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## ESSAYS

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### THE USES OF HAIKU: NATIVE AMERICAN WRITERS

#### PART II

*Charles Trumbull*

Part I of this essay examined the parallels between European America's discovery of Native American poetry and Japanese haiku. It looked at the path travelled from translators' work to poets' work, through cultural lenses and poetic trends. Finally, Part I looked at similarities between Native American poetry and haiku. In Part II we will look at haiku by individual Native Americans as well as the influence of Native American poetry on American haiku

#### POEMS AND HAIKU BY NATIVE AMERICANS

Native American poetry hasn't gotten much respect in the past hundred years or so. At the 1915 World's Fair in San Francisco, for example, Indians were considered "an interesting but limited people whose future was only of marginal concern to their fellow Americans."<sup>1</sup> Compare this with some of the early Western impressions of Japanese poetry, such as the evaluation of Sir Charles Eliot, in his 1907 *Letters From the Far East*:

The three-lined poems, or Haikai [...] are not only impressionist, but so elliptical and enigmatical as to be unintelligible to a foreigner. Thus, when a Japanese writes—

“That single note —  
Did the moon sing?  
Cuckoo”

he is under the impression that he has produced a poem.<sup>2</sup>

Other contemporary authors were even less willing to entertain the notion that Japanese could write true poetry.

Now, I would like to share with you some haiku and short poems by a few prominent Native American poets, and some examples of how Native American views have colored the haiku of non-Indians.

**Gerald Robert Vizenor** (1934– ), an Ojibway from Minnesota, is the most insightful Native American critic and prolific writer of haiku. He has explored the relationship between the dream song and storytelling traditions of indigenous North American peoples and the Japanese haiku that he was exposed to when he was a soldier in the Far East in 1953–54. He has published books of renditions of Ojibway dream songs as well as of his own lyrical haiku beginning in 1964. Compare this haiku from Vizenor’s 1967 collection *Empty Swings*:

With the moon  
My young father comes to mind  
Walking the clouds<sup>3</sup>

with one of the Ojibway dream songs that he has transcribed:

with a large bird  
above me  
i am walking  
in the sky

Karen Jackson Ford points out that in his haiku Vizenor deliberately avoids references to Native American images and, more significantly, identities except for the occasional oblique mention. The egolessness of haiku provides “separation from identity that permits connection to nature. Haiku makes available a form through which Vizenor could explore his relationship to the world apart from imposed categories of identity.”<sup>4</sup> The apprehension of nature evident in Ojibway dream songs directly, without the intervention of human speech, “is how Vizenor has been able to equate Japanese haiku and Anishinaabe dream songs: the oral

tradition is a visual memory passed down from one generation to another in images, and haiku is particularly well suited to carrying those visual images forward.”<sup>5</sup> One might compare this with the idea of haiku as “the wordless poem” made famous by Alan Watts and Eric Amann.

Making the point about this poet’s oneness with nature, Vizenor’s student Kimberly Blaeser points out the metaphoric relationship between cedar cones floating downriver from a distant place and letters from home in this haiku:

cedar cones  
tumble in a mountain stream  
letters from home<sup>6</sup>

And illustrating the sense of discovery—the “aha! moment”—so essential to haiku, Blaeser offers this example:

Under the crossing log  
Fresh opening in the ice  
Haloed with footprints.<sup>7</sup>

Writers of the Ojibway nation are the most prominent among the Native American haiku poets. We already presented a haiku by Kimberly Blaeser, who is a scholar as well as a poet and has written extensively about Vizenor’s work. George Henry, Jr., like both Vizenor and Blaeser, is a member of the Ojibway White Earth clan. An encyclopedia entry about him says, “He and Vizenor share not only a commitment to writing grounded in the tradition of tribal storytelling, but a passion for Japanese haiku, long recognized for its kinship with traditional Anishinaabe dream songs. Henry’s short story ‘The Prisoner of Haiku,’ which speaks to the loss and recovery of tribal language, is written as a chain of linked haiku.”<sup>8</sup>

**Raven Hail** (1921–2005), a Western Cherokee author and lecturer from Oklahoma, immersed herself deeply in her nation’s culture and developed an original (and controversial) Cherokee astrology. In her “Five Haiku,” she views nature on highly personal terms, for example:<sup>9</sup>

The eye of the Storm  
looks over the trembling Earth  
and takes what She will.

