
ESSAYS

BLACK HAIKU: THE USES OF HAIKU BY AFRICAN AMERICAN POETS

Charles Trumbull

PART II: JAZZ AND BLUES HAIKU

Part I of this essay traced the origins of the African American haiku tradition in the early years of the 20th century, showed how the haiku consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance poets led to the Black Arts movement and haiku of black awareness, and examined the work of a number of black poets who work in what might be called the haiku mainstream. In Part II we trace another important legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, haiku grounded in quintessential African American lyrical forms, jazz and the blues.

JAZZ AND BLUES POETRY

In his chapter on jazz and blues poetry in Cary Nelson's anthology of modern and contemporary poetry, Edward Brunner succinctly and poetically pinpoints the origin in music of jazz and blues poetry and the differences between them:

In vernacular African American music, jazz and the blues began as being intricately entwined. Jazz and the blues share the same harmonic inclinations—the flatted third, fifth, and seventh notes in the diatonic scale—but jazz improvisation escapes both the formal regularity of the blues and its interest in the refrain. Unlike the emphasis in the blues on the communal

possibilities of a repeated set of phrases, jazz performance ultimately highlights the isolation and daring of the individual, encouraged to self-present as a virtuoso. Jazz is always on the run, escaping from the restrictions of regularization even as its route of escape is woven through the protective of standard harmonic progressions (that may be manifest, in another virtuosic achievement, through ingenious substitutions). The blues, by contrast, embraces repetition, in an invitation extended to others to anticipate and thus join in a refrain, though a well-marked point in its patten always makes space for the individual to have a say, to remark on what everyone has heard. If the harmonies and rhythms of jazz tend to startle and surprise, the harmonies and rhythms of the blues are old friends, familiar and stylized.¹

and again later:

To all the novelty represented by the noisy nonmusic of saxophones in Jazz Age poetry, the blues were poised to circulate as a powerful emotional alternative. Though their lyrics might verge on the sensational, their structure maintained an underlying sobriety. Poetry associated with the blues delivered just what the jazz text often avoided: the blues establishes a groundwork for appreciating and even respecting the difficulties of black experience.²

Historically both jazz poems and blues poems tended to have as their principal themes the music itself, the performers, and the mood experienced while listening to the music. These themes expanded in the 1960s, however, to include all aspects of the black experience in America, notably oppression of blacks in white society, oppression of other minorities, and eroticism. In time, this became the focal point of most blues poems. African Americans in the past few decades have taken to jazz haiku and blues haiku as their own, largely, it seems, because of a perceived affinity between haiku and the blues and jazz forms. To put matters into perspective, however, music—especially jazz and blues—has been a popular topic for haiku writers of all colors and ethnicities for many years.

JAZZ POETRY

First noticed by mainstream American culture in the early years of the 20th century, jazz music rapidly became a worldwide phenomenon. In the wide-open years after World War I, many besides musicians were struck by jazz's openness, driving rhythms, insouciance, and a touch of nose-thumbing at cultural norms. We have shown that poets of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and '30s were steeped in jazz and the blues and knowledgeable about haiku. It is not surprising that jazz poetry spawned a subset of jazz and blues haiku.

In the literary realm at the time, the exciting news was *vers libre*—free verse—imported from France and offering a stimulating alternative to the restrictiveness of the Romantic tradition in poetry. The freedom and undisciplined nature of jazz music was a perfect marriage for free verse. Jazz poetry is the freest of free verse.

Jazz proved so alluring that it was adopted by non-blacks everywhere. Almost immediately both jazz music and jazz writing were co-opted by whites; George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, Darius Milhaud, Igor Stravinsky, and many other musicians began composing jazz pieces. They wrote, however, in a style that composer Virgil Thomson derided as “ersatz” jazz, not to be compared with the real thing as played by Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, and others. At the same time, literary figures such as novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald (who coined the term “Jazz Age”) and poets Vachel Lindsay, Hart Crane, Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings, and, later and more importantly, the Beats, infused their works with jazz too. The same is true of jazz haiku. Even Japanese haiku poet Santōka wrote a few jazz-inspired haiku. For example:

(In this neighborhood)
 Chanting the sutras
 Cannot drown out the jazz music.³

Of course the pioneer black haiku poets of the late 1960s referenced jazz, e.g., Etheridge Knight and Richard Wright:

Making jazz swing in
Seventeen syllables AIN'T
No square poet's job.⁴

From a tenement,
The blue jazz of a trumpet
Weaving autumn mists.⁵

White poets and musicians appreciated the affinity of haiku and jazz. In the late 1960s Jack Kerouac recorded a selection of his haiku, each followed by an improvised jazz sax riff by Al Cohn and Zoot Sims.⁶ Poet Charlie Rossiter (voice and conga) has been doing something similar in public performances with his friend saxophonist Al Degenova in the Chicago area for years.⁷ Haiku poet Arizona Zipper and his jazz drummer friend Bob Richardson claim inventors' rights to "jazz-ku"—actually a renku—in 1996–97.⁸ With the assistance of Raffael de Gruttola, the first of their jazz-ku was performed publically at the Deer Tree Summer Theatre, Harrison, Maine, in the summer of 1999, Zipper playing an African rainstick as background accompaniment.⁹ De Gruttola, together with Paul David Mena and other friends, continue to perform jazz- and blues-related renku in the Boston area.

