In 2012 I read a haiku about the war in Iraq that left me uneasy. The more time I spent with the poem the more convinced I became that it was technically a good poem. I could see how the parts worked together nicely, yet something about it still bothered me. A month or so later I read an equally good haiku about Hiroshima by a different poet that had the same effect upon me, so I decided to research war haiku to discover why a technically good haiku could still feel problematic.

In the first part of this essay I will examine the landscape of war haiku. I will look at its history, discuss why poets might choose haiku instead of other genres for their impressions of war, look at who is writing war haiku, and point out some major themes. Additionally, since a haiku’s small size often means that its specific war is left unmentioned, I will discuss the sometime use of particular referents—and how those can help build a vertical axis.

In the second part, to be published in the next issue of *Frogpond*, I will move from the landscape of war haiku into the important questions that the poems and poets themselves raise. I will discuss the differences between the haiku of war participants and those who comment from the sidelines, look at haiku that take a moral stand, ask questions concerning authenticity—including creating a definition of authenticity that extends beyond war haiku, and examine the thorny question of historical revision. I will also discuss why any one of these issues can potentially cause a haiku to fail.

For the most part I will be examining war haiku from outside Japan. However some haiku were written by Japanese and other nationals, so I should mention upfront that I am not a reader of Japanese, Croatian, Serbian, or any other language but English, and am reliant on the translation work done by many others. It is a fair argument that this limits the available examples of war haiku and, at the same time, my analysis of
the subject. So be it. In the words of Euripides: “The god of war hates those who hesitate.”

**Introduction**

All civilized men agree that war in the abstract is undesirable and should be avoided for its human, spiritual, and material costs. Robert E. Lee, in a letter to his wife, wrote:

What a cruel thing is war: to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world.¹

A hundred years later Dwight D. Eisenhower added,

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.³

And more recently the Dalai Lama wrote:

War is neither glamorous nor attractive. It is monstrous. Its very nature is one of tragedy and suffering.⁴

Yet if war in the abstract is monstrous, the necessity of a specific war is debatable. Without the American Civil War, slavery might continue to be a viable institution, and the continental United States divided into two hostile and closely adjacent, economic foes. Future conflicts would be inevitable. Similarly, without World War II, Europe would be dominated by the Third Reich and the Japanese Empire would be spread across the South Pacific. And I would argue that by Tibet’s lack of preparation for war, and by no other country’s military intercession on its behalf, Tibet lost much of its culture. The Dalai Lama himself sees the occasional necessity for war when he says:
It is plain to all of us that the Second World War was entirely justified. It ‘saved civilization’ from the tyranny of Nazi Germany . . . The Korean War was also just, since it gave South Korea the chance of gradually developing democracy.⁵

Clearly war and its morality are complex subjects and we would expect any dialogue or art about war to be equally so.

Haiku on war have been looked at previously both in anthologies and standalone essays. In the several anthologies on the subject, it seems to me that little analysis has been attempted except to suggest that war is bad in the few brief introductions to the collected haiku. In fact, in some cases, the only criteria of a haiku’s worth (meaning inclusion in the anthology) seems to be that it pointed out the horror of war. Some essays address the question of why more poets don’t write war haiku. And while this is certainly an important question—considering that many poets view haiku as an expression of our engagement with the world, and it can be easily argued that war is seemingly ever present in our culture—they don’t address the effectiveness of the poems compared to non-war haiku. The essays are more concerned with providing strategies for making poets comfortable writing war haiku.

My goal in this essay is to do more than point out that war is bad. I want to examine war haiku from all sides—historically, thematically, and morally—to determine, more importantly, how war haiku can succeed or stumble.

**History**

Haiku have been written on many wars. However, tracing the origins of war haiku is a tricky business, because war was considered an unsuitable topic for haiku during much of its history. Bashō, apocryphally, is reported to have said “You shall not carry a smidgen of steel on your hips,” an injunction which many took to mean that the master considered such haiku “unbefitting haikai sensibility.”⁶ So whoever wrote the first war haiku most likely didn’t share it with the public.
first war haiku most likely didn’t share it with the public. That said, two of the earliest known haiku that reference war were by Bashō—both from his travel diary *The Narrow Road to the Interior*. They both reference famous battles. Bashō, of course, wasn’t a soldier himself, and was writing 500 years after these battles. Both haiku are from 1689.

summer grasses
where stalwart soldiers
once dreamed a dream

how piteous!
under the helmet
a cricket

Given the high literacy rate of the Japanese warrior class, we might expect to find war haiku in the death haiku of some samurai. We know of death haiku from some of the 47 Ronin from around 1703. They were a famous group of samurai whose master was compelled to commit ritual suicide for assaulting a court official. Two years later they avenged their master by killing the same court official. Found guilty of murder, they were allowed to commit ritual suicide themselves rather than be executed because they had proved themselves to be loyal retainers, and the embodiment of *bushidō*. But none of their death haiku were on war. We also have other non-war-related, death haiku from some combatants who participated in the Meiji restoration in 1868. Given that haiku was practiced by these samurai and Meiji combatants—at least as far as death haiku—it is conceivable that haiku were written by them on individual battles. However, I and some translators of Japanese were not able to find any.

The shift away from this taboo was perhaps facilitated by the emphasis on realism that Masaoka Shiki brought to the genre at the turn of the nineteenth century, as well as the Meiji restoration’s new focus on the individual. Shiki himself, in youthful fashion, wrote martial haiku as early as 1893 and volunteered as a war correspondent for the newspaper *Nippon* during the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894. However, by the
time he had arrived in China the war had ended. He wrote this haiku during his brief stay in China.

Pears in bloom—
a wrecked house
left from the battle

Some of the earliest poets to write haiku outside of Japan were the French. Julien Vocance in 1916 used the form to write *Cent Visions de Guerre (A Hundred Visions of War)*, a book of one hundred haiku on his experiences in the trenches of World War I.

White wooden crosses
Surging from the soil,
Each day, here and there

All night in a hole
facing a giant army
two men

Japan had gained a foothold in China with the first Sino-Japanese war. In 1931 they invaded Manchuria, and in 1937 Beijing. Two haiku from that conflict:

Young men march away
The mountain greenness
Is at its peak

This is cold rain: two or three carry the bones on their chests

The Katayama haiku was written on the Chinese front. Some soldiers would carry the ashes of their fallen comrades in boxes strapped to their chests in order to return them to family back home.
As may be expected, I can only find poems written by Japanese—either national or expatriate—about World War II. A few examples:

spring snow
purifies earth and heaven—
our enemies perish

Mizuhara Shūōshi\(^\text{14}\)

Singapore has fallen: the spring lamp suggests morning

Watanabe Suiha\(^\text{15}\)

Nation victorious: with cold smoke high the train departs

Yamaguchi Seishi\(^\text{16}\)

A machine gun
In the forehead
The killing flower blooms

Saitō Sanki\(^\text{17}\)

air-raid
the single well-sharpened
pencil

Kaneko Tōta\(^\text{18}\)

