

THE CANON'S UNDERCURRENT:
A SURVEY OF HAIKU AESTHETICS IN
AMERICAN NATURE WRITING¹

Amy Whitcomb

I dentifying similarities in expressions through time—artistic, imaginative, interpretive expressions—can help us recognize and evaluate persistent values that influence the study of literature and environment. What are the qualities that tie our expressions together? What might they tell us about what the environment has provided to writers for centuries, and how we foster those values in and through our writing? It is with these questions in mind that I approached the largest collection of contemporary environmental writing in English, the anthology *American Earth* (published by The Library of America), in search of the smallest form of poetry, the haiku.

By most accounts, salient traits in haiku include change, permanence, ephemerality, humility, familiarity, loneliness, lightness of language, delicacy, and spirituality. I don't know the Japanese language, but from reading and participating in haiku groups for years, I've come to think of these traits as images, senses, flow, intimacy, and suggestiveness. There are expectations for sonic qualities as well, but syllables are different enough from Japanese *on* that I've never understood the guidelines beyond "one breath," and that's what I listen for.

From this loose definition of aesthetics, we see that haiku depend on close observation or interaction with events in the natural world, on reflection, and on association. If our environmental texts do not employ these modes, are we less literate with images, senses, and ambiguity? Are we less intimate with our subject matter and raw material, the environment? I'm suggesting that these aesthetics might be a gauge for our ecoliteracy and overall engagement with the earth.

I'm suggesting as much after reading Ian Marshall's book *Walden by Haiku*, published in 2009 by the University of Georgia Press. Marshall re-reads Thoreau's classic to see when and how the following traits

appear: ideas represented in natural images, diminished boundary between self and world, and appreciation for simplicity, humility, and solitude. These are further discussed by Marshall as paradox/juxtaposition, oneness/universality, compassion, humor, surprise, acceptance, present moment, and my favorite, “comforting vastness.”²

Walden, remember, was produced nearly one hundred years before haiku infiltrated mainstream American culture by an author widely considered quintessentially American.

When Marshall detects the above traits in Thoreau’s prose, he applies any of several techniques to render the original passage in haiku: he flips the word order, he condenses descriptions (from interspersed within a whole paragraph to being adjacent in one line), he cuts overt similes, he changes verb tense or point of view.

What does he find? Hundreds of pretty strong poems from paragraphs in *Walden*. Thoreau’s writing exhibits juxtaposition, concrete imagery, and sensory representation in much the same way as haiku. Among other insights, Marshall also finds that his own sensibilities as a reader and writer, what he calls “stylistic tendencies,” affected his selections and edits.

Do the aesthetics Marshall identified trace from *Walden* to contemporary writing? Is there an undercurrent to our environmental writing canon? In *Walden by Haiku*, Marshall peeks at an excerpt of Terry Tempest Williams’ book *Refuge* from the 1990s and finds a handful of haiku. Other haiku enthusiasts have discussed haiku aesthetics in other literature, such as Michael Dylan Welch’s examination of poetry by e.e. cummings.³ I attempted a more comprehensive search.

American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau was edited by journalist and activist Bill McKibben and published in 2008.⁴ It contains writings from over 100 authors responding to pollution, habitat degradation, energy use, and other environmental phenomena in poetry and prose as varied as Mary Austin’s “The Scavengers,” Gifford Pinchot’s “Prosperity,” Loren Eiseley’s “How Flowers Changed the World,” and Julia Butterfly Hill’s “The Legacy of Luna.” I read its 900 pages open to notice haiku aesthetics and actively seeking images that encapsulated a larger meaning or message. I read only prose, not poetry contributions, and I marked passages of haiku aesthetics while I read. I returned to craft

the haiku soon after, within an hour, and returned later, sometimes weeks later, to type and collate my poems. I performed this work at home, in the office at school, in the morning, at night—that is to say that my own “stylistic tendencies” were present and variable along the way. I culled the collection once while typing up the poems, when I saw the haiku removed from their context. I culled it again as I cleaned the collection for analysis, when I scrutinized the poems more closely for images, senses, flow, intimacy, and suggestiveness.

I did not doubt that I would identify haiku aesthetics and craft strong haiku from the extensive prose pieces in *American Earth*. I read approximately half a million words from eighty authors. I found and crafted four hundred sixty-seven haiku.⁵ Yes, haiku aesthetics trace through the canon. I wanted to know if the presence of these aesthetics, in the form of found haiku, exposed patterns and implied answers to my questions about a nurturing exchange between literature and environment. Here is small sample of what I found:

Skin from the back of the last animal our exposed frontier

George Catlin

From “Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs,
and Condition of the North American Indians”

1841

Treetop
Taking the wind
Into my pulses

John Muir

From “A Wind-Storm in the Forest”

