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The Yau Identity

He was affable, and stared into space when he wasn't drinking coffee, but when I saw him from only a few feet away I realized what an effort you had to make—blindly, so to speak, in the darkness of the body—in order to look always the same to others and to yourself. —*Jean Genet*

No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. —*Ralph Ellison*

[B]ut when I gits my Affikin Up then I know that Whatever personality I may possess is simply the collage effect of too many meaningful documentaries . . . and plenty of knowing glances.

—*Kara Walker*

"I Was Born . . ."

Open on a body surrendered to a motion not its own, seen from below, afloat on the agitated surface of murky blue water filling the screen. It isn't the start of *Sunset Boulevard*, though this image is engaged with that movie's literally fluid history: here we're not in the star's stagnant pool but under the churning surface of an ocean at night. Ending as beginning (again), these wilder waters (in Doug Liman's film *The Bourne Identity*) resurrect a weirder hero: fished up out of the troubled Mediterranean with nothing to go on but what's been forced into what Genet calls "the darkness of the body," literally under the skin (where the number of his Swiss account resides), is an amnesiac, protean protagonist who has no secure sense of inhabiting any of his possible subject positions, a secret agent whose Agency is a secret from himself, whose *bourne* or goal is self-knowledge, and whose long, violent "mission" ends in the discovery that he's the bad guy. While that's not so rarely where the western quest for truth winds up, the images we encounter in this version—watching someone walk into the American Embassy as a citizen, and fight their way out minutes later as a criminal, for instance—can help crystallize the identity issues we've inherited from Modernism and the problems they continue—ever more urgently—to pose. A terribly fragile instant of tentative certainty is lost (and something closer to an actual vision of who we are now is gained)

when our anti-hero's epiphanic self-recognition at his bank is removed with his safety-deposit box's false bottom and the camera frames a gun resting on a vertiginous wealth of passports and currencies. Let's face it, any illusion that a coherent "I" fell under attack by Postmodernism or Deconstruction or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry fails to acknowledge the ways that our former social understandings have been destabilized by specific historical events: we're too involved with each other, financially for starters, to go on enacting—and dying for—a nostalgia for former, costly, clarities. Like it or not, we've gone multinational. But this complexity or perplexity of both our own identity (now) and our relations with others remains an urgent challenge only partially addressed by a well-intentioned "multiculturalism" whose emphasis is on telling "other" stories in forms we already recognize. The question, then (or one of many) becomes how to—given Modernism's engagement with race, gender, and nationality (and the translation of this engagement into our concern for "diversity")—give a realistically complicated sense of the problems and potential of Postmodern identity as it takes shape in language. Which is where poetry comes in. For while poetry, as Auden noted, "makes nothing happen," looking into its "way of happening" is an always available opportunity for an encounter with otherness. Because poetry's relationship to meaning is by definition strained and strange each reading is a chance to experience some other kind of mission and to dwell—or find you have no dwelling—in uncertainties. "We inhabit many lives to varying degrees," as Yau notes ("Short Movie with Long Cartoons"), "and some of them intersect. . . ."¹ For its range of genres, relentlessly experimental character, and complicated entanglement with "identity politics," John Yau's poetry is exemplary for the way it keeps presenting its often puzzled readers with the dazzling vision of further possibilities under the false bottom of every box (or category) we thought was safe.

Passports please:

Orales: here is a poem by John Yau:

Poem
I ask that love
come home again
for if there is a way
to follow you

1. *Paradiso Diaspora*.

I would
but there are no substitutes
for memory's carved tree
itself a tent of air's
cold thought

Ecoutez: here is the opening stanza of a sestina by John Yau:

Hair sack is always slick seat
Seat hair sack is always slick
Is always slick seat hair sack
Slick seat hair sack is always
Always slick seat hair sack is
Sack is always slick seat hair²

Listen: here are some stanzas from a poem by John Yau:

I do not now 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 1021 and was able to
return to America in 1949 and become a citizen

I no speak Chineese, Chanel, or Cheyenne

I do not speak or dream in Chinese because my parents were afraid I
would never learn to speak English properly or properly. They were
afraid I would mumble in Ing Grish

I do know English because I am able to tell others
I am not who they think I am³

How tempting it is to press the work into the service of a coherent story
about the poet: to say, "Ah ha, a long career." Indeed John Yau is, "a
poet, fiction writer, and critic, author of 13 books of poetry and prose,
an NEA fellow, and an Associate Professor at . . . ," etc. But trying to

2. "Fourth Metabolic Isthmus Sestina," *Borrowed Love Poems*.