War was standing at the corridor’s end

Watanabe Hakusen\(^\text{19}\)

Confident of peace to come
not looking up
at woodpecker

Shintomi Deisha\(^\text{20}\)

for a while
resting under the shade of a horse
a mother and child

Kikue Izutsu\(^\text{21}\)
I lay her dead body on the roadside
night dawns early

Shimomura Hiroshi²²

Some explanatory comments. The Mizuhara haiku was written about Japan’s conquest of Singapore in 1942. For the Watanabe haiku, according to Hiroaki Sato, “spring lamp” was a relatively new *kigo*, and referred to a warm sensual atmosphere. Sato added, “[This] haiku . . . probably won hearty approval from the military and police censors.”²³ Mizuhara was not alone in supporting the war. The well-known haiku master Yamaguchi Seishi’s haiku is clearly pro-empire. Kaneko Tōta, another Japanese master, served as an accounting lieutenant on the Truk Islands during the war. He penned many haiku about his time stationed there. Unlike Mizuhara and Yamaguchi, he was critical of the war. Shintomi was a Japanese-American interned at Rohwer Relocation Camp in Arkansas. This haiku is from the collection, *May Sky*. Kikue was a Japanese settler in Manchuria. She, like many other women and children, was abandoned by the Japanese Army in their retreat from the invading Red Army. Shimomura was a Nagasaki survivor.

In 2000 Ernest J. Berry published *Forgotten War*, a book-length haiku sequence on his experiences in Korea. Jerry Kilbride, another Korean War veteran, contributed a closing haibun. The fact that fifty years later Berry could put together a collection of more than 100 poems demonstrates the lasting emotional toll that war imposes on soldiers.

lull in the fighting
I crush a butterfly
for no reason

Ernest J. Berry²⁴

given in action:
recalling the way he pulled
a book from his pocket

Jerry Kilbride²⁵
Likewise, American poets Ty Hadman, Robert D. Wilson, and w.f. owen used haiku to describe their experiences in Vietnam. Hadman in his book *Dong Ha Haiku*, Wilson through his *Vietnam Ruminations* series, and Owen primarily in several of his haibun. Additionally, Nick Virgilio wrote several poems on the death of his brother in Vietnam. In 1984 Edward Tick published *On Sacred Mountain*, a collection of haiku inspired by veterans he worked with. In addition, through his work, some veterans themselves have written haiku. And in 2006, John J. Dunphy put out his book *Old Soldiers Fading Away* containing haiku that dealt with veterans’ issues.

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no enemy seen
but I get a good look
at myself

Ty Hadman
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twilight—
soldiers and the jungle wear
the same uniform

Robert D. Wilson
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combing
the military beach
a crab with one claw

w.f. owen
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Haiku were also written about the 1990 Gulf War. Lenard D. Moore, an ex-soldier himself, wrote haiku about his brother’s experiences as a marine in Desert Storm. Additionally, Michael Dylan Welch and Christopher Herold edited *The Gulf Within* in 1991, which gave stateside, non-combatant poets a voice in the conflict.

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dust drifts
where the duffle bags were
the white-hot sun

Lenard D. Moore
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moonless night—
in the streetlamp’s brightness
a yellow ribbon

Adele Kenny
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Frogpond 37:1
The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and its several civil wars, produced a great many haiku. Anthologies included *Haiku iz rata (War Haiku)*, edited by Marijan Čekolj; *A Piece of the Sky*, edited by Dimitar Anakiev; *The Third Bank of the River*, edited by Nebojša Simin; and *Haiku from an Air-Raid Shelter*, edited by Dragan Ristić. Additionally there were some individual collections.

Spring time—
in the national flag
a mere three colors

Dimitar Anakiev\(^{31}\)

On the wheat fields
bomb craters
are sprouting!

Marijan Čekolj\(^{32}\)

after the bombing
ruins of a bridge
linked by the fog

Nebojša Simin\(^{33}\)

A stray bomb
has fallen upon the
cemetery.

Nikola Madžirov\(^{34}\)

Serbian-born Anakiev is the most prolific of these writers. For ten years he resided in Slovenia without passport or other official identification upon the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Many of his haiku deal with the war-torn region, particularly his books *Rustic* and *Kosovo Peony*. He most recently edited the 390-page *World Haiku Anthology on War, Violence, and Human Rights Violation*, an anthology on war in general.

Kylan Jones-Huffman, an intelligence officer in Iraq, published several haiku before he died in Iraq in 2003.

gaunt children
selling old bayonets—
noonday sun\(^{35}\)

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112

Haiku Society of America
And Rick Black, a former news correspondent in Jerusalem, put out a poignant chapbook titled *Peace & War* on the complexities and contradictions of his posting in Israel.

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just buried soldier—
too soon for his mother to
notice the crocus36
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While the above is hardly an exhaustive history, it should be apparent that war has achieved a strong foothold in haiku poetry by poets with many different viewpoints on the subject.

**Why Haiku?**

Why did these and other writers choose haiku as the form for their war poetry? Japanese poets aside (since haiku is such an ingrained part of their literature), we might instead ask: why not haiku? Poems on war in world literature have been written in all forms: metered Greek works such as the “Iliad,” Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” with its repeated lines, the World War I sonnets of Rupert Brooke, the irregularly rhymed “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” by Randall Jarrell and “I Have a Rendezvous with Death” by Alan Seeger, and the free verse of Denise Levertov’s anti-Vietnam poem “Life at War” . . . among numerous others. Haiku, with its emphasis on the here and-now, provides a poetic vehicle perfect for expressing a writer’s immediate perceptions and emotions. Equally important, since haiku usually present an image without interpretation, haiku let readers re-experience the moment themselves. Edward Tick nicely sums it up:

As a poetic form, it is uncanny that haiku appears in key ways to be similar to the experience of war itself. Both the haiku and the war experience present as spontaneous, fragmentary, non-conceptual, imagistic and immediate. Both cut into the psyche through the impact of their imagery. Neither gives us time to breathe or recover. We are hit or not.37
One specific characteristic of haiku that gives it this ideal impact is its brevity. Because of a haiku’s focus, for the most part, on a moment, a haiku on war isn’t about a complete war—like say, the “Iliad.” Instead it is often about a single explosion, or a single bullet. A haiku is a single moment of fear, dread, or excitement . . . a single emotion. A longer poem is often about understanding the poem, rather than feeling it. There’s an immediacy to haiku. Additionally, by focusing on small moments, the poet can avoid the harder—if not impossible—questions about war’s meaning and motivation. It brings the moment to the individual’s level.

Another characteristic of haiku is objectivity or realism. Haiku tend to focus on what is, rather than what could be, or some abstract version of it. Likewise haiku tend to provide just the facts—without interpretation. This is in contrast to poems like “The Charge of the Light Brigade” with its final lines that direct the reader to “Honour the Light Brigade.” These are lines that tell the reader what to think and how to interpret the charge, and by extension the poem. The poem intends to teach the reader, to actively persuade, and has elements of propaganda. The St. Crispin’s Day speech in “Henry V” works the same.

