

East-West Literary Imagination: Cultural Exchanges from Yeats to Morrison by Yoshinobu Hakutani (2017, University of Missouri Press, Columbia MO) 293 pages, 6×9", cloth bound. ISBN 978-0-8262-2080-6. \$80 from press.umsystem.edu

Reviewed by Randy Brooks

Yoshinobu Hakutani is Professor of English at Kent State University, known for his scholarship on African American writers and American haiku. He is the author of *Richard Wright and Haiku* (University of Missouri Press), *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*, and *Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism* (Ohio State University Press). This new study explores the cultural exchanges between the East and West that began in the nineteenth century with American transcendentalists and continued with modernists such as Noguchi, Yeats, Pound, Camus, and Kerouac. In the third section, Hakutani makes the case that African American writers including Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and James Emanuel are postmodernists. Hakutani argues that these writers' literary work is better understood not as national literature, but as literature informed by cultural exchanges with the East.

For scholars interested in the history of English-language haiku, this collection of essays provides three significant contributions. First, Hakutani provides evidence that Yone Noguchi was a primary source for modernist conceptions of haiku and Japanese literature. This includes Noguchi's own collection of haiku in English, lectures and essays on Japanese haiku, and several books on Japanese literature.

Second, Hakutani examines early American haiku writers from the 1950s and 1960s in his chapters on "Richard Wright's Haiku and Modernist Poetics" and "Jack Kerouac's Haiku, Beat Poetics, and *On the Road*." While noting that R.H. Blyth's translations were significant to all of these haiku poets, he argues that Wright follows a modernist approach from Shiki "that haiku should be a depiction not only of nature but also of humanity, and that humanity should be represented by the author of

a haiku himself or herself.” Based on Shiki’s essay, “Criticism of Basho,” he views Richard Wright’s haiku as following Shiki’s “opposition to the classic tradition of suppressing subjectivity.” Hakutani writes:

Many of Wright’s haiku reflect the features of modernist haiku, such as the expression of subjectivity and the interaction of humanity and nature. Although Wright emulated classic haiku, he consciously or unconsciously departed in many of his compositions from the classic poetics in which the poet effaces human subjectivity. (139)

Hakutani compares Wright to Basho:

A thin waterfall
Dribbles the whole autumn night,—
How lonely it is

A crow
Perched on a withered tree
In the autumn evening.

He notes that:

Basho focuses on a single crow perching on a branch of an old tree, as does Wright on a thin waterfall. Both haiku create the kind of beauty associated with the aesthetic sensibility of *sabi* that suggests loneliness and quietude, the salient characteristics of nature, as opposed to overexcitement and loudness, those of society. As Basho expresses *sabi* with the image of autumn evening, so does Wright with the line “How lonely it is.” Subjectivity, however, is absent in Basho’s haiku while it is directly expressed by Wright’s third line, “How lonely it is.” (139)

In his chapter on Kerouac’s haiku, Hakutani notes that while Gary Snyder was interested in Zen Buddhism, “Kerouac was

impressed with Mahayana Buddhism, for one's goal of life is to achieve Buddhahood, a celestial state of enlightenment and acceptance of all forms of life" (155). In another passage, he writes about Kerouac:

For him, Buddhism taught one to transcend the origin of suffering and death: desire and ignorance. Most impressively, Buddhism taught Kerouac that the phenomenal world was like a dream and an illusion and that happiness consisted in achieving that strange vision in the mind—enlightenment. (138)

Hakutani makes a convincing argument that Kerouac's writing and haiku responded to:

the Zen principle to establish authority in one's spontaneous and intuitive insights and actions. Kerouac took pains to see things as they existed, without commentary, interpretation, and judgment. (155)

He also notes several Confucian principles that are evident: "Several of Kerouac's haiku reflect a Confucian perspective that all things in the universe are related and united:

The tree looks
like a dog
Barking at Heaven.

The last section of this book examines Eastern connections evident in other African American authors including Richard Wright, Sonia Sanchez, and James Emanuel. After reviewing the reception of Richard Wright's collection *Haiku: This Other World*, Hakutani examines the haiku of Sonia Sanchez as an example of a postmodern approach:

Although most of the short poems collected in *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* are stylistically influenced by the

poetics of haiku as well as by the aesthetics of modernist poetry, much of Sanchez's ideological concern is postmodern, postcolonial, and African American. Many of her poems aim at teaching African Americans to achieve individualism and value their heritage. Even such haiku as *mixed with day and sun / i crouched in the earth carry / you like a dark river* succinctly expresses what Langston Hughes does in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." (257)

This book ends with a study of haiku by James Emanuel who "found a strong affinity between haiku and jazz" as evident in his collection, *Jazz from the Haiku King* published in 1999.

BRIEFLY REVIEWED

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Blowing Up Balloons: Baby Poems for Parents by Vanessa Proctor and Gregory Piko (2017, Red Moon Press, Winchester VA) 120 pages, 4¾×7", perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-936848-78-2. \$15 from redmoonpress.com

Blowing Up Balloons: Baby Poems for Parents is a collection of parenting haiku by Australian haiku writers Vanessa Proctor and Gregory Piko. The haiku are presented one per page, without designation of author, so the reader has plenty of room to enter into the imaginary space and let each expand in his or her own mind. I enjoyed the playful haiku, *breakfast / throwing up / baby names*, which is both about morning sickness and the fun of rejecting possible names for the coming baby. Some of the haiku are straightforward observations with commentary: *stretch marks — / proof that you / have changed me*. However, all seem genuine to the parenting experience: *sleepless night / we pack the hospital bag / again*. My favorite was *patchwork quilt / the women discuss / stitches* which is, of course, about stitches beyond the quilt.