

## The Fluidity of Otherness in John Yau's Selected Poems

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الغيرية السائلة في قصائد مختارة لجون ياو

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Keywords: Yau, ethnic-self, otherness, fluidity, stereotypes, cultural identity

### Abstract

Ever since the 1970s Asian American literature emerged to tackle issues of Western racism against Asians, the importance of preserving the Asian ethnic heritage, and chiefly constructing a definite sense of identity based on self-definition. Celebrating the ethnic self and its nationality and language of origin as well as its traditional values from root culture are the most essential aspects that formed Asian American literature. Asian American writers came to be known for being a vital voice of justice for the marginalized members of their community who strive to preserve their culture in the face of ethnic segregation. However, John Yau (1950- ), a prominent contemporary Chinese American poet, goes beyond self-identified poetic writings of the ethnic self, challenging the cultural stereotypical molds of the American mainstream that encapsulated the Asian American identity. Instead of promoting the preservation one's ethnic and cultural identity, Yau evokes an unsettling image of fluid 'Otherness' that does not yield to prescribed representations.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Yau's poetic vision of otherness and its significance by exploring a selection of his poems, mainly "Ing Grish," arguing for an anti-essentialist notion of constructing the Asian American identity that is not based on one's culture of origin. Tackling the poet's unorthodox presentation of the ethnic self of Chinese Americans, the paper also emphasizes

that within the fluid culture of contemporary America, the Asian American identity is necessarily unsettling, but liberated from rigid predicate identities and cultural classifications.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ياو ، الغيرية، الآخر، الذات العرقية ، الهوية السائلة ، القوالب النمطية ، الهوية الثقافية

## الملخص

إنبتق الادب الامريكي الآسيوي منذ سبعينيات القرن الماضي لمعالجة القضايا العنصرية الغربية ضد الآسيويين ، وأهمية الحفاظ على التراث العرقي الآسيوي ، وبالأخص التأكيد على بناء شعور واضح للهوية القائم على التعريف الذاتي. إن التعني بالذات العرقية وتأكيد أهمية الجنسية واللغة الأم وكذلك التقاليد الممتدة من ثقافة الجذور الآسوية هي المحاور الأكثر أهمية التي شكلت الأدب الأمريكي الآسيوي. ولذلك اشتهر الكتاب الأمريكيون الآسيويون بكونهم صوت العدل لأبناء مجتمعهم المهمشين الذين يسعون جاهدين للحفاظ على ثقافتهم في مواجهة التمييز العنصري. بينما يتجاوزون ياو (١٩٥٠-) ، وهو شاعر أمريكي صيني معاصر بارز، يتجاوز الكتابات الادبية والشعرية التقليدية المستندة على التعريف الذاتي للهوية العرقية والمتغنية بالجذور الثقافية. فهو يتحدى في شعره التمثيلات الثقافية والأدبية النمطية السائدة في المجتمع الامريكي للهوية الأمريكية الآسيوية ويجسد صورة الآخر "الغيرية" للذات العرقية المتغيرة والسائلة التي لا تخضع للتمثيلات الثقافية المقولبة.

إن هدف هذ البحث هو دراسة رؤية ياو الشعرية للغيرية السائلة ومدى فاعليتها في المجتمع الامريكي الحديث من خلال دراسة مختارات من قصائده وبشكل خاص قصيدته "Ing Grish"، مؤكدا على مفهوم مناهض لمفهوم بناء الهوية الامريكية الآسيوية القائم على الثقافة الأم والتمسك بالجذور الثقافية. ومن خلال تناول تمثيل الشاعر الغير التقليدي للذات العرقية ، يجادل البحث بان الهوية الامريكية الآسيوية وسط الثقافة السائلة للمجتمع الامريكي الحديث هي بالضرورة غير ثابتة ، لكن متحررة من الهويات المفروضة والتصنيفات الثقافية الجامدة.

