

Women's Voice: Senryu Has Its Place

Susan Galletti Campion, San Diego, California

Senryu is at a crossroads in its development as a unique genre in contemporary English Language (EL) writing. There is, in fact, great debate over its place within the larger grouping of Japanese short-form poetry (haiku, tanka, kyoka, etc.). While senryu was originally created by men, and largely dominated by men over the past two centuries, women are increasingly involved in debating, discussing, and describing senryu's place in EL short-form poetry.

In September 2011, I embarked on a journey to learn more about the senryu form of poetry—its origins, history, and evolution as a writing form. I invited seventeen other women from around the world to join me as a learning community to study senryu and its cousins, sometimes referred to as stepsisters, kyoka and senryu-haiga. The result of our work is a first-of-its-kind anthology published in November 2012 entitled *Pieces of Her Mind: Women Find Their Voice in Centuries-Old Forms*.

During this journey, I corresponded with well-respected authors, editors, and publishers in the genre of short Japanese poetry forms, including Alexis Rotella, Jane Reichhold, Liam Wilkinson, Ce Rosenow, Chen-ou Liu, Gabi Greve, and Alan Summers. I participated in an AHA Poetry Forum with Jane, Chen-ou, Gabi, and others where we discussed issues surrounding the senryu form. Several of these authors contributed thoughts and comments for this essay.

Over two years, we women created a learning community with lively discussion and debate. Learning about senryu has continued, for me, and us, beyond the publication of the anthology. This essay summarizes my current and considered thoughts and opinions, and I would like to hear yours, so we can continue to learn.

I'll start with a few assumptions and biases:

1. Dialogue and debate are healthy, professional, and extremely important in the writing world. I welcome such dialogue and believe it informs all of our work.
2. A woman's voice enlivens, spices up, and gives depth to the body of work around the senryu form.
3. Just as haiku writers want haiku accepted as a poetic form by mainstream poets, serious senryu writers would like the same for senryu.
4. All writers exploring the genres of Japanese short poetry should have a grasp of nuances of various forms, and be willing to understand and incorporate their subtle dynamics and differences in an intelligent way, before publishing and labeling their poems.

Selected History of Women Poets and Senryu

Historically, women writers in multiple genres have been influential in how people think, and how they write. Women writers like Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Jo Freeman, Maya Angelou, Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Muriel Rukeyser come to mind. Since the early 19th century, women activists have sought to counter the accepted "male" point of view in the existing culture. They have not been shy about expressing their voices in writing. In some cases, writing was the only vehicle for them to express their voice. Some used "pen" names of men.

I would offer that speaking in their own voice offers contemporary women a wonderful opportunity to counter the male origin of the literary genre senryu. As Truth Sojourner stated, way back in 1851: "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, together women ought to be able to turn it right side up again."¹

Senryu became an acknowledged short Japanese form, dating from 1746, when men chose to use satire and irony to comment on their observations of human conditions, especially as regards women. They did not sign their names.

The history of senryu suggests its colorful origins. The word itself means "river willow," which was slang for "prostitute."

The origin of the form is largely attributed to Senryu (1718–1790), the pen name of Karai Hachiemon, who held contests to complete senryu poems. He wrote two or three lines of poetry and asked men to add a line or two to create a senryu or kyoka. Both forms have been dominated by men throughout the ages, and senryu clubs in Japan still exist.²

However, while senryu in Japan is experiencing a resurgence, in my research, I found no senryu written by women writers until fairly recently, other than senryu written by Japanese women in American internment camps during World War II, and Taira Sōsei’s anthology, *Ryōran josei senryū* (Midori Shobō, 1997). Translations by Hiroaki Sato are excerpted from his “White Dew, Dreams, & This World” (as yet unpublished), an anthology of Japanese women poets from ancient to modern times. They are excerpted in his article, “A Brief Survey of Senryu by Women.”

