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: More Stories by Japanese Women Writers : An  
Anthology

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[Book Review]

Selden, K., & Mizuta N. (Eds.) (2011)  
*More Stories by Japanese Women Writers: An Anthology.*  
New York: M. E. Sharpe (247 pages)

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With the pleasant regularity of a metronome, editors Noriko Mizuta and Kyoko Selden have succeeded in publishing anthologies of Japanese women writers for three decades, offering Anglo-phonics readers choice stories that amply demonstrate the immense range and creativity of modern and contemporary authors. In 1982, Mizuta and Selden translated and edited *Stories by Contemporary Japanese Women Writers*; in 1991, *Stories by Contemporary Japanese Women Writers* appeared, and in 2011, the most recent of this editorial duo's efforts materialized with the publication of *More Stories by Japanese Women Writers: An Anthology*. The present volume includes a selection of short fiction by Higuchi Ichiyō, Tamura Toshiko, Chiri Yukie, Ozaki Midori, Mori Mari, Hayashi Kyōko, Tsushima Yūko, Saegusa Kazuko, Kurahashi Yumiko, Ogino Anna, Ogawa Yōko, Yū Miri, Sakiyama Tami, Tawada Yōko, Shōno Yoriko, and Kawakami Mieko.

Readers will be pleased to find that unlike the 1991 anthology, largely comprised of the same stories found in the 1982 anthology, albeit slightly revised, virtually all the writers (fifteen of sixteen authors) in *More Stories by Japanese Women Writers: An Anthology* are not represented in the earlier anthologies. The sole exception to this rule is Hayashi Kyōko, whom Mizuta and Selden previously introduced with the inclusion of "Yellow Sand," a story based on the author's childhood memories of Shanghai. It is certainly true that Hayashi has delighted her readers with several stories that are set in Shanghai during the colonial period and told through the viewpoint of a child much like the author. However, since Hayashi, herself a victim of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, has not veered from her mission to serve as the "reciter of August 9<sup>th</sup>" (*hachigatsu kokonoka no kataribe*) and has made the atomic bombing and its aftereffects the central theme of her oeuvre since her Akutagawa Prize-winning 1975 debut *Ritual of Death (Matsuri no ba)*, the editors' decision to include a signature A-bomb piece, the unforgettable "Masks of Whatchamacallit" by the author, is a sound one.

This volume shares with its predecessor a wide range of time, a variety of styles, and rich subject matter. Arranged chronologically, the anthology begins with "This Child," a Meiji era story published by Higuchi Ichiyō in 1895, and concludes on a contemporary note with Kawakami Mieko's 2008 "You People's Love is Near Death." Happily, the ratio between earlier and more recent works is not skewed: four stories were published prior to 1934 and six are from after 1987. Literary style ranges from the formal writing of Mori Mari to the colloquial style of Yū Miri; from standard language used in several stories to regional dialects used by Sakiyama Tami (Okinawa) and Ogino Anna (Kansai); and from romanticism (Mori Mari) to realism (Hayashi Kyōko), to dreamscapes (Saegusa Kazuko), and to the surreal (Ozaki Midori). Subject matter includes preg-

nancy, abortion, maternity, and marriage, topics perhaps unsurprising given the volume's concentration on writing by women. However, in addition to these well-worn themes are stories that focus on parental loss, bullying, the creative process, and the destruction of nature, whether by bow and arrow, industrialization, or the atomic bomb.

While the broad range of time, styles, and subject matter is noteworthy, what I find remarkable about this volume is the editors' inclusion of stories by three ethnic minorities. The first is told by Chiri Yukie, a writer of Ainu descent known for pioneering the transcription and translation of Ainu oral tradition into modern Japanese.<sup>1</sup> In "The Song the Owl God Himself Sang: 'Silver Droplets Fall Fall All Around,'" one of thirteen songs of gods, the Owl God tells of the good fortune that comes to a pauper family whose child, unlike children of the rich who thoughtlessly shoot with their golden bows, refuses to shoot the Owl God with his plain bow and arrow. With their fortunes reversed, the family thereafter never fails to remember the Owl God with a ceremonial gift, bringing peace to the village. The tale suggests that the boy's refusal to harm the bird reveals his reverence for nature, without which discord would befall the earth. Chiri's translation of the original Ainu is widely recognized for its poetic beauty, and Kyoko Selden's translation of the Japanese captures this well in her English.

If Chiri Yukie's "The Song the Owl God Himself Sang" rails against the onslaught of nature by man, then in "The Tale of Wind and Water," Sakiyama Tami, a writer of Okinawan descent, lays waste to the stereotype of the healing "island girl," exotic and submissive. The story, told through the point of view of a male reporter from mainland Japan, shows how his sense of self diminishes the longer he stays in Okinawa, where he becomes entranced by a young woman named Sato, the child of an American father and Okinawan mother. As the story unfolds, the initially exotic-seeming, blue-eyed Sato only grows in complexity. From her maternal grandmother, a war widow, who raises Sato after she is abandoned by her parents, Sato learns the language of the island (*shimakotoba*) and its songs. Nocturnal wanderings lead the male reporter away from Sato to another female, a siren-seductress whose singing of the very same traditional Okinawan song Sato's grandmother sang to her as a child, "Windmill of Flowers" (*hana nu kajimayaa*), hints that she is Sato's mother, forced into prostitution after an unsuccessful attempt to find Sato's American father in the United States. Whereas deep disappointment and betrayal estrange the women from one another, Sakiyama shows that what finally forges indestructible links among grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter is language and song.

"Tale of Wind and Water," published in 1997, marks a neat transition from Sakiyama's early stories of islands lost to stories of language lost, the former owing to depopulation and the latter to the encroachment of standard Japanese.<sup>2</sup> In her 2002 essay "A Wild Dance with Island Words" (*Shimakotoba de kachaashii*, 2002), Sakiyama writes of her methodological turn to writing fiction that destabilizes Japanese. In subsequent fiction, Sakiyama's protagonists pursue imperiled words, restoring them to life if only in the span of a given work. Even as alien words, left un glossed, threaten comprehension, Sakiyama's masterful storytelling keeps the reader engrossed. Whereas many fellow writers from Okinawa kindly provide readers aids to understand local language, Sakiyama, increasingly, does not. Hers is writing that treads a fine line between captivating and confounding readers. The breakdown in communication between the mainland Japanese male

reporter and Okinawan siren-seductress at the end of “Tale of Wind and Water” hints at the extreme direction Sakiyama’s writing has increasingly taken. Today, Sakiyama not only continues to do away with the idea of Okinawa as a place of fantasy but also resists the dominance of standard Japanese, even if this limits her readership.

The third ethnic minority writer represented in the volume is Yū Miri, who is a Zainichi writer of Korean descent. Sakiyama Tami and she are a study in contrasts. Sakiyama is not widely known despite having been nominated for the Akutagawa Prize more than once; Yū is phenomenally popular, a writer-celebrity who appears frequently on television and in newspapers. Yū has resisted the identification of her works as part of the Resident Korean literature tradition and often makes ambiguous the identity of her characters, reminding readers of the near invisibility of a diversity of ethnic backgrounds in Japan, whether Ainu, Okinawan, or Resident Korean.<sup>3</sup> In “Tidal Hour,” Yū depicts with frightening detail the dynamics of a group of upper-elementary schoolchildren who bully a transfer student who happens to be of Korean descent. The focus of the story is on the ebb and tide of the emotions of the young children, but more disturbing is the behavior of the adults in the story, from the mother who continues to leave her daughter vulnerable to bullying to the school officials who claim no bullying transpires despite clear evidence to the contrary. Even though Yū marks the victim as a Zainichi Korean, finally her story is less about the experience of life as an ethnic minority than it is a universal story of cruelty among children, particularly young girls.

In the final section of their informative Introduction, Selden and Lippit remark how in the course of the last century, women writers in Japan have gone far beyond the confines expected of them as heirs of the long tradition of females in Japan who wrote poems, tales, personal essays, memoirs, and diaries in the Nara and Heian periods to addressing contemporary issues such as war, peace, the atomic bomb, empire, and ethnicity. Even so, until the 1980s, these writers were referred to as *joryū sakka* (female-school authors). Recent changes in the literary climate, however, have resulted in blurring the long-held distinction between women writers and mainstream writers: feminists have challenged the distinction in scholarship such as the 1992 *Danryū bungaku-ron* (On Male-School Literature); the organization founded in 1936 to support women writers, Joryū bungakusha-kai (Association of Female-School Writers), dissolved in 2007; and prizes awarded to women writers have proliferated. The editors write:

The biannual Akutagawa Prize for new authors (founded in 1935) was first awarded to a woman in 1938, followed by two in the forties, four in the sixties, and five in the seventies. The number subsequently increased to seven in the eighties, ten in the nineties, and eight in the first decade of the current millennium. The Tanizaki Jun’ichirō Prize, first awarded in 1965 and given to outstanding established authors, went to four women out of nine recipients in the nineties and four out of eight in the years 2000 to 2009. Seven of fourteen winners of the Itō Sei Literary Prize between 1995 and 2009 were women. These ratios are higher than those of leading international prizes, including the Pulitzer, Booker, and Nobel literature prizes: seven out of twenty in the period 1990 to 2009, respectively, were women. In Japan, where new authors usually start by publishing short fiction in coterie literary magazines, win-

ning literary prizes is a crucial path to appearances in prestigious literary journals or books and recognition as an established writer. In addition to gains in such spheres as business, science, intellectual life, and government, women have achieved particular distinction and recognition in literature. (xxii)

By concluding their Introduction with this supporting evidence for the claim that there is no further need to separate women from mainstream literature, the editors come dangerously close to suggesting the obsolescence of an anthology such as theirs. Why continue to produce such collections if the diversity in time period, style, and themes employed by the included authors is such that no meaningful common ground, except gender, remains? Has the success of Japanese women writers today spelled the demise of future anthologies of female authors? While these and related questions crossed my mind, it must be remembered that Selden and Mizuta have persisted in making available the distinctive voices and rich linguistic approaches of women writers for very good reason. Whereas their previous anthologies were part of an effort to demarginalize women's writing, long segregated in Japan, this one, with a clear subtheme on ethnicity, goes a long way to demarginalize ethnic minority writers and bring them to the forefront of critical debate.

Its wide range of contributions of modern works and introductory and biographical information makes *More Stories by Japanese Women Writers* a valuable work. The translations, executed by no fewer than ten individuals, are quite polished. I hope that Selden and Mizuta do not cease in their efforts to draw more attention to women writers but rather show us how much they continue to mean.

#### Notes

- 1) See Sarah M. Strong's *Ainu Spirits Singing* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011) for a complete translation of Chiri Yukie's collection of Ainu tales.
- 2) See Takuma Sminkey's translation of Sakiyama Tami's *Round Trip over the Ocean (Suijo ōkan)* for an example of one of the author's lost island works in *Manoa*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2011): *Living Spirit: Literature and Resurgence in Okinawa*.
- 3) See for example Melissa L. Wender's translation of Yū Miri's "Full House" (*Furu hausu*) in *Into the Light: An Anthology of Literature by Koreans in Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

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