Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism

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Cross-Cultural Poetics:  
Sonia Sanchez’s *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums*

Some accomplished poets produced their work in isolation. Emily Dickinson is one of the world’s best-known and widely admired poets, though at the time of her death in 1886, only eight of her more than seventeen hundred poems had been published. Richard Wright, as noted earlier, wrote in exile over four thousand haiku in his last year and half. But only twenty-four of them had posthumously appeared in print before the publication of *Haiku: This Other World* (1998), a collection of 817 haiku Wright himself had selected.

Time has changed not only for the poet but for the literary public. Readers of poetry over a century ago were not quite familiar with the style and vision of Dickinson, who wrote terse verses with the bold, startling imagery. Nor were readers as interested in cross-cultural visions as are today’s readers. When Wright experimented with his massive collection of haiku in the late 1950s, he did so in isolation, just as Dickinson wrote her poems in isolation. Recovering from illness, Wright composed his haiku in bed at home as well as in the hospital, in cafés, in restaurants, and in Paris as well as in the French countryside.

Sonia Sanchez, by contrast, has appeared as a postmodern, postcolonial, and remarkably cross-cultural poet. Such an observation, however, does not suggest that Dickinson and Wright were less cross-cultural. Indeed, Dickinson’s readers have long recognized in her poetry the Calvinist tendency to look inwardly, as well as the transcendental view of nature and humanity. Many of her poems also exhibit a dialogue she had with contemporary industrial culture. And Wright’s later work, such as “The Man Who Lived Underground” and haiku, shows his interest in French existentialism as well as in Zen aesthetics.
While Sanchez is known as an activist poet, much of her poetic impulse in *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* (1998) derives from the tradition of Japanese haiku, in which a poet pays the utmost attention to the beauty inherent in nature. A great majority of Sanchez’s latest collection of poems are entitled haiku, tanka, or sonku. These poems reveal that Sanchez, turning away from the moral, intellectual, social, and political problems dealt with in her other work, found her latent poetic sensibility in nature. Above all, her fine pieces of poetry show, as do classic Japanese haiku and tanka, the unity and harmony of all things, the sensibility that nature and human beings are one and inseparable. In this collection, much of her poetry poignantly expresses a desire to transcend social and racial differences and a need to find union and harmony with nature.

1.

Many of the haiku and tanka presented in the first section of Sanchez’s collection, entitled “Naked in the Streets,” reflect the poetic tradition in which human action emulates nature. As the section title suggests, Sanchez creates an image of nature out of a scene of streets. Today the poet as well as most of her readers lives in the streets, just as classic haiku poets and their readers lived and worked closely with nature. The first haiku in *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* conveys the delightful sensation one feels in contact with nature:

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you ask me to run
naked in the streets with you
i am holding your pulse. (4)
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Much in the same spirit, Whitman writes in “Song of Myself”:

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I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me. (25)
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While immersing herself in nature, Sanchez from time to time subtly expresses her aversion to artificiality and domesticity. The first song in “Naked in the Streets” reads:

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i cannot stay home
on this sweet morning
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i must run singing laughing
through the streets of Philadelphia.
i don’t need food or sleep or drink
on this wild scented day
i am bathing in the waves of your breath. (5)

The urge Sanchez feels to cleanse herself of the unnatural and the artificial also echoes in Whitman’s “Song of Myself”:

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with
perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it. (25)

Both Sanchez and classic Japanese haiku poets are always inspired by the visual beauty in which nature presents itself. Buson was well known in his time as a professional painter, and many of his haiku reflect his singular attention to color and its intensification. One of Sanchez’s haiku included in the middle section, “Shake Loose My Skin,” and one of the longer poems, “A Poem for Ella Fitzgerald,” both thrive on colorful imagery. The haiku reads:

i am you loving
my own shadow watching
this noontime butterfly. (61)

“A Poem for Ella Fitzgerald,” the longest poem in this collection, is focused on these lines:

the moon turned red in the sky,
.................................
nightingales in her throat
..........................
an apollo stage amid high-stepping
yellow legs
..............
i remember it was april
and the flowers ran yellow
the sun downpoured yellow butterflies (104–7)

Both poems are reminiscent of Buson’s “Also Stepping On,” a haiku compared to Wright’s haiku in chapter 9:
For a seasonal reference to spring, Buson links an image of a bird with a spring sunset, because both are highly colored. As a painter he is also fascinated by an ambiguous impression the scene he has drawn gives him; it is not clear whether the setting sun is treading on the pheasant's tail or the tail on the setting sun. In any event, Buson has made both pictures beautiful to behold. In Sanchez's haiku “I Am You Loving,” it is ambivalent whether the focus is on “my own shadow” or “this noontime butterfly”; both constitute beautiful images of nature. Likewise, “A Poem for Ella Fitzgerald” juxtaposes the image of the red moon with that of nightingales. Sanchez in these poems creates, as does Buson in his, a pair of counter-images, themselves highly colorful and bright, which in turn intensify each other.

