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Global Haiku  
Reader Response Essay

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### Haiku by Sonia Sanchez

Sonia Sanchez's haiku spoke to me with a voice of pain and sorrow. The haiku she wrote that resonated with me the most made me reflect on the effects systemic racism has on the American society today. Sanchez's haiku from, *Morning Haiku*, published in 1992 by Beacon Press and *Like the Coming Singing Off the Drums*, published in 1998 by Beacon Press are phenomenal examples of feeling the pain a people experience time after time. Many of Sanchez's haiku are mournful, and rightfully so.

your limbs  
fly off the ground  
little birds...

Sonia Sanchez, *Morning Haiku*, pg. 11

The first haiku to be discussed is one Sanchez writes in response to the murder of Emmett Till. Till's murder was a critical point in the civil rights movement that turned the minds of many his age. Many adolescents saw themselves in Till's beaten body and realized how radicalization shouldn't be an option. Sanchez was 21 at the time of Till's murder and the hurt that she felt when writing this piece transcends to the reader. When she writes about Till, she doesn't mention his face; something that was always commented on in historical context. Instead, Sanchez describes his arms and legs. I feel this was intended to divert away from discussing Emmet Till in the context of his murder to what he could have been. Discussing his limbs makes the readers think about what he could have done with those in his life. I find envisioning what this young man could have been to be humanizing because historically, he's always been described as a boy who was beaten for maybe instigating a white woman to call her husband to beat him. The next line is a turning point in this Haiku. I see his limbs turn into raw potential taking off from the ground in the form of birds. I feel Sanchez wrote this about all the people that finally took a stand against the oppression black people were specifically facing after the story of Till broke. The Murder of Till and the second line in the haiku are both turning points in the narrative for what is expected after another person unjustly taken from the world. When a black child was killed back then, they were just another story to be told and a name to cry over. For Emmett Till however, people who had never realized how wrong oppression is spoke out and became advocates for the movement for equal rights. The little birdies that are the newly born advocates and radicals flew for the first time through Till's limbs that day.

a mother's eyes  
remembering a cradle  
pray out loud

Sonia Sanchez, *Morning Haiku*, pg. 12

Another haiku Sanchez writes to Till that diverts the reader's attention away from Till's beaten body but this time, onto who he was and how his mother remembers him. I remember when I first learned about the murder of Emmett Till, I was in middle school in my 8th grade social studies class that was taught by a middle-aged white guy. He explained the story to the class as "This boy went and catcalled a lady thinking he could have anybody he wanted but when she went home and told her husband and brother-in-law, they went out and beat his face into oblivion! Like they just kept wailing on his face! His mother wanted to actually show her son's deformed face at the funeral because she thought he looked beautiful". There's

obviously a lot to unpack here; starting with the blatant insensitivity my teacher had for the racially motivated murdering of a black child. I feel a lot of my internalized racism stemmed from the normalizing of this sort of attitude my trusted educators held for minorities. That would be something I had to unlearn through listening to stories of the oppressed and realizing for myself that it isn't ok. But the last part of what my teacher said always resonated with me. The thought that a mother would want to put on full display what her son had looked like after being brutally assaulted made me think maybe she was so psychologically damaged that it was the only thing that made sense to her. When I read this Haiku, I think I finally understood why she wanted to have an open casket for Emmett's funeral. Her eyes, implying what she sees when she looks at Emmett, see what she remembers him as. She remembers the little boy that made her so happy. She remembers the cradle he slept in and the baby that she fell in love with. When she prays, she isn't praying to return her son back to her. She doesn't want him to return because the world that he left, the same world that called him slurs and beat him to make him feel lesser than, wasn't good enough for her son. So when she prays, she wants the world to know her son was too good for the world he was stolen from.

how to dance  
in blood and  
remain sane?

Sonia Sanchez, *Morning Haiku*, pg. 38

This haiku was in a section of her book, *Morning Haiku*, in a section dedicated to African American modernist painter, Beauford Delaney. When taking a glance at Delaney's work, I notice how he likes to paint his portraits with the subjects staring intensely at the viewer. It's almost to say they know they're being stared at and reply with, "I'm still here". When Sanchez sees the work of Delaney, she takes note of the integrity and professionalism the subjects of his paintings have. Delaney's work featuring black people is a reminder to Sanchez, and ultimately her readers, that despite the pain, the humiliation, and erasure, they still stand up tall with the wind in their face to say they're not going anywhere. Sanchez sees this and then replies to Delaney's work in the form of a haiku. She asks how her people still stand up and thrive as if they shouldn't be in a perpetual state of mourning. She wants to know how does black continues to be excellence while it is simultaneously being lynched. Sanchez was around way before the civil rights act was ratified so when she talks about the blood, she's not just talking about the most recent hashtags, she's talking about the murder of Emmett Till and many more. The last line is quite possibly how Sanchez tries to make sense of it all. She wants to know how her and her people do not collapse due to the weight of the oppression they face into insanity. She might have felt like descending into madness many times in her life; so when looking at Delaney's work, she asks how do we do it every day and remain sane?

