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# Inverting the Haiku Moment: Alienation, Objectification, and Mobility in Richard Wright's 'Haiku: This Other World'

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# Inverting the Haiku Moment

*Alienation, Objectification, and Mobility*

*in Richard Wright's Haiku: This Other World*

— THOMAS L. MORGAN —

Richard Wright's haiku—both the 4,000 he wrote at the end of his life and the 817 he selected for inclusion in *Haiku: This Other World* (1998)—remain something of an enigma in his larger oeuvre; critics variously position them as a continuation of his earlier thematic concerns in a different literary form, an aesthetic departure from the racialized limitations imposed upon his earlier work, or one of several positions in between. Such arguments debate the formal construction as well as the strategic reinvention of Wright's haiku. The present essay engages both sides of this conversation, arguing that Wright's inversion of the logic of the "haiku moment" offers him a new generic form with which to explore the themes of alienation, dehumanization, and inequality appearing in his earlier works. Wright's reformulation of the haiku moment allows him to reengage the same cultural and social mores seen in his earlier works in a different generic context, one stripped of the pre-inscribed notions of identity that influence the critical reception of his prior works. Mapping out the revisions Wright strategically employs to manipulate the formal construction of his haiku reveals the way those manipulations allowed Wright to refine and extend his artistic vision.

In the afterword to Richard Wright's *Haiku: This Other World*, Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener discuss the "haiku moment." Quoting Joan Giroux's definition, they observe that "the haiku moment 'may be defined as an instant in which man becomes united to an object, virtually

becomes that object and realizes the eternal, universal truth contained in being."<sup>1</sup> This moment of unification between nature and humanity, where the two become inseparable, is mediated by the author's evacuation of subjectivity in the act of representation, and "[a]ll nature is unified with human beings through the poet's perception and expression," making the author's perspective "almost imperceptible."<sup>2</sup> As such, the haiku moment is created by the writer's contemplation of a natural object that, when presented as a visual image in the haiku, allows the writer to merge with nature via that contemplation. In this definition, the relationship between nature and humanity is located as an essential requirement to create the seamless fusion of form and content found in haiku. Applied to Wright's haiku, this definition positions the conceptual logic that his work would ostensibly be expected to fulfill. However, while Wright was undoubtedly aware of the formal configurations of haiku—critical work consistently points to Wright's working knowledge of R. H. Blyth's four-volume collection entitled *Haiku* (1949–52)—Wright's haiku do not always reflect these expectations.

This deviation should not be too surprising. As Eugene E. Miller explains in *Voice of a Native Son* (1990), "It is unlikely that [Wright] would have attempted to reproduce the Japanese haiku precisely. He would have known, from the first lines of Blyth's first volume, if not from some other source, that authentic haiku are intimately connected with a whole cultural tradition of which he was not a part."<sup>3</sup> As Miller implies, an exclusively formalist reading of Wright fails to consider Wright's own awareness of the connection between culture and art as well as the importance of this relationship to identity. Richard A. Iadonisi, in "'I Am Nobody': The Haiku of Richard Wright" (2005), further argues that Wright's deviations are both strategic and intentional and that an exclusive reliance on the formal definition of haiku limits our understanding of Wright's poetic experimentation. For Iadonisi, moving beyond traditional definitions of form "allows us to see how Wright radically reinvents the haiku form, making of it a revolutionary poetry that offers and then savagely undercuts the possibility of Zen oneness; in the process, the haiku serve as a vehicle that articulates the author's anti-colonial position."<sup>4</sup> Drawing Miller's and Iadonisi's claims about Wright's aesthetic project into conversation with the comments in the last paragraph concerning the formal definition of the haiku moment



reveals the connections to be made between the two ostensibly opposing perspectives. Wright's revision inverts the basic formulations that locate the haiku moment to suit his own ends, using a logic of disjunction in regard to humanity's relationship with nature rather than of unification to organize a good number of his haiku. While this inversion subverts the rhetorical thrust of the haiku moment as defined by Joan Giroux, it does so through utilizing the same framework to achieve opposite ends: the realization of universal truth comes through the disjunction created with nature, not humanity's unification with nature.

### Aesthetic Interests, or Wright and Perspective

To best understand Wright's aesthetic interest in revising the haiku moment, it is necessary to revisit Wright's earlier beliefs about the role and function of art. In "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), Wright argues that authors in general, and black authors in particular, need to have an "angle of vision [that] can show them all the forces of modern society in process."<sup>5</sup> Labeling this "The Problem of Perspective," Wright states that perspective "is that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggle, hopes, and sufferings of his people." Wright proceeds to note that the black author hoping to use perspective successfully "must create in his readers' minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil."<sup>6</sup> This relational perspective, one that creates connections between the different possible poles of experience within the space of the nation (or even a global context), is intended to ameliorate the *perceived* differences that readers incorrectly believe exist between these two subjects. The relationship that Wright advocates here moves beyond the assumed differences of race, gender, class, and even regional affiliation to argue for a common humanity and a common dignity that exist across the spectrum of experience. It is thus no coincidence that Wright also connects the idea of "perspective" to both "awareness" and "consciousness,"<sup>7</sup> further indicating the connection he sees between art, representation, and consciousness-raising.

Wright makes a similar appeal for a shared humanity in a 1955 interview with *L'Express*, asserting "[i]f my writing has any aim, it is to try to reveal that which is human on both sides, to affirm the essential unity of man on earth."<sup>8</sup> In this quote, the relationship between the two "sides" is framed as a commonality or as a unified whole that is not readily understood by either group; Wright's interest in revealing "that which is human" to the other side points to his desire to foreground their shared humanity. As both quotes indicate, Wright embraces art for its transformative possibilities, and numerous examples from his work pursue this aesthetic agenda. For example, in "Long Black Song" from *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Sarah thinks to herself that "[s]omehow, men, black men and white men, land and houses, green cornfields and grey skies, gladness and dreams, were all a part of that which made life good. Yes, somehow, they were all linked, like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel. She felt they were. She knew they were."<sup>9</sup> Coming as this does when Sarah's husband, Silas, is about to be lynched, Wright's observation about the "linked" connections that "made life good" points to the types of collective humanity that the violence and "old river of blood"<sup>10</sup> portrayed in the story attempt to erase.