**N. Scott Momaday** (1934– ) is perhaps the most prominent and honored Native American writer to have fallen under the spell of haiku. Born in Oklahoma and a member of the Kiowa nation, his work in poetry and fiction has won numerous awards, including a Pulitzer Prize, and earned him the National Medal of the Arts. He is considered a pioneer of the Native American Renaissance. A classroom guide to Momaday’s work notes a formal affinity between Momaday’s work and haiku:

Momaday’s major structural emphases in his early poems include close attention to syllabics, use of lyrical language, and emphasis on a unity of poetic effect. Often, these characteristics combine to align Momaday’s poetry with Oriental forms such as haiku and tanka. Readers will recognize structural and thematic connections between Momaday’s poems and the haiku of Basho and some of the poetry of Wallace Stevens (e.g., “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”), Gary Snyder (e.g., “Pine Tree Tops”) and Jean Toomer (e.g., “Storm Ending”). Momaday’s later poems move away, though not entirely from the degree of control exhibited in his early work. In his later work, Momaday writes free verse, prose poems, and he creates poetic forms that mix genres—verse, prose, drawing, calligraphy.<sup>10</sup>

We might extend this characterization by pointing out that Momaday’s recent readings, at least in his sometime hometown of Santa Fe, have focused heavily on his newfound passion for haiku. Few of his haiku have been published, however; and we have found only this one in print:

the old couple walk  
through the gardens of their youth  
with no thought of time<sup>11</sup>

**Sherman Alexie** (1966– ) is another Native American author and poet who has won wide attention and earned major literary honors. Of the

Spokane/Coeur d'Alene nations, He was born in Wellpinit, Washington, on the Spokane Reservation, and lives now in Seattle. He has mastered many genres, including novels, short fiction, poetry, and screenplays, and has won top literary honors in most of them. In addition, Alexie writes haibun on native topics. Here is the opening prose passage and first haiku from a medium-length work titled simply "Haibun":

In the spring of 1954, two non-Indian brothers, James and John, and a Chippewa named Leo, went searching for God on the Spokane Indian Reservation. It was midnight. They carried geiger counters and a mineral light. They found pieces of God whispering beneath a spur of Lookout Mountain. When they cracked open the earth, it was so bright that it fooled the birds, who lifted into flight.

The half-life of a raven  
is still a life.  
Raven stopped the flood.<sup>12</sup>

**Mary TallMountain** (1918–1994), a native Alaskan born to a Koyukon/Athabaskan mother and a Scots/Irish father, employed the terseness and structure of traditional haiku to bring home the spiritual and economic impoverishment of her people, especially those living in urban areas, such as San Francisco's Tenderloin District, where she made her home.

lightly with no sound  
earth bares her body  
to beating rain<sup>13</sup>

women playing hearts  
in the golden summer noon  
lazy slap of cards<sup>14</sup>

**Nora Marks Dauenhauer** (1927– ) is a Tlingit and was born in Juneau, Alaska. She is active in collecting, translating, and editing materials from the Tlingit oral tradition and in preserving the language through

teaching and developing Tlingit textbooks and other teaching materials. Dauenhauer is well-versed in the haiku genre and, in fact, has translated classical Chinese verses, modern American poetry, and Japanese haiku into Tlingit. In her own poetry Dauenhauer writes about living in the tradition and the continuity of the spirit of her people. Her images are vivid and concrete:

GRANDDAUGHTERS DANCING

Granddaughters dancing,  
blossoms  
swaying in the wind.<sup>15</sup>

Although haiku poets will immediately latch onto the word “blossoms” as a Japanese haiku buzzword, Dauenhauer explains that the word in Tlingit carries an implication of “seed,” which puts a different twist on her view of her granddaughters. Here’s another of her haiku:

WEALTH

Slime squishing  
through gold and silver bracelets:  
women slicing salmon.<sup>16</sup>

The title snaps into sharp juxtaposition the dual images of the bracelets and the fish and gives a new appreciation of what wealth is and where it comes from.

