

2019

Reading Mythology in Ocean Vuong's Night Sky With Exit Wounds through Just Memory

Havannah Tran
htran@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection>

Recommended Citation

Tran, Havannah, "Reading Mythology in Ocean Vuong's Night Sky With Exit Wounds through Just Memory" (2019). *Honors Thesis Collection*. 667.

<https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/667>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.

Reading Mythology in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* through Just Memory

Havannah Tran

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors in English under the advisement
of Yoon Sun Lee

April 2019

© 2019 Havannah Tran

Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Introduction: Histories I Can't Remember	4
A History of The War and the Difficulties of Remembering	12
Queer Memories	41
The Father	70
Conclusion: Why I Will Try To Remember	97
Bibliography	101

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been completed without the tremendous mentorship of my committee members. Thank you Professor Octavio R. Gonzalez for helping understand the breadth and depth of queer studies. Thank you Professor Dao for rethinking how I write about the histories of our people. Thank you Professor Chiasson for helping me connect Vuong's poetry to a larger poetic lineage. Thank you Professor Mata for serving on this committee as my out of department advisor. And thank you to Professor Yoon Sun Lee, to whom I owe so much to for giving me the confidence to study the literature of my own and to claim space that I never thought was possible in the English discipline.

Thank you to Karen Shih, for providing me with the financial and emotional support to attend my first Association for Asian American Studies conference.

Thank you Victoria Huynh for reminding me that our communities can heal through writing.

Thank you to Kavindya Thennakoon and Alexandria Guo for late nights in Clapp library and Shafer living room.

Thank you Shane Cox for letting me write my thesis in your apartment during spring break, when I should have been taking care of you after your surgery.

Thank you to Summer Farah, Yujane Chen, and Keke Quach for being the poets of color who have helped me parse this poetry all the way from Berkeley, CA.

Thank you to Southeast Asian Student Association for being a community where I locate the importance of telling and studying our stories.

Thank you to the Vietnamese Americans in Fullerton, Westminster, and Garden Grove, CA, where I grew up surrounded by unprecedented resilience and love.

Thank you Ocean Vuong for this work which I hold so close to my heart.

Cảm ơn mẹ, anh, [và ba tôi]. Con thương mẹ, Andrew, và ba oi nhiều.



Introduction: Histories I Can't Remember

If you get there before me, if you think
of nothing

& my face appears rippling
like a torn flag—turn back.
Turn back & find the book I left
for us, filled

with all the colors of the sky

forgotten by gravediggers.

Use it.

Use it to prove how the stars
were always what we believed
they were: the exit-wounds
of every
misfired word.

- *Lines from "To My Father / To My Future Son" by Ocean Vuong*

My mother was born on October 6, 1956 in the outskirts of Sài Gòn, then the capital of Vietnam. The country was transitioning out of an era of French colonialism. Her adolescence was spent in Catholic boarding school, where she had a penchant for singing. She tells me how her youth was filled with cải lương performances and dodging unfit suitors. In the backdrop of my mother's teen years was a war. Sài Gòn would fall when she came of age and my Ông Ngoại and Cậu Chanh escaped to the United States.

My mother tells me she did not join them then. I ask why she had not left with the thousands of "boat people" who would make the journey across the Pacific. After all, she tells me, her half-sister, Dì Mỹ Trang, made the journey around this time. She says she was told to not go on the journey over the Pacific because being a young girl would put her in a difficult position if pirates were to find her ship. She won't go into details and my curiosity is abated by the troubled expression on her face, like she is actively trying to forget a memory she has never had. Instead, my mother became a displaced person, hiding out in homes of family, friends, and

acquaintances, knowing that the Việt Cộng had ransacked her home and would kill her if they found her. Over the next ten years watching, the nation she once knew was torn apart.

My mother became intimately familiar with waiting. When she first arrived in 1985, my mother spent six hours in the San Jose International airport for a bus en route from Los Angeles. She watched unfamiliar faces pass by, paying her no attention. They spoke in scrambled tongues: radio static in the backdrop of a place she was desperately trying to call home. Remembering this, she pauses and says, “Let’s not talk about that anymore. We are in America now.” Her words are brief, but I know the stories of war are long. They are chronic and lingering, triggered in ways we least expect.

I reunited with my *Dì Mỹ Trang* and my mother this past summer. They exchanged strongly-gripped hugs and vibrant chatter. My *Dì Mỹ Trang* is a bit more open about talking about her migration. She and her sister boarded a rickety boat that would stop in Guam and then the United States. They would spend more than two weeks on that boat, with little food or water and dwindling faith about whether they would make it to land without losing themselves or their loved ones. My mother’s other half-sister had perished on that boat. She sits quietly in this knowledge.

This is where that story ends, with gaps and silences that I have chosen never to fill. I will never push my mother to tell me more about her experiences with the war than she is comfortable revealing. Like Maxine Hong Kingston, I have decided that “I cannot ask that [because m]y mother has told me once and for all the useful parts.”¹ Making her relive these years just so *I* could better understand my experiences would be undeniably selfish of me.

¹ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The woman warrior : memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books 1977).

But there was so much I still wanted to know. Why was there a war? Why did my mom not like to talk about it? What was so significant about America and being American that my mom used this fact to end our conversations? I turned to scholarship to fill the gaps and, with that, I now better understand the politics and social conditions that have led to my family creating a new home in Southern California. I know the history of this war, ushered by imperial and colonial interests of the United States, France, Japan, and others. These powers produced famine and stole Vietnamese labor for the economic interests of other nations. They inflicted trauma and violence well before the Vietnam War reached the height of its conflict.² I have the language to explain why so many elders in my community continue to believe in American exceptionalism despite the U.S. military intervention that exacerbated the death toll of Southern Vietnamese. Refugees feel indebted to the U.S. government for allowing them to escape war by coming to the United States. To adopt American conservative values and selectively forget of the trauma of U.S. intervention is to express gratitude for their rescue.³ I understand the difficulty of assimilation, compounded with the psychological and physical consequences of war, that leave so many Vietnamese American socioeconomically disadvantaged, including my own family.

Even with this knowledge, I have questions which I cannot answer with scholarship, namely: as time progresses and we move away from the war, how will we remember it? How are these memories informed by our changing formation as Vietnamese Americans in light of recent globalization and growing economic alliances between Vietnam and the United States? How do I remember this war, one that I have no memory of but still feel its consequences ripple through my family and community?

² See “A History of War and the Difficulties of Remembering”

³ Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press 2012), 1-28.

These are questions not easily answered, but explored in the literature of the Vietnamese-American diaspora. In 2016, I came upon Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. When I first read this collection, it struck me as a body of work deeply interested in desire and the desire to remember. Vuong's prose is one that is often blending the literal and symbolic, playing with the conventions of language to capture the memory of war and queer desire. It is in this marriage of memory, mythology, desire, and war that I have conferred my own, as Sedgwick terms, "restorative" reading onto Vuong's work and found some answers to why my mother has chosen to hold her tongue.

Methodology

In this thesis, I choose to read the mythologies created in Ocean Vuong's 2016 collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* through the framework of "just memory". I proceed through this analysis by first providing a history of the Vietnam War and subsequent critiques of how the conflict is memorialized in the United States. In this critique, I explore how discourse around the war prioritizes the interests of the United States and the West more broadly, erasing refugee voices and creating an uneven and incomplete narrative of war. It becomes instrumental to provide a "just memory" of war in response, a recollection of war that recognizes the trauma inflicted upon refugees, but also does not flatten these figures to passive victims. Scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen describes "just memory" as a model that is concerned with remembering survivors both as victims and perpetrators of violence; additionally, just memory is concerned with the mode in which memory is created around the war, along lines of cultural production.⁴ From here, I discuss how literature has helped in creating and shaping memory that has formed the identity of the nation. Vuong's collection is concerned with myth-making, what I see as a

⁴ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp 12.

way of creating memory that informs empire and national identity. It is in this connection between myth-making, the mythology that proceeds from this myth-making, and memory that I read this collection through the lens of “just memory”. Specifically, I examine two mythologies around queer desire and the father through this framework.

I embark on a queer analysis of Vuong’s poetry examining the poems “Of Thee I Sing”, “Seventh Circle of Earth”, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”, “Because It’s Summer” and “Devotion”. My analysis is split into two conflicts of queer identity: one that exists externally to question desire in creating an American identity around heteronormative exceptionalism and one that exists as a internal conflict of desire, duty, and trauma. “Of Thee I Sing” and “Seventh Circle” demonstrate Vuong’s understanding of heteronormativity as a part of America; this external conflict between queer bodies and the national identity produces the history in which the internal conflict of queer desire proceeds. The three poems, “Because It’s Summer”, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”, and “Devotion” constitute an arc of queer desire where conflict arises between desire and familial obligation. In this difficulty, Vuong explores queer temporality and the negotiating visibility in light of violence.

Following this exploration of queerness, I proceed to the mythology of the father, one composed of many poems around the figure in the collection. Given the absence of the father in his own life, Vuong uses this gap to create a mythology. The mythology proceeds from the understanding that this is a figure that can inhabit the anxieties and realizations the speaker has about being a queer body *and* a war refugee. I have chosen to look at the poems, “To My Father / To My Future Son”, “Telemachus”, “In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back”, and “My Father Writes from Prison”. Vuong writes to two impossibilities in “To My Father / To My Future Son”, making reference writing in respect to

creating these two absent figures. He concludes that writing becomes a way of exploring and creating memory. “Telemachus” and “In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back” are written from the perspective of the son about the father, where the speculation on the father’s existence provides a space to think about the consequences of war and critique the politics of rescue. “My Father Writes from Prison”, written from the perspective of the absent father, Vuong explores how inheritance and desire interplay. Vuong speculates how his desire, in the queer mythology he creates in this collection, is one that is inherited from his father, implicated by the difficulties of war and isolation. Ultimately, these father poems are all fabricated memories and/or myths that communicate the difficulties of relationships and inheritance in light of absence and war.

Lastly, in my conclusion I summarize the ways that these mythologies inform and criticize American identity as they have been explored in the collection. I proceed to comment and critique my analysis, one founded in a highly interdisciplinary approach, and present more spaces for research in the collection that I have not covered.

