

Haiku as Queer Tourism: From Bashō to David Trinidad

by Justin Sherwood

Coming out is a form of travel. First, the metaphor of removal: the ostensibly heterosexual subject is located one place (in the closet, what have you) and then must move out to another. This idea has been tacitly accepted through the stock phrase of gay liberation, but even tourism scholars acknowledge that gay subjects have a particular affinity for travel, beginning from that first shattering movement. Howard L. Hughes, in an article in *Tourism Management*, argues that the travel requirement for the gay subject becomes an indelible part of her identity: "Given that the fulfillment or achievement of gay identity often involves travel and is thus, in practice, a variation of tourism, it may also be argued that the search for gay identity is itself conceptually a form of tourism." [1] To come out as gay is to be a tourist.

Tourism finds its poetic form in the Japanese haiku and haibun. Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), among the most revered of the haiku masters by modern poets, belonged to a tradition wherein removal and homosocial formations were inextricable from poetic practice. [2] Haiku, commonly translated from the Japanese into three-line poems with seventeen syllables (five syllables in the first and last lines, seven in the middle), are complicated little machines. Traditional haiku capture a moment in nature, speak of the poet's emotional resonance with that moment, and also demonstrate the poet's knowledge of the haiku tradition. Bashō's most famous haiku, for reference (here translated into four lines):

Breaking the silence
Of an ancient pond,
A frog jumped into water—
A deep resonance.

In order to link these moments into a cohesive travel narrative, Bashō turned to a variation on the haiku form, the haibun. Haibun are texts comprised of both prose and haiku, and the integration of the haiku into the prose should be seamless. An example of Bashō's haibun:

Mount Kurokami was visible through the mist in the distance. It was brilliantly white with snow in spite of its name, which means black hair.

Rid of my hair,
I came to Mount Kurokami,
On the day we put on
Clean summer clothes.[3]

Haibun are extended, sometimes book-length poetic sequences. The prose is used to advance the narrative, whereas the haiku pause to capture a single moment or

image the poet encounters on his journey. Haiku and haibun were traditionally written collaboratively by two master, male poets. In the excerpt above, Bashō wrote the prose passage, while his compatriot Sora wrote the haiku. In Bashō's time, the poetic tradition was dominated by men, and the world of haiku composition, as well as the content of the poems, was entirely homosocial: men writing to, of, for, with, men.

In 1981, poet John Ashbery discovered Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson's newly published anthology of Japanese poetry, *From the Country of Eight Islands*.^[4] Ashbery began experimenting with the haiku and haibun forms, both of which would appear in his poetry collection, *A Wave* (Viking Press, 1984). Midway through that collection, a sequence of five haibun appears, each titled "Haibun" with a corresponding number. As the critic John Shoptaw notes, these haibun are hugely significant poems in John Ashbery's oeuvre, as the first poem from the sequence, "Haibun," is the only poem in his considerable body of work to use the word "homosexuality," and indeed the entire 5-haibun sequence is concerned with homosexual encounter—a rare, explicit treatment of homosexuality as a subject by the poet who otherwise does not overtly thematize homosexuality in his poetry. ^[5]

As Shoptaw notes, Ashbery's relationship to Bashō transcends formal affinity: Bashō stresses in his haibun that his relationships with men are non-commercial, a "universal brotherhood" in Ashbery's rendering. In a haibun passage entitled "Snowball," Bashō speaks of a neighbor who comes over to cook with him, and notes, "our relationship doesn't involve money." With his five haibun, Ashbery transforms the tradition of homosociality and travel into a new tradition: the haibun as queer narrative. In Ashbery's "Haibun 4," homosocial camaraderie is tinged with homosexual promise:

It is a man, it was one all along. No it isn't. It is a man with the conscience of a woman, always coming out of something, turning to look at you, wondering about a possible reward. How sweet to my sorrows is this man's knowledge in his way of coming, the brotherhood that will surely result under now darkened skies.

Four years after the publication of Ashbery's *A Wave*, James Merrill published *The Inner Room* (Knopf, 1988), containing a sequence of fourteen haibun entitled "Prose of Departure." Merrill's haibun are a meditation on travel, illness, and Japan as metaphor. By the time he began writing this sequence, Merrill had learned that he was infected with HIV (or ARC, "AIDS-related complex", as it was then called), and many of his loved ones were succumbing to the effects of the virus, or already dead. ^[7] This knowledge, in combination with a planned trip to Japan, inspired a haibun sequence bound up in the themes that inspired Bashō himself: solitary journey and the quest for internal peace.