Obviously, Wright was not alone in pointing out the importance of establishing connections between different groups for readers. As Ralph Ellison points out in "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), "[t]he welfare of the most humble black Mississippi sharecropper is affected less by the flow of the seasons and the rhythm of natural events than by the fluctuations of the stock market."<sup>11</sup> In highlighting the economic dependence created by this relationship, Ellison not only mirrors the example from Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing," he also points out that the social relations created by economic subordination trump the rhythm and flow of the natural world—that economic relationships have a material effect on maintaining perceived notions of established difference in the social realm. Zora Neale Hurston, too, shares with Wright an understanding of the importance of "reveal[ing] that which is human on both sides."<sup>12</sup> As she observes in "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950), "[b]ut for the national welfare, it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem. That they are very human and internally, according to natural endowment, are just like everybody else. So long as this is not conceived, there must remain that feeling



of unsurmountable difference, and difference to the average man means something bad. If people were made right, they would be just like him."<sup>13</sup> Here, it is the perception of "unsurmountable difference" between different social groups that precludes the possibility of an "essential unity"<sup>14</sup> for humanity—after all, difference without understanding "means something bad." Hurston's description of this type of transformation as "urgent" for the health of our collective "national welfare" points to the importance of overcoming notions of difference for the larger collective good. The use of "welfare" by both Ellison and Hurston further emphasizes the relational connections between different groups—constructing a collective sense of well-being requires all being treated equitably. For Hurston, as for Wright and Ellison, transforming readers requires art that has the ability to address readers' limitations. As Hurston asserts, until minorities are seen as "just like everybody else"—until they can be imagined as possessing the same hopes, dreams, and aspirations as those who look down upon them—notions of difference will continue to drive social and cultural relationships and prevent the development of a feeling of shared humanity.

Thus, the preoccupation with creating connections between groups and addressing the prejudices minorities face was clearly an important part of Wright's aesthetic agenda. Flashing forward, this is the same artistic sensibility that Wright brought to bear on his experimentation with haiku. And the haiku moment that Wright discovered, as Floyd Ogburn describes, "draws heavily upon the *satori* of Zen. The haiku moment is an aesthetic moment—one in which the words which create the experience and the experience itself are one. Anti-temporal and eternal, the haiku moment culminates 'in a new insight or vision which the poet must render as an organic whole' (Yasuda 24–25)."<sup>15</sup> The unification of words and experience to create an "organic whole" is also dependent upon the fusion of humanity and nature; as Hakutani and Tener observe in the afterword to *Haiku: This Other World*, "Well-wrought haiku thrive upon the fusion of man and nature."<sup>16</sup> They note further that "[i]t is also imperative that a haiku be primarily concerned with nature; if a haiku deals with man's life, that life must be viewed in the context of nature rather than society."<sup>17</sup> However, while Wright's own relationship to nature is well documented,<sup>18</sup> his experimentations with nature in his haiku depart from the traditional relationship between humanity and nature as defined in the

haiku moment. This disjunction has helped produce the seeming rift in the criticism surrounding Wright's haiku alluded to at the beginning of the essay. As Miller argues, "Wright's haiku should be analyzed in light of his own poetics, rather than be compared to the Japanese poems he used as models. This approach might not reveal them as any better poems, but it will reveal more about Wright as a creative artist."<sup>19</sup> And, as Meta Schettler observes, Wright's haiku "attempt to complicate the space and process of representation itself [. . .] creat[ing] a hybrid, transcultural space in the haiku."<sup>20</sup> As can be inferred from Miller's comments, Wright's poetics are an integral part of understanding his experimentations with haiku; merely comparing them to their Japanese counterparts does nothing to extend our understanding of Wright. At the same time, Schettler's "hybrid, transcultural space" requires an awareness of haiku aesthetics to understand how hybridity functions in Wright's work as well as the ways in which the cultural fusion Wright creates can challenge representational norms. This fusion of the formal components of the haiku moment with Wright's intentional inversion of haiku aesthetics marks where this essay moves beyond the argument made by Richard A. Iadonisi;<sup>21</sup> connecting Wright's "reinvent[ion of] the haiku form"<sup>22</sup> to the aesthetic conventions that Wright manipulates reveals the correlations between alienation and subject formation that Wright uses to revise his aesthetic project and bring it full circle.

Wright's inversion of the haiku moment follows two main paths: the primary one focuses on humanity's relationship with nature. His initial revision breaks apart or inverts the traditional fusion between humanity and nature seen in traditional haiku. In doing so, Wright foregrounds man's separation from nature and/or nature's isolation of man to highlight the ways in which alienation and estrangement are produced and replicated. In a similar vein, Wright's haiku also personify nature to make nature meet humanity rather than having humanity evacuate subjectivity to meet nature. Iadonisi refers to this type of revision as Wright's "human-centered" haiku, where "the speaker's mock audacity to project his will onto what is beyond human control" highlights a lack of cohesion between the speaker and nature.<sup>23</sup> While the personification of nature ultimately serves as an illusion of humanity's power, it still functions as part of Wright's manipulation of the haiku moment. The process of alienation



and imagined power and control that Wright constructs is his inversion of traditional haiku aesthetics; rather than relinquishing subjectivity and perspective to build meaning, Wright uses the disjunction between nature and humanity, as well as a false belief in the ability to control nature, to underline meaning within his haiku.

The second main path of inversion concerns the process of objectification present in Wright's haiku and the Japanese notion of *wabi*, which "refers to the uniquely human perception of beauty stemm[ing] from poverty."<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, the contemplation of a natural object becomes the path through which the writer relinquishes subjectivity and unites with nature. However, in several of Wright's haiku the object of contemplation is itself another human; in conjunction with a focus on the poverty of the subjects depicted, Wright uses the combination to challenge the traditional operation of *wabi*. The shift in contemplation from natural object to fellow subject as object allows Wright to complicate the traditional coming together of writer and object by making this unification dependent upon dehumanizing a fellow subject: readers finding aesthetic pleasure in the contemplation of poverty participate in the processes of dehumanizing and alienating their fellow subjects by turning them into objects of reflection.

The final section of the present essay employs both of these aesthetic inversions to examine the role that intertextuality plays between *Haiku: This Other World* and Wright's other works, specifically in regard to mobility. While mobility and movement are both components of Wright's earlier inversions, they also function in a broader context. For example, there are twenty-two haiku featuring trains in Wright's collection; this intertextual connection work not only points to further connections to be made between Wright's haiku and his other work, it also signals the ways in which Wright saw his haiku as dialogically connected with his earlier work. Linking Wright's conscious inversions of the haiku moment with his larger body of work reveals that Wright's manipulation of the haiku moment examines humanity's isolation from nature as the means to affirm a shared, albeit not acknowledged, set of human experiences. In documenting the alienation and estrangement that all subjects experience, Wright highlights the importance of recognizing "that which is human" as a collective universal process that can create a sense of our shared humanity when built upon



mutual dignity and respect. The catalyst of separation becomes the means to examine both the sociological context that produces marginalized subjectivity as well as the resulting effects of that alienation upon the subject. While the means taken to reveal our shared humanity as a universal truth may undercut traditional notions of the haiku moment, it nonetheless allows Wright the textual space to resolve, in his own terms, the themes of alienation and objectification that span his collected works. By locating the existential ennui created by estrangement as a shared human experience, Wright invites his readers to recognize that established notions of difference are illusions most often fostered by self-centered notions of human hubris.