Criticism

In choosing Vuong as the subject of this body of work, I have to examine why it is it I have decided to explore this one poet when there are many others who participate in the same tradition as he. There are thousands of stories of war, memory, and trauma out there that have been told, but Vuong’s collection has been the subject of much praise, decorated with acclaim and literary accolades, including the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2017, the Whiting Award, the Thom Gunn Award, and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection.⁵

⁵ Ocean Vuong, “About”, 2018, March 28, 2019, <https://www.oceanvuong.com/about>

It is important then to take a Bourdieuan critique, a Marxist understanding of how class informs notions of taste, of my study of Vuong's work. French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, finds his ideology in response to the Kantian idea of aesthetic theory that is rooted in a certain level of "disinterestedness" in art; Kant argues that only when we separate ourselves from our personal biases to a work, can we evaluate its aesthetic value.⁶ This idea implies that art and artistic critique exists in a world separate from that of capitalistic cultural production. Bourdieu rejects this notion, claiming that the autonomy of art critique is a false narrative. The production of taste is a site that is informed by class and capital. His Marxist critique stems from the following idea:

To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class' (...) Culture also has its titles of nobility — awarded by the educational system — and its pedigrees, measured by seniority in admission to the nobility.⁷

Vuong's ascendance as a poet is particularly interesting and worthy of examining under this framework, as his contemporary Vietnamese-American queer poets contend with similar themes of war, memory, and desire. Why has Vuong seemingly been singled out as a primary voice of the diaspora? As Vietnamese American scholar Marguerite Bich Nguyen suggests, perhaps Vuong's work - intentionally or not - reflects an immigration narrative more than it does refugee exodus, which in itself affords his work a social capital in the literary world⁸. His use and mastery of the canon, demonstrated by his allusions to classical mythology, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson and others cemented in the English discipline, also provide him prestige in circles

⁶ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu. *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁸ Marguerite Bich Nguyen. *American's Vietnam: The Longue Durée of U.S. Literature and Empire*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2018).

who share his literary knowledge. His capital in the literary world not only stems from this knowledge apparent in his work, but also the capital he has earned as an BA graduate from the Brookyny College.⁹

As a student of the academy, my tastes are also crafted by class markers; I admit this as a fault of my own training. There are other writers who equally deserve the kind of attention that I have given Vuong in this thesis who do not rely on the canon as heavily as Vuong does. In the work of Hieu Minh Nguyen, I have found that the mother can be a memorial for the war that contends with the difficulties of survivor's guilt and working class struggles. In Trinh Minh Ha's poems, war can crop up in the desire for another person; its memory is an unwelcome guest in the mind of the refugee. Outside of these English-speaking, academically-trained writers, whom I have engaged with given my training in English as a discipline, there are Vietnamese-American writers crafting stories in their mother tongue, remaining invisible to the English literati but creating restorative work, many of which I need to make efforts to know.

With that being said, I do not mean to uphold Vuong on a pedestal or inadvertently tokenize him as the sole voice of the Vietnamese-American diaspora, though I realize this danger still exists solely in the fact I am committing this entire body of work to him. I know that by writing this thesis, I am perhaps participating in reinforcing productions of taste informed by class. But my intention here is that in exploring Vuong's poetry, this work can be a starting point for me to explore these themes of memory broadly in Vietnamese-American literature. In the future, I would like to give *more* writers, creating in English and Vietnamese — with and without academic training — the attention I am giving Vuong.

⁹ Daniel Wenger. "How a Poet Named Ocean Means to Fix the English Language." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker 19 June 2017, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-a-poet-named-ocean-means-to-fix-the-english-language. (accessed 21 April 2019).

A History of The War and the Difficulties of Remembering

Before theorizing about memory and Vuong's poetry, it is important to understand the histories in which inform this body of work, namely the Vietnam War. If I am to properly discuss memory, I must recall a history of war from where memories originate. In creating a narrative of the Vietnam War, we must recall a history that begins before 1963, when the United States government began to send troops to Vietnam.¹⁰ Only in this extended history can we locate the difficulty of remembering such a complicated history of conflict.

Understanding The War Before the War Years

In the American consciousness, the conflicts in Vietnam were present between the years of 1963 and 1973, when the United States government had troops deployed in Vietnam.¹¹ Americans know this conflict as the "Vietnam War", neatly timeboxed in a little more than a decade where the United States fought to stop the North Vietnamese Communist insurgency in light of the Cold War.¹² However, no war really is as neat as it seems; as scholar and novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "all wars have murky beginnings and inconclusive ends".¹³ To really understand the Vietnam War, the event which traumatically brought so many diasporic peoples to the United States, the war needs to be seen before and after the years of 1963 and 1973 respectively.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. 2. Vincent B. Leitch (New York, London: WW Norton & Company 2010), pp 1782 - 1795.

¹¹ Sucheng Chan. *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), pp 44.

¹² Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945 - 1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), pp x.

¹³ V. Nguyen, pp 5.

I believe that this particular analysis of the Vietnam War is necessary to our understanding of how to responsibly remember the war for two central reasons. One is that the danger of viewing war as a fixed period in history is that it invites us to strictly view the U.S. military intervention as a response to Cold War politics and imperial interests; this particular reading of the period ignores the agency of the Vietnamese, simply rendered as being “passive” victims of this conflict between Western powers. Such a reading primes the discourse about “pathetic” and “passive” refugees requiring the aid of American humanitarian efforts when speaking on the periods of migration following 1975.¹⁴ The second being that looking beyond the war years is critical in understanding how we remember the war, trauma, and migration: not simply as a war between the United States and Vietnam, but as a consequence of a long history of conflict in Vietnam as a result of colonial rule and imperialism. Through this lens, the war is given another name: the Second Indochina War, proceeding from the first Indochina War and years of colonial conflict between the Vietnamese and French.

French colonization of Southeast Asia began in the 19th century and lasted until the mid 20th century.¹⁵ Beginning their colonial conquest, the French sent missionaries to “uplift” and “civilize” the Vietnamese; their first expedition was in 1858 with the help of the Spanish who had at this point in time already colonized the Philippines. In 1859, the French took Sài Gòn, a major Vietnamese city located in the South (known as Cochinchina) and eventually the regions of Tonkin and An Nam (also known as Bắc Kỳ and Trung Kỳ), Northern and Central Vietnam respectively.¹⁶ French colonization brought about extreme wealth inequality between the French

¹⁴ Yên Lê Espiritu. “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1-2 (2006), pp. 410–433. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410.

¹⁵ Chan, pp 12.

¹⁶ Chan, pp x.

and Vietnamese. While most French private citizens were wealthy and owned land to grow rice, the Vietnamese were tenants and laborers on these fields. Furthermore, the rice tilled from Cochinchina was not allowed to be sent to the central or northern colonized regions and as a result, famine ravaged the Vietnamese.¹⁷

The famine in Tonkin and An Nam pushed Northern radical intellectuals, usually coming from wealthier backgrounds, to look towards Western ideologies such as Marxism and Leninism. During the 20th century, educated people in colonized countries found Marxism-Leninism to be attractive because it gave an explanation to their history and conditions. Leninist form gave frameworks for nationalist and anti-colonial struggle towards an independent Vietnam.¹⁸ The success of the 1917 Russian Revolution confirmed the supposed correctness of Lenin's analysis and Mao Tse-tung made Communism accessible to agrarian societies.¹⁹ Of the intellectuals enamored by the Communist movements blooming across the world was Hồ Chí Minh, the future leader of the Northern Vietnamese insurgency against the French and then the United States. In 1919, Hồ became a public figure for the revolution by sending a petition to the Allies of World War I in Versailles, asking that the French colonies be able to send their own representatives to French parliament.²⁰ Some historians argue that Hồ was a nationalist before he became a staunch Communist; this turn to radicalism had been attributed to the United States rejecting Hồ at Versailles.²¹

In the spring of 1925, Hồ would establish "Hội Việt Nam Cách mạng Thanh niên", the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth Association "Thanh niên" for short. This group would be the

¹⁷ Ibid, 14 - 15.

¹⁸ Ibid, 20.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, pp 12. Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945 - 1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), pp 3.

²¹ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945 - 1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), pp 2.

first explicitly Marxist and Leninist organization amongst Vietnamese.²² The revolution, as Thanh niên would see it, was composed of two prongs: (1) A national bourgeois revolution led by the patriotic, anti-colonial, urban middle class which would remain capitalist in nature followed by (2) a socialist class revolution where land and capital would be redistributed. The political interests of the Communist International, known as the Comintern, and financial unrest during the Great Depression pushed the Thanh niên to revise this approach to replace the two part model with a simultaneous national and class revolution.²³ Ho would later become instrumental in another group: *Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*, the League for the Independence of Vietnam, known as Việt Minh for short. This group was an effective nationalist group created by the Indochinese Communist Party.

Leading up to the First Indochina War, which began in 1945, a number of negotiations between the Allies and Axis powers would lead to a Vietnam constantly in conflict for its independence. In June of 1940, when Germany invaded France and the Vichy government was created, Japanese troops were sent to French Indochina. These conditions allowed for the Japanese to exploit the colonial region for rice.²⁴ At the end of World War II, the Allied powers, including France, would meet in Normandy where France would push to maintain their colonial territories while Japan would call for Vietnamese independent, but not until after the consequences of French and Japanese occupation had already ravaged the Vietnamese population. As a result of Japanese exploitation of rice farming, French laws that forbade surplus rice from being shipped to An Nam and Tonkin, U.S. military bombs disrupting trade, and poor weather conditions, famine struck Northern and Central Vietnam in 1943. By 1945, around 2

²² Chan, pp 22.

²³ Ibid, 23.

²⁴ Ibid, 26.

million Vietnamese had starved to death.²⁵ The Việt Minh at this point intervened to help alleviate the conditions of famine and create their rise to power.²⁶ Võ Nguyên Giáp, leader of the military division of Việt Minh moved toward Hanoi and took the city on Aug 19, 1945. The Việt Minh would then seize Huế and Đà Nẵng and round up any pro-French or Japanese “traitors”.²⁷ A provincial government was established which enacted a series of land reforms; because of these reforms, many landlords were killed and peasants were forced to share in the blood-guilt for the success of the party.²⁸

The First Indochina War was triggered when the French tried to seize Hải Phòng, a city in Northern Vietnam. The French felt compelled to maintain their colonial rule in Vietnam in an effort to repair its crumbling image and prevent its other colonial territories from being inspired by Vietnamese independence.²⁹ During the First Indochina War, the United States supported the French against the Việt Minh, paying 78% of French military expenditures; however, this support was supposedly uncharacteristic of the United States, which outwardly supported the freedom of all people.³⁰ As a result, the United States created a poorly supported narrative that Hồ and the Việt Minh were a Communist regime under Soviet jurisdiction; they created such a story on the basis that because the Việt Minh did not repudiate the Soviet Union, they had to be supporting them in some capacity.³¹ After the defeat at Điện Biên Phủ in November of 1953, where the French surrendered to the Việt Minh, the Vietnamese thought they would have independence. But the Geneva Accords in 1954 would not grant the Vietnamese this

²⁵ Chan, pp 29.; Young, pp 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Chan, pp 30 - 31.

²⁸ Van Chi Hoang. *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam*. (Frederick A. Praeger Publisher, 1964), pp 212.

²⁹ Young, pp 20-22.

³⁰ Young, pp 44.

³¹ Ibid, 22 - 23.

independence. Instead, the Soviet foreign ministers encouraged the Vietnamese to accept a compromise: Vietnam would temporarily be partitioned at the 17th parallel and then future of country would be determined in general election in July 1956. This officially split Vietnam into the North and South, named the “Democratic Republic of Vietnam” and the “Republic of Vietnam” respectively.³²

In South Vietnam, the United States government placed Ngô Đình Diệm as its prime minister; subsequently any aggression against South Vietnam and its new leader would be seen as an attack against the United States.³³ Yet Diệm’s rule was stringent and heavily relied on terror. The Southern Vietnamese government would interrogate former Việt Minh and their families to determine if they were “slaves of Red Imperialism”; additionally, the conditions for the poor and landless were exacerbated by the glaring corruption on all levels of the bureaucracy and the reimposition of old taxes.³⁴ These conditions provide the basis for the increased popularity of Communist ideology and eventually the conditions for the second Indochina War.

