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"Yearning for what I never had": The Persistence of Subjectivity in Richard Wright's Haiku

Though Richard Wright's haiku have received relatively little critical attention, a couple major points of disagreement have nonetheless emerged from this body of scholarship. One issue concerns the degree to which the poems convey political content; another centers on whether this political content—insofar as it exists—enhances or detracts from the poems's aesthetic merit. In this paper, I will argue that these critical disagreements are themselves revelatory of the ambiguous, ambivalent, and unstable relationship that inheres between Wright's politics and the haiku form—that Wright employs this form in order to trouble it, to explore what it does or does not allow to be said. After briefly reviewing Wright's involvement with haiku and the previous scholarship these poems have generated, I will turn to the poems themselves in order to show how they foreground what's at stake when an African-American writer with a deep investment in the struggle for racial equality takes up this traditional Japanese form.

In his biography of Wright, Michel Fabre traces how an author primarily known for overtly political novels such as *Native Son* (1940) turned to haiku poetry at the end of his life. As Fabre details, Wright grew interested in this poetic form after his gradual disillusionment with both communism and existentialism. Wright's desire to look beyond "the European cultural tradition" (*Unfinished Quest* 376) and his increasingly vocal advocacy of "a worldwide humanism" (375) naturally spurred his interest in African and

Asian culture.[1] Wright increasingly identified with a worldwide community of disenfranchised peoples, and his dedication of *White Man, Listen!* (1957) to "the lonely outsiders who exist precariously on the clifflike margins of many cultures" reflects this more global outlook. As part of this interest in the East, Wright read a study of the haiku by the English literary critic R.H. Blyth, which motivated him to experiment with the form himself, and between August 1959 and March 1960 he wrote over 4000 haiku—later selecting about 800 for publication (*Unfinished Quest* 505-9). Wright composed the haiku while coping with recurrent bouts of illness and he ultimately died on November 28th, 1960. As such, his haiku collection proved to be the last sustained writing project of his life.

By reading Blyth's study, Wright would have come to understand haiku as a type of poetry influenced by Zen Buddhist philosophy. In the first volume of the study, *Eastern Culture* (1949), Blyth describes the Zen "state of mind" as one "in which we are not separated from other things" (5), and he writes that "[h]aiku is the apprehension of a thing by a realization of our own original and essential unity with it" (8). The traditional Japanese haiku, developed by Basho and others, articulates this sense of interconnectedness between speaker and world. As such, Blyth identifies selflessness as the primary characteristic of the haiku. Consistent with this principle, Blyth writes, the haiku addresses neither intellectual nor moral issues; after all, such content would represent the intrusion of overly subjective preoccupations into poems that should be

[1] See *Unfinished Quest*, pp. 374-6, for more detail on these shifts in Wright's beliefs, including his increased dissatisfaction with Jean-Paul Sartre, whom Wright felt remained overly sympathetic to the Communists. See also Jeffrey Atteberry for a reading of how Wright's novel *The Outsider* (1953) critiques both communist and existentialist philosophy.

evocative of more universal themes. In *The Haiku Form* (1974), a later study heavily influenced by Blyth's own, Joan Giroux summarizes many of Blyth's key points in her discussion of the "haiku moment":

> The haiku moment may be defined as an instant in which man becomes united to an object, virtually becomes the object, and realizes the eternal, universal truth contained in being… The moment of "ah-ness," the haiku moment, is timeless; man is united to his environment and realizes that he partakes of the eternity of the universe. (45-6)

The haiku moment seeks to capture some fundamental reality of the natural world. As such, Giroux tells us, the poems forego symbolism and metaphor in favor of direct expression, which "allows the reality of the things in nature to speak for themselves" (51). A paradigmatic example is the following poem by Basho:

> An old pond
> A frog jumps in
> The sound of the water. (Quoted in Giroux 48)

This poem provides a precise image of the natural world, one that brings together stillness and motion, silence and noise. The speaker watches the scene unfold, but this individual point of view is de-emphasized, muted; hence, the poem indicates the speaker's identification with, or connection to, this moment in nature.

