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On the Barest of Boughs: A Poetics of Insignificance in the Contemporary Philippine Haiku

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Abstract:

The thesis of this essay is straightforward: many contemporary Filipino poets working from the haiku, tanka and other Japanese-inspired forms, appropriate them in their own way, departing largely from Japanese literary aesthetics. Thus silence is transformed into elaboration, evanescence into what I call “a statement of eternity,” the concrete into philosophical abstraction, the *ukiyo* (scenes of the everyday, or the fleeting world) converted into direct social, political or ideological thematic frames, and the kigo (seasonal word) and *kireji* (cutting word) discarded in favor of more ‘modern’ approaches to poetic enjambment and phrasing, the interjection of the poet’s sentiment into the scene instead of restraint, and lastly, nature as recessed in many cases instead of being the pivot around which the meditation or reflection is launched. The departure from the unity of subject and object so upheld in Japanese aesthetics reveals that many of these poets work from a different sensibility, a Filipino sensibility, a rhetorical background rooted in “statement-making.” While there are some accomplished works, they are few and far between, and thus making only the traditional or normative meter (5-7-5 for the haiku, or 5-7-5-7-7 for the tanka) a skeletal trace or spectral presence. The haikai and renga (linked verse forms) are self formulated, rather than the communal activity in which spirit it is written. It is therefore a curious paradox that what seems to have been initially inspired by Basho’s ideal is sourced elsewhere, such as in the haikai tradition that made fun of courtly manners and language by commoners as parody or play. More significantly, it directly relates to the Heian tradition of the inconsequential, as seen in Sei Shonagon’s *Pillow Book*, where she employs *zuihitsu* (poetic musings, or literally the wanderings and meanderings of the brush), commenting in catalogue form items like Disagreeable Things, Things No One Notices, etc. This results in a kind of hybridity, a work of Filipino sensibility leaning towards statement-making, yet dressed up in what is putatively a subtle, revelation-driven meditation.

Introduction

As a way to begin looking at Japanese literary sensibility, I would like to quote, if facetiously, the British poet John Cooper Clarke's version of a haiku,

Writing a poem
In seventeen syllables
Is very diffic [.]

Without saying anything more, it is curious that in the global haiku (that is, written in a language other than Japanese), the normative meter of 5-7-5 syllables has held sway as the golden standard in which it is written, or supposed to be written. However, as Hiroaki Sato (1987) notes, the tanka (5-7-5-7-7) and hokku or haiku “are regarded as one-line forms by the majority of Japanese poets and scholars” (347).¹ However, this “translation” of a Japanese verse form into a skeletal presence through mechanical syllabic counting and trilineation occurs elsewhere in the non-Japanese haiku, with the English haiku as its frontrunner. The second aspect for which we need to account is the actual translation of the Japanese classical poems, especially those written by the canonical poets such as Basho, Issa, and Buson that have found their way in anthologies worldwide across languages and cultures. Thought behind this is frequently overlooked, but since the translations serve as template or inspiration from which non-Japanese poets work, the unsuspecting foreigner tends to accept them without any problem as regards to equivalence or fidelity from the original.

Consider Basho's famous “crow” haiku in English. We give a corresponding gloss, or literal translation on the right. Elin Sütiste (2001) has tracked down at least 32 variations or retranslations in English for comparative purposes, of which we will only deal with four. Here is Basho.

¹ Sato, Hiroaki. “Lineation of Tanka in English Translation.” *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1987, 347-356.

² Sütiste, Elin. “A Crow on a Bare Branch: A Comparison of Matsuo Basho's *Haiku 'Kara-eda ni...*’ and its English Translations.” *Studia Humaniora*, Vol. 2, No. 1B, 2001, 1-21.

kara-eda ni	on a withered branch
karasu-no tomari-keri	a crow is perched
akino-kure	autumn evening

Here are some of the retranslations.

1. Blyth, 1952	2. Cohen, 1972	3. Britton, 1974	4. Ueda, 1991
Autumn evening: A crow perched On a withered bough.	Barren branch; Balancing crow; Autumn dusk.	On a leafless bough In the gathering autumn dusk A solitary crow!	on a bare branch a crow has alighted... autumn nightfall.

What are we to make of these translations or retranslations³ that obviously vary in style, diction, lineation, word order, punctuation, meter, the momentary breathing pause (*kireji*) and overall sensibility? Do we leave it to the reader just to “take in” whatever translation he has at hand, and gather from it any purpose that serves? Will this hypothetical reader change his mind, or its initial impact once he reads another version? What if he is that foreign poet setting out to write a haiku from any of these translations?

I will also cite here the Tagalog translation proposed by Jose Villa Panganiban in his book *Tanaga, Haiku, Pantun* (1963)⁴ for comparison but provide no further comment. Panganiban writes that his indirect, or relay translation⁵ comes from Reginald Blyth in a footnote (41)⁶.

Taglagás
Panót na sangá,
Uwák na nag-íisá.
Taglagás...Dí ba? (48).

Such range of interpretations, indeed! This leads us to that impulse to put the haiku in some order, so to speak, and consider the essential features

³ *Retranslation* is the current term of choice in Translation Studies for the phenomenon of looking back at a canonical piece, the ‘new’ being reflective of contemporary thinking and values, and the ‘new’ translator questioning past version/s, or to ‘update’ that to current audiences.

⁴ Panganiban, Jose Villa. *Tanaga, Haiku, Pantun*. 1963. San Juan, Rizal: Nasyon ng Onse. Print.

⁵ *Indirect translation*, rather than *relay*, is the current term of choice.

⁶ I am not sure which version of Blyth Panganiban refers to, because in the Sütiste article above, Blyth has had four translations of “Kara-eda ni...” over time.

from a Japanese perspective first of all, and only later, how it has been appropriated elsewhere.