## I. Introductory Part

Writing poetry about ethnic minorities, Asian American writers usually accentuate their ethnic identity as unique in its cultural formation and inherited traditions, underlining that its Asianness can never dissolve in its adopted Americanness. This tendency unmistakably recalls Edward W. Said's (1935 –2003) discussion of Orientalism, the exotic othering of the East and its peoples through crude, naïve cultural representations that are patronize by the spirit of imperial authority of the West. Therefore, major Asian American poets such as Li-Young Lee (1957- ), Cathy Song (1955- ), David Mura (1952- ), and Marilyn Chin (1955- ) have contributed to the formal recognition of Asian American poetry in the literary history of American poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. Their poetic output is deeply rooted in their Oriental heritage, autobiographical and narrative



style in relation to personal experiences, family history, and collective memories, pursuing self-definition and enforcing their personal voices that stand for the collective voice of their race. It is worth saying that due to the U.S. white presumptions of Anglophone writing, early Asian American writers of the 1970s were encrypted within this frame of literary writing otherwise they would have been considered unauthentic. However, their works form an essential part of the development of Asian American writings, claiming social and cultural justice, and literary authenticity within modern American literature.

Yau's poetry, on the other hand, deconstructs the familiar modes Asian Americans are represented in minority literature written by Asian American writers of the 1960s and 1970s. His poetic personas neither represent those who hold on to their Chinese past nor those who assimilate themselves neatly into the salad bowl of the American hybrid society. By writing non-Asian identity-based poetry, Yau goes beyond the claims of the ethnic boundaries, presenting experimental approaches to Asian American identity that entails multi voices versus the clichéd and fixed representations of the Asian American individual by American public culture.

Focusing on otherness as the quality of being different with a fluid modern society or liquid modernity as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman(1925-2017) calls it, Yau is driven by the fact of living in a world of constant transition, fragmented, defined by contrasting identities rather than by certainties or traditionalism. Bauman who first introduced the idea of liquid modernity claims that the modern world is of "spongy and porous boundaries in which it is difficult to ascertain who legally belongs and who is a stranger" (Bauman, 2011,p.35). Based on this premise, Yau's poetic works show no interest to invest personal experiences, family heritage, Asian customs, or food; his poetry, instead, disrupts easy notions of race, identity, language, and nationality. In this respect, he states: "If you are an Asian American, as I am, many people expect you to write transparent or autobiographical poems, poems about garlic, soy sauce, ginger etcetera" (qtd. in Rohrer 2002, 23). Thus, he is quite cognizant to avoid the self-identified mode of writing, seeking to present a different perspective of Asian American writers and individuals that break the imposed social codes and cultural molds. In "Peter Lorre Speaks to the Spirit of Edgar Allan Poe During a Se'ance", Yau's persona says: "[I'm] waiting for further instructions on how / I might dig myself out of the roles // blind biographers have stuck me in" (Yau, 2002, 63).

In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said upholds that “identity does not necessarily imply ontologically given and eternally determined stability, or uniqueness, or irreducible character, or privileged status as something total and complete in and of itself”(Said,1193,p.382). Anthropological modern studies do not deny the impact of culture on articulating the general identity of a society, yet they go beyond the assumption that culture outlines its members in a mode that creates them a copy of itself. Therefore, as Yau lives within the modern fluidity of American culture, he expresses a rejection of the presumptions that culture is simply a unificatory force that is supposed to frame one’s identity and lifestyles. Therefore, to generate a continuing dialectical discourse and constant dynamic argument to interpret and re-interpret ourselves, there comes the necessity to confront the ‘Other’ (Said,1995,p.332). To do so, Yau displays in his works an Asian American poet who is a kind of disorientalist, a quality that sets a departure of one’s culture of origin, adopting a transcultural perspective that transcends and the limitations of cultural spaces in order to embrace otherness and set from self-enclosure. Similarly, Said says in his *Culture and Imperialism*:

No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems to be no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. (Said,1993, p.407)

Accordingly, within Yau’s poems only shattered pieces are found about his personal or past life, and sometimes they can be even inaccurate. For instance, according to his biographers, Yau was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, while in “Autobiography in Red and Yellow,” a poem from *Borrowed Love Poems* (2002), he writes: “I was born in Shanghai/shortly after one cylinder of war ended// and another revolution/in barnyard fashion began” (95). His parents are the ones who were born in Shanghai from which they fled due to the armed conflicts between the Republic of China and the imperial Japanese capture of Shanghai in 1937. Declaring that he was born where he was not, Yau seems to underline the space from which he was dislocated and the land to which he no longer belongs. China, the expected geographical realm of his origins, becomes the means to disorient and disappoint the reader to resist and question identity politics and the known conception of belonging. Indeed, Yau makes any personal or biographical reference in his poetry unreliable. In

an interview with Edward Foster, he spoke about his family and upbringing in such a fluid and playful manner that indicates an attempt to decompose any ethnic signifiers:

Foster: You grew up in Lynn?

Yau: No, in Brookline. We only lived in Lynn for a short time.

Foster: So then you grew up in Brookline?

Yau: No, actually, we lived in on Beacon Hill in Boston until sixth grade...

Foster: And then you went to Bard.

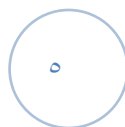
Yau: No, I went to Boston University for two years...(Foster, p.40)

The quest for one's identity and the emphasis on the autobiographical narratives of the ethnic-self by going back to its roots are not a component of Yau's concern: "In my case, my parents left China. They could not go back to live there, so the notion of return seems to me both an impossibility and a repressive illusion" (Perloff, p.39). No sense of nostalgia is injected in him since he believes that: "Who you are is simply an accident of birth . . . it becomes to me an interesting dilemma: how do I deal with it? How do I write about it?" (qtd. in Yu, 149). To deal with this dilemma, Yau delves into the meaning of otherness and experiments ways to articulate within a heterogeneous society that tends to be more homogeneous in its nature.

Throughout his main poetry collections such as *Forbidden Entries* (1996), *Borrowed Love Poems* (2002), *Ing Grish* (2005), *Paradiso* (2006), *Exhibits* (2010), and *Adventures in Monochrome* (2012) Yau reveals a poetic style mostly experimental and closely connected to the New York school of poetry of the 1950s and Language poets of the 1960s. Poets such as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Charles Bernstein, and Bruce Andrew who are also associated with the art of abstract expressionism form a notable component of Yau's artistic formation. Under the influence of both groups, his poetry is marked by its departure from the traditional employment of the authorial lyrical 'I', autobiographical narratives, and language rules that are supposed to enfold the poetics of a writer of minorities.

## II. Yau's Poetics of Resistance

It would be quite unconvincing to state that behind Yau's poetry lies no influence of his Asian American experience and racial marginalization of the 1960s and 1970s Asian Americans





confronted. However, his poetry neither demonstrates a canonical counterpart to white poetry nor familiar Asian American writings. Yau transforms the poet-I into multi voices as a way to underline the importance of foreignness, plurality, and complexity of the ethnic self that goes beyond the clichéd racist molds. In this respect, Xiaojing Zhou states that “Transforming the lyric I, rather than getting rid of it, constitutes a crucial part of Yau’s poetics of resistance. For him, writing poetry entails attention to the other and allowing the silent or silenced other to be heard” (Zhou, p.199). As an avant-garde poet, Yau resists the transparent representation of both the Asian American author and the individual, de-emphasizing the confessional mode. In the same interview with Foster, he claims: “I didn’t find my day-to-day life all that interesting. I didn’t want either to celebrate or lament my own life in any particular fashion” (Yau, 1990, p.45). Through digging into the depth of one’s self, he does not only transcend but breaks the limitations of fixed and stigmatizing stereotypes in which Chinese Americans were enclosed.