A number of other white haikuists have found great success publishing their jazz and blues haiku and sequences. A few examples:

the blues singer
tells how bad it is
then the sax tells you too
*Cor van den Heuvel (1991)*¹⁰

furious sax solo —
an old lady
does the "nasty rooster"
*Jeffrey Winke (1994)*¹¹

Coltrane's Ballads ...
in the silence between songs
night rain
*Robert Gilliland (1999)*¹²

Willow weep for me
it does, Lady, it does
*Marian Olson (2012)*¹³

BLUES AND BLUES POETRY

If jazz music and jazz poetry celebrated freedom and open-endedness, blues lyrics and the poetry that derived from them are much more restrictive. In music, the standard twelve-bar blues is usually limited to

three chords. The structure of the lyrics is typically three rhyming lines: a statement; a repetition of the statement with some slight change for emphasis or humor; and a second statement that comments on, or resolves, the first. An example is Willie Dixon's:

THE RED ROOSTER

I have a little red rooster, too lazy to crow for day
I have a little red rooster, too lazy to crow for day
Keep everything in the barnyard upset in every way

Oh the dogs begin to bark, and the hound begin to howl
Oh the dogs begin to bark, hound begin to howl
Ooh watch out strange kind people, cause little red rooster is on
the prowl

If you see my little red rooster, please drag him home
If you see my little red rooster, please drag him home
There ain't no peace in the barnyard, since the little red rooster
been gone¹⁴

The metamorphosis from blues lyrics and poetry to blues haiku is thus different from the jazz example. Jazz haiku is a variant of free verse. Blues haiku harkened to the notion that haiku is an oral, more or less fixed form that suggests some kinship to African work songs, spirituals, and blues. Anthologist Kevin Young makes a useful distinction between jazz and blues as applied to poetry: "with the blues the form fights the feeling, with jazz the form is the feeling." Blues haiku has remained primarily the domain of black poets.

LANGSTON HUGHES AND THE ORIGINS OF JAZZ AND BLUES POETRY

Langston Hughes, the virtual poet laureate of Harlem, inaugurated interest in both jazz and blues poetry.¹⁶ Hughes and other figures in the Harlem Renaissance sought to develop a unique African American literature (see his poem "My People" in Part I of this essay) and the black

musical forms of jazz and blues appealed for exactly these reasons. The verses Hughes wrote were keyed more to blues than to jazz, for example his “Po’ Boy Blues,” written in blues song style:

PO’ BOY BLUES

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I come up North de
Whole damn world’s turned cold.

I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong.
Yes, I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong,
But this world is weary
An’ de road is hard an’ long.

I fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
Fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
She made me lose ma money
An’ almost lose ma mind.

Weary, weary,
Weary early in de morn.
Weary, weary,
Early, early in de morn.
I’s so weary
I wish I’d never been born.¹⁷

Note Hughes's use of Negro dialect. Solidly in the blues tradition, Hughes's poem is a restatement, in new words, of a traditional blues ballad about the poor boy a long way from home. Hughes likened the blues to folk song.

In the pages below we will look at the work of proponents of jazz and blues haiku.

JAMES A. EMANUEL

In his autobiographical sketch on the Academy of American Poets website, James A. Emanuel (born 1921) writes:

In 1992 in "Le Barry," the country home of the Plassard family in southwest France, where I have now and then composed poetry for over twenty-five years, I planned an apparently new literary genre, the "jazz haiku." My "breakaway haiku" in *Deadly James and Other Poems* (1987) had begun my experiments with the Japanese 3-line form, adhering to its 5-7-5 syllabic pattern, but widening its sensory impact beyond the capacity of the usual single impression. My haiku added the toughness of poverty and racial injustice, the declarative emphasis made possible by narrative style, and the technical challenge of time.¹⁸

Emanuel's jazz haiku are usually about a prominent figure in jazz or other musical genre; among the luminaries he has invoked in his haiku are Ella Fitzgerald, Mr. Bojangles (Bill Robinson), Josephine Baker, Michael Jackson, Charlie "Bird" Parker, John Coltrane, Chet Baker, Dizzy Gillespie, Mahalia Jackson, Art Farmer, and King Oliver. Emanuel's jazz haiku are typically written telegraphically, in a quick succession of images, replete with dialect and wordplay:

MICHAEL JACKSON

There ain't NO-BO-DY
can dance like THAT, 'cept them twins
Jazzlene and Jazzphat.¹⁹

FOUR-LETTER WORD

Four-letter word JAZZ:
naughty, sexy, cerebral,
but solarplexy.²⁰

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND DUKE ELLINGTON

Satchmo's warm burlap,
 Duke's cool cashmere: fine fabrics
 make your love "Come here!"²¹

Emanuel obtained degrees from Howard and Northwestern universities before earning his Ph.D. at Columbia University. He remained in New York City and was the first to teach African American literature at City College of New York. He was involved with the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance and considered Langston Hughes his mentor (Emanuel wrote a biography of Hughes), surely the origin of his interest in jazz poetry. Emanuel traveled to Toulouse, France, on a year-long Fulbright grant in 1968–69—it would be interesting to know if he met with Richard Wright—and later moved permanently to France, where he taught in several universities. Of Emanuel's status among poets, "Critics have put forward several reasons for Emanuel's poetry being neglected by the larger literary world, including the fact that Emanuel writes more traditional poetic forms, that he no longer lives in the United States, and the fact that he refuses to take part in the politically correct world of Black academia."²²

SONIA SANCHEZ

Sonia Sanchez (born Wilsonia Benita Driver, 1934) is certainly the most celebrated African American to be writing haiku since Richard Wright. She was reared by a series of relatives and foster parents. She graduated from Hunter College in New York City and remained in Harlem for three decades before moving to Philadelphia, where she taught at Temple University. Sanchez was involved in the civil rights movement during her days in New York and counts Malcolm X among her literary influences. She was deeply affected by the assassination of Martin Luther King. She was married to poet Etheridge Knight for two years in the late 1960s.