Defining the Haiku

This is not as simple as it sounds. Scanning the various dictionaries of literary terms, I see J. A. Cuddon (1999: 372)⁷ enter the haiku thus: “A Japanese verse form consisting of seventeen syllables in three lines of five, seven and five syllables respectively. Such a poem expresses a single idea, image or feeling: in fact, it is a kind of miniature ‘snap’ in words.” Cuddon then makes a mandatory comment on Pound, Lowell, Frost, Aiken and Yeats as having been inspired or influenced by it in some part or parts of their poetry.

On the other hand, the more modest *A Handbook to Literature* (2002) by William Harmon and Hugh Holman describes it, beyond the normative meter, in a way that “a clear picture” so emerges “to arouse a distinct emotion and suggest a specific spiritual insight” (236)⁸. Meanwhile, introductory collegiate texts on poetry like Mark Strand and Eavan Boland’s *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (2000), or J. Paul Hunter’s *The Norton Introduction to Poetry* (6th. Ed, 1996), or Helen Vendler’s *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (2nd. Ed, 2002) do not mention the haiku at all; yet Ron Padgett’s ever-popular *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms* (1987), written primarily for secondary school students, devotes three loving pages, including a quote that the haiku is a “poem recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived in which nature is linked to human nature” (89)⁹. Almost obligatorily, it appears, Padgett then proceeds to quote Basho’s frog haiku. This is telling: haiku is a minor form, or if learned (at least by American high school students), playful and fun.

⁷ Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th. Ed. London: Penguin Books. Print.

⁸ Harmon, William & Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*, 9th Ed, 2002. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

⁹ Padgett, Ron A. (Ed.). *Handbook of Poetic Forms*, 1987. New York, NY: Teachers and Writers Collaborative.

Perhaps. Thus far, we have not succeeded in defining the form in a definitive manner, but we are strewn with hints as to aspects of what characterizes, and builds it up. Donald Keene, the eminent Japanologist and critic-translator in the middle of the 20th century has some sobering, if resonant words to this effect: “Almost any general statement about Japanese aesthetics can easily be disputed and even disproved by-citing well-known contrary examples” (1969: 293).¹⁰ This definitional issue may help explain why in the global haiku, only the meter remains, making it vexing and vexatious to evaluate the merits of any work from its merely spectral trace. However, for any criticism to have some value, a set of standards must be upheld, for which we now turn to Kenneth Yasuda’s (1957) serviceable framework:

Haiku is a poetic form of expression which employs primarily substantives and centers around groups of words, usually seventeen syllables in length, in and through which the poet realizes his poetic experience [...]; if we give to haiku a conceptual definition by saying that it is a poem of seventeen syllables containing among other things a sense of season or seasonal theme, there is the danger [...] of entertaining the idea its form was attained only accidentally or by poetic fiat (108).¹¹

What Yasuda is emphasizing here is the form’s evolution in Japanese literary history; that it cannot be pried apart from its early modern moorings of the early seventeenth century, and that it had predecessors as well as its successors in that much of Japanese poetry is “haiku-like”. There is a sensibility of silence or restraint, a meditative feeling, an anchorage on nature, the transitory life and ephemerality of all things, the small and the everyday, the here and the now, pivoting only around one image, and then “a sigh”, or calm acceptance of whatever happens, or initially, *aware*, “the ahness of things,”¹² which spells inexplicable delight or pleasure from a small detail of nature keenly observed, but would be transformed into a sense of internal loneliness, or the pathos of things, giving rise to *sabi*, beauty in imperfection and its twin, *wabi*, impermanence.

¹⁰ Keene, Donald. “Japanese Aesthetics.” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1969, 293-306.

¹¹ Yasuda, Kenneth. *The Japanese Haiku*, 1957. Rutland, VT & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company.

¹² De Bary, W. M., Theodore, et. al. Eds. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*. 2001. New York: Columbia University Press, 197.

The haiku poet is interested in the object for its own sake, not even being aware of how beautiful it is, or how he is affected by it. All these attributes contribute to an aesthetic -- “the haiku attitude” --which Yasuda describes as “a readiness for an experience for its own sake” (10). The poet cannot interject his personal needs and the experience at hand, and refrains from making a statement out of his own sentiment about it. Most Japanese writers consider this non-interjection the most important, if not the only criterion that matters in composing haiku. In summary, Yasuda says that the chief characteristics of haiku are: “ellipsis, condensation, spontaneity, and nakedness of treatment” (111).

Considering all these attributes, the poet must therefore act in readiness for the mostly unexpected “haiku moment,” which is anytime. Yasuda, who coins the phrase, identifies it as “a moment in which the words which created the experience and the experience itself can become one” (24). The haiku moment is anti-temporal yet its quality is eternal: there is no sense of time when man and his experience come together in a unified whole. Thus, the well-realized haiku is quite taxing on the poet’s inner resources, and therefore is relatively rare. Haruo Shirane (2002), today’s foremost international expert on Japanese literary history and its forms, reminds us that the hokku (haiku) must be considered in light of its accretionary character, that is, it picks up from past ideas and tradition, but at the same time looks to novelty for freshness. This is what Basho calls “the *haikai* spirit,” which refers to the popular linked verse of the time, but under his hands, the haiku became so refined and thus achieved a canonical status for itself. Shirane summarizes the *haikai* spirit meant, among other things:

...taking pleasure in recontextualization: defamiliarization, dislocating habitual, conventionalized perceptions, *and* their refamiliarization, recasting established poetic topics into contemporary language and culture. The *haikai* spirit was also marked by a constant search for novelty and new perspectives (180).¹³

¹³ Shirane, Haruo. *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900*. 2002. New York: Columbia University Press. Print.

It must be recalled that it was the commoners' linked-verse haikai, with its first meter of 5-7-5 that gave birth to the haiku as an independent form, with Basho its chief exponent and master.