The combination of brevity and objectivity produces a suggestiveness to haiku that is often missing in other genres. Where other poems “tell” us how to feel, haiku suggest it—and ultimately, the best haiku leave the interpretation to the reader. As perhaps an unfair exercise, compare the first few lines from Denise Levertov’s famous poem, “Life at War,” to a haiku by Ernest Berry. First Levertov:

The disasters numb within us
captured in the chest, rolling
in the brain like pebbles. The feeling
resembles lumps of raw dough
weighing down a child’s stomach on baking day.
Or Rilke said it, ‘My heart . . .’

Denise Levertov
To Stay Alive (1971)
Note the language Levertov uses: the vague word “disasters,” the simile “like pebbles”; she doesn’t tell us the “feeling” in line 3, but rather that it resembles something else. Later in the poem she speaks of eyes that are like flowers, the laughter of dogs, and “the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk / runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies. . . .” Note the abstractions, which are clever, but—like the fantastic language—also keep us safely removed from the action. She introduces the poet Rilke, which takes us even further away from the scene at hand. Despite all the horrors she presents, the quick shuffling from scene to scene actually keeps the reader safely disengaged—except intellectually. One might argue that the introduction of phrases like “a child’s stomach on baking day” brings in other senses, and in this case perhaps obliquely introduces ideas like Agent Orange and deforestation, but it does so at the expense of immediacy and makes the poem too large and complex to easily hold.

In contrast, a haiku by Ernest Berry doesn’t allow the reader to step away.

frosty morning
migrating geese
and refugees

Ernest Berry

This haiku paints a scene of refugees presumably on a road. Like the geese they only have the possessions on their backs. But unlike the geese, they may not be able to fully flee the war zone.

In contrast to the Levertov poem, once we are engaged with the scene, Berry doesn’t shift us away from it. Haiku’s brevity means that there is nowhere else to go. The reader is forced to stay with the scene—to face it. In this way, its emotional meaning stays with the reader. Additionally, because of haiku’s emphasis on showing vs. telling, it is the reader who discovers meaning in the poem. And it is their personal meaning, not one that is told to them.
A tangential question to “why haiku?” as a format for war poetry, one that Ruth Yarrow asks in her essay “Haiku Awareness in Wartime,” is why don’t haiku poets write more war haiku. After all, haiku are poems of engagement, war has clearly permeated our daily culture, and many poets have strong feelings about it. Yarrow notes the difficulties around writing war haiku: many poets may want to avoid the strong emotions it evokes, many may lack direct experience with the subject, and many may prefer not to engage in what may be perceived as political writing. But, strong emotions have been handled successfully many times in haiku (especially loss—I’d direct people to Robert Epstein’s excellent anthologies on the subject), and Yarrow notes that lack of direct experience with a subject didn’t stop many poets from writing about 9-11 or Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as we’ll see in the next installment.

Regarding the possible politicizing of haiku, Yarrow quotes Robert Bly, who claims that “political concerns and inward concerns have always been regarded in our tradition as opposites, even incompatibles.” However, he and Levertov go on to refute that notion. I’d add that when we consider haiku’s historical past as part of the social, shared game of renku, and now the commonly understood notion of the reader as completer of a haiku, opposition to political haiku doesn’t make sense. But Yarrow warns, “It is a challenge to write from particular experiences related to war so that the poem doesn’t shout like a bumper sticker but reverberates like haiku.”

**Themes**

In looking across the large population of haiku on war, it is tempting to think such haiku will be limited thematically to war and destruction. But I found that themes of all kinds prevailed, including some I didn’t expect. I’d like to focus on a few of the main ones.

An obvious theme is the horror of war.

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liberated village
the survivor holds out
his severed hand
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Ernest Berry

116

Haiku Society of America
Another theme is the indifference of war. War, in its modern form, in which killing can be done from a distance, is often incapable of distinguishing targets: friend or foe, military or civilian.

Spring evening.
The wheel of a troop carrier
Crushes a lizard.

Another theme is the dehumanization of the participants. In another set of circumstances Anakiev’s poem below could easily mirror Bashō’s question of how his neighbor lives. But during a war, there is a fine line between wonderment and spying—and its consequences.

Another theme is war as a machine, where soldiers are seen less as people and more as commodities that are ultimately replaceable and disposable.

war was standing at the corridor’s end

Hakusen Watanabe

autumn morning
two veterans shoulder
their brooms

w.f. owen
Owen’s poem, which we can assume takes place post-war, speaks to how the machine has no need for people after the fact.

Yet another theme is the cost of war.

combining
the military beach
a crab with one claw

A fallen soldier.
How loud the ticking
of the watch.

Additionally, the ever-shifting atmosphere of war creates uncertainty for the soldier and for the civilian.

Lights in fog
A truck
Full of refugees

sugarcane fields
the beautiful countryside
swarming with snipers

The unnaturalness of war is often shown through the juxtaposition of nature and some element of war. The Machiko haiku below is a favorite of mine because it subverts expectation so well.

In a spring field
I am polishing
machine guns

On the wheat fields
bomb craters
are sprouting!

In contrast, at some point, war becomes commonplace, even natural.
Shells falling
into the river—
it’s flowing . . .  Željko Funda

A child’s drawing.
Of the same colour are tank
and soldier and sun. Marinko Španović

The Španović haiku is especially powerful (and sad) with its observation that this is perhaps all natural to a child; that this is all he knows.

Politics can enter the poetic realm, as in the two following haiku. Bilankov is a Croat. His poem seems to suggest that no matter how battered they are by the Serbs, they will rise again.

New blades of grass
Will be growing higher
On fire-scorched land. Smiljka Bilankov

National Foundation Festival—
the enemy base falling
burns and burns Mizuhara Shūōshi

The Mizuhara haiku is from a class of haiku known as holy war haiku, nationalistic propaganda written primarily during World War II. Such haiku include nationalistic code words, such as: “holy war” (which frames the war in a religious/righteous tone), “National Foundation Festival” (which celebrates the anniversary of the first emperor), “chrysanthemum” (the imperial seal), and “kamikaze” (the name of the storms that repelled the Mongol invaders in Japan’s past).

Finding humor in war haiku was something I didn’t expect, although humor is often a human reaction to horror.

tactical retreat
through the wheat field
a platoon of quail Ernest Berry
concertina wire
a water buffalo
wiggles through

Ty Hadman

Nor did I expect the theme of beauty. It quickly becomes apparent that any emotion is available in war.

A starling
vivaciously slips through
a shell fragment.

Luko Paljetak

Vietnam
during the firefight
a rainbow

John J. Dunphy

Because of the baggage of war, found here in the shell fragment, how much more vivacious is the bird? And how much more beautiful is the rainbow?