Sanchez came by haiku in a familiar matter that she describes in "haikuography," the delightful introduction to her 2010 collection, *Morning Haiku*, here reproduced in full:

From the moment i found a flowered book high up on a shelf at the 8th Street Bookshop in New York City, a book that announced Japanese haiku; from the moment i opened that book, and read the first haiku, i slid down onto the floor and cried and was changed. i had found me. It's something to find yourself in a poem—to discover the beauty that i knew resided somewhere in my twenty one year old bloodstream; from the moment i asked the clerk in the bookstore if i was pronouncing this haiku word correctly, i knew that i had discovered me, had found an awakening, an awareness that i was connected not only to nature, but to the nature of myself and others; from the moment i saw the blood veins behind beautiful eyes, the fluids in teeth, and the enamel in tongues, i knew that haiku were no short term memory, but a long memory.

Patricia Donegan shares the idea of “haiku mind”—“a simple yet profound way of seeing our everyday world and living our lives with the awareness of the moment expressed in haiku—and to therefore hope fully inspire others to live with more clarity, compassion, and peace.”

i knew when i heard young poets say in verse and conversation: i'm gonna put you on “pause,” i heard their “haiku nature,” their haikuography. They were saying, i gotta make you slow down and check out what's happening in your life. In the world.

So this haiku slows us down, makes us stay alive and breathe with that one breath that it takes to recite a haiku.

This haiku, this tough form disguised in beauty and insight, is like the blues, for they both offer no solutions, only a pronouncement, a formal declaration an acceptance of pain, humor, beauty and nonbeauty, death and rebirth, surprise and life. Always life. Both always help us to maintain memory and dignity.

What i found in the 8th Street Bookshop was extraordinary and ordinary: Silence. Crystals. Cornbread and greens. Laughter. Brocades. The sea. Beethoven. Coltrane. Spring and winter. Blue rivers. Dreadlocks. Blues. A waterfall. Empty mountains. Bamboo. Bodegas. Ancient generals. Lamps. Fireflies. Sarah Vaughan her voice exploding in the universe, returning to earth in prayer. Plum blossoms. Silk and steel. Cante jondo. Wine. Hills. Flesh. Perfume. A breath inhaled and held. Silence.

And i found that my mouth and the river are one and the same.

i set sail
in tall grass
no air stirs.

For many years Sanchez has included haiku among her oeuvre. Two of her collections—*Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums: Love Poems* (1998) and *Morning Haiku*—consist almost exclusively of poems in these forms. She frequently arranges her haiku in sequences, à la Hayden, which lends a storytelling quality that would be impossible in single verses. Many of her poems are dedicated to black cultural figures, including, of course, musicians, but particularly black women. For her haiku Sanchez chooses principally themes of love, the situation of women, and the African American milieu. Like Emanuel, she sometimes writes in dialect, uncommon elsewhere in English-language haiku.

The differences between Sanchez's short-poem forms haiku, blues haiku, and sonku are not always clear-cut, but she can certainly write in a variety of moods and styles. For example, this haiku, from her American Book Award-winning *Homegirls and Handgrenades*, is classic in conception and execution:

HAIKU
(written from Peking)

let me wear the day
well so when it reaches you
you will enjoy it

Sanchez's blues haiku are more likely to involve African American themes, even if not the blues per se, than her plain haiku and to employ dialect, for example:

BLUES HAIKU 1

all this talk bout love
 girl, where you been all your life?
 ain't no man can love.²³

BLUES HAIKU

his face like chiseled
 china his eyes clotting
 around rubber asses.²⁴

Her sonku—presumably a portmanteau word from “Sonia” and “haiku”—is a form Sanchez made up, she says, to teach her students that they can make their own forms when they write poetry. She argues, “the haiku was created by someone, the tanka was created by someone, the cinquain is American....”²⁵ Asked what the sonku does for her that tanka and haiku do not, Sanchez replied, “Well the sonku—I like the sound of the sonku, and quite often the sonku also requires some kind of lyricity. I think because of the sound of it.” Sanchez agreed with her interviewer that the sonku is written in lines of 4, 3, 4, and 3 syllables, but in fact the sonku in, for example, *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums*, are varying lengths and syllable counts. The subject matter is no different from other poems of Sanchez’s:

SONKU

i collect
 wings what are
 you bird or
 animal?
 something that
 lights on trees
 breast pawnshops
 i have seen
 another
 path to this
 rendezvous.

