

Sonia Sanchez and Haiku

Sonia Sanchez has chosen haiku for many decades to create magic in the now and to throw down sacred words with the power of healing past trauma. As a writer of the Black Arts movement, like Amiri Baraka, she has also consistently affirmed African culture and turned to an “ancient image” of African civilization to nurture her vision. This writing assignment explores Sanchez’s wide-ranging development of new strategies within haiku — techniques that, in the words of Baraka, “raise up, return, destroy, and create,” knocking down almost all of the traditional conventions for haiku to chart her own journey as a Black woman poet.

According to the scholar Meta L. Schettler, Sanchez’s continuing attention to African culture has allowed her to lay claim to natural images within haiku while navigating the tensions of an exploitative, nihilistic past that destroyed African life as ordinary practice. Sonia Sanchez covers a wide range of historical topics in her haiku, including the 1985 MOVE bombing in West Philadelphia, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the courageous actions of Harriet Tubman in the abolitionist movement affirming a collective consciousness and implicitly calling for increased activism for social justice. Sonia Sanchez relates her own understanding of spirituality, self-discovery, and scholarship to her reading of Egyptian and West African philosophies that affirm unbroken connections between the New World and African civilizations, and these connections inevitably influence her approach to writing haiku.