Particular Conflicts

Most of the haiku I’ve presented so far do not reference any particular war. Meaning that if I hadn’t identified them as such, you might not know which war the poem was written in response to. This, I think, speaks to the often universal experience of war. However, as Hiroaki Sato pointed out in a book review of World Haiku Anthology on War, a lack of context can also be frustrating. Because of their briefness, haiku often rely on context to fill out the unsaid details—and often the emotional context. Without those details, a haiku can still be powerful (as we have seen so far), but perhaps not as powerful as one whose context we know.

Many haiku, however, do reference particular conflicts. Some contain an overt reference to a particular war within the poem itself. This can be achieved by naming a battle’s location or, as in some Japanese poems, by using a phrase like “holy war”—which references World War II.
Vukovar—
destroyed town. Croatia’s soul
bleeding . . .

Marijan Čekolj 64

just an olive tree
and a peeling mural are left
yitzhak rabin square

Rick Black 65

Vukovar refers to Vukovar Hospital, a Croatian hospital in which patients were massacred by a Serb militia group, and Rabin Square is where the 1995 assassination of the Israeli prime minister occurred. Classical Japanese poetry often contained what are called utamakura, which are locations whose mention in a poem invokes strong emotion based on some historical event. A good example is Bashō’s use of Sado Island in his Narrow Road to the Interior. The haiku, as many readers will recall, is:

the rough sea—
flowing toward Sado Isle
the River of Heaven

Sado Island’s remoteness made it the perfect place for the Japanese government to send difficult or inconvenient persons. Such persons included artists, a former emperor, and when gold was discovered, homeless people sent to work the mines. None of these exiles were expected to return. So Sado Island, when encountered in a poem, should bring to mind the sorrow and loneliness of those who have been exiled there.

Locations such as Vukovar or Rabin Square, when included in a haiku, have the ability to do the same thing. In the first poem, the phrases “destroyed town” and “Croatia’s soul bleeding” shouldn’t be needed, since mention of Vukovar should be enough to impart those feelings. It is often said that haiku outside of Japan need to build their own vertical axis—an axis that bridges the immediate moment with the larger historical past. Subjects such as these might be a place to start.
Additionally, a particular conflict may be referenced by information external to the poem, such as the name of the poet (if the reader knows that the poet was in a particular combat zone), or how the poem is presented (such as in a particular book, anthology, or website). Anthology poems are often collected for the purpose of speaking about a particular conflict. Many of the poems wouldn’t be identified with a particular war without the title of the book or website.

Here ends my review of the landscape of war haiku. Up to this point I haven’t made a differentiation between poems written by participants in the various conflicts, and those written by commentators. This, in fact, is where I will pick up my argument in Part 2 of this essay, to appear in the next issue of *Frogpond*. For the poet’s experience of war, and the reader’s understanding of the poet’s experience, has much to do with a haiku’s impact—above and beyond technical quality—and the reasons why certain war haiku may linger uneasily in the mind.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Haiku North America conference, August 17, 2013.
5. Dalai Lama, “The Reality of War.”
42. Berry, *Forgotten War*, 133.
47. Wilson, “Vietnam Ruminations.”
50. Owen, “Featured Poet.”
51. Čekolj, ed., *Haiku iz rata*, 44.
60. Berry, Forgotten War, 103.
64. Čekolj, ed., Haiku iz rata, 29.
65. Black, Peace and War, 28.
66. Ueda, Bashō and his Interpreters, 260.

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Haiku and War¹
Paul Miller, Bristol, RI

Part one of this essay, published in *Frogpond* 37:1, outlined the landscape of war haiku. I looked at its history, who was writing it, pointed out some major themes, and speculated upon why such poets might choose haiku over other genres. Finally I looked at haiku that referenced particular conflicts and suggested that such haiku might be useful in building a vertical axis.

In the concluding part of this essay, I will make a distinction between haiku written by participants in war and those written by outside commentators to see if there is any important difference. I will explore haiku that take a moral stand, examine the idea of authenticity in war haiku, and conclude with concerns about historical revision.

Commentators

In part one of this essay I didn’t make a differentiation between poems written by participants in the various conflicts and those written by commentators. In fact, most of the poems presented in part one were written by actual participants: either combatants or those physically affected by war as either civilians in a war zone or as refugees. However, there is a large population of war haiku written by commentators. In the United States, the number of haiku by commentators far outweighs the haiku of actual participants.

Haiku by commentators can be found in any number of places. The first poems I’d like to look at come from the Internet: in particular, several anti-war haiku walls. As would be expected, the quality isn’t always very high.

diarrhea, cholera
a humanitarian gift
to Iraqi children

Daniel²

What wise forefathers
once gave, Gucci-loafered faux
fathers take away.

libbyliberalnyc³
Poetry walls are websites established for specific purposes. For example, the webpage “100 Thousand Poets for Change” collects poems by poets “to create serious social and political change.” Such sites are essentially participatory blogs, and the posters are more known for their dedication to a cause than for their poetry. Frankly, the quality of the poetry doesn’t seem to be the point. These sites are really a place for people to give voice to their opinions.

The first poem cited above comes from Serge Tomé’s website temps libres. The site is undoubtedly the largest and most diverse depository of online English-language war haiku. It covers a variety of wars and has an especially large selection on the wars in the former Yugoslavia. And while most of those web pages related to specific conflicts contain more literary haiku, this one is from the generic “Anti War Haiku Wall.”

Like most haiku wall poems, it can be dismissed as poetry designed for a bumper sticker. While haiku wall poems can be effective commentary, they are usually lectures and violate the “Show Don’t Tell” rule of haiku. In fact, they are often not haiku, or at best they are poor quality haiku. We know they concern a specific war only because the name of the wall tells us so.

Poor quality anti-war haiku are not, however, isolated to haiku walls. Anthologies can suffer the same fate when editors value message over poetry, as in these two haiku from the recent Kamesan’s World Haiku Anthology on War, Violence, and Human Rights Violation.

After a war
a man with one leg
is he a hero?

Karunush Kumar Agrawal

Human rights my arse
If good for America
Then by all means yes

Tomas O Carthaigh

Haiku Society of America
These examples notwithstanding, in the main, haiku by commentators are of a high standard. One from the aforementioned anthology and a second from *The Gulf Within*, an anthology of Gulf War haiku edited by Christopher Herold and Michael Dylan Welch:

spring dewdrops
cling to a blade of grass—
Iraqi children

Chen-ou Liu

...talking to the tree
outside the window
about rain, about the war

Marlina Rinzen

As would be expected, many commentators’ haiku fall thematically into some of the categories discussed in part one of this essay. Most concern the subject of waste: usually the waste of human life. However, there are some themes that seem solely existent among commentators. I’d like to point out a few.