**Donna Beaver**, of the Tlingit/Tsimshian, Kaagwaantaan/Wolf Clan, is an anthropologist, filmmaker, and poet well-known and highly-regarded in the American haiku community. She has recently been working with her husband, haiku pioneer Alan Pizzarelli, on the *Haiku Chronicles*, a Web-based audio history of American haiku.

bear scat  
we link our arms together  
to look bigger<sup>17</sup>

picking berries  
 on a path made by bears  
 we talk louder<sup>18</sup>

Of course, there are many Native Americans who write haiku on general, non-Indian topics. Indeed, even Gerald Vizenor's haiku are predominantly not on themes specific to the Native American experience.

**William Oandasán** (1947–1992) was one such poet who only sometimes wrote in his ancestral traditions. He was an important figure in Native American letters, gaining recognition as a poet, journalist, editor, and publisher. He was born on the Round Valley Reservation near Fort Bragg in Northern California of a Filipino father and Yuki mother. He founded the A Press in Laguna, New Mexico, in 1976 and edited *A: A Journal of Contemporary Literature*, one of the first literary magazines devoted to American Indian writers. He published eight books from 1976 through 1984, and his *Round Valley Songs* (1984) won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation.<sup>19</sup> Former Kansas Poet Laureate Denise Low-Weso is reportedly writing a book about Oandasán.<sup>20</sup>

Oandasán sometimes wrote of the ancestral spirits and the old ways, using strong images and terse lines and stanzas to capture his verses. The first lines of “Words of Tayko-mol” are of special interest to the student of the haiku process. Tayko-mol is the creator of the Yuki people and their realm, which is called the Yukian World:

#### WORDS OF TAYKO-MOL

1.  
 from heart through mind and image:  
 the pulse of the four directions  
 the voice of our blood  
 the spirit of breath and words

2.  
 from fresh currents of night air  
 above manzanitas near the cemetery

the words of ancient lips  
turn in our blood again<sup>21</sup>

Among his other verses, Oandasan wrote haiku. This one was published in *Frogpond* in 1981.<sup>22</sup>

the moon overhead,  
all around the city sounds...  
the moon overhead

Oandasan also invented a variation of the haiku form that he called “syrenyu,” which Ford interprets as “a coinage that combines 'senryu' (a form of poetry written in the haiku stanza but concerned primarily with human nature) and perhaps 'siren' (to intimate these are songs of human frailty and loss) and 'serenity' (to evoke a tranquil attitude toward loss).”<sup>23</sup>

An example:

full moon;  
woods on one side town on the other  
the path between<sup>24</sup>

There is little in these verses in terms of mood or content to distinguish it as Native American haiku.

**Barbara Robidoux**, of mixed Cherokee (Tsalagai), Scottish, and Italian heritage, grew up on an Indian reservation in northeastern Maine and now lives in Santa Fe. She writes fiction, tanka, and haibun about Native American topics in part and is working on a novel. Her 2016 book of short stories, *Sweetgrass Burning*, is subtitled “Stories from the Rez.” Here is a topical tanka of hers from an earlier poetry collection:

our chief is laid out  
at the community center  
killed on black ice;  
asleep in the next room  
you dream your own death song<sup>25</sup>



**INFLUENCES OF NATIVE AMERICAN POETRY ON AMERICAN HAIKU**

The culture and history of Native Americans has always appealed to non-Indian writers. Some were better than others at entering into the spirit of the Native American world; others remained outside and could only write about Native American life and people.