Even though the three lines in 5-7-5 syllables has become the normative form in English language haiku (and elsewhere having been influenced by English), this codification was a 19th century invention of Western mediators to make sense of the seasonal and breathing pause requirements, including how the classics would be translated. As we saw earlier Japanese poets mostly wrote in one line, sometimes two, rarely three, or even four, but not five because the piece would technically turn into tanka. This has advantages for the foreign poet, especially because it became easier to handle as a form. And because "received knowledge" included requisites as such as direct experience by keen observation of nature, the use of concrete imagery, and the avoidance of metaphor and other tropes, and a preference for 'originality of vision', all of which were quirky from the Japanese perspective, the haiku is what we know it is today.¹⁴

Haiku in the Philippines

Just when and how the haiku came to the Philippines is unclear. The literature is scant, both for history and criticism. Even though there is a freely-floating document in the Internet called "A History of Philippine Haiku" (no date) by Ernesto P. Santiago, many of the propositions in this paper are questionable, and only few are based on empirical evidence. He says, for example, that *haiku* writing in the Philippines, "can be traced back to the influence of the Japanese occupation, 1941-1945" without giving support to the assertion. As Panganiban (1964) hints, "Sa katu-tubong haiku ng mga Haponés at sa mga salin sa Ingles at Kastilà, ang pagtutugmâ ay hindi gaanóng pinahalagahan" (36).¹⁵ Here he implies the influence on some Filipino writers, whether in Tagalog or English, of both English and Spanish translations of the haiku just before the war. It is true that Spanish was still a viable literary language at that time,

¹⁴ See Shirane (2000) in "Beyond the Haiku Moment: Basho, Buson and Modern Haiku Myths." *Modern Haiku* 21.1, 2000, 48-63.

¹⁵ "From the native Japanese haiku and its translations from English and Spanish, rhyming (in either) is not given much value" (translation mine).

and that the Spanish *jaiku* had gained currency from the 1920s onwards in the Spanish-speaking world via French translations, one of whose proponents was Federico García Lorca (Landeira: 2010)¹⁶. However, we do not exactly know how such writers of the period as Fernando María Guerrero, Rafael Palma, Cecilio Apóstol, or Jesús Balmori were influenced by the *jaiku* movement then quite trendy both in Europe and Latin America concurrently.

The most likely route that the haiku took to the Philippines was through the United States. As an American colony, the Philippines became not only an English-speaking nation, but in time produced a robust literature in a borrowed, if co-official tongue that it is today. Thus, the haiku's passage into Philippine literary culture was probably a case twice removed from the origin. The first was through English translation via American letters, and the second, through the lenses of the Imagist models of the first and second decades of the twentieth century. The first widely acknowledged haiku in English is Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913),

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough

even though Pound himself referred to it only as a "*hokku*-like sentence" (Pound, 1914: 465).¹⁷ That it has a seasonal element, autumn, and a breathing pause at the end of the first line, makes many scholars concur it is a true haiku, despite its deviation from the normative 5-7-5 syllabic structure and lineation.

It was only much later in the early 1960s through the English translations of classical Japanese haiku that it became a popular form among Filipino poets working in Tagalog, English, as well as in other regional languages. While it is true that Gonzalo K. Flores (Severino Gerundio) was already writing original Tagalog haiku during the Japanese occupation (as a result of the suppression of English writing by Japanese

¹⁶ Landeira, Joy. "Remapping Genre: Spanish Jaiku of the Early Twentieth Century." 2010. *Hispania*, Vol. 93, No. 4, 615-623.

¹⁷ "Vorticism," *The Fortnightly Review* 571 (Issue of 1 September 2014). *Hokku* is the old term for haiku.

authorities and the momentary blooming of vernacular literatures), he was nearly alone in the enterprise. Two of his accomplished haikus are “tutubi” (dragonfly) and “anyaya” (invitation), published in *Liwayway* at the height of the Japanese occupation in 1943.¹⁸

tutubi

hila mo’y tabak...
ang bulaklak, nangingig!
sa paglapit mo.

dragonfly

taking out your sword
the flower quivered one bit
soon as you touched it.

anyaya

ulilang damo
sa tahimik ng ilog.
halika, sinta.

invitation

lonely orphaned grass
along the quiet river.
come hither, my love.¹⁹

The birth of the popular Philippine haiku as we know it today was in 1963 when Panganiban came out with his book, and the first academic article by Silvino N. Epistola called “The Haiku as a Poetic Form” was published by *Asian Studies* journal of the University of the Philippines. Epistola’s essay is a prolegomenon, and imparts a feeling that most readers (then) would have heard of haiku for the first time.

Again this came in a roundabout way. When R. H. Blyth published his four-volume set *Haiku* from 1949 to 1952 for English-speaking audiences, and featured his own and others’ translations of Japanese classical haiku, it caught the fancy of the American literary scene, and especially attracted not only college educators, but most of all, high school teachers whose essential feature of brevity and syllabic countability were pedagogically powerful. Thus, the “haiku movement” was born. Although this would take a while, as in most things imported go, to reach the Philippines, it propelled both Panganiban and Epistola to publish their pieces and plant their ideas more widely, especially in the schools. Even though Conrado S. Ramirez would write “To Hitomaro” in 1932 with

¹⁸ Cited from Ernesto P. Santiago’s “A History of Philippine Haiku” (no date).

¹⁹ Translations of both poems mine.

its haiku-like sensibility, it is not a normative haiku, but rather more reminiscent of tanka, with five lines. However, the invocation of Bashō's frog imagery makes us associate the lines with haiku, even if the suggestive title pays tribute to the celebrated *waka*²⁰ poet of the *Man'yōshū* (Collection of a Thousand Leaves) in the 8th century.

In Nara still the herons fly
 A line of snow across the sky;
 The morning-glory drapes the wall;
 But though the pool knows not the rain,
 The dead frog floods it still with ghosts of song.

We can argue similarly that Conrado V. Pedroche's "River-Winds" (written in the same year) as haiku-like not only for its brevity but also its characteristic restraint; yet, the poem is clearly a Carl Sandburg derivation.

