

Haiku and War¹

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Part one of this essay, published in *Frogpond* 37:1, outlined the landscape of war haiku. I looked at its history, who was writing it, pointed out some major themes, and speculated upon why such poets might choose haiku over other genres. Finally I looked at haiku that referenced particular conflicts and suggested that such haiku might be useful in building a vertical axis.

In the concluding part of this essay, I will make a distinction between haiku written by participants in war and those written by outside commentators to see if there is any important difference. I will explore haiku that take a moral stand, examine the idea of authenticity in war haiku, and conclude with concerns about historical revision.

Commentators

In part one of this essay I didn't make a differentiation between poems written by participants in the various conflicts and those written by commentators. In fact, most of the poems presented in part one were written by actual participants: either combatants or those physically affected by war as either civilians in a war zone or as refugees. However, there is a large population of war haiku written by commentators. In the United States, the number of haiku by commentators far outweighs the haiku of actual participants.

Haiku by commentators can be found in any number of places. The first poems I'd like to look at come from the Internet: in particular, several anti-war haiku walls. As would be expected, the quality isn't always very high.

diarrhea, cholera
a humanitarian gift
to Iraqi children

Daniel²

What wise forefathers
once gave, Gucci-loafered faux
fathers take away.

libbyliberalnyc³

Poetry walls are websites established for specific purposes. For example, the webpage “100 Thousand Poets for Change” collects poems by poets “to create serious social and political change.” Such sites are essentially participatory blogs, and the posters are more known for their dedication to a cause than for their poetry. Frankly, the quality of the poetry doesn’t seem to be the point. These sites are really a place for people to give voice to their opinions.

The first poem cited above comes from Serge Tomé’s website *temps libres*. The site is undoubtedly the largest and most diverse depository of online English-language war haiku. It covers a variety of wars and has an especially large selection on the wars in the former Yugoslavia. And while most of those web pages related to specific conflicts contain more literary haiku, this one is from the generic “Anti War Haiku Wall.”

Like most haiku wall poems, it can be dismissed as poetry designed for a bumper sticker. While haiku wall poems can be effective commentary, they are usually lectures and violate the “Show Don’t Tell” rule of haiku. In fact, they are often not haiku, or at best they are poor quality haiku. We know they concern a specific war only because the name of the wall tells us so.

Poor quality anti-war haiku are not, however, isolated to haiku walls. Anthologies can suffer the same fate when editors value message over poetry, as in these two haiku from the recent *Kamesan’s World Haiku Anthology on War, Violence, and Human Rights Violation*.

After a war
a man with one leg
is he a hero?

Karunush Kumar Agrawal⁴

Human rights my arse
If good for America
Then by all means yes

Tomas O Carthaigh⁵

These examples notwithstanding, in the main, haiku by commentators are of a high standard. One from the aforementioned anthology and a second from *The Gulf Within*, an anthology of Gulf War haiku edited by Christopher Herold and Michael Dylan Welch:

spring dewdrops
cling to a blade of grass—
Iraqi children

Chen-ou Liu⁶

talking to the tree
outside the window
about rain, about the war

Marlina Rinzen⁷

As would be expected, many commentators' haiku fall thematically into some of the categories discussed in part one of this essay. Most concern the subject of waste: usually the waste of human life. However, there are some themes that seem solely existent among commentators. I'd like to point out a few.

One theme is the overall reach of war, how it has expanded from the battlefield into the everyday civilian landscape, especially in this age of twenty-four-hour news—and there seems to be no escaping it.

the latest war news
I drink my whiskey
straight

Carla Sari⁸

on every channel—
a scud attack
in my living room

Garry Gay⁹

Another theme is the powerlessness that many poets feel.

fall leaves
burying toy soldiers
her small son

Fonda Bell Miller¹⁰

Parakeet
locked in a cage
with the war news

vincent tripi¹¹

Some poems illustrate a distrust or suspicion of government leaders—another form of powerlessness, but directed toward governments, and in some cases describing a segregation of those in power from those outside.