SONKU

when i die
 i shall take
 your smell
 inside me.²⁶

Other short poems in Sanchez’s *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* bear a variety of titles, including “Tanka,” “Poem,” and “Short Poem,” and what the differences might be to Sanchez are not really clear.

Sonia Sanchez has taught and worked extensively with the new generation of writers, and it is safe to say that most of the younger African American poets who write haiku today have been influenced by her.

QUINCY TROUPE

Poet, writer, and editor Quincy Troupe (born 1939) gained prominence and won awards for his biography of Miles Davis in the late 1980s and the 1990s and was named California poet laureate in 2002. He is another poet who occasionally dabbled in haiku and haiku-form stanzas as well as tanka—a significant detour for a poet known mostly for long poems in long lines. The stanzas from “Faces” from his 1999 collection *Choruses* are written in 5–7–5 syllable form and are shaped into a haiku sequence. The repeated phrase “leaves dance” is reminiscent of blues lyrics:

FACES

leaves dance tree branches,
shook by wind tongue, glows there, look —
faces in green light

leaves dance tree branches,
shook by wind tongue, faces glow
there, pulse through green light

leaves dance on blue air,
pushed by tonguing breezes, look,
faces break green light

helter-skelter, leaves
dance like faces bobbing in crowds
shake & bake on breezes

leaves dancing in trees,
pushed by tongues of breezes, look
faces in blue light

high in branches, above ground²⁷

KWAME ALEXANDER

Kwame Alexander is a poet, playwright, and publisher with four books to his credit, most of them for young people. He studied with Nikki Giovanni at Virginia Tech. Alexander became interested in haiku not from Giovanni, however—it is not clear if she writes haiku—but from a workshop with Sonia Sanchez in the 1990s.²⁸ Alexander is very active in the literary scene in the Washington, D.C., area, especially teaching young people. He founded BlackWords, Inc., a publishing company, in 1995, the same year he began writing poetry. His work is sprinkled with haiku, usually statements in the titled, 5–7–5 pattern. As is the case with other poets of his generation, black cultural figures are a common topic for Alexander. His “Haiku for Maya Angelou,” for example, is included in his collection *Dancing Naked on the Floor*. His “for Miles & indigo” relies on the widespread belief that the workers who built the Egyptian pyramids were black slaves and ends with a clever bit of wordplay on “milestones / miles’ tones”:

HAIKU

for miles & indigo

if your ancestors

could build pyramids then your

dreams are but mild stones²⁹

JERHRETTA DAFINA SUITE

Haiku by a poet named Jerhretta Dafina Suite was published on the *ChickenBones* Web site, but no information on her background or other work of hers has been found. Her haiku occupy a topical space similar to that of Sonia Sanchez—love, feminism, black consciousness—and uses the haiku form for her ideas and judgments, as in these examples:

HAIKU #2

No comfortable
place on earth for a thinking
African woman

BLUES

This space in my mind
I wallow unconsciously
my penance not paid³⁰

GEOFFREY WILSON

Geoffrey Wilson is also unknown to us except for his sequence “100 Mississippi Delta Blues Haiku” on the Web, seven verses of which were picked up by Allan Burns for his online *Montage* feature and anthology.³¹ In what way these lightweight poems are blues haiku is unclear. They only occasionally mention blues topics, but are mostly jokey comments on life in the South:

Juke joint’s blue light
Drifts across the bayou.
Moonshine laughter.

Delta blues are six boys;
A girl —
The Seventh Son.

VAN G. GARRETT

Van G. Garrett is a writer, photographer, and teacher living in Houston. He is interested in a variety of short-form poems. His “12 Jazz Haiku” traverses the familiar territory of classifying jazz figures or chronicling the poet’s reaction to hearing them perform, but Garrett’s take seems more aligned with Western poetry in his humor, inventiveness, and wordplay:

12 JAZZ HAIKU

we sing funk jazz groove
we very seldom play blues
our duet is cool

too cool miles davis
in astronomical shades
hunches in green gel

dizzy i need help
i love great jazz but can’t find
fare for tunisia

roach was my favorite
drummer with soloing hands
rudimenting beats

jazzy jezebels
wear funk on their lips and blues
inside their red thighs

chicken blues and beer
a saturday night special
sickly spewed sunday

bless the child whose got
a song a soul a something
worth crying about

supreme j. coltrane
saxophoning in the dark
her head on my chest

rhythm chugs and chinks
guitar strings sing harmonies
of life before death

bird in the front yard
pecking on his battered horn
trying to be sane

half and quarter notes
eights sixteenth thirty-seconds
scaling the worn paper

louisiana
bluegrass blues jazz zydeco
cafes dives streets swamps juke³²

When asked why he writes haiku and what it is that makes haiku especially appealing, Garrett responded:

I appreciate the haiku because it allows me to challenge myself as a poet. Additionally, it challenges readers to pay attention to every word. When I began writing haiku there was something that seemed familiar in the phrasing, jazz-like. I began writing jazz haiku because for me they just seemed to “make sense.” I later moved to the structured 49-word poem termed the kwansaba. I love the kwansaba for the very reasons I fell in love with the haiku. It was a way of thinking about writing in a way that seemed natural. The kwansaba is an African American form, whereas the haiku is obviously Japanese-inspired.