In the evening
 The river-wind takes the village
 In their arms,
 Whispering fragments of old lost songs;
 And, pulling a blanket of dreams
 Over the sleeping roofs,
 Softly, softly move on.

We could transform a hypothetical Pedroche into a haiku thus

Evening river-winds
 The fragment of old lost songs--
 Ah, blanket of dreams [!]

yet we know that Sandburg himself, like Amy Lowell and e.e. cummings, were influenced by Japanese literary aesthetics. Similarly, too, Celestino M. Vegas' poems, written in about the same period, partook a similar frame, as in the first stanza of "High Noon"

²⁰ *Waka* simply means 'poem,' specifically a Japanese one, in contrast to *kanshi*, which was Chinese derived.

to see you pass
 before my eyes
 is high noon mass [.]

Yet, neither the tanka nor haiku took wing in Philippine letters then. It would take another generation or two, past World War II and the American fever of the late 50s, for it to take root in the country. One push factor was education itself, where in the early 70s, the Bilingual Education policy was first mulled over under the rubric of “English as a Second Language” movement (Sibayan: 1978).²¹ This policy proposed curricular changes in the schools, including the introduction of Afro-Asian literature for the sophomore year in high school. As a result, the production of textbooks along new policy lines became a “cottage industry” of sorts. Since Asian literature meant covering Japanese literature, and within that, its prose and poetry, even if only superficially, the haiku would be requisite.

A cursory inspection of some of these Afro-American literature textbooks reveals the following numbers represented among the Japanese poetics forms:

Table 1
 Number of Poems Represented
 under “Japanese Literature”

Authors, Year of Publication	Waka/Other Older Form	Haiku	Tanka	Senryu	Modern Poem
Encarnacion et. al.(1979)	1	3	2	2	2
Calixihan et. al. (2010)	0	3	3	0	2
Carpio et. al. (2006)	3	3	3	1	3
Rosales (2014)	1	3	1	0	0

²¹ Sibayan, Bonifacio. “Bilingual Education in the Philippines: Strategy and Structure.” 1978. In J.D. Atlatis (Ed.) *Georgetown University Round Table on Language and Linguistics 1978*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 302-329.

The haiku and tanka are consistently represented, with each textbook representing three haiku. While the haiku poets and selections vary, there is one Basho apiece; otherwise, the authors/editors pick and choose from among Issa, Buson, Kubutsu, and a few canonical others. They also cite Blyth, Keene, or Bownas as their sources. Normally, two or three paragraphs introduce Japanese poetry in general, describe the forms, and a set of guide questions after all the poems are represented. The latter normally includes, “Now, write your own haiku” type of instruction. It goes without saying it is the “do-able” haiku given pride of place above others. It is no wonder why most Filipino high school students are familiar with the haiku, and given a dedicated English teacher carrying out the instruction as suggested, why Filipino students would have had at least one direct experience at writing one.

On a personal note, I recall my second-year literature textbook in 1972 (when martial law was declared) with three indelible images: the frog splashing into the well (of course, the inexhaustible Basho), the baby looking at the moon as Buddha (Kubutsu), and the tears in the eyes of the fish, the first haiku entry in Basho’s poetic travel diary, *Journey to the Deep North* (which I read only four or five years ago). Even though the memory of that textbook’s scent is stronger - the acidic smell of freshly-minted ink on paper - and Miss Iluminada Teodoro never took up any of the haiku there for class discussion, I was diligent enough to read my books through. I bring this up only in the context of the canonization of haiku, which I will discuss in the last part of this paper.

This background, supported by the increasing popularity of writing workshops and amidst the wider societal ferment of the 60s, made young or beginning writers experiment with new forms and styles, including the Japanese poetic forms. In the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for 1960-1970, for example, many of the winners would have at least one haiku, or some derivative in their collections. Among such writers were Jose Celi (Jun) Lansang, Manuel Viray, Federico Licsi Espino, Jr., and E. P. San Juan, Jr. Given the times, the haiku would be become a vehicle for social commentary. Lansang’s “Haiku” (1969), while of two stanzas, reads

with leaflets spread like this
mimosa pudica
bright with morning dew
in the living leaf
no blood no pulse no quiver
in the leaf no death

Espino, Jr. in “Four Haiku Studies” (1969/1970)²² has, for the first two because they appear linked, this:

Bad News
The town postman leaves;
Open telegram in hand,
A poor mother grieves.

Stillborn

The obstetrician
Hangs his head; the mother weeps
Till her eyes turn red.

It is the more politically-vocal Emmanuel Lacaba who would turn the haiku as a form of direct left-wing protest. “Haiku de Manila” (1986)²³ reads

A white limousine
In front of the squatter’s hut
Honks: “Who says we’re poor?”

Filipino poets from the 1980s onwards, however, would deploy the haiku and other Japanese forms in more complex ways, beyond social comment, and covering more subjects, themes, and treatments than their predecessors.

²² The first year refers to the Palanca submission, while the second the anthology of Palanca winners from 1961 to 1970 the award-giving body published in book form.

²³ The date here comes from *Salvaged Poems* edited by his older brother Jose after Emmanuel’s untimely death, although it was part of the Palanca submission in 1970. For his voice, he had to pay the highest price, his own life.

The Contemporary Philippine Haiku

Obviously, there is a whole world of difference between Basho's cicada song and Cesar Ruiz Aquino Jr.'s daisy chain "Haiku Luck" (2008), which I place side by side only for illustration.

Stillness--	She loves me. She loves
Piercing the rock me not.	She loves me. She loves
The cicadas' song, me not.	She loves me.

Nor could any meaningful and commensurable comparison be made between Jack Kerouac's fine haiku on the winter fly and Jose Marte Abueg's equally fine haiku on cobwebs called "Small hours in old haunt" (2009).