Part of Yau’s poetics of resistance and experimental style is employing same America’s dominant mass media accounts of Asian Americans and ironically exaggerating them to expose their banality. Undoubtedly, there has been some progress in depicting ethnic minorities in American mass media, yet the general image is not quite positively portrayed. In Yau’s series of “Opinion Sonnets,” for instance, he employs unidentified personas to show how the ‘Chinaman’ is seen in the eyes of the American culture as nameless of blurry character, mute, robotic hard working, and basically as a prop used in the ‘silver screen’. In “Opinion Sonnets” number (3), the speaker ironically states: “Though seldom labeled ‘The Chinaman’/Wong Song, Long Dong or Ding will do” (qtd. in Hong, para.3). Yau conjures vocalities with an exaggerated way, inspired by the intonations of the Chinese language as part of his poetics of resistance against the clichéd Asiatic other:

Especially if they speak very good English  
And, when the occasion calls for it, tell a joke  
That is funny to those who aren't Chinese  
None of this is entirely their fault.  
They grew up differently than the rest of us.  
Otherwise, I like them and think they are fine. (qtd.in Hong, para.2)



The patronizing and sarcastic tone is rendered clear by the persona of the poem to represent a culture that still finds amusement in putting Asian Americans in a position as punchlines.

Being of Asian origins living in the United States is what makes Asian Americans in a state of in-between Eastern and Western worlds, either holding on to their Asian heritage or trying to reconcile the two and reconstruct a new identity that fits within the fluidity of the American society.

In an interview with Anselm Berrigan, Yau states:

I'm interested in the people that can't really fit in, or can't quite be assimilated.... There are times that I think that the reason I'm interested in these people is that I'm a bi-racial Asian-American and I'm never going to fit in. America, as far as I can tell, on a good day recognizes that it's black and white. On a bad day it recognizes that it's white. It seldom recognizes that it's more than two colors. (Berrigan, 2018, para.s.55-56)

Yau's poetry posits a negation of the construction of an in-between identity combined of Chineseness and Americanness, though both are not denied existence. In "Russian Letter," for instance, the speaker introduces a philosophical perspective about the notion of one's past and present, referring to their association in a mode of being jammed to one another. The past is thought to be detained in the present, yet the individual strives to set himself free:

It is said, the past  
sticks to the present

like glue,  
that we are flies

struggling to pull free

It is said, someone

cannot change  
the clothes

in which  
their soul

was born. (Yau, 2002, p.22)

The image given of the past as being glued to the present denotes the difficulty to set free from one's root culture or history. The past seems so powerful, clinching to the present in such an adhesion. However, the speaker repeats twice "It is said", which can be an indication of a carry-over and imposed assumption of this philosophical perspective that can be interrogated. No doubt that no change in one's DNA can take place "in which/ their soul/ was born," yet, people are in an ongoing pursuit of change and liberation from their past. The speaker seems to be leaning more to a skeptical observation of the stickiness of the past over the present. The line "I, however, / would not go so far"(p.22) suggests "that the poem recommends resistance to conformity, resistance to blind acceptance of what others have repeatedly said is true" (Milne, p.185). Indeed, the "Russian Letter" does not provide the reader with a replacement of that notion of the past, yet the speaker implies that it is not necessarily the only refuge, especially as he refers to "the hawk's plumes/ as it shrieks down/ from the sky" (Yau, 2002,p.22). Cannot that diving of the hawk be the means to free one's self from the glue?

Yau's representation of the Asian ethnic self sounds quite liberating and confusing at the same time due to its indefinite portrayal. In "Autobiography of Pink and Blue," the speaker states:

Okay. Okay. You want to know. Well, all right.

I am not an Egyptian napkin. I am not even  
a retired cosmonaut or guileless barber.