This paucity of early senryu by women, and the emergence of contemporary women in the field, is reinforced in the observation by Inoue Nobuko in Sato’s essay: “One senryu observer has noted that if the period of 250 years since the senryu was established as a genre were to be divided into five ages, this would be the fifth, and women writers have dominated it. In the early part of the 20th century, women senryu writers were, the pioneering Inoue Nobuko said, ‘fewer than the stars at daybreak.’”³

Nevertheless, today, these stars shine. *Prune Juice*, the online journal founded by Alexis Rotella and now edited by Terri L. French, has published an increasing number of senryu poems and senryu-haiga by women, including a number of the authors in *Pieces of Her Mind*. The Haiku Society of America continues to sponsor the Gerald Brady Memorial Award for senryu. The three winners in 2012 were all women. Kudos to Julie Warther, Michele L. Harvey, and Terri L. French.

Women’s Voices in the Senryu Conversation

While men (including Chen-ou Liu, Liam Wilkinson, Alan Pizzarelli, Michael Dylan Welch, Robert D. Wilson, and William

Pinckard) continue to be engaged in conversations around the relevance of senryu in contemporary poetry, women have increasingly emerged to influence the description of the senryu form, and to lead debates surrounding senryu with a slightly different voice—not so scholarly or analytical; a saucier, more challenging voice.

An Opportunity

Some clarification about the bias I mentioned above, that a woman’s voice enlivens, spices up, and gives depth to the body of work around the senryu form, is in order. It has been my observation that women have few avenues to express what they REALLY think, in a way that they can be heard. In 2013, we still have extremely talented women golfers and basketball players who make a lot less money than their male counterparts, and thus do not compete on equal terms. The women who do get paid highly are the models in the “Sports Illustrated Swimsuit” edition.

In comfortable settings, however, we women get saucy and spicy—and on our own terms. We laugh at our own dry wit. We laugh at our own bodies. We make fun of telling the truth about what we might never make fun of in public, especially ourselves and those we nurture. We share a sense of freedom and liberation, in certain settings, that we cannot in much of our lives. We use language we don’t use in public (but men use freely all the time). We love the fact that someone actually listens, and understands.

Yet, we remain limited, in what we can express, and how we can express it. Senryu opens doors for us. Women can expand themselves, if they give themselves permission, and add a whole lot of spice and sauciness to the conversations around the senryu form, including offering good examples. And senryu, as a form, invites us to have a voice in a way haiku does not.

Ce Rosenow states the point well in her recently published essay on senryu when she says in the conclusion, “When its

focus centers on human activities during times of great difficulty, senryu offers moment by moment reiterations of human persistence in the face of adversity.”⁴

Taking the Invitation Seriously

Indeed, women are offering critical points of view concerning to what degree senryu should be valued in the contemporary EL writing world as its own separate genre.

In her essays on senryu, Jane Reichhold implores senryu writers, “if they wish to write what they call senryu, to find a way to distinguish their work from haiku, and until that is done, all EL senryu currently being written should be considered as haiku.”⁵ She also asks senryu writers to examine more carefully what they consider to be distinguishing differences between the two forms.⁶ I believe that is a fair request.

On the other hand, Dr. Gabi Greve of the Daruma Museum, Japan, and moderator of the World Kigo Database, agrees with me that senryu is a different form from haiku, and summarizes her thoughts in the following senryu:

senryu
don't tell me this is
a haiku⁷

Marlene Mountain offers yet a contrasting perspective in “‘the japanese haiku’ and so on”: “re haiku or senryu. good grief. what a weird separation.”⁸ She wonders if this should even be an issue, as she sees the entire argument as silly.

I am forming my own opinions. Recently, I sponsored a rather rigorous contest on a writing site, asking writers to study the difference between haiku, senryu, and “5-7-5.” I received very thoughtful responses from well-respected women writers. As a writer, myself, of both senryu and haiku, I take Jane’s invitation very seriously. Other women writers of senryu do as well,

including many of the seventeen women involved in creating *Pieces of Her Mind*.

I ask the same of haiku writers: to take this conversation seriously. Let's, collectively, decide on a difference(s) between the two forms, and allow senryu to be the historically evolving, rising star that has the potential to offer so much value in contemporary literature.

Separating the Chafe from the Chaff?

Reichhold has written an essay that provides a provocative metaphor of Apples getting mixed up and contaminated on their trip from Japan to become Apples H and Apples S.⁹ It is a further invitation to both haiku and senryu writers to find a way to differentiate these two poetic forms.