Blyth's account of haiku—and this idea of the "haiku moment," well summarized by Giroux—has consistently informed critical responses to Wright's experimentation with the form. Accepting this idea of the haiku as an apolitical type of poetry encapsulating universal themes, Fabre argues that Wright's interest in haiku demonstrates his increased "detachment" from the political arena at the end of his life ("Poetry" 271). In Fabre's reading, Wright never abandoned his political goal of fighting against "racism and injustice," but he turned to haiku in order "to paint scenes at once more personal and more universal" (271). Yoshinobu Hakutani, perhaps the foremost scholar of Wright's haiku, offers an account that is essentially similar to Fabre's, arguing that "Wright turned away from the moral, intellectual, social, and political problems dealt with in his prose work and found in nature his latent poetic sensibility" (112). As such, Hakutani contends, Wright emulated the traditional Japanese poets in attempting to suppress "subjectivity… as much as possible" (116).[2] Another critic, Floyd Ogburn, agrees that Wright's haiku convey the "common human experience of nature and man" and differs from previous scholars only in emphasizing that this haiku sensibility informs Wright's work even much earlier in his career (63-4).

In contrast to these readings of Wright's haiku as following the traditional, non-political model, Robert Tener argues both that Wright's poems are frequently political and that this political content is "intrusive," detracting from his ability to achieve the haiku moment (283). Tener faults Wright for investing his poems with racial symbolism,

[2] Hakutani is also influenced by Jacques Lacan's critique of the concept of subjectivity, and he finds Wright's poems, in their ostensible suppression of subjectivity, to be consistent with this Lacanian project. See Hakutani, pp. 123-5 for a fuller discussion of this point. Hakutani does acknowledge that his reading does not hold for all of Wright's haiku, but he satisfies himself by maintaining that "a great majority" are about trying to cast aside one's subjective perspective and identify with nature (125).

which makes them too intellectualized and too bound up with a persistent subjective perspective. A final critic, Richard Iadonisi, agrees with Tener in making the poems out to be more overtly political than others have suggested; however, Iadonisi argues that, far from making the poems worse, their political implications show Wright's ability to wield the haiku in service of his "anti-colonial position" (179). For instance, Iadonisi points to the first poem in the collection, which reads:

I am nobody:
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away. (1)

One interpretation of this poem would be that it showcases the speaker's acceptance of a detached perspective and identification with the natural world—"his attainment of the state of *mu*," or selflessness (Iadonisi 187). But Iadonisi argues against this interpretation, pointing out that "implicit in the involuntary loss of identity and dis-embodiment is a sense of violence. The autumn sun, after all, has taken the speaker's name away" (187). As such, Iadonisi provides a different perspective on the haiku, one in which their gestures toward political matters are not a blemish on the poems but an essential element of their power. In Iadonisi's view, Wright does not simply adopt and seek to reproduce the tenets of traditional haiku; rather, he re-imagines the form in order to infuse his poems with the same political spirit that informs so much of his better-known writing.

Losses of Agency and Violent Responses

This opening haiku is in fact the first of many liable to be read in different ways. For, while it is rare that Wright's haiku overtly address political or racial themes, many tempt us to read them along these lines. Insofar as Wright's poems depart from the tenets of traditional haiku,[3] these departures often raise questions about whether the haiku moment, and the state of selflessness it implies, is either possible or desirable for the politically disenfranchised human subject—a subject who in some cases might be African-American, or in others might simply be part of the larger, global community of "lonely outsiders" with whom Wright identifies. Like the "I am nobody" poem, Wright's haiku that seem to evoke the state of *mu* can, alternatively, be read as registering a politically problematic loss of agency. Consider, for instance, two other poems that foreground the idea of naming:

Just enough of snow
For a boy's finger to write
His name on the porch. (33)

Naked to the sky,
A village without a name

[3] I should note at this point that Wright writes many haiku that do closely mimic the traditional form. A good example of such a poem in Wright's collection, as Tener notes, is haiku 571, which reads: "From across the lake/ Past the black winter trees/ Faint sounds of a flute." (See Tener pp. 281-2 for discussion of this poem.) I will not be focusing on these more traditional haiku, as Tener, Hakutani, and others have already given them ample attention.