in the beginning  
there wuz we and they and others  
too mournful to be named

Sonia Sanchez, *Morning Haiku*, pg. 51

This haiku has many layers to it. The first line is a biblical reference to the start of the Bible. Word-for-word even. When looking at this haiku from the viewpoint of black people in the U.S., we have to look at it through a historical lens. African people were stolen right from their hometowns and sold as products for the first time in their life. They would be subjected to travel in hellish conditions across the ocean in what was referred to as the middle passage. The boats were meant to fit as many people as possible to the point where they could only adequately fit everyone if they were all laying down on their backs like the sardines in a can. The women would often be called to the top of the ship to be raped by the crew and sent back down once they were done with her. Disease, starvation, and suicide were all too common in the middle passage. The ones who survived the trip to the new world had nothing to celebrate. When they arrived, they were sold at auctions the same way an antique would be sold now-a-days. Some of the most common

destinations for people who were enslaved during this time were farms, plantations, and domestic servitude roles. They all brought their own trauma and cultural impact. Domestic servitude, for example, placed women and children in more danger of being sexually assaulted and abused. I once read that a woman who was a slave was raped by the man of the house. When his wife found out that he got her pregnant, she did everything she could to bring shame onto the girl. The due date finally came and the wife made it a point to be there during the birth. She saw her husband's mistress laying on the bed in agony knowing she would die soon and laughed at her face. She laughed at the mistress and yelled how ashamed she should be of herself for giving birth to a bastard child. Both the mistress and her baby died shortly after. The wife instructed the mistress' mother to clean up her daughter and granddaughter's mess. When I read Sanchez's haiku, I envision it from the perspective of the mother who lost her child to a man and lost her again while watching the man's wife mock her death. I imagine those are the people too mournful to be named. I imagine those are the people who are not remembered because history only remembers those who got to write down that they were here. Those people were carried on in the hearts of their loved ones and communities. Those people may not be remembered but are still felt in the souls of those who are hurt by the crimes of oppression. For better or for worse, the unwilling mistresses and those who jumped into the ocean for fear of being captive any longer gave rise to the genesis of African American culture.

in the absence  
of authentic Gods  
new memory;

Sonia Sanchez, Morning Haiku, pg. 53

One can't help but feel cultural erasure is an underlying tone in this haiku. Sanchez writes this haiku as if it's a response to the relationship between the church and African American people. Many black people in the U.S. follow some form of Christianity. They participate as leaders, worshipers, singers, and musicians. In many ways, this is phenomenal because it serves a community for black people to feel empowered and heard when the rest of the world does not make them feel as such. However, black people in the U.S. weren't always as unified when it came to religion. When the remaining survivors of the middle passage arrived to the new world, they were forced to interact with the other enslaved people who rarely all spoke the same language, a common method of preventing the people from unionizing against their captors. This was also an effective way of dying off the religion and spirituality the people had by being unable to share and celebrate together. Eventually the enslaved people were forced to be Christians in order to appease their masters: creating a new memory in place of their former Gods. The use of "authentic" makes me feel like it's a direct punch in the throat to Christianity for erasing the "true" religions African people celebrated for thousands of years. When reading this haiku, I feel that Sanchez writes to the people who still experience the consequences of cultural erasure by being subjected to Christianity and never knowing the religion their ancestors knew.

silence. no words.  
just the sound  
of earthquakes

Sonia Sanchez, Morning Haiku, pg 88

I loved this haiku because it's a perfect metaphor for systemic racism. Taken at face value, it's like an elephant in the room that doesn't need to be acknowledged to continue to exist. Systemic racism can take the form of short bursts of uneasiness and disruption, like an earthquake. But it's so much more than that. It's riddled in the statistics of deaths, poverty, unemployment, graduation rates, arrests, and hate crimes in minority groups. Systemic racism is all around us and it can often go unnoticed with all parties involved. An example could be how many books that medical professionals use to study their careers mention untrue things about black people and their pain tolerance. A common reason why black women suffer disproportionately higher rates of mortality during childbirth than white women. I love how two lines of this

haiku are dedicated to the absence of words but are disrupted by something you can feel. The earth shifting in an earthquake isn't what harms most people directly, it's what happens all around you. It's the falling of shelves, cabinets, and buildings that hurt you. A strong earthquake, like the oppression black people have faced for hundreds of years, moves through you and leaves you feeling powerless. It makes you feel like the only thing you can do is wish for it to all be over and pass. This is Sanchez's more somber work and I appreciate it for that. Not all sentiments towards black oppression are going to be hopeful or prideful, sometimes they're going to feel like giving up. This haiku felt like laying down and taking oppression right through you. I feel that Sanchez wanted to make others who are feeling the same, feel seen.

love between us is  
speech and breath. loving you is  
a long river running

Sonia Sanchez, *Like the Singing Coming off the Drums*

The last haiku I wanted to discuss by Sanchez is one that takes a step away from racism and oppression. This haiku is written with deep passion for the intended reader. I felt special reading this because I imagined this would be the last few words to end a letter from true love ensuring that no distance can question our integrity. "Love between us" is such a beautiful start to a haiku because it leaves the door open to many possibilities of how the haiku can continue. Love between us could be laughter or touch or words spoken... but those are all temporary moments in the sand to be washed away only to be remembered as "nice moments had". The exact moment this haiku shifts from the temporary now, to the ongoing future, is at the word "you". "loving you is" flips the haiku around to say: "we can tell each other we love our company all we want, but I'm going to tell you what loving you means to me". The last line says it beautifully. The last line implies that the love she feels cannot be disrupted or stopped because it is well established and ongoing; just like a river.

Sonia Sanchez's haiku all spoke to me with passion and intensity. Her work always had the voice of tragic wisdom behind every line. A feature of her work I imagine she developed as a woman of color born with less rights than most Americans have today. Her work always had layers upon layers to interpret and the context behind her haiku only added to it. I value the work Sanchez bestowed upon me for gaining an additional perspective of the view oppressed women of color had of the world that I had not yet been born into.

#### Work Cited

Sanchez, Sonia. *Morning Haiku*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992, Print.

Sanchez, Sonia. *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998.