parting clouds reveal
a full Snow Moon—
the president's war speech

Barry George¹²

groups of schoolchildren
entrance to the parliament
by reservation

Hanne Hansen¹³

Some express hope, either for an end to conflict, or simply for peace of some kind. The hammer and chisel in the following haiku by Gerd Börner refer to the coming down of the Berlin Wall.

bright November—
the ring
of hammer and chisel

Gerd Börner¹⁴

long winter of wars
yet still we kneel
. . . crocus in the snow

Evelyn Lang¹⁵

Additionally, some express sympathy with troops overseas, as in the following haiku by Adele Kenny; and some protest war, as in Ruth Yarrow's.

moonless night—
in the streetlamp's brightness
a yellow ribbon

Adele Kenny¹⁶

I send a fax
protesting the bombing
pages come out hot

Ruth Yarrow¹⁷

Something to note: most commentator haiku are not disguised as participant haiku, meaning that most of these poets write about the war honestly from the sidelines. They don't pretend to be in a war zone. They write about their concerns and the effect the war has upon them—at home. Of course, there are exceptions, which we'll review later.

Morality

Most haiku on the subject of war don't reach into the larger question of a war's rightness or wrongness. However, some haiku do take a stand and present a moral perspective. Consider the following poem from Ruth Yarrow, an anti-war activist:

against the wind
we hold the peace banner—
our spines straighten¹⁸

Morality aside, Yarrow’s haiku is technically excellent. On the surface the peace activists are fighting to keep the wind from blowing down their banner; but they also stiffen their spines against the metaphorical wind of public opinion, power brokers, or the military industrial complex. There is, however, no doubting her message. She is against war.

However, haiku poets have not always been of the same mindset, as seen in the following pro-war haiku written in reference to Japan’s 1942 capture of Singapore.

Nation victorious: with cold smoke high the train departs

Yamaguchi Seishi¹⁹

Public opposition—poetic or otherwise—to the Japanese expansion in World War II was a dangerous risk to a Japanese citizen. Yet as Hiroaki Sato explains in his essay, “Wartime Haiku,” to suggest that most poets were against the war would be a mistake.

the majority were for it. Following the darkening atmosphere of the 1930s when Japan’s military adventure . . . got nowhere in China and the world’s criticism of Japan mounted, the Japanese experienced a collective sense of liberation and intoxication when their army and navy simultaneously attacked the United States, the Netherlands, and Great Britain toward the end of 1941 and won a string of victories.²⁰

A prime example of this nationalism comes from Kyoshi Takahama, poetic heir to Shiki and editor of the influential journal *Hototogisu*. In 1928, at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, he wrote a series of haiku with the title “Conquering Singapore.” During World War II he served as president of the Haiku Branch of the Japanese Literary Patriotic Organization and wrote what are known as “Holy War” haiku. However, since these wars ended in defeat for Japan, many such nationalistic poems were destroyed or conveniently forgotten. Itō Yūki, in the *Simply Haiku* article “Forgive but Do Not Forget,” references the difficulty he had finding copies of “Holy War” haiku, and was shocked that in the fifteen-volume *Collected Works* of

Kyoshi, and in virtually all other books on this “haiku saint,” his war haiku are either ignored or rarely mentioned.²¹ Similarly, Seishi’s poem, cited earlier, was also excluded from his translated collected works.

It is not surprising that years after the war many poets would try to downplay their support. A question that has to be asked, however, is what would be collected today had the Japanese military effort been successful, and Japan had exported its culture to Southeast Asia and the South Pacific? Would those same poets, who now refute their wartime poetry, be singing a different tune?