In the setting sun. (73)

The first poem captures a moment of attempted self-assertion, as the boy tries—literally—to leave his mark upon his world. By writing his name in snow, the boy endeavors to use the natural world in service of his own aims. However, the poem suggests that the boy's act of self-assertion, his expression of identity, is necessarily a transient one, for writing in snow ensures that one's message will disappear almost as soon as it is expressed. Like the first poem in the collection, this one is not explicitly political but certainly invites a political reading all the same: in the context of this moment that suggests not only the desire to make an impact upon the world but also the difficulty of doing so, it is easy to read the boy as either specifically African-American or more broadly representative of a politically disenfranchised group.

The second poem returns even more directly to the subject matter of the opening haiku; once again, Wright places concerns about namelessness against the backdrop of a setting sun. As with the opening haiku, this poem could be read as consistent with the sense of selflessness in traditional haiku, as the speaker perhaps recognizes that the village proves insignificant and temporary against the unceasing cycles of the natural world. Once again, however, the tone of the poem is ambiguous enough that this realization does not need to be seen as peaceful. If anything, the idea that the lack of identity has expanded from an individual in the opening poem to a village here is an ominous sign, for it suggests that this entire community has been disenfranchised or rendered nameless. Indeed, the first word of the poem—"Naked"—suggests the village's powerlessness, its vulnerability, when confronted with these unfeeling natural forces.

Moreover, the structure of the poem reinforces this community's comparatively weak position, since in fact the village gets mentioned at all only in the poem's middle line; it is bookended by the sky in line one and the sun in line three. This structure creates the sense that these natural forces are oppressive ones, hemming in this particular human community on all sides.

Another poem, from later in the collection, similarly suggests the futility of human striving in the face of the natural world:

> The snowball I threw
> Was caught in a net of flakes
> And wafted away. (616)

Like the boy who attempts to write his name in snow, the speaker who makes and throws a snowball reveals his desire to impact the world. Moreover, throwing a snowball, more than writing a name, suggests that this desire to assert oneself is an aggressive one—we could imagine that the speaker wishes to enact violence against his world in retaliation for the violence he feels it has enacted upon him. Whatever the case, however, once again this individual expression of agency gets subsumed by larger natural processes; the individual snowball the speaker has made is quickly lost forever.

In each of these poems, then, the unity of man and nature, the loss of self in the natural world, comes about only via an implied restriction of human agency. If the speakers exist in a state of selflessness, the poems suggest, it is not necessarily by choice. All the poems discussed so far present a picture of man and nature struggling against

each other and indicate that, when the "haiku moment" is achieved, it is because the natural world has won out at man's expense. But even when Wright writes a haiku more fully illustrating the unity of man and nature, this unity is still not as peaceful as the conventions of traditional haiku would suggest:

A spring pond as calm
As the lips of the dead girl
Under its water. (140)

Here, the speaker clearly connects the state of humanity to the state of the natural world—the spring is "calm," and so are the dead girl's lips—but this unity itself is not calming, so much as it is deeply sinister. Rather than conveying to the reader a sense of peacefulness, the poem is liable to have the opposite effect—to prompt confusion and even outrage about the lack of explanation the text provides for the girl's death.[4] If this state of affairs is what the identification with nature and the renunciation of self results in, we could image the poem's speaker thinking, then the "haiku moment" proves highly problematic.

Perhaps as a result of this implicit critique of selflessness, another strand of Wright's haiku showcase speakers fighting back against the natural world; these poems play out a fantasy of exerting or attaining power over one's circumstances.[5] Rather than

[4] We could even say, in relation to the poems discussed above, that if this poem does not illustrate a struggle for control between man and nature, it is only because nature has already won: the only human who appears in the poem is already dead.
[5] Iadonisi makes a similar point when he talks about how some of the haiku can be read as performative utterances (following J.L. Austin) in which the speaker imagines putting

passively accepting selflessness and the absence of political agency it implies, the subjects of these poems attempt to reconfigure their relationships to the natural world. For example:

A blacksmith's hammer
Beating the silver moon thin
On a cool spring night. (197)

Burning autumn leaves
I yearn to make the fire
Bigger and bigger. (49)

In the first of these poems, the blacksmith's trying to make the moon "thin" suggests his desire to suppress, to reduce the influence of, the natural world. Wright's choice of the participle "Beating" emphasizes the aggression behind the blacksmith's effort, and the second poem foregrounds this sense of aggression even more prominently. The use of the first-person pronoun in the latter poem highlights the persistence of the speaker's subjectivity: far from losing himself in nature, he "yearn[s]" to burn, to destroy, the natural world around him.

