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Global Haiku

Reader Response Essay

**Social Justice, Love, and Heartbreak:
A Reader's Response Essay to Kalamu ya Salaam Haiku**

Kalamu ya Salaam means "pen of peace" and that is what Salaam uses his voice for in his writing (Jones, *Kalamu ya Salaam*). Salaam writes and performs jazz haiku and other types of haiku. He often writes about the black community and relationships. Some of his haiku are in the traditional 5-7-5 format but not all. Salaam also includes many metaphors in his work that add to his crisp imagery. I was initially interested by Salaam's focus on social justice in his haiku. Social justice is something that I am passionate about and I hadn't read any haiku about it until I read one of Salaam's haiku in *Haiku: The Art of the Short Poem*.

official death count
excludes so called looters, shot
on sight of their skin

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Haiku: The Art of the Short Poem*, p.30

I thought this haiku was formatted brilliantly. It immediately stuck out to me in this collection. The inclusion of "shot" on the second line which then leads into the line that talks about racism. The word "shot" is after a comma, brief but important. This haiku talks about the very real issue of police brutality and racism. It feels poignant in this time as the Black Lives Matter movement has picked up support but also opposition. This haiku has a good build to it. Salaam starts with a death count which could be for anything, then he talks about looters and shootings, and finally he talks about race. This shows how black people have been suppressed and how even their deaths are covered up by the media and government. Yes, the people in the poem were looters, but they might not have been shot if they were white looters. I had not found a haiku, until this one, that had eloquently noted the scary reality of racism in America.

(for Mandela)
emerging from jail
their dragon, our butterfly
his smile is so huge

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 112

This poem is another show of Kalamu ya Salaam's purposefulness in his writing. My favorite line is "their dragon, our butterfly". I get chills every time I read this line. I am not black so I cannot speak to the specific admiration of Mandela that Salaam experiences. However, I have people that I look up to that others condemn. I know the feeling of pride that happens when someone who I fight for and who fights for me experiences a victory. The juxtaposition of a dragon and a butterfly, two winged creatures but complete opposites, is beautiful. This haiku also starts with a potentially sad line, "emerging for jail" but the haiku ends on a positive note, "his smile is so huge". I know that I love a haiku that turns around and is unexpected. This haiku by Kalamu ya Salaam provided that. Furthermore, I sometimes struggle with dedicated haiku because I can feel like I am missing something by not having known the person. But I didn't feel that way with this haiku. I think it has to do with the fact that Nelson Mandela is someone that a lot of people know. This haiku is not just from Salaam to Mandela, but rather captures the feeling of a community who are grateful and look up to Mandela.

black people believe in god, and
 i believe in
 black people, amen.

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 45

This haiku is stunningly beautiful to me. Kalamu ya Salaam said in an interview with Rudolph Lewis that he is spiritual but doesn't believe in any god (Lewis, *Rudolph Lewis Interviews Kalamu ya Salaam*). I found this interesting and also represented by this haiku. I think that Salaam is trying to capture the feeling that the universe has to be on your side sometimes. It feels optimistic and loving to me. Salaam writes about the struggles and strengths of black people in his haiku and this one classifies as a strength one to me. He fully believes in the fortitude of black people even if he doesn't believe in a god. I especially love the inclusion of "amen" at the end. Salaam writes this haiku like a prayer. This haiku is about the power of beliefs and unity as shown by the repetition of "believe" in lines 1 and 2 written in third person and then first person.

i enter your church
 you receive my offerings
 our screaming choirs merge

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 79

This haiku begins to branch into Kalamu ya Salaam's love and relationship haiku but still continues with religious or spiritual undertones. In this case it appears that "church" and "offerings" are referring to bodies and sexuality. This is something that other writers use since religion often calls the body a temple or sacred. I like the use of "i" and "my" in this haiku. If this haiku had been written in third person I don't know if it would have been as strong. I also find it interesting that someone who does not believe in God still turns to religious imagery. It could be because a lot of people understand it, or it could be that the metaphor is also a strong juxtaposition of religion and sexuality. Whatever it is, I think the metaphor strengthens this haiku, which is difficult to do.

thought i was gone but
 my train rumbles in circles
 each station is you

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 49

I like this haiku because I still don't know if I fully understand it. I have two readings for this haiku, and it changes based on what I imagine comes before the first line. If it is "I" then it makes the haiku a struggle that the speaker is experiencing because they cannot stop thinking about this person. If the word before the first line is "you" then the haiku becomes scary for the "you" in this person because the speaker won't leave them alone. The reading I take changes the feel of the haiku for me. In the first scenario it is sad and longing while in the second scenario it is haunting. I like the first reading because of how I interpret the second line. When Salaam writes "my train rumbles in circles" I imagine someone who is unable to get off of a spinny roller coaster and is sick because of the constant turning. The line seems like the speaker is forced into the circles because it is the train that is moving rather than the speaker. This haiku also includes another metaphor which shows me that Salaam is talented when including metaphors in his haiku and should be an example of how metaphors can be beneficial in haiku if they are used properly.