In hindsight it is easy to cynically view such nationalistic poetry as Kyoshi’s and Seishi’s (and thousands of others) as a result of blind nationalistic enthusiasm, or naiveté concerning the effects of war. We must be careful at this point not to impose our current morality on different times, and also, and perhaps more importantly, to realize that there is no absolute morality. For example: some have successfully argued for the achievements of the Roman and British empires—despite the heavy toll they often took on native populations. I’m reminded of a Monty Python sketch from the film *Life of Brian*, in which the People’s Front of Judea—listing their grievances against Roman occupation—humorously end up with:

apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order,
irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what
have the Romans ever done for us?²²

Indeed, we do well to remember that the American Revolution can also be viewed as a nationalist movement. Perhaps had haiku been available to the colonists, we’d have today established *kigo* such as “tea tax day” or “Bunker Hill.” We tend to look through a colored lens at that “justified” conflict, yet it included atrocities perpetrated by revolutionaries that are the equal of those in any other war.

As we’ll see later, there is a subset of war haiku that deal with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In some cases the haiku take the moral stance that the dropping of the bombs was a crime against humanity. Yet it can be persuasively argued that the bombs ended the war with fewer casualties on both sides than had the U.S. had to attack the Japanese mainland.

A similar moral complexity may be present in Robert D. Wilson's and Ty Hadman's haiku on Vietnam, seen in part one of this essay, which make the case that American involvement was morally wrong. However, the Dalai Lama's comment justifying the Korean War as a vehicle promoting democracy, also seen in part one, might suggest otherwise. Additionally, in relation to haiku opposing more recent wars, you can surely find Shia in Iraq and women in Afghanistan who welcomed America's military intervention.

I bring up the murky question of morality, not to dissuade anyone from writing war haiku that take a moral stand, or to try to convince anyone that there is a particular "right" side to any conflict. On the contrary, polemic poetry has a well-established history in American poetry and Yarrow's poem, for one, sits nicely inside that tradition.

Authenticity

Up to this point I have steered clear of questions concerning the authenticity of these haiku moments, because I believe that participants and commentators can write about their direct or indirect experience of war without violating the reader's trust. However, some commentators have written haiku as if they were participants. A good example is a series of haiku written by Dean Summers based on photos of the Iraq war he had seen in *Time* magazine. Two from that series:²³

sandstorm
for this the young marine
hides his face

children and fathers
their smiles for the soldiers
not the same

Additionally, Anita Virgil wrote *Pilot*, a collection of found haiku based on Stephen Coont's Vietnam War novel *Flight of the Intruder*; and other poets have published similar haiku in journals and anthologies.

the attack pilot
 rocketing down the valley
 startling birds

Anita Virgil²⁴

Dumping sand from his boot,
the soldier looks up
at the stars.

Alexis Rotella²⁵

These haiku follow an established tradition in Japan. During World War II, such haiku would be called *senka sōbō*, meaning “imagining and watching the fire of war from afar.”²⁶ Initially, such haiku were condemned by those poets who felt that haiku ought to describe only things actually experienced, but their views were in the minority, and numerous poets wrote *senka sōbō* haiku.

As far as quality goes, the haiku of Summers, Virgil, and Rotella are the equal of any written by a participant, so I'm not sure a distinction between participant and commentator haiku is valuable—or that from a reader's perspective one is more authentic than the other. And it is worth asking if we need a special category for haiku written by Lenard Moore, who served in the army, so clearly he has some sense of its sights and sounds, yet he wasn't actually in an active war zone. His inspirations came from conversations with his brother who served as a marine in Desert Storm and from others who served in war zones. Similar are the haiku of Edward Tick, a psychologist who received his knowledge of combat indirectly from soldiers with whom he worked.

blood-stained shirt
on a wounded soldier
rising desert moon

Lenard D. Moore²⁷

Swinging in her hammock
between banana trees
cradling her AK

Edward Tick²⁸

Also, what about poems written by a participant decades after the war? The poet writing now, with the benefit of hindsight and added maturity, is most likely a very different person than the one who lived through the actual experience. Robert D. Wilson is perhaps a good example. You'll recall his poem from part one of this essay:

End of Tet—
the marks on her back, a letter
I'd rather not read²⁹

In his collection *Vietnam Ruminations*, written decades after the fact, Wilson empathizes deeply with the Vietnamese people and understands how destructive the war was for those caught between the Viet Cong and American forces. His descriptions and analysis of the various scenarios show how much he has reflected upon the war. The haiku in *Vietnam Ruminations* are followed by brief prose passages. This poem in particular is followed by a paragraph explaining that the young woman was a laundrywoman whose family had been tortured and murdered by the Viet Cong because of her employment by the Americans. Clearly, Wilson's *Ruminations* presents a mature viewpoint, unlike the one he presents in his blog of his time as an eighteen-year-old sailor who spent his nights in Vietnamese brothels and engaged in drug use, "coping," he explains, "with a war we were ill equipped to handle."³⁰

It could be argued that we have two different people—one, the young Wilson (a participant) who knew nothing about haiku, who was just a scared kid trying to survive; and years later a very different person, a writer (a commentator). Which begs the question: how authentic are the poems by the latter? I don't suggest that the younger Wilson was an advocate for the war, but this illustrates the complexities of talking about war—or

in our case today, in talking about poetry on war. Because of these gray areas, “authenticity” in haiku is something that has never really been explored. Yet, to return to the very start of this essay in part one, I have always felt that some kind of authenticity was at issue in the war haiku I read—the ones I had a slight discomfort in reading.

I think most haiku poets’ definition of an authentic haiku is similar to the one expressed by Michael Dylan Welch on the Haiku Foundation blog:

What matters to me, as a reader, is for the poem to strike me as seeming to be real, echoing my own experiences, or providing enough detail for me to empathize with it even if I’ve not experienced it. It has to FEEL real, regardless of whether it really did happen or not—which is seldom provable anyway.³¹

The notion of believability is a key factor in determining a haiku’s authenticity. But believability in and of itself doesn’t define authenticity for me. Like many things haiku, the notion of authenticity depends (as Welch pointed out) upon whether you are the reader or the writer. For a writer, I think a fair definition is that upon revisiting a haiku a year or so later, does it still present the discovery, or emotional moment, of the original impetus? If yes, then it is authentic. For a reader, authenticity is a trickier issue.

Haiku are poems of engagement. We want the reader to be able to take the usually objective parts of a haiku and re-create the moment or discovery for themselves; or to paraphrase Ogiwara Seisensui: to complete the poem. It is this engagement that is at the heart of my definition of authenticity:

An authentic haiku is defined by a reader’s ability to engage a haiku with the minimum of distraction.

What do I mean by that? A haiku presents a series of observations that are designed to represent a situation, an emotion, or a moment. These observations are like the words used to express the situation: they are stand-ins for the thing itself. For me,

authentic haiku are ones that I as a reader can engage with fully. They are the perfect observations; they are the perfect words; and they are shared with me in the perfect way.

My definition isn't so much about an authentic haiku "moment" as it is about an authentic haiku "sharing." Haiku, after all, got its start in renku, so it has an inherent basis in sharing. It isn't about the truthfulness or falsity of the observation, but about its transmission from writer to reader. How seamless is it? To help better explain this, let's look at some possible distractions to a haiku's transmission.

Distraction: The poet has a point to make.

This distraction comes into play most often on haiku walls and in collections of anti-war, anti-nuclear power, anti-politician—anti-anything poems. And I suppose in pro-anything poems as well. Because haiku are poems of engagement, where the reader is the ultimate decider of what the poem means, haiku that are placed on sites with advertised polemic purpose are saying to the reader: there is no point interpreting this poem for yourself; it means X. It is someone telling you how a book ends, and from that point on you can't read the book without that voice or knowledge in the background. The distraction is knowing that your reading of a poem is purposely steered.