One theme is the overall reach of war, how it has expanded from the battlefield into the everyday civilian landscape, especially in this age of twenty-four-hour news—and there seems to be no escaping it.

the latest war news
I drink my whiskey
straight

Carla Sari

...on every channel—
a scud attack
in my living room

Garry Gay

Frogpond 37:2

Another theme is the powerlessness that many poets feel.

fall leaves
burying toy soldiers
her small son

Fonda Bell Miller\textsuperscript{10}

Parakeet
locked in a cage
with the war news

vincent tripi\textsuperscript{11}

Some poems illustrate a distrust or suspicion of government leaders—another form of powerlessness, but directed toward governments, and in some cases describing a segregation of those in power from those outside.

parting clouds reveal
a full Snow Moon—
the president’s war speech

Barry George\textsuperscript{12}

groups of schoolchildren
entrance to the parliament
by reservation

Hanne Hansen\textsuperscript{13}

Some express hope, either for an end to conflict, or simply for peace of some kind. The hammer and chisel in the following haiku by Gerd Börner refer to the coming down of the Berlin Wall.

bright November—
the ring
of hammer and chisel

Gerd Börner\textsuperscript{14}
long winter of wars
yet still we kneel
... crocus in the snow

Evelyn Lang

Additionally, some express sympathy with troops overseas, as in the following haiku by Adele Kenny; and some protest war, as in Ruth Yarrow’s.

moonless night—
in the streetlamp’s brightness
a yellow ribbon

Adele Kenny

I send a fax
protesting the bombing
pages come out hot

Ruth Yarrow

Something to note: most commentator haiku are not disguised as participant haiku, meaning that most of these poets write about the war honestly from the sidelines. They don’t pretend to be in a war zone. They write about their concerns and the effect the war has upon them—at home. Of course, there are exceptions, which we’ll review later.

Morality

Most haiku on the subject of war don’t reach into the larger question of a war’s rightness or wrongness. However, some haiku do take a stand and present a moral perspective. Consider the following poem from Ruth Yarrow, an anti-war activist:

against the wind
we hold the peace banner—
our spines straighten
Morality aside, Yarrow’s haiku is technically excellent. On the surface the peace activists are fighting to keep the wind from blowing down their banner; but they also stiffen their spines against the metaphorical wind of public opinion, power brokers, or the military industrial complex. There is, however, no doubting her message. She is against war.

However, haiku poets have not always been of the same mindset, as seen in the following pro-war haiku written in reference to Japan’s 1942 capture of Singapore.

Nation victorious: with cold smoke high the train departs

Yamaguchi Seishi\(^{19}\)

Public opposition—poetic or otherwise—to the Japanese expansion in World War II was a dangerous risk to a Japanese citizen. Yet as Hiroaki Sato explains in his essay, “Wartime Haiku,” to suggest that most poets were against the war would be a mistake.

the majority were for it. Following the darkening atmosphere of the 1930s when Japan’s military adventure . . . got nowhere in China and the world’s criticism of Japan mounted, the Japanese experienced a collective sense of liberation and intoxication when their army and navy simultaneously attacked the United States, the Netherlands, and Great Britain toward the end of 1941 and won a string of victories.\(^{20}\)

A prime example of this nationalism comes from Kyoshi Takanahama, poetic heir to Shiki and editor of the influential journal *Hototogisu*. In 1928, at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, he wrote a series of haiku with the title “Conquering Singapore.” During World War II he served as president of the Haiku Branch of the Japanese Literary Patriotic Organization and wrote what are known as “Holy War” haiku. However, since these wars ended in defeat for Japan, many such nationalistic poems were destroyed or conveniently forgotten. Ito Yuki, in the *Simply Haiku* article “Forgive but Do Not Forget,” references the difficulty he had finding copies of “Holy War” haiku, and was shocked that in the fifteen-volume *Collected Works* of
Kyoshi, and in virtually all other books on this “haiku saint,” his war haiku are either ignored or rarely mentioned. Simi-
larly, Seishi’s poem, cited earlier, was also excluded from his translated collected works.

It is not surprising that years after the war many poets would try to downplay their support. A question that has to be asked, however, is what would be collected today had the Japanese military effort been successful, and Japan had exported its culture to Southeast Asia and the South Pacific? Would those same poets, who now refute their wartime poetry, be singing a different tune?

In hindsight it is easy to cynically view such nationalistic poetry as Kyoshi’s and Seishi’s (and thousands of others) as a result of blind nationalistic enthusiasm, or naiveté concerning the effects of war. We must be careful at this point not to impose our current morality on different times, and also, and perhaps more importantly, to realize that there is no absolute morality. For example: some have successfully argued for the achievements of the Roman and British empires—despite the heavy toll they often took on native populations. I’m reminded of a Monty Python sketch from the film Life of Brian, in which the People’s Front of Judea—listing their grievances against Roman occupation—humorously end up with:

apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

Indeed, we do well to remember that the American Revolution can also be viewed as a nationalist movement. Perhaps had haiku been available to the colonists, we’d have today estab-
lished kigo such as “tea tax day” or “Bunker Hill.” We tend to look through a colored lens at that “justified” conflict, yet it included atrocities perpetrated by revolutionaries that are the equal of those in any other war.

As we’ll see later, there is a subset of war haiku that deal with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
In some cases the haiku take the moral stance that the dropping of the bombs was a crime against humanity. Yet it can be persuasively argued that the bombs ended the war with fewer casualties on both sides than had the U.S. had to attack the Japanese mainland.

A similar moral complexity may be present in Robert D. Wilson’s and Ty Hadman’s haiku on Vietnam, seen in part one of this essay, which make the case that American involvement was morally wrong. However, the Dalai Lama’s comment justifying the Korean War as a vehicle promoting democracy, also seen in part one, might suggest otherwise. Additionally, in relation to haiku opposing more recent wars, you can surely find Shia in Iraq and women in Afghanistan who welcomed America’s military intervention.

I bring up the murky question of morality, not to dissuade anyone from writing war haiku that take a moral stand, or to try to convince anyone that there is a particular “right” side to any conflict. On the contrary, polemic poetry has a well-established history in American poetry and Yarrow’s poem, for one, sits nicely inside that tradition.

**Authenticity**

Up to this point I have steered clear of questions concerning the authenticity of these haiku moments, because I believe that participants and commentators can write about their direct or indirect experience of war without violating the reader’s trust. However, some commentators have written haiku as if they were participants. A good example is a series of haiku written by Dean Summers based on photos of the Iraq war he had seen in *Time* magazine. Two from that series:

sandstorm
for this the young marine
hides his face

children and fathers
their smiles for the soldiers
not the same
Additionally, Anita Virgil wrote *Pilot*, a collection of found haiku based on Stephen Coont’s Vietnam War novel *Flight of the Intruder*, and other poets have published similar haiku in journals and anthologies.

the attack pilot
rocketing down the valley
startling birds

Anita Virgil

Dumping sand from his boot,
the soldier looks up
at the stars.

Alexis Rotella

These haiku follow an established tradition in Japan. During World War II, such haiku would be called *senka sōbō*, meaning “imagining and watching the fire of war from afar.” Initially, such haiku were condemned by those poets who felt that haiku ought to describe only things actually experienced, but their views were in the minority, and numerous poets wrote *senka sōbō* haiku.