1894

North woods
I paddle my cedar shell
In every direction

W.H.H. Murray
From "Adventures in the Wilderness"
1869

A cardinal
Makes a point
In green woods

Theodore Roosevelt
From "To Frank Michler Chapman"
1899

In the nest
A little more breath
Than noise

Mary Austin
From "The Scavengers"
1903

At the water trough
Nuzzling the surface
Dust dust dust

John Steinbeck
From "The Grapes of Wrath"
1939

The shovel
Good points in need
Of gentler use

Aldo Leopold
From "A Sand County Almanac"
1949

Tongue out war on the tip

E.B. White
From "Sootfall and Fallout"
1956

Uneaten leaves the heaps of many-hued feathers

Rachel Carson
From "Silent Spring"
1962

Sitting
With my doctor
Maples scarlet and gold

Lyndon B. Johnson
From "Remarks at the Signing of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965"
1965

Descending
Into the canyon
The roar of motors

Edward Abbey
From "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks"
1968

Earth Day
Schoolkids wash the windows
Of a subway train

Joseph Lelyveld
From "Millions Join Earth Day Observances Across the Nation"
1970

Energy strategy:
In the attic dusting off
Old values

Amory B. Lovins
From "Energy Strategy: The Road Not Taken?"
1976

Our place —
Most of the scars
Grassed over

Wendell Berry
From "The Making of a Marginal Farm"
1981

New garden
Killing the snake
Eve and I learned nothing

Alice Walker

From "Everything is a Human Being"

1989

Another test
Ravens watch
The desert heave

Terry Tempest Williams

From "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place"

1991

Westward expansion
The lone wolf over
The next ridge

Rick Bass

From "The Ninemile Wolves"

1992

Casino lobby
Not one cricket
In the potted tree

Ellen Meloy

From "The Flora and Fauna of Las Vegas"

1994

Backyard garden
Children clapping
As carrots come up

Barbara Kingsolver
From "Knowing Our Place"
2002

Using the average number of words I read per piece to find one haiku—that is, the frequency of found haiku—I performed statistical analyses to test for the effect of gender, the effect of genre, and the effect of era on haiku aesthetics. The tests show no significant difference in frequency of haiku between male and female authors ($t = -0.48$, $df = 59.75$, $p = 0.63$; I excluded the group authors from this test). They show no significant difference in frequency of haiku among personal essay, fiction, letter, speech, reportage, and one court dissent ($f = 2.33$, $p = 0.39$). The tests do show a significant difference in frequency of haiku among different eras spanning the twentieth century ($f = 2.49$, $p = 0.01$).

What is the nature of that difference? I investigated more and found no significant difference in any combination for the years between 1855 and 1944. Further, these eras were not significantly different from more recent eras. The difference, then, exists between the era of 1945 to 1974 and the era of 1975 to 2007 ($p = 0.008$).

Why would texts from 1945 to 1974, on average, exhibit haiku aesthetics more frequently than, on average, texts from 1975 to 2007? It could simply be editorial discernment by McKibben and by me. It could be subject matter, but when I compared the topics of texts during these eras to each other and to a timeline of environmental events, I saw almost perfect overlap: in spite of particular crises or events drawing (inter)national attention, the writers in the middle of the century and near the end of the century both responded to toxic and hazardous pollution, energy use, species and habitat loss, environmental justice, climate change, and agriculture. The answer to why I found a difference between eras could be technology. Among many global events, the Internet looms large in how our lives have changed from 1945 to 1975 to 2007 and today.

What's certain is, if we use haiku aesthetics in environmental writing as a gauge, then my study suggests that our ecoliteracy and engagement have diminished since 1975. This seems unlikely, because ours has been an era of laws and citizen science and popular debates about inconvenient truths. Here I reiterate that my sample was not representative of the general population of authors and writing—not in the proportion of males to females (and to group authors), not in the proportion of fiction to nonfiction. Many texts were necessarily excluded, and my crafting and coding are mine alone—this work should be validated by other readers to be considered robust. Nonetheless, the survey and analysis recommend a more detailed study of aesthetics in the last half of the twentieth century, possibly asking after the influence of technology or any correlations with trends in American values.

The aesthetics that shape our expressions are our advocacy for the environment and our education from it. “Found” haiku link us to cultural and environmental histories at the same time they newly excite our imaginations and impetus in the present. This ecocritical work honors literary traditions while applying analytical rigor to scholarship as well as providing a new collection of haiku to examine and enjoy.

NOTES

The author would like to acknowledge Su-Miao Lai and Michael Wotherspoon for their help with statistical analyses.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the 2015 conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in Moscow, Idaho.

² Marshall, Ian. *Walden by Haiku*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2009. Print.

³ Dylan Welch, Michael. “The Haiku Sensibilities of E.E. Cummings.” Spring: *The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society* 4 (1995): 95-120. Web. <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/webster/cummings/Welch4.htm>

⁴ McKibben, Bill, ed. *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*. New York: The Library of America, 2008. Print.

⁵ For the complete dataset of found haiku (n= 467), coding structure, and/or statistical analyses, please email the author at amyawhitcomb@gmail.com.