In portraying nature, Sanchez is at times puzzled by its spontaneous imagery. Two of the poems in the collection—“I Collect” (sonku) and “In This Wet Season” (haiku)—have a thematic affinity with the famous haiku by Moritake (1472–1549):

Rakka eda ni Fallen petals
Kaeru to mireba Seemed to return to the branch,—
Kocho kana A butterfly\(^2\)

Both of Sanchez's poems “I Collect” and “In This Wet Season” create an illusion similar to that in Moritake’s poem. “I Collect” begins with a query:

i collect
ing wings what are
you bird or
animal? (15)

In the other poem, Sanchez is reluctant to draw a distinction between children and birds, hands and rain:

in this wet season
of children raining hands
we catch birds in flight. (103)

As brought up in my reading of Wright's haiku in chapter 9, it is this haiku
by Moritake that influenced Ezra Pound’s composition of the famous metro poem, often regarded as the first published haiku written in English:

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

(“Vorticism” 467)

As pointed out earlier, Pound was influenced by Japanese poetry in general and by the art of haiku in particular. In the “Vorticism” essay, he quoted Moritake’s haiku, just before discussing his “In a Station of the Metro.”

In emulating the spirit of nature, Japanese poets are often struck with awe and respect. A score of American poets, such as Emerson, Dickinson, Pound, and Wright, viewed nature from a similar vantage point. And Sanchez seems to have followed the same tradition. In keeping with this tradition, the haiku poet may aim not only at expressing sensation but also at generalizing and hence depersonalizing it. This characteristic can be shown even by one of Basho’s lesser-known haiku:

Hiya hiya to How cool it is,
Kabe wo fumaete Putting the feet on the wall:
Hirune kana An afternoon nap.

Basho was interested in expressing how his feet, anyone’s feet, would feel when placed on the wall in the house on a warm summer afternoon. His subject was nothing other than this direct sensation. He did not want to convey any emotion, any thought, any beauty; there remained only poetry, only nature. In a similar vein Sanchez expresses, in two of the haiku included in “Naked in the Streets,” the pure sensation nature offers for human perception:

i count the morning
stars the air so sweet i turn
riverdark with sound. (8)

i come from the same
place i am going to my
body speaks in tongues. (9)

The predilection to portray human life in close association with nature means that the poet is more interested in genuinely natural sentiments than
in moral, ethical, or political problems. Looking at the wind as a primal signifier of nature, Sanchez composed two poems in “Naked in the Streets,” one entitled “Haiku” and the other “Blues Haiku”:

**Haiku**

how fast is the wind
sailing? how fast did i go
to become slow? (38)

**Blues Haiku**

let me be yo wil
derness let me be yo wind
blowing you all day. (39)

Traditionally, another singular, awe-inspiring signifier of nature in haiku is silence. Besides “The Old Pond,” Basho is known for another haiku that concerns nature’s silence, “It’s Deadly Quiet,” another well-known haiku that I compared to Wright’s haiku in chapter 9:

**It’s deadly quiet**

Piercing into the rocks
Is the shrill of cicada
(Basho)

In the middle section, “Shake Loose My Skin,” Sanchez wrote this haiku:

**how still the morning sea**

**how still this morning skin**

anointing the day. (50)

Just as Basho was awed by the silence pervading the backdrop of the scene in contrast to “the shrill of cicada,” Sanchez is struck by the equation of the stillness of both “the morning sea” and “this morning skin.” As pointed out earlier, Richard Wright, perhaps influenced by Basho, composed the following pair of haiku in which he focused on nature’s silence:

**In the silent forest**

**A woodpecker hammers at**

**The sound of silence.**

(Wright)
A thin waterfall
Dribbles the whole autumn night,—
How lonely it is.6

(Wright)