As far as quality goes, the haiku of Summers, Virgil, and Rotella are the equal of any written by a participant, so I’m not sure a distinction between participant and commentator haiku is valuable—or that from a reader’s perspective one is more authentic than the other. And it is worth asking if we need a special category for haiku written by Lenard Moore, who served in the army, so clearly he has some sense of its sights and sounds, yet he wasn’t actually in an active war zone. His inspirations came from conversations with his brother who served as a marine in Desert Storm and from others who served in war zones. Similar are the haiku of Edward Tick, a psychologist who received his knowledge of combat indirectly from soldiers with whom he worked.

blood-stained shirt
on a wounded soldier
rising desert moon

Lenard D. Moore

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Swinging in her hammock
between banana trees
cradling her AK

Edward Tick

Also, what about poems written by a participant decades after
the war? The poet writing now, with the benefit of hindsight and
added maturity, is most likely a very different person than the
one who lived through the actual experience. Robert D. Wilson
is perhaps a good example. You’ll recall his poem from part
one of this essay:

End of Tet—
the marks on her back, a letter
I’d rather not read

In his collection *Vietnam Ruminations*, written decades after
the fact, Wilson empathizes deeply with the Vietnamese people
and understands how destructive the war was for those caught
between the Viet Cong and American forces. His descriptions
and analysis of the various scenarios show how much he has
reflected upon the war. The haiku in *Vietnam Ruminations* are
followed by brief prose passages. This poem in particular is
followed by a paragraph explaining that the young woman
was a laundrywoman whose family had been tortured and
murdered by the Viet Cong because of her employment by the
Americans. Clearly, Wilson’s *Ruminations* presents a mature
viewpoint, unlike the one he presents in his blog of his time as
an eighteen-year-old sailor who spent his nights in Vietnamese
brothels and engaged in drug use, “coping,” he explains, “with
a war we were ill equipped to handle.”

It could be argued that we have two different people—one, the
young Wilson (a participant) who knew nothing about haiku,
who was just a scared kid trying to survive; and years later a
very different person, a writer (a commentator). Which begs
the question: how authentic are the poems by the latter? I don’t
suggest that the younger Wilson was an advocate for the war,
but this illustrates the complexities of talking about war—or
in our case today, in talking about poetry on war. Because of these gray areas, “authenticity” in haiku is something that has never really been explored. Yet, to return to the very start of this essay in part one, I have always felt that some kind of authenticity was at issue in the war haiku I read—the ones I had a slight discomfort in reading.

I think most haiku poets’ definition of an authentic haiku is similar to the one expressed by Michael Dylan Welch on the Haiku Foundation blog:

What matters to me, as a reader, is for the poem to strike me as seeming to be real, echoing my own experiences, or providing enough detail for me to empathize with it even if I’ve not experienced it. It has to FEEL real, regardless of whether it really did happen or not—which is seldom provable anyway.31

The notion of believability is a key factor in determining a haiku’s authenticity. But believability in and of itself doesn’t define authenticity for me. Like many things haiku, the notion of authenticity depends (as Welch pointed out) upon whether you are the reader or the writer. For a writer, I think a fair definition is that upon revisiting a haiku a year or so later, does it still present the discovery, or emotional moment, of the original impetus? If yes, then it is authentic. For a reader, authenticity is a trickier issue.

Haiku are poems of engagement. We want the reader to be able to take the usually objective parts of a haiku and re-create the moment or discovery for themselves; or to paraphrase Ogiwara Seisensui: to complete the poem. It is this engagement that is at the heart of my definition of authenticity:

An authentic haiku is defined by a reader’s ability to engage a haiku with the minimum of distraction.

What do I mean by that? A haiku presents a series of observations that are designed to represent a situation, an emotion, or a moment. These observations are like the words used to express the situation: they are stand-ins for the thing itself. For me,
authentic haiku are ones that I as a reader can engage with fully. They are the perfect observations; they are the perfect words; and they are shared with me in the perfect way.

My definition isn’t so much about an authentic haiku “moment” as it is about an authentic haiku “sharing.” Haiku, after all, got its start in renku, so it has an inherent basis in sharing. It isn’t about the truthfulness or falsity of the observation, but about its transmission from writer to reader. How seamless is it? To help better explain this, let’s look at some possible distractions to a haiku’s transmission.

_Distraction: The poet has a point to make._

This distraction comes into play most often on haiku walls and in collections of anti-war, anti-nuclear power, anti-politician—antianything poems. And I suppose in pro-anything poems as well. Because haiku are poems of engagement, where the reader is the ultimate decider of what the poem means, haiku that are placed on sites with advertised polemic purpose are saying to the reader: there is no point interpreting this poem for yourself; it means X. It is someone telling you how a book ends, and from that point on you can’t read the book without that voice or knowledge in the background. The distraction is knowing that your reading of a poem is purposely steered.

Let’s examine how this distraction works in a poem by Billie Wilson:

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howling wolves—
there’s still enough light
to find our way home
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It can be found on the “Anti War Haiku Wall” on Serge Tomé’s _temps libres_ site. Now, if you came across this poem in _Frogpond_ or _Modern Haiku_, it is open enough to let you decide what it means to you. You may not even think of war when you read this poem. But given where it was published, you know even before reading the poem that it is about war—and, based on the title of the wall, that the poet believes that that particular
war is bad. My personal reading of this poem starts with its surroundings (the haiku wall), and I think, “Okay, here comes an anti-war poem.” Then I read the poem, and I think, “Yup, there still is time to get ourselves out of this war.” Wilson meant me to “get” something and I got it. No need to ponder . . . or experience . . . or engage this haiku further.

Additionally, because I know this poem is about war, despite containing no overt references to war, I am forced to find a way to make it about war. So for me, the wolves in the first line take on a metaphorical meaning and the poem as a whole becomes a bit abstract—which is what happens when haiku are messages instead of shared experience.

*Distraction: The poem is made up.*

If readers know that a poet wasn’t in a war zone they automatically question the details of a poem. A poem after all is made up of details. In a poem written by a poet who was present for all the details, the reader can trust that the details weren’t manipulated for effect. But in a poem that we know to be made up we unconsciously question why some details were given rather than others and look for motivations.

A well-known haiku poet, who has judged a number of contests, once told me about a fellow haiku poet who always submitted haiku about children and their dolls. The children and their dolls were out in the rain, sitting alone on the swings, or looking into empty refrigerators. It was this judge’s opinion—and one it’s hard not to share—that the poems were created with the purpose of manipulating the judge’s emotions. Believability is important here. It is especially important in poems for which the reader doesn’t have direct experience. Recall Welch’s comment about haiku “echoing [his] own experiences, or providing enough detail for [him] to empathize with it even if [he’s] not experienced it.” Most readers don’t know the details of a war: the uncomfortable boots, the living on edge, the lack of sleep, the weight of body armor. So they are relying on the poet more than ever. Welch says—and I agree—that from the reader’s point of view, whether a poem happened or not is irrelevant. But if
the pieces of a haiku don’t—for whatever reason—ring true, we suspect it is a made-up poem, and thus question the “point” of it. It becomes no different than the poems about the children and their dolls.