I think some African American poets appreciate the structures because they still give the creative element room to “breathe.” There is space to incorporate rhyme and/or stylize poems in ways that make the poems authentic. I appreciate other forms of poetry, but the haiku and kwansaba are the forms I’m known for crafting. For me these forms remind me of why I began writing poetry—to say a lot in a compressed space.³³

KALAMU YA SALAAM

Kalamu ya Salaam (born Vallery Ferdinand III, 1947) is a music writer, playwright, poet, educator, social critic, and activist based in New Orleans. He lists Langston Hughes and the Black Arts movement as his poetic influences. Like Sonia Sanchez, Salaam uses jazz and blues idioms as well as African American traditions and speech patterns in his work in order to present the black experience in America in haiku form. Unlike the case with Sanchez, however, haiku is a small portion of Salaam’s work, though he has a very interesting take on the Japanese form. Frederick Raborg’s haiku journal *Cicada* published a seven-haiku sequence of Salaam’s work in 1988, including these two in traditional form on themes of physical love and personal philosophy:

i enter your church	patient, you wait but
you receive my offerings	i am gone like a flung stone
our screaming choirs merge	sinking in water ³⁴

Salaam has outlined his approach to haiku in great detail in an article in the Web journal *ChickenBones*. The following excerpt gives the flavor

of Salaam's view, which is radically different from that of most modern English-language haiku poets—even black haiku poets—and seems to consider the haiku form and its relationship to blues at greater depth than other African American poets:

Haiku #48 is what I call a “perfect” haiku, meaning it has exactly seventeen one-syllable words. Here is an example of using blues imagery. This haiku is a direct variation on the blues line “fattening frogs for snakes.” I personify the night, the quality of hurt, and then use a simile to make complete the reference to the blues line. It is also a blues in the classic a/a'/b structure, which is say a line, repeat the line with a variation, and then respond to or comment on the line with a third line. Here I completely rephrase the second (or a') line but I keep the same basic image (“night moan” = “arms of hurt” and “grip my waist” = “snake round me”).

HAIKU #48

night moans grip my waist
 the arms of hurt snake round me,
 i feel like a frog³⁵

It's not clear that Salaam has written other paraphrases of blues lines—none turned up in the sources available to us—but it is an interesting idea that bears further investigation. Whether such haiku are closer to mainstream haiku or to aberrations such as retellings of Shakespeare's plays or presenting the Psalms in 5–7–5–syllable form might be a topic for discussion.

The 2007 gathering of the biennial Haiku North America conference in Winston-Salem, N.C., featured a panel discussion on African American haiku with Sonia Sanchez, Kalamu ya Salaam, Tara Betts, and Lenard D. Moore. In the ensuing question-and-answer session, haikuist A.C. Missias asked Salaam what it was about haiku that particularly attracted his attention as a poet. His reply was that he felt comfortable writing in a form that did not come from the dominant white culture—a fascinating echo of the Black Arts poets who counterpoised black and white

literatures and sought to ally the former with black cultures elsewhere in the world.

THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HAIKU

It appears that haiku has caught on among young black poets. Some of them write in the blues-haiku mode of Sonia Sanchez, others in what we are calling mainstream haiku. Here are few of the best young poets we have found.

DJ RENEGADE

The African American haiku tradition is in sound hands with poets such as the young man known as DJ Renegade. Born Joel Dias-Porter in Pittsburgh, probably in the 1970s, he now lives in Atlantic City, where he alternates his attention between poetry and the poker tables.³⁶ A former disc jockey in the Washington, D.C., area, he cut his teeth as a slam poet in the late 1990s and, his online biographies relate, was Haiku Slam Champion in 1998 and 1999.³⁷ His work is published widely. DJ Renegade has clearly studied the haiku traditions and, while his themes are often the standard ones for black haikuists, his craft is much closer to mainstream poetry. His more recent work in particular abandons titles and rigidity of form, usually includes two images or statements, and often shows an appreciation for seasonality in haiku.

April sunrise —
my finger in the cleft of
a peach

POEM

Spirituals are how
angels would sound, singing
in a cotton field.³⁸

flicking his wrist
the DJ rocks and wrecks shop
heads bob like Marley³⁹

The following haiku of DJ Renegade's is included in *The 100 Best African American Poems (but I cheated)*, the anthology that Nikki Giovanni edited in 2010⁴⁰ and is indexed in *The Columbia Granger's Index of African-American Poetry* (1999).⁴¹

HAIKU

Jazz is
The way brown sugar
would sound
if it was sprinkled
in your ear

C. YAPHET BRINSON

C[leon] Yaphet Brinson was born about 1970, hailed from New York City, and studied with E. Ethelbert Miller at Howard University in the early 1990s. Brinson died about 2006, but we have found no information about the circumstances of his death. Miller included these haiku of Brinson's in his 2002 anthology, *Beyond the Frontier: African-American Poetry for the 21st Century*:

HAIKU 10

black, brother, nigga,
african-american:
what the hell am I?

HAIKU 30

Saturday cuties
crossing georgia avenue
my brown eyes jaywalk

HAIKU 50

"I love you" is a
phrase most commonly spoken
by those who do not

HAIKU 60

above and beyond
the call of duty, above
and beyond the law⁴²

The form and content of these poems of Brinson's are fairly standard for millennial black haiku: titled, in strict 5-7-5-syllabic structure,

tending towards a single assertive statement, and sociopolitical or at least very personal in tenor.