3. "Ing Grish," *Ing Grish*.

straighten the confusion of poetic styles with a story won't work. If—depending on your own aesthetic bent—you're thinking he started out as experimenting with word games and then, after mastering the lyric poem whose epiphanic "deep image" touches all of us, became a contemporary confessional poet with a lesson to give about the way language is involved in the shaping of identity (and identity politics) you have made a mistake. Or if you reversed that sequence, or even if you have, à la the sestina above, yet another arrangement (confessional poet, deep image poet, language poet), you're wrong. In any case you'd be thinking he moved from becoming to *being*: that the poet "progressed," that he "grew up." Whatever way you arrange that narrative, however, it no longer works: these poems are all, in fact, fairly recent. There was a world where the next question would be: *Who is this guy?* Or rather (the questions Modernism taught us to ask), where's the signature style? What happened to that difficult to define but easy to put a finger on thing we call voice? *Who does he think he is?* (A question we like to ask of those who do not act like who we think they are.) But the question is harder than that one, and—in Yau's work or playing around with it—funnier: What is this who? How does recognition occur and at what cost? For Yau's dynamic cross-genre play with received forms and thorny identity issues, along with his refusal of a "signature" style and singular voice, open up the question of what recognition entails and what an identity is as well as how we communicate and find community. Isn't telling someone that you are not who she thinks you are a crucial step towards a better understanding? Who did we think he was? Let's go back. . . .

The Picture of Little J.Y. in a Prospect of (Doubled) Flowers

I scoffed as if all this pointing
reached me in the mirror
where my resemblance once stood

crouched in oil
shot through

with flakes of spit and gold⁴

4. *Forbidden Entries* (Black Sparrow, 1997).

Marjorie Perloff's gorgeously clear-eyed analysis of the Yasusada "hoax" in the *Boston Review* ("In Search of the Authentic Other")⁵ is sequentially followed by the issue containing her review of Yau's *Forbidden Entries*. The juxtaposition is useful: a few glances back and forth make it clear that while the critic is mostly at ease with and in favor of the "Orientalism" (Vol. 22 #2 ,32) of the hoax, what she calls Yau's "Nasty stuff" (Vol. 22 #3-4, 41) gets under her skin. Having congratulated "Yasusada" for "inventing a world at once ritualized and yet startlingly modern . . . a poetic world that satisfies our hunger for the authentic, even though that authentic is itself a perfect simulacrum" (Vol. 22 #2 p 32), Perloff chastises Yau for not sufficiently indicating "that [he] is in fact Chinese-American" (Vol. 22 #3-4, p 39) as well as for the "reductionism" of his poems and their "failure to grapple with the poet's own conflicted identity." Beginning with an analysis of Yau's "cultivated" "image" and a lengthy description of the "picture . . . on the back cover of one of his early books," the critic draws the reader's attention to what she sees as Yau's efforts to "distance [himself] from his middle- class background" and his effort to install himself as "representative multiculturalist." Hoping to confine Yau's "Oppositionality" to "the vein of [his] mentor John Ashbery" (i.e. "linguistic density, dislocation, and fragmentation . . ."), Perloff's efforts to rescue "'Excellence'" from what she sees as its "subordinat[ion] to issues of agency and positionality" are disorienting, seeming to turn into something that might have been written by a very different kind of critic. "The best poems in *Forbidden Entries*," evidently, are poems whose subjectivities, while "acute and schizophrenic," remain not only racially unmarked but in fact highly unspecific: "These are not confessional poems: one never knows who's who or what it is that has actually happened." While "Yasusada's," work is (like Ashbery's) "characterized by irony and restraint," it seems Yau's poems, like the poems of actual Hiroshima survivors, are "more notable for their subject matter than for their poetic quality." Unsurprisingly, "the more overt representations of racial oppression in *Forbidden Entries* are . . . the volume's least successful poems" (Vol. 22 #3-4, 40), and by the end of the review Yau is viewed as not only an uneven poet but (and the linkage itself is worth exploring) a bad person: "too eager to probe his own pain, his own version of the *abject*."

5. *Boston Review* April/May, 1997.