The War Years: The United States Involvement and Failure

Involvement of the United States in Vietnam escalated exponentially after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. While the United States had a military presence in Vietnam before, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s military advisors suggested taking drastic action by attacking North Vietnam directly. During this time, the South would have a series of unstable leaders, put in place by the United States government to uphold anti-communist regimes.³⁵ When Northern Vietnamese boats attacked US destroyers, President Johnson saw this as a justification to enter Vietnam. Whether that attack was legitimate or not, or rather instigated by

³² Ibid, 42 - 43.

³³ Ibid, 59.

³⁴ Young, pp 62.

³⁵ Ibid, 48 - 49.

the United States was irrelevant: the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was passed by Congress to fight an undeclared war in years to come.³⁶

U.S. occupation brought 2.7 million American soldiers alongside the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and a massive influx of American money into the Southern economy, namely to Sài Gòn (renamed Hồ Chí Minh City after 1975). In 1965, the United States government decided to bomb the North, intensify the war in the South using U.S. troops, and concentrate on the pacification of the countryside, since no single method held the promise of victory.³⁷ In 1966, the American military would drop an average of 300 bombs a day.³⁸ During the course of the war, more than a million tons of bombs were dropped on North Vietnam, 4 million tons on South Vietnam, 1.5 million tons on Laos, and 500,00 tons on Cambodia. It was more important to destroy the Việt Cộng of the South, resulting in the increased violence in that region. Along with bombs, the U.S. would send 400,000 American troops in the country by the end of 1966; 500,00 by the end of 1967; and 540,000 by the end of 1968.³⁹ While the war was fought supposedly for the Southern Vietnamese, it was clearly a U.S. military operation with little regard for the Southern Vietnamese, those they were meant to fight for. For the U.S. Military, Vietnam became a laboratory in which weapons and “weapon systems” could be battlefield-tested, targeted specifically at the South.⁴⁰ As the war progressed, there came a Buddhist led opposition that called for the reinstatement of a civilian led government; this opposition escalated into a full blown struggle against US military presence and intervention. In the United States, growing anti-war sentiment grew from civil rights movement, establishing a

³⁶ Ibid, pp 49 - 50, 117.; Chan, pp 49.

³⁷ Ibid, pp 143 - 150.

³⁸ Chan, pp 50.

³⁹ Chan, pp 50 - 52.

⁴⁰ Young, pp 91.

transnational call for liberation of all people. Living in the United States meant feeling guilty about one's knowledge about the war and the government's lies about it.⁴¹

By 1967, a larger more robust anti-war movement erupted with protests at Berkeley and New York, which would eventually inspire the rise of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies.⁴² Despite the visibility of college protests, the movement was strongest amongst poor and low-income folks, disproportionately Black people, who would be drafted to fight.⁴³ The anti-war movement connected Vietnam to the counter-revolutions in Latin America and Africa. Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights activist and vocal anti-war proponent, called for ending the bombing of North and South Vietnam, a unilateral ceasefire and to set a date for withdrawal of troops in accordance with the 1954 Geneva Accords.⁴⁴ Yet, despite powerful criticism, congress continued to fund the war because they found that their intervention was too deep-seated.⁴⁵ Such a choice illuminated the paternalistic sentiment of the United States that believed that South Vietnam could not win this war by itself.

In 1968, the changing tide of the war in Vietnam pushed the United States to end its involvement. The February Offensive phase was the most public state of the war with attacks on 119 cities, starting with the Tết Offensive. On Tết, there was supposed to be a a ceasefire for the Vietnamese new year. However, the National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese Troops launched coordinated attacks throughout the country, not honoring the agreement.⁴⁶ Though the Tết Offensive was a militaristic defeat for the North, it was a psychological defeat for the United

⁴¹ Ibid, 168.

⁴² Ibid, 197.

⁴³ Ibid, 203.

⁴⁴ Young, pp 200.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 205

⁴⁶ Young, pp 220 - 222.

States.⁴⁷ In response, the United States would commit the My Lai Massacre, an inexplicable act of violence.⁴⁸ 1968 would also mark the year that Nixon, with the encouragement of Henry Kissinger, would begin his campaign of “Vietnamization”, transferring the responsibility of war back onto the Southern Vietnamese.⁴⁹

Though sentiment began to change in the government, before the United States would begin to pull troops out of Vietnam, the war would extend to other parts of Southeast Asia. When Nixon took office, the war would spread to Laos, Pathé Laos specifically, though the U.S. would deny such an accusation; as a result, a quarter of the Laotian population became refugees as a result of mass bombings, fleeing their homeland to other parts of Asia.⁵⁰ Efforts were made to mitigate the violence in Thailand and Laos by passing the Military Procurement Authorization Bill in 1969, but this legislation did not stop the carnage. Cambodia would be the last Indochinese region to be affected by the war. Under the counsel of Secretary of State and Henry Kissinger, Nixon believed to end the war, they must expand it by playing poker with lives. Nixon would code name the secret raids and carnage of Cambodia (as food): Breakfast, Lunch, Snacks, Dinner, and Dessert.⁵¹

On March 31, 1975, the Northern Vietnamese military and political leaders formally launched Hồ Chí Minh’s Campaign to capture Sài Gòn by 1976. Sài Gòn officially fell on April 30, 1975.⁵² As a result, the Vietnamese refugee crisis began. The refugee diaspora would continue for years following, having lasting ramifications on the Vietnamese communities torn by the American war.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 52.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 229.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 53.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 235.

⁵¹ Ibid, 235 - 238.

⁵² Chan, pp 57.

The Refugee Crisis

As of 2016, according to the US Census Bureau, there are 21.6 million Vietnamese living in the United States.⁵³ After the failure to defeat the Communist Northern Vietnamese army, the United States government passed a number of refugee acts that allowed Southern Vietnamese to take shelter in the United States. On April 8, 1975, the State department began to consult the House of Representatives and Senate about using the attorney general's parole to admit refugees. They agreed 6 days later and the first wave of migration came as a result of the "Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975". President Ford made the Interagency Task Force to welcome Indochinese refugees, and extended this parole to at risk Vietnamese and Cambodians abroad. After the North Vietnamese came closer to the capital on April 22, for 8 days after the United States airlifted out about 7,500 people a day. That operation ended a week later. On April 28, North Vietnamese pilots dropped bombs on Tân Sơn Nhứt and helicopters managed to pull 7,014 Vietnamese refugees. During this time, Guam offered the island to refugees and bases in Subic Bay, Wake Island, Camp Pendleton, Fort Chaffee, Eglin Air Base, and Indiantown Gap.⁵⁴ The number of refugees admitted into the United States during this time is unclear.⁵⁵ Many were government officials, relatives of U.S. Citizens, or skilled professionals.⁵⁶

Refugees continued to seek asylum even after American evacuation efforts ended. The United States paid little attention to the 1976 to 1977 batch of refugees. Many of these "boat people" were seeking asylum in neighboring Southeast Asian countries. Refugees would leave

⁵³ US Census Bureau. "Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: May 2018." 3 Aug. 2018, 21 April 2019, www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2018/asian-american.html.

⁵⁴ Young, pp 63.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 61 - 62. V.T Nguyen, pp 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid.; Nhi T. Lieu. *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp 3.

Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam and find their way to Malaysia via unsafe boats; smaller numbers found themselves in Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines.⁵⁷ Only relatively small amounts of people were able to escape because the North Vietnamese government began to put people into re-education camps, especially potential opponents. The Vietnamese prisoners in these camps were subjected to hard labor, near-starvation diet, and political indoctrination.⁵⁸ In response, the United States would extend their parole period for refugees, creating categories for asylum seekers. Priority I refugees had close relatives in the United States. Following these would be former employees of the US government agencies in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. The third group had close associations with US policies or programs, and the last group would encompass all other asylum seekers.⁵⁹ As the possibility of returning back to Vietnam dwindled for asylum seekers, President Carter passed legislation that turned all refugee parolees in permanent residents. In 1979, this particular group of refugees came en masse, but not after many perished at sea or in re-education camps.⁶⁰

Another 300,000 refugees would come again in the years of 1980 and 1981 through the Orderly Departure Act. In 1987, the Ameriasia Homecoming Act welcomed 23,000 mixed race Vietnamese and 70,000 of their family members.⁶¹ In 1989, terms for resettlement of re-education camp prisoners was reached.⁶² The last major wave of migration began in 1990, under the Humanitarian Operation program.⁶³ In 2001, the United States Congress makes a last attempt to resettle the remaining refugees. They modified the refugee act to let children of former re-

⁵⁷ Ibid.; Young, pp 65.

⁵⁸ Young, pp 66.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 68 - 69.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 64. V.T Nguyen, pp 5.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Young, pp 65.

⁶³ Ibid.

education detainees come and modified the terms for refugee status so that children over the age of 21 of refugees were also welcome.⁶⁴

The Difficulty of Remembering

When we think of the Vietnam War, we remember the conflict as described and remembered by United States. Exhibitions memorializing the war often prioritize the American veterans who fought, highlight the Cold War discourse in the West, and examine political and social conditions in which the United States became involved in a war they eventually failed to win.⁶⁵ But where are the Vietnamese in these projects? Relegated to being anonymous subjects of images of carnage, the Vietnamese victims and survivors of the war are rarely given space to recall their own memory of war and migration.⁶⁶ In fact, much of this memorialization remakes harmful Orientalist discourse. Notably, Vietnamese-American scholar Marguerite Nguyen notes how Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, a popular text on the Vietnam War, describes the mutilation of the Vietnamese body in gothic rhetoric as reinforcing Orientalist discourse on Vietnam and the United States:

In *Dispatches*, the gothicized Vietnamese body parts allow Herr to carve difference between the American self and the Vietnamese Other by giving narrative space to Vietnamese on the condition that their form is subhuman and mutilated and, in Herr's version of the imperial gothic, that actual contact with them is foreclosed.⁶⁷

Such violent othering assists in imagining the Northern Vietnamese soldier as savage, and the Southern Vietnamese refugee as passive body needing help. Creating a memory of war that recognizes refugee trauma is compromised by these narratives that downplay the violence of

⁶⁴ Ibid, 96.

⁶⁵ New York Historical Society. "The Vietnam War: 1945 – 1975." accessed April 21, 2019. vietnamwar.nyhistory.org/.

⁶⁶ Richard Stockton. "The Widely Misunderstood Story Behind The Iconic Image Of 'Napalm Girl.'" 24 July 2018, accessed April 21, 2019. allthatsinteresting.com/napalm-girl.

⁶⁷ M.B Nguyen, pp 91.

American military intervention and uphold American “exceptionalism”, both of which contradict the reality of refugee experiences.⁶⁸ The discourse around the Vietnam War in the United States ignores, erases or troubles these histories and stories of trauma, survival, and resilience of the millions of refugee peoples and communities. Thus, with the current conditions in which the United States currently remembers the war, we must ask this question: How can we responsibly contend with the trauma of migration and violence that recognizes the voices that have been silenced, Vietnamese refugees, in ways that do not reproduce harmful U.S. hegemonic discourse?