JAMIE WALKER

In her fulsome online autobiographical sketch Jamie Walker writes that she is “a literary activist and filmmaker. Her research background is in African American History as well as African American and Caribbean Literature. Walker’s scholarly work and film projects focus on the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality.”⁴³ Another poet who studied at Howard University, Walker enrolled in a class offered by Sonia Sanchez, and the two became close. Walker in fact served as an intern with Sanchez and traveled around the country with her assisting in workshops. It is not surprising that Walker’s haiku have much in common with Sanchez’s in terms of their sociopolitical, feminist, or erotic content, and her use of vernacular language and slang.

HAIKU

(for big V)

my neglected toes
stinky smelly without u
curse each last bunion

HAIKU

(for the “counterfeit” president)

if it ain’t cancer
it’s anthrax terror west Nile
secondtermforbush⁴⁴

HAIKU

dripping wet with lust
my nipples stand attention
begging you to taste

REGINA HARRIS BAIOCCHI

Chicago native Regina Harris Baiocchi (born 1956) has found haiku to be a sympathetic medium for her “urban haiku,” mostly graphic sketches of her city, neighborhood, and people. She began writing haiku at age seven and is now quite active in haiku outreach in Chicago, holding workshops and activities for grade-school children, including the

Haiku Festival, which honors the legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks. Her book *Urban Haiku & Other Selected Poems* was published in 2004. Baiocchi's descriptive haiku—often single sentences or phrases in 5–7–5 syllables—rarely dip into the stridency of more contentious black topics. She is a composer as well as a poet, so it's not surprising to find musical references in her literary work. She has a playful touch with her haiku craft and is especially fond of wordplay:

I laud my Lush Life	Seamus heard bagpipes
blowing Stray horns minted by	Pedro felt mariachis
seashells soaked in sand.	Indugu birthed drums ⁴⁵

RUTH FORMAN

Poet and novelist Ruth Forman was born in 1968 and educated at the University of California and the USC Film School and now is based in Washington, D.C. Anthologist Kevin Young chose a haiku of hers for his *Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers* (2000), and in the biographic sketch he writes: "Forman continues the tough tradition of poets like Sonia Sanchez and June Jordan, who helped form and refine the Black Arts movement, mixing vernacular voices and folk forms such as the blues with the precise images of haiku."

HAIKU I

Sometimes I wonder
 why did I have to be Black
 I get over it⁴⁶

TARA BETTS

Tara Betts is primarily known as a slam and performance poet but has won some renown as a writer of erotic and feminist poems and as an actress. Her longer poems also delve into African American issues; she has written about Emmett Till, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, jazz and popular music and musicians, and the eroticism of the black female body—though her published haiku generally treat more mainstream

topics. Betts has published a full-length collection of poetry, *Arc & Hue* (2009). Born in Kankakee, Ill., in 1974, she won the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Poetry Award of the Chicago-based Guild Complex in 2009. Five of her haiku were featured in *Simply Haiku* 6:4 (winter 2008), and she has had haiku included in Hiroki Sato's *Erotic Haiku* (2004), Richard Krawiec's *Taboo Haiku* (2006), and Randall Horton and M.L. Hunter's *Fingernails Across a Chalkboard* (2007), an anthology of poetry about HIV/AIDS in the Black community.

Bottomless, one word	rain flecks signs
he said while enveloped	on election day —
by folds of woman.	we watch the storm ⁴⁷

DERRICK WESTON BROWN

Derrick Weston Brown (born 1976) attended American and Howard universities in Washington, D.C., and still lives in the capital area. He is a member of the Cave Canem workshop. His haiku are edgier than those of most of his contemporaries. One of these is included in *Taboo Haiku*:

Sue's mandingo dreams
strong limbs taut ropes
dicks in jars⁴⁸

Brown clearly strives for impact in his haiku. He writes in a casual, almost slapdash style, with little regard for grammar and spelling, but his haiku hew closely to the standard syllable count:

HURRICANE KATRINA HAIKU

I
The submerged sign reads
Welcome to Elysian Fields
As bodies float bye.

II

Waiting for rescue
 He drinks his own pale urine
 As the copters pass

III

Draped in Old Glory
 A corpse lies still beneath a
 Super dome shadow.

IV

How Shakespearean
 In the wake of Katrina
 Ophelia waits⁴⁹

ADRIENNE CHRISTIAN

Adrienne Christian grew up in Michigan, earned a B.A. in English from the University of Michigan, and an MFA in creative writing from Pacific University. She lives now in Greensboro, N.C. A professional author, editor, and fine-art photographer, she has been a Cave Canem Fellow and served as editor for *Ripples*, the Haiku Society of America newsletter, from 2013 to 2015. *Frogpond* has published a few of her haiku:

the full moon —
 time to start
 an argument

I could call
 could
 evening sets in⁵⁰

LAURENCE STACEY

Laurence Stacey received a B.A. in English language and literature and an M.A. in professional writing from Kennesaw State University in Georgia, and has taught in various colleges in the South, working on the University System of Georgia's African-American Male Initiative. As co-editor of *Haiku News*, a weekly e-zine that compresses news headlines into haiku, Stacey's work often focuses on current events, especially social problems, but also includes witty senryu, as in these respective examples:

world hunger report
 I turn the potatoes
 a second time⁵¹

essay due
 his grandmother dies
 again⁵²

CONCLUSIONS

Haiku has been an ever-present, if modest, handmaiden to the evolution of African American literature from the early years of the 20th century. It seems likely that Lewis G. Alexander brought what he learned about haiku from the Imagist poets and academics to W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, the preeminent figures in the Harlem Renaissance. Many black poets in the 1960s found in haiku a resonance with the oral and musical forms of their culture and background, especially jazz and the blues, and appreciated the power of the Japanese-originated poem to express a lot in a very few words. Poets such as Richard Wright apparently sought solace in the nature aspect of haiku, while others involved in civil rights activism, such as Amiri Baraka, used the punchiness of haiku to wrap a sociopolitical message. Usually as a sideline to their other writing in poetry and prose, African American poets from the 1980s onward experimented with short-form poetry and used haiku and variant forms to condense their messages and reflections. Throughout, the reader can follow a significant thread of the influence of America's black music forms: the openness and freedom of jazz and the structure and community-building nature of the blues. In the process, new definitions of classic form and subject matter have emerged that will continue to revitalize English-language haiku.

NOTES

¹ Brunner, Edward. "Stepping Out, Sitting In: Modern Poetry's Counterpoint with Jazz and the Blues." *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*. Ed. Cary Nelson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012: 215–47. The quote is on page 218.

² *Ibid.*, 230.

³ Stevens, John. *Mountain Tasting: Zen Haiku by Santôka Taneda*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill Press, 1980: #93.

⁴ Knight, Etheridge. *Poems from Prison* (1968).

⁵ Wright, Richard. *Haiku: This Other World*. Ed. and with notes and afterward by Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener. Introduction by Julia Wright. New York: Arcade Publishers, 1998. #253.

⁶ Kerouac, Jack. "American Haikus." *Blues and Haikus*. Featuring Al Cohn and Zoot Sims, saxophones [phonograph record]. Rhino Word Beat, 1990. R2 70939 B.

⁷ The haiku-plus-music performances by Kerouac and Rossiter, as well as settings of classic Japanese haiku and, again, Kerouac, to jazz by Canadian world-music flutist Michel Dubeau, are presented in my essay, "Haiku and Music—A Morganatic Marriage?" in *A Hundred Gourds* 5:1 (December 2015).

⁸ But note the jazzku of Lenard Moore mentioned in Part I and the claims of James Emanuel below.

⁹ Carley, John, and Raffael de Gruttola. "Renku—Jazz-ku: Notes." *Simply Haiku* [Web] 3:1 (Spring 2005). http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv3n1/renku/Jazz-ku_notes.htm; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

¹⁰ van den Heuvel, Cor. "the billboard's shadow: a haiku/senryu sequence." *Frogpond* 14:1 (spring 1991), 20. MHL Award (sequence).

¹¹ Winke, Jeffrey. *Modern Haiku* 25.1 (winter–spring 1994): 80.

¹² Gilliland, Robert. *Frogpond* 22:1 (1999): 21.

¹³ Olson, Marian. "Lady Sings the Blues." *Frogpond* 35:1 (Winter 2012): 52.

¹⁴ Dixon, Willie. "The Red Rooster." Lyrics from *Blues for Peace*, <http://www.bluesforpeace.com/lyrics/red-rooster.htm>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

¹⁵ Young, Kevin. "Foreword." *Jazz Poems*. New York: Everyman/Knopf, 2006: 15; cited in Brunner, 215.

¹⁶ Much as Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Scott Joplin sought to legitimize African American musical forms in their compositions and performances.

¹⁷ Hughes, Langston. "Po' Boy Blues." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994. Reprinted on Poet.org Web site, <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15608>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

¹⁸ Emanuel, James A. *Whole Grain: Collected Poems, 1958–1989*. Detroit: Lotus Press, 1991. The quote is from Terebess Asia Online, <http://terebess.hu/english/haiku/emanuel.html>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

¹⁹ Emanuel, James A. *AfroPoets Famous Writers*. <http://www.AfroPoets.Net/jame-semanuel3.html>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Schneider, Dan. "The Not So Strange Emanuel Case." *Cosmoetica*. <http://www.cosmoetica.com/S1-DES1.htm> acc. Nov. 3, 2015; quoted in "James Emanuel," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Emanuel; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

²³ Sanchez, Sonia. *Wounded in the House of a Friend*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

²⁴ Sanchez, Sonia. *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998: 81.

²⁵ Finch, Annie. "Form and Spirit: A Conversation with Sonia Sanchez." *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*. Ed. Joyce A. Joyce. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007: 33–34; short excerpt on Google Books. https://books.google.com/books/about/Conversations_with_Sonia_Sanchez.html?id=UdRIAAAAMAAJ; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

²⁶ Sanchez, Sonia. *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998: 15, 79.

²⁷ Troupe, Quincy. *Choruses: Poems by Quincy Troupe*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1999: 19. This poem and other excerpts from the book are available online at Google Books.