### **Inverting the Haiku Moment: Alienation and Nature**

Wright's inversion of humanity's relationship with nature is at work from the very beginning of *Haiku: This Other World*. The opening haiku observes

I am nobody:  
A red sinking autumn sun  
Took my name away.

While there is a loss of subjectivity in the opening line, this loss represents not a coming together with nature but rather a break or split from it in that the "red sinking sun" actively removes the writer's "name" to make the speaker into a "nobody." This active alienation, articulated through the verb choice of "took" and created by the natural phenomenon of the sunset, departs from the haiku moment as described by Hakutani and Tener, where the "loss of [the speaker's] individuality within the union [of humanity and nature] involves a generalized melancholy aspect or loneliness as an underlying rhythm."<sup>25</sup> A more traditional reading would argue that the evacuation of subjectivity presented in the opening line and the disappearance of the speaker's name in the third line calls upon the "melancholy" and "loneliness" invoked in Hakutani and Tener; however, the use of "took" to open the final line implies a harsh disjuncture from nature rather than

a harmonious cohesion, in that any fusion or union created by the verb "took" can only come via force. The loneliness the speaker experiences is a product of the conscious alienation created by the speaker experiencing nature; as Iadonisi notes, the disjunctive "relationship between speaker, self, and nature [in haiku 1] is very un-Japanese."<sup>26</sup> It is in this way that alienation becomes an active construct in Wright, produced by a confrontation with nature that exerts agency on humanity.

Numerous other haiku in the collection use the same logic of disjunction to build their examination of subjectivity and alienation. Haiku 461 describes the alienation created by a winter snowstorm:

Entering my town  
 In a heavy fall of snow,  
 I feel a stranger.

Here, nature creates the isolation the speaker feels through depersonalizing or transforming physical space; the sense of inclusion and possession invoked by the pronoun "my" is transformed into feelings of exclusion and alienation now articulated as being that of a "stranger." While such a feeling is generated in part by the presence of "a heavy fall of snow," it is also reciprocally produced by the speaker's movement, invoked by the departure and subsequent return seen in "entering." Combined with the sense of alienation created through the change in the landscape produced by nature, Wright's use of "feel" further locates the speaker's alienation in terms of an emotional response to nature's explicit estrangement—whether or not nature intends its natural phenomena to create such a response, the speaker's reaction is still an experiential reality connected to the external stimuli of the snow. As with haiku 1, a sense of loneliness is present; the speaker, returning to "my town," does not experience a sense of community or happiness in conjunction with her/his homecoming, but rather the estrangement of feeling out of place. R. H. Blyth observes that "loneliness is the second state of mind necessary for the creation and appreciation of haiku" and that "the loneliness of haiku emanates . . . from the nameless realm where the human and non-human meet and are one."<sup>27</sup> As with haiku 1, there is no union between humanity and nature here; instead, it is the sense of alienation and disjunction created by nature that propels the



haiku. While, as Blyth implies, loneliness may be necessary to create and understand haiku, in Wright there is no subsequent coming together of humanity and nature: the creation of loneliness becomes the focal point, not its resolution. In both haiku, the isolation produced through humanity's interaction with nature helps highlight the psychic pain alienation creates in subjects; whether produced by nature or our fellow humans, alienation affects subjectivity by marking it with the psychological burden of exclusion in ways that will continue to manifest itself in later behavior.

Three other examples from Wright's collection are worth noting for their use of snow to develop the sensation of alienation and for their contribution to the use of estrangement from nature as a disruptive inversion of the haiku moment. The first two:

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. (519)

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. (521)

Haiku 519 and 521 build upon the context created by haiku 461. Across the page from each other, these two haiku point to Wright's ability to employ what Blyth refers to as "seasonal words"<sup>28</sup> to build his haiku, while at the same time functioning as a part of his intentional inversion of the union between humanity and nature. In the first haiku, "seem" works much like the use of "feel" in 461, where the focus is more on the speaker's perception than on the outside world. While the qualifier of "first" may position this feeling as the novelty of seasonal change, it still contributes to producing a reaction in the speaker that foregrounds exclusion: "old friends" become "newly met strangers" through the transformation created by seasonal effect. In the juxtaposition of old and new, it is nature that stands between or transforms human relationships, as with the ability of snow to enhance estrangement in haiku 461. As well, the replication of "stranger" in both helps highlight the defamiliarization nature produces in these two haiku.

Haiku 521 points to the importance of *visuality* and *perception*. Again, snow disrupts the scene; while the speaker no longer focuses on her/his feelings, as with the first snow haiku, the speaker's response highlights the necessity of assessing one's situation and acting correctly in response to that changed context. This can be seen in the relationship established between "carefully" and "familiar." While the use of "carefully" in connection to "look" implies a need to examine the scene closely to ascertain whether or not the streets are actually "familiar," it also carries with it a note of warning. In this sense, being "careful" implies knowing how to act and behave accordingly; after all one of the products of alienation, and being made to feel like an outsider, is a changed set of behavioral responses to social conditions. The verb choice of "make" further accentuates these connections; the lack of choice and reciprocal implication of force carried by "make" points to nature's ability to dictate human behavior. In this sense, haiku 521 becomes the behavioral response to haiku 461—once becoming a "stranger," the speaker must act "carefully" and in accordance with the expectations accorded to a stranger in an unfamiliar situation. The easy assurances of "familiar streets" normally taken for granted are no longer readily available, having been transformed by nature into something alien and unknown.