This is a difficult question, because as we begin to listen to the stories about war, we realize this truth: no one group of people has the same collective consciousness about the events that bring them to the present. More importantly, memory is not created independently of the consequences of imperialism, colonialism, and Western hegemony. Examining how war events are documented, it becomes clear that such accounts remove the carnage from the events themselves and reframe trauma as an internal refugee struggle.⁶⁹ Even as we move away from a strict history of war and look at the movements deeply critical of this violence, these movements similarly may erase the trauma of Communism in favor of a narrative of global liberation.

Current dominant American memorializations of the war paint the intervention as a misguided political decision, but one that does not inform the current status of U.S. military imperialism — or if it does, the U.S. government has conveniently chosen to forget these atrocious mistakes.⁷⁰ War conflicts are also framed strictly in the context of the progression of

⁶⁸ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁶⁹ Yên Lê Espiritu. “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1-2 (2006), pp. 410–433. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

the war, removing the documented attacks from their carnage. But in reality, the Tết Offensive was not simply a surprise to the United States military; it was an attack that killed thousands of Vietnamese people. The Mỹ Lai massacre was not just a retaliation to the Tết Offensive, but an equally aggressive and violent attack on the Vietnamese citizenry. It is important to critically examine how these events have been traditionally discussed. Simply talking about war in the context of United States political interests does nothing in terms of recognition for the bodies who were directly affected and harmed. Additionally, the way that refugees have been treated in scholarship has denied the nuance necessary to fully capture these experiences responsibly. These accounts have cast refugees as objects of rescue, where the site of conflict is only in the mind of the refugee themselves, not in the years of conflict and war. Rivaling this narrative is an equally flat depiction of the Vietnamese “desperate-turned-successful”, which leaves unasked questions of history, identity and power while simultaneously ignoring the Vietnamese-Americans who remain socioeconomically disadvantaged.⁷¹

Even when we look at the Anti-war movement, clearly incredibly critical of U.S. military intervention and imperialism, the Vietnam War is still used as a talking point, not engaged with the trauma that the Communist party inflicted upon some Vietnamese people. When leaders of the Anti-war movement, which birthed the Asian American movement, tout Mao Tse-tung, Hồ Chí Minh and Che Guevara as revolutionaries to model their own liberation, they ignore the fact that during the Việt Minh land reforms, political opponents were jailed and killed.⁷² They ignore the reality that Vietnamese intellectuals were silenced and forced into manual labor, supposedly for the betterment of the party at the cost of the livelihood of many citizens.⁷³ These are the

⁷¹ Ibid; Data Bits. “Southeast Asian American Achievement Gaps Through Many Factors.” 11 Oct 2017, accessed 21 April 2019. apidata.com/blog/se-aa-achievement-gaps/; Lieu, pp 2.

⁷² Lieu, pp XIX.; Hoang, pp 213.

⁷³ Ibid, 218.

conditions and histories in which Vietnamese-American elders find their anti-Communist sentiment. Talks of global liberation amongst Asian American activists alienate these survivors of trauma and potentially participate in a “neo-colonial commodification and institutionalisation” of war memory in the West.⁷⁴

Given the shortcomings of both these approaches to remembering the war and its survivors, a more responsible memorialization could happen by documenting the stories of the community directly affected by the military action taken: the refugees. Yet there is a difficulty with this as well. If we look towards creating a memory of war from these stories, the splintering of war sentiments proposes conflicting narratives of war, imperialism, and migration. Earlier refugee groups felt that the United States had betrayed the Southern Vietnamese, while those of later migration groups felt more positively about U.S. humanitarian efforts; the sentiments of this latter group contributing to the narrative of “refugee nationalism”, which suggests that the United States is “the lone hope to restore freedom and democracy to [Vietnam]”.⁷⁵ Phuong Tran Nguyen writes that “America’s quest for atonement became the unofficial basis of refugee admissions, even though it was never written in policy”. Vietnamese immigrant groups, constituted of those who more recently migrated post-2001 when the US ended its resettlement efforts, further complicate the collective consciousness about the war, having lived in a post-war Vietnam where Southern Vietnamese refugees were suspected of rising up against and overthrowing the government.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Laura Chrisman. *Postcolonial contraventions: Cultural readings of race, imperialism and transnationalism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp 10.

⁷⁵ Phuong T. Nguyen. *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp 7.

⁷⁶ M.B Nguyen; Valverde, pp1-28.

But the splintering of experiences does not necessarily mean we cannot make a responsible memory of war. It makes the task much harder, but I firmly believe the challenge of capturing the nuances and contradictions of migration and trauma is not only possible, but vitally important. For the stakes of creating a memory of war that recognizes war trauma in all its dimensions is to better understand the pain inflicted in our communities today. Remembering war lets us know that “the reasons people hurt us is not because they want to”, as queer Vietnamese-American poet Hieu Minh Nguyen said.⁷⁷ Novelist Monique Truong reiterates this notion, writing that writing these histories with nuance means “the possibility of complicating our narratives [and] write the full spectrum of who we are in the world — to look at our full humanity”.⁷⁸ To remember as widely and deeply as I aim to is not just *a* way to remember war — it is the only responsible way to do so.

⁷⁷ Hieu Minh Nguyen. "Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network: A Discussion Among Writers" (Panel, Asian American Writer's Workshop, New York City, NY, 23 March 2019).

⁷⁸ Monique Truong. "Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network: A Discussion Among Writers" (Panel, Asian American Writer's Workshop, New York City, NY, 23 March 2019).

Just Memory and Ocean Vuong

Addressing the difficulty of remembering is part of the project of Critical Refugee Studies.⁷⁹ It is only in these stories, experiences, and lives that we can fully understand the weight of war: not only the violence and carnage of military conflict and continual harm inflicted upon survivors, but also the trauma survivors inflict on each other. Critical study of refugees and war aims to imbue nuance into a rather flat narrative of conflict that paints refugees as savages or victims, when the work should recognize both the humanities and inhumanities. In particular, I am interested in the concept of “just memory” in this field of study, developed by Vietnamese-American scholar and novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen and how such a framework could be applied to Ocean Vuong’s poetry.

Just Memory

Before proceeding to a definition of “just memory”, it is important to recognize the conditions in which this concept originates and operates. In creating this concept of “just memory”, Nguyen is responding to the harmful production of war memory discussed previously.⁸⁰ The production of memory is not only artistically relevant, but politically powerful. Nguyen notes that the identity of a nation is tied to the memory of wars, given that wars are fought to defend the nation. A “good war” can render a nation as the arbiter of justice; a “bad war” defines a nation as unjustly violent. Just memory operates on the individual and collective level; it is a practice that should happen with one’s own memories of war, but also that in which the nation creates for public consumption.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Espiritu, pp. 410–433.

⁸⁰ See “A History of War and the Difficulties of Remembering”

⁸¹ V.T Nguyen, pp 10.

Just memory is defined through two courses of actions. First, just memory proceeds through “the ethics of remembering” one’s own and others. Second, just memory requires that the production of memory be under scrutiny, specifically to examine how the “industry of memory” memorializes war in ways that uphold the identity of the nation-state.

In the first avenue of action, Nguyen suggests that every act of memory is imbued by one’s own political, social, and cultural affiliations and conditions. “The ethics of remembering one’s own” has national variations “with the Vietnamese more willing to remember women and civilians than the Americans are, the Americans more willing than the Vietnamese to remember the enemy, and neither side showing any inclination for remembering the southern Vietnamese, who stink of loss, melancholy, bitterness, and rage”.⁸² He warns though, that for Vietnamese refugees to, simply “identify solely as the victims of war can have its own shortcomings, specifically because “denying one’s inhumanity and the inhumanity of one’s own, is the ultimate kind of identity politics. It circulates through nationalism, capitalism, and racism, as well as through the humanities”.⁸³ That even in narratives that recognize trauma, these stories run the risk of depicting refugee groups exceptional in their trauma, when in reality this is not the case. Responding to this idea, Nguyen calls for “just memory” to remember not only the trauma in one’s own community, but how other voices have been silenced in these narratives:

In the struggles that take place within and between nations over the meanings of war and the justifications for them, those who resist war and remember others fight for the imagination, not for a nation. In the imagination, new identities can arise, alternatives to the national identities and the identities that nations attribute to their wars. But while remembering others may be admirable to some, this mode of memory can also be dangerous or deceptive, for remembering others can simply be a reversal, a mirror, of remember one’s own, where the other is good and virtuous and we are bad and flawed. These competing ethics of remember one’s own or remembering others are simple ethical models of memory. What I look for and argue for in this book is a complex ethics of memory, a just memory that strives both to remember one’s own and others, while at the

⁸² V.T Nguyen, pp 9.

⁸³ Ibid, 71.

same time drawing attention to the life cycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten, how they evolve and change.⁸⁴

With this particular framework, Nguyen is referring to “others” as the Southern Vietnamese and how to simply see these refugees as good also proposes its own problematic binary of “good” and “bad”. This alternative ethics of remembering in just memory aims to remember and recognize the voices of every community involved in war, because the nature of war is that no one leaves conflict without experiencing trauma, death, and unnerving silence.

Nguyen also notes the “life cycle of memories” and their industrial production. In an echo of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, just memory is as an act that also critically examines the conditions in which memory is made. To embark on this analysis, Nguyen describes the “memory industry” and the “industry of memory”. In the memory industry, Nguyen notes that memory can be made into a commodity under capitalism:

Both memory and forgetting are subject not only to the fabrications of art, but also to the commodification of industry, which seeks to capture and domesticate art. An entire memory industry exists, ready to capitalize on history by selling memory to consumers hooked on nostalgia. Capitalism can turn anything into a commodity, including memories and amnesia.⁸⁵

This memory industry becomes apparent in the proliferation of Vietnam War movies during the 1970s, including “Apocalypse Now” and “Full Metal Jacket”.⁸⁶ Nguyen notes that the memory industry is simply a byproduct of a process that extends from war industrialization: the industrialization of memory. He locates this process in the way that memory is collected and made into a large, mechanized operation:

But this argument misunderstands that the so-called memory industry is merely a symptom of something more pervasive: the industrialization of memory. Industrializing

⁸⁴ V.T Nguyen, pp 12.

⁸⁵ V.T Nguyen, pp 13.

⁸⁶ Michael Anderegg, ed. *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/stable/j.ctt14btcb5>.

memory proceeds in parallel with how warfare is industrialized as part and parcel of capitalist society, where the actual firepower exercised in a war is matched by the firepower of memory that defines and refines that war's identity.⁸⁷

Memory production moves from the personal to the political in its industrialization. Nguyen concludes that this memory industry and the industry of memory indicate that the production of memory is not independent of power and hegemony. In particular, memory is constantly in service of the power of the nation and capitalism:

Recognizing that the memory industry is only one aspect of an industry of memory enables us to see that memories are not simply images we experience as individuals, but are mass-produced fantasies we share with one another. Memories are not only collected or collective, they are also corporate and capitalist. Memories are signs and products of power, and in turn, they service power.⁸⁸

What extends from this conclusion is that memories are produced and forgotten by means of power. The project of just memory is concerned with recovering those memories that have been forgotten and the voices that have been silenced in service of the dominant powers of the state. Perhaps this project of memory may rely on a kind of identity politics, where the marginalized should be granted power and access by the condition of being a minority; but Nguyen claims that this critique is faulty, in not seeing nationalism itself as a kind of dangerous identity politics. He writes, "This kind of memory recognizes that nationalism is the most powerful form of identity politics, armed to the teeth and eager to harness all the nation's resources for war, including memory and the dead."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ V.T Nguyen, pp 13.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 15.; Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz. "Introduction: Mapping Memory." In *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by RADSTONE SUSANNAH and SCHWARZ BILL, (NEW YORK: Fordham University, 2010), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.4>. pp 1-10.