²⁸ Alexander, Kwame. Personal communication, 1 July 2012. Alexander further says of his interest in haiku, "I tend to write it for young audiences, as I find it extremely useful in my work with youth. Many are not intimidated at all by it, especially the reluctant readers. They are more than willing to tackle it because of its conciseness, because it provides you with full instruction, because it seems manageable and fun to meet its form's requirements. Of course, when you add on the explosive nature of its power in those few words, it becomes quite a nice poetry package. I like to think, and have seen it work, that poetry is the bridge to our young people developing an appreciation for all of writing."

²⁹ *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* [Web] 2:1 (winter 2001). <http://washingtonart.com/beltway/alexander.html>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

³⁰ Suite, Jerhretta Dafina. "Haiku." *ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes*. No issue number or date. <http://www.nathanielturner.com/jerhrettahaiku.htm>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

³¹ Wilson, Geoffrey. "100 Mississippi Delta Blues Haiku." Terebess Asia Online. <http://terebess.hu/english/haiku/wilson.html>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

³² Garrett, Van G. "12 Jazz Haiku." *Songs in Blue Negritude: Poems*. New Orleans: Xavier Review Press, 2008. Reprinted in *ChickenBones*. No issue number or date, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/12jazzhaiku.htm>, and in Terebess Asia Online, <http://terebess.hu/english/haiku/garrett.html>; both acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

³³ Garrett, Van G. Private communication, 5 July 2012. On the kwansaba, Garrett has written, "Professor Eugene Redmond introduced me to the Kwansaba about four or five years ago. It is a seven line poem that has seven words in each line, and each word should not have more than seven letters (proper nouns excluded). I love the form because I like to say a lot in a compressed space. I use to write a lot of haiku, but over the last four years the majority of the poems I've written that have appeared or will appear in journals are Kwansabas." One Ghana, One Voice: Author Profile, <http://oneghanaonevoice.com/2007/04/author-profile-van-g-garrett.html>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

³⁴ Kalamu ya Salaam. "A Sequence." *Cicada* 11 (4:2, 1988).

³⁵ Kalamu ya Salaam. "On Writing Haiku." *ChickenBones*. No issue number or date. <http://www.nathanielturner.com/onwritinghaiku.htm>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

³⁶ See "Poet at the Poker Table: Searching for DJ Renegade in the Casinos of Atlantic City; Joel Dias-Porter Interviewed by Jeffrey McDaniel." The Poetry Foundation Web site; <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/243666>; accessed July 4, 2012.

³⁷ Shuffle Machine; <http://renegadesblog.blogspot.com/>; accessed July 4, 2012.

³⁸ *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* [Web] 3:3 (summer 2002). <http://washingtonart.com/beltway/renegade.html>; accessed July 4, 2012.

³⁹ "NaPoMo 30 Haiku/Senryu." DJ Renegade (On the Ones and Twos) [blog]; April 1, 2012. http://renegadesblog.blogspot.com/2014_04_01_archive.html; acc. Nov. 3, 2015. A visit to the blog on Oct. 31, 2015, revealed that DJ Renegade has recently been posting rather good, classic-style haiku and senryu every few weeks.

⁴⁰ Giovanni, Nikki, ed. *The 100 Best African American Poems (but I cheated)*. Na-

perville, Ill.: MediaFusion, 2010: 170.

⁴¹ The haiku noted in Nicholas Frankovich and David Larzelere, eds. *The Columbia Granger's Index to African American Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, present a very strange and uneven picture of haiku by Black Americans. Included are 11 haiku by Etheridge Knight, 7 by Sonia Sanchez, 6 by Lenard D. Moore, one each by Moore's wife Lynn and daughter Maiisha, and one by DJ Renegade. None by Richard Wright, Amiri Baraka, or any of the others discussed in this essay.

⁴² Miller, E. Ethelbert, ed. *Beyond the Frontier: African-American Poetry for the 21st Century*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2002: 36. This anthology also includes a longer poem by Lenard D. Moore.

⁴³ Dr. Jamie Walker, Author & Professor, <http://www.jamiewalker.org/about-us.php>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

⁴⁴ *ChickenBones*. No issue number or date. <http://www.nathanielturner.com/haiku3jw.htm>, and Terebess Asia Online, <http://terebess.hu/english/haiku/walker.html>; both acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

⁴⁵ Baiocchi, Regina Harris. *Urban Haiku & Other Selected Poems*. Chicago: Susami Books, Inc., 2004: 44, 51.

⁴⁶ Young, Kevin, ed. *Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers*. New York: Perennial, 2000: 85–86.

⁴⁷ Betts, Tara. *Simply Haiku* [Web] 6:4 (Winter 2008). <http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv6n4/haiku/Betts.html>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015. Biographical information available on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tara_Betts; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

⁴⁸ Krawiec, Richard, ed. *Taboo Haiku: An International Selection*. Greensboro, N.C.: Avisson Press, no date [2006]: 43.

⁴⁹ *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* [Web] 7:1 (winter 2006). <http://washingtonart.com/beltway/dbrown.html>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.

⁵⁰ *Frogpond* 36:2 (spring/summer 2013): 6. For additional information see her website, <http://adriennechristian.com/>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015

⁵¹ *Haiku News* front page, http://www.wayfarergallery.net/haikunews/?page_id=2. Biographical information from the Linked In website, <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/laurence-stacey/70/999/515>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015

⁵² *Prune Juice* [Web] 13 (March 2014): 73. <https://prunejuice.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/july14-prune-juice-final-version3.pdf>; acc. Nov. 3, 2015.