This idea of a disenfranchised human subject enacting violence upon his world in a desperate effort to change it recalls *Native Son*, wherein the protagonist commits two murders as part of a failed attempt to propel himself beyond the poverty and hopelessness

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himself into a position of power over the natural world simply by voicing such control. See pp. 184-6 of his article.

that have defined his existence. As such, it's notable that the name of *Native Son*'s protagonist, Bigger, appears twice in this poem—as though Wright is inviting us to read this haiku as continuing the earlier work's highly political censure of American racism. Moreover, after Bigger commits his first murder by suffocating a young white woman named Mary Dalton, he incinerates Mary's body in a furnace to hide the evidence; as such, the fire imagery in this poem heightens the parallel between the two works. In another haiku, Wright portrays his speaker as "[y]earning for what I never had/ And for what never was" (308). In poems that either communicate dismay at a speaker's loss of agency, or depict an individual actively trying to increase his power in opposition to the natural world, Wright suggests that many of his speakers are similarly "yearning" for a different world, a world wherein they have more than they do in this one, and wherein they might feel more comfortable, more at peace, with their surroundings.

Black and White Symbolism

Another, related way in which Wright's poems foreground their own ambiguity and invite multiple readings is by employing visual imagery that, while not explicitly about race, is highly suggestive of racial struggle. Understandably, such poems have contributed to the critical confusion about how to read Wright's collection. For instance, in response to Tener's denigration of intrusive racial symbolism in the poems, Ogburn writes, "Tener's conclusion, it appears to me, is rather strange… In several instances the problems with black-white symbolism… may lie with the way he is reading the poems,

not with Wright's intent and craft" (60).[6] What neither Tener nor Ogburn recognize, however, is that the poems encourage exactly this dispute. For instance, consider haiku 149:

I had long felt that
Those sprawling black railroad tracks
Would bring down this snow.

In response to this poem, a critic like Ogburn might point out that nothing in the text explicitly refers to race relations—and this is admittedly true. At the same time, a critic like Tener might respond that the contrast between "black" train tracks and white "snow" is highly suggestive of racial conflict—and this is true too. Indeed, if we read the poem in racial terms, it proves consistent with those haiku, discussed above, that depict man and nature struggling against each other. This particular poem, though, generates additional ambiguities: even if we envision this scene as a power struggle between humanity and the natural world, it is unclear which side has the upper hand. The cause of this ambiguity is the provocative phrase "bring down." In context, "bring down" might mean "lead to," or "bring about": under this interpretation, the speaker suggests that despite all the labor that has gone into building the railroad tracks, they will eventually be covered in snow. In

[6] An example of a poem about which Tener and Ogburn disagree is haiku 31: "In the falling snow/ A laughing boy holds out his palms/ Until they are white." The potential for disagreement centers on the question of whether or not to read the boy as black—if he is, then the white snow takes on symbolic resonance in a way it otherwise would not. As is often the case with Wright's haiku, both readings are possible. In my discussion, I will be considering poems that other critics have not focused on, but that present similar interpretive issues.

racial terms, then, we could say that the white world (the snow) inevitably subsumes the black world (the railroad), rendering irrelevant all the black community's yearning and striving. However, "bring down" could also mean "defeat." Read this way, the poem suggests that it is the black railroad tracks—not the white snow—that will triumph in this struggle.

