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“I Cannot Find Her”

The Oriental Feminine, Racial Melancholia, and Kimiko Hahn’s The Unbearable Heart

I am apparition and flesh, fantasy and nightmare. I am Suzie Wong, Madame Butterfly, Geisha Girl, China Doll, Miss Saigon. I am bargirl, prostitute, gook, dead yellow whore, slit-eye, slant-cunt, chinky slut, leather-clad dominatrix with a whip. I am adopted daughter, model minority, professional woman, sewing woman, shopkeeper, peasant woman, war bride, mail-order bride. I am petite, sexy, mysterious. Me so horny, me love you long time.—Hortense Spillers, Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book

The Oriental Feminine and Racial Melancholia

The Asian American female inhabits a position in the U.S. national unconscious that I will call the oriental feminine, a femininity produced by orientalism. Edward Said and others have noted that the “Orient” was produced discursively and epistemologically as a feminized location, (im)penetrable by the West. The metaphorical feminization of the Orient resulted in the metonymic hyperfeminization of “oriental women,” as if culture compounded gender. This oriental femininity does not correspond to the status of a subject; rather, it is a negative, enabling other of the modern subject. It is the legacy of a modernity that constructed the European male subject as the universal, representative subject of history and produced as a remainder the colonial other that remains outside history and modernity. In this essay, I explore how the Asian American

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female subject, as symbolized by the speaking subject of Kimiko Hahn's book of poetry *The Unbearable Heart*, inhabits a melancholic position that signals a racial return of the national repressed. American-born and-raised, this Asian American woman is ostensibly a legitimate citizen-subject of the U.S. nation-state, a legible subject of modernity. In reading Hahn's book, however, we find that this subject of modernity and nation nevertheless remains haunted by a specter of modernity's "other": the oriental feminine, which remains outside of modern history and modern subjectivity. The gendered racialization of the Asian American female as oriental femininity introduces an other temporality: that of the primitive, the traditional, the antique, the alien. We can thus see how racial difference forms and deforms the inhabitation of a presumably abstract and universal national citizenship.¹ Citizenship would seem to produce the Asian American female as a coherent, modern subject of the U.S. nation-state, but national racialization as well as the legacies of colonialism result in a remainder that disrupts this coherence. It is this haunting remainder that I will explore in this essay by employing the psychoanalytic concepts of melancholia and *jouissance*.

For some time, psychoanalysis has been considered suspect by scholars of critical race studies because of its universalization of white European family formation, its racist inscriptions of the figure of the primitive, and its inattention to race as a meaningful category of analysis. More recently, scholars of feminist, postcolonial, and critical race studies have been able to deploy psychoanalysis as a useful tool for analyzing racial and national difference, as well as sexual difference.² Critical race scholars have long critiqued individualist understandings of race by showing how institutional structures such as capitalism and the state profit from and reproduce racial inequalities. I would like to add to this critique of individualism from another angle, by using psychoanalysis to theorize the racial subject. Common assumptions about race in the United States include the belief that individual attitudes are uniformly racist or nonracist, and that solutions to racism lie in individual encounters of education, healing, and reconciliation. In contrast to these assumptions of the individual as the locus of wholeness, sincerity, authenticity, and sovereignty, psychoanalysis takes seriously the divisions and contradictions within a subject created by its relationship to power and discourse. Psychoanalysis provides a compelling way to analyze libidinal economies of race and nation, to understand how surplus pleasures as well as surplus wealth are extracted from our

social relations (Lane 1998, 5). What enjoyment does one extract from, and invest in, formations of race, gender, and nation? How is racial difference the site of collective and ambivalent fantasies, desires, and anxieties? This essay focuses on the “oriental feminine” as one such site of racial fantasy, desire, anxiety, and enjoyment.

Contemporary analyses of racial representation tend to operate within the Lacanian registers of the imaginary and the symbolic. The imaginary refers to the dyadic relation between the ego and its images, the symbolic to the relation between the subject and culture. Critics of visual culture and media have demonstrated how patterns of racial images constitute the U.S. racial imaginary, theorizing how spectators may absorb particular images as “self,” “other,” or some complex mix. We may think of the various hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses about race as constituting the U.S. racial symbolic. In examining images and ideologies of the oriental feminine, my essay adds to these analyses of the national racial imaginary and symbolic. I want to show, however, that the oriental feminine is the site not only of imaginary and symbolic fantasy, but also the site of the traumatic real. The Lacanian real pertains to that which cannot be symbolized or imagined. This “real” does not refer to an empirical prediscursive reality, but rather to a residue, blockage, or excess of the symbolic. The real is that which must be excluded from our symbolic universe for us to maintain a coherent sense of reality. That is, the exclusion of the real constitutes reality, because our sense of reality is symbolic. The collapse of the symbolic would result in psychosis, the disintegration of reality. This is why the real is traumatic—it threatens our sense of reality. Although we are compelled toward the real in the form of *jouissance*, which promises a primordial, presymbolic wholeness, this *jouissance* is traumatic because its pleasures are so excessive as to be unbearable. Fantasy operates as a support of reality and subjectivity by veiling over the trauma of the real. On a national level, antagonisms and contradictions that prevent the nation from achieving the form of a coherent, self-sufficient whole function as its traumatic real, and ideologies of racial, gendered, and sexual differences serve as social fantasies covering over these antagonisms and contradictions. The oriental feminine constitutes one such fantasy of this type, but Hahn’s racial melancholia exposes the real that can disrupt this national fantasy.