In the words of Yeats, Yau's is a world of "great hatred, little room"; indeed, like Yeats's Ribh, he "stud[ies] hatred with great diligence." Mistrustful of love and friendship, hostile to and suspicious of strangers and friends alike, Yau has invented a surrealist discourse of controlled scorn and anger.

The critic's objection to a particular emotion (anger) is worth exploring, as is the fact that the aesthetic criteria invoked are arguably the same aesthetic criteria that led editors and poets astray in their encounter with Yasusada's work: what the critic approves is the most general version of an "anxiety of exclusion," "an awareness of difference as individual as it is racial or ethnic" informing poems which "convey a poignant sense of loss." But Yau's poetry was and is dense with marked identities, mixed feelings, and strongly opposed values ("spit and gold"). Here's a section of "Genghis Chan: Private Eye":

XXIV

Grab some
Grub sum

Sub gum
machine stun

Treat pork
pig feet

On floor
all fours

Train cow
chow lane

Dice played
trade spice

makes fist
first steps ⁶

6. *Forbidden Entries* (Black Sparrow, 1997).

While Perloff accuses the poem of merely repeating the stereotypes it attempts to critique, readers more well-oriented understand the power of incorporating the master's insults for the purposes of building alternative communities, and can grasp Yau's sophisticated use of "surreal images and unconventional language to draw the reader's attention to the fictitiousness of [the] racial image as a cultural production and commodity."⁷ But what about the way those mostly two beat lines (shall we call them bound feet?) and uncertainly rhyming couplets stagger or knock against silence, *enacting* the problem of speaking from a straitened (stereotyped) subjectivity? Reading the poem aloud you find it's an uneasy space to be inside of, in which acts of speech fail to resolve into narrative, remaining somewhere in-between the descriptive or imperative, and destabilizing the speaker's identity across a constantly enacted power divide. What a critic sees as "labeling" and reads easily as a victim's story (something bad has happened to someone) a less entitled reader might hear otherwise. Listen to the way "on floor / all fours" shifts: are you (as reader) slave or master, or both? It isn't clear whether the speaker of the poem is being prepared for rebellion (will the "fist" be used?) or to join the armies of the repressed. The poetry explores the extremely unstable territory of power dynamics, and requires the kind of reader Perloff calls for at the end of her Yasusada essay: a reader characterized by "a willingness . . . to look searchingly and critically at what is . . . *there*."

"Hoo" are you?

BOOM, kill the Arabs.
BOOM, kill the white men,
HOO, HOO, HOO
—Vachel Lindsay

In Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry*, the author reads the "content and intertextualities" of "a vibrant, aggressive sound of threat and promise" in Lindsay's *Hoo*, where Michael North had previously—struck by the same recurring phoneme in Modernist verse—read a "purely phatic sound" "associated with cultures outside of Europe." Building on the

7. Zhou Xiaojing, *Asian American Poets: A Bio-Bibliographic Critical Sourcebook* (Greenwood Press, 2002).

work of both critics⁸ it's possible to go still further in sounding the sound, hearing it both elsewhere, and other. Not *only* "a resistant version of the words *hoodoo/voodoo*,"⁹ not *only* "phatic," not *only* a warning and thrill, but also a question, sounded aggressively, but out of an anger with roots in a deep confusion, and at times sounding closer to a sob of despair. Whether in Lindsay, Eliot, Stevens, or Pound, the hole opened by Modernism's "HOO"¹⁰ echoes back a questioning of identity which at the same time refuses to recognize or confer personhood, where a who is reduced to a meaningless what. While the sound can be seen as a risky surrender to the materiality of the medium, revealing a vulnerability on the part of the poet,¹¹ its sense enacts a desire to understand or at least find a name for—*Hoo are you*—while warding possible understanding of: *you are "hoo," not "who."* In other words, the changed letters invite and refuse passage to a de-humanized other whose existence is sounded but not sensible: heard but not formally recognized. We might say that this other lacks papers, for what writing would steady, speech restores to uneasiness. *Listening*—in "The Congo"—to Lindsay's refrain, for instance, allows us to feel the pressure of the HOOs which follow the imperatives ("kill the Arabs . . . kill the white men") as both a drop into a potentially bottomless list (who *else* shall we kill?) and an unmasking of both the problem posed by identity (who, who, *who are we*—not Arabs, not white men . . .) and its revelation of the problem's radically violent solution (as if killing everyone *not us* might make us certain of ourselves at last). Our focus on a phoneme so rich and strange helps us re(en)vision the identity problems and problematic solutions of Modernism which haunt us in

8. And recalling Dr. Suess' *Horton Hears a Who*: a text written in part in response to cultural antagonisms.

9. DuPlessis.

10. DuPlessis calls our attention to Eliot's citation of Lindsay as well as Stevens' "hoos": with an ear attuned we hear it also in Pound (Cantos LXXVII) "hooo."

