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Remembering Kyoko Selden

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For this volume honoring her memory and providing a glimpse into her extensive accomplishments, it is my honor to offer words of tribute for Kyoko Selden, my colleague of over two decades at Cornell University. By the time this special issue goes to press, it will have been two years since Kyoko's untimely passing on January 20, 2013. Our shock over losing her so abruptly at that time, however, was tempered by a different kind of surprise. With the parameters of her life suddenly starkly fixed, we for the first time took stock of Kyoko's creative oeuvre in its entirety. Calligraphy, paintings, poetry, diaries, manuscripts for translations long since published as books, as well as for ambitious translations still underway, appeared from bookshelves, closets, and file boxes of her home. It was as if, against the backdrop of that muted January landscape, when we could no longer hear Kyoko's gentle, mischievous voice nor see her bundled in the winter coat that was twice her size, the outlines of her accomplishments emerged the more powerfully.

I have heard that in a poem produced some years ago for a family contest, Kyoko expressed astonishment that she had ended up living so long in Ithaca. Indeed, it was in Ithaca that she raised her family, and it was Cornell that was her professional base. While here, Kyoko was continuously involved in publication projects that spanned what emerged as her four great areas of interest: literature and poetry of all periods, but especially by women; writings by atomic bomb survivors, writings by Ainu, and most recently writings from Okinawa. In addition to works she published discretely in journal issues, exhibition catalogues, and anthologies, Kyoko was also author, translator, or editor (the latter most often with friend and colleague, Mizuta Noriko, as well as with her husband, Mark) of six books. An unfinished, annotated translation of the medieval *Taiheiki: The Chronicle of Great Peace* was also found among her files.

If to a broader world of readers Kyoko Selden was most prominently known as a translator of works by distinguished Japanese authors, and at Cornell as a revered teacher

of language, in retrospect it is clear that she was first and foremost a scholar. Looking back, it now seems that teaching, translation, and scholarship were indistinguishable for Kyoko. Of course, we often hear that research and teaching should enrich each other. But Kyoko's spirit could never be captured by such a cliché. Rather, we might say that a fierce intellectual curiosity and passion for expressive media, especially language, music, and the graphic arts, simply compelled Kyoko to explore the materials she taught with such intensity and in such detail.

It is true that Kyoko took up in the classroom texts that were relevant to her translation projects. But the reverse was also the case. For she just as often guided other readers and translators, whether students, fellow faculty, or colleagues and friends elsewhere, through the linguistic intricacies of the texts they were working on, relishing the work as if it were her own. Her contributions to doctoral dissertations written at Cornell, for example, were immense, and will be lasting. As one former student recalled of the T. A. room near her office: "Three other students were gathered there, bent over texts as I was about to be. Someone asked me what I was working on, and I said it was an independent study with Selden-*sensei*. One after the next, each graduate student revealed what he was working on—*kuzushiji*, modern poetry, Buddhist texts in *kanbun*, Meiji political tracts—all for independent studies with her."¹ New requests for help seemed only to reveal greater depths of Kyoko's knowledge, although she was also often learning as she taught. Her fascination with the rhythms, scripts, puns, and dialects she found in whatever she was reading, and her drive for precision, were legendary.

Kyoko prepared her teaching materials with a kind of artistry, always mindful of how a printed text could evoke rich sensuous associations. While working on the translation of *Harukor*, she brought to the classroom recordings of Ainu story telling collected by Kindaichi Kyōsuke. Or, she would include a hand-colored illustration of persimmons in her course reader.² She learned early on to use the computer as a resource—whether it was to reproduce orthography that had not been preserved in the contemporary edition of a literary work, to fashion artful classroom materials, or to create, through desktop publishing, anthologies of translations and essays in Japanese produced by her students each year. As many of us know, the translations usually made their way into published anthologies (*The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, co-edited with Mark Selden, 1989; *More Stories by Japanese Women Writers*, co-edited with Noriko Mizuta, 2011), where they appeared under the names of these former students who by then were Kyoko's colleagues and friends. Best of all, whenever possible, Kyoko introduced students to the authors of works they read. Together with scholar/editor husband Mark, she was part of a rich network of Japanese artists, activists, and intellectuals who often visited them in Ithaca. Parties at their home for Tawada Yōko and Hayashi Kyōko (with Kyoko's signature poached salmon at the center of the table) were particularly memorable.

Friends in Ithaca were familiar with the sight of Kyoko, sitting at her large desk beside a picture window, working well into the night. This will perhaps become an indelible image. In those long hours, she was certainly simultaneously teacher, scholar, and translator. While then and now, we could never be inside Kyoko's mind, the sheer volume of what she left behind suggests just how vivid the mental experience of moving, ceaselessly, between one language and another must have been for her. The imaginative hearing and seeing involved forged connections to dense histories, to people Kyoko in some cases knew, and to many she would never meet.

Expressions of profound indebtedness for her tact and generosity have also been staples of reminiscences about Kyoko. These are primarily from those she assisted and instructed in their work with the Japanese language. Kyoko deserves every word of these and more. But we should not overlook a deep wisdom she herself tried to exemplify. As if keenly aware of the fundamental sociality of language, Kyoko repeatedly stressed that the best translation work involved collaboration. She not only assisted others, but readily allowed her work to be read and edited by them. This was true of beloved family members Mark, and daughters Lili (co-translator of Kayano Shigeru's *Our Land Was a Forest*, 1994, and Yumi. (It seems only Kyoko's son Ken was a uniquely musical being.) Free-spiritedly, then, Kyoko sent almost all of her major projects out into the world as collaborations. Perhaps this can be another lesson conveyed to all of us—colleagues, friends, and readers yet to be known—by the works collected here in her honor.

(January 11, 2014)

Notes

1.	for Kyoko Selden.	tribute, <i>H-Japan</i> , January 23, 2013.
My thanks to Dan McKee for sharing words from his memorial statement	2.
I take the detail from Mark Maguire's	
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