love gone is bird flown
 sad sunset song tartly sung
 without harmony

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 123

This haiku may have my heart. I love the amount of description that Salaam includes. It is also one of his haiku that follows the 5-7-5 pattern that people in America are taught growing up. However, it was so good that I didn't even notice. I know that reading it out loud would be like sweet sugar which is another testament to Salaam's writing ability. I love the word "tartly" in this poem. When I read it I could taste a sweet, fruity pie even though this haiku has nothing to do with food. I imagined pursing my lips as I deal with a harsh flavor in the same way that the body clenches when something is painful. To me there are three comparisons to lost love: "bird flown", "sad sunset", and "song tartly sung/without harmony". But all of these could also be combined: a single bird flying at sunset and chirping away. These two readings combined remind me of the phrase, "don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened". Losing love sucks, but at least the speaker got to experience it for a time.

Nothing else changes one's
Life as much as does love or
The absence thereof

Kalamu ya Salaam, Catfish and Yellowgrits, Haiku 130

This is a haiku of Kalamu ya Salaam that I was able to listen to. It included Aminisha Ferdinand who spoke the haiku along with Salaam. There was music that included strings, percussion, and electronic sounds and built as they both repeated the first and second lines of the poem. They then say "or/The absence thereof" at the end of the piece. It was very powerful, and I wish I could hear all of these haiku out loud. This haiku has a great message about choosing love over hate as do many of Salaam's haiku. I would consider this one his social justice haiku because love is often a buzzword in movements. My first thought was of the signs that say, "love trumps hate". The language in this haiku is also interesting. The word "as" is used before and after "much" in the second line. I think this makes the haiku have a specific voice because it is written as if a person is speaking. I don't believe that is correct grammar, but it flows in the haiku. Furthermore, the word "thereof" is a specific word that I don't hear very often in poems which adds to the unique quality of this haiku.

summer rain showers
fall, in renegade silence
i strip search my soul

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 7

This haiku has a lot of opposing forces that intrigue me. The first line "summer rain showers" is peaceful to me but then the words "renegade" and "strip search" add an abrasive tone to this haiku. The speaker appears to be struggling through some introspection at this moment. "[S]trip search" is a powerful phrase and for a lot of people it means an awful, degrading experience. People are at their most vulnerable and their physical selves are revealed. The inclusion of "my soul" after "strip search" tells the reader that this is not a literal strip search but is an investigation of one's own person. Throughout all of Kalamu ya Salaam's haikus I have admired his tenacity and ability to craft unique haiku. I don't think any other poet would have come up with a poem like this because of its specificity and imagery. I admire Salaam's ability to write in this way.

there's no night so long
that we cannot ride through to
taste tomorrow's dawn

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 1

In this haiku Kalamu ya Salaam once again uses the 5-7-5 format in an effortless way. I think every word serves a purpose and it doesn't feel too short or too long. My favorite part of this haiku is the last line "taste tomorrow's dawn". I imagined the sunrise to taste like honey as it slowly moved into the day. Another image that this haiku created for me was a man riding a chariot in the sky pulled by two black horses towards the sunrise. I also love the positivity of this haiku. I was just talking to my counselor about the fact that right now is difficult for me, but I know that there is a better time in the future if I can just make it through. Kalamu ya Salaam captured this sentiment perfectly in this haiku.

what we know limits
us, wisdom loves everything
not yet understood

Kalamu ya Salaam, *Nia: Haiku, Sonnets, Sun Songs*, 100

This haiku exemplifies Kalamu ya Salaam's haiku that don't include imagery but manage to leave a reader with a lot. This haiku made me recall when I was told the difference between knowledge and wisdom. I was told that wisdom is an action that you take with the knowledge you have. You are only considered wise if you use that knowledge in the best way, but you cannot judge an action as wise until it happens. This haiku also tells the reader that wisdom can constantly grow and change while knowledge is a solid entity. I like how he ends the first line with "limits" even though that is not the end of a thought. It shows a physical limitation on the page. I also like the personification of wisdom. Salaam writes, "wisdom loves everything/not yet understood" which makes the reader consider wisdom with more gravitas. Finally, I love the use of first person with "we" and "us" which tells the reader that anyone can access wisdom.

As I read the haiku of Kalamu ya Salaam I learned more about the use of metaphor in haikus, poetry as social commentary, and specificity of language. Salaam has a wide range of haiku that all include his distinct voice. When I read them, I hear his voice in my head. I think Salaam is an important poet to read because of his social justice haiku that differ so greatly from most haiku found in collections. I believe that art is more than entertainment and Kalamu ya Salaam has found his corner of the written arts.

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