When we consider haiku 149 in conjunction with Wright's earlier works, the potential racial implications of the poem's imagery become even more glaring. In *Native Son*, after Bigger hides out in order to escape punishment for his crimes, the scene wherein the police finally catch him takes place on a snowy, winter night, and since this is the moment when Bigger finally and irrevocably loses his struggle against the white world, his difficulty traversing the snow that surrounds him proves highly symbolic. For instance, seconds before the police apprehend Bigger, Wright depicts his protagonist falling from a water tank and "land[ing] on the roof, on his face, in snow, dazed" (*NS* 269). The novel then describes how two men "placed a foot on each of [Bigger's] wrists, making them sink deep down in the snow" (270). With these and other images, Wright presents Bigger as stuck in, oppressed by, the white snow. Given the relatively obvious racial undertones here, it grows increasingly easy to read a poem like haiku 149 as similarly symbolic. Moreover, it is not only snow imagery that has appeared in a heavily racialized way in Wright's earlier works, but railroad imagery as well. In *Black Boy* (1945), Wright's memoir, he recounts how his family lived at one point near the railroad tracks in Chicago. Wright's speaker in the memoir explicitly connects these tracks to the black struggle for power in a white-dominated world, commenting at one point, "I heard a trolley lumbering past over steel tracks in the early dusk and I knew that underpaid,

bewildered, black men and women were returning to their homes from serving their white masters" (*BB* 383). Once again, then, Wright's haiku about "black railroad tracks" can be understood as consistent with this earlier, politicized imagery.

The conflict between the black railroad and the white snow, begun in haiku 149, carries over into number 153:

> The snow has melted,
> And now all the fields belong
> To the railroad tracks.

Whereas haiku 149 proves ambiguous about who has the upper hand in this snow-railroad power struggle, in this later haiku it is clear that the train tracks have outlasted the snow. Once again, the poem does not explicitly discuss race, and here the railroad tracks are not even specifically identified as black; however, when this poem is read together with 149, it certainly becomes plausible to see them as two vignettes in the same narrative, and thus all the racial implications of 149 extend to 153 as well. If this poem suggests a racial power struggle, then it proves one of the more politically optimistic haiku in the collection, as the world of black labor represented by the railroad tracks has evidently lived through the oppressive white winter and emerged with unchallenged influence and claims to ownership. In contrast to previously discussed poems wherein politically disenfranchised subjects disrupt the haiku moment by enacting violence upon their surroundings, here the poem's speaker adopts a more unproblematically calm tone, as if experiencing a rare moment of satisfaction with the world he perceives around him.

The Scarecrow as Disenfranchised Subject

The last set of poems I want to discuss are those that depict the figure of the scarecrow, a recurring character in Wright's haiku. While criticism has thus far not devoted much attention to Wright's numerous poems about scarecrows, these poems call attention to their own ambiguity in ways comparable to many of the haiku this paper has already discussed.[7] Scarecrows in fields might seem like staples of idyllic, pastoral scenes, except that Wright's depictions often cast the scarecrow as an oppressed figure, whose agency is restricted or denied. Consider, for instance, the following haiku, wherein the speaker's sympathy for the scarecrow's plight is evident:

Scarecrow, who starved you,
Set you in that icy wind,
And then forgot you? (577)

By lamenting the scarecrow's exposure to the natural elements and apparent abandonment, the poem encourages us to imagine that this figure feels the bitterness of the wind and the pain of hunger, just as a human subject would. Once again, the poem begs comparison with Wright's own experiences: Wright's own hunger was a constant preoccupation of his childhood and a constant theme of *Black Boy*—indeed, the memoir's

[7] In their afterword to Wright's haiku collection, Tener and Hakutani note that Wright "identifies closely with the scarecrow" in multiple poems, but they do not pursue the full, potentially political implications of this identification (288). See haiku 492 and 684 for examples of poems wherein Wright's identification with the scarecrow is clear.

original title was *American Hunger*. Moreover, by implying the scarecrow's very human feelings of discomfort, the poem also invites a comparison between this figure and other individuals or groups whose humanity has historically been denied. The insistence on the scarecrow's humanity, and the potential political ramifications of this insistence, is even more overt in the following poem:

Accidentally
Cut by the tip of the hoe,
The scarecrow shudders. (670)

This poem achieves its effect by revealing, in its final line, that this ostensibly inanimate figure does in fact feel the violence enacted upon it. As such, the poem becomes a critique of this violence, and a call to prevent its being continually enacted upon such helpless figures.