In my medicine cabinet the winter fly has died of old age.	In a blink phantomlike from the brew uncounted cobwebs coming away, crawling spinning in circles displacing memory aspiring for wind in what [outside the window] are mildew hours.
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Yet we get some sense of what is retained as "Japanese" such as the meditative tone and silence, equally as we get the stamp of individual voice in

the deadpan Beat humor of Kerouac and the dark yet sober melancholia of Abueg's style. We might question if Abueg's work is in fact haiku at all, but recalling again Yasuda's hallmarks of the haiku attitude, we see that it is pretty close. Only the form is "different," yet much of non-Japanese haiku being written today (and this includes Filipino poets) has departed from the original structural expectations set down by the Japanese 17th century masters. Hiroaki Sato (whom we met early in this paper) contends that it may not be possible nor even desirable to imitate the codified form of Basho, but the intention and spirit of the modern writer in setting down to write one are important in and for themselves. Sato also adds that, if we apply the same fidelity rules to the haiku written today, then even modern Japanese writers would be found deficient (Sato: 1984).²⁴

Nature, the Ur source of Japanese meditative aesthetics, is taken up by many non-Japanese haiku poets on either side of the Pacific, yet as we can see between Gary Snyder's "Hitch Haiku" sequence in *The Back Country* (1968) and Alfred Yuson's haiku sequence "Seven Haiku on the Heave-Ho" (*Trading in Mermaids*: 1993, 14-15), the approach to nature is quite different. Snyder, writing about the lumber camp where he was laborer, speaks of the nature of (human) loneliness against the backdrop of abundant nature, while Yuson speaks of an aspect of nature, in particular of its occasional tragedy as seen in the Baguio earthquake of 1990.

They didn't hire him	Heaves once, twice, the land.
So he ate his lunch alone:	Seethes, pulses, seeps cries of fright:
the noon whistle.	A mountain surprise.

Just as human and mother nature are one, then poet and form are one in the haiku moment, in reference to the subject and object coming together in the poem, as we have seen in Yasuda's explanation. Prosodically, the sibilants help establish the tone of desolation and helplessness (Snyder's *so, lunch, whistle* and Yuson's *seethes, pulses, seeps, cries*).

²⁴ Sato, Hiroaki. "A Diversified Art." *The Mainichi Daily News*, 26 November 1984, p.18. Print.

The contemporary Philippine haiku exhibits so much diversity in the treatment of subject and form (just as it does in American and British haiku) that it is hard to “unify” them under a characteristic signature or single critical rubric. Yet amidst such diversity, nature remains the ready reserve for keen observation, if not earnest meditation along the lines of Zen Buddhist tradition. For a final comparison in this context, I place two stanzas each from the haiku sequence of Joel Toledo’s “Tree Five-Seven-Five” (2009) on a caterpillar and Justine Camacho-Tajonera’s “Kulintang” (2018) on mangrove trees.

Caterpillar, hi
 Could you please not forget your
 Left-behind cocoon,

 How you unfolded
 Into ribbons of color,
 Swooping down roses?

Mamals

The mangroves are
 full of fishes
 and hiding children.

Pangandungan

Trees stretch
 slowly
 from graves.

While Toledo’s tone is marked by levity, or even catchy, breezy humor and Camacho-Tajonera’s by surreally macabre if mordant wit, they are united in a sharp observation of nature, as if asking to see the world anew, which in Daisetz Suzuki’s (1964) words, might be “the awakening of a new sense which will review the old things from a hitherto undreamed-of angle of observation” (96).²⁵ Of course, one does not have to be an adherent of Zen in order to cultivate a poetics of and write poetry inspired by it. Just as many poets of ancient China and Japan were not adherents of Zen, but made meditation as part of their poetic praxis, these two poets ask us to look at nature as Self *and* Other, that is, the object and subject are one, so that in the imagined dialogue with the caterpillar, Toledo sees a mirror of himself; in the

²⁵ Suzuki, Daisetz. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1964.

same vein, Camacho-Tajonera uses a gradual unfolding of the mangroves as both natural and human, culminating with the startling image of the graves that arose therein. Their forms are different—Toledo’s is in the normative haiku 5-7-5 meter, Camacho-Tajonera’s in the three lines, but the meditative poetic process is strikingly similar.

One can argue that Rowena T. Torrevillas’ “Basho’s Pond” (1991) is not haiku at all, as it uses free verse and rather lengthy, but because it is inspired by Basho’s most famous haiku, let us call it a haiku variant, a kind of “anti-haiku,” to use Jim Kacian’s (2013)²⁶ term-- but I prefer to call it “meta-haiku” since the poem talks about *that* haiku. Whether this argument has weight, or is specious, is not as important as looking at it as meditation sprung from nature.

You would beg to know

Why they keep
This Zen of certainties:
the thing, only itself
and nothing more—

Basho’s frog that jumped,
The rippling pond,
The lotus blossom,
The stone.

Because sadness or joy
Must become sure of itself
Or your heart cannot spin

The single drop of tear
That holds, then spills
The grief howling within.

²⁶ See Jim Kacian’s “An Overview of Haiku in English” in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013. (Editors Jima Kacian, Philip Rowland and Allan Burns).

And joy, likewise, must be
 Unbidden as dust motes
 Rippling in the clear day,
 An essence of roses
 Wafting in a room
 Where Beethoven heard
 Laughter and sought it
 With his fingers.

Even if the whole of the poem strikes us as more Auden than Basho, Torrevillas has, wittingly or not, identified the hallmarks of Japanese literary aesthetics as she unfolds the meditation. The first stanza speaks of Yasuda's haiku moment, where the separation of the object and subject is obliterated—the poet and the poem become one: *“the thing, only itself / and nothing more.”* In the second stanza, where Basho's haiku is invoked, the use of the concrete, the everyday, the ordinary, and the ephemeral, all build up to *aware*, “the pathos of things.”

