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# “Continental Drift”: Translation and Kimiko Hahn’s Transcultural Poetry

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XIWEN MAI

Based in New York, Kimiko Hahn has published nine books of poetry since 1989 and has won several prizes including an American Book Award. The daughter of a Japanese American mother and a German American father, Hahn studied Japanese literature during her undergraduate and graduate years. Her poetry often involves elements from Japanese, Chinese, as well as Euro-American culture. In a poem titled “Asian American Lit. Final” from her 2006 collection *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, Hahn ends a series of questions and concerns about teaching Asian American literature with these lines: “I plan on proposing a course on Asian American work inspired / by / influenced by Asian literature. Title: Continental Drift.”<sup>1</sup> The geological notion “continental drift,” a precursor to the theory of plate tectonics, refers to the hypothesis that today’s continents broke off from a single “super-continent” and were then propelled into their present positions after drifting apart from or colliding with each other.<sup>2</sup> With the term, Hahn calls attention not only to the hidden connections between different geographies and cultural traditions, but also to the movement of cultural elements from one geographical location to another. In fact, Hahn’s own poetry belongs to this category she defines as “continental drift,” since it is significantly “inspired by / influenced by” East Asian literature.

This essay will focus on how Hahn engages East Asian—Japanese and Chinese—traditions in her poetry, a poetry that I call “transcultural.” I prefer “transcultural” to the more commonly used term “transnational” for its inclusiveness. For “transnational” may not be completely applicable to Hahn’s work, as what concerns her may not be “nations” per se. In an interview with François Luong, Hahn says, “traditional East Asian aesthetics and forms have influenced my work. When I studied Japanese literature in college, the works by Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, and others were essential to my development. I think (I hope) I have approached these writings from the point of view of a Japanese American woman, rather than a Western tourist. I hope I bring to the readings a possession of this culture.”<sup>3</sup> Hahn

differentiates her own approach to those texts from an exoticizing, “tourist” viewpoint. Yet, ironically, Hahn’s approach to Japanese culture is greatly influenced by “a Western tourist’s”—her father’s—attitude. In another interview with Laurie Sheck, she reveals that her interest in Japan comes more from her German American father than from her mother: “my mother, because of the war and being second-generation Japanese, rejected her Japanese background, which was pretty typical of that generation, while my father, on the other hand, was deeply curious and was studying Asian culture even before he met my mother. So it’s through my father’s interest that we came back around to my mother’s culture.”<sup>4</sup> Hahn’s intentional shunning of the topic of “nation,” or the history of the conflict between the United States and Japan during World War II and its consequence for Japanese Americans, stems from her mother, an artist who resists Japanese culture as many Japanese Americans of her generation do. Influenced both by her mother’s attitude and by her father’s interest in Japanese tradition, Hahn’s passion for classical Japanese literature is not nation-centered but mainly oriented toward pre-national, pre-modern Japanese culture.

I read Hahn’s transcultural poetry in the current context of transnational Asian American literary criticism and seek to show how her work exemplifies the importance of reading Asian American literature through international and intercultural relations. Sau-ling Wong’s essay “Denationalization Reconsidered” has inspired a range of discussions on how to reframe Asian American literary and cultural criticism in the current global context. Wong criticizes the emerging “diasporic perspective” in Asian American cultural criticism. As Wong insists, it is important to establish “the Asian American presence in the context of the United States’ national cultural legacy and contemporary cultural production” as a way to critique the center-periphery dichotomy of traditional criticism.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, relying only on a “domestic perspective” runs the risk of overlooking the significant role that international and intercultural relations play in the production of Asian American literary and cultural texts. In fact, in the past decade and a half, scholars have begun to reconsider Asian American studies beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. In her groundbreaking *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe notes the necessity of situating the Asian American subject not only within the United States but also in “the histories of wars in Asia, immigration, and the dynamics of the current global economy.”<sup>6</sup> David Eng, in the epilogue to his influential *Racial Castration*, also suggests that we should “force Asian American studies beyond the borders of the domestic.”<sup>7</sup> He reminds us of the inseparability and “interpenetration” of the diasporic and the domestic dimensions of the formation of “Asian American as a political identity and an oppositional social movement.”<sup>8</sup> Kandice Chuh explores the possibilities and impact of studying Asian American texts at the intersection of Asian American studies and Asian studies. She argues that “to defy the conventions of US hegemonic epistemology, it is necessary to amplify purposefully the cross-geographic, cross-

historical, and cross-discursive dynamics between Asianness and Asian Americanness in the critical methods of knowledge production.”<sup>9</sup>

Hahn’s transcultural poetry embodies these critical interventions. Actively referring to, adapting, and translating materials from Japanese, Chinese, French, and American literature, she consciously produces (inter)texts which cannot be interpreted without understanding the forms and traditions with which she engages. Particularly remarkable is her use of “translation” as a primary mode of transcultural writing. She cites and critically reads English translations of the classical *The Tale of Genji* in her early poems. Moreover, her use of East Asian images and literary forms—including *nū shu* and *zuihitsu*—in her later poems further intervenes in the oversimplified representation or misinterpretation of these traditions by foregrounding a reading praxis based on historically and culturally sophisticated understandings. In this essay, I trace the development of Hahn’s transcultural poetics by focusing on her deployment of “translation,” which includes her early criticism of existing translations of Japanese works and her recent creative practice of “retranslating” and “untranslating” East Asian traditions. Drawing on the translation theories of Walter Benjamin and Gayatri Spivak, I examine her poetics through a close intertextual reading, comparing and making connections between her texts and those with which she engages. I argue that her poetry provides an intriguing lens through which the transcultural dimensions of Asian American literature, and the necessity of reading Asian American literature beyond domestic boundaries, can be viewed.