There are several key points of debate that appear in conversations around forming a description of senryu. I'll summarize them briefly here, and offer my thoughts, as an ongoing learner, about where we might consider heading collectively, as writers of contemporary EL haiku and senryu. Helpful to my thinking, in addition to numerous essays, was the document created by The Haiku Society of America, "Official Definitions of Haiku and Related Terms."¹⁰

To Kigo or Not? A Seasonal Waltz

First, should haiku include a *kigo*, or seasonal word, and should senryu not have a *kigo* or seasonal word? I would answer yes to this question. Unfortunately, EL haiku has evolved, in current years in EL writing, such that haiku are published and recognized as haiku even though they don't have a *kigo*, and senryu have been written with *kigo*, which confuses the issue.

However, large databases of *kigo* now exist (e.g., Higginson and Greve), which, for me, no longer allows writers of either form to ignore *kigo* (or lack of one) as an excuse not to differentiate the forms.

Reichhold argues that *kigo* should not be considered a factor in differentiating senryu from haiku as “nature” includes “human nature.” On this point, I disagree. The original meaning of the word *kigo* was “seasonal word” as opposed to its EL evolved definition of “nature.” For me, at least, that differentiation alters the discussion. Human nature may be a part of nature, but human nature is definitely not a seasonal indicator.

Additionally, when a word contained in a *kigo* database is used in a senryu, it generally is not used as a seasonal word. Anita Virgil, former president of the Haiku Society of America, appears to agree that *kigo* in senryu really cannot be classified as *kigo* as they are in haiku. Virgil discusses the uses of season words and their relevance to senryu by examining links in classical renku: “These links within the *haikai no renga* (renku) contain several things which prepare for the advent of senryu. They often deal with human eroticism. Human activity rather than nature dominates. Most links do not rely on season words or phrases (*kigo*) though they may contain one . . .”. Virgil goes on to explain how the renku poet’s “skill and playfulness” allow him to bend the rules around season reference by “utilizing [the word] ‘blossoms’ metaphorically to imply the woman’s body. Thus he creates an extraordinarily beautiful link that is really about human passion.”¹¹

Kireji, Where Do You Stand? Do You Want to Dance, or Not?

Second, should haiku contain a *kireji*—cutting word or grammatical marker—and senryu not contain a *kireji*? For me, this poses a lot of problems in that *kireji* is a much more difficult concept to define than *kigo*, in its translation from Japanese to EL writing. With apologies to Chen-ou Liu (whose senryu sometimes contain *kireji* and sometimes don’t), I would say that both haiku and senryu can contain a *kireji*.

Liu, who advocates for a required *kireji* in haiku, and not in senryu, points out, himself, numerous “complications” around the use (or not) of *kireji* in both haiku and senryu, where it is liberally used in current EL writing by writers of both short

poetry forms. He argues that syntactic breaks and use of punctuation actually make for weaker haiku, and he calls on haiku writers to write poems with a psychological bent, opening up an interpretive space for the reader to coauthor the poem (as Professor Hasegawa Kai has suggested¹²)—and with alternative forms of *kireji*.

Based on the work of Mark Morris, author of the groundbreaking essay entitled “Buson and Shiki,” Liu suggests the following three alternatives to consider around *kireji*:

1. Something that separates a hokku into two parts and establishes a visual correspondence between two images;
2. That which clearly expresses a division of yin and yang, or the existence of an interesting confrontation within a poem; and
3. The feeling of going and coming back again.

Liu uses as an example the famous poem by Bashō to describe a well-written haiku with a *kireji* (and, I do agree this IS a haiku, and not a senryu):

an old pond . . .
a frog leaps in
the sound of water¹³

Contained in Bashō’s haiku are a *kigo*, *kireji*, and *hai* humor. I beg haiku writers to continue in this time-honored tradition, just as Reichhold begs that senryu writers better-define senryu. However, senryu beg for a *kireji* just as haiku do. So, it is difficult for me to include *kireji*, or not, as a definer between the two forms.

Fashion Sense—What Should I Wear If I Want to Dance?

Third, should senryu be differentiated from haiku by some sort of “visual” appearance, such as being in one line, using punctuation, using exactly 17 syllables, having a 5-7-5 syllable count, or being composed in a different color font, as Reichhold suggests in her essays and comments in the AHA Forum? My answer would be no.

