Exploring Richard Wright’s Other World

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During the seventeen years since the publication of *Haiku: This Other World* (New York: Arcade, 1998), scholars and critics have been at once fascinated and puzzled by the fact that Richard Wright (1908–1960) composed slightly more than 4,000 haiku during the last two years of his life. The magnitude of his output is impressive, very impressive for a writer plagued by illness and political surveillance. It is now commonplace to claim that Wright’s experiments with a Japanese poetic genre were therapeutic, but such a proposition is not sufficient. One of the outstanding features of Wright’s prose fiction and non-fiction was powerful, often jolting, imagery. Something beyond therapy that we may not yet be able to name motivated his deep investment in the discipline of haiku.

Recent books by Yoshinobu Hakutani and Jianqing Zheng seek to forge a critical discourse that can benefit readers who have a special interest in haiku or Richard Wright or both. Within the limits that are perhaps innate in explanatory activity, these books do move us forward in a quest to understand more about Wright’s exploration in that other world of haiku. They help us to understand a little better the changing tensions between ancient Japanese and modern American ideas regarding poetry, poetics and aesthetics, and the cultural functions of haiku. Hakutani and Zheng invite us to participate in crucial critical work.

Hakutani’s *Richard Wright and Haiku* focuses primarily on Wright’s creativity within a specific genre. One might expect that the study would illuminate Wright’s innovations as well as dialogues among haiku scholars about the consequences of innovation. Hakutani is one of the leading experts on haiku
in the United States and an esteemed Richard Wright scholar. Along with Robert L. Tener, he edited the first edition of *Haiku: This Other World* and provided invaluable notes and an afterword. In *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (1996, hereafter *RWRD*), chapter 12 “Nature, Haiku, and ‘This Other World,’” he provided a summary of points he has consistently made about haiku, Zen, an African view of life, Wright’s retreat from moral, political, social, and intellectual life to find “in nature his latent poetic sensibility” (*RWRD* 261). It is noteworthy that Hakutani concluded this chapter by assuring readers that “Just as [Wright’s] fiction and nonfiction directly present” the conviction that materialism and greed are “twin culprits of racial conflict,” Wright’s haiku “as racial discourse indirectly express the same conviction” (291). That *Richard Wright and Haiku* hesitates to engage implications of such a conviction is one of its shortcomings.

Hakutani chose to divide the book into Part I History and Criticism and Part II Selected Haiku by Richard Wright. Five of the chapters in Part I summarize the long history of Japanese haiku and the major work Yone Noguchi did in bringing notice of the genre to the English-speaking world of the early twentieth century; the remaining five chapters discuss Wright’s haiku as English poems and senryu, the relationship of those poems to classic haiku and modernist poetics, and Hakutani’s *idée fixe* about Wright’s discovering “a primal outlook on life” which might reveal what Akan religion and Zen Buddhism share in common. Let it suffice that Wright possessed a primal outlook independent of his visiting Ghana and writing *Black Power*, and a more thorough investigation of Wright’s use of African American rather than African lore would have been desirable. Hakutani’s failure to use a skeptical, multi-dimensional perspective on what has been called the cultural unity of African thought is a demerit. Part II reprints 145 of the 817 haiku published in *Haiku: This Other World* along with the corresponding “Notes on the Haiku” from that edition. The recycling does not escape notice.

For readers who know very little about haiku or Richard Wright, Part I provides enlightenment, and Part II may encourage them to read all of the published haiku. More advanced readers may use Part I to refresh their memories of the haiku presence in American poetry and to ask questions about what such poets as Lenard D. Moore and Sonia Sanchez have contributed to the genre. On the other hand, some Wright scholars might dismiss the truncated repetition of Part II and invest energy in comparing Wright’s early proletarian poetry with his later haiku by way of a close reading of Eugene E. Miller’s *Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (1990).

It would have been politic for Hakutani to have acknowledged either continuity or discontinuity between Miller’s study and his own work in poetics. He would have impressed his readers with greater attention to incongruities in the study of Wright’s haiku and minimized the sense that he is reaffirming overmuch the “official” perspective he and Tener established. Hakutani’s choices in recycling so much in *Richard Wright and Haiku* are not fatal and certainly should not preclude a fair reading of the book. On the other hand, he does not satisfy a reader’s hunger for insights about Wright as much as *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku*.

It is exceptionally valuable to have complementary and contrasting views of Wright’s haiku, because only a few scholars have read all of his 4,000-plus haiku in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. A complete analysis of the haiku with the aid of a remarkable database recently constructed by Toru Kiuchi will unsettle any comfortable ideas about Wright’s poetics. Jianqing Zheng has an uncanny sense of what is necessary; his anthology sets us on a journey toward future
critical assessments of Wright and, indeed, toward expansive interpretations of the varying functions haiku can have in the contemporary world. Zheng made good choices in publishing original essays in tandem with reprinted ones from such journals as MELUS, Valley Voices, Tamkang Review, and Journal of the College of Industrial Technology (Nihon University). The ten essays in this anthology invite readers to contemplate Wright’s daring and discipline, his flaws and triumphs, his humor and use of the American South and racial histories in grounding his haiku, and his fidelity to 5-7-5 syllable structures. Special notice should be given to Richard A. Iadonisi’s challenging argument that Wright’s haiku are not quite the escape hatches many believe they are, and to Zheng’s belief “that nature, which fulfilled Wright and made him an integrated part of it through his haiku, is a fundamental element in his works” (TOWRW xvii). One must entertain the possibility that Wright’s signature skepticism precluded any ideal, aesthetic integration with nature and exposed the mythopoetics of writers ancient and modern who assert they have achieved sublime enlightenment. Even as Wright submitted to the severe discipline of classical Japanese haiku, he was defiant in creating a body of poems that ultimately are projections in the haiku manner.

Richard Wright and Haiku and The Other World of Richard Wright are commendable guides that point us toward a future in the study of Richard Wright’s poetics. They strengthen us to measure the merits of groundbreaking claims in Dean Anthony Brink’s article “Richard Wright’s Search for a Counter-hegemonic Genre: the Anamorphic and Matrixial Potential of Haiku,” Textual Practice 28.6 (2014): 1077-1102. In many ways our exploring of Wright’s other world is always a beginning, a fresh attempt to understand mysteries, those red suns that take our names away.