11. Thinking about the physical requirements of the sound's production is useful. Born of or borne on what might be seen as an aggressive exhalation the formation of the phoneme requires a mouth made—for the terms of this making—vulnerable, even sexually inviting. While the exhalation might be read (after Julia Kristeva) as an abjection or thrusting out, we might say that the effort makes or marks an open invitation for the other's return in the role of lover on the inspiration or inhalation that must follow, mouth agape.

the "contact zone"¹² of the classroom, where our work is often that of making introductions in the effort to open the space for an encounter with otherness. The demands of teaching forbid facile dismissals of theory and demand a wider variety of (interdisciplinary) pedagogical practices in an institution alert to the long-range evils of inattention. For it turns out that the "death of the author" marks an important first step toward the birth of more translators.

Fang in the Avant-Garde's Achilles Heel

In her essay on Yasusada, Marjorie Perloff asserted that "Kent Johnson has found a perfect recipe for a new Orientalism, conceived in the best American tradition of Emerson's doctrine of 'natural' hieroglyphic language, Pound's *Cathay* and books like Kenneth Rexroth's *Love Poems of Marichiko* (1978), presented by the poet as translations of the erotic lyrics of an actual Japanese woman . . ." (Vol. 22 #2, 30). The list (and we might add other, more recent names and titles) seems to locate the birth of the "simulacrum" in Emerson's stress on the *natural*—pointing to the troubled relation between those terms. Perhaps it's worthwhile, then, to complicate the issue further (locating the origin of the *natural* in the "simulacrum") by including those who have made or make careers performing versions of a racially marked subjectivity we are prepared to accept. But if a list of what we recognize, under either orientation, as "Oriental" is informative, looking at what struggles, under erasure, at the edges of such a list is even more so. It's interesting to note, for instance, that for a long time Yau's name did not appear in *most* collections—either creative or critical—of Asian-American poets and poetry. But to begin to try to understand the screening process such an elision represents, or to see why a critic might prefer, say, a Ghengis-Con to a "Ghengis-Chan,"¹³ a hard look at the prejudices and "yellowface" plays of high Modernism itself is in or-

12. My attention was brought to this term by Yuenta Huang, *Transpacific Displacements*. The classroom is an increasingly dangerous zone, no more demilitarized than any other American space, shaped by market pressures as well as personal and cultural prejudices. Here we work to hear better, to see—past the narrow version of "multiculturalism" given to us by the teaching anthology—the limitations of our own sight/site as well to fill in, for our students, what we think of as blind spots.

13. In her *Boston Review*, Perloff finds Yau—in his "Ghengis-Chan" series—"guilty of reductionism," but Bio-Bibliographer Zhou Xiaojing (in *Asian-*

der, specifically via the work of Ezra Pound. That Modernism's racism, misogyny, and Nationalisms continue to pose problems is both known and constantly relearned; that Pound himself is a hotspot for these issues while continuing to be a touchstone for avant-garde poetics is equally understood.¹⁴ But while an accounting of Pound's complicated debts to and devaluations of African-American, feminist, and Jewish identities and issues continues to unfold with some momentum, the problems his work (as both poet and "translator") poses for our encounters with Asian and Asian-American poets and poetry are harder to get the figures for. Part of the difficulty, of course, is that Modernism and Orientalism are deeply, even inextricably, entangled.¹⁵ The interest and excitement of various poets and editors when confronted by Yasusada's work (and the biography of its "author"), aren't caused by too much Foucault but (as Perloff notes vis-à-vis the editorial credulity "Yasusada" took advantage of) too little history, too little political awareness, too little effort to understand other languages (that is: other systems of thought) and finally (as Charles Simic points out in his *Boston Review* response to Perloff) too little *exposure* to world poetry. But a simple exposure to "world poetry" isn't enough: translators and editors can turn what should be a wide and various range of aesthetic strategies into another smug mono-lingualism,¹⁶ ensuring that our encounters with otherness are restricted to a safe masquerade. If we would try to reach beyond the mask it seems we need—to start with—an informed engagement with the act of translation and a deeper understanding of its history as well as its difficulty (or, impos-

American Poets) draws our attention to the care with which the poet, in that series, "disrupts the production of stereotypical Asian American identity even as he parodies the stereotypes . . . subvert[ing] identity construction by disturbing its means of production—image, narrative, and language, especially the relationship between the signifier and its referent."