The final example, haiku 132, shifts the scene to the contemplation of an actual outsider although, in conjunction with the other haiku, the status of this "stranger" as an actual stranger, as opposed to someone familiar but unrecognized by the speaker, is not readily discernable. Appearing earlier in the collection than the previous three, the poem is nonetheless framed around similar concerns:

What stranger is that  
Walking in the winter rain  
And looking this way? (132)

In this haiku, the tensions created between the internal and external ascriptions of *subjectivity* seen in the haiku discussed earlier are intensified—there is no "feel" or "seem" to qualify experience in this haiku; instead, this figure is located as a "stranger." The roles of *visuality* and *identification*, which make acknowledgment possible, are not operating, at least not



in a sympathetic or compassionate manner. Instead, the speaker sees the "stranger," but there is no indication that the speaker responds to the look of the outsider as a fellow human; the speaker instead positions the subject with the alienating appellation of "stranger." Identification rests on recognition; in this haiku, the speaker's application of learned logic builds barriers between subjects, and the stranger, located as an outsider obscured by the "winter rain," is marked as not worthy of fellow feelings. As with previous examples, nature contributes to and conditions the social ostracism presented in this haiku. And, as the next section of the essay will demonstrate, Wright's manipulation of the speaker's perspective highlights the ways that assumptions of privilege contribute to the process of objectifying and dehumanizing other people.

Projected inward onto the self or outward onto others, assessed in regard to one's own behavior or that of an approaching stranger, Wright's examination of perspective draws connections between the speaker's thoughts and the creation of alienation in others. In doing so, Wright presents the coldness and bleakness of winter as a corollary to the type of human behavior that produces social exclusion and ostracism. Whether merely felt or actually experienced, the end result is the same—subjectivity and behavior are negatively affected. Perception and perspective are conditioned by the natural world in these haiku, separating individuals from both nature and each other and creating the barriers that lead to isolation. The bright sunlight of the first haiku aside (which is an "autumn sun"), many of the haiku that most dramatically focus on alienation are set in fall and winter, foregrounding seasonal images that correspond to the behavior being enacted in the haiku. The relationship between seasonal words and the speaker's perspective indicates that Wright adheres to certain components of haiku aesthetics while intentionally deviating from others. As such, this use of perspective connects back to Wright's comments in "Blueprint for Negro Writing"—Wright's structuring of subjectivity in relation to winter and alienation identifies the awareness needed from readers in relation to identity and their fellow subjects. In learning to identify the effect one's thoughts and actions can have on others, in focusing on the connections between one another rather than the assumptions of difference, Wright gives his readers the tools to treat others with the respect and dignity they deserve.

Another equally important component of Wright's inversion of the haiku moment occurs when he reorders the relationship between humanity and nature rather than having the writer/speaker abandon or evacuate subjectivity to unite with nature, Wright either personifies nature in order to make nature meet humanity, or he restructures the relationship between humanity and nature to privilege humanity's perspective even when such privileging is itself an illusion of humanity's power. These "human-centered"<sup>29</sup> haiku, to use Iadonisi's term, are an important part of Wright's inversion of haiku poetics, specifically as they build upon his initial disjunction between humanity and nature. The lack of awareness embodied in the speaker's thoughts toward nature points to ways in which alienation is produced through the obliviousness of human behavior. This behavior is another instance of the importance of "perspective" for Wright in regard to human action, specifically in relation to the effect it can have on other subjects. Haiku 307 is an example of both personification and the privileging of humanity's perspective; Wright uses humanity's interest in a suitable explanation for an irresolvable condition to anthropomorphize the autumn rain and its attempt to convey mortality to the speaker:

I feel autumn rain  
 Trying to explain something  
 I do not want to know.

That the speaker is able to articulate a lack of desire to know about death—after all, the "autumn rain" is "trying" but not succeeding to convey its ominous message—positions human subjectivity as the privileged perspective that nature must attempt to satisfy. The use of "autumn" as a seasonal reference helps to emphasize the looming significance of the information being presented; the waning of the year and the twilight of the speaker's life function in tandem, building the unresolved dilemma of the haiku. However, while the fact of death cannot be explained away, that the autumn rain must stoop to quibble with humanity over nonnegotiable information allows Wright to shift the trajectory for how meaning is created within his haiku. The license claimed by the speaker in this haiku is the privilege to remain ignorant of the way the world operates. This choice,



and the assumed agency that comes with it, leaves the speaker unable to recognize her/his connection with the natural world.

Personification also occurs without human participation, as seen in haiku 676:

[REDACTED]

Here, the personification of "meeting" functions to explain the reason for the accumulation of leaves in the "corner garden" from both a temporal and spatial perspective. However, the return to natural imagery for the resolution of the haiku—the use of "scattered" rather than departed or left—reinforces the personification required to create the initial image. While the disjunctive nature of Wright's inversion of nature is more pronounced here than in haiku 307, in part because of the omission of human agents within the haiku, Wright makes use of personified nature frequently. Two other commonly quoted examples,

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] (22)

and

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] (69)

highlight nature's ability to take on human characteristics. To "read," to "leave," or, as with the first example, to "explain" and alleviate humanity's collective concern with a looming and irreversible death, further situates the positive possibilities contained within nature as contributing to the alienation that humanity feels when it seeks solace in the processes of nature or attempts to make nature conform to human guidelines and categories.

The examples of haiku that most specifically privilege humanity's perspective when reordering the relationship between humanity and nature tend to focus on verb choice that empowers human subjectivity:

██████████  
 ██████████  
 ██████████ (2)

██████████  
 ████████████████████  
 ██████████ (5)

██████████  
 ████████████████████  
 ██████████ (14)

These haiku are three occurrences that articulate the speaker's empowered perspective. And in all three, it is the verb choice—"order," "give," and "grant"—that positions the speaker's authority even when such "permission" is merely an empty verbal gesture by the speaker. The speaker's rhetorical assumption of power carries with it a sense of hubris; the control the speaker claims is not only predicated upon an incorrect understanding of the relationship she/he shares with nature but on an attempt to maintain that hierarchical status at the expense of nature. A similar example, although not so straightforward as the previous three, occurs later in the collection:

As my anger ebbs,  
 The spring stars grow bright again  
 And the wind returns. (721)

Here, the relationship between the speaker and nature privileges the speaker's perspective; the verb choice of "ebbs" positions the speaker's perspective as the one controlling the cause-and-effect relationship with nature. Thus, when "my anger ebbs," the natural world responds appropriately; "grow bright again" implies that nature has dimmed and then



intensified with the "again" signifying repetition while "returns" signifies that wind has left and come back rather than having remained constant all along. Making the speaker's emotional response the perspective through which nature is apprehended—as it "ebbs," nature "returns"—privileges the speaker's perspective even as it simultaneously impedes her/his ability to see, experience, and understand the natural world.