⁸⁹ V.T Nguyen, pp 17.

The shortcomings in Nguyen's work appear in its idealistic and Romantic tendencies. He admits that there really is no way to create a just memory that can recognize all the voices in a war, for the nature of giving space to one voice means to silence another by principle.

Additionally, he puts an incredible emphasis on art, defined quite broadly by monuments, movies, books, and more, as the ideal mode of just memory:

Art is crucial to this ethical work of just memory. The writing, photography, film, memorials, and monuments that I include in this books are all forms of memory and of witnessing, sometimes of the intimate, the domestic, the ephemeral, and the small, and sometimes these works of art because after the official memos and speeches are forgotten, the history books ignored, and the powerful are dust, art remains. Art is the artifact of the imagination, and the imagination is the best manifestation of immortality possessed by the human species, a collective tablet recording both human and inhuman deeds and desires.⁹⁰

Yet, the production of art can appear to have little material consequence; it is a flaw he acknowledges himself, writing "Art and ethical work are never enough to effect change without power."⁹¹ Nguyen calls for a more equitable production of memory, where power needs to be redistributed by the nation-state that creates the dominant narrative of war to those who have been silenced, but provides little tangible basis for how do so. What would a more equitable production of memory look like?

Yet despite these flaws, I still find Nguyen's framework especially powerful, not only in responding to the difficulties of equitable memory production but also in the ways memory operates as a product of power. When we are able to create space for memories that are not produced in the industry, only then can we work through these histories. Just memory calls for us to work through our trauma, to not repeat our mistakes nor act irresponsibly. It is in this discussion of war, power, and memory that I find the concept of just memory applicable to

⁹⁰ V.T Nguyen, pp 12.

⁹¹ Ibid, pp 18.

Vuong's collection, where mythologies are created in response to the memories shaped by the dominant ideologies of the United States. These mythologies themselves constitute a sort of just memory through poetry.

Vuong's Mythologies and Just Memory

Vietnamese American literary scholar Isabelle Thuy Pelaud explains the unique role of diasporic authors in responding to the memory of war, given their reception and experiences in her work *This is All I Chose to Tell*. Pelaud points out how the those who receive Vietnamese American work tend to create connections between the war and the literature; this is a relationship which diasporic writers have learned to exploit to respond to dominant ideas about Vietnam and the war:

Vietnamese American authors function and respond to a culture in which Viet Nam represents, as I have explained, a thorn in the psyche of the nation. Those who write in English are well aware that reviewers tend to look for and emphasize connections to the Viet Nam War. These authors both resist and at time use to their benefit their complex "interplay between authorial design, available social space, and accessible cultural resources," a process characterized by negotiation.⁹²

Pelaud's theorization claims how Vietnamese-American authors are always in conversation with the memory of the Vietnam War, one she refers to as "the thorn in the psyche of the nation". Like Nguyen, Pelaud believes there is a way of critiquing and conversing with this dominant memory through one's positionality as a writer. While Nguyen alludes to this Romantic idea of art as a mode of just memory, Pelaud provides a more tangible basis for how an artist's relationship to memory could allow them to participate in creating a just memory. In having their work always in conversation with the war, Vietnamese-American writers can use this relationship to provide alternative memories to dominant American memorialization, memories

⁹² Isabelle Thuy Pelaud. *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt8kb. pp 143 - 144.

that explore the trauma of migration and war. This connection between literature and critiquing the national memory of war ushers me to look towards Vietnamese-American literature in its role in creating just memory. I choose Vuong's work for this particular exploration, given his collection's concern with remembering.

Ocean Vuong is a queer Vietnamese-American poet and editor. Born in Sài Gòn, he migrated to Hartford, CT. Vuong would go on to earn a Bachelor of Arts at CUNY. His debut collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* explores the sites of desire, war, trauma, remembering and writing.⁹³ The collection is composed of four sections.⁹⁴ It begins with a proem titled "Threshold" and proceeds through three unmarked sections. Reading through the collection, I roughly categorize the sections as concerned with migration, queer desire, and writing as trauma broadly. This collection pulls from a number of histories for its content: the Vietnam War, French colonization, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and more. For a collection so diverse in its lineages, Vuong speaks the importance of one in particular: mythology:

A lot of the poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* attempt to navigate history through a rewriting or rather, a recasting, of history into a mythology, much in the tradition of our poetic forebears, like Homer, Dante, Milton. And I was interested in writing the history of the Vietnam War and also the history of writing a queer American body as a mythology because it has yet been done before. What that offered me is that I got to tell these stories that I perhaps have not witnessed myself through a poetical reimagination

⁹³ Michiko Kakutani, "Review: 'Night Sky With Exit Wounds,' Verses From Ocean Vuong", *New York Times*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/10/books/review-night-sky-with-exit-wounds-verses-from-ocean-vuong.html>; Kate Kellaway, "Night Sky with Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong review – violence, delicacy and timeless imagery", *The Guardian*, 9 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/09/night-sky-with-exit-wounds-ocean-vuong-review>; Miguel Soto, "A Review of Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*", *JetFuel*, <http://www.jetfuelreview.com/ocean-vuongs-night-sky-with-exit-wounds.html>

⁹⁴ "Ocean Vuong", *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ocean-vuong>

without claiming witness as my own, without appropriating the witness, the stories, of some of survivors of this war, a war that I did not live through.⁹⁵

But the idea that Vuong proposes here of mythology is rather nebulous. Is mythology simply an activity of the imagination? Does it rely on a knowledge of accepted mythology? It is in this ambiguity that I begin my discussion on mythology as just memory.

Vuong's muddled conception of mythology points to the central question of myth studies: what constitutes a myth or mythology? Such parameters are not clearly defined. Myth-status could be conferred upon stories which hold reference to canonical myth, established predominantly in the Western canon. These historical interpretations of myth reveal their own flaws: a referential myth relies too heavily on taking for granted the authority of literary studies which has cemented certain stories as myths; the standardization process is one that is uneven, influenced by the colonialism, imperialism, and other advents. Myth can be some sort of primitive science, explaining the natural phenomena which civilization had no means of giving more sophisticated explanation to. A scientific interpretation of myth relegates myth-making to the past, where there is no space for the modern myth in light of scientific advances. These are critiques that literary scholar Eric Gould explores in coming to the conclusion on his hypothesis on myth, where it is "the nature of language itself to be symbolic, and the nature of myth is to be the rhetoric of that intent."⁹⁶ I find this definition to be somewhat compelling in the context of Vuong's poetry, one riddled with symbolic and literal images of impossibility, in an attempt to create memories, or what Vuong constitutes as myths in his mythologies. However, what a semiotic interpretation of myth fails to do is define exactly where the failure is located: what is

⁹⁵ "Ocean Vuong talks about his work." *Youtube*. 4 January 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtgE>

⁹⁶ Eric Gould. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

the truth or condition of being that language cannot capture? If we cannot define these notions, how could we possibly claim language to be inadequate in capturing them?

Perhaps we should not provide a definition for myth or mythology, for in this theoretical openness, we can see how mythology relates to memory, as a site of production of the identity of the nation or empire. In answering this question of what is mythology in Vuong's poetry, I hope to delineate the ways that the mythology Vuong creates can be read through the frameworks of just memory. In his poetry, Vuong examines the conditions in which his memories have been shaped. In his myth creation, he critiques the identity of the United States.

Before reading Vuong's mythologies in conversation with the concept of just memory, mythology and memory, more broadly, should more be established as part of the same lineage. Memory, like mythology, faces its own crisis of identity, one that allows for a multitude of definitions. For "[i]f the study of memory is to fulfill its promise, it must necessarily remain an open project, whose theoretical boundaries can accommodate competing paradigms."⁹⁷ Thus, this theoretical openness of memory and mythology allows us to explore the two definitions in tandem. The line between both concepts become clear in their concern with the past. After all, mythology, in the Classical sense, has been concerned with recalling the triumphs and histories of past; consider Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, concerned with telling the history of the Trojan War and the journey of Odysseus. In a sense, mythology is a form of memory, where memory is a recall of the past. It is only through recalling memories of the past that mythology can be created. Likewise, it is in mythology that memories, passed on from generation to generation, can be sustained.

⁹⁷ Radstone and Bill Schwarz, pp 5.

Memory and mythology have also both found their place as the subjects of poetry. Vuong mentions his poetic forebears who created mythologies: “Homer, Dante, Milton” amongst others, like John Keats and his “Hyperion”. Alongside this lineage, Vuong descends from an even larger poetic tradition, one that T.S. Eliot speculated requires the contemporary poet to look back upon.⁹⁸ Along with poetic makers of myth, Vuong descends from William Wordsworth and his “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798”, a remembrance of youth, and Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 30”, a meditation on memory and regret, amongst other poets who chose memory as their prime poetic muse. Therefore, memory and mythology share both an interest in recalling the past and their poetic form.

Where I locate just memory as a framework to read mythology is in the project of mythology in informing the identity of empire. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, myth finds its origins back in 1830. The Greek word “mythos” simply meant story, and held little resemblance to the grandeur that myth seems to have prescribed today; this particular common iteration of myth as historical recall of triumph or failure originates from a Romantic understanding.⁹⁹ The Romantic period concurrently happened with the expansion of the English empire, one informed if not inadvertently created through the mythologies in the poetry of the period. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said states that “nearly every nineteenth-century writer was extraordinarily well-aware of the fact of empire,” recognizing the undeniable line of influence of English Romantics and their myth-making on producing Orientalist discourse, an ideology that

⁹⁸ T.S. Eliot. "Tradition and the Individual Talent by T. S. Eliot." Poetry Foundation. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>.

⁹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “myth,” accessed April 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/view/Entry/124670?rskey=MqAL7M&result=1#eid>.

reinforces the hegemony of the West.¹⁰⁰ Inevitably, this influence manifests itself in the construction of the Orient and a larger imperialistic tradition. Nguyen claims that memory and the powers that create memory are central to the identity of a nation, then mythology seems to align with memory, as an ancestor to Nguyen's memory discussion. Mythology aids in the creation of empire, much like memory and its industries aid in defining the nation.