14. See Bernstein's "Pounding Fascism," and Michael North's *Dialectic of Modernism*, among other sources.

15. See Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Displacements* as well as Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism*, and Kathleen Flanagan, "The Orient as Pretext for Aesthetic and Cultural Revolution in Modern American Poetry."

16. By choosing the Michael Hamburger translations of Paul Celan, for instance, for his *The Vintage Book of World Poetry*, the editor is able to flatten not only Celan's radical difference from his own aesthetic, but important distinctions between Celan's relation to language and that of, well, every other poet in the collection.

sibility).¹⁷ For to be immersed (and Modernism is *soaking* in) Pound's China is, as he himself notes in the *Cantos*, to be immersed in a translation, up to our necks, if not over our heads, in the political or military history of translation itself,¹⁸ a history shaping contemporary aesthetics—and contemporary senses of post-colonial identity. That Yau's work comes directly out of Pound's globalization of poetry is a key to our understanding of the dynamically performative nature of his work.

Pound's Chinese poems were very, very meaningful . . . I just read them over and over again. For me, they were about being Chinese, about some kind of identity; they were something I could get ahold of.¹⁹

Yau isn't the only poet for whom Pound's translations offered a grasp on a problematic natural identity, but he's one of the few who, conscious of that fact, can tell us "the whole story": in which a fragmented identity, made always of partial and "borrowed" versions, keeps falling apart.

Later, no one will be able to agree on what they saw . . . By then the mirror will have vanished and the movie will have started. This time in pieces.²⁰

Where it's at (I got two turntables and a microphone)

It is a silly thing, to ask someone how you might go about finding out who you are. Presumably you already know. But, in my case, I am of two minds and at least two bodies. Only one is visible to me. The other one I inhabit but cannot catch sight of.

17. Perhaps Pound's "Fellenosa" should simply never be taught without Achilles Fang's "The Difficulty of Translation" and Yunte Huang's *Radical Translation* as assigned readings? Perhaps each course on *The Cantos* should require that students work on a translation project, for a first-hand experience of potential problems as well as the fecundity of potential versions . . .

18. See Huang's discussion of Japan's role in "translating" the China Pound presents (*Transpacific Displacements*) as well as Cantrell and Swinson on the weaknesses of the China *Cantos* imposed by Pound's dependence on DiMailla (*Paideuma* v 17, 2 & 3 and v 18 1& 2).

19. *Talisman* interview.

20. *Radiant Silhouette: New and Selected Work 1974–1988* (Black Sparrow, 1989).

My dilemma is familiar. I can't recognize my reflection, as I can only nod to the shadows the director has painted on the wall behind me. These painted blobs move in tandem to my hesitations. We could begin to dance, but that would only prove a distraction to those whose attention I have gathered like wool on a spring day.

"Boris Karloff in *The Mummy Meets Dr. Fu Manchu*"
—John Yau²¹

A reading of the first sentence in the passage above reveals the sophistication of the poet's enactment of his "familiar" predicament. This speaker, who thinks of asking a question he/she decides it is "silly" to ask, and records the question (unasked) along with the judgment (of what imagined audience exactly?) which (only apparently?) halts the inquiry—is already of "at least" two *minds*. Worth noting here as well, of course, is the fact that going about "finding out who you are" (Socrates' famous advice, the subject of the *Bildungsroman* and the great passion of the "me" generation) is not entirely regarded as "silly." So that that gosh-silly-me setting the tone veils a honed critique—silly *us*—to which the next sentence adds a sharp pressure of irony. In the third sentence the poet steps back, into his "case" we might say, invoking the discourses that structure confession while apparently confessing his situation at last. Such apparent honesty, however, only confuses the issue: the truth may or may not make you free—what it certainly makes you is multiple. Unlike Walt Whitman, however, Yau doesn't "contain multitudes": he's parted between, party to, and ("We could begin to dance . . .") partying with the apparently infinite possibilities generated by multiplying labels, and language itself.