What is common in these haiku by the three poets is that the scene is drawn with little detail and the mood is provided by a simple, reserved description of fact. These haiku create the kind of beauty associated with the aesthetic sensibility of saki that suggests loneliness and quietude as opposed to overexcitement and loudness.7

Traditionally as well, the haiku in its portrayal of human beings’ association with nature expresses the poet’s enlightenment, a new way of looking at humanity and nature. In some of her poems in Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums, Sanchez follows this tradition. The second stanza in “Love Poem [for Tupac],” the following lines suggest Sanchez’s fascination with the Buddhistic worldview of reincarnation:

the old ones
say we don’t
die we are
just passing
through into
another space. (111)

The Buddhist concept of reincarnation, as discussed in my reading of Wright’s Black Power, has a striking affinity with the Akan concept of life and death. Buddhism and the Akan religion share the belief, as does Lacan, that death is not the opposite of life but that death is a continuation of life.8

The following haiku expresses not only the concept of reincarnation but also an enlightenment in Zen philosophy:

what is done is done
what is not done is not done
let it go . . . like the wind. (27)

The last line, “let it go . . . like the wind,” spontaneously expresses the truth about nature and humanity. Some of Sanchez’s haiku like this one have an affinity with the Zen concept of mu. This state of nothingness, as discussed earlier, is devoid of all thoughts and emotions that are derived from human subjectivity and egotism and contrary to the conscious or unconscious truth
represented by nature. An enlightened person is liberated from the self-centered worldview, convention, or received opinion that lacks fairness and justice. While Sanchez, in the first two lines of this haiku, describes facts in human life, she, in the last line, as a Zen master gives the admonition that one must emulate the principles of nature in molding one's conduct and action.

Another haiku by Sanchez, included at the end of “Naked in the Streets,” also concerns the Zen-like discipline of thought:

let us be one with  
the earth expelling anger  
spirit unbroken. (44)

In the middle section of “Shake Loose My Skin,” Sanchez composed another Zen-inspired haiku:

you are rock garden  
austere in your loving  
in exile from touch. (97)

In these haiku Sanchez tries to render the austerity of the human mind by viewing nature as a revelation.

Not only do many of Sanchez's haiku follow Zen doctrine; they also share the aesthetic principles that underlie classic haiku. One of the most delicate principles of Eastern art is called *yugen*, mentioned earlier. Originally *yugen* in Japanese art was an element of style pervasive in the language of *noh*. It was also a philosophical principle that originated in Zen metaphysics. In Zen, every individual possesses Buddhahood and must realize it. *Yugen*, as applied to art, designates the mysterious and dark, what underlies the surface. This mode of expression, as I have noted earlier, is subtle rather than obvious, suggestive rather than declarative. *Yugen* functions in art as a means by which human beings can comprehend the course of nature. Although *yugen* seems allied with a sense of resignation, it has a far different effect upon the human psyche. The style of *yugen* can express either happiness or sorrow. Cherry blossoms, however beautiful they may be, must fade away; love between man and woman is inevitably followed by sorrow.

The sense of loss also underlies the principle of *yugen*. Sanchez's first tanka in “Naked in the Street” expresses such a sentiment:

i thought about you  
the pain of not having
you cruising my bones.
no morning saliva smiles this
frantic fugue about no you. (18)

A pair of blues haiku, included in the same section, figure a brightened sense of *yugen*:

when we say good-bye
i want yo tongue inside my
mouth dancing hello. (16)

you too slippery
for me. can’t hold you long or
hard. not enough nites. (17)

As aesthetic principles, *yugen* and the blues share the sentiments derived from private and personal feelings. As modes of expression, the blues stylistically differs from *yugen* since, as Amiri Baraka has observed, the blues “issued directly out of the shout and of course the spiritual” (62). Whereas *yugen* is characterized by reservation and modesty, the blues tradition calls for worldly excitement and love. Unlike *yugen*, the blues confine its attention solely to the immediate and celebrates the bodily expression: both “When We Say Good-Bye” and “You Too Slippery” convey direct, unreserved sexual manifestations. Most importantly, Sanchez tries to link the blues message with sexually charged language so as to liberate black bodies from the distorted images slavery inflicted.