While originally referring to “the ahness of things” for the pleasurable revelation or insight haiku brings, its meaning over time gradually changed to its current understanding in finding beauty in imperfection, what is now generally known as *sabi*, etymologically meaning ‘the beauty of poverty’ -- the aesthetic in employing detachment, loneliness, and austerity. Basho's chief enterprise, after all, was to find “the subtle, the refined, and the spiritual in a regenerative process in everyday, commoner life” (Shirane, 2002: 202). Together with its aesthetic twin, *wabi*, ‘the beauty of harmony,’ associated with reflection in nature, silence, and the moment's being that all point to the evanescence of all things, the haiku essence can be distilled into three points: brevity, ellipsis, and because of purposeful ambiguity, the plurality of meanings that it generates.

While there are single or stand-alone haiku in personal collections or in some (but rarer) published anthologies, this appears more of an aberration than the rule for most Filipino poets. Thus, many of them work

in haiku sequences. What this tells me is that the form is too short, too elliptical and rather inadequate to give the individual poetic vision justice, and that to be truly ‘substantive’ the poet must work at some length. The tendency to elaborate, to explain, and to be substantial negates the very essence of haiku, which its koan-like aporetic self-questioning. The seizure of the moment, and the attendant epiphany as a result of that brevity thus take a backseat, so to speak, in many contemporary Filipino haiku.

This yields a feeling that the haiku sequence is descriptive elaboration, or even perhaps poetic cataloguing, such as in Santiago Villafania’s “Extra Judicial Haiku” (2017) of which we take the first four in the 13-haiku sequence.

“you sons of bitches
 all of you who’re into drugs
 I’ll really kill you”
 --du30

...
 killing time began
 here is a death penalty
 without due process

...
 a gunshot
 and another
 a young girl dead

...
 drug lords scot-free
 addicts dying on the streets
 drug war casualties

Perhaps protest poetry may need more words than the haiku can accommodate, but Alfred Yuson does the exact same thing half a generation earlier. “Haiku for the Times (1983)” (1986) is a 15- part haiku sequence that picks up news pieces of the tumultuous year marking the assassination of Sen. Benigno Aquino, the massive funeral in its wake, and which hastened the downfall of the Marcos regime. The zigzagging of events makes a dizzying catalogue. Taking the gallimaufry of the last five stanzas, we get a sense that we had to be historical witness (to those events), or else Yuson has taken the risk of being “forgotten,” or worse, misunderstood or misread.

11. Habeas corpus
Delicti, doloroso.
In the van, a ghost.

12. Above us, a hole.
Would that the lying media,
Foreign, be sucked up!

13. One suckling pig each,
Movie stars have big backyards.
“Lechon de leche!”

14. What the heck! Don't use
“Covenant with the people...”
That's ridiculous!

15. Lost and found, the art
Of weeping over humor.
Over death's gay heart.

Yuson uses many allusions that I imagine are lost on today's say, millennial or Gen X readers. The images move from one to the next with seeming urgency, and yet, even though ‘sequenced’, do not build up into anything climactic. The prolixity and elaboration of discrete items in

catalogue leave one a feeling of exhaustion, because in the need for proclaiming one observation to the next, the space for reflection is seriously arrested. This dashes the haiku's original aspiration.

On the other hand, an achieved sequence is found in a "haiku of witness" in Luis Cabalquinto's "September Eleven" (2007).

1
A bright clear morning:
Two planes, sleek as dragonflies—
Towers bloom in fire!

2
The overnight guests,
With fine manners of breakfast,
Cold-slaughtered their hosts.

3
Is this the day God
Was looking the other way
When the two planes struck?

Without the temptation to elaborate, Cabalquinto has struck the right haiku chord. In my view, however, the first two are sufficient, since the third part borders on plain philosophical abstraction, something that a true haiku artist such as Buson or Issa would have avoided.

Even in a deeply-held, or private topos (read, erotic), Michelle Macaraeg Bautista cannot help but still sequence desire. Thus in "*Balot: A Pair of Haiku*" (1991):

Staring creation
In the eye, I turn off the
Lights, Mmmm...sensuous.

It calls from the streets,
I follow. Hold two hot orbs.
Open. Salty. Wet.

Must the language of the boudoir be ever so loquacious? Could the signature of moans and grunts in lovemaking be channelled into the elliptical, rather than the metaphorical? The effect here is incongruous, or comical, not meditative, so as to allow the needed silence of the erotic haiku to emerge.

Among the most productive employers of the haiku and its variants must be mentioned Federico Licsi Espino, Jr. once more, who in the beginning and middle of his career, wrote a considerable number. Like his successors, he launches self-reflection, social comment or aesthetic subjects in the brief form, but *unlike* them, eschews any sequencing. If his work “appears” sequenced, it is only for economy on the printed page; thus, Espino, Jr. gives titles to his self contained haiku, and the pieces do not link together in a meaningful way.

Rorschach

Ink blots...fearful symmetry...
Questions of the Sphinx...
Oedipus with eyes intact.

Portrait

Byronic limp...
Satyr-faced...
Ripples of gossip.

Flapping wings...
Raging pyre...
Moth or Phoenix?

Paranoia

Hearsay wind...
 Fungoid ears...
 Quivering, listening.

The last appears to allude of Van Gogh's self-portrait after cutting his own ear, while "Portrait" refers to the enigmatic Lord Byron sitting for Thomas Phillips around 1813 (or maybe any of his 36 portraits), and the first recalls the silver-tone prints of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. This Palanca submission from 1969, called *Counterclockwise & Dark Sutra* has the subtitle of "Telegraphic Poems," making Espino, Jr. aware of not calling his three-line sketches haiku on the apparent aberration from the haiku syllabic count. A couple of pages later, however, he has three "Haiku" poems interspersed among others, it seems, at random. All are individually called "Haiku."

And suppose I watch
 Grey dust-spheres climbing the clear
 Tapering sun-ray?
 ...
 Lo, this dawn I keep
 Vigil with the full moon and
 Ex-virginity.