It is from this understanding of memory and mythology that I prescribe just memory as a framework to read Vuong's mythologies. While Nguyen creates just memory in response to war memory, the fabric of a nation's identity is informed by more than just war. These questions of silence and memory production in regards to national identity also apply to an understanding of the United States as a heteronormative state. Such an assertion extends from a lineage of queer theory scholars, whose beginning I locate with Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience". Rich describes the material condition that prescribes heterosexuality and the norms associated with this orientation to all peoples.¹⁰¹ For queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath, the *visibility* of same-sex desire exists as an impossibility in a heteronormative society.¹⁰² Jasbir Puar applies these discussions to a national framework in her work *Terrorist Assemblages*. In particular, Puar makes note of the ways that the national identity of the United States is contingent on this negotiation of desire. She first notes the way that the nation-state paints heterosexuality as the norm through legislation and cultural means, by the policy and dominant media that barred the recognition of same-sex couples and marriage, [that] nation and

¹⁰⁰ Edward Said . *Orientalism*, (New York City, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp 9.; Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Parisa Shiran. "The Other Transformed: Orientalist Discourse in Book IV of Keats Endymion," *Journal of Language Teaching & Research* 4, no. 1 (2013): pp 67 - 73, <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/jltr/vol04/01/09.pdf>

¹⁰¹ Adrienne Rich. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834>.

¹⁰² Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

citizenship [are] implicit in the privilege of heteronormativity.”¹⁰³ She defines the heteronormative nation state as the “hetero-national”. Puar makes it clear though, that same-sex desire can become a possibility in the national identity, but only within the imperial parameters of the United States empire. The “homonational” becomes a companion to the hetero-national, where queer people can be incorporated in the national ethos by way of subscribing to other normative notions of the particular nation-state.¹⁰⁴ In this case, Puar argues that whiteness and class privilege can be an entry into the homonational; in that way, the queer person of color is still at odds with the hetero-national and the homonational. Therefore, for Vuong, the mythologies around the queer refugee body are worth viewing through the lens of just memory, as these identities have been excluded in the creation of national identity through memory.

In the mythologies Vuong creates surrounding a queer American history and the Vietnam War, I locate explorations of how memory is created, who speaks in these memories, and how these memories constitute a critique of the United States and American exceptionalism. All these sites are those in which Nguyen’s just memory are concerned. A just memory of war asks that this memory recognize those who have been silenced in dominant memories; in Vuong’s mythologies, the queer refugee body and the father become prominent figures and voices. In the national memory of war, the refugee has rarely given space to talk, especially that of the queer refugee who experiences another dimension of invisibility to protect one’s body in the hetero-national state.¹⁰⁵ In Vuong’s personal memory, his father is never there; thus he gives space for the father to speak, to be a real figure, in his poetry.

¹⁰³ Rich, pp 631 - 660.

¹⁰⁴ Puar.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Just memory also asks that memories be scrutinized under the conditions of their production. I choose these two mythologies because they extend from the same nature of desire as created by the consequences of war and migration. In Vuong's poetry, the conditions that explain this mythological production appear in the history that informs the poetry and poetic form itself. For the queer body Vuong writes about, the opposition between the home and queer desire extends from the war. If the trauma of migration is so potent, and queerness is antithetical to the heteronormative nation-state, being queer is posited as a difficulty in assimilation. Ultimately, these memories of internal queer conflict are also produced broadly through and by trauma; pain that erases and creates impossibilities to "rediscover original memories" according to Freud.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the father is a cipher; in this ambiguous figure, Vuong questions the ways that relationships are severed and uneven patterns of inheritance are created through war. In the following chapters, I detail what these mythologies say about the United State's national identity and how this critique proceeds through myth, memory, and mythology.

¹⁰⁶ Sigmund Freud. "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, 1914.

Queer Memories

The queer mythology Vuong creates in his poetry extends from the notion of just memory. These memories are produced in opposition to the hetero-national state, one that Vuong explains in his poetry. He creates a queer narrative concerned with the external conditions of queer conflict, that of which desire is negotiated by the nation; the consequence for deviating from the sexual norm is death. Vuong delineates the conditions that perpetuate the death of queer people, then proceeds to speak for the dead who cannot speak for themselves in the poems “Of Thee I Sing” and “Seventh Circle of Earth”. With this impossible voice, Vuong responds to the heteronormative and homophobic nation-state that have produced this traumatic memory of death. Of this external conflict, an internal one is born through the poems that give voice to the queer refugee in “Because It’s Summer”, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”, and “Devotion”. Like refugee voices who have been erased from dominant war memory, one shaped by the nation-state in favor of an American humanitarian identity, queer voices have also been erased. These memories of queer desire are informed by the histories of war and migration, conditions that make queerness appear antithetical to assimilation. Internal conflict that manifests between the home and queer desire is reflective of these conditions. What concludes from these two narratives of external and internal conflict in this queer mythology is a form of just memory: one that gives voice to the queer refugee and the dead, and by doing so examines the United States’ intervention in queer lives and Vietnam to uphold its identity, as both supposed humanitarian state and hetero-national ideal.

The Heteronormative, National Ideal in “Of Thee I Sing”

The conflict of queer existence lives in a public sphere, where queerness poses a threat to the national fabric of desire, one that defines the identity of the United States as heteronormative

ideal. Before talking about how this identity is compromised by the queer body, it is important to first define the identity of the United States through desire, and subsequently establish the ways that desire and citizenship interoperate. In this national identity, queerness is given little to no space.

The poems “Of Thee I Sing” and “Seventh Circle of Earth” proceed in succession in the collection, suggesting that they can be read in conversation with each other. “Of Thee I Sing”, written from the perspective of former First Lady Jackie Kennedy as President John F. Kennedy is assassinated creates a narrative of how desire is negotiated by the nation. The negotiation of desire posits the way that queer desire cannot be a part of a larger American ethos; in fact, queerness is only acceptable when its is destroyed. Read in conversation with “Of Thee I Sing,” Vuong’s “Seventh Circle of Earth”, a poem completely written in footnotes whose title borrows from Dante’s *Inferno*, recalls the murder by immolation of a gay couple.¹⁰⁷ His poem, written from the perspective of one of the lovers describes the tenuous relationship of the queer body to the nation.

“Of Thee I Sing” speaks on the negotiation of desire in an overtly American context. The title of the poem, an allusion to the American musical and novel of the same name about a fictional presidential election by George S. Kaufman and George and Ira Gershwin, already foregrounds the poem as one deeply involved with American politics and desire. In the original namesake, John P. Wintergreen falls for Mary Turner instead of pageant winner Diana Devereaux, resulting in national scandal.¹⁰⁸ It is a play that itself proceeds and questions the fabric of desire. In Vuong’s poem, former first lady Jacqueline “Jackie O.” Kennedy Onassis

¹⁰⁷ Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri : Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise*, (New York :The Union Library Association, 1935)

¹⁰⁸ George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin, *Of Thee I Sing*.

narrates the assassination of her husband, former president John F. Kennedy. By alluding to this particular play and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Vuong places the politics of desire in this poem in a larger American ethos about desire and relationships.

Choosing Jackie O. as the voice of this poem places desire and the Vietnam War in conversation with one another. American involvement in Vietnam began in 1963, two years after the beginning of President Kennedy's term. After Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson would quickly escalate military involvement in Vietnam, exponentially increasing the carnage. Thus, the assassination as an event represents an increase in conflict in Vietnam and the popularity of the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism; similarly, this event also presents an escalation of conflict and nationalism in Jackie O's narration. Thus, the assassination of John F. Kennedy is not only a domestic issue, but one that is informed by global conflict and liberation. The death of "Camelot" couple represents shattering of an ideal heteronormative America, one that precedes escalating the presence of United States military in Vietnam.

For the Jackie Kennedy in Vuong's poem, heterosexuality is an American ideal. She proudly proclaims "We made it, baby" at the beginning of the poem.¹⁰⁹ Such a proclamation insinuates an achievement accomplished by both her and her partner. She follows this declaration with a description of the scene:

We're riding in the back of the black

limousine. They have lined

the road to shout out our names.

They have faith in your golden hair

& pressed grey suit.

¹⁰⁹ Ocean Vuong, "Of Thee I Sing", *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, line 1

They have a good citizen

in me. I love my country.¹¹⁰

It is clear that the speaker is painting an image of the stereotypical American couple: attractive, young, white, and patriotic. Ideal heterosexual desire, in which makes Jackie “a good citizen” and “love [her] country” is tied to these stereotypical images. The speaker is so preoccupied with this ideal image that she pretends “nothing is wrong”, to “not see the man / & his blonde daughter diving / for cover, that you’re not saying / my name & it’s not coming out / like a slaughterhouse.”¹¹¹ Clearly, Jackie is aware of the assassination about to take place, but to perform heterosexual success and preserve this image, she chooses to ignore it. She reminisces upon these instances saying “Jack. I’m reaching across the trunk / for a shard of your memory / the one where we kiss & the nation / glitters...”¹¹² The nation responding to the couple’s display of affection paints the national ideal around desire to be heteronormative.

Even after her husband is killed, Jackie has to continue to perform an ideal; she desperately reinforces her dedication to the nation. The panic of the moment is reflected formally in the way the poem jumps from side to side, each line occupying the opposite position of its predecessor. Jackie herself proceeds calmly. In response to her husband’s assassination, she states “I’m not Jackie O yet / & there isn’t a hole in your head, a brief / rainbow through a mist / of rust. I love my country”, detailing the murder and quickly following the loss of her husband with the affirmation of her love for the nation.¹¹³ She mitigates the loss of her husband with nationalistic fervor. She continues to affirm her dedication to the nation in spite of this death. Jackie continues to sprinkle affirmations of her citizenship and good American ideals. When she

¹¹⁰ Vuong, lines 2 - 8

¹¹¹ Ibid, lines 9 - 14.

¹¹² Ibid, lines 22 - 25.

¹¹³ Ibid, lines 15 – 18.

is threatened with the fact that her husband is “all over / the seat now, deepening / [her] fuchsia dress”, Jackie says again “But I’m a good / citizen, surrounded by Jesus / & ambulances. I love / this country. The twisted faces / My country.”¹¹⁴ In light of the tragedy that threatens the nation and Jackie’s desperate attempts to reaffirm her love for the nation and Christianity, a prominent feature of American life. She ultimately re-narrates the tragedy, saying “My one white glove /glistening pink — with all our American dreams.” Jackie sees the death of her husband, as synecdochally represented by “glistening pink”, describing the blood on her white glove as “our American dreams”.¹¹⁵ In other words, their relationship was part of defining an American identity as heteronormative, represented by a young, attractive, White male president and his beautiful White wife.

The recall of the assassination of John F. Kennedy here proceeds as a heroic reimagining of Jackie’s resilience of tragedy. It is a memory which gives voice to the remaining heteronational ideal: the grieving first lady. This memory is one that is clearly produced by and for the sake of the national identity, one that is threatened by the growing conflict in Vietnam and queer bodies.

Queer Death as American in “Seventh Circle of Earth”

If “Of Thee I Sing” communicates an American identity formed by the ideal straight, White couple, the poem following it in the collection, “Seventh Circle of Earth”, demonstrates how a visibly, happy queer couple must die in this nation built on an identity that precludes their existence. It is written from the perspective of either Michael Humphrey or Clayton Capshaw, the queer men burned alive because of their relationship on April 11, 2011 in Dallas, Texas. Placing these poems next to each other makes this idea very apparent: where Jackie O. can

¹¹⁴ Vuong, lines 26 - 31

¹¹⁵ Ibid, lines 33 - 35.

belabour being a citizen, and participate in creating a nationalistic mythos, Humphrey and Capshaw's queer love meant they had to violently die to become American. In giving a voice to the dead, Vuong produces a memory that exists in opposition to America's hetero-national identity, one that is produced through the trauma of hateful violence.