"Prose of Departure" opens with Merrill considering his friend Paul's HIV treatment, which he is receiving at "the Clinic," "Famous and vast and complex as an ocean liner." At the clinic, Merrill describes Paul's "voyage" among the elderly,

those prepared for “their final honeymoon”—but Paul is too young, too unprepared, and so is Merrill. In the first haibun, “Imagining It.” Merrill mobilizes what will be the driving metaphor of the sequence: his journey to Japan as his final voyage, and the culture and people of Japan as symbolizing ill health and infirmity.

...Yes, yes, these
old folks grown unpresuming,
almost Japanese,

had embarked too soon
—Bon Voyage! Write!—upon their
final honeymoon.

Throughout “Prose of Departure,” Merrill relies on orientalist tropes to draw parallels between his suffering and what he imagines to be the servile, long-suffering character of the people of Japan. Merrill describes observing a “‘Hiroshima’ of trivial symptoms” as evidence of his advancing HIV. In his sequence of haibun, Merrill cites only one scholar of Japanese culture, Lafcadio Hearn, the early 20th century American scholar now known for his overtly orientalist, exoticizing portraits of Japan. While Merrill’s haibun are wrenching for their unflinching look at untimely death, and breathtaking in their innovative use of rhymed haiku, Merrill’s poetic travel to Japan primarily serves as a metaphor for the deterioration of his mind and body.

The tradition of white, Euro-American gay men exoticizing the cultures and people of the global south and east is almost as old as the tradition of haiku and haibun. Scholar Hiram Perez, in his essay “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!” examines the beginnings of the tourism industry, and the role that gay white men played in it. Perez uses the word “cosmopolitan” to describe “a subject position originating with a white, urban, leisure-class gay male whose desire is cast materially onto the globe at the close of the nineteenth century.” For Merrill, it is both his sexual desire and his desire for life that is cast onto the nation and people of Japan.

Merrill is not alone in turning to Japan, and the Japanese cultural tradition of haibun, to explore his own feelings about travel, illness, and death. Perez argues that,

The development of an Anglo-American tourism industry to service a growing leisure class contributed to the formation of a cosmopolitan gay male identity, making available for consumption both the spaces and bodies imagined as precivilized. The very notion of civilization requires a fantasied, primitive space onto which repressed desires are projected and disavowed. This idyllic space, populated by pansexual, uninhibited

brown bodies—bodies without shame—promised liberation from Victorian restrictions on same sex desires. These characteristics, mobility and shame and fantasies about the primitive continue to shape dominant Anglo-American gay male culture.[8]

The notion of a “precivilized” Japan, belonging to a people “without shame,” attracted Merrill precisely because of the stigma and shame homosexuals were made to feel in the late twentieth century in the United States, externalized and exponentially increased by the onset of the HIV epidemic. Though Merrill knew he had been infected with HIV by the time he wrote his haibun, he revealed his status to only a few of his closest friends. [9] His private shame could be externalized, explored, and projected onto an external source in the space of Japan—imagined as precivilized—a space he could access by virtue of his wealth and mobility. Merrill also had access to Japan through use of the haibun, which he used to create a queer narrative in which his own suffering was matched only by the imagined, historical suffering of the Japanese.

Queer scholar Eve Sedgwick cites Merrill’s haibun as the inspiration for her book-length haibun, *A Dialogue on Love* (Beacon Press, 1999). In her book, Sedgwick recounts her coming into queerness and self-love through a long period of therapy she began as a treatment for depression following a cancer diagnosis. Sedgwick’s haibun recount sessions with her therapist Shannon—a heterosexual man who does not share her intellectual training or interest in queerness.

And it frightens me to feel rage, to have it reach into my senses so
deeply I can’t see around it anymore, can’t go on suspending it

as I’ve suspended
the worry about Shannon
just being too dumb

these hours when I’ve splashed around so happily in his mild, hired
companionship.