There has been much pushback against the standardization of form, including several excellent articles written about why 5-7-5 syllable count is not appropriate for haiku, senryu, or the first three lines of tanka (M. Kei, William J. Higginson, and Michael Dylan Welch come to mind).¹⁴

Poets need room to develop their own forms or styles. Alexis Rotella, for example, explains her own use of caps and punctuation, in all poems, including senryu, haiku, and tanka, in the essay “Why Does Alexis Rotella Use Punctuation and Capitalization in Her Little Poems?”¹⁵:

- it frames her work
- it is her method of cantillating in her writing
- she has been using it for 18 years

Developing form in this fashion is akin to developing voice.

What Say You? Want to Tango?

So, what IS something we all can wrap our arms around? I’d like to suggest, as a serious contemporary EL senryu writer, the distinguishing difference be an agreed-upon definition of satire and irony around human conditions (for senryu), as opposed to the humor, fun, and exploration that is framed around seasonal references (for haiku).

I recognize, and respect, as a writer of both haiku and senryu myself, that though *karumi*, the light touch, is valued in the haiku world, many haiku writers are seeking to understand their observed world in a serious and earnest fashion. That seriousness, and lightness, combined with an observation of seasons, as opposed to a much more sarcastic, ironic, and satirical tone of observation about the human condition, seems, to me, to be one way to differentiate haiku from senryu.

Reichhold has observed:

Many persons argue that verses having humor or satire should be called senryu instead of haiku, but the *hai* of haiku means in Japanese

“humorous, joke or funny.” In spite of the efforts to make haiku profound (which it certainly can be), the *hai* still means not only joke or funny, but also “crippled” referring to the use of sentence fragmentation. This factor has been so hidden from us who do not speak Japanese that we think *haijin* (a writer of haiku) is a term of honor when in reality *haijin* can mean to a Japanese “a crippled person.”¹⁶

For me, “satire” and “irony” do not imply “humorous, joke, or funny.” Rather, satire and irony involve sarcasm, parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, analogy, double entendre, and a play on words. It is a “militant” type of language where the writer professes to approve, or accept as natural, the very things she wishes to attack, just as, in 1746, Japanese men chose to attack.

Let me offer a few of Rotella’s classic *senryu* (from *OUCH: Senryu That Bite*¹⁷) as examples of *senryu* that are fashionably dressed, sassy, and contain satire and irony:

The hitchhiker
gives me
the finger.

Or, how about:

To see what
I’ve been up to
I google myself.

No *kigo*, and obvious satire and irony. Rotella does not celebrate, or observe, nature or seasons, but makes fun of herself. In the process, she plays with words and makes the reader think. She relates to us, about us.

Pieces of Her Mind

My inspiration for the book, *Pieces of Her Mind: Women Find Their Voice in Centuries-Old Forms*, came from several sources.

First, I had been taking classes in Japanese short poetry forms and discovered a true love for senryu as a way to express my own voice. Second, one of my teachers, and the editor of our book, remarked that he would love to see a book on senryu, written by women, and I discovered that none existed. And, third, I read an enticing quote from Liam Wilkinson, former editor of *Prune Juice*, a journal I follow faithfully, that described how I like to write: “Presenting one’s self in a spontaneous, truthful, funny, and/or profound way whilst also arousing a recognition of the reader’s own human nature is the not-so-simple key to being a good writer of senryu.”¹⁸

Thus, I convened a group of women writers to take on the challenge of writing and describing senryu. After two years of study, including Internet research, publication and reviews, conference calls, extensive collective editing, and professional support from graphic illustrators, editors, and the publisher, we chose to honor Japanese history, tradition, and aesthetics around senryu. Mind you, amongst eighteen of us, there were (and remain) differences of opinion. And, these differences are becoming more defined and more learned, through continuing dialogue. Over half the poems we submitted for inclusion in the book were rejected by the editor of the book. We continue to ask ourselves whether all the poems accepted were, in fact, senryu.