The following haiku by Cor van den Heuvel was published in 1973 in the journal *Haiku West*:<sup>26</sup>

Water striders  
draw the shadows of evening  
across the water

Robert Spiess, then associate editor of *Modern Haiku*, thought he recognized this image, having seen it among the Densmore translations of Yuma poems:

The water bug is drawing  
the shadows of the evening  
toward him on the water

A rather nasty flap over the originality of van den Heuvel's poem ensued, instigated by a public challenge from Spiess. Sensationalist aspects aside, it is clear that van den Heuvel was at least writing under the influence of the Native American spirit. In his final words on the subject he wrote, "This controversy has made me aware that more recognition should be accorded to American Indian poetry.... For American Indians have given us not only an invaluable body of poetry, preserved by such devoted translators as Frances Densmore, but have passed on to us a spiritual heritage of a love for nature which has undoubtedly played a part in making possible American haiku."<sup>27</sup>

**Robert F. Mainone** (1929–2015) was a quintessentially American haiku poet with a strong sense of place and the history of the land beneath his feet. His haiku vividly portray the sense of changing stewardship of the land, from the times of the dinosaurs and the mastodons, to the realm of

the Indians, to the depredations of modern society. Note how his identification with the creatures of the land, and the personification of the raven and the frog by capitalizing them, make these haiku reverberate with Native American sensibilities:<sup>28</sup>

Misty island  
 only Raven  
 spoken

Beyond  
 Tree Frog's echo  
 echo

Mainone also uses themes from Native American mythology.<sup>29</sup>

Bridge to the sky  
 rainbow  
 ghost of flowers

Now that cicadas are still  
 a full moon enters  
 the ancient grove

**H. F. Noyes** (1918–2010), in his book *The Blossoming Rudder*,<sup>30</sup> presents a series of “Haiku and Pithy Sayings Based on Native American Prose and Song.” In a footnote he states that Margot Astrov, in *American Indian Prose and Poetry*, “finds in the Indian’s [sic] sketches of fleeting impressions something analogous with Japanese haiku, which ‘turn the listener into a poet himself.’” Here are two from that collection, based on Densmore’s translations in *Papago Music* (1929):

Blue evening breezes—  
 corn tassels trembling  
 in all directions

From the west  
waves of the singing ocean  
roll toward me

New Mexico poets are often deeply steeped in the state's Native American culture. **Foster Jewell** (1893–1984) and his wife **Rhoda de Long Jewell** (1900–1995), who were both originally from the upper Midwest and lived in the mountain village of El Rito in the 1960s and '70s, published a book titled *Hiawatha's Country* in 1976 that, as Ford writes, "proposes to treat the injustices of Native American conquest and removal." Ford continues:

Of the 143 haiku in *Hiawatha's Country*, only the first eight convey an interest in Native America, as, for example, in the third and fourth poems: "Cold east wind . . . / These huddled gray shapes of clouds / disappearing westward . . ." and "Not yet extinct, / fishing as his forebears did, / The Great Blue Heron." The rest of the sequence may contain many oblique allusions to its titular subject, yet their very obliqueness is a function of the volume's elegiac thesis about the Vanishing American. Moreover, failure to recognize the Jewells' symbols for Indians and colonizers is entirely predictable given the traditional concreteness of haiku, where natural phenomena are said to be apprehended in their own right and not pressed into figurative service. The self-obliterating impulse of haiku is utterly at odds with the Jewells' desire to compose an "endless song" to Native America.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, Santa Fe poets Elizabeth Searle Lamb and Marian Olson, respectively, referring to the Pueblo peoples of the Rio Grande Valley, wrote:

earth, sky,  
and an eagle's feather  
Maria's black pots<sup>32</sup>

pueblo clowns  
circle the dancers  
and snap  
black whips<sup>33</sup>

And, if I may, I'll slip in one of my own, written at Cochiti Pueblo:

cracking adobe  
and a rough wooden cross  
Cochiti drumbeats:

One final example will show how Native American as well as Japanese traditions infuse the work of top American haiku poets. Marjorie Buettner has written a haibun that fits nicely into this theme:

#### DAYCLEAR

The Ojibway have a custom when honoring their dead which releases the spirit of the loved one so that it can be carried to the ancestors, given back to the earth—the original grandmother. In this way, mother, and in so many other ways, I set your spirit free, casting it between this nightbreak and dayclear, sending your spirit off on its journey.

river mist rising ...  
I call your name out  
to the other side

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jerold Ramsey, *Reading the Fire*, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Charles Eliot, *Letters From the Far East*, 152; cited in David G. Lanoue, “Global Haiku.”