I am neither an escapee from House of Grubb

Nor an inmate from the House of Hubbub. (p. 95)

Sarcastically, the speaker identifies himself by what he is not, negating that his identity is associated with transcribed factors of nationality, profession, family, or any settling suppositions. Self-configuration in Yau's poems comes to be materialized by decomposing identity politics and fracturing the clichéd notions of the Asian identity. The fluid nature he gives to his personas is deliberately done to underline the banality of enclosing an entity within a certain structure.

For Yau, living in a conflicted position and experiencing racialized attitudes, Asian Americans would have a continual opportunity for identity revision and cultural variability. Thus, it is difficult to discern a well-defined sense of identity in his poetry. For example, in "Angel Atrapado





XXI,” the one speaker refers to indefinable selves that are hard to distinguish which is which; there is ‘someone’ who could be he or she with a name or names that seems ‘like yours’. ‘You,’ ‘he,’ ‘she,’ and ‘they’ are all interchangeable and undetermined, giving the impression that they may simply refer to one single self:

Someone is speaking into a tape recorder,  
someone with a name that sounds like yours,  
someone who claims she (or perhaps he) dreamed  
that they (there must have been two of them) were you,  
that they had your hair and hands,  
saw through your eyes, and did  
the things they did

to someone else, someone with the names you wanted for your own. (Yau, 1996, p.13)

This unsettling and fluid image the poem displays gives seems whirling with plurality similar to an encounter of strangers and familiar people at the same time but above all an encounter the otherness within.

The notion of authenticity and originality by which Asian American writers were/are assessed is another issue that Yau resists in his poetry. To fit within the literary standards of inclusion an authentic American writer of ethnicity is to be American-born and write in proper English, conforming to a monolingual white American culture. Though he never learned Chinese, he developed a strong consciousness of the impact of both Chinese and English languages on constructing and deconstructing the Asian American identity. In *American Poetry Review*, Eliot Weinberger criticizes Yau by saying that he “barely speaks and cannot read Chinese,” creating “a remarkable new persona for himself: that of the angry outsider person of color” (qtd. in Chang, p.226). His ignorance of Chinese is employed in his poetry to fracture any static or models of Chinese Americanness, a matter which has put his ethnic authenticity in question majorly by white critical reception rather than by Asian American writers.

In order to deconstruct the racialized depictions of the Chinese immigrants, Yau overstates their broken or grotesque English by which they are generally mocked no matter how they try to perfect their accent. Stereotypically, they are known for the ‘ching-chong, ching-chong,’ ‘ching-



chong, chow,’ ‘chop chop, ‘sank you,’ ‘ah – so,’ and ‘Ing grish.’ By using the same public images Asian Americans are encoded with the poet expresses his commitment to racial justice and recontextualize such racial clichéd representations. The notion of considering English as the expressive and poetic language that would humanize the primitive ethnic-self of the Asian American individual is strongly rejected in Yau’s poetry. In comparison to Standard English, Chinese English is thought of as a hard-hitting distortion within the modern American society, making Chinese Americans perpetual immigrants, unable to adapt to American life (Demick, pp.22-23). The erroneous Chinese English also is assumed to set a threat against American monolingual culture whose supremacy or hegemonic influence is considered to be the very factor that determines the acknowledgment of an authentic American citizen.

To accentuate this cultural and social blemish through his idiosyncratic style, Yau uses sarcasm, paradoxes, and wordplay, parodying these linguistic distortions to break the myth of assimilation and promote a language of otherness. It is a language that is built around differences and syntax variability regardless of whether it displays complete clarity, correctness, or a well-defined history. For instance, in his series of poems “Genghis Chan: Private Eye XXV,”<sup>1</sup> he playfully employs oriental resonances to parody the stereotypical presentation of Asians in mass media, especially in terms of speaking the English language:

Strong song

Oolong

Rinky dink

Trinket rock

Duck walk

Talk muck. (Yau, 1996,58)

Equivalent choice of the number of words in each line along with their rhythmic beats, yet they intentionally seem to have no sense, as Barry Schwabsky states in the introduction to Yau’s Ing

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<sup>1</sup> “Genghis Chan Private Eye” is a “sequence of seven poems that combines Genghis Khan, the thirteenth-century Mongol conqueror, and Charlie Chan, the Chinese American Honolulu detective created by the white American novelist Earl Derr Biggers and played in movies by the white actors, Warner Oland and Sidney Toler, and on television by the white actor J. Carrol Naish” (Milne,p.198).