The poem proceeds as a conversation between the lovers as they burn alive, as indicated by the frequent use of the second person. Vuong is writing an impossible memory here, one he has absolutely no access to since he is neither Humphrey or Capshaw. The intimacy of the moment itself, between these two victims and lovers, poses this poem as practicing just memory in giving voice to the dead — people who have no way of creating memory anymore. In this memory that operates to create a mythology of queer lives, Vuong forces the reader to contend with the violence that queer bodies face as a result of the hetero-national state. Vuong tries to capture the violence of the crime in form and allusion. Even before the poem begins, Vuong imbues violence into the work through the title. "Seventh Circle of Earth" specifically, references Dante's "Seventh Circle of Hell". Dante's seventh circle begins with walking through a round of murderers, and killers. By making reference to Dante's work, Vuong clearly condemns the murder of this queer couple as heinous action, but not one that exists in another place; murderers roam Earth in Vuong's reality, not in hell. Paralleling earth and hell in this tale of queer death, Vuong communicates how difficult and dangerous it is to be a queer body in this day.¹¹⁶ Formally, the poem demands the reader engage with the consequences of queer death. For "Poetry School", Vuong writes that the use of footnotes places an emptiness on the page that is left by this murder and the death of these two men:

[The footnotes] possessed, in that reading, an urgency that began to stitch itself into a fabric of broken utterances fused together by parataxis. It was, in a way, found poetry. That gave me the idea to re-work "Seventh Circle of Earth" into a piece written entirely

¹¹⁶ Alighieri

in the footnote. This time, the vast and utter emptiness one confronts on the page felt more faithful to the violent erasure of the two murdered men. It felt right to begin the poem with its own vanishing.¹¹⁷

The form is a physical consequence of loss. Furthermore, the forced lineation Vuong employs with the slashes also imbues the poetry with dual meaning. Reading the first few lines conventionally tells the tale of how the speaker is aware of the fact that his queer identity will lead to his death; but the alternative lineation presents the speaker's frustration with such inevitability. "To forget / we built this house knowing / it won't last. How / does anyone stop", reads as if the speaker is questioning why this house that he has built with his partner will not last, then redirecting his question more generally to an anonymous "anyone" to stop the violence against queer bodies.¹¹⁸ "It won't last" refers to the home; "does anyone stop" refers to the violence, but also perhaps a call to people to recognize that this violence is being committed. "Seventh Circle of Earth" demonstrates the resignation of the queer couple to the violence they will endure to be American but also the frustration with a heteronormative America.

This idea of queer invisibility and death as defining American citizenship becomes present in the last few lines of the poem. The speaker asks the reader, or the other lover, to "Look how happy we are / to be no one / & still / American", stating that queerness is not part of a larger American ethos, so the only way a queer body can become American is through being "no one", rendered invisible at best, nonexistent at worst. It is a fact that the speaker is well aware of, made clear by the beginning of the poem, a resignation. The speaker proclaims "As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed doors, / was enough / to erase myself."¹¹⁹ Just the act of

¹¹⁷ Ocean Vuong. "How I Did It: Forward First Collection Special - Ocean Vuong on 'Seventh Circle of Earth' • Poetry School." *Poetry School*. September 21, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://poetryschool.com/how-i-did-it/i-forward-first-collection-special-ocean-vuong-seventh-circle-earth/>.

¹¹⁸ Ocean Vuong, "Seventh Circle of Earth", *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, lines 16 - 17.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, line 1.

secret queer affection, as evidenced by the speaker saying his lover's collarbone and seeking out the scent of his lover, evidenced in "... Old Spice I seek out each night" is enough to dispel the speaker out of existence.¹²⁰ In fact, the speaker sarcastically attributes his ability to "burn best" when intimate with his partner, "when crowned / with your scent: that earth-sweat".¹²¹ In this case, queerness expedites the murder according to one of its victims.

The speaker continually reminds the reader and his partner, "don't laugh". The insinuation in response to this violent murder shrouds the poem in a dark humor that reveals the nature of American homophobia and hetero-nationalism. The speaker says "It's funny" that he always knew he would "burn best beside" his partner.¹²² The function of the command is to make the reader uncomfortable, with the reality that this wit and banter of the speaker reveals that he knew that this crime would be committed; he simply was just waiting. The laughter comes as a response to increasingly tragic incidents: the first being the realization that the couple was burning alive, the second being "Our faces blackening / in the photographs along the wall," and the third being "when walls collapse / & only sparks / not sparrows / fly out." Laughter also functions as an indication of love. The connections between laughter and terms of endearment are drawn at the end of the poem "Each black petal / blasted/ with what's left / of our laughter. / Laughter ashed / to air / to honey to baby / darling, / look. Look how happy we are". Laughter transforms into successive terms of endearment such as "honey", "baby" and "darling". In doing so, the admonishment to not laugh also functions to directly address the American hate that allowed this heinous crime to action. A call to not laugh is a call to not feign supposed love and care for queer bodies that remain victims of hate.

¹²⁰ Vuong, lines 6.

¹²¹ Ibid, lines 5 - 6.

¹²² Ibid, line 5.

Juxtaposed with this admonishment is the plea to the speaker's lover to recall a story of reincarnation in the shadows of falling empire. Such a story alludes to the ways that the death in this poem upholds the nation, an empire in itself. The speaker asks his partner to "tell me the story / again / of the sparrows who flew from falling Rome, / their blazed wings. / How ruin nested inside each thumbed boat / & made it sing"; the story of the sparrows rising and finding their voice mirrors that of the poem and its speaker.¹²³ In this tragic event, Vuong has given the gay couple a voice through the poem. However, the Romantic sentiment is tempered when the speaker reveals that "when these walls collapse / & only sparks / not sparrows / fly out. / When they come / to sift through these cinders — & pluck my tongue, / this fist rose, / charcoaled & choked".¹²⁴ Where a voice is found in this poem, it proceeds from a plucked tongue, "charcoaled & choked", from the conditions in which the queer couple found themselves: burning alive. After all, the reality of the violence of the crime cannot be tempered with poetic reimagining. Furthermore, the story that the speaker mentions originates from Rome, the ancient and archetypal empire in the West, one where many classic myths originate. In the story proposed, the sparrows can escape from the empire, but for the queer bodies of the poem, they cannot and do not. The voice and memory is what lives in this poem; this sentiment is expressed in the command to "Speak — / until your voice is nothing / but the crackle / of charred bones." The voice is what persists, becoming the remaining of their burning bodies.¹²⁵ The oppression of the national heterosexual identity is one that kills the gay couple.

In "Seventh Circle of Earth", Vuong makes it clear: the reality of a queer body politically means to be constantly a target of hate and violence in America. Formally and tonally, the poem

¹²³ Vuong, lines 8 - 9.

¹²⁴ Ibid, lines 12 - 14

¹²⁵ Ibid, lines 10 - 11.

forces the reader to contend with these biases built in the fabric of American identity, one that is explored in “Of Thee I Sing”. Where Vuong gives the dead a space to speak, he creates a just memory built out of the material of trauma. This external conflict proceeds from the national identity that only allows the heterosexual couple to be America, which primes the internal conflict of queer desire, one that queer refugee must contend within himself.

Beginning Internal Queer Conflict with “Because It’s Summer”

“Because It’s Summer” reads almost like a bildungsroman. It is a poem told by an older queer narrator on his early memories of queer desire. The memory created here is one that is coated in violent imagery, one that extends from the internal conflict of the speaker: between cultural and domestic responsibility and his own personal desires. In this retelling, the fabric of the United States, as the ideal heteronormative state for asylum seekers, is under scrutiny. For if the queer refugee is truly at peace in America, after running from a war torn country, why does the war follow in this queer internal conflict? If the state is the site for the heteronational, who is this queer refugee to be finding a home here? “Because It’s Summer” ultimately introduces the life of the queer young refugee as mired in internal conflict, connected to displacement and the legacy of a war that never ends.

The use of the second person, beginning on the first line of the poem which reads “you ride your bike” suggests “Because It’s Summer” as a remembrance of a younger self. The distance in the second person produces this temporal distance. As aforementioned, the speaker is implied to be an older queer man, reminiscing on an earlier moment of queer experience. Vuong reinforces this nostalgia by painting the encounter with the nerves of American adolescence:

... he’s waiting
 in the baseball field behind the dugout
 flecked with newports torn condoms
 he’s waiting with sticky palms & mint

on his breath a cheap haircut
 & his sister's levis
 stench of piss rising from wet grass
 it's june after all & you're young
 until september ...¹²⁶

An image of archetypal youth is provided here of the setting with “torn condoms” and reeking of “piss rising from wet grass” and the figure of desire, described as any nervous boy with “sticky palms”, “mint on his breath”, “a cheap haircut” and “his sister's levis.” Nothing about this particular scene implies experience nor maturity. The connection between summer in “june”, associated with adolescence and an American nostalgic image of youth, and the juxtaposition with fall in “september”, associated with maturity, places this particular memory in a time of adolescence and naivete.

Alternatively, the second person perspective also operates in creating distance between the speaker and the event itself. This particular reading invites the interpretation of this early queer encounter as an introduction to a narrative of queer awakening mired in discomfort and internal conflict. This distance can be explained as the product of trauma, one that creates the dissonance. In Freud's “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through”, trauma appears in the absence of memory, and the recovery of original memory is often a painful and uncomfortable process.¹²⁷ This potential trauma manifests itself in the poem's frenzied form. No proper punctuation, capitalization, or natural breaks reinforces a panicked reading and ultimately creates an unmediated battle of images. Syntactically, the poem reads as one long sentence, beginning with the title itself as the first line:

¹²⁶ Ocean Vuong, “Because It's Summer”, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, lines 7 - 15.

¹²⁷ Sigmund Freud. “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II).” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, 1914.

Because It's Summer
 you ride your bike to the park bruised
 with 9pm the maples draped with plastic bags
 shredded from days the cornfield
 freshly razed & you've lied
 about where you're going ...¹²⁸

The enjambment follows no natural pattern, where full thoughts spill into different lines, creating a recalling that is proceedingly difficult to follow syntactically. Modifiers for nouns come on the lines following their subjects. The use of the ampersand symbol enters as a visually distinct symbol from the rest of the poem, sprinkled in as an interruption that contributes to the chaos of the piece.

The origin of the trauma that informs this frenzied memory locates itself in the internal conflict of desire. The speaker's guilt is expressed through the contradictory nature of desire in the poem. The speaker claims that he does not deserve the boy complicating the nature of his desire:

... but you don't deserve it: the boy &
 his loneliness the boy who finds you
 beautiful only because you're not
 a mirror ...¹²⁹

The mixed images of desire in the undesirable and taboo reinforces the guilt the speaker feels. The speaker admits that he does not "deserve" the boy and "his loneliness." Where loneliness is conventionally undesirable, the speaker has found something to covet that he does not believe he should have access to. Similarly, the boy also finds the desirable in the undesirable, when he finds the speaker "beautiful" because he is "not." As the speaker and his partner dress again after

¹²⁸ Vuong, lines 0 - 5.