Both of these inversions allow Wright to pursue his interrogation of subject formation in relation to the social and cultural mores that affect the construction of identity. In conjunction with the aesthetic norms connected to the haiku form, Wright's inversion of the haiku moment allows him the aesthetic space to experiment with a generic form that is more racially neutral or ambiguous than his previous prose productions. Coupled with the possibility of manipulating perspective for precise literary effect and for presenting the necessity of carefully examining one's own behavior, Wright is able to expand and continue the development of his earlier themes, including the estrangement experienced by nonwhites, in ways that would not be immediately coded as race-based by his readers. Wright's interest in examining the relationship between privilege and alienation through manipulating the speaker's perspective points to the value Wright sees in using the haiku as a literary tool. Projected forward, this possibility also paves the way for an examination of the way Wright interrogates objectification in his transformation of the haiku moment.

### **The Politics of Zen: Objectification and the Contemplation of Poverty**

As previously noted, one of the central elements of the haiku moment is to create a visual image that allows the writer to merge with nature through the contemplation of the object presented in the haiku. This union requires what Robert L. Tener refers to as a "compassionate irony" or a "compassionate wry humor,"<sup>30</sup> one intended to allow the speaker to understand the equality between humans and things so that she/he may identify and unite with nature. These objects of contemplation, as Ogburn observes when discussing Wright's use of natural imagery in his haiku, "carry the emotional power of the scenes. As the haiku poet should, Wright uses the

objects to present experiences simply and succinctly, leaving the reader to intuit or imagine the details necessary to make meaning."<sup>31</sup> As someone interested in the subjectivity of the oppressed, Wright's decision to locate humans as the objects of contemplation within his haiku is significant when examining his revisions of the haiku form, not only for the fact that these subjects must become objects of contemplation—they are objectified for aesthetic enjoyment—but also because this objectification becomes the means through which the speaker unites with nature. Wright's choice to foreground the process of objectification as a component of the alienation and estrangement he revises in regard to the haiku moment is his second main inversion of haiku aesthetics.

In Wright's initial inversion, he employs the disjunctive relationship between humanity and nature to reveal the experiential effects of alienation and/or the illusory components of human control on human perception. Here, Wright engages the relationships between subjects to expose how perspective, when predicated upon assumed notions of power, privilege, and control, functions to impede human relationships and perpetuate inequality. Wright's focus is the concept of *wabi*; as Yoshinobu Hakutani observes in *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse*, *wabi* "refers to the uniquely human perception of beauty stemmed from poverty. *Wabi* is often regarded as religious, as the saying 'Blessed are the poor' suggests, but the spiritual aspect of *wabi* is based upon an aesthetic rather than moral sensibility."<sup>32</sup> The aestheticization of poverty implied in *wabi* is based upon an abstract or idealized logic; as Wright's inversion of *wabi* makes clear, when aesthetics prevail over our shared humanity, we, whether inadvertently or intentionally, participate in the process of objectifying and dehumanizing our fellow humans.

For instance, in one of the most compelling examples in *Haiku: This Other World*, Wright focuses on a black woman washing clothes:

Sun is glinting on  
A washerwoman's black arms  
In cold creek water. (60)

The vision of the speaker focuses on the interaction between the "glinting" sun, the "cold creek water," and the woman's "black arms," making her arms



the object of contemplation within the haiku. While the flashing sunlight playing off the woman's wet skin could be seen as an aesthetic coming together of nature and object, the metonymic use of "arms" to represent the woman's labor—and alienated labor at that, as being a "washerwoman" literally implies doing someone else's dirty work—complicates the normative union between the speaker and object within the haiku. To find aesthetic pleasure in this moment, the speaker (and by proxy the reader) must ignore the unpleasant aspects the woman experiences; in addition to the metonymically reductive use of "arms" to represent the woman's identity, we have the harsh, sharp flashing implied by the "glinting" sun and the frigidity and numbness experienced through repeated immersions in the "cold creek water." Wright's manipulation of perspective—he mediates the speaker's vision in ways that force readers to make aesthetic choices about the scene being represented—allows him to invert the function of *wabi* within the haiku moment. In locating the relationship between the speaker and the subject/object of the haiku as one that finds aesthetic pleasure rather than noting the class- or race-based conditions that should mediate how this moment is viewed, Wright makes readers complicit with the orthodoxy of oppression. After all, while focusing on the dignity of labor may make readers feel good about themselves, doing so elides the connections between this woman and "the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil."<sup>33</sup>

Wright's focus on the material conditions of the subjects he represents is an important part of his inversion of *wabi*. As Hakutani argues, the hardships experienced by haiku poets are an important part of reaching the "higher state of mind"<sup>34</sup> implied by *wabi*; for Bashō, as Hakutani observes, "an empty stomach was necessary to create poetry."<sup>35</sup> In Wright, however, the focus is not on the speaker's hardship, but that experienced by the subjects the speaker observes, as with the washerwoman, whose labor the speaker represents. Thus, achieving *wabi* through contemplating the washerwoman's labor requires ignoring the material conditions she experiences, transforming her into an object. Iadonisi draws similar conclusions when examining the speaker's contemplation of her/his own poverty as well as Wright's haiku on prostitutes; "[t]he perception of poverty in Wright's haiku is not overlain with quiet beauty. Instead, the poverty speaks of pain and misery."<sup>36</sup> The appropriative pleasure found in the

speaker's observation is not mirrored in pleasure of being for the washerwoman, and the privilege enjoyed by the speaker's perspective functions to aestheticize the washerwoman as an object of contemplation. In this sense, Wright's manipulation of the speaker's perspective is intended to create a change in his readers—instead of mirroring the insights discovered by the speaker through contemplating his own poverty, Wright uses the speaker to foreground the disregard created by objectification.

The process of objectifying subjects, specifically those exploited for their lack of power, appears elsewhere in the collection. Haiku 467 focuses on the image of flood survivors in the moonlight:

A radiant moon  
Shining on flood refugees  
Crowded on a hill.

As with haiku 60, a triad of images constructs the speaker's focus: "radiant" moonlight, "refugees," and the lack of space implied by "crowded." While the use of "radiant" and "shining" carries healthy and even resplendent qualities to the scene, finding aesthetic pleasure in the condition of the "flood refugees / Crowded on a hill" requires the ability to ignore the material condition they face; one need only recall the voyeuristic representation of Katrina victims in New Orleans to get a sense of the scene Wright could be discussing here. The disjunction between the opening and closing lines—between "radiant" and "crowded"—is more difficult to gloss over than the image of the washerwoman presented in haiku 60, however. Continuing the aesthetic effect created by the initial language and description provided by the speaker necessitates a disregard of both the danger that "crowd[s]" these refugees together and the reciprocal economic losses that they have most likely suffered.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the lack of control implied by being "crowded" together carries with it a sense of powerlessness as well as an inability to change such conditions; forced to retreat, these refugees have been herded and trapped by rising floodwaters. Not only has nature turned against those represented in the haiku, the speaker's attempts to render the refugees as a poignant image of human frailty further trades on their suffering, thus locating aesthetic pleasure in the misfortune of others.