*Grish* that “ Syntax and meaning can sometimes come close to falling apart, and for reasons that have nothing to do with formal exercise in abstraction, chance, or autonomy. (pp.x-xi).

Similarly in “Autobiography in Red and Yellow,” Yau plays on the widespread social notion in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century about Chinese people being known for their deceitful and fake nature. He says, “In my youth, I spoke / with forked tongue // and ate with forking sticks” (Yau, 2002, p.96). This stereotyping is transformed by Yau “into a capability for poetic wordplay (chopsticks become, through a periphrastic renaming, ‘forking sticks’)” (Leong, 2014, p.527). His endeavor to reidentify Asian Americans entails more than just an implementation of interculturalism or identity configuration. As an alternative, Yau emphasizes the need to explore the existence of alterity within a fluid culture that seems to advocate a “yet-to-be defined program that might be called difference politics” rather than identity politics (Yau, 2005,p.xi).

### III. Yau’s “Ing Grish”

His poetry collection, *Ing Grish*, which has received large scholarly attention, is overly concerned with identity deconstruction concerning the English language as the very factor to acknowledge an authentic Asian American citizen. In the title poem, “Ing Grish,” Yau provides a debatable vision of the Asian Americans’ multicultural origins, an exploration of an identity that is no more belonging neither to its Asian nor western roots, creating a radical sense of disintegration or impertinence. Otherness is perceived as an ontological part of Asian Americans' existence. An identity of plural voices is the starting point of Yau’s “Ing Grish”, for it goes beyond a mono vocal worldview of identity construction.

The very choice of the title of the collection *Ing Grish* is meant to unfold the mocking features ascribed to Asians as they pronounce ‘Engrish’ instead of ‘English’. Their incapability of pronouncing a correct ‘L’ that is replaced by ‘R’ stands for the way white America evaluates Asians for their unfitting social and cultural correctness. In this respect, Tara Fickle in her “English before Engrish: Asian American Poetry's Unruly Tongue” remarks that Yau playfully redefines the Asian American identity “by racializing those differences, such that the Asian speaker’s ostensible difficulty in pronouncing the “l” sound often serves as a derisive comment on the Asian body’s failure to live up to not only an American linguistic standard but also a racial one” (Fickle,2014, p. 85). By underlining such mispronunciation of English, the poet questions whether knowing English

or Chinese can really establish an individual's authenticity or determine his fake or true American citizenship. Thus, the poem begins:

I never learned Singlish.

I cannot speak Taglish, but I have registered

the tonal shifts of Dumglish, Bumglish, and Scumglish.

I do not know Ing Grish, but I will study it down to its

black and broken bones. (Yau, 2005,p.62)

The assumed deformed English vernacular spoken by Asian immigrants who may come from Singapore, Manila, Bangladesh, or other parts of Asia is referred to in terms of ridicule, associating one's identity with his knowledge of English as it is affected by his mother language and nationality.<sup>2</sup> The tone of sarcasm sensed in the poem serves to dismantle the racist attitude with which Asian Americans are stereotyped. The reference to the image of black and broken bones seems also to "summons the legacy of violence against Asian Americans in the U.S" (Demick, 2015, p. 72).