That the blues tradition has a greater impact on Sanchez’s poetry than does the aesthetics of *yugen* can be seen in the way Sanchez constructs her imagery. If imagery in classic haiku is regarded as indirect and suggestive, the imagery in Sanchez’s poetry has the directness and clarity of good prose as opposed to the suggestiveness and vagueness of symbolist poetry. The first poem in “Naked in the Streets” has an extremely sensuous image: dancing is described in terms of “corpuscles sliding in blood” (3). In the second poem of the same section, a haiku quoted earlier, the central image of running “naked in the streets” does not suggest anything other than what it describes:

you ask me to run
naked in the streets with you
i am holding your pulse. (4)
In another poem, a blues haiku in “Shake Loose My Skin,” a series of images consist of instantaneous actions:

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legs wrapped around you
camera. action. tightshot.
this is not a rerun. (68)
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Both poems have an affinity with imagistic poems in the expression of love, such as Pound’s “Alba”:

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As cool as the pale wet leaves
of lily-of-the-valley
She lay beside me in the dawn.
(Personae 109)
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In this haiku-like poem, what Pound expressed was not the personal feeling he had about the woman lying beside him at dawn but his spontaneous sensation of the coolness of “the pale wet leaves / of lily-of-the-valley.” Likewise, the actions themselves of running “naked in the streets” and “legs wrapped around you” were Sanchez’s subjects in the poems.

Such poems as “You Ask Me to Run” and “Legs Wrapped around You” bear a structural resemblance as well to Pound’s famous imagistic haiku, “In a Station of the Metro,” quoted earlier. Unlike Sanchez’s haiku, Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” is constructed in two lines simply because Pound had in mind “a form of super-position” in which the poem was to be composed. “In a poem of this sort,” he explained, “one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (“Vorticism” 467). Compared to Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” Sanchez’s “You Ask Me to Run” has a similar structure in imagery. Just as in the other haiku, “Legs Wrapped around You,” Sanchez in this poem is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective, that is, running “naked in the streets,” transforms itself or darts into a thing inward and subjective, that is, the image of “I am holding your pulse.” The image of running “naked in the streets” is based in immediate experience, whether real or imagined since Sanchez lived in Philadelphia. Not only did she see the “thing,” but it must have generated such a sensation that she could not shake it from her mind.

Most discussions about the genesis of the imagist movement are speculative at best. Pound’s insistence that an image in poetry must be active rather than passive suggests that a modernist poem such as Pound’s and
Sanchez's is not a description of something, but, as Aristotle said of tragedy, an action. Pound approaches Aristotelianism in his insistence that the image of the faces in the crowd in his metro poem was not simply a description of his sensation at the station but an active entity capable of dynamic development. According to his experience, this particular image instantly transformed itself into another image, the image of the petals on a wet, black bough. To Pound the success of this poem resulted from his instantaneous perception of the relatedness between the two entirely different objects. Although in Sanchez's poems the two related objects are not entirely different, as in Pound's “In a Station of the Metro,” Sanchez's images, like Pound's, are strikingly active and instantaneous rather than symbolic and suggestive.

2.

Although most of the short poems collected in Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums are stylistically influenced by the poetics of haiku as well as by the aesthetics of modernist poetry, much of Sanchez's ideological concern is postmodern, postcolonial, and African American. Many of her poems aim at teaching African Americans to achieve individualism and value their heritage. Even such a haiku as

mixed with day and sun
i crouched in the earth carry
you like a dark river. (36)

succinctly expresses what Langston Hughes does in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”:

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to
New Orleans, and
I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(Selected Poems 4)

Sanchez and Hughes are both portraying how the African American soul, a symbol of humanity, is deeply embedded in the earth. The soul, as Hughes sees, “has grown deep like the rivers”; anyone endowed with it, like Sanchez, carries anyone else “like a dark river.”

Hughes’s signifying thrives on a chain of signs, signifiers, and signifieds. While “the Euphrates,” “the Congo,” “the Nile,” and “the Mississippi” are all signs of great rivers, they also signify different human histories. All of the signifieds in turn signify yet other historical events. For African Americans, “the Mississippi” signifies its “singing . . . when Abe Lincoln / went down to New Orleans”; not only does it signify “its muddy bosom,” but its signified in turn signifies a beautiful image, the golden river under sunset. Sanchez’s haiku, on the other hand, consists of fewer but nonetheless equally powerful signs, signifiers, and signifieds: the words “mixed,” “day,” “sun,” “i,” “crouched,” “earth,” “carry,” “you,” “dark,” and “river.” These words express natural, spontaneous human sentiments, as do those in classic haiku, rather than emotional, personal feelings. In fact, an epiphany given in Sanchez’s haiku, “Mixed with Day and Sun,” bears a strong resemblance to a cross-cultural vision captured in Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”