In Yau's work the *either/or* is explored, enacted, and destabilized, as boundaries—between self and other, life and death, true and false—are constantly being transgressed. Perloff was correct about Yau's distrust, even if she didn't quite see what he was doing with it, or how often the "hatred" is turned against (in order to transform or strip away another knowing glance) the self. "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation." So begins, sounding almost as if it were written yesterday (and by a certain poet), Poe's eponymous short story. That classic doppelgänger tale is a reminder that what Norman Mailer called (in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket") "the [double] dream

21. *Borrowed Love Poems* (Penguin, 2002).

life of the nation" is older than our "Civil" war. To some extent the "dilemma" Poe and Yau explore is both a social and political reality as well as an essential problem of representation. But while the double is part of Yau's literary heritage, his splittings are sped up and their cancerous divisions mirrored in mechanical reproductions, until—as at the end of Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai*—there is no choice but to seek the truth "in the realm of appearances" and an apparently infinite replication. As the poet says elsewhere, "there is always more of this / where this came from." Yau's fervent enactment of such multiplicity makes for a daunting level of production in a wide variety of directions, so if one proposes to consider a book of his, one should be ready to come up against questions of one's own focus along with a feeling of being already far behind. Should the emphasis fall on one of the endlessly inventive poetry collections (on Penguin): *Paradiso Diaspora?* *Borrowed Love Poems?* The astonishing *Ing Grish* on Saturnalia Books? The collection of essays on Art & Poetry: *The Passionate Spectator?* One of the books of compressed and elegantly brilliant prose, say, *My Heart Is That Eternal Rose Tattoo?* Why not his cheeky and mysterious collaboration with the artist Archie Rand, *100 More Jokes from the Book of the Dead?* Enmeshed as all these works are in a deep intertextuality that crosses genres and mediums, they defy our expectations, complicating and extending our ideas about genre as well as identity, and giving us—readers and writers alike—a lot to live up to. And it is worth noting, respecting this poet's extraordinary courage, that to live outside the law requires (as the Dylan song put it) endless honesty—and involves real risk.

"Man's face is a flag"

In *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, the critic and philosopher Giorgio Agamben clarifies the extraordinarily high stakes in the problem of being recognizable and recognized. Pressing on the question of representation, Agamben looks into the deadly aporia that opens when—our ability to see humanity or *people* (without an article, definite or indefinite) blunted or absent—the other falls into an area of unrecognizability:

When their rights are no longer the rights of the citizen, that is when human beings are truly *sacred*, in the sense that this term used to have in the Roman law of the archaic period: doomed to death.

Noting that "what is new in our time is that growing sections of

humankind are no longer representable inside the nation-state," Agamben finds in the refugee "a limit-concept that at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories . . ." Letting the figure of the refugee guide us²² we come to Yau's work better able to understand the complexities of its restless and "ever changing"²³ situation. From his first book, *Crossing Canal Street*, Yau's poetry is en route—the title locates the poet in a vulnerable gerund that implies that there is no belonging on either side of *a* or *the* line (which in this case announces a border between Chinatown and what's now known as SoHo). In one of the last poems in that collection the poet draws our attention to a "sign" "painted in gold" whose crossings are instructive:

New Land Old Land

Neither mourning nor celebration, announcement of both birth and death at once, and historically disorienting (shouldn't "Old Land" come first?) this "sign" might be the poet's signature. Locating itself in transition or as translation, in the "in between," in border zones between possible communities and communalities, and life and death, Yau's work puts at risk the understanding of identity that Modernism (despite or *because* of its emphasis on fragmentation) would "shore against . . . ruin." One aspect of Modernism, we might say, loses a self only to find it (recovered precisely by and in the threat of loss). But if former threats to identity are examined in the context of a considerably more open canon, they seem remarkably restricted—and repressive—in their insistence on the "irony and restraint" of emotionally limited enactments of individual difference (meant to reassure us that we are not different at all, actually). In "Eleven Months Is Not a Year"²⁴ Yau gives us the key to our understanding of both his work and our present condition, when he tells us, speaking of the characters in the poem in their variety of situations: "None of them have found refuge. In that, and perhaps only that, they are not alone."

22. "Refugee" seems better than "Nomad" both for its rejection of seductive exoticism (it is closer to our history) and its more complicated relation to choice: the refugee's flight is neither wilted nor seasonal . . . (Nobodaddy Press).

23. From the title of Yau's 1977 collection: *The Reading of an Ever-Changing Tale*.

24. *Paradiso Diaspora* (Penguin, 2006).