In the end, we came up with a tentative description (not definition) of senryu which guided us in our work:

Senryu is a short poetic form of Japanese origin with a smooth, not staccato, flow that focuses on humans or the human condition in an often ironic, cynical, sharply witty, or satiric manner.

Here is a sampling of senryu from *Pieces of Her Mind*, selected from the eight chapters of the book:

Beauty—*on face value*

for my life to change
first I must change—
what will I wear?

~ Deborah Kammer

Enlightenment—*“aha!” says she*

alone
in a room full
of people ~ Vicki Bonnell

Laughter—*naughty but nice*

maybe
in a way, I’m sort of
indecisive ~ Suzanne Fuller

Passion—*I have a headache*

I bake bread
to see something rise
in the morning ~ Marie Toole

Strength—*nego-she-ator*

mammography . . .
tightening the grip
on breast cancer ~ Dana Furrow

Truth—*little white lies*

I’m an open book
unfortunately it’s blank
like my diary ~ Marie Toole

Wisdom—*with thyme comes a sage*

her income
is fixed
she can’t budge it ~ Sally Yocom

Friendship—*bosom buddies*

after her service
I stare into the portrait
we fought over ~ Lois J. Funk

Collectively, I ask how anyone can call these haiku?

They have no *kigo*, and are satirical statements about the human condition, including ours. I can hear my fellow women laughing, or commenting provocatively, over these senryu during lunch, or over a glass of wine while sitting at the bar! They invite a bit of follow-up sass. Yes, a few do contain a *kireji*.

Summary

Senryu is a delightful form for women to embrace, to study, analyze, and pursue. For me, it is its own separate genre of poetry that allows us to express ourselves, literally and metaphorically, in a way that is unique and current. We women have a history, over years, of becoming increasingly independent, free, and not afraid to clarify, and yes, change, “rules.” We also maintain and respect a sense of history and rebellion. To a large degree, both rebellion and history define who we are, and who we can still become, today.

As responsible poets and writers in all genres, I believe it is our collective responsibility, as women writers, to research history and traditions behind short Japanese poetic forms before calling them a certain name. If we choose to rebel against the traditional roots of a particular form, I tend to think it needs to be reasoned and informed. I also think we can change course as we become more informed.

I encourage that we continue to “fuss” with each other (phrase from a Reichhold essay¹⁹), and pay attention to how our work is influenced by, and can influence, that of the Japanese. After all we are becoming a global world, and Japanese women are liberating themselves as well.

I offer that we continue to follow the evolution of the senryu form in Japan. Yes, it is rehabilitating and resurrecting, and let’s honor that evolution, while also informing it. This means not disparaging the senryu form, but recognizing it for what it is, and, through our collective and informed dialogue influencing global conversations as collective learners.

I also offer that we change the conversation amongst ourselves. Let's change the old "ranking system" to make senryu an equally respected form of EL poetry as is haiku, despite history and tradition.

Let's, collectively, find a way to differentiate senryu from haiku that makes sense and can be embraced by writers in both genres. Personally, I like apples called Fuji over those called Granny Smith, even though the two might have been confused or contaminated on their trip from Japan to America, per Reichhold's metaphor.²⁰

Women ARE speaking up about senryu. Numerous examples can be found on blogs and forums. In *Haiku Matters!*, for example, Susan Shand comments:

I've been looking at senryu. I haven't written much senryu myself so I'm not familiar with this form—which is often considered to be the poor cousin of haiku. I don't think it is a poor cousin at all. It provides a medium which is largely free of all the form judgments that haiku suffers from and which allows for a level of comment and observation lost to haiku. You do tend to get a lot of aphorism-ku and joke-ku but there is some well-crafted and beautifully engaging work around.²¹

Aubrie Cox, graduate assistant at Millikin University, and haiga editor for the online haikai journal *A Hundred Gourds*, is compiling an anthology of haiku and senryu by women. She wrote on her website:

At the beginning of 2011, it came to my attention that there is no anthology of just women's English-language haiku (none that I've found anyway). With such prolific and powerful women writers within the English-language community, they deserve a space/recognition of their own. With that in mind, I decided to put the project into motion on my own.²²

I look forward to Cox's anthology. In the meantime, those who wish to learn more about *Pieces of Her Mind: Women Find Their Voice in Centuries-Old Forms*, or who wish to comment

on the thoughts in this essay, please visit the book's Facebook page or the *Pieces of Her Mind* blog.²³

Alexis Rotella summarizes my thoughts so well in her own senryu²⁴:

The person I wrote
the book for
doesn't buy a copy.