Sanchez’s most important thematic concern is love of humanity, an act of faith that must begin with self-love. The last poem in the collection, dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks, is a response and rejoinder to such a poem as Brooks’s “The Mother.” Not only is Brooks portrayed as “a holy one,” but she has also become a universal symbol of the mother with enduring love and humanity:

for she is a holy one
restringing her words
from city to city
so that we live and
breathe and smile and
breathe and love and
breath her . . .
this Gwensister called life. (133)
The sign that Sanchez’s “For Sister Gwen Brooks” shares with Brooks’s “The Mother” signifies the universal vision that love emanates from mother. Sanchez’s refrain “for she is a holy one” further signifies the goddess worshiped among the Ashanti and the female king who owns her children, as described in Richard Wright’s Black Power. In Pagan Spain, as Wright speculates, universal motherhood has derived from the Virgin Mary, “Maya, the mother of Buddha,” and “Isis, mother of Horus.” As Wright remarks, “Egyptians worshiped Isis . . . and she was called Our Lady, the Queen of Heaven, Mother of God” (Pagan Spain 65).

In “The Mother,” Brooks, referring to the issue of abortion as a sign, makes it signify the universal issue of love. The opening lines graphically describe the lifeless fetuses:

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,

“The damp small pulps,” a signified, in turn signifies “[the] singers and workers,” the objects of motherly love, who would have flourished if their unborn bodies had not been aborted:

The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

Brooks as a mother expresses her remorse for aborting her children as if she committed a crime:

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children.
I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck
And your lives from your unfinished reach,
If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your deaths,

Toward the end of the poem, however, the issue of abortion signifies that of nurture. Millions of children the world over, born of poverty and neglect, are Brooks’s ultimate issue and concern. While the poem, on the surface, depicts the abortion of a fetus, Brooks appeals to the moral conscience of adults with profound love and compassion for children. The poem is also a social protest in allusion to the issue of nurturing children instead of a debate on the issue of abortion in itself:

If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.
Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?—
...........................................
You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

(Selected Poems 4–5)

Brooks agonizes over the callousness of society, which stunted and killed children, who would have become “singers and workers.” “The Mother,” then, reads as an admonition that neglect of children is the fault of society, not that of mother. It is only natural and universal that mother should love child; it is unnatural and immoral that society should refuse to nurture children.

The penultimate poem in Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums is dedicated to Cornel West. In contrast to the rest of the poems, it is a prose poem like Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Cornel West, a Harvard professor, is not presented as a spokesman of the academia but is characterized as a cultural activist like Whitman, Hughes, and Brooks, each of whom in a unique way sought to apotheosize the humanity of the land. Sanchez sees West as a foremost individual at the dawn of the twenty-first century, a spokesperson always “questioning a country that denies the sanctity, the holiness of children, people, rivers, sky, trees, earth” (130). Sanchez urges the reader to “look at the father in him. The husband in him. The activist in him. The teacher in him. The lover in him. The truth seeker in him. The James Brown dancer in him. The reformer in him. The defender of people in him. The intellectual in him” (130–31). West is
This man. Born into history. This humanist. This twenty-first-century traveler pulling us screaming against our will towards a future that will hold all of humankind in an embrace. He acknowledges us all. The poor. Blacks and whites. Asians and Native Americans. Jews and Muslims. Latinos and Africans. Gays and Lesbians. (131)

Rather than dwelling on the racial conflict and oppression the country has suffered, Sanchez admonishes the reader to see cross-pollination in the various cultures brought together to the land.

Whether *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* is Sanchez’s best work remains to be seen in the generations to come, but her effort to use diverse principles of aesthetics in molding her poetry has few precedents in American literature. Thematically, nineteenth-century American poets such as Emerson, Poe, Dickinson, and Whitman were partly influenced by various cultural and religious thoughts, just as twentieth-century American poets such as Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Richard Wright, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder at some points in their careers emulated Eastern poetics. Sanchez, on the other hand, remains one of the accomplished contemporary American poets writing from the perspective of cross-cultural visions in shaping the form and content of her poetry.