### **Criticism of Translations**

In almost every book she has written, Hahn mentions *The Tale of Genji*, the classical Japanese novel—sometimes referred to as the world’s first novel—attributed to the court lady Murasaki Shikibu, composed in the early eleventh century near the peak of the Heian Period (794–1185). Many of Hahn’s early poems deal with thoughts and questions concerning translations of *The Tale of Genji* and other Japanese texts. Through these poems, she participates in twentieth-century translation studies from her unique position as a Japanese American poet. Critics trace modern and contemporary translation studies to Walter Benjamin’s classic 1923 essay “The Task of the Translator,” written during a time when Euro-American modernist literature engaged actively in the practice and discussion of literary translation.<sup>10</sup> In the essay, Benjamin differentiates the work of a writer from that of a translator: whereas a poet works with his/her specific selection of language, or what he terms as “specific linguistic contextual aspects,” a translator—far from rendering a literal meaning—takes the original text as a “point of departure” in order to liberate the “pure language” out of the original language and release it into his/her own.<sup>11</sup> Through the sublime-sounding, metaphysical term “pure language,” Benjamin suggests the existence of a pre-linguistic, divine “language” superior to all existing languages,

which can never be realized, but only approximated in translation. For Benjamin, translation is not a communicative act. Rather, it is a “mode” of writing that “issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife” and thus plays a significant role in a work’s “survival,” or “ever-renewed” life in history.<sup>12</sup> With its theological connotations that explain what a translator does, Benjamin’s theory resists a Eurocentric mode of translation. He believes that “a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification.”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin also suggests that a translator should welcome the transformative impact that the “foreign” may bring to the “self” through the act of translating. This openness toward heterogeneity and transformation, in a sense, anticipates what contemporary translation studies increasingly advocates today.

In the past few decades, translation studies has paid increasing attention to the question of how to understand the cultural politics of the self-other relationship involved in translation. In postcolonial contexts, critics of translation are particularly concerned with how languages always need to be seen within unequal relations among races, cultures, and nations. Gayatri Spivak echoes Benjamin in multiple ways but with a more specific focus on literary translation as a site that reveals the politics of gender and international relations. Like Benjamin, Spivak finds translation more than simply a task of transmitting information. She argues that, particularly in the case of translating non-European women’s literature, the translator should “surrender” to the original text and attend to not only the “logic” of language but the “rhetoricity” of texts, which often disrupts that “logic.”<sup>14</sup> She finds that translators of texts written by women from the developing world often lack sufficient engagement with the social logic and rhetorical complexity involved in the original text.<sup>15</sup> She criticizes the double standards that apply to translation depending on the geopolitical position of the author: “If we were thinking of translating Marianne Moore or Emily Dickinson, the standard for the translator could not be ‘anyone who can conduct a conversation in the language of the original (in this case English).’ When applied to a third world language, the position is inherently ethnocentric.”<sup>16</sup> Spivak thus criticizes the “ethnocentric,” reductive approach that readers in the developed world tend to have toward texts “from elsewhere.” She reminds us of the necessity of a nuanced cultural and historical investigation in translating any text in order to represent the complexity and depth of the original.

Translation for ethnic American writers often becomes, in Martha Cutter’s words, “a space of both peril and promise: a mode of literacy wherein they find something previously lost in the silences of an ethnic parent or in a language in which they no longer have fluency.”<sup>17</sup> For Hahn, translation is indeed “a mode of literacy” and a generative force in exploring Asian American poetics. Her (mostly autobiographical) speaker often occupies the position of a critic of translation like Benjamin and Spivak. In a poem suggestively titled “Comp. Lit.” from her 1992 volume *Earshot*, Hahn questions the centrality of a male perspective in existing

translations of *The Tale of Genji*. Traise Yamamoto in her insightful reading of the poem argues that Hahn can be seen as a “metatranslator” of *Genji*, competing with previous translators using her own ideas regarding female agency in the original text.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Hahn’s speaker complicates the issue of translation with her tricky position as a mixed-race, female, Asian American poet. The speaker is forced to confront daunting questions about her own positionality in relation to Japanese and American cultures while reading the English versions of the Japanese text. What makes the situation even more difficult is that, having forgotten most of her *bungo*—the classical literary Japanese in which the original text is written—the narrator is unable to seriously assess the accuracy of the translated texts. Throughout the poem, the speaker questions not only the texts she reads but also her own critical judgment. Her perplexed critical reading experience unfolds a series of irresolvable problems about how to read a translated text and how to view the “task of the translator”:

What happens when there are two texts  
in translation?  
Who can we trust  
when our *bungo* has deteriorated  
to elementary tables  
for *beshi*, *kemu*, *gotoshi*.  
How can we compare  
without the original<sup>19</sup>

These lines highlight the inability to judge a translation, an inability which is the result of the speaker’s “deteriorated” understanding of the original language. The rapid succession of questions makes visible the speaker’s frustration. However, the poem does not dwell on this predicament but quickly moves on to quote passages from Arthur Waley’s and Edward Seidensticker’s translations of *The Tale of Genji*. Citations of the two versions continue to appear throughout the poem, interrupting the speaker’s voice and thus encouraging the reader to assume the position of a translation critic, a position requiring critical and comparative reading.

Halfway through the poem, the speaker juxtaposes one of Waley’s elaborate, lyric passages with Seidensticker’s characteristic succinct rendering. In response, Hahn’s speaker voices a series of questions even more breathtaking than those that open the poem.