Let's examine how this distraction works in a poem by Billie Wilson:

howling wolves—
there's still enough light
to find our way home³²

It can be found on the "Anti War Haiku Wall" on Serge Tomé's *temps libres* site. Now, if you came across this poem in *Frogpond* or *Modern Haiku*, it is open enough to let you decide what it means to you. You may not even think of war when you read this poem. But given where it was published, you know even before reading the poem that it is about war—and, based on the title of the wall, that the poet believes that that particular

war is bad. My personal reading of this poem starts with its surroundings (the haiku wall), and I think, “Okay, here comes an anti-war poem.” Then I read the poem, and I think, “Yup, there still is time to get ourselves out of this war.” Wilson meant me to “get” something and I got it. No need to ponder . . . or experience . . . or engage this haiku further.

Additionally, because I know this poem is about war, despite containing no overt references to war, I am forced to find a way to make it about war. So for me, the wolves in the first line take on a metaphorical meaning and the poem as a whole becomes a bit abstract—which is what happens when haiku are messages instead of shared experience.

Distraction: The poem is made up.

If readers know that a poet wasn't in a war zone they automatically question the details of a poem. A poem after all is made up of details. In a poem written by a poet who was present for all the details, the reader can trust that the details weren't manipulated for effect. But in a poem that we know to be made up we unconsciously question why some details were given rather than others and look for motivations.

A well-known haiku poet, who has judged a number of contests, once told me about a fellow haiku poet who always submitted haiku about children and their dolls. The children and their dolls were out in the rain, sitting alone on the swings, or looking into empty refrigerators. It was this judge's opinion—and one it's hard not to share—that the poems were created with the purpose of manipulating the judge's emotions. Believability is important here. It is especially important in poems for which the reader doesn't have direct experience. Recall Welch's comment about haiku “echoing [his] own experiences, or providing enough detail for [him] to empathize with it even if [he's] not experienced it.” Most readers don't know the details of a war: the uncomfortable boots, the living on edge, the lack of sleep, the weight of body armor. So they are relying on the poet more than ever. Welch says—and I agree—that from the reader's point of view, whether a poem happened or not is irrelevant. But if

the pieces of a haiku don't—for whatever reason—ring true, we suspect it is a made-up poem, and thus question the “point” of it. It becomes no different than the poems about the children and their dolls.

One key to a made-up poem is the poet's name—often called the fourth line of a haiku. For example, if I read a poem about the Iraq War by Kylan Jones-Huffman, knowing that he served in Iraq I can re-create the moment much more comfortably—and without distraction. If I read that same poem by a poet who I know wasn't in Iraq, then I experience that moment with less enthusiasm, because I suspect they got the details from television or the movies. I know that they don't know the sounds and smells of the place, which prevents me from fully engaging the poem. And I read it at a bit of a distance.

Of course, we don't always know if a poet was there or not—which either might make things worse (because doubt is a distraction as well) or better (because we are a trusting person and assume all the information given is true). For example, two poems about Hiroshima:

black ash
covers the trees
somewhere a sister

Tanaka Kaito

Children—
floating lit paper lanterns
not knowing Hiroshima

Yasuhiko Shigemoto³³

If you didn't know anything more about the poets, both names being Japanese, it would be reasonable to believe that both poets were there. Tanaka was with a group of students weeding a potato field on the east side of town, while Yasuhiko was part of another group of children who were sent to dig tunnels outside the city.

But what if one of their backgrounds changed, and I told you instead that Tanaka was actually born and raised in Tokyo—years after the bombing—and that it was his parents who directly experienced the black ash. Does that change your engagement with the poem? What if he was actually born in Hawaii by parents who were in Tokyo during the war?

Yasuhiko's story is true, and he has written a number of poems on his experiences in Hiroshima. However, I wrote the Tanaka haiku. Now take a moment to read the "black ash" haiku again. I'd be surprised if anyone rereads the poem, knowing that I wrote it rather than an actual survivor, with the same engagement. It isn't that it is a bad poem, but knowing that I wrote it, you're a bit distracted—disengaged—by my artifice, my manipulation.

Distraction: Unrealistic elements.