The alienating and objectifying gaze of the speaker does at times get turned back on the speaker, as in haiku 615:



As with haiku 467, the verb choice of "make" calls attention to the connection between the "watching faces" and the estrangement Wright develops in the haiku; "make" indicates the effect that the "watching faces" have on the speaker. In transforming the speaker into a "traveler," the speaker is made aware of her/his exclusion from the community, indication that continued movement and escape appears to be in the speaker's best interests. The speaker is also objectified by these viewers; while being made into a "traveler" may seem to be a bit of stretch here, the speaker is positioned as an outsider, as foreign, as other. The use of "traveler" is also quite similar to Wright's use of "stranger" in the earlier snow haiku, specifically 132, which reads "What stranger is that / Walking in the winter rain / And looking this way?" In 132, the outward gaze of the speaker makes the other subject into an object, while in 615, the speaker experiences the same treatment at the hands of others. Both haiku, however, indicate not only the close connections between Wright's different inversions of the haiku moment, but also the ways in which privilege and power can be used to produce alienation and objectification.

As Wright uses the speaker's perspective to make clear, the making of subjects into objects allows readers to gloss over the inequalities that exist: the privilege to choose consciously to ignore the connections that exist between those laboring and those who enjoy the rewards of that labor. Wright's revision of *wabi* questions the assumptions that privilege often unconsciously carries with it—the ability to objectify and ostracize, to estrange and exclude when refusing to think through any perspective other than your own. In questioning the "higher state of mind"<sup>38</sup> that *wabi* carries, Wright engages the romanticizing gaze that allows the speaker to objectify the labor of others for her/his personal spiritual development while at the same time ignoring their psychological needs and material

conditions. After all, there is no higher consciousness to be achieved when the pleasure of watching requires disregarding the humanity of others.

### **Intertextuality: Trains, Mobility, and Singing the Haiku Blues**

Previous critics have noted the connections between Wright's haiku and his earlier work. Richard A. Iadonisi ties two of Wright's haiku that focus on rats with the opening scene of *Native Son* before going on to observe that those haiku, which examine "the subjectivity of the impoverished and oppressed, form an important and largely unexplored strain in Wright's collection."<sup>39</sup> Meta Schettler, in "'The rifle bullet': African American History in Richard Wright's Unpublished Haiku," makes connections between Wright's work and the violence African Americans experienced in the South. Schettler observes that "Wright frequently invokes images of fire or the sun to allude to the South's violent and repressive history" and analyzes his unpublished haiku to argue that "the redness of the cotton makes connections between the exploitation of black labor and the use of racial violence as a form of social control."<sup>40</sup> Applying Schettler's observations to the analysis already provided for haiku 1—"I am nobody: / A red sinking autumn sun / Took my name away"—adds new insights into this work. If the "red sinking autumn sun" is an image connected to the "South's violent and repressive history," then the speaker's alienation and loss of identity, while outwardly stripped away by nature, is also removed by the violence historically done to African Americans in the South. The verb "took" signifies doubly in this sense, both in regard to the literal violence the sunset acts out on the speaker and the metaphoric violence the South performs on black subjects. This reading also connects to the way subjects with privilege and power contribute to objectifying and alienating others—the South's desire to control blacks plays a part in the process of stripping blacks of agency and reinforcing their objectification. As well, there are the connections presented in this essay between the haiku on flood refugees and Wright's short fiction in both *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Eight Men*; not only does this example point out new intertextual connections in Wright's work, it also looks to build and extend an examination of the "impoverished and oppressed" that Iadonisi labels as an "unexplored



strain in Wright's collection."<sup>41</sup> However, while initial work has been done to begin connecting Wright's haiku to his larger body of work, much work remains to be done to enrich and expand this line of critical inquiry. In this light, examining Wright's use of trains is one place to begin such an investigation.

That trains are a significant part of the Wright canon should be self-evident; Wright's observation about his "first lesson in how to live as a Negro" in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" positions his childhood home as "behind the railroad tracks."<sup>42</sup> Also significant in *Uncle Tom's Children* is the role that trains play in "Big Boy Leaves Home," including the idea of freedom in the North that trains invoke for the boys, the mournful tones of the train whistles, and the tangible danger Big Boy experiences after killing a white man: "In the distance he heard the approach of a train. It jarred him back to a sharp sense of danger . . . As he turned from the road across a plowed field he heard the train roaring at his heels. He ran faster, gripped in terror."<sup>43</sup> *Native Son* opens with Bigger Thomas's mother singing a blues-themed train song: "Life is like a mountain railroad / With an engineer that's brave / We must make the run successful / From the cradle to the grave . . ."<sup>44</sup> while *Black Boy*, to quote Ralph Ellison, is "filled with blues-tempered echoes of railroad trains."<sup>45</sup> Finally, there is also Dave's choice in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" in *Eight Men* to run away on a train at the end of the story.<sup>46</sup> Collectively, these moments involving trains connect to Wright's larger literary themes: trains as images of freedom, terror, and enforced racial codes, trains as a metaphor for life, carrying with them, to quote Ellison again, the "jagged grain"<sup>47</sup> of blues, and trains as a means of escape. Thus, the inclusion of twenty-two haiku featuring trains in *Haiku: This Other World* indicates that Wright did not turn to haiku with the intention of abandoning his previous artistic endeavors; rather, he was making use of the opportunities provided by the formal structure of haiku to further develop his larger aesthetic interests.

As mentioned previously, the haiku is a more racially neutral generic form than Wright's other prose projects; in making use of the form, Wright's predominantly white readership would be less likely to code the thoughts and actions of the speaker in the haiku along the same white-black dichotomy as his fiction. In other words, they would be less likely to use their own potential biases about difference to read Wright's work.



