, which predominantly focuses on single poems, Kiyooka's books include travel journals in the form of poem sequences that mix verse and prose including *Kyoto Airs*, *Wheels*, and *StoneDGloves*. Of these, *Wheels: A Trip Thru Honshu's Backcountry* connects most directly with Basho's haibun travel journals.

*Wheels* has both formal and thematic connections to haiku. The journal or poem sequence records a trip the poet took with his father and an interpreter in 1969. They traveled from Kyoto to Izumo, Hiroshima, Miyajima and back to Kyoto through Shikoku along the inland sea. The word 'backcountry' in the title, echoes the word *oku* for interior or rural area in a direct reference to Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi* or *Narrow Road to the Interior*. Like Basho's journal, *Wheels* has descriptive prose sections followed by short lines of verse. Kiyooka created this journal on the trip and revised it for years afterward. In these revisions, Kiyooka maintained the rough, happenstance quality of the writing. Like Basho, Kiyooka writes haiku based on famous, historically significant places, and addresses themes of impermanence. They visit Kintai Bridge in Yamaguchi and Kiyooka writes,

Pictures  
of the Floating World...  
Portals of  
our Passage through  
it, I thought...

winding the film up (Pacific Windows 162)

Like haiku, this short poem has two images, the picture of the floating world and the winding of the film, that contrast in tone and temporality. There is word play on the concept of a picture as both an imagined image and a photographic image. Thematically, the poem addresses impermanence by naming our passage through the world. It also voices resistance to this impermanence by attempting to record or hold onto the present in a picture.

*Wheels* does not adhere strictly to haiku conventions of season markers and phrase length but it does celebrate the *haibun* form and a cultivated attention to the poetic moment. Elsewhere in his writing, Kiyooka directly cites Wallace Stevens, a major twentieth century poet influenced by Imagism (Shirane 41). It follows that Kiyooka's writing are shaped by interpretations of haiku in Imagism through Stevens' work and also some familiarity of the formal qualities of Basho's travel journals.

giovanni singleton (1969-) is part of a new generation of west coast poets whose writing is shaped by multiple lineages of American poetry including haiku. She was born in Richmond, Virginia and moved to California to study poetry. Her work shows the influence of Gary Snyder and the Beat poets. She has studied poetry with Jane Hirshfield and Joanne Kyger. The influence of haiku in her work is subtle and reflects how aspects of haiku have been acculturated into west coast, free verse poetry. She explains, "haiku sentiment is more influential in my work than haiku itself. I'm interested in how haiku has spread out and permeated contemporary poetry."<sup>1</sup> singleton is not concerned with the formal qualities or rules of haiku but rather is interested in the poetic experience created by haiku. Like Gary Snyder, her work brings together multiple faith traditions. singleton's poems reference Buddhism, Hinduism, and Black Baptist faith traditions (singleton 75). Her work also embraces concrete poetry (visual poetry) and music. The influence of haiku is evident in a number of poems in her 2012 award winning book, *Ascension*.

singleton wrote a series of poems following the death of Jazz musician and spiritual leader Alice Coltrane. Structured as a journal, there are 49 short poems, one

for each day that Coltrane's spirit was in the bardo. This concept reflects a Buddhist belief that in the time following death, the spirit is in an intermediary space between death and rebirth. The poems are spare and attend to subtle changes in the seasons. The influence of Joanne Kyger is evident in the chronological naming of the poems. "Day 30" begins in observation:

{021007.saturday}

DAY 30

in the Spring  
garden, Bessie  
the outdoor  
cat claws  
at her make-  
believe mouse.

On one level, the "make-believe mouse" describes reality in a direct observation. On another, it points to an illusion of reality. The poem then pivots to a quiet restrained interior interpretation of this image:

now is  
not the  
day for  
growing figs.

This last stanza has a resigned tone. The poem evokes a realization by bringing together an attention to the present moment through two images. This realization, however, remains mysterious. The poem functions in the contrast of these images and does not have an over arching narrative frame. singleton's poems show multiple formal influences including free-verse poets influenced by haiku and her own training in Tibetan Buddhism. singleton's work is an example of how haiku has imbued the aesthetics of free verse poetry.

Haiku has been influential in North American poetry for more than a century.

This influence lives in a variety of spaces such as formal and aesthetic qualities. It also includes the thematic qualities of poems and approaches to broader aspects of cultivating poetic attention. The poetry and broader creative practice of Jane Hirshfield, Roy Kiyooka, and giovanni singleton illuminate ways that poets in North America access the tradition of haiku and interpret it within their poetics. In Hirshfield's poems there is an interrelation of images that offers sensory awareness. In Kiyooka's writing the juxtaposition of images evokes impermanence while in singleton's poems this juxtaposition draws attention to the present moment. These poets are employing aspects of haiku in free verse poetry. As singleton points out, her goal is to create sentiment of haiku or aesthetic experience of haiku. These free verse poems use the techniques of both haiku and free verse to create a poetic moment. The formal structures of haiku such as 5-7-5 syllable count and one season marker are largely set aside however there is a connection to the sentiment of haiku. These are just a few examples of the many contemporary poets writing in conversation with Basho and the tradition of haiku.

#### Notes

- (1) Personal interview with giovanni singleton. January, 2016.

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