The third haiku has been quoted on page 10. The exuberance of the then -30-year old Espino, Jr. in this remarkable collection cannot be curtailed, and for his love of the foreign or the artistic, he continues with three other Japanese-themed or inspired poems, "Waka for Mme. Sato," "Homage to Hokusai," and "Four Haiku Studies," rather too long to be included here. The latter, however, uses the popular Filipino folklore structure of "Doon Po Sa Aming Bayan ng San Roque," the first two of which we saw on the tenth page as well.

The most prolific contemporary poet of the haiku, however, is the irrepressible Cesar Ruiz Aquino, Jr. His haiku cover a wide range of themes and treatments, guided only by 5-7-5 meter. He has haiku sequences, single haiku, paired haiku, and other haiku variants. Consider his paean to the condom, “Tarot” (2008).²⁷

Every inch a fool
But somehow safe every step
Of the way. Foolproof.

The comic deflection of the prosthesis into medieval geomancy is quite witty, because the Tarot can be read any which way, and remain “Foolproof.” For as long as one uses a condom, it is always risk-free, a divination as good as any. On the other hand, Ruiz Aquino, Jr. can be quite somber, as in “Signs of the Times.”

Flood smile, lightning crow’s
Feet, eye fire, earthquake touch, storm
Signal in a move.

The enjambment is modern and nimble, and not the kireji breathing pause; “crow’s / Feet” and “storm / Signal” are caesurae of considerable weight. Likewise, he uses the device in his other sequences, including “Going Japanese.”

Thanks for the go set.
Can I see you? Can you teach
Me the rudiments?

Go must be like love
Poems. Look in the mirror –
What an opponent!

I wish we could play.
I want to kiss you just once:
A haiku. In go?

²⁷ I date all the Ruiz Aquino, Jr. poems 2008 even though they were written at different times and based on his latest collection *In Samarkand* (UST Publishing House, 2008). He himself does not cite the original sources in this anthology of old and new poems.

By using the oldest extant board game to launch a meditation on love, the haiku likens the abstract game of strategy to love, something full of intricacies and potential traps. The idea of ‘letting go’ becomes a mesmerizing notion, since one can ever be calculating in affairs amorous, yet missing out on the emotion entirely. Such enigmatic Martial-like epigrams he also reinforces in “The Wind.”

The wind that takes my
Words away as I say them
Will say them. Let it

In the same vein, he “lifts” the preface of Dylan Nelson’s *Birds in the Hand* (2004), an anthology of fiction and poetry on birds, an approach Ruiz Aquino, Jr. calls “verseliteration,”

When birds fly, they show
us we cannot. When birds seem
innocent, we are [.]

Even if he seems self-defensive about this tack of copying from other writers many of their words verbatim, the idea is as old as the hills, or in the Bloomian sense, poets writing from and for other poets. Edith Tiempo defends him: “the poetical substance is blatantly non-original, and yet, who can gainsay the fact the artistic procedure is very novel, the attempt at “verseliterating” is at the peak of originality and inventiveness.”²⁸

The fact is, haiku in the Basho sense, must necessarily be original and inventive at the same time. Koji Kawamoto (1999) wraps this up as:

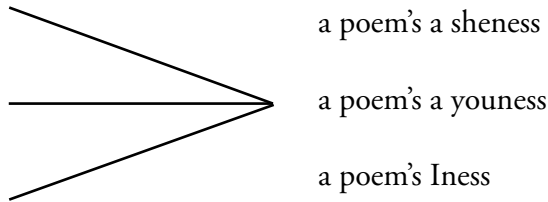
The key to its [haiku’s] unabated vigor lies in Basho’s keen awareness of the utility of the past in understanding an avant-garde enterprise, which he summed up in his famous adage, “fueki-ryuko,” which can be roughly translated as permanence and change” (709).²⁹

²⁸ From the Introduction to *In Samarkand*, xiii.

²⁹ Kawamoto, Koji. “The Use and Disuse of Tradition in Basho’s Haiku and Imagist Poetry.” *Poetics Today*, 20.4, 1999, 709-721.

Like so many other scholars before and after him like Yasuda, Sato, and Shirane, this forms the essence of Japanese poetics in a nutshell: one respects the past by using its forms and tropes, while staking out an independent voice and vision to carve a unique identity.

Can we ask such sensibility from non-Japanese poets? Maybe not, but since the haiku is an appropriation, we might reformulate the question into, How much can we tighten the bow string, so to speak, before it snaps? Can haiku be so freely experimented with or upon so that it is no longer haiku? Consider Nieves Epistola's "She" (2003).



Or another of her experimental free forms, "From Corner to Here" (2003) where we include only the last "stanza" of five:

eye	fools	sky
tricked	seemed	trusted
earth	traps	ear

(The lines on the table are approximate, since in the print version, they are "written" or "drawn" in the effect of a thick magic marker.) Experimentation for its own sake may be risking too much by way of poetic envisioning because not only do these two poems call attention to themselves wilfully, they are also whimsical, trite, and worse, meaningless, if the principle of form following substance is followed. Maybe they are not haiku at all altogether. Which brings me to the last point of this paper, the canonization (or lack of it) of the haiku and its variants in Philippine letters.

The Haiku's Uncertain Position

The observations I have drawn make me think that most of today's haiku poets primarily work from a different framework; many of them use the normative meter, not the sensibility that form its wellsprings. While apparently 'Japanese,' they have looked (perhaps even unwittingly) elsewhere in the Japanese tradition, but *not* of the haiku. The haiku is a single-object stand-alone poem with a required tensive element by juxtaposing two apparently contradictory parts "to resonate and forcing the reader to find some internal connection" (Shirane, 2002: 171). We have seen that in both the haiku sequence and independent haiku in many examples above do not match this criterion. What we see instead is a tendency to elaborate, to wax abstractly philosophical (even if in a comic vein), to wrest evanescence and convert it to universal truth making, or what I call a rhetoric of "statement-making" that is truly anchored on Filipino poetics, and the frequently miscued use, or non-use, of nature, the seasonal word (*kigo*) and the cutting word (*kireji*). While I state once more that there is nothing inherently improper here because the haiku has been appropriated, and not simply copied or borrowed, the spectral presence of the haiku's normative meter presents some real problems regarding its ambiguous position in Philippine literature.