As with other poems in the collection that represent oppressed subjects, Wright's scarecrow poems move between lamenting this figure's lack of agency to illustrating his active attempt to improve his lot. Here's a poem in the latter vein:

Late one winter night
I saw a skinny scarecrow
Gobbling slabs of meat. (150)

Like those discussed above, this poem emphasizes that the scarecrow is not an unfeeling, inanimate figure, but unlike the others this poem shows the scarecrow engaged in a successful effort to mitigate his disenfranchised position. Though still "skinny," the scarecrow does manage to satisfy the hunger that bothers him in haiku 577—just as Wright feeds his own hunger over his life and reaches a position wherein he no longer needs to worry about the source of his next meal.

Critiquing Objectivity

We have seen how often Wright's poems call attention, not to the loss of self, but rather to the persistence of subjectivity, the persistence of yearning. Indeed, the body of criticism the poems have generated itself reinforces this point: because of their openness to being read in multiple ways, Wright's poems remind us that assessments of their political content and merit are themselves subjective interpretations by individual readers. When critics disagree, it is because each brings his or her own personal perspective to bear on the poems, and each reader notices or chooses to highlight different features of their composition. In a naturalist novel like *Native Son*, Wright illustrates how Bigger's environment shapes his particular, subjective outlook on the world; in this sense, the emphasis in Wright's haiku on the inextricable individual perspective is consistent with this earlier work. But a naturalist novel also purports to narrate its events from a certain critical distance, offering a more objective stance on the circumstances it depicts. In his later work, however, Wright proves increasingly skeptical as to whether such an objective viewpoint is truly possible for him as a writer, or indeed for anyone.

Interestingly, this skepticism is bound up with his increasingly global outlook; as Wright came into contact with different cultures and peoples, he evidently recognized that he could not help but view them through his own particular lens. He makes this point in "Tradition and Industrialization," the speech he gave at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956:[8] "I'm black. I'm a man of the West. These hard facts are bound to condition, to some degree, my outlook. I see and understand the West, but I also see and understand the non- or anti-Western point of view" (47). When he considers Eastern cultures, then, Wright recognizes that even as he shares many of their criticisms of the West, he still looks at them from an unavoidably Western viewpoint. Recognizing that he cannot escape this particular perspective, Wright emphasizes that "there is no such thing as objectivity" (47).[9] It is this view that informs his encounter with the East—including, crucially, his work in haiku. Rather than unproblematically accepting the Zen concept of selflessness, of *mu*, Wright writes haiku that point to the political disadvantages of such a state. Operating off the idea that the traditional Japanese haiku tries to avoid symbolism, Wright writes poems that are not necessarily symbolic—except that anyone who has any familiarity with Wright's biography and earlier writings would be hard pressed not to find a great deal of symbolism in these poems. Whereas Blyth and others describe the haiku as capturing universal, apolitical experience, Wright's haiku ask whether our reading or writing can ever be wholly detached from our own political realities and goals.

[8] For more details about this conference, see Fabre, pp. 430-41.
[9] Atteberry also discusses Wright's critique of objectivity in this speech; see p. 891 of his article.

Conclusion

Given the frequent ambiguity of Wright's haiku, and the critical disagreements they have generated, it's worth noting that Wright composed these poems at an interesting moment in the history of Western literary criticism. When Wright was working on his haiku in 1959 and '60, the dominant critical approach in many English departments was New Criticism, a school of thought that emphasized looking only at the words on the page in order to make interpretive claims, excluding any reference to political events or authors' biographies from one's analysis.[10] This critical approach was perhaps best exemplified by Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn*, published in 1947; however, New Criticism certainly remained in vogue through the '50s and into the 60s. However, more recent decades have spawned a number of alternative critical approaches—Marxism, Feminism, New Historicism, and others—all of which argue that a writer's work cannot be understood apart from the historical circumstances that produced it, and that to claim literary texts are apolitical is to overlook the social forces that determined how these texts were written and read in the first place. Though Wright of course died before the Academy's various historically-grounded critical approaches gained influence, his haiku invite precisely the same questions that later literary critics would ask, about whether a text can ever be truly apolitical or speak to truly universal themes. Given that the haiku, traditionally understood, is supposed to capture a precise image of the natural world, and to exclude political concerns, this type of poetry seems particularly conducive to a New Critical approach. But Wright's haiku demonstrate

[10] For a fuller account of the history of New Criticism, see Eagleton, pp. 40-6.

wherein such an approach breaks down, and in so doing they foreshadow the broader turn away from exclusively formalist critical work.

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