Aside from a brief description of her interest in Buddhism, recounted as a conversation with Shannon, Sedgwick’s haibun is not preoccupied with Japanese culture, nor does she employ Japanese culture or iconography to mobilize her metaphorical journey from shame and isolation to interpersonal connection and more capacious love. Instead, Sedgwick is enticed by the formal qualities of the haibun, the movement of the form, deliberate as calligraphy: “sweeping into and through the arias, silent impasses, the fat, buttery condensations and inky dribbles of the mind’s laden brush,” “some use / for all the white space.” Sedgwick’s haibun, like Bashō’s, explore interior landscapes, movements from internal preoccupation to external connection. Sedgwick finds shame to be a creative internal resource, rather than a fault to be externalized, projected, and disavowed. Sedgwick’s notion of shame-creativity is expressed through the haibun form, which allows for observation, narrative, and progression, but also

reflection and triangulation. Not poetry, not prose, but a queer form.

David Trinidad's poetry collection "Peyton Place: A Haiku Soap Opera" (Turtle Point Press, 2013), ushers haiku into the 21st century. While Ashbery, Merrill, and Sedgwick's queer haiku and haibun extended the tradition of travel narrative to narratives of queer emergence, Trinidad masterfully introduces the gay tradition of camp. Trinidad's 514 haiku provide brilliant and often hilarious 17-syllable synopses and observations of each episode of the long-running American soap opera Peyton Place. While Trinidad's haiku are often played for laughs,

Mia can't forgive
Dorothy's deception. I still
can't forgive her hair.

he also shows a deep appreciation for the history of haiku, with a "Haiku in the Traditional Manner," and haiku after Kobayahsi Issa, Bashō, and Yosa Buson.

HAIKU IN THE TRADITIONAL MANNER

The first day
of Rod's murder trial—
autumn wind

While Trinidad's *Peyton Place* haiku often parody the plot lines, characters, and actors of the series, the haiku collection pays tribute to many haiku masters and modern poets throughout. Trinidad's haiku come not from dubious conceptions of Japanese culture and traditions, but instead, like Ashbery and Sedgwick's, a traditional Japanese form reconfigured for a new purpose altogether. Trinidad's inventive syntheses of melodrama reveal that the traditions of camp and haiku are surprisingly similar: both require internalizing decades (even centuries) of artful gesture, performance, and representation, in order to recast them into highly compressed, personal, and historically-resonant art works. And what more ambitious journey could a queer haiku writer undertake than a 514-episode arch of Peyton Place?

Taken together, the haiku and haibun of Trinidad, Sedgwick, Ashbery, Merrill, and Bashō himself, demonstrate the elasticity and enduring relevance of a form that at its best—as Sedgwick describes Merrill's best moments of queering the haibun form— creates

sentences fraying

into implosions
of starlike density or
radiance, then out

into a prose that's never quite not the poetry.

Notes

[1] Hughes, Howard L. "Holidays and Homosexual Identity." *Tourism Management*, Vol. 18, No.1.

[2] Bashō, Mitsuo. *The Record of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton [Nozarashi Kikō] (1684). The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Nobuyuki Yuasa, translator. London: Penguin Books, 1966.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Sato, Hiroaki and Burton Watson. *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. New York: Anchor Books, 1981.

[5] Shoptaw, John. *On the Outside Looking Out*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

[6] Perez, Hiram. "You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!" *Social Text*, Fall-Winter 2005 23(3-4 84-85):171-191.

[7] Cole, Henri. "Bravery in Poetry." *Pen World Voices Festival*. The New School, New York, NY. 1 May 2013.

[8] Hiram Perez.

[9] Henri Cole.

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Trinidad and Tobago regularly experience heavy rains during the hurricane season, leading to severe flooding and landslides. These severe storms can put you at risk and hamper the provision of essential services. If you decide to travel to a coastal area during the hurricane season: police: 999. emergency health services (provided by National Emergency Ambulance): 811. Tourism Policing Unit, located at Crown Point Police Station, 1-868-639-0020. fire and alternate ambulance services: 990. Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management: 511. Haiku and haibun were traditionally written collaboratively by two master, male poets. In the excerpt above, Bashō wrote the prose passage, while his compatriot Sora wrote the haiku. In Bashō's time, the poetic tradition was dominated by men, and the world of haiku composition, as well as the content of the poems, was entirely homosocial: men writing to, of, for, with, men. 4. The Basho Wayfarer, Japan. This trail follows the route taken by haiku poet Matsuo Basho 1689. Shutterstock. Japan boasts numerous ancient trails, connecting temples and cities. Walking the Great Wall at the tourist hotspot of Badaling can be a stressful experience, with crowds and hawkers making it almost unbearable.