One key to a made-up poem is the poet’s name—often called the fourth line of a haiku. For example, if I read a poem about the Iraq War by Kylan Jones-Huffman, knowing that he served in Iraq I can re-create the moment much more comfortably—and without distraction. If I read that same poem by a poet who I know wasn’t in Iraq, then I experience that moment with less enthusiasm, because I suspect they got the details from television or the movies. I know that they don’t know the sounds and smells of the place, which prevents me from fully engaging the poem. And I read it at a bit of a distance.

Of course, we don’t always know if a poet was there or not—which either might make things worse (because doubt is a distraction as well) or better (because we are a trusting person and assume all the information given is true). For example, two poems about Hiroshima:

black ash
covers the trees
somewhere a sister

Tanaka Kaito

Children—
floating lit paper lanterns
not knowing Hiroshima

Yasuhiko Shigemoto

If you didn’t know anything more about the poets, both names being Japanese, it would be reasonable to believe that both poets were there. Tanaka was with a group of students weeding a potato field on the east side of town, while Yasuhiko was part of another group of children who were sent to dig tunnels outside the city.
But what if one of their backgrounds changed, and I told you instead that Tanaka was actually born and raised in Tokyo—years after the bombing—and that it was his parents who directly experienced the black ash. Does that change your engagement with the poem? What if he was actually born in Hawaii by parents who were in Tokyo during the war?

Yasuhiko’s story is true, and he has written a number of poems on his experiences in Hiroshima. However, I wrote the Tanaka haiku. Now take a moment to read the “black ash” haiku again. I’d be surprised if anyone rereads the poem, knowing that I wrote it rather than an actual survivor, with the same engagement. It isn’t that it is a bad poem, but knowing that I wrote it, you’re a bit distracted—disengaged—by my artifice, my manipulation.

_distraction: Unrealistic elements._

A third kind of distraction is that a poem contains unrealistic elements. Here, the poet creates a barrier between the transmitted moment and the reader through stylistic choices. And I believe this is why the reading of some avant garde or science fiction haiku can seem less engaging. Haiku, I believe, are about sharing, and such abstract or imaginary elements force the reader to step back from the poem to figure out how to engage with it. That “stepping back,” that uncertainty, is a distraction.

A good example is a haiku by Sugimura Seirinshi:

\[
\text{war dead} \\
\text{exit out of a blue mathematics}^{34}
\]

There is no doubt that this is an interesting haiku, but I find the pairing of generic war dead (no context is given) with the abstraction “blue mathematics” gives me pause. I can think of several meanings for the abstract phrase and even more possible relationships between it and war dead. Indeed, I suspect if polled, it is doubtful that a collection of readers could come to a single consensus as to the haiku’s meaning.
Philip Rowland, a supporter and publisher of this poem, referred to its image as “oblique.” That is hardly a synonym for engagement.

This lack of clear focus, the bouncing from one idea to another, without actually settling on one—as I’m trying to engage with the poem—means I am disengaged. I am trying to second guess Sugimura’s intentions, and I end up with competing meanings—meaning no one clear meaning—at the end of the day. Now, I think a fair argument against this is that in reading any haiku not on war we go through a similar process. After all, words are abstractions. So when I come across a haiku about a generic tree I have the same concern. I have similar competing images: is it a pine, oak, or hemlock? Which is why the best haiku find a balance between the specific and the general. And I would argue that when they are too general we don’t engage as much.

Additionally, abstract haiku send a clear message that the writer is being clever, which isn’t a bad thing in itself, but it can be at the expense of the reader. Obviously there are degrees to this cleverness and degrees to its distraction. At one end are perhaps mild distractions such as Watanabe’s haiku “war was standing at the corridor’s end” mentioned in part one of this essay; while at the other end, if such distractions are carried too far, the reader ceases to become a participant in the haiku, and instead becomes an observer.

Additionally, haiku on war come with baggage that haiku on birds and flowers don’t have. Haiku on war almost demand realism, because unrealistic elements may come off as flippancy, and I suspect most readers want the issue of war dealt with in a serious manner. War is a serious subject after all.

Perhaps this one distraction (unrealistic elements) really comes down to a sense of seriousness. And perhaps this distraction only applies to haiku on war, child abuse, domestic violence, or any other weighty topic. Haiku and senryu have a well-established history of puns and humorous wordplay—but not about such grim topics.
There are undoubtedly other kinds of distractions, but the important thing is that these distractions shape how we read a poem, as well as how deeply we engage with it. In a perfect transference from writer to reader, there wouldn’t be any distraction.

Revisiting my definition of authenticity you’ll recall that it isn’t about things being true or false. And I don’t mean to suggest that certain poems are worth less than others, just to point out to writers how readers may read, and question, their haiku—and based on that questioning, possibly adjust their engagement with a poem. Now does the presence of one of these distractions mean that a haiku is inauthentic? No. In fact I would suggest that there are levels of authenticity, based upon how distracted you as a reader are. Again, any one of these distractions, or even a combination of them, doesn’t make a poem bad.

**Historical Revision**

Every poem begins with a choice: to write about subject A instead of subject B. To mention the underside of a leaf instead of its top surface. Of interest to me are the numerous haiku written on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As would be expected, the bomb sites are fertile poetic ground for Japanese haiku poets. For example, we learn from Kyoko and Mark Selden’s *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki* that “In 1983 a Tokyo press published a 15-volume compendium of ‘the atomic bomb literature of Japan.’ Volume 13, devoted to poetry, includes almost 800 haiku about Hiroshima drawn from anthologies published in 1955 and 1969, and these haiku constitute only a fraction of all haiku written about Hiroshima.” Note, that doesn’t even consider Nagasaki.

This output is to be expected. A couple examples of atomic bomb haiku from the Japanese:

- atomic bomb anniversary
- a streetcar dangling countless arms

Imai Isao
In an atomic bomb picture mouths open. I too open my mouth: cold

Katō Shūson\textsuperscript{38}

However, the Japanese aren’t the only ones writing haiku on these two bombings. English-speaking poets have also written haiku on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and these are the ones that I find most interesting.

Hiroshima anniversary—
throughout the garden
empty snail shells

James Chessing\textsuperscript{39}

Hiroshima
another anniversary
not a cloud in the sky

Lee Lavery\textsuperscript{40}

a thin \textit{futon}
and everything beneath
Hiroshima

David Cobb\textsuperscript{41}

Nagasaki, Hiroshima
names etched in the memory
of our collective guilt

Cara Holman\textsuperscript{42}

The majority of English-language haiku written on Hiroshima and Nagasaki relate to the loss of human life, or the general horror caused by the bombings, as seen in Chessing’s poem. Some hope to learn a lesson from the event, as in Lavery’s haiku. Others find fragility in life. However a number of haiku—like Holman’s—speak of guilt, or the wrongdoing by the United States. This is something the Japanese don’t do. In going through the numerous Japanese haiku on the two bombings that are available in English
I found none that blame the United States. Japanese haiku are primarily about loss and the general horror of the events. I won’t go into the complex morality of whether the U.S. should feel guilt or not, or why perhaps the Japanese don’t express blame; I merely want to point out that these American haiku on the atomic bombings differ from the Japanese in that regard.