A third kind of distraction is that a poem contains unrealistic elements. Here, the poet creates a barrier between the transmitted moment and the reader through stylistic choices. And I believe this is why the reading of some avant garde or science fiction haiku can seem less engaging. Haiku, I believe, are about sharing, and such abstract or imaginary elements force the reader to step back from the poem to figure out how to engage with it. That "stepping back," that uncertainty, is a distraction.

A good example is a haiku by Sugimura Seirinshi:

war dead
exit out of a blue mathematics³⁴

There is no doubt that this is an interesting haiku, but I find the pairing of generic war dead (no context is given) with the abstraction "blue mathematics" gives me pause. I can think of several meanings for the abstract phrase and even more possible relationships between it and war dead. Indeed, I suspect if polled, it is doubtful that a collection of readers could come to a single consensus as to the haiku's meaning.

Philip Rowland, a supporter and publisher of this poem, referred to its image as “oblique.”³⁵ That is hardly a synonym for engagement.

This lack of clear focus, the bouncing from one idea to another, without actually settling on one—as I’m trying to engage with the poem—means I am disengaged. I am trying to second guess Sugimura’s intentions, and I end up with competing meanings—meaning no one clear meaning—at the end of the day. Now, I think a fair argument against this is that in reading any haiku not on war we go through a similar process. After all, words are abstractions. So when I come across a haiku about a generic tree I have the same concern. I have similar competing images: is it a pine, oak, or hemlock? Which is why the best haiku find a balance between the specific and the general. And I would argue that when they are too general we don’t engage as much.

Additionally, abstract haiku send a clear message that the writer is being clever, which isn’t a bad thing in itself, but it can be at the expense of the reader. Obviously there are degrees to this cleverness and degrees to its distraction. At one end are perhaps mild distractions such as Watanabe’s haiku “war was standing at the corridor’s end” mentioned in part one of this essay; while at the other end, if such distractions are carried too far, the reader ceases to become a participant in the haiku, and instead becomes an observer.

Additionally, haiku on war come with baggage that haiku on birds and flowers don’t have. Haiku on war almost demand realism, because unrealistic elements may come off as flippant, and I suspect most readers want the issue of war dealt with in a serious manner. War is a serious subject after all.

Perhaps this one distraction (unrealistic elements) really comes down to a sense of seriousness. And perhaps this distraction only applies to haiku on war, child abuse, domestic violence, or any other weighty topic. Haiku and senryu have a well-established history of puns and humorous wordplay—but not about such grim topics.

There are undoubtedly other kinds of distractions, but the important thing is that these distractions shape how we read a poem, as well as how deeply we engage with it. In a perfect transference from writer to reader, there wouldn't be any distraction.

Revisiting my definition of authenticity you'll recall that it isn't about things being true or false. And I don't mean to suggest that certain poems are worth less than others, just to point out to writers how readers may read, and question, their haiku—and based on that questioning, possibly adjust their engagement with a poem. Now does the presence of one of these distractions mean that a haiku is inauthentic? No. In fact I would suggest that there are levels of authenticity, based upon how distracted you as a reader are. Again, any one of these distractions, or even a combination of them, doesn't make a poem bad.

Historical Revision

Every poem begins with a choice: to write about subject A instead of subject B. To mention the underside of a leaf instead of its top surface. Of interest to me are the numerous haiku written on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As would be expected, the bomb sites are fertile poetic ground for Japanese haiku poets. For example, we learn from Kyoko and Mark Selden's *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki* that "In 1983 a Tokyo press published a 15-volume compendium of 'the atomic bomb literature of Japan.' Volume 13, devoted to poetry, includes almost 800 haiku about Hiroshima drawn from anthologies published in 1955 and 1969, and these haiku constitute only a fraction of all haiku written about Hiroshima."³⁶ Note, that doesn't even consider Nagasaki.