Wright's previous experiences with the entrenched racism and privilege of white America had undoubtedly exposed him to both blatant racism as well as naive liberalism. Thus, Wright's interest in haiku allowed for the possibility of naming the dread and fear created by alienation and objectification without it being exclusively connected to black experience, precisely because it stripped away the outward configurations of race. While the problem of a shared humanity is particularized by race, in that racial categories help determine and construct the perceived differences that exist between subjects, Wright's aesthetic interest in revealing "that which is human on both sides"<sup>48</sup> necessitates removing the normative framework his readers unconsciously use to perceive the world. And, as this essay has demonstrated, Wright's use of a racially neutral speaker allows Wright the space to foreground the processes of estrangement, isolation, and dehumanization, specifically as they impede our ability to recognize the similarities that exist across the spectrum of human experience.

Wright's interest in trains performs a similar function; trains carry less preestablished meaning than the characters inhabiting Wright's work, but are still marked with poignancy as a symbol. In the haiku, they are further stripped of the specific needs of the speaker, and at times signify and represent on their own. In "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison observes that "[t]he function, the psychology, of artistic selectivity is to eliminate from art form all those elements of experience that contain no compelling significance."<sup>49</sup> While Ellison is referring to Wright's writing process in regard to *Native Son*, this passage is also prescient in regard to Wright's interest in haiku. For Wright, a lack of awareness of power and privilege is no more a specifically white problem than living with objectification is a black problem; rather, both are human problems. Yet both social norms and the reception accorded to a transgressive African American author interested in challenging accepted hierarchies of power are shot through with just such contradictions and preconceived notions. In choosing the haiku form and then inverting its organizational structure to suit his needs, Wright can "eliminate" precisely "those elements of experience" that impede the construction of his aesthetic vision; the speaker in the haiku carries less baggage that will influence Wright's readership than the characters in his fiction. Trains, too, can serve in this capacity to call

upon and remember the "jagged grain" of a blues-tempered past without literally invoking the subjects that experience such treatment. Trains are also able to embody the type of mobility that brings people together as well as pulling them apart. In this sense, Wright's use of trains not only serves as an intertextual moment between his earlier and later works, it also connects mobility to the ideas concerning alienation and objectification examined earlier in this essay and to the way subjects see and experience the world.

Wright uses trains in a variety of ways in his haiku: at times they are personified, as Wright did with nature; in others they are given the agency and power to affect the speaker as well as other subjects; and finally they foreground movement and motion, whether in regard to the speaker, relationships between subjects, or sometimes just the possibility of mobility itself. For example, haiku 526 implies a connection between towns created by the appearance of a train:

The arriving train  
All decorated with snow  
From another town.

While the snow in this haiku invokes the previously discussed haiku concerning alienation, in this one, snow does not impede or limit perception. Instead, as the use of "decorated" implies, the snow provides the train with a sense of adornment and festivity—the train looks different, but is recognized for what it is as carrying good tidings in the passage from town to town. Compared to haiku 132 and 615, where the latent threat implied by the "stranger" and the "traveler" that pass between towns configures mobility as dangerous, the train in haiku 526 presents mobility in a more positive light—it is welcomed rather than ostracized. The juxtaposition between the benefits of mobility versus the dangers carried by strangers presents movement in a different light when subjectivity is removed from the equation.

Other haiku, however, are not so sanguine in the presentation of movement represented by the train. In haiku 632, the train is personified as more of a malevolent force:





The verb choice of “screams” personifies the noise that the train makes into a form of address the train uses to speak to the village. While loud and vocal, however, this type of speaking does not effectively communicate the train’s point. Instead, “screams” implies a harsh and abrasive sound that signals the breakdown of communication. At the same time, the train’s continuing motion, described as “rolls on,” seems to indicate that the train behaves similarly at each village—it proceeds through the “rainy dark,” screaming at each village it encounters. In this sense, the train is marked as exterior to and apart from the village; unlike the inhabitants the “stranger” and the “traveler” encounter in 132 and 615, however, the village cannot stop the train from passing through—power and control rest in the hands of the assaulting train. This agency is part of what gives the train its blues-tinged impetus in Wright’s haiku; rather than locating loss and pain onto those who have ostensibly created that suffering, it is personified in the scream of a train whistle that shatters the silence of the night. Connecting this image of the train back to the repressive violence presented in Schetler’s essay, the intrusion of the train carries with it the menace of social control implied by the nighttime visit of Southern patrollers or the threat of violence implied by Southern lynch law.

In connecting loss and suffering to the agency of trains, Wright also embodies economic, social, and political forces that, while having no direct human agents, impose limitations and exert influence on disenfranchised subjects. Haiku 601 presents the pain of separation through the power the train has over the speaker:

The train that took her  
 Steams into the autumn hills  
 And becomes silent.

The verb choice of “took” positions the power and authority the train holds over the speaker, in that the speaker is helpless to stop “her” removal. As with the forceful removal of the speaker’s identity by nature in haiku 1, the



use of "took" implies a lack of choice and even force in creating the rupture between the speaker the woman who departs. The burgeoning silence of the last line imparts a sense of loneliness and sorrow; the speaker watches the train's departure until it is no longer visible, its sound lost among the "autumn hills." In this sense, the haiku foregrounds the train's ability to literally take away the speaker's happiness. The train's agency and authority is further indicated by its being the subject of all three verbs in the haiku—"took," "steams," and "becomes"—reciprocally emphasizing the speaker's motionlessness and inability to act. A second haiku, 635, gives the train a similar power, although in this case it is in relation to the passage of time:



The link between the passage of seasons and the passing of time is predicated on the train's departure, giving the train the agency to control the passage of time in the schedule it keeps. As with haiku 1 and 601, the variant verb form of to take—here "taking"—carries with it a lack of choice for those who are experiencing the passage in time. Embodied in the image of the train, human loss and the passage of time portray the human condition as a blues-inflected lament based on a collective lack of control.

Ultimately, Wright's train haiku provide him the space to connect his revisions of the haiku moment with his larger beliefs about the function of art, linking isolation with the mobility and agency that exist outside the speaker. In haiku 636, the speaker observes,

How lonely it is:  
A rattling freight train has left  
Fields of croaking frogs.

The speaker's feeling of loneliness and isolation are perceived in relation to the absence of mobility and reduction in noise represented by the departing train. The train's authority is represented by what it "has left" behind: a scene of nature. While the "croaking frogs" undoubtedly existed prior to and during the passage of the train, the train's actions are presented as

creating the scene. In a slight variation on the "human-centered"<sup>50</sup> haiku examined earlier, the speaker's assumed authority over nature has been supplanted by the train's; the train's ability to leave behind a cargo of already existing croaking frogs mirrors the privileging of the speaker's perspective in haiku 721, where the choice of "ebbs" to describe the speaker's anger allows the stars to "grow bright again." Here, the train's departure leaves the speaker alone to contemplate nature although his contemplation creates no unity or connection to nature. While the speaker's isolation is not a direct product of nature, as with haiku 1, it is produced by the train's passage through and transformation of the scene. In invoking a sense of sadness in the speaker via conveying what she/he does not have—community and companionship—the train provides the speaker with an awareness of the importance and necessity of humanity that was not present before the train's passage. The speaker's blues-induced reflection provides an understanding of the importance of connecting with others—fingering the jagged grain of isolation and estrangement gives the speaker the perspective needed to embrace the necessity of a collective humanity.