“With many timid glances towards him she began  
to write. Even the childish manner in which she  
grasped the brush gave him a thrill of delight which  
he was at a loss to explain.”

AW, 107

“It was strange that even her awkward, childish  
way of holding the brush should so delight him.”  
ES, 110

Chirp, chirp, chirp, she said.  
Translation?  
Where do the translators translate?  
New York? Tokyo? Kyoto?  
At their desk? tatami? longhand?  
Can we go from stroke to scribble?  
And who are *they*?  
When you turn your back  
will they laugh  
because you forgot your *bungo*;  
can't even understand the entry  
not so much to read  
but to correspond  
from her small heart.<sup>20</sup>

The quoted passages are from the moment in the book where Prince Genji is struck by the beauty of the little girl, Murasaki, and takes her to live in his house. The little girl resembles his stepmother with whom he has fallen in love. Genji provides her with everything she needs and teaches her to write, secretly waiting for her to grow up to be his lover. However, Hahn's speaker seems rather skeptical about both translators. Waley's passage begins with a sentence describing Murasaki, emphasizing her "timid" psychological state; Seidensticker's, on the other hand, describes their interaction without much elaboration. The sharp contrast between the two versions indeed makes one wonder how the original text reads. Moreover, the speaker's questions about the translators' geographical locations and their identities cast doubt on their investment in the context of the poem—that is, Japanese history and culture. Ironically, Waley had never been to Asia even though, in the early twentieth century, he was a famous translator of classical Chinese and Japanese literature.<sup>21</sup> His translation of *The Tale of Genji* was published in six volumes from 1921 to 1933, and not surprisingly, his translation has been criticized for its inaccuracy, as he transforms the original text, with its hybrid prose and poetry, into a largely modern novel in Edwardian English.<sup>22</sup>

While Waley's is an assimilationist rendering involving numerous paraphrases to make the text accessible to English readers, Seidensticker's version, published in 1976, is more scholastic. As Edwin Cranston notes in his review of the translation, Seidensticker's version is characterized by a closer rendering of the characters' social background and "condensation and reductionism" in language and style.<sup>23</sup> Seidensticker, well-known for his technically accurate rendering, provides more

annotations than Waley and makes an effort to maintain the poetic forms that appear in the original novel. However, his laconic version lacks the rhythm of the original's richly embroidered prose.<sup>24</sup> Masao Miyoshi, in his review of Seidensticker's translation, also elucidates the limits of both versions and the near impossibility of re-creating Lady Murasaki's text, which constantly "flows and drifts," in modern English "with its fixed syntactic expectations." As Miyoshi imagines, it may take a translator of Virginia Woolf's language, style, and feminist concern to better render Lady Murasaki's text into English.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the poem, Hahn's speaker continues to think about the passages she quotes and the gender relationships involved in the translated text. She ponders the ambiguity of the original author's attitude toward gender issues:

She wrote with such childish abandon  
that error took on a style.  
To make her his.  
What would this mean:  
wait a few years and put aside her toys,  
replace them with strips of paper,  
feel her crushed beneath him.  
*Why did a woman write this?*  
Did she speak from the small heart  
[ . . . ]  
Do I examine from the male persona?<sup>26</sup>

"Why did a woman write this?" Without access to the original, the speaker asks whether Murasaki's original work simply reinforces male domination through the figure of Genji. Could the original somehow suggest female agency and resistance against male domination? Disappointingly, neither translator provides answers. Yamamoto argues that the uncertainty of Hahn's speaker "opens a space for the female subject."<sup>27</sup> What Yamamoto does not clarify, however, is that Hahn's poem raises questions about interpretation on three levels. First, how does the original author Murasaki interpret the gender relations she writes about? Second, how do the male translators represent those relations? Third, how should the reader understand the relations represented and mediated through the male translators? Hahn's poem is as much about the latter two questions as it is about the first. Unable to access the original text, the speaker can only turn to the discursive agency of the woman author. The recurrence of the phrase "small heart" is striking since, through it, the speaker identifies with the author of the Japanese text, forming an alliance against the male protagonist and the male translators.

In the poem "Revolution," which appears earlier in the same collection, Hahn tells us how the language of *The Tale of Genji* is remarkable for its implications of female agency in Japanese literary history. "Forbidden to learn Chinese / the women



wrote in the language / of their islands,” Hahn writes, referring to the court women of the Heian period who had been denied formal education in the Chinese language—the more privileged language in Japan at the time, just like the use of Latin among the privileged in medieval Europe.<sup>28</sup> According to the Japanologist Donald Keene, the court women enjoyed much more freedom and more access to learning than ordinary women; they left numerous writings about their life in the Japanese script, *kana*. In fact, *The Tale of Genji* was one of the most extraordinary representatives of this vernacular literature that began flourishing in the Heian period,<sup>29</sup> and Waley and Seidensticker both talk about Heian women’s court life in the introductions to their translations. Yet, neither of them pays much attention to the female agency inherent in this literary language. While Seidensticker only provides a brief introduction to the author, Waley captures some of the most interesting features of Murasaki as a writer in his introduction.<sup>30</sup> Murasaki, through Waley’s review of her diary, appears as a lively woman who loves literature, cares for details and appearance, and characterizes the rigid-minded princess she works for as “dull,” “narrow,” and “uncompromising.”<sup>31</sup> She secretly learns Chinese and longs for more freedom, especially a working environment where she might converse freely with men.<sup>32</sup> With substantial quotations from Murasaki’s diary, Waley’s introduction is almost entirely about her court life, with minimal discussion about the work, leaving out the question of whether or not Murasaki’s novel actually critiques the dominant gender dynamics of her time.