The poems in *The Unbearable Heart* are occasioned by the sudden death of the poet’s mother, who is killed in an automobile accident. This death is

experienced by the family as traumatic because it is unexpected, untimely, premature (26). The first poem introduces some of the main concerns of the book:

The Toll Attendant

whiter under a fluorescent halo
horn-rimmed and high-pitched
collects our coins and gives directions
to the hospital where mother's body
may be retrieved at our earliest convenience,
to a land perpetually 3:20 am
rain always raining heavily
and to where her two daughters and two sons-in-law
travel in the family station wagon
to tell father mother is gone. . . . (1)

The “fluorescent halo” suggests a convergence of the otherworldly and the everyday, and the toll attendant himself represents the potential passage between one realm and another, a passage that one may make only if one pays the toll. In reading the body of the poem, we realize that this body is missing its head: there is no subject of the adjectives “whiter” and “horn-rimmed,” of the verbs “collects” and “gives directions” in the beginning sentence. The subject lies outside the poem itself, in another realm: the title. We begin the book with a displacement of the traditional subject. This displacement might be explained by lines that describe the passage that the speaker must make: “to a land perpetually 3:20 am/rain always raining heavily” (1). This temporality of suspension, in which time does not flow forward but remains endlessly and unrelievedly still, signals the condition of trauma. Trauma is that which the subject is unable to assimilate into her symbolic universe; it is considered not so much an experience as a missed experience. Trauma can only be experienced belatedly and repeatedly, so that the past does not flow safely into the past (Caruth 1996, 1–9). Thus overwhelmed and immobilized, the traumatized subject cannot place herself into a symbolic narrative such as that of history; she is displaced from normative historical time. The speaker of Hahn’s poem cannot move into the closure represented by her father’s poignantly hopeful, and erroneous, assumption:

The toll attendant points beyond the plaza lights
into the dark that will become the hospital.
and when we reach the emergency room father smiles
glad someone will finally assure him
Maude is all right. (1)

The remainder of the book grapples with that broken hope. On an initial reading of the book in its entirety, the subsequent poems in *The Unbearable Heart* seem to overcome the temporal suspension of “The Toll Attendant,” to place the subject within a framework of normative, albeit painful, temporality. The subject marks the passage of time in the long prose poem “Cuttings”: “Two weeks now since mother died” (27); “Three months have past” (29); “The 100th Day Anniversary” (31). The poems follow an apparently normal trajectory of grief, whereby memories of the lost love-object cause sorrow, but one eventually “goes on” with one’s life. However, if we pay attention not only to the narrative and thematic trajectories, but also to the poetic trajectory of the book, we will discover an alternative reading. The book begins with a series of elegies, short poems in a conventional lyric voice mourning the mother’s death. As one continues to read, the poems become longer and increasingly fragmented, increasingly inhabited by “other” voices. These voices of alterity indicate a melancholic subject, for whom others reside within the self. The remainder of this essay will focus primarily on Hahn’s long poem “The Hemisphere,” but I will first briefly describe other poems to indicate the trajectory of Hahn’s book. “The Flooding” includes the undemarcated voice of the father who both complements and interrupts the daughter’s voice. In “Wisteria,” apparently random words not attributed to any speaker recurrently break up the narrative. “Cuttings” derives its form from the Japanese notion of *zuihitsu*, or the writing of one’s thoughts as they occur. The long poem “Cruising Barthes” incorporates quotes from critic Roland Barthes and *Life* magazine, and playfully addresses Freud and Melanie Klein. Following “Cruising Barthes” are five apparently anomalous poems that feature not an autobiographical speaker, but narrators from Japanese folktales and tales of the supernatural. The penultimate poem, “The Hemisphere: Kuchuk Hanem,” is a long, fragmented prose poem that takes up a quarter of the length of the book. “The Hemisphere” takes the form of a collage, splicing together short, discontinuous prose segments spoken by four voices made

distinct by typography, including quotations from writer Gustave Flaubert and critic Edward Said, the imagined voice of Kuchuk Hanem, a nineteenth-century Egyptian courtesan, and the voice of the autobiographical Asian American female subject at different ages. As a process of cutting apart and resuturing, and as an act of re-signification through dismemberment, Hahn's poetic technique of citation in this poem presents the subject as partial, open, and multiply inhabited. The poetic practices of citation, interruption, repetition, and mimicry in "The Hemisphere" enact the haunting of the subject by other voices, splitting apart the coherence of the conventional lyric voice. This long poem represents a radical departure from the lyric elegies that begin the book. How might we explain the poetic breakdown of lyric form and lyric voice in *The Unbearable Heart*?