Among the tradition that many contemporary poets employ instead is the fun-making or parodic *linked* verse form known as the haikai (haikai no renga) [later codified as the *renga*], which subverted classicism by mocking courtly behavior and literary custom. This made the renga a true medium of the people, and one enjoyed by commoners in merriment, especially in drinking jousts. This reinforced community spirit and renewal since everyone took part in crafting the linked verse. We might locate the spirit behind this in the Tagalog *balagtasan*, or the Cebuano *panag-ambahan* or any of the poetic joust forms among many Filipino minority groups with a primarily ludic intent. We can even perhaps 'translate' this in the passing around of the microphone in karaoke clubs anywhere in the country. In this way, the contemporary haiku is a very "post-modern" form in that it accepts nearly everything. What was once

formal and stiff in the tanka (thirty-one syllables) with the first hemistich of 5-7-5 known as the hokku was converted into the mirthful haikai.

Recall that in Ruiz Aquino's daisy chain, condom and the spirit of the times haiku, the ludic prevails, even if stand-alone and not linked. Then too Yuson's longer social commentary on the 1983 events rings satirically funny, poking fun at movie stars and beauty queens who have joined Sen. Aquino's funeral cortège. Ditto for Macaraeg Bautista, prostrate before her lover's genitals, comparing the testes with that quintessential Filipino aphrodisiac, fertilized duck's eggs, even perhaps as fun/pun, "the sack/sac" since *balot* as written without diacritics. Even the grim Licsi Espino, Jr., despite a predilection for dark dreary brooding, must mimic and parody Blake, Byron, van Gogh's bandaged ear self-portrait and letter to his brother Theo, lifting some of their words in parodic parlor gamesmanship. After all, is not parody's chief remit the playful, subverting the original to a simulacrum, making us think twice about things? In 5-7-5 syllabics, the poets have all captured, if self-consciously, Rhodora Ancheta's notion of *halakhak*, hallmark of the culture's raucous humor and harbinger of hope in a nation in a constant state of crisis.

The other tradition is the Japanese form of insignificant things, musings of the brush, known as *zuihitsu*, which we associate clearly with Sei Shonagon's literary diary, the *Pillow Book*. As this is familiar to many, such as her catalogue of Elegant Things, or Unpleasant Things, I will quote another, an anonymous writer, a lowly retinue, of *The Dog Pillow Book* (1607?), who clearly parodies her.

Things the Bigger the Better

Roof beams.

The heart of the master's son.

The penny cakes of a teahouse where one stops on a tiring journey.

Blossoms on trees – the fruit too.

The sword of a strong man.

Things the Smaller the Better

The youth who is one's personal servant.
 The sword worn in a reception hall.
 The wine cup of a weak drinker.
 Acolytes and serving boys.

As writing or poetic technique, cataloguing is as old as Homer, or the Bible. Something about a list makes a text compelling, the gradual unfolding building into something, a climax perhaps, or the maximization of action. Yet, it also stands the chance of becoming listless after a time, and so a writer must make a decision when to stop once the point is made. In the Japanese literary diaries where such trivia are catalogued, the specifications must be arresting enough to serve the reader a chuckle or two. One should like to stop reading and make a list for him or herself. The “insignificant” becomes nearly pressing, and thus an invitation of sorts. The inconsequential hence turns into significance.

I argue that the haiku sequences of Yuson, Licsi Espino, Jr. Ruiz Aquino, Jr. and Cabalquinto work in the same manner. While there is a risk of inconsequentiality, there is also redemption in that it provokes greater reflection on the reader's part. The question now is, if the supposedly silent haiku is adapted for prolixity, like in the case of many contemporary Filipino poets, will it render the form's lofty ideals unserved or underserved? I posit that this is the real reason why the haiku occupies an uneasy, ambiguous position it obtains today even after more than half a century of writing. There is the feeling that while it is an easy “picking,” or an old stand-by, it has not moved either into a loftier plane. The haiku is a poor relative to free verse, the couplet, the sonnet, or even the villanelle, all of which take pride of place once poets reach a certain stature. Thus, in the “Selecteds” or “Collecteds” or “Olds and News,” or even in the relatively neutral or disinterested anthologies of the heuristic kind, or for academic purposes, haiku are few and far between. The same is true of high school or university Philippine literature in English textbooks; none contains a haiku, let alone a haiku sequence.

While canonization is a complex literary affair, three major players in the Philippine context are the award-giving bodies such as the Palanca, the academic anthologists, and the textbook compilers or editors. Because there is relatively little criticism, critics have limited input in this regard. Except for the Palanca in the 1970s and early 1980s, no single haiku or haiku sequence has appeared since. In the historically-oriented academic anthologies, the most common forms are free verse, the sustained couplet or triplet, and the mostly-modified sonnet, and *not* haiku. In the ‘tenured’ poets’ collections, they do not normally revisit their old haiku. (The sole possible exception here is Cesar Ruiz Aquino, Jr.). There are, of course, thousands of haiku written by Filipinos, judging from the four or five haiku association websites, in English and in many other regional languages as well. Most are of the ‘Sunday poem’ types, of the dilettante variety, the garden kitsch, and possess little literary merit. None will ever make it to the canon, not because one or two could not have meritoriously aspired to such place, but because the canon makers themselves think little of the haiku, even from among the heavyweights of our past and contemporary poets. Could it be that the “poetics of insignificance” is sourced from such a stance, and not from the “disuse” or appropriation resulting in a hybridity of the haiku in the hands of Filipino poets?

Here, I surmise a highly likely affirmative, a yea -- or in the words of Shosun (aka Kenneth Yasuda, 1957),

Broken, broken, yet
 Perfect is the harvest moon
 In the rivulet. (“Harvest Moon,” 205)

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