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Tatjana Debeljački vs. Yoko Danno

Interview

Yoko Danno

Can you tell us something about your hometown and growing up?

My hometown Kobe has a long history as a port from which ships made port since ancient times. It was an important hub for trade with China and other countries. After the Meiji Restoration (1868) many foreigners came to live in Kobe, and as a result Kobe cultivated a unique, cosmopolitan, 'haikara' (stylish) culture. Kobe survived the two destructive damages; once by bombs in 1942, and the other time by the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. Externally Kobe has greatly changed, but in spirit it is still Kobe. I was born, raised and educated in Kobe. It is my 'home,' ever.

When did you start to write and what inspires you?

Looking back, when I was a young girl and read “Wuthering Heights,” I was so captivated by the book that I wanted to write just one book in my lifetime like Emily Bronte. At that time I had no idea that it was an outrageous (and far-beyond-my-abilities) wish. And moreover, I didn’t know how to express my thoughts and feelings with words, until I met David Kidd (author of “Peking Story”), who was the instructor of American/English literature and English composition classes at Kobe University. One day he gave us each an assignment to translate a favorite Japanese poem. I found it difficult to transfer the rhythm and nuances of Japanese to English, and instead wrote a poem in English, which came out rather smoothly, I remember. It was my first poem in English. Kidd liked it a lot and encouraged me to go on writing poetry in English. Since then writing poetry in English has become my self-imposed, lifelong ‘experiment.’

When did you publish your first book and how did the success follow later?

Later, Kidd introduced me to Hisao Kanaseki (scholar/critic/essayist/poet), professor at Kobe University then, who introduced me to the poet/scholar Lindley Williams Hubbell, who was my poetry mentor until his death in 1994 (cf. “a memoir by Yoko Danno” <<http://www.themontserratreview.com/bookreviews/LWilliamsHubbell.html>>).

In 1970 Hubbell, Kanaseki and other friends raised fund and set up the IKUTA PRESS to bring out my first collection of poems, “**trilogy**.” Some reviews of the book appeared in English newspapers and magazines in Japan and one in the US. In 1972 Hubbell, Kanaseki and I, each inviting another contributor, started the annual (and later biennial) collection of poems under the title **ANTHOLOGY**. In each issue we invited a few new poets to participate. I contributed to every issue ten pages of my poems. **ANTHOLOGY** lasted until 1991.

What can you tell us about your work, prizes, journeys and friendships?

I have never been awarded any prize. My first journey abroad was to New York City in 1978. Father Mann of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, with whom I became friends via “trilogy,” invited me to come and stay in the guesthouse of the Cathedral ‘to experience New York.’ I stayed there about three

weeks and visited again in '79. My inner world expanded as well as the outer one. In effect I wrote many long poems, including **“Four Songs”** (published in *NEW DIRECTIONS 47: International Anthology of Poetry and Prose* by New Directions, New York, 1983), **“Portraits '78”** (ANTHOLOGY 79), **“Eleven-Headed-Kannon”** (ANTHOLOGY 83/84) **“Hagoromo: A Celestial Robe”** (the IKUTA PRESS, 1980) among others. A collection of my poems written during the period (1970 ~ 1987) will be due out next year, titled **“A Further Center”** (with Gary Snyder's introduction).

My next 'big' journey abroad took place in 2001, when my longtime friend Avidesh Shashaani (with whom I stayed at the Cathedral's apartment) invited me to join a workshop held by the Word Works (Washington, D. C.) in an old castle Montegufoni, near Florence, Italy. I had no idea what was expected to do at a poetry workshop, but was intrigued to stay in an old castle (which is said to have existed since Dante's days and many celebrities have stayed in), and so I joined it.

There I met a bunch of lively poets, including the fine poet/instructor Grace Cavalieri, Karren Alenier, James C. Hopkins, Sabine Pascarelli, Bernadette Geyer, Jean Emerson, Miles Moor among others. Grace published a collection of my poems **“Epitaph for memories”** (the Bunny and the Crocodile Press). With James C. Hopkins I started collaborative writing, which grew into two books: **“The Blue Door”** (the Word Works, 2008) and **“a sleeping tiger dreams of manhattan”** (the IKUTA PRESS, 2010). The latter was translated into Latvian (Mansards, Riga, 2012). James and I were invited to Poetry Days in Latvia in 2010 and 2012 and read poems from **“a sleeping tiger...”** and individual poems by each.

Do you think you have outwitted the expectations?

I have never 'expected,' but only 'hoped.' And some hopes have been realized.

How do you manage all that with so much work that you do? Do you have time for yourself? What inspires you?

At present I do mainly housework as a housewife, so I have time for myself, although not enough energy to produce much poetry. It's hard to predict what will inspire me— many times it's a word (or a phrase) in a dictionary, or a poem, or a

story. I love to read dictionaries, which are a great source of inspiration. I love to read mysteries, books on science for lay readers, encyclopedia, Wikipedia, any kind of writings or films that capture me, but generally, small daily experience and dreams are the source of my inspiration. Meanwhile, I translated the “**Kojiki**”(the Record of Old Matters), the 8th-century compilation of Japanese myths, legends, and semi-historical accounts (“**Songs and Stories of the Kojiki**,” tr., Yoko Danno, Ahadada Books, 2008, and the revised edition by Red Moon Press, 2014), which has been a great source of inspiration for my later poems. A collection of my recent poems “**Aquamarine**” was published by Glass Lyre Press (2014).

Is there anything that you could pinpoint and tell us about yourself between the dream and reality?

I try to erase the boundaries between the dream and reality in my work, but in reality, as someone said, ‘when you cut your finger, the blood is real.’

What are your plans for the future creative work?

I have a plan to bring out “**Scrolls**” with the photos, a collaborative work in progress with James C. Hopkins. <www.ikutapress.com/scrolls.html>
I have a new collection of poems (almost finished editing) to get published.

Have you achieved everything you have ever wanted to and if you could live your life again would you be an artist again?

I don’t know if I’ve ‘achieved’ everything I have wanted to. I only have tried to do as best as I could in my creative work. My output is rather small, but I feel all I have done might be integrated into one book, titled “**Yoko Danno**.” Yes, I would like to be an artist again. It’s fun!

URL: <http://www.ikutapress.com/danno3.html>

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