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Empty Swings*.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Jackson Ford, “Marking Time in Native America,” 345.

<sup>5</sup> Ford, 347.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Matsushima*; see also Kimberly Blaeser, “The Multiple Traditions of Gerald Vizenor’s Haiku Poetry,” 356.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Raising the Moon Vines* (1964 ed.), 89; cited in Blaeser “Multiple Traditions,” 357. The 1999 edition of *Raising the Moon Vines* changes the text to “breaks in the ice / encircled by fresh footprints / near the crossing log,” somewhat damping the sense of discovery.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Smapath Nelson, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*, Vol. A–C, 973. Henry’s piece appears in Robert Bensen, *Children of the Dragonfly* (2001), viewed on Google Books online.

<sup>9</sup> Information about Raven Hail and her astrology can be found at the Manataka American Indian Council website, <http://www.manataka.org/page2804.html>. The cited verse is from “Five Haiku,” in Raven Hail, *Ravensong—Cherokee Indian Poetry*, a website no longer available. Many spoken and sung poems of hers, often with guitar accompaniment, are downloadable from sites including Spotify and cdbaby.

<sup>10</sup> Jim Charles, *Reading, Learning, Teaching N. Scott Momada*; viewed on Google Books online.

<sup>11</sup> Axle Contemporary, *Haiku Roadsign*, 31. In September 2017 we were informed that a book of Momaday’s work is planned for publication in a few months. A large portion of that work will be haiku.

<sup>12</sup> Sherman Alexie, “Haibun,” from *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996); posted by Glen R. Butkus on his blog, *Feel Free to Read*, Oct. 28, 2008; <http://bibliosity.blogspot.com/2008/10/haibun.html>.

<sup>13</sup> “Somewhere Little Hawks” [sequence], in Mary TallMountain, *Haiku & Other Poetic Forms*.

<sup>14</sup> “Haiku For Four Seasons—Summer” [sequence], *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Nora Marks Dauenhauer, *The Droning Shaman*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>17</sup> Donna Beaver, from her blog, <http://www.donnabeaver.com>.

- <sup>18</sup> In Lee Giesecke, ed., *Path Made by Bear*.
- <sup>19</sup> University of Arkansas at Little Rock American Native Press Archives website.
- <sup>20</sup> Sequoyah National Research Center (University of Arkansas Little Rock), *SNRC Newsletter*, August 2012; [http://ualr.edu/sequoyah/files/2015/07/2012\\_08August.pdf](http://ualr.edu/sequoyah/files/2015/07/2012_08August.pdf).
- <sup>21</sup> Duane Niatum, ed. *Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry*, 210.
- <sup>22</sup> *Frogpond* 4:2 (1981), 36.
- <sup>23</sup> Ford, 350.
- <sup>24</sup> William Oandasan, *Branch of California Redwood*, 48.
- <sup>25</sup> From a review by Miriam Sagan of Barbara Robidoux, *Migrant Moon* (2012) on Sagan, *Miriam's Well* [blog], Nov. 2, 2012.
- <sup>26</sup> *Haiku West* 6:2 (January 1973).
- <sup>27</sup> *Modern Haiku*, 4.3 (fall 1973), 51.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert F. Mainone, *The Spring Within*.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> H. F. Noyes, *The Blossoming Rudder*, 72.
- <sup>31</sup> Ford, 339–40. Ford's quotes are from Foster and Rhoda Jewell's *Hiawatha's Country*, 5-6 (not seen).
- <sup>32</sup> *Hermitage* 1:1/2 (2004)
- <sup>33</sup> Marian Olson, *Desert Hours*, 2007.
- <sup>34</sup> Charles Trumbull, *A Five-Balloon Morning* (2013).
- <sup>35</sup> Marjorie Buettner in *Frogpond* 27:1, 52.

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