That said, if there is a subset of haiku that I feel is inauthentic, again, meaning they have too many distractions for me to comfortably or fully engage, they are atomic bomb haiku written by non-Japanese. This leads me to wonder why Americans write Hiroshima/Nagasaki haiku. I would hate to think that poets are simply playing along—that Americans are writing these kinds of poems simply because the Japanese are doing so. For the same reasons Americans sometimes write haiku on tea ceremony, geishas, and samurai swords?

A fellow poet suggested instead that these haiku are really anti-war protest poems, in which case they are similar to poems written for a haiku wall (albeit more literary), and there is a long-standing tradition in American poetry into which we could place them. But if they are protest poems, why the focus on the atomic bomb sites? Where are the Pearl Harbor, Bataan Death March anniversary, or Nanking haiku? When I pulled a sample from Charles Trumbull’s haiku database, there were multiples of Hiroshima/Nagasaki haiku to only a handful of Pearl Harbor haiku. In fact there were only ten haiku on Pearl Harbor—and none on Bataan or Nanking. Interestingly, numerous poems were written about 9-11 at the time of the attack, but few since then. Yet we continue to see fresh atomic bomb haiku written by poets outside Japan.

Another poet suggested that the poems were really about the historical significance of this new and terrifying weapon. Or as Jonathan Schell is quoted as saying in an essay by Ruth Yarrow: “These bombs were built as ‘weapons’ for ‘war’ but their significance greatly transcends war and all its causes and outcomes. They grew out of history yet they threaten to end history.”

In this scenario, atomic bomb haiku are not so much
about those particular bombings, but perhaps are a stand-in for all wars, all bombings, or the possible final bombings that will eradicate mankind. Yet this is something that a reader of these haiku wouldn’t necessarily know. If this is the case, I think a better strategy would be to speak directly of the weapon itself, as Charles Trumbull does in his sequence “Trinity.” An example:

Trinity Site
in the guard’s vehicle
fuzzy dice

Another poet suggested that the haiku were not so much anti-war haiku, but rather anti-nuclear power haiku, and pointed to the many haiku on Fukushima. While this is perhaps a satisfying answer, I have to wonder what the explanation was prior to Fukushima. After all, if poets are writing anti-nuclear power haiku when they write on Hiroshima or Nagasaki, then Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl provided ample opportunity, yet a pull from Trumbull’s database finds few poems on those accidents as well.

Alternatively, on the Haiku Foundation blog, Scott Metz made an interesting comment during a conversation about war haiku. He said, “[I] find myself trying to put myself in the shoes of the citizens the U.S. military terrorizes and dictates over.” In this scenario, poets are using their imagination to write “in character” and from angles they normally wouldn’t write. Yet I think similar questions apply. Why so few haiku from the perspective of an Afghani or Iraqi?

Finally, another poet suggested that the emphasis on the atomic bombings was from a sense of collective guilt that some Americans feel. This is a valid reason, but then I have to ask: why no haiku on the fire-bombing of Dresden or Tokyo? Or the United States’ treatment of the American Indian?

Personally, I wonder if it isn’t perhaps a combination of protest (whether anti-war or anti-nuclear power) and playing
along, in which, like calls from haiku anthology editors for anthologies on flowers, death, and so on, there is an established Japanese tradition that calls out for these kinds of poems on a regular basis—whether as an anniversary contest or a memorial. And American poets read these invitations and write a haiku to participate? Whereas no editor in the United States makes the same call for Pearl Harbor or 9-11 poems.

Beyond these thoughts I don’t have a definitive answer for why Americans write so many atomic bomb haiku, but I think it is a question worth exploring by those who do.

The result, though, is that such poems place an emphasis on the two atomic bomb sites at the expense of other wartime locations, or at the expense of other war victims—which has the effect of simplifying history. The overwhelming volume of atomic bomb haiku, compared to haiku on other war sites, suggests that the only terrible, or perhaps the most terrible, events were the atomic bombings, and that the Japanese suffered the most. This is clearly not true, yet if a future historian only had haiku to go on, it is understandable that he or she might come to that conclusion.

**Conclusion**

War has many reasons—biological, sociological, historical—that lie beyond the scope of this essay. I would only point out that systematic conflict is a complex issue and ought never to be simplified. A wonderful trait of haiku is that they come to a reader unresolved, in a way that can mirror the complexities of war, and possibly our feelings about a particular war. It becomes the reader’s job to complete a haiku—to resolve it, if possible. Based upon the variety and quality of war haiku, I don’t think war haiku have to be composed solely by soldiers or other participants. I think successful war haiku can be composed by anyone who feels touched by war—whether in person or tangentially.
In her essay “Haiku Awareness in Wartime,” Yarrow notes that many poets have “strong feelings about [war] . . . when it permeates our news media and our world.”46 In another essay, “Haiku and the Mushroom Cloud,” she could be talking about the larger population of war haiku when she concludes, “Writing haiku about the mushroom cloud, then, while certainly not easy, is clearly appropriate, possible—and necessary.”47 Metz treads similar territory in the sadly defunct Envoy Series on the Haiku Foundation blog: “Writing from interests and experiences is, of course, vital.” He then asks, “If we want to stop the atrocities of war and their destructive repercussions, shouldn’t we be writing about it then, instead of, say, birds and baseball?”48

Some poets and readers would agree. Yet haiku on the subject of war—unlike those about birds and baseball—have to work that much harder to overcome questions of distraction and authenticity. Personally, I might go so far as to suggest that the most successful war haiku are those that are specific to human circumstance within a war, yet don’t take on the larger issue of war as a whole, but I would never presume to tell another poet what to write.

Ultimately, it is not desirable to bring issues of morality, authenticity, motivation, manipulation, and historical revision raised in this essay into the moment of poetic composition. However, I think it is appropriate and necessary to ask these questions after a poem is written, considering how war haiku may be shared with individuals of diverse experiential, political, and historical understandings.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Haiku North America conference, August 17, 2013.
5. Ibid., 75.
6. Ibid., 206.
10. Anakiev, *Kamesan’s World Haiku Anthology on War*, 42.
13. Ibid., 145.
14. Ibid., 52.
15. Ibid., 199.
20. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
43. Yarrow, “Haiku and the Mushroom Cloud,” 40–47.
47. Yarrow, “Haiku and the Mushroom Cloud,” 40–47.

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Paul Miller is the editor of *Modern Haiku*. His haiku and essays have been widely published and anthologized. He most recently won the Haiku Society of America Mildred Kanterman Award and Haiku Foundation Touchstone Award for his latest collection, *Few Days North Days Few* (Red Moon Press, 2011).