¹²⁹ Vuong, lines 26 - 30.

having implied to have had sex, the images are imbued with double meaning that suggest the feverishness of leaving the scene quickly:

... he's already fixing
 his collar the cornfield a cruelty steaming
 with manure you smear your neck
 with lipstick you dress with shaky hands (36, 37 - 40)

The speed in which the boy begins to ready himself to go home, to escape the scene with “steaming manure” points to the speaker’s guilt — that both figures left their homes to find each other. The enjambment of the latter lines imbues two images: of the speaker smearing himself with manure and with lipstick. Images of desire and the disgust are synonymous. The contradiction of images alongside the speed and anxiety that the boy leaves with points to the way that conflict rises from guilt, from knowing that he should not have been here.

This internal conflict also manifests in the images of desire as often impossible metaphors, coating same-sex desire in the chaotic and absurd. The speaker describes the sexual encounter through intangible metaphors:

... because the fly’s dark slit is enough
 to speak through the zipper a thin scream
 where you plant your mouth
 to hear the sound of birds
 hitting water snap of elastic
 waistbands four hands quickening
 into dozens: a swarm of want you wear ¹³⁰

The mix of senses, such as the vision of the “dark slit” with its the ability to “speak” and the planting of the “mouth” to “hear” defines desire through the impossible. It is in this impossibility that explains that this memory is uncomfortably created, by and through trauma. The images provided to describe the encounter are aggressive and disruptive: birds “hitting” the surface of

¹³⁰ Vuong, lines 19 - 25.

water, “snapping” waistbands, and swarming hands. All these descriptors are reminiscent of the Vietnam war: bombs hitting water, sending birds into a frenzy and the chaos of combat.

Corroborating these actions and images with others in the poem, including “the cornfield / freshly razed”, mentioned earlier, conflict here is imbued with that of the war. These allusions invite the reader to understand queer conflict as informed by the violence and lasting legacies of migration. How does the positionality of being a refugee body inform the conflict in this poem of queer awakening? If being a refugee posits a loss of homeland and cultural displacement, queer desire is a threat to cultural and domestic responsibility for assimilation in the hetero-national humanitarian state. In other words, refugee positionality informs the conflict of queer awakening because the responsibility to assimilate given the speaker’s displacement is threatened.

The origins of internal conflict are clear in juxtaposing the expectations of the speaker’s mother and what he has done that will disappoint her. This disappointment can extend from the idea of the mother as emblematic of the homeland and in helping shape the project of national and cultural identity.¹³¹ The contrast in the types of affection the speaker presents in the poem towards his mother and towards the queer boy he meets are clear. When the speaker goes to meet the boy, he speaks on negotiating his expectations:

... he looks different
 from his picture but it doesn't matter
 because you kissed your mother
 on the cheek before coming¹³²

¹³¹ Florence Hsiago-ching Li, “Imagining the Mother/Motherland: Karen Tea Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*” 30.1 (2004): 149 - 167. <http://www.concentric-literature.url.tw/issues/Disease/Dis-ease/6.pdf>; Elleke Boehmer, “Motherlands, Mothers and Nationalist Sons: Theorising the En-gendered Nation.” In *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 22-41. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2005. doi:10.2307/j.ctt155j4ws.5.

¹³² Vuong, lines 15 - 18.

The speaker admits that he is disappointed in his partner's appearance, having been misled. This disappointment is discounted in light of the affection he gives his mother via a kiss on the cheek — for it “doesn't matter” if he looks better because the affection he gave his mother to be here was already dealt, as if affection to his mother and home is something he must give to qualify the act he is about to do that would upset her. The knowledge that he would be doing something his mother would not agree with placed in direct succession with the performance of affection towards his mother primes this particular conflict, contextually and visually. With the understanding of the mother as motherland, the internal conflict the speaker explores in this poem extends from the fact that his queer body troubles the homonational project of the United States. In the homonational, whiteness is entry into being queer and American. The homonational project also poses queer American identity as an exception, one that cannot exist for non-white bodies in non-American contexts. Thus, by being a queer refugee and opposing the mother and motherland, Vuong's queer refugee speaker complicates the homonational American identity project. Yet, another explanation of internal conflict extending from displacement can also derive from this mother and son interaction. This difficulty extends from the troubles of assimilation and familial relationships. Disappointing the mother stems from creating another barrier to assimilation, to finding home, in indulging queer desire. In this reading, the mother represents a sort of domestic or familial responsibility that is compromised by queer desire. For why would a refugee choose to make assimilation a harder task for oneself and their family by being queer, if their displaced existence already ruptures the American identity?

But conflict cannot happen in ambivalence. The intensity of the speaker's queer desires demonstrate the stakes of being able to live fully. The speaker describes this rendezvous by saying “you've come / this far to be no one”, demonstrating that in queer love there is an

incredible loss of one's self; the speaker has sacrificed his identity for the chance of intimacy.¹³³

These stakes grow in potency, from losing identity to that of a matter of life and death. The speaker admits he is “supposed to be out with a woman” that he “can’t find a name for”, revealing that meeting this boy is against what he is expected to, but the action of finding a woman he cannot find a name for is completely unattainable.¹³⁴ Heterosexuality is posed as an impossibility. He makes this clear in saying “... a stranger steps out of summer / & offers you another hour to live”, drawing a connection between the boy he has just met and the new life he has been given.¹³⁵ The motif of same-sex desire as a tool to resurrect appears earlier when the speaker reflects on the incident:

until morning you're young until a pop song
Plays in a dead kid's room water spilling in
From every corner of summer & you want
To tell him *it's okay* that the night is also a grave
We climb out of...¹³⁶

Where isolation poses a death for the queer boy, described as a “dead kid” in a grave, the meeting and the desire poses itself as a means of resurrection. The dead kid can climb out a grave by being with another queer boy. The ability to be young and alive is preserved in the night where the meeting happens, before morning breaks. As the poem closes, the speaker juxtaposes gratitude and sacrifice as two ways of responding to his queer partner. The speaker recalls that he said “*thank you thank you thank you*”, expressing his appreciation towards the boy.¹³⁷ However, this is in response to the speaker's inability to know “the purpose of *forgive me*”, the phrase he actually wanted to say.¹³⁸ Forgiveness implies sacrifice on the part of the

¹³³ Vuong, lines 32 - 33.

¹³⁴ Ibid, line 6 - 7.

¹³⁵ Ibid, line 46.

¹³⁶ Ibid, lines 33 - 37.

¹³⁷ Ibid, line 42.

¹³⁸ Ibid, line 44.

partner, and more largely how to be queer is a sacrifice that the speaker is aware of. However, it is a sacrifice that the speaker is grateful for because to be intimate with a boy is to be sustained.

“Because It’s Summer” recalls queer youth, one informed by trauma that manifests in an uneven and impossible formation of memory. Vuong gives voice to the young queer refugee produced in response to the difficulty of assimilation and cultural responsibility. This poem functions as a memory that critiques the identity of the United States as a place for the young queer asylum seeker. If the United States is truly a place of asylum, then why is this refugee body going through so much trauma? It is because of his queer identity; it is in this conflict that the national identities around humanitarian and heteronormative nation battle cannot coexist, forcing us to consider why either American identity exists at all.

A Collective Queer Memory in “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”

Written by an older speaker, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” proceeds from “Because It’s Summer” as a collection of queer experiences that the speaker has throughout his life: hearing his father climax, having sex with a divorced stranger, and another sexual encounter with a young man. This particular memory is constituted of several moments, reflective of the ways that queer temporality is created and informed by multiple traumas. This pain stems from the negotiation of visibility and survival, as an older speaker realizes that to be queer means to be rendered invisible to the public for self-preservation. More specifically, that in negotiating this visibility, other queer men have caused the speaker pain and discomfort.

Much like “Because It’s Summer”, this particular memory (or collection of them) exists in response to the difficulties of assimilation and cultural obligation. In a recall of an early memory where the father hurts the speaker’s mother, and proceeds to climax, the idea of the mother juxtaposed to queer desire surfaces again. Though not a moment of explicit desire, there

is an undeniable “queerness” of this particular moment that comes from the speaker’s interest to his father’s sexual climax:

I’ll tell you how we’re wrong enough to be forgiven. How one night, after backhanding mother, then taking a chainsaw to the kitchen table, my father went to kneel in the bathroom until we heard his muffled cries through the walls. And so I learned that a man, in climax, was the closest thing to surrender.¹³⁹

The speaker’s interest in this moment functions queerly, as a moment of early male desire — not one that is clearly not romantic, but imbued with a degree of desire to witness such an intimate moment. This particular moment also places the mother and the father as opposites; where the mother is seen as a the purveyor of the home, the father is seen as the perpetrator of violence against the home, but also a sexualized being and an object of interest to speaker. The queerness of the father operates as a symbol for queer desire itself; how this desire can literally wreak destruction on the home, in the “chainsaw to the kitchen table” and the violence against the mother. The act of destroying the home also alludes to displacement itself; to destroy one’s home is to cause one’s own displacement. For the refugee body, being queer poses a kind of displacement from the American identity.

Guilt from this desire manifests in the speaker’s own destruction of his home. When the speaker returns to his home, his body begins to burn down his mother’s home. He narrates, “At home, I threw myself on the bed like a torch & watched the flames gnaw through my mother’s house until the sky appeared, bloodshot & massive. How I wanted to be that sky — to hold every flight & fall at once.”¹⁴⁰ To throw oneself on to a bed is usually a sign of resignation, to hide one’s body. The form that he takes gnaws, violently like an animal through his home, turning

¹³⁹ Ocean Vuong, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, pp 44.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

everything into flames for the desire of the speaker “to be the sky.” The way that the body becomes a weapon, destroying the home demonstrates that queerness is in conflict with the home. More significantly, that the queer refugee has caused his own displacement from the home in this new nation by his queerness. The queer refugee speaker impedes on not only his own home, but that of the archetypal white suburban American who owns a Buick, with a “pink breast-cancer ribbon on his key chain” that “swayed in the ignition.”¹⁴¹ The scene is rendered like the speaker is a perpetrator of a crime who has just been caught. The speaker recalls, “When I left, the Buick kept sitting there, a dumb bull in pasture, its eyes searing my shadow into the side of suburban homes.” In this regard, what is suggested is that this speaker’s queer desire is wrong, and that the speaker was wrong in his queerness. This wrongness proceeds from the idea that queer people of color are not a part of a visible American identity; the speaker is deeply aware of this in realizing his own act of disappearing through desire, admitting “I wanted to disappear — so I opened the door to a stranger’s car”.

“On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” is also informed by another kind of internal conflict. Where “Because It’s Summer” proceeds from a binary between home and queer desire, internal conflict in this poem also arises from traumatic queer experiences themselves. Vuong sees both unsettling queer relationships and the state as perpetrators of discomfort and erasure. This assertion is not to place the abuse in queer relationships as extending from the same kind of material violence as the state projects, for the conditions in which uneven and traumatic relationships are created partially because queer people are never afforded the same freedom or visibility as their straight counterparts. Nonetheless, Vuong sees these two origins of trauma as informing how these queer memories are produced.

¹⁴¹ Vuong, pp 44.

The poