

Signature Style: How Identity Informs Voice in Haiku by Robin Anna Smith (additional notes)

SLIDE 1

Intro

SLIDE 2

This is a brief bio. I normally prefer humorous bios, but I realize many people here have no idea who I am.

I recently Co-Founded the Trailblazer Awards, which is opening up in August, so please check out our site and start getting a submission ready! Our website is trailblazercontest.com.

SLIDE 3

So, this is my abstract. I'm not going to read through it since you've seen it already. But basically, I'll be talking about how identity informs our poetics. How to identify certain things while reading and how to use these things to help create a memorable signature style.

For the purpose of this talk, I'm including both haiku and senryu. Many standout poems include environmental nature as well as human nature, some riding the line between the two to where they are nearly indistinguishable as one or the other.

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What about the RUUUULES?

First, we can touch on some ideas that we see repeatedly mentioned when discussing haiku - some so-called "dos and don'ts," as focusing too much on these things sometimes gets in the way of our reading and writing. *I mention reading here at the very beginning as reading is as important as writing, if not more. Yes, probably more.*

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If you've been around the haiku community for a minute, you've heard all sorts of things about "the RUUUULES": about pronouns in haiku, haiku becoming "too feminine," about people using their imaginations, so-called "desk haiku" and so on. We don't have time today to go discuss ALL of them, but I wanted to hit on a few that relate directly to this presentation. While some of these ideas may be rooted in Japanese aesthetics, some interpretations of them are simply not grounded in the *now*.

First, we hear a lot about ego, and those who wish to not see the I's, the my's, the me's in haiku. But the reality is the use of these words is not necessarily individualistic, but these personal pronouns can be used as a tool to reflect on an entire group. To assume these are ego-centric based on a single use of a word is simply incorrect. It all depends on the manner in which they are used.

Universality does not necessarily mean it applies to everyone, it can mean it applies to one's society, class, or any other group. Given the international nature of English Language Haiku in the 21st century, where we have a convergence of different cultures and the richness they all contribute, there can be innumerable universalities and it is not up to any single group or individual to make the decision in regard to what is or isn't universal.

And lastly, the railing against so-called desk haiku because it is perceived to not be a "haiku moment," is preposterous and totally ableist as well. Many well-known and well-loved haikai poets have written from their beds. There is a large percentage of poets in our community who are disabled - we can't all go on a ginkgo - and we can't discount their experiences or the experiences of people who cannot or simply prefer not to write in one particular way. The "haiku moment" is only one option!

It is up to each of us to decide how to interpret and adhere to perceived guidelines and suggestions. And it's up to each of us to expand haiku and take it beyond the past and into the future. We should all focus on writing what only we can, and not try to parrot some watered-down version of a misinterpretation.

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So, when I talk about how identity informs voice, I am not referring to what has become known as "identity poetics." This is where the poems are only about one's identity and the poem reflects back on the poet. I'm presenting identity as the lenses through which we observe the world. These leave an inevitable imprint on our psyches and translate over into our poems.

Life Experience as Lens applies both to the writer and reader.

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These lists are just some aspects of culture.

No two people have had the same experiences in life. Even within families where demographics may be otherwise identical. Because we all develop our own ideas, preferences, and interpretations of our surroundings.

Whether we think we're filtering these out or we purposely write them into our poems, these perspectives and experiences affect how we see the world, so of course, they are reflected in our work.

People with similar lives to a poet they're reading, may not even notice this in a poem because they are looking through similar lenses. The further away from our own experiences, the more we may notice differences.

We hear a lot about "the work speaking for itself," and that is true to some degree: a poem has to communicate with readers. However, *as* readers, we must build some intuitiveness . . . open our minds and be curious to see beyond the surface and beyond ourselves. To not be too closed off to do a simple word search on the internet or search for deeper meaning that may come from a point-of-view different from our own.

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For these reasons, we can't really speak about the *best* haiku or senryu without considering the author. If we assume to only read work that speaks to our personal culture or experiences and assume to label *these* poems the "best," we assert our own voices over a wide swath of poets, and this practice erases the *voices* in the minority. It is simply exclusionary.

***We should be reading as responsibly and astutely as we are writing. ***

SLIDE 8

So, this Cross-cultural Understanding I'm referring to is simply, how we interpret the work of others (and how they interpret ours as well). Often, we are told that work is not universal because someone may not personally be familiar with a topic or a point-of-view used. BUT we CAN identify with them if we take a moment and consider the possible lenses this writer is looking through.

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So, these are just some imaginary examples ... some fake people I made up ...

Looking at their similarities and differences, how well do you think this reader can find resonance in the work of this poet?

Whether or not we share the same experiences, we can all relate to them via empathy, our imaginations, and subjective similarity. (This is what we perceive as having in common). This, in contrast to merely meeting halfway, where we only scratch the surface or a hit and run reading, where we make contact and quickly move on. We have to slow down and give it more time.

In this example, the reader doesn't have to be a wheelchair user to have an idea of what being in a wheelchair might be like, because most of us know someone who is a wheelchair user or who has had to use one at some time. The same way the reader doesn't have to have the same profession to appreciate being exhausted after a long day of work. If this poet writes about her relationship with God, depending on the way the poem is written, the reader may not even know this person practices a different religion, but they can relate to the concept of faith.

So, if we read poems that reflect a difference from our own lives and assert that, for example, the experiences of the disabled, LGBTQIA folx, and those of different races, religions, and so on from our own, are not universal, we further cultural divides that "other" the people writing these poems. These are indeed universal, so we should be reflecting on them as such. Frankly, to *neglect* to do so is an inequitable action.

So, how do we read poems more openly in a way more receptive to these lenses that may differ from our own? And how do we write poems in a way we can relay our unique experiences to others, without watering down who we are?

We'll come back and take another look at this slide after we see work from our sample poets and see if we view this any differently.

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So, onto the more direct part of this talk in regard to style. This is a list of Style Identifiers I've compiled. By no means exhaustive. Many identifiers may overlap in our work, just as our lenses of experience do.

This is just the beginning of things that we can identify in the work of others as readers and employ in our own work to help ground it in who we are as individuals.

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This grounding can lead to bodies of work that are all, kind of connected at the roots, versus having lists of random poems that are searching for a place to root themselves.

Now, this is *not* to say one can't have great poems if they don't have this threading together in their body of work, but in order to create a signature, there has to be a sort of consistency between poems. Sometimes, people do initially have this in their work but edit it out to sanitize their poems. But in doing so, they rob themselves of the opportunity to publish some of their best work. We should be focusing on creating work that is more powerful...not more palatable.

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Subgenres

Some poets regularly work within specific subgenres. These are just some examples:

Femku as coined by Lori A Minor.

SLIDE 11

Topics

There are innumerable potential topics that can be repeatedly addressed in one's work.

SLIDE 12

Form

There are some people who consistently write in an alternate form to the tercet. This can be one manner of more precisely expressing one's experience, thoughts, or ideas. Haiku is not a form, so we don't need to restrict ourselves to using the tercet.

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Specificity - This is writing specifically in relation to something else.

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Manipulation of Language - The unique or unusual way the words are used.

Situation framing - setting the scene in a particular way (I think of this as forcing the reader to take on a different perspective versus merely reading about a different perspective).

access to vocabulary

Whether it's Latin words or phrases or words from one's native tongue, the mixing in of something not normally spoken in English can add a personal flavor to haiku.

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These are the 8 poets whose work we'll be reading today. I selected poets whose work has strong signatures and were significantly different from each other so we could see a good variety of identifiers. I also wanted my selections to represent *a range* of experience in both writing and life, in general.

So, I will surely miss some identifiers and I'm sure you'll think of your own, but I tried to do my best with limited time and space.

SLIDE 16 - Hifsa Ashraf

So, I'd first like us to think back to one of the previous slides, where I was talking about the use of pronouns not necessarily making a haiku egocentric.

patriarchal shadow overstepping my double helix

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Does this poem ONLY represent this individual? Of course not. It represents patriarchal culture as a whole, it can represent anyone whose life has been prescribed by an individual man, it could include nonbinary people, trans, or gay men as well. That's probably about half the population, right?

- subgenres - strong feminist voice (femku as coined by Lori A Minor)
- it's topical (reflecting on local culture/customs as well as gender roles)
- a variety of lineations and spacing in her poems, as a tool to strengthen the narrative
- mental health (topical & specificity when it's showing a state of mind)
- manipulation of language - "he finds the moon a mere dot" uses something familiar to show an exaggerated POV to emphasize the extreme nature of this woman's experience.
- mix of haiku and senryu

SLIDE 17 - the late Jan Benson

- natural history
- situation framing - shifting from close to far - the bray of young longhorns clouds break blue... from the sound surrounding you out into the clouds
- Manipulation of language - she had medical issues affecting neuroplasticity, memory, and cognition which also played into her use of turn of phrase - the WAY she used words was unique... the specific vocabulary

SLIDE 18 - Susan Burch

- topics - relationships
- humor (a type of specificity) as well as her use of imagination (example of effective "desk haiku") in this one, her imagination is running right through her: zen garden - an imaginary river runs through me
- her use of specific punctuation (en dash versus em dash) which I don't have on my lists but is a signature of hers
- manipulation of language (situation framing) looking for love and then the jump to proctologist

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SLIDE 19 - Kat Lehmann

These sudo-ku are only a single facet of her work but I wanted to show something highly experimental but also extremely effective.

If you haven't seen these before, they are intended to be read vertically and horizontally, and you may even find haiku diagonally.

- form is the first thing we notice here of course
- natural and personal histories
- imagination, abstraction, and manipulation of language (situation framing)
- use of precise language (topics/science) and punctuation: following a sun into winter - the inner spinning axis / the inner spinning of midnight to chase what becomes empty

Many of these things are reflective of Kat's analytic mind as a scientist.

AND you may not know these details about people, but if you dig into the poems versus grazing the top, you can perceive hints.

SLIDE 20 - Réka Nyitrai

- use of surrealism (subgenre)
- topics: personal history (relationships) mixed with images from natural history
- form (alternate lineation to tercet)
- specificity in relation to roles (as a child, as a lover)
- abstraction (the aftertaste of a white lie)
- great example of multiple readings in the monoku

lullaby in her mouth swarming fireflies

lullaby / in her mouth / swarming fireflies

lullaby in her mouth / swarming fireflies

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lullaby / in her mouth swarming / fireflies

SLIDE 21 - Vandana Parashar

- haiku and senryu (almost blending genres)
- topics: relationships
- roles (specificity) motherhood
- personal identity - the specificity of the mental states involved in these roles
- situation framing...she puts the reader in her shoes...postpartum the sky finally clears - a mother's life revolving door

SLIDE 22 - Orrin Tyrell PreJéan (matsukaze)

- Personal and societal history
- relationships
- specificity: there is a longing in this work and use of imagination, a sensuality and delicateness. I didn't even realize until I had all of these on the slide that they all contained flowers.
- these are person first (senryu) that still include nature elements
- situation framing - attention to detail, turn of phrase (there is a delicateness and nuance here) "a collapsing city inside me"
- use of pronouns that could be read as universal: "my naked body and the black orchids in dusk"...is this a literal image or is this strictly metaphor?

SLIDE 23 - Shloka Shankar

- use of grammatical and musical terms (specificity)
- abstraction and turn of phrase (manipulation of language)

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Unlocks something in your subconscious, works its way in like an earworm or a feeling of déjà vu. You may have never heard it, but it still feels so familiar that you keep going back to it. That is what makes it so effective.

SLIDE 24 - Shloka and GRIX

Collaborations are an example of adding another layer of lenses to the mix, creating deeper meaning or additional resonance. I'm just sharing this single haiga as an example but it could also apply to collaborative sequences, rengay, etc.

Peter Jastermsky & Bryan Rickert's split sequences

Tanya MacDonald & Lew Watts' rengay

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So, here we are back to the example where we see reader and poet overlap. Can you see any more potential for resonance here?

The choices people make when writing are inevitably influenced by their identities.

So, meeting the poet in the middle is not enough. We need to look deeper - go beyond. We can't just skim or meet halfway. In the middle, where there is overlap: empathy, imagination, and subjective similarity, these things are the glue that holds together these many lenses and allow the reader to be pulled into the poem and remain there long enough to look deeper.

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As reader, what can we do?

We need to read and re-read haiku that we may not "get" the first time. Not to commit hit-and-run reading. And not just skim journals for the names we know or whose work comes easily to us.

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As a writer...

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(e.g. Where were you born? Did you grow up in a small town? What do you do as a hobby? What kinds of jobs have you held?)

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We are poets writing poems - seems obvious, right?

Writing is an artform, and art, no matter its topic or object, always includes the artist, somewhere in the work.

Let's not forget that when we are writing.

Thank you :)