This output is to be expected. A couple examples of atomic bomb haiku from the Japanese:

atomic bomb anniversary
a streetcar dangling countless arms

Imai Isao³⁷

In an atomic bomb picture mouths open. I too open my mouth: cold

Katō Shūson³⁸

However, the Japanese aren't the only ones writing haiku on these two bombings. English-speaking poets have also written haiku on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and these are the ones that I find most interesting.

Hiroshima anniversary—
throughout the garden
empty snail shells

James Chessing³⁹

Hiroshima
another anniversary
not a cloud in the sky

Lee Lavery⁴⁰

a thin *futon*
and everything beneath
Hiroshima

David Cobb⁴¹

Nagasaki, Hiroshima
names etched in the memory
of our collective guilt

Cara Holman⁴²

The majority of English-language haiku written on Hiroshima and Nagasaki relate to the loss of human life, or the general horror caused by the bombings, as seen in Chessing's poem. Some hope to learn a lesson from the event, as in Lavery's haiku. Others find fragility in life. However a number of haiku—like Holman's—speak of guilt, or the wrongdoing by the United States. This is something the Japanese don't do. In going through the numerous Japanese haiku on the two bombings that are available in English

I found none that blame the United States. Japanese haiku are primarily about loss and the general horror of the events. I won't go into the complex morality of whether the U.S. should feel guilt or not, or why perhaps the Japanese don't express blame; I merely want to point out that these American haiku on the atomic bombings differ from the Japanese in that regard.

That said, if there is a subset of haiku that I feel is inauthentic, again, meaning they have too many distractions for me to comfortably or fully engage, they are atomic bomb haiku written by non-Japanese. This leads me to wonder why Americans write Hiroshima/Nagasaki haiku. I would hate to think that poets are simply playing along—that Americans are writing these kinds of poems simply because the Japanese are doing so. For the same reasons Americans sometimes write haiku on tea ceremony, geishas, and samurai swords?

A fellow poet suggested instead that these haiku are really anti-war protest poems, in which case they are similar to poems written for a haiku wall (albeit more literary), and there is a long-standing tradition in American poetry into which we could place them. But if they are protest poems, why the focus on the atomic bomb sites? Where are the Pearl Harbor, Bataan Death March anniversary, or Nanking haiku? When I pulled a sample from Charles Trumbull's haiku database, there were multiples of Hiroshima/Nagasaki haiku to only a handful of Pearl Harbor haiku. In fact there were only ten haiku on Pearl Harbor—and none on Bataan or Nanking. Interestingly, numerous poems were written about 9-11 at the time of the attack, but few since then. Yet we continue to see fresh atomic bomb haiku written by poets outside Japan.

Another poet suggested that the poems were really about the historical significance of this new and terrifying weapon. Or as Jonathan Schell is quoted as saying in an essay by Ruth Yarrow: "These bombs were built as 'weapons' for 'war' but their significance greatly transcends war and all its causes and outcomes. They grew out of history yet they threaten to end history."⁴³ In this scenario, atomic bomb haiku are not so much

about those particular bombings, but perhaps are a stand-in for all wars, all bombings, or the possible final bombings that will eradicate mankind. Yet this is something that a reader of these haiku wouldn't necessarily know. If this is the case, I think a better strategy would be to speak directly of the weapon itself, as Charles Trumbull does in his sequence "Trinity." An example:

Trinity Site
in the guard's vehicle
fuzzy dice⁴⁴

Another poet suggested that the haiku were not so much anti-war haiku, but rather anti-nuclear power haiku, and pointed to the many haiku on Fukushima. While this is perhaps a satisfying answer, I have to wonder what the explanation was prior to Fukushima. After all, if poets are writing anti-nuclear power haiku when they write on Hiroshima or Nagasaki, then Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl provided ample opportunity, yet a pull from Trumbull's database finds few poems on those accidents as well.

Alternatively, on the Haiku Foundation blog, Scott Metz made an interesting comment during a conversation about war haiku. He said, "[I] find myself trying to put myself in the shoes of the citizens the U.S. military terrorizes and dictates over."⁴⁵ In this scenario, poets are using their imagination to write "in character" and from angles they normally wouldn't write. Yet I think similar questions apply. Why so few haiku from the perspective of an Afghani or Iraqi?