I hope to hear more from the persons for whom I wrote this essay.

Notes

1. Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree), "Ain't I a Woman?" in *Modern History Sourcebook: Sojourner Truth* (December 1851).
2. William Pinckard, "Some Senryu about Go." Retrieved March 17, 2013 from <http://www.kiseido.com/sen.htm> and Alan Pizzarelli, "History of Senryu: A Satirical Parody of R.H. Blyth's History of Haiku," *Simply Haiku* 3:3 (autumn 2005).
3. Hiroaki Sato, "A Brief Survey of Senryu by Women," *Modern Haiku* 34.1 (spring 2003).
4. Ce Rosenow, "Written in the Face of Adversity: The Senryu Tradition in America." *Modern Haiku* 44.1 (winter-spring 2013).
5. Personal communication, March 22, 2013. Reichhold asked that this sentence be included in the essay "exactly as it is."
6. Jane Reichhold, "Should Senryu Be Part of English-Language Haiku?" *Modern Haiku* 44.1 (winter-spring 2013).
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8. marlene mountain, "'the japanese haiku' and so on." Retrieved March 19, 2013 from <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/haikumania/marlenejapanesehaiku.htm>.
9. Jane Reichhold, "Apples, Apples and Haiku." Retrieved May 6, 2013 from <http://www.ahapoetry.com/AHI%20apple%20art.html>.
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September 18, 2004. Retrieved March 19, 2013 from http://www.hsa-haiku.org/archives/HSA_Definitions_2004.html.

11. Anita Virgil, interviewed by Robert D. Wilson, in *Simply Haiku* 3:1 (spring 2005) and 3:3 (autumn 2005). Retrieved March 19, 2013 from http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv3n1/features/Anita_Virgil.html and http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv3n3/features/anita_virgil_senryu.

12. Chen-ou Liu, “To the Lighthouse: Three Formulations About the Use of Cutting.” Retrieved April 10, 2013 from <http://never-endingstoryhaikutanka.blogspot.com/2013/02/to-lighthouse-three-formulations-about.html> and Mark Morris, “Buson and Shiki: Part One,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44:2 (December 1984), pp. 381–425.

13. Ibid.

14. Michael Dylan Welch, “Why ‘No 5-7-5’?” NaHaiWriMo essay. Retrieved March 19, 2013 from <https://sites.google.com/site/nahaiwrimo/home/why-no-5-7-5>.

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16. Jane Reichhold, “Senryu As a Dirty Word,” *How to Haiku*. Retrieved March 19, 2013 from <http://www.ahapoetry.com/AHI%20senryu%20art.html>.

17. Alexis Rotella, *OUCH Senryu That Bite: A Collection of Senryu 1979–2007*. Press release of book retrieved on <http://www.the.metpress.com/bookstore/books.html>.

18. Liam Wilkinson, Editorial, *Prune Juice*, Issue 8 (Spring/April 2012).

19. Jane Reichhold, “Should Senryu Be Part of English-Language Haiku?” One of several essays at www.ahapoetry.com/AHI%20senryu%20art.html. Published in *Modern Haiku* and retrieved May 4, 2013 from <http://www.modernhaiku.org/issue44-1/MH44-1-Reichhold-Senryu-2013.pdf>.

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23. *Pieces of Her Mind* Facebook page: www.facebook.com/PiecesofHerMind; *Pieces of Her Mind* blog: <http://www.book-piecesofhermind.blogspot.com>.

24. Alexis Rotella, *OUCH Senryu That Bite*.



Sue Champion received her doctorate degree from the University of Washington. Her professional career was in education, as a middle school teacher, principal, and executive of three national nonprofit professional development organizations. Now retired, she writes for enjoyment, and has grown to love senryu in particular as a vehicle to express her voice. Sue resides in Southern California with her husband John. She has been published in several education books and journals as well as poetry anthologies, and is most proud of the journey she was privileged to facilitate with Pieces of Her Mind.

