

The Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry Emory University

2023-2024 Great Works Seminar

Poems to Map a Crisis: Matsuo Bashō's Japanese Haiku Classic *Narrow Road to the Interior* (*Oku no hosomichi*) in an Era of Environmental Change

April 8, 15, 22 & 29, 2024 • 6pm-7:30pm

Moderated by Cheryl Crowley, Ph.D. (she/her)
Associate Professor of Japanese Literature and Cultures

Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) is the most famous writer of haiku, the short-form poem that has become one of Japan's best-known literary exports. Bashō's *Narrow Road to the Interior* (*Oku no hosomichi*) combines haiku verse and prose to describe his 1689 journey through the rural areas in Japan's northeast. An account of chance encounters, dangerous roads, and visits to famous historical sites, *Narrow Road to the Interior* is admired for its exploration of the potential of poetry in navigating human relationships with the natural world. For centuries it has inspired countless writers--both inside and outside Japan--to compose similar works.

However, *Narrow Road to the Interior* reads differently in the 21st century. Bashō's haiku foreground nature's changes precisely because those changes were predictable. How then, as seasonal cycles destabilize, do we read haiku? How do we imagine Bashō's "interior" when the aftereffects of the 2011 earthquake in Tōhoku (the *oku* or "interior" of the work's title) have rendered parts of it uninhabitable?

Using *Narrow Road to the Interior* as a point of departure, we will reflect on the potential of this text -- and literature more broadly -- to help us explore climate change. We will read and discuss the text itself, consider its role in Japanese and global literary history, and discuss the genre of haiku past and present. Depending on interest, we may explore *Narrow Road to the Interior's* literary sources or look at some of the works it influenced. Finally, we may workshop ideas about participants' own writing in a similar mode.

This Great Works Seminar will meet at **The Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry @ Emory University** from **6pm-7:30pm** on the following **Monday** evenings: **April 8, 15, 22 & 29**. Participants are expected to attend all four sessions. For further information and to reserve a spot on a first-come basis, email the Fox Center at foxcenter@emory.edu. Everyone from the Atlanta community is welcome and invited to join us for this free seminar.