Finally, another poet suggested that the emphasis on the atomic bombings was from a sense of collective guilt that some Americans feel. This is a valid reason, but then I have to ask: why no haiku on the fire-bombing of Dresden or Tokyo? Or the United States' treatment of the American Indian?

Personally, I wonder if it isn't perhaps a combination of protest (whether anti-war or anti-nuclear power) and playing

along, in which, like calls from haiku anthology editors for anthologies on flowers, death, and so on, there is an established Japanese tradition that calls out for these kinds of poems on a regular basis—whether as an anniversary contest or a memorial. And American poets read these invitations and write a haiku to participate? Whereas no editor in the United States makes the same call for Pearl Harbor or 9-11 poems.

Beyond these thoughts I don't have a definitive answer for why Americans write so many atomic bomb haiku, but I think it is a question worth exploring by those who do.

The result, though, is that such poems place an emphasis on the two atomic bomb sites at the expense of other wartime locations, or at the expense of other war victims—which has the effect of simplifying history. The overwhelming volume of atomic bomb haiku, compared to haiku on other war sites, suggests that the only terrible, or perhaps the most terrible, events were the atomic bombings, and that the Japanese suffered the most. This is clearly not true, yet if a future historian only had haiku to go on, it is understandable that he or she might come to that conclusion.

Conclusion

War has many reasons—biological, sociological, historical—that lie beyond the scope of this essay. I would only point out that systematic conflict is a complex issue and ought never to be simplified. A wonderful trait of haiku is that they come to a reader unresolved, in a way that can mirror the complexities of war, and possibly our feelings about a particular war. It becomes the reader's job to complete a haiku—to resolve it, if possible. Based upon the variety and quality of war haiku, I don't think war haiku have to be composed solely by soldiers or other participants. I think successful war haiku can be composed by anyone who feels touched by war—whether in person or tangentially.

In her essay “Haiku Awareness in Wartime,” Yarrow notes that many poets have “strong feelings about [war] . . . when it permeates our news media and our world.”⁴⁶ In another essay, “Haiku and the Mushroom Cloud,” she could be talking about the larger population of war haiku when she concludes, “Writing haiku about the mushroom cloud, then, while certainly not easy, is clearly appropriate, possible—and necessary.”⁴⁷ Metz treads similar territory in the sadly defunct Envoy Series on the Haiku Foundation blog: “Writing from interests and experiences is, of course, vital.” He then asks, “If we want to stop the atrocities of war and their destructive repercussions, shouldn’t we be writing about it then, instead of, say, birds and baseball?”⁴⁸

Some poets and readers would agree. Yet haiku on the subject of war—unlike those about birds and baseball—have to work that much harder to overcome questions of distraction and authenticity. Personally, I might go so far as to suggest that the most successful war haiku are those that are specific to human circumstance within a war, yet don’t take on the larger issue of war as a whole, but I would never presume to tell another poet what to write.

Ultimately, it is not desirable to bring issues of morality, authenticity, motivation, manipulation, and historical revision raised in this essay into the moment of poetic composition. However, I think it is appropriate and necessary to ask these questions after a poem is written, considering how war haiku may be shared with individuals of diverse experiential, political, and historical understandings.

Notes

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5. *Ibid.*, 75.
6. *Ibid.*, 206.
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8. Cited in Ruth Yarrow, "Haiku Awareness in Wartime," *Frogpond* 28:2 (Summer 2005), 61.
9. Herold and Welch, *The Gulf Within*, 9.
10. Anakiev, *Kamesan's World Haiku Anthology on War*, 42.
11. Herold and Welch, *The Gulf Within*, 25.
12. Anakiev, *Kamesan's World Haiku Anthology on War*, 132.
13. *Ibid.*, 145.
14. *Ibid.*, 52.
15. *Ibid.*, 199.
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