It is worth saying that "Ing Grish" was partly published as a response to the contemporary American writer, Eliot Weinberger (1949- ) whom accusatory observation indicated that "Yau doesn't know Chinese and hence has no authority with which to speak from a minority position" (Leong,2014, p.528). Being considered neither a Chinese nor Anglophone poet, Yau is motivated to engage his poem with a series of negations and affirmations regarding one's knowledge of English and Chinese. The reader is invited by this swaying form of writing to acknowledge the dynamic process of cultural fluidity that "dispel the notion that language is tied to any particular cultural essence" ( Demick, 2015, p.23).

It might be quite unconvincing to deny the importance of learning and understanding a particular language of a nation as one crucial step to obtain its citizenship and integrate into its culture. Gloria Anzaldúa, an American scholar of Chicana cultural studies, sums up this position

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<sup>2</sup> English used by some Chinese individuals, including the spoken medium of Chinese Pidgin English and the written medium of Chinglish are a modified form of English used as a trade language between the British and the Chinese, first in Canton, China, and later in other Chinese trade centers (Britannica).



with her rallying cry that “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.81). Yau, on the other hand, sees the absurdity of distinguishing a real citizen from a fake one just based on his mastering of the English language. Therefore, by constantly distorting the word ‘English’ to ‘Ing grish,’ or ‘Ang Grish,’ or ‘Um Glish’ the poet denotes the inaptness of accusing Asian Americans of deforming English that is already applicable and exposed to vast mutations. That is why the insistence on how Chinese people substitute English ‘L’ with ‘R’ seems to invent new words that may mean something to the speaker others cannot consider:

I do not know Ang Grish, but I can tell you that my last name  
consists of three letters, and that technically all of them are vowels.

I do not know Um Glish, but I do know how to eat with two sticks.  
Oh but I do know English because my father’s mother was English  
and because my father was born in New York in 1921  
and was able to return to America in 1949  
and become a citizen.

I no speak Chinee, Chanel, or Cheyenne. (p.62)

The indetermination of knowing and not knowing English is a way to voice a protest against a culture that favors English to the language of otherness. Also, by using the same English language in such a puzzling way, the speaker, deliberately, complicates the presentation of his identity. His identity is anything but stable or well configured. This instability is not meant to be a negative aspect but to signify the innovative potentiality of the ethnic self, which can be always in revision. The sense of unsettlement becomes part of the poem’s fluid nature to involve flip-flopping of the speaker’s attitude regarding his knowledge of languages.

The speaker becomes an articulation of various and contradictory voices, asserting his otherness: “I do know English because I am able to tell others/that I am not who they think I am” (p.62). His paradoxical attitude towards language operates as means to set free the individual from cultural dictations of who he should be. Like language poets, Yau questions language and its rules as the very factor that would help the individual into his journey of character construction:

Because I do not know Chinese I have been told that means  
I am not Chinese by a man who translates from the Spanish.  
He said that he had studied Chinese and was therefore closer



To being Chinese than I could ever be. No one publicly disagreed with him,  
Which, according to the rules of English, means he is right.

.....

The fact that I disagree with the man who translates from the Spanish  
is further proof that I am not Chinese because all the Chinese  
living in America are hardworking and earnest  
and would never disagree with someone who is right.

This proves I even know how to behave in English. (p.63)

Not knowing Chinese becomes a reason by which the speaker is judged as an unauthentic Asian American, and his act of disagreement ‘with someone who is right’ generates further disbelief in his Asianness and in his acquired Americanness. Only the speaker’s knowledge of English would give him the privilege and liberty to have different social conduct from those who do not master it. In both cases, the speaker’s knowledge of a certain language seems to bind him to an awaited social behavior by American society.

The very lyrical ‘I’ becomes an embodiment of otherness that refers to multiple and contradictory perspectives of different voices that never seem to settle: “I, who was and is one of Them, do not want to become one of Us” (p.43). Even in this statement, Yau, ambiguously refers to the collective ‘them’ and ‘Us,’ making it difficult to determine whether by the former he means Asians or by the latter he indicates Americans. Therefore, throughout “Ing Grish” the speaker reflects an unsettling and chameleon-like identity of constantly shifting voices, reflecting no resolute desire to provide a clear interpretation of a settled ethnic self. What matters for Yau is to explore what is outside the ‘I,’ meaning the other(s) in which he keeps finding an entity in continuous revision.