The book's thematization of maternal loss and absence, which becomes assimilated into the form of a story in the book's final poem ("The Story and the Daughters"), would seem to invite a reading based on the paradigm of mourning. However, the unsettling effects of Hahn's voices of alterity within her poems suggest a more provocative paradigm: melancholia. The mother is not the only absence haunting the subject; far more disturbing and traumatizing is the spectral voice of Kuchuk Hanem, known to modern readers through the travel writings of Gustave Flaubert. We are introduced to Kuchuk Hanem in the epigraph to "The Hemisphere," a quotation from Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that describes the discursive production of a fantasized oriental feminine: "Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman. . . . He spoke for and represented her" (45). As a model, Kuchuk Hanem becomes form emptied of content, a specter giving shape to the abstract. She not only represents a particular instance of the general, but as the exemplary instance, becomes singular: rather than comprising one element in a category, she forms her own category. Hahn's poem imagines and conjures this transformation of woman into orient: "I have become a continent . . . I have become a continent. I have become half the globe . . . a hemisphere . . . a hemisphere" (47–51). These repetitions, characteristic of the poem, produce the effect of an echo, a ghostly sound that comes from no subject and no place.

I consider *The Unbearable Heart* a text of racial and sexual melancholia haunted by this colonial figure of the oriental feminine.³ In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud defines these two states as psychic responses to loss, differentiated from each other by states of closure and resolution. He

defines mourning as a finite process, one of eventually achieving closure in its breaking of libidinal attachments. Melancholia, in contrast, does not break its attachment to the object. Instead, melancholia preserves the lost object by internalizing it, and by internalizing this lost object as loss. This is why Freud says that “in grief [mourning], the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” that becomes empty (Freud 1963, 167). By incorporating into herself the lost and absent object, the melancholic subject becomes herself ghostly. If melancholia is evidence of unfinished business and unsettled accounts, Hahn’s subject internalizes and embodies this state of nonclosure.

In Hahn’s book of poetry, the trauma of the Asian American mother’s death triggers the return of colonial trauma. Hahn’s poetics of racial and gendered melancholia offer alternative temporalities and epistemologies of nation and modernity. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon notes, “the ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there . . . makes itself known or apparent to us” (1997, 8). In positing a racialized national subject haunted by the specter of colonialism, Hahn ultimately exposes the encrypted secret of U.S. nation-statehood as imperialism.⁴ Hahn’s hauntology of orientalism punctures the myths of American exceptionalism, revealing the disavowed imperialism and racism at the heart of American nationalism, the structures of violent domination underpinning the democracy and freedom promised to the abstracted national citizen-subject. We will find as we read Hahn’s book that the Asian American mother’s death results from an imperialism-derived racism, and that in passing into the status of inhuman spirit, her death conjures other specters of colonial and imperial history.

I Cannot Find Her

Following the epigraph from Said’s *Orientalism*, “The Hemisphere” begins with a scene in which the subject is a young child searching for her mother, a scene narrated in the present tense.

I am four. It is a summer midafternoon, my nap finished. I cannot find her. I hear the water in the bathroom. Not from the faucet but occasional splashes. I hear something like the bar of soap fall in. I cannot find her.

Flaubert's encounter, Flaubert's encounter, Flaubert's encounter—

I stand outside the white door. Reflected in the brass knob I see my face framed by a black pixie cut. More splashes.

I hear humming. It is mother's voice in the bathroom through the closed door and it is midafternoon. No light from beneath the door. . . . (45)

The death of the mother triggers the return of the subject to this moment at which she experiences the mother as lost and missing object. The association of the mother with water suggests an amniotic environment, promising the plenitude of what Freud calls the “oceanic feeling”⁵ of undifferentiation. However, the sounds that the child hears—the splashes of water, the bar of soap falling in water, the humming of the mother's voice—are not experienced as certainty about the mother's presence. Rather, they indicate all the more keenly the mother's unlocatability. Sound functions spectrally, hinting at but eluding full apprehension. Even as the child hears these sounds, she repeats, “I cannot find her.”

Most curious, of course, is the interruption of the phrase “Flaubert's encounter, Flaubert's encounter, Flaubert's encounter—” in the child's narration. Representing the moment of colonial modernity as the production of the European subject and its colonial other, this is a Lacanian encounter in the sense that at the meeting are not two but rather One, and an Other. It is this encounter that opens up the “time-lag” that Homi Bhabha describes as characterizing the disjunctive temporality of modernity (Bhabha 1994, 236–56). Because it creates this time-lag and disjunction, “Flaubert's encounter” remains a fragment. Failing to achieve the wholeness of a complete sentence, the fragment can only be repeated in its attempt to attain fullness. Unfinished, this moment does not remain in the past, but returns to disrupt the Asian American daughter's desire for the completion promised by union with the mother. For the Asian American female subject, the potential for full subjectivity, for *jouissance*, is interrupted by the return of colonial history, which in Hahn's poems appears in the form of Flaubert's encounter with Kuchuk Hanem.

From 1849 to 1850, Flaubert traveled through Egypt, and his travel notes and letters comprise part of a long legacy of European orientalist writing. Flaubert's writings include descriptions of his encounters with the famous courtesan Kuchuk Hanem, some of which are excerpted in “The Hemisphere”:

"Kuchuk Hanem is a tall, splendid creature, lighter in coloring than an Arab . . . slightly coffee colored. When she bends, her flesh ripples into bronze ridges . . . her black hair, wavy, unruly, pulled straight back on each side from a center parting beginning at the forehead; small braids joined together at the nape of the neck. She has one upper incisor, right, which is beginning to go bad." [FLAUBERT, 114] (50)⁶

"Kuchuk's dance is brutal. She squeezes her bare breasts together with her jacket. She puts on a girdle fashioned from a brown shawl with gold stripes, with three tassels hanging on ribbons . . ." [FLAUBERT, 115] (52)

"The oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another man. Smoking, going to the baths, painting her eyelids and drinking coffee . . . You tell me that Kuchuk's bedbugs degrade her in your eyes; for me they were the most enchanting touch of all. Their nauseating odor mingled with the scent of her skin which was dripping with sandalwood oil. . . ." [FLAUBERT, 220] (60–61)⁷

Among the quotes by Said and Flaubert, and the autobiographical voices of Kimiko Hahn, "The Hemisphere" intersperses the imagined voice of Kuchuk Hanem:

In 1850 a woman with skin the color of sand in the shade of the Sphinx, midday, meant little and of course mine was seen more than veiled and I could earn a living "dancing." What I liked best were gifts of chocolate. Usually from a French man thinking I'd consider the evening amorous and reduce the rate. Paris must be lovely but for the French. (46)

It's true when all is said and done, I am less a dancer than a whore. Men pay me money, stick their cocks in me, laugh, weep, curse, or silently ride my body. And leave. Because that's what I am, a whore and alone. To be despised by the men because who else would let me come as they come but someone with vagrant morals. . . . But I do not fear a man's departure. Know that.

And I have made a name for myself that will, Flaubert boasts on his own behalf, not mine, that will cover the globe. Know that. That the image is not my own. My image does not entirely belong to me. And neither does yours, master or slave. (47)

Typographically, Said's and Flaubert's voices are marked and separated from the other voices in the poem by quotation marks, the authenticating marks of official, legitimate discourse. The absence of quotation marks in

representing the voice of Kuchuk Hanem conveys the lack of access she has to legitimately recognized subjectivity. In contrast to the material referentiality figured by the quotation marks—marks that reference historical texts—the lack of quotation marks designating the passages ascribed to Kuchuk Hanem gives the impression of her voice as disembodied, free-floating, permeable. Said has noted how citationality, or intertextual borrowing and referencing, legitimated Orientalist epistemologies: “The legitimacy of such knowledge as Orientalism was during the nineteenth century stemmed not from religious authority, as had been the case before the Enlightenment, but from what we can call the restorative citation of antecedent authority” (Said 1978, 176). We can think of Hahn’s poetics of citation in this poem as signifying on this legacy of Orientalist citation. Unlike paraphrase or description, which are methods of assimilation into a coherent text, citation is a method that enacts the incorporation of the inassimilable. The lack of quotation marks for Kuchuk Hanem’s voice might be thought of as indicating a haunted citation, a citation not of another subject, but of subjectivity’s other. As indicated by the use of typography, the speaker of the poem does not assimilate this other into the self, but incorporates the other as other. “The Hemisphere,” and other poems from *The Unbearable Heart*, are not spoken by a self-identical subject; rather, they reveal the speaking subject as riven by alterity.

The opening passage of the poem, which narrates the Asian American daughter’s search for her mother, may be read as staging the entrance of the daughter into the symbolic order. The statement “I cannot find her” signals the denial of access to the plenitude and *jouissance* promised by union with the mother; in fact, the grammatical separation of “I” from “her” already indicates the impossibility of this conflated identification. The interruption of “Flaubert’s encounter” marks the process whereby the Asian American daughter’s object of *jouissance* is blocked and replaced by that of the European male colonizer, even as her object of *jouissance* is *already the same* as that of the European male colonizer.⁸ For the speaker of the poem, the mother represents the oriental feminine as both Same and Other, self-identical and self-divided. Hahn’s book as a whole might be seen as an extended meditation on the dynamic embedded in the statement “I cannot find her”: an attempt to articulate the “I” in relation to an elusive and unlocatable “her.” Hahn suggests the relationship between Asian

American female subject and the oriental feminine object as one in which the unfixable object destabilizes and unsettles the subject.⁹

Later in the poem, an autobiographical scene presents a more contemporary encounter between European male and “oriental female,” describing the dynamics of racial interpellation and identification. The subject recalls that at the age of thirteen, she is approached at a beach by a Portuguese sailor.

I knew what he wanted. He wanted to fuck me. He guessed I was 16
But I was 13 Why would this Portuguese sailor come over to me and
in his broken English point to the tatoo [sic] of a geisha as if I would
identify with it. And I did a little. (48)

This scene is repeated later in the poem, with additional detail.

One afternoon as I lay on my towel a wiry tanned man in a small aqua
bathing suit walked over and asked to sit next to me. He did not speak
much English but conveyed that he was a sailor from Portugal. Swarthy.
In hindsight probably mid-20s. By way of conversation he pointed to a
large tattoo on his arm; an intricately designed geisha after Utamaro.
He smiled as if I somehow identified with this. I did a little. He asked if
I'd like to board his ship. (57)

The subject's compulsive return to this scene, like so many other repetitions in the poem, indicates the traumatic nature of racial interpellation. Sexualized through her racial marking as Asian, the young adolescent is asked to identify as a Japanese geisha, an icon of sexualized service and pleasure. The sailor assumes that she will identify with “it” or “this,” that is, with a thing. The ambiguity of whether the subject is assumed to identify with geisha or tattoo participates in the legacy of Orientalist citationality, in which orientalist discourse often refers not to “Orient” but to Orientalist texts.¹⁰ The speaker recalls that she does indeed identify with the image, “a little.” One interpretation of this act of identification is that the subject has internalized her interpellation properly as embodiment of oriental feminine. Entering into sexual maturity and comprehending feminine value as determined by the ability to evoke male desire, she desires to occupy the position of object of desire. The phrase “a little,” however, indicates that this is an identification marked by uneasiness and incompleteness. What I would like to consider is how identification might

operate not only as an acquiescence to power, but also as a form of defense or protection. The geisha tattoo as image of oriental femininity, as the “known” oriental feminine of the imaginary and symbolic, might be considered a screen that protects one from the oriental feminine as specter. This specter is a remainder of the modern, western symbolic: it gives shape to what Lacan called the real.¹¹ The Asian American female identifies with the image as a defense, in order to protect herself from the trauma of the real. It is this traumatic real, in the form of imperial and colonial history, that I will turn to in the final section of this essay.

The Unbearable Real

The following passage from “The Hemisphere” is ambiguously placed: it comes directly after the narration of the young adolescent’s encounter with the Portuguese sailor, but precedes a quotation from Flaubert, which is followed by the imagined voice of Kuchuk Hanem. It could thus refer to either the contemporary or historical encounter between the European male subject and the oriental feminine other. My reading of the passage is that it refers to Flaubert, but is ambiguously positioned to suggest that the historical encounter haunts the contemporary one.¹²

He wanted someone who did not resemble his mother or his friends’ sisters or wives. The mistress he dumped before departure. He wanted license. The kind available not even in one’s own imagination—but in departure. (48)

Hahn describes here a desire for femininity in difference from white European femininity, a desire for a femininity that grants one “license.” White European femininity, figured as civilizing, moralizing, and repressive force, is construed as that which inhibits the free expression of masculine desire. In contrast, oriental femininity is considered “licentious,” the site of a license that not only enables but also provokes one to unleash desire and aggression in full force. The ascription of licentiousness makes the oriental feminine the appropriate site for the release of those desires and aggressions otherwise repressed by the constraints of civilization. As the uncivilized subject, the oriental feminine embodies excess and enjoyment—an enjoyment denied to the civilized subject, and therefore an enjoyment that he desires.

As an embodiment of enjoyment or *jouissance*, the oriental feminine is outside the symbolic, outside the law. Kuchuk Hanem's status as racial and colonial other, and as prostitute, means that Flaubert's colonial encounter is differentiated from the more legitimate pairing of the European couple, the couple that would presumably form the foundation of the legitimate bourgeois European family. At one level, the autobiographical parents of *The Unbearable Heart* occupy a different status from this colonial relationship: the German American father and Japanese American mother are both U.S. citizens and encounter no legal barrier to their contemporary interracial marriage. In this sense, their union is legitimated by the state. However, the mixed-race Asian American daughter experiences anxiety that she is not seen as her father's legitimate daughter. In the following scene, the young daughter understands that she may be taken for her white father's sexual companion because of her apparent racial difference from him.

The hotel salon made an error and not only trimmed my bangs but curled my hair. For a ten-year-old this excited and threatened. In a bus I feared people might think I was with my father, a sexual companion, because I do not resemble him unless you look closely (50–51).

The daughter feels excluded from a normative femininity defined by protection by the father (from his own aggressive impulses as well as those of other men); she understands herself as embodying a deviant, illegitimate femininity. The anxiety articulated in this scenario is the anxiety of not being exempted from the incest taboo—of falling outside patriarchal law. The daughter's status is technically legitimate, yet she is inscribed as culturally illegitimate because of racial difference. If the incest taboo is one mark of modern, civilized status, we see here how the construction of the oriental feminine positions the Asian American female subject at the border of modernity and its other.

Hahn's poems similarly show how the oriental feminine is positioned outside the category of the human. Immediately preceding "The Hemisphere" is an anomalous set of poems, five poems set in different font from the others. These are the only poems that do not speak from the position of the autobiographical "I," the only poems that do not address the loss of the autobiographical mother. Instead, these poems are fictive, even fantastic, narrations of Japanese folktales, stories of erotic and violent encounters with the nonhuman other: crabs tearing apart a snake to

prevent a girl's marriage to the snake; the fox who dies bloodily for the protagonist's sensual pleasure; the monk who awakens to find that he has been "sucked off by a snake" (43). These encounters with the nonhuman prefigure the colonial encounter with the oriental as alien, and the reader's encounter with Kuchuk Hanem as specter, in "The Hemisphere." In the last of these five poems, "The Old Woman's Breast," the narrator retells the Japanese folktale of Momotaro ("Peach-boy"). The childless old woman is about to consume a peach when the boy bursts out of its/her flesh.

I jumped in
to pull out the enormous fruit
I warmed it in my lap,
. . . . My mouth watered.
As I picked up a blade to slice through
the orange and red
my gut trembled and throbbed so violently
I shouted tremendous shouts splitting open the flesh
and lay bare a small perfect child (44)

The poem ends, "He sucked on my withered breast and it filled so full/he choked on the milk. Imagine that" (44). The child's desire, his sucking, produces so much of what he wants, that it could potentially destroy him. This scene represents an eruption of the real: a sudden, unnatural, unfathomable spurt of bodily fluid from an organ deteriorated by age. The real here is the brute materiality that we cannot make sense of, cannot integrate into the symbolic. Similarly, these five poems of the supernatural represent a kind of eruption of the real onto the landscape of the symbolic, a tear in the universe of Hahn's autobiographical poems. While the autobiographical poems employ familiar paradigms of family and sociality, these five poems provide a glimpse into the underside of such relations. In reading these five tales of violent and erotic encounters with nonhuman others, we realize that the desires for and encounters with the oriental feminine thematized in the "main" part of the book are similarly encounters with the oriental feminine as inhuman. As an embodiment of *jouissance*, or the real, the oriental feminine cannot be apprehended as human, for the human can emerge legibly as human only through the symbolic, through the law.

The racialization of the Asian as alien to America includes elements of this dehumanization: the alien as other to the nation also means alien-as-

inhuman. Thus, for the normative American subject, even the “Americanized” Asian American woman embodies a trace of the alien other. In this way, we can think of the Asian American woman as a symptom of the U.S. nation, a symptom that is the symbolic manifestation of the traumatic real. In other words, the phenomenon of Asian American gendered racialization indicates an underlying national disorder. The following section from Hahn’s poem “Cuttings” suggests what the Asian American woman symptomatizes:

The funeral director says, “She doesn’t look 68, but then oriental women never look their age.” He then reminisces about “The War.” (26)

The mother is second-generation Japanese American—born and raised in the United States—but to the funeral director, she is equivalent to the “oriental women” of war. If Asian and Asian American women are figured as docile subjects in the U.S. national imaginary, then the Asian American female corpse is, to paraphrase Sharon Holland, the ultimate docile body (2000, 30). The dead Asian American woman cannot speak English, convey American cultural literacy, or have her body language interpreted as American. The corpse of the Asian American woman embodies, without interference, the oriental feminine. The funeral director’s comment that “oriental women never look their age” resonates with the Portuguese sailor taking the thirteen-year-old girl for sixteen, as well as the ten-year-old girl understanding that she may be perceived as old enough to be her father’s sexual companion. This apparent dissimulation of age places the body of the oriental feminine outside of a knowable, normative temporality. Johannes Fabian has noted how temporal distancing relegates the racial and colonial Other to an Other time, an Other order. Thus, for example, the oriental feminine is seen as embodying antiquity, and functioning as the other of Western modernity. We can also see from these examples that the oriental feminine belongs to no time, to the atemporality of fantasy. Excluded from the historical time of a normative humanity, the specter of the oriental feminine offers an alternative temporality, that of haunting.

The outlines of this alternative temporality become clearer when we analyze the repressed that returns in the symptom of the Asian American woman. From where does the funeral director derive his expertise on oriental women? From “The War.” The funeral director uses a shorthand term for World War II that genericizes the location of oriental women: the

war. In addition to World War II, the U.S. military soldier has also received his education about oriental women during wars in Korea and Vietnam, while stationed on U.S. military bases in the Philippines, on “rest and recreation” in Thailand. As companion and prostitute serving the U.S. military, the social and sexual services of the oriental woman are understood as providing relief from the brutalities and traumas of war. Moreover, Hahn connects U.S. militarism with commerce in the following passage from “The Hemisphere”: “Three wars have taught military men ‘about’ Asian women. Orientals. Extended by the classifieds” (1995, 54). The classifieds, as a mode of advertising commodities and services, can stand here for racially marked escort or massage services, for mail-order bride services, for sex tourism, even for racially marked personal ads. Militarism and capitalist commercialism construct the Asian woman as sexually available to the U.S. male subject. War and the “classifieds” initially appear to belong to separate spheres: the former pertains to the state, and the latter circulates as part of “free-market” civil society. In fact, they converge and support each other to uphold U.S. economic and military global hegemony. Oriental women, in the above passage, are U.S. goods and examples of the U.S. “good,” the good that the U.S. does around the world in spreading democracy and liberating people from their otherwise oppressive fates. The repressed that returns in the symptom of the Asian American woman is this history of U.S. militarism and imperialism, upholding U.S. global economic hegemony. This history of imperialism is revealed by Hahn’s alternative temporality of haunting, in which the past does not remain in the past.

The legacy of U.S. imperialism surfaces in the death of the mother. This fatality is due to an accident; the mother is the victim of an automobile collision that resulted from a car chase. “[M]other died, instantly, 10:35 PM, /broad-sided by an Arab kid fleeing a car of white kids with baseball bats” (2). Not only does the term “accident” refer to the automobile collision, but it also refers to the apparent contingency of her death, for she is not the intended target of racist aggression in this particular encounter. Yet she is the object fatally positioned in its path, annihilated instantly. For psychoanalysis, the accident (e.g., the slip of the tongue) is a site that manifests the effects of the unconscious. The apparently unintended act is often the most “telling,” revealing those desires that have been disavowed or repressed. What might we learn about the U.S. national

unconscious in analyzing this “accident,” this collision resulting from the traffic or flow of racial violence?

The mother’s death, and the anti-Arab violence that precipitates it, takes place in 1991, the year of the U.S. war in the Persian Gulf. These white teenagers interpret the appearance of the racialized Arab in the American landscape at this moment as the traumatic real: a radically foreign body threatening the existence of the coherent national body. Within the U.S. imaginary, the Arab functions as the psychoanalytic subject-presumed-to-enjoy. He is presumed to control the oil upon which the stability of the U.S. economy depends; he is presumed to enjoy excess wealth, religious fervor, and ecstasy, and the sadistic, irrational terrorizing of innocent white Americans. The psychoanalytic subject-presumed-to-enjoy is a subject who enjoys without me, and moreover, who robs me of my enjoyment, my *jouissance*. While all subjects must sacrifice *jouissance* to enter into the symbolic order, in order to become intelligible as subjects, we nevertheless continue to seek this impossible *jouissance*.¹³ We imagine that others are the site of a *jouissance* that will ameliorate our sense of lack. This sense of lack is especially unbearable to those whose social privileges have conditioned them to expect accessibility to all experience. The enjoyment, the *jouissance*, generated from terrorizing the “Arab kid” in this car chase is thus experienced as a kind of compensation, or payback, for his stealing of “my” *jouissance*, and the violence of this act of racial terror is covered over by the ideological production of the Arab subject as the original source of terrorism. The racist aggression in this encounter is the manifestation of unbearability, the unbearability of the racial other as site of *jouissance*. The intended target of the Arab is one that is implicitly sanctioned by the nation-state’s acts of war, and by the ideological racialization of the Arab as fundamentally un-American and anti-American. The “accident” of the mother’s death, the *unintended* act, however, is most revealing. The Asian American has in recent times been paradoxically racialized as both foreign and as supremely assimilable. Those Asian Americans who have assimilated, who have been accepted as Americanized, would seem to occupy the privileged and protected position of the normative citizen-subject. What this accident warns, however, is that this sense of racial safety for the Asian American is an illusion. While the Arab has in many ways replaced the Asian as figure of foreign threat to the U.S. nation, the contingent fatality of the Asian American mother demonstrates how imperialist orientalism

continues to violate the apparently accepted Asian American, revealing that the protected status of the assimilated Asian American is indeed contingent.

Colonial eroticism and racist aggression can be seen as both resulting from this perception of the other as the site of *jouissance*, and the subsequent desire to incorporate this *jouissance* into the self, to annihilate the other as other. Without warning, “The Hemisphere” ends, “My mother might have told me this story but she died suddenly a few months ago” (61). This abrupt ending enacts what it describes: the instantaneous annihilation of the mother. The poem too suddenly vanishes. This disappearance recalls the description of the fox-woman in the poem “The Fan,” another of the five poems of the supernatural.

She vanished
without even opening the door. Not a trace of her in the alley.
I ran to Butoku hall. There on the floor
lay a bloody fox with a fan over its face. (41)

In “The Fan,” the male speaker disregards the warning by a beautiful, ravishing woman that if they have sex, he will die. He continues to press his sexual demands, and she finally acquiesces, saying, “Take me but know that I shall die in your place” (41). Selfishly focused on his sexual pleasure, he dismisses his warning until she vanishes, and he finds elsewhere the body of a bloody fox with the fan that he had given to this woman. The valorized figure of the self-sacrificial woman is combined here with that of the lascivious seductress, as well as the supernatural form of an animal-human shape-shifter, heightening the transgressive danger and pleasure of the sexual encounter with the other. The vanished figure of the mother at the end of “The Hemisphere,” and her unlocatability at the beginning of the poem, indicate her status as a similar sacrificial object in racialized encounters of eroticism and violence.

The racial anxiety of whiteness is that the racial other has access to what he does not have: *jouissance*. The fantasy of the oriental feminine is that she willingly and happily gives this *jouissance* to the white male subject. Like the fox-woman, this fantasy object sacrifices herself so that he may enjoy her. The truly seductive aspect of this fantasy is that she gives without demanding anything in return. In this fantasmatic psychic economy, the giving is endless, and the scales always balance. This is what differentiates the fantasy of the oriental feminine from other U.S. racialized subjects, to whom the white subject fears he is in debt for past transgressions. Hahn’s

figure of the specter, however, arises to remind us that a ghost always demands something. Recall the otherworldly figure of the toll attendant that opens *The Unbearable Heart*, the figure that reminds one of what is owed. Avery Gordon formulates the ghostly demand in melancholic terms: “This something to be done is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had” (1997, 183). What is this thing that is repressed, unowned, and disavowed? Recall the funeral director’s invocation of “the war” upon viewing the corpse of the Asian American woman. If we understand the death of the mother as linked to the 1991 U.S. war in the Persian Gulf, to U.S. imperial aggression in the region now known as the Middle East, we can understand how this death uncannily recalls and repeats the traumas of previous U.S. military actions in Asia, and the traumatic histories of European colonial domination in the Middle East and North Africa. Hahn’s racial melancholia allows us to comprehend imperial violence and colonial eroticism as the secret kernels at the heart of U.S. and European nationalisms.

Hahn’s text provides an alternative site in which we may limn the unmourned, unowned disavowals and losses of the nation-state. In this text of racial melancholia, the specters of war, colonialism, and imperialism return in the form of the oriental feminine, breaking apart the coherence of the Asian American female as subject of modernity and nation. For the Asian American female subject of *The Unbearable Heart*, the oriental feminine is an object violently rendered other. Hahn’s title poem refers to “the air in this blizzard that cannot cool the unbearable heart” (3). I read the burning heart that cannot be cooled as an expression of the raw, traumatic real, the real that will not be domesticated by fantasy and ideology. The subject’s melancholic attachment to the impossible object is a refusal to sacrifice or extract the real, an extraction that would enable the symbolic fiction of national wholeness and national modernity. This melancholia is an acknowledgment of the traumatic secret of U.S. nationalism—the histories of imperial violence that unbearably haunt hemisphere and heart.

NOTES

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The epigraph is indebted to the beginning of Hortense Spillers' article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (2003, 203).

1. Lisa Lowe's discussion of racialization and citizenship (1996) has influenced my argument here.
2. See Abel, Christian, and Moglen 1997; Bhabha 1997; Butler 1993; Cheng 2001; Copjec 2003; Eng 2000; Eng and Kazanjian 2003; Khanna 2003; Lane 1998; MacCannell 2000; Pellegrini 1997; Seshadri-Crooks 2000; Spillers 2003; Tate 1998; Walton 2001.
3. For additional analyses of racial melancholia, see Cheng 2001; Eng 2000; Kim 1998; Luciano 2003; and Parikh 2002.
4. This notion of the encrypted secret derives from Abraham and Torok's theories of psychic concealment (1994). Ranjanna Khanna's discussion of the melancholic secrets of European nation-statehood (2003) inspired me to think about the secrets of U.S. nation-statehood.
5. Freud's use of this term was probably influenced by his study of Indian religious figures. Khanna cites J. Moussaieff Masson (1980) on this possibility.
6. The citations in brackets are included in the text of Hahn's poem. The source is acknowledged as Francis Steegmuller's *Flaubert in Egypt* (1972), a translation of notes, letters, and essays by Flaubert and his travel companion, Maxime du Camp. The page numbers in parentheses indicate the location of the passage in *The Unbearable Heart*.
7. Lisa Lowe notes that the description of the oriental woman as machine "is paradigmatic of the intersections and collusions between several nineteenth-century French discourses, not only of orientalism and romanticism but also of race and industrial capitalism" (Lowe 1991, 76). See Lowe's chapter "Orient as Woman, Orientalism as Sentimentalism: Flaubert" (75–101) for a fuller discussion of Flaubert's orientalist writings.
8. Juliet Flower MacCannell (2000, 65–73) offers a provocative discussion of how colonialism results in the replacement of the colonized subject's object of *jouissance* with that of the colonizer's.
9. My discussion here of the phrase "I cannot find her" is indebted to comments made by *Meridians*' anonymous reviewer.
10. For example, in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the young lover imagines his mistress through the lens of Ingres's painting *Odalisques au bain*. Ingres himself never traveled to North Africa; his paintings were inspired by the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*. See Lowe 1991, 1–4.
11. Alan Sheridan defines the real as "that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic" (Sheridan 1977, x).

12. Traise Yamamoto interprets “The Hemisphere” as poetically conflating the voices of the contemporary Asian-American woman and the historical Egyptian courtesan in a gesture of mimicking orientalist conflation. Yamamoto notes that Hahn self-consciously draws a parallel between herself and Flaubert as writers who assume narrative authority and potentially consolidate a sense of self in representing the oriental feminine as other (Yamamoto 1999, 253–61). In other words, Hahn highlights the privilege of the Asian-American female subject in relation to the oriental feminine other, a privilege of self-representation and discursive power. Unlike Flaubert, Hahn explicitly calls attention to the status of Kuchuk Hanem as the imagined fantasy of the writer, asking, “Can I speak for her?” (1995, 51) Such gestures allow us to see that the poem is not about the oriental feminine as a subject that we can have direct knowledge of. Rather, “The Hemisphere” highlights how the construction of the oriental feminine as European modernity’s other impacts the Asian-American female subject, who is ambivalently interpellated as a subject of modernity and nation, and as the other of modernity and nation.
13. *Jouissance is impossible because the subject must sacrifice this fullness of being to enter into the symbolic order, in order to be constituted as a subject.*

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ERRATA:

In volume 4, no. 2, the preface note to Juliana Chang's essay "'I Cannot Find Her': The Oriental Feminine, Racial Melancholia, and Kimiko Hahn's *The Unbearable Heart*" was erroneously attributed to Hortense Spillers; in fact, the preface is the author's own. A footnote should have followed this preface to read: "This preface is indebted to and inspired by the opening of Hortense Spillers's article 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' (Spillers 2003, 203)."