The significance of Richard Wright's inversion of the haiku moment comes when readers are able to recognize the relationship that exists between the function of social forces and the experience of alienation in the construction of identity. The separation from nature that Wright articulates in his haiku gives him the space to foreground the unconscious privilege that is at the heart of the exploitation of others and that exists as part of the social fabric. As noted previously, when the haiku moment "deals with man's life, that life must be viewed in the context of nature rather than society."<sup>51</sup> Wright's collective inversion of the haiku moment positions the operation of social forces at the forefront of his haiku, along with the social connections that mediate and perpetuate alienation and estrangement. Making readers aware of the similarities in the hopes and dreams, feelings and experiences that exist between themselves and others gives Wright the space to argue for a common humanity that can transcend notions of difference imposed by the social hierarchies that mediate reality. Further, as Wright's revision of the aesthetic contemplation of poverty found in *wabi* indicates, ignoring the material conditions of those being represented foregrounds the needs of the speaker at the expense of those being represented. The consolation found in contemplating poverty



ignores inequality, exposing again the unconscious privilege enjoyed by the speaker. As Wright reveals, in order to transform perceived assumptions concerning difference, readers must locate the connections that unify and unite, not the ones that leave established social barriers intact. When difference governs human interaction, or when the desire to aestheticize inequality is normative, then a haiku is no longer merely a haiku. The potential exclusion implied in the simplest verbal act can have long-ranging repercussions, especially when a speaker remains unaware of the violence being perpetuated on others. Thus, no matter how pretty an utterance is made to sound, it can still cause damage. And while anyone can experience the effects of estrangement and isolation, not everyone recognizes the need to affirm the existence of others. Although alienation may be the closest thing to a common universal human experience, as Wright's haiku indicate, an awareness of the self in relation to others can create the understanding required to make respect and dignity a practical reality.

### Notes

1. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener, afterword to *Haiku: This Other World* (New York: Arcade, 1998), 273.
2. *Ibid.*, 275.
3. Eugene E. Miller, *Voice of a Native Son* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 246.
4. Richard A. Iadonisi, "I Am Nobody': The Haiku of Richard Wright," *MELUS* 30, no. 3 (2005): 179.
5. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *Within the Circle*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 103.
6. *Ibid.*, 103-4.
7. *Ibid.*, 103.
8. Richard Wright, "Richard Wright: I Curse the Day When for the First Time I Heard the Word 'Politics,'" in *Conversations With Richard Wright*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 163.
9. Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*, in *Early Works*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Library of America, 1991), 352.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1994), 89. It is also worth noting that Ellison observes in this essay that Wright's "dual role" is to "discover and depict the meaning of

Negro experience; and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding" (77), which is rather portentous when considering Wright's comments in relation to the 1955 interview with *L'Express* quoted above.

12. Wright, "Curse," 163.

13. Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," in *Within the Circle*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 119.

14. Wright, "Curse," 163.

15. Floyd Ogburn Jr., "Richard Wright's Unpublished Haiku: A World Elsewhere," *MELUS* 23, no. 3 (1998): 59.

16. Hakutani and Tener, afterword to *Haiku: This Other World*, 254.

17. *Ibid.*, 251.

18. See, for example, Michel Fabre, "The Poetry of Richard Wright," in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1992), 252-72, and also Hakutani and Tener, afterword to *Haiku: This Other World*, 274, among others.

19. Miller, *Voice*, 246-47.

20. Meta Schettler, "'The rifle bullet': African-American History in Richard Wright's Unpublished Haiku," *Valley Voices* 8, no. 2 (2008): 67.

21. While I am indebted to Richard A. Iadonisi's essay, my argument plays out in slightly different terms. To clarify, my interest in pursuing Wright's intentional inversion of the haiku moment focuses on combining the formal logic of the haiku moment with Wright's aesthetic manipulation of the haiku; this operates differently than Iadonisi's argument, which examines Wright's structural divergence from haiku aesthetics in order to argue for the "anti-colonial position" (179) articulated in his haiku. Nonetheless, I do see this essay as extending Iadonisi's ideas, particularly in regards to examining those haiku that "foreground materiality and the subjectivity of the impoverished and oppressed [which] form an important and largely unexplored strain in Wright's collection" (192).

22. Iadonisi, "Nobody," 179.

23. *Ibid.*, 184.

24. Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Nature, Haiku, and 'This Other World,'" in *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 280.

25. Hakutani and Tener, afterword to *Haiku: This Other World*, 281.

26. Iadonisi, "Nobody," 187.

27. Quoted in Ogburn, "Unpublished," 70-71.

28. Seasonal words are described by R. H. Blyth as follows: "This word may give the atmospheric background, it may be a kind of seed, a trigger which releases a whole world of emotion, of sounds and scents and colors." See R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1962), 335.

29. Iadonisi, "Nobody," 184.

30. Robert L. Tener, "The Where, the When, the What: A Study of Richard Wright's



Haiku," in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 287.

31. Ogburn, "Unpublished," 73.

32. Hakutani, *Racial Discourse*, 280.

33. Wright, "Blueprint," 104.

34. Hakutani, *Racial Discourse*, 281.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Iadonisi, "Nobody," 189-91.

37. Wright's use of floods and flooding in his other works, most notably "Down by the Riverside" from *Uncle Tom's Children* and "The Man Who Saw the Flood" from *Eight Men*, should also give readers insights into the conditions that the refugees in this haiku face.

38. Hakutani, *Racial Discourse*, 281.

39. Iadonisi, "Nobody," 192.

40. Schettler, "History," 70-71.

41. Iadonisi, "Nobody," 192.

42. Wright, *Children*, 225.

43. *Ibid.*, 262.

44. Wright, *Native Son*, 10.

45. Ellison, "Blues," 79.

46. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," in *Eight Men* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 18.

47. Ellison, "Blues," 78.

48. Wright, "Curse," 163.

49. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

50. Iadonisi, "Nobody," 184.

51. Hakutani and Tener, afterword to *Haiku: This Other World*, 251.