No wonder that the speaker expresses neither a sense of nostalgia for his Chinese origins nor preference to modern American society, trying to break from racialized dictation. He finds no sense of dwelling in neither of them:

I do not know Chinese because my mother said that I refused to learn it  
from the moment I was born, and that my refusal  
was one of the greatest sorrows of her life.



.....

The authority on poetry announced that I discovered that I was Chinese

When it was to my advantage to do so.

My father was afraid that if I did not speak English properly

I would be condemned to work as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant.

My mother, however, said that this was impossible because

I didn't speak Cantonese, because the only language

waiters in Chinese restaurants know how to speak was Cantonese.

I do not know either Cantonese or English, Ang Glish or Ing Grish. (63)

While the aptitude to cultivate a different identity from that of one's national origins can be seen as a factor of cultural uprooting or a betrayal of traditions, it can also be a liberating force from accepted and generalized notions of identity construction or identity politics.

In his essay, "Between the Forest and its Trees," Yau asserts that in writing he finds "an attempt to hear the Other, the Others," which "forms an attention and responsibility" (1993, pp.187–88). Thus, the language he uses in "Ing Grish" with all its absurdism, word playing, humor, and incongruity is never intended to stem merely from the interiority of an estranged or frustrated Asian American. Instead, Yau uses a persona whose unsettled identity is "bound up with the other(s) and with its socially constructed identities, but uncontainable and elusive in its otherness" (Zhou, pp. 196-197).

By the end of the poem and for the first time the speaker asserts his ignorance of English and Chinese in the same line, signifying their insufficiency to express the language of otherness that is silenced. Both languages are characterized by their inability to reduce the Asian American individual to any form of pigeonhole cultural structure:

I do not know either English or Chinese and, because of that,

I did not put a gravestone at the head of my parents' graves

as I felt no language mirrored the ones they spoke. (65)

On the one hand, the lack of finding in English or Chinese a sense of belonging alludes to the unspeakable ethnic-self that is denied the freedom to voice its mind. On the other hand, by de-emphasizing the expressive power of the two languages, the poem denotes that none of the two is



central or more important than the other. Yau tries to disrupt the hierarchical demand of Standard English as part of the mainstream of modern American culture.

#### IV. Conclusion

Yau's unorthodox perception of cultural identity helps to unlock new cultural horizons and possibilities of racial awareness, promoting the ethics of otherness, which can be the source of a broader investigation of the ontology of the self and knowledge of human development in general and the ethnic-self in particular. It can also be the path towards transcending the limitations of language discourse, racism, gender, and nationality. Outwardly, the stress on unsettling and fluid ethnic identity can be seen as too pluralistic in no way a remedy to identity crisis. Yet, it can also be an evolution of a new culture in which no ethnic self is reduced to fixed categories or stereotypes. Although Yau's discussed poems provide no sense of stability or convenient articulation of self-definition, the fluid otherness, broken foreignness, and plurality they convey do shake and break the limitations of imposed identity notions. They, indeed, assert an ongoing interrogation of identity construction that raises the question whether one's identity is homogeneous or heterogeneous. Would not such an ongoing endeavor encourage a further research work on materializing the politics of inclusion rather than the politics of exclusion? Would not this emphasis on alterity or indefinite otherness be the starting point to see the Other as an extension of one's self? Cannot it be a source of an abundance of cross-fertilization of diverse cultures where no foreign self is marginalized? Exploring such untraditional paths to configure the ethnic self would take us along with Yau as he says: "I also tend to get lost in research. I'm quite willing to wander off down any number of paths, just to see where they take me, and what piece of writing I might end up with....Who knows where that will lead?" (Berrigan, 2018, para 85).

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