Forming a web of complicated relations between the characters in the text-within-a-text, between a female writer and her male translators, between the female writer and the female reader, between the nations where each of these figures is located, Hahn’s poem reflects on the hierarchy of cultures, genders, and races often operating in translation. Hahn’s implicit critique of the translators’ lack of attention to the issue of female agency in the ancient Japanese text follows the same line of critical inquiry as Spivak’s criticism of problematic translations of texts written by women from the developing world. At the end of Hahn’s poem, interrogations about the translations are replaced by a critical imagination of the translator’s life:

The translator puts the pen down  
and stretches his arms and neck.  
*Genji* is complete.  
He’s completed the text  
in time for the fall semester.  
The students call him professor and bore him  
but brings a salary, medical benefits, an office.  
The volumes of translation are exact.  
Exactly right.  
He walks into the bathroom,  
turns off the light and sits down.<sup>33</sup>

The speaker suggests a dissatisfaction with the “complete,” “exactly right” translation, and the emphasis on literal fidelity, but not without a Benjaminian echo. The meaning of a literary translation, as the speaker wants to convey, should be more than providing an “exact” representation of a text and attaining its academic currency. Nevertheless, the poem “Comp. Lit.” leaves the reader in a rather frustrating position, without answering the question of how to transcend these translational limits.

### **Creative Retranslation**

Hahn often crosses the line Benjamin draws between the author and the translator. In the poem “The Izu Dancer,” which immediately follows “Comp. Lit.,” she herself translates lines from Kawabata Yasunari’s “The Izu Dancer,” a story published in 1925 and a classic of modern Japanese literature. Writing about her experience of reading, translating, and thinking about Kawabata’s story, she quotes a number of sentences and words from the original Japanese text and translates them into English, making the poem a modernist, bilingual collage. The original Japanese text provides a “point of departure” in the Benjaminian sense, though not for her to seek the “pure language” but to explore the possibility of translating as a mode of creative writing. The task of translation, here, is part of her task as a poet. Benjamin as a critic-translator emphasizes what a good translator or translation can achieve—making possible an “afterlife” or the “survival” of the original, and enacting a “kinship” between languages. Hahn as a poet-translator is more concerned with the process of translating—or what she calls the “journey inside the words”—than with the outcome.<sup>34</sup> In this process, her ultimate goal is to transfer the “fragrance” of the Japanese words into her own English writing. She uses the word “fragrance” repeatedly in both “Comp. Lit.” and “The Izu Dancer.” She probably borrows it from Tanizaki Junichiro’s *In Praise of Shadows*, a book on Japanese aesthetics, in which Tanizaki argues that literary language can bring resonance to the ear, hues and sparkles to the eye, and fragrances to the nose.<sup>35</sup> In her more recent work, Hahn becomes even more engaged in the process of “translating”—though in the creative sense of the word—by rewriting images and forms across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Her 1999 collection *Mosquito and Ant* draws significantly on classical Chinese women’s writings, particularly *nü shu*, as a framework, in which she retranslates Chinese images in the Poundian tradition.

Referring to Carolyn Lei-Lanilau’s research and translation of *nü shu* poems, Hahn explains that the phrase “mosquito and ant” refers to *nü shu*, a nearly extinct writing system invented probably a thousand years ago by Chinese women excluded from formal education.<sup>36</sup> In standardized Chinese pinyin, or the Romanization of Chinese pronunciation, the term *nü shu* (女书), literally women(’s) writing, refers to a script exclusively used by women in the Jiangyong County of Hu-nan Province in southern China. Scholars have not determined for certain when and how it originated.

The earliest *nü shu* work found thus far is dated to the mid-nineteenth century. Extremely slim and miniscule compared with Chinese characters, the script was called “mosquito-shaped writing” in a regional cultural report in the 1950s, probably its earliest appearance in official discourse.<sup>37</sup> Since its rediscovery by Chinese anthropologists and ethnographers in the 1980s, it has been officially called “*nü shu*” and has attracted tremendous academic attention both within and beyond China. The existing *nü shu* writings consist mostly of correspondence between women friends, sworn sisters, or relatives, often written in verse forms about the joy and sadness of domestic life. As Anne McLaren has noted, emerging from and responding to the dominant Confucian ideology of the late imperial period, the women’s script “offers a private domain in which women inscribe formulae of fantasy and consolation, struggle and self-assertion, within a ‘restricted linguistic code’ of their own devising.”<sup>38</sup>

It is likely that the *nü shu* poems described by Lei-Lanilau’s appeals to Hahn precisely because of its resemblance to the Japanese women’s writing of the Heian period. Although created by women within two different historical settings and from distinct social classes in their respective cultures, *nü shu* poems and Heian women’s writing in vernacular Japanese exemplify how women could negotiate their limited space within a patriarchal system. In *Mosquito and Ant*, Hahn includes a series of epistolary poems written in the style of *nü shu* correspondence. Like her earlier poems in *Earshot*, the poems here feature a woman speaker, who, having lost her *bungo*, often discusses the translingual, trans-historical experience of reading and writing. The speaker also shares her family life and hidden passions with L., a mysterious woman correspondent who is proficient in classical Chinese. In the title poem “Mosquito and Ant,” Hahn’s speaker explicitly refers to the *nü shu* script that Chinese women invented:

I want my letters to resemble  
tiny ants scrawled across this page.  
They spy a crumb of dark sugar  
on the far side of the embankment  
and their strategy is simple:  
the shortest distance between two points  
is tenacity not seduction.

I want my letters to imitate  
mosquitoes as they loop  
around the earlobe with their noise:  
the impossible task of slapping one  
across its erratically slow travel.  
Those spiderlike legs. The sheaths of wings.  
The body that transports disease.  
I wonder if a straight man can read such lines.<sup>39</sup>

The repetition of the syntactical pattern “I want . . .” here makes evident a woman’s assertive attitude about her own writing, something which Hahn values in ancient Chinese women’s writing and seeks to express through her own writing. What is especially interesting about the passage is how Hahn quite unexpectedly teases out the empowering side of the seemingly negative evocations of the term “mosquito and ant.” Described as “mosquito-shaped writing” by their initial male discoverers, the designation seems fraught with contemptuous connotations, emphasizing annoyance as well as small-ness and negligibility and probably even implying an aversion to it. The term nevertheless evokes a vivid image for Hahn’s speaker who would like to don the creative power of the ancient women and invent a poetic language of her own. For her, the script is characterized by “tenacity” and an “impossibility” of dying. Moreover, the female friendship suggested between the women correspondents renders the *nü shu* writings somewhat like the Sapphic epistolary writings. In fact, Hahn repeatedly draws parallels between the Japanese women’s writing of the Heian period and Sappho’s poems in *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, where she explores in more detail the possibility of a comparative reading of Eastern and Western traditions.

Reinventing the Chinese tradition for her own poems in *Mosquito and Ant*, Hahn does not use the foreign element appropriatively but instead presents her own sophisticated interpretation. In an interview with Francoise Luong, Hahn comments on the heteroglossia of *Mosquito and Ant*: “For those unacquainted with Chinese characters, I hope that my word play produces something startling and bewildering and beautiful. For those who are familiar, I hope my usage is a playful validation of non-Western culture inside American poetry (which of course is far from new).”<sup>40</sup> Hahn is obviously aware of previous uses of Chinese characters, such as in Ezra Pound’s work. The Chinese characters in her poems, however, often work as part of her “playful” retranslation of Poundian images. Pound’s famous rewriting of classical Chinese poems in *Cathay* (1915) reveals the prominent role imagery plays in Chinese poetry. The recurring appearance of images such as “hairpins,” “petals,” “clouds,” and “crescent moon” in the *Cathay* poems and Pound’s other Chinese-influenced works partly defines what generations of western poets and readers consider to be the “essence” of Chinese poetry. In these poems, women are mostly anonymous court ladies or abandoned wives, heartbroken about their endless waiting for men. Even when women’s voices are heard in some of these poems, they are mostly situated in a passive, weakened position that reflects the hierarchy of genders.<sup>41</sup> Reading *nü shu* poems and other works by Chinese women poets, Hahn must have found radically different female voices from those conveyed by Pound—voices through which familiar images seem to be able to take on new meanings. In “Orchid Root,” one of Hahn’s poems written as letters addressed to the woman friend L., the exotic “orchid root” leads to a self-reflective comment on the connotations of images:

I need to return to the Chinese women poets.  
The flat language  
of pine and orchid.  
The clouds playing over the crescent moon.  
Return to the coy lines  
that advertise and protest.  
The words weighted in object  
as much as flight.<sup>42</sup>

Hahn's reference to the images is remarkable due to her emphasis on the "women poets." Her description of their "flat language" and "coy lines" are especially ironic, considering the "coy" women figures in Poundian renderings. Underlying the superficial images, she suggests, may be an intention to "protest" and "object," as well as a longing for "flight" and escape. In the following part of the poem, two stereotypically imagistic passages are interrupted by a subversive commentary. Chinese characters appear again. They are by no means simply picture-like ideographs, dehistoricized and idealized as a better medium for imagistic poetry writing. Instead, the Poundian rewriting of Chinese ideograms and classical Chinese images is further complicated by Hahn's feminist reading of Chinese women's writing:

iv.  
Take—the anonymous courtesan  
who wrote the lines:  
My hairpins on your fallen jacket—  
My stockings on the tiles—  
My petals on your root—

v.  
The women write poems to one another  
to protest the man's inattention:  
and they fall in love  
consequently  
as the honeysuckle climbs the fence  
from one garden to the next  
its fragrance on the draft beneath the door.

vi.  
PINE           杉  
MAGPIE       鶺鴒  
CLOUD         雲<sup>43</sup>

Here one sees a list of images that frequently appear in Pound's *Cathay* poems: "hairpins," "petals," "pine," "magpie" and "cloud." Hahn continues to intervene in the conventional understanding of the images with a playful re-reading here. Accordingly, the women may actually write "to one another to protest the man's inattention." The female friendship built upon writing completely excludes men from their world and thus becomes a way of resisting patriarchal power. The image of honeysuckle works as a perfect metaphor for the *nü shu* writings between women, because its blossoms look like mosquitoes and its ability to "climb the fence / from one garden to the next" indicates a transgressive power. Recalling "fragrance" of the words in the Heian women's texts, the "fragrance" here again links the women from the two traditions. The structural difference between the stanzas is worth noting too. While the simple imagistic catalogue of Stanza iv and Stanza vi recalls Pound's reworking of Chinese poems and his oversimplified reading of Chinese written language, the middle Stanza v foregrounds an image described and structured in a much more convoluted syntax, as if disrupting the tendency to overemphasize the imagistic feature of Chinese literature and the ideographic characteristic of the Chinese language. Thus, Hahn imaginatively rewrites the images in classical Chinese texts through the lens of *nü shu*. She shows how women writers may lend different meaning to images used by men and how Chinese characters are carriers of their own complex history involving both patriarchal oppression and the potential for subversive poetic creation.

### **Creative Untranslation**

Hahn's translational writing also involves experimentation with form. Her recent volume, *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, is remarkable for its creative "untranslation." Here, she continues to call attention to women's agency by experimenting with the Japanese forms *zuihitsu* and *tanka*. For decades, *haiku* has been considered perhaps the representative form of Japanese poetry, to a large extent due to its introduction by Pound, Amy Lowell, and other Imagist poets. Hahn's work rarely contains *haiku* pieces. Rather, her use of *zuihitsu* and *tanka*—both of which are important literary forms in classical Japanese literature and have a much longer history than *haiku*—reveals a different and more sophisticated view of Japanese literary culture. Classical Japanese *tanka* refers to a verse form written in thirty-one Japanese syllables. Without any concept of rhyme or line, it was traditionally written in a "mono-linear form" composed of "units" and "phrases," as the Japanese poet and translator Hiroaki Sato explains.<sup>44</sup> In English-language translations, *tanka* takes on the appearance of a western poem, divided into five lines in a syllabic pattern of five-seven-five-seven-seven, with every unit becoming a separate line.<sup>45</sup> Sato points out that the form was rendered by Arthur Waley and other translators without much attention to its original formal characteristics.<sup>46</sup> Inspired by Sato's translation of *tanka*, Hahn "unwrites" *tanka* poems to restore the original structure and style of the

verse form. “Although I have not maintained the [syllabic] count,” she says in *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, “I have attempted brevity, the original convention of rendering each as a single line, and the use of seasonal/nature references.”<sup>47</sup> Her *tanka* verse, echoing Sato’s critique of dominating *tanka* translations and his restorative translations, tries to undo the assimilationist rendering of the form and explores the possibility of writing English poems in the untranslated, original “mono-linear form.” While her *tanka* reveals an attempt to undo certain existing interpretations of the form, her *zuihitsu* seeks to intervene in the misrepresentation of a Japanese literary tradition.

*Zuihitsu* is a classical Japanese prose form that features random, fragmentary, diary-like, and loosely connected passages. The history of the form follows a journey from China to Japan. The Japanese term *zuihitsu* is a transliteration of the Chinese literary term, *suibi* 随笔, literally meaning “following the brush.” It was first used in the twelfth century by Chinese scholar Hung Mai to refer to his collection of essays and notes on a variety of topics from poetics to medicine. Japanese writers might have become familiar with the form through the circulation of Hung’s and other Chinese texts.<sup>48</sup> The transliterated term *zuihitsu* was first used in Japan in the fifteenth century, although an earlier work in the Heian period, Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book* written in vernacular Japanese, was retrospectively thought of as an early model of *zuihitsu* in Japanese literature.<sup>49</sup> A contemporary of the author of *The Tale of Genji*, Sei Shōnagon recorded in her essays her observations of and contemplations on the Heian Palace.

If Hahn’s earlier engagement with *The Tale of Genji* marks her critique of the repression of female agency in translation, her exploration of *zuihitsu*, as much as her *nū shu* poems, foregrounds female voices. In the last poem in *Mosquito and Ant*, “Sewing without Mother: a *zuihitsu* for my sister,” Hahn discusses this “formless” form as an “anti-structure,”<sup>50</sup> foreshadowing her further experimentation with it in *The Narrow Road to the Interior*. Continuing her *nū shu*-inspired correspondence with L. in *Mosquito and Ant*, the opening poem, “Compass,” is a letter that intends to give a “compass” to L. as she navigates the *zuihitsu* form. Seeking out a definition of the form in books on Japanese literature, the speaker cannot find anything illuminating, for none of the existing explanations precisely describes the “sense of disorder that feels so integral” to the form itself.<sup>51</sup> She goes on to quote three descriptions of the form and then lists a series of problems these descriptions pose for scholars and translators of Japanese literature. Her manner here is very much reminiscent of her style in “Comp. Lit.”:

[L]iterally, “following [the impulses of] the brush,”  
and consisting of brief essays on random topics  
—Donald Keene, *Seeds in the Heart*

[Miscellany] . . . partly of reminiscence, partly of entries in diary-form

—Arthur Waley, *The Pillow Book*

[S]tray notes, expressing random thoughts in a casual manner

—Makoto Ueda, *Principles of Classical Japanese Literature*, Earl Miner, ed.

Notice that none conveys the tonal insistence a writer finds her/himself in. None suggests an organizing principle—what we might call a *theme*. None comments on structural variety—list, diary, commentary, essay, poem. Fragment.

None offers that a sense of disorder might be artfully ordered by fragmenting, juxtaposing . . .<sup>52</sup>

Beginning her critical views with the word “none,” the speaker conveys a strong sense of dissatisfaction. In “Comp. Lit.,” Hahn’s speaker critiques the two translations of *The Tale of Genji* mainly by asking questions. The critical force is often weakened by occasional self-doubt. Here in *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, her critique of inadequate interpretations of a Japanese form is far more straightforward. Her own concept of the form as “disorder artfully ordered” is assertively expressed through the critique. Toward the end of the piece, the speaker unabashedly expresses her intention to fully embrace the formless *zuihitsu*: “Okay—for me, that the *zuihitsu* feels *encompassing*. That a fragment might be synecdoche, or excerpt. Or scrap. (Sappho comes to mind.) Why not!”<sup>53</sup> The sentence fragments, charged with a strong determination and excitement, provide a clear preface to what the book will unfold: a vastly “encompassing” feminist poetic with rich cross-cultural references. Rather than theorizing the form or retranslating the Japanese texts, Hahn represents the form by actually writing in it. She thereby attempts not only to demonstrate the empowering inspiration of the Japanese women writers’ *zuihitsu*, but also strives to undo the previous interpreters’ rather general and oversimplified emphasis on “randomness.”

Hahn’s *zuihitsu* pieces in this collection appear to be long prose pieces, consisting of apparently fragmented, disparate paragraphs, perfectly illustrating the genre name “following the brush.” Some of them include short poems, and others have embedded in them journal entries or email messages. Not too concerned about how to categorize the form—whether it is prose or poetry—Hahn welcomes the potential of prose paragraphs that the form enables. She claims that “paragraphs absorb the emotionality differently than lined poems.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, allowing room for distraction and fragmentation, the form makes possible a multi-dimensional writing with rich historical annotations. It provides Hahn with ample space for fully



exploring emotions and for engaging women's writing in different historical and cultural contexts. For example, in "Pulse and Impulse," a *zuihitsu* piece consisting of a series of journal entries, the speaker's reflection on the Japanese form is intricately woven with her contemplation about women poets in the Euro-American tradition. Simultaneously, a narrative focused on her own body runs through the work. A list of American women poets—"Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, H.D."—appears early in the poem and is meant to be read alongside another list of women writers in classical Japanese literature: "Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, Ono no Komachi, Lady Ise."<sup>55</sup> Once again, Lady Murasaki and Sei Shōnagon's *zuihitsu* remind the speaker of Sappho:

That [*zuihitsu*] was cultivated by a woman and feels significant—as a writing space for women. It is by its own nature a fragmented anything. I love long erratic pieces into which I can thrash around—make a mess. Lose the intellect.

Begin with your own fleshy body to seek fragments that will sustain.

I think of what we are left of Sappho's work—so ravaged by patriarchal flames yet still enduring. Endearing.<sup>56</sup>

Although Hahn seems to simply draw a cross-cultural connection between Japanese and western women's writing by contrasting "body" and "the intellect," throughout the poem she actually calls attention to the complicated dialogism between body and mind, East and West.

Early in the poem, the speaker quotes Louise Glück's "Circe's Power": "I'm sick of your world / that lets the outside disguise the inside."<sup>57</sup> Glück's poem gives voice to Circe, the demanding, seductive, and dangerous sorceress in Homer's *Odyssey* who transformed Odysseus's men into pigs. Glück rewrites Circe and makes her defend herself by saying that men are pigs anyway and that all she does is to reveal their disguise. Not simply foregrounding female voice and agency, Glück's poem presents a female figure with a highly analytical mind and impressive negotiating power. She knows how to make clear her indisputable authority through language and at the same time saves the pride of her male listener. After assertively declaring her hatred for men's deceptiveness by saying, "I'm sick of your world / that lets the outside disguise the inside," she tells Odysseus that his men "weren't bad men" but just turned greedy by "undisciplined life." Then, through the comment—"As pigs / under the care of / me and my ladies, they / sweetened right up"—the men become subjected to her controlling power.<sup>58</sup> More interestingly, Glück ends Circe's monologue with a passage that demonstrates what Joanne Diehl calls "a *realpolitik* of desire":<sup>59</sup>

You think

a few tears upset me? My friend,  
every sorceress is  
a pragmatist at heart; nobody  
sees essence who can't  
face limitation. If I wanted only to hold you

I could hold you prisoner.<sup>60</sup>

Glück's Circe does not confirm to stereotypes about womanhood: with an ironic, playful, and extremely confident voice, she is almost a masculine figure, immune to tears and capable of pragmatic thinking.

Hahn, too, is concerned with how to foreground the female voice in writing. After all, it is the "clear voice" of Japanese Heian women's writing that makes it so attractive.<sup>61</sup> However, her intertextual references to Glück and the Heian women writers make visible two different ways of exploring the female voice. While Glück's subversive portrait of Circe moves the focus away from the woman's body to her mind, one that is analytical and rational enough to compete with men, the classical Japanese women's texts, as Hahn's speaker tries to show, demonstrate how empowering and liberating writing based on the female body can be with its daringly erotic subject matter and embodied aesthetics of style. Hahn's speaker proposes a positive way of looking at "those traits women have been assigned, usually with negative connotations: subjectivity, intuition, irrationality (what short essays or lack of a formal structure might suggest)." She expresses a determination to hold onto her own point of view as a woman, in the strong, rebellious rhetorical question, "What is wrong with subjectivity anyway?" Reconsidering these "traits," however, Hahn is not reducing the idea of the female voice to an essentialized view of femininity and feminine writing. Rather, she invites the reader to think about how to reconsider the relationship between body and intellect, or in her own words, how "to invite the intellect back in for re-vision."<sup>62</sup>

Toward the end of the poem, Hahn rephrases Glück: "Not just the outside or inside," suggesting a notion of writing that includes a complementary—rather than mutually exclusive—relationship between body and mind.<sup>63</sup> To "begin with your own fleshy body," for her, indicates a way to "seek words and a poetic."<sup>64</sup> She intends to write about the female body as an important site of discursive exploration. What the reader sees in her cross-cultural piece "Pulse and Impulse," then, is not a celebration of some "universal" feminist writing but a display of different-yet-related ways of (dis-)engaging with the female body in exploring the female voice. Glück's rewriting of Circe, the Heian women's intuitive, spontaneous record of their life, and the female speaker's thinking about her own body in the contemporary western context are brought into play through Hahn's use of the *zuihitsu* form—a form which

provides a space of comparison. Untranslated by translators and scholars of Japanese literature, the form is shown to be an “encompassing” one, allowing limitless connections to multiple literary and cultural traditions.

With her continuous exploration of “translation,” Hahn’s writing makes evident the importance of studying Asian American literature in relation to Asian literature. Her poetry not only participates in the discourse of translation studies through its critique of translation texts but also explores new modes of Asian American writing with its creative translations of images and forms from classical East Asian literature. Her work of “continental drift” thus unsettles the purely domestic perspective from which Asian American literature was usually studied, demonstrating a transcultural, trans-historical poetics that requires a critical comparative reading of diverse cultural traditions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kimiko Hahn, *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Homer Eugene LeGrand, *Drifting Continents and Shifting Theories: the Modern Revolution in Geology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Hahn, interview with Françoise Luong, “At the Intersection of Murasaki Shikibu and Rapunzel: the Poet Kimiko Hahn.” Last accessed January 28, 2008, <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/.../after-reading-my-piece-monday-on-holly.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Hahn, interview with Laurie Sheck, *Bomb* 96 (2006). Last accessed January 28, 2008, <http://bombsite.com/issues/96/articles/2834>.

<sup>5</sup> Sau-ling C. Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads.” *Amerasia Journal* 21.1 (1995): 16.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>7</sup> David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 212.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>9</sup> Kandice Chuh, “Imaginary Borders,” in *Orientalisms: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*, eds. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 293.

- <sup>10</sup> For an illuminating reading that historicizes Benjamin's essay, see Steven G. Yao, *Translation and the Language of Modernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1–22.
- <sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 76–80.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–72.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.
- <sup>14</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 181.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 181–185.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.
- <sup>17</sup> Martha J Cutter, "Editor's Introduction: Translation and Alternative Forms of Literacy," *MELUS* 34.4 (2009): 7.
- <sup>18</sup> Traise Yamamoto, *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 247.
- <sup>19</sup> Kimiko Hahn, "Comp. Lit." *Earshot* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1992), 81.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>21</sup> John Walter De Gruchy, *Orienting Arthur Waley: Japonism, Orientalism, and the Creation of Japanese Literature in English* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 34–55.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 125–127, and also see David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 296.
- <sup>23</sup> Edwin Cranston, "The Seidensticker Genji." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 4.1 (1978): 6.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>25</sup> Masao Miyoshi. "Review: Translation as Interpretation." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38.2 (1979): 301.
- <sup>26</sup> Hahn, "Comp. Lit.," *Earshot*, 85, original emphasis.
- <sup>27</sup> Yamamoto, *Masking Selves*, 247.
- <sup>28</sup> Hahn, "Revolution," *Earshot*, 17. For more about the women writers of the Heian era, see Donald Keene, "Feminine Sensibility in the Heian Era," in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Nancy G. Hume (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 112.
- <sup>29</sup> Keene, "Feminine Sensibility," 109–110, 112–113.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Seidensticker. "Introduction," in *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu, trans. Edward Seidensticker (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), v–xvii; Arthur Waley, "Introduction," in *The Tale of Genji: A Novel in Six Parts*, Murasaki Shikibu, trans. Arthur Waley (New York: Modern Library, 1960), vii–xvi.

<sup>31</sup> Waley, "Introduction," viii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>33</sup> Hahn, "Comp. Lit.," *Earshot*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Hahn, "The Izu Dancer," *Earshot*, 87.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of Tanizaki, see Thomas Lamarre, "The Deformation of the Modern Spectator: Synaesthesia, Cinema, and the Spectre of Race in Tanizaki." *Japan Forum* 11.1 (1999): 29.

<sup>36</sup> Kimiko Hahn, *Mosquito and Ant* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 101.

<sup>37</sup> Zhebing Gong, et al., *Nü Shu: The Only Female Script in the World* (Taipei: *Fu nü xin zhi ji jin hui chu ban bu*, 1991), 23.

<sup>38</sup> Anne McLaren, "Women's Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese Nushu Writing." *Modern China* 22.4 (1996): 384.

<sup>39</sup> Hahn, "Mosquito and Ant," *Mosquito and Ant*, 29–30.

<sup>40</sup> Hahn, interview with Francoise Luong.

<sup>41</sup> Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Short Poems* (New York: A New Directions, 1990), 134, 136.

<sup>42</sup> Hahn, "Orchid Root," *Mosquito and Ant*, 57.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Hiroaki Sato, "Lineation of Tanka in English Translation." *Monumenta Nipponica* 42.3 (1987): 356.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 347–350.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>47</sup> Hahn, *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Linda H Chance, *Formless in Form: Kenkō, Tsurezuregusa and the Rhetoric of Japanese Fragmentary Prose* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 55.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–65.

<sup>50</sup> Hahn, "Sewing without Mother," *Mosquito and Ant*, 96.

<sup>51</sup> Hahn, "Compass," *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>54</sup> Hahn, “Pulse and Impulse,” *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 47–48.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>57</sup> Louise Glück, “Circe’s Power,” *Meadowlands* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1996), 47. Quoted in Hahn, “Pulse and Impulse,” 47.

<sup>58</sup> Glück, *Meadowlands*, 37.

<sup>59</sup> Joanne Feit Diehl, “Introduction,” in *On Louise Glück: Change What You See*, ed. Joanne Feit Diehl (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 1–22.

<sup>60</sup> Glück, *Meadowlands*, 38.

<sup>61</sup> Hahn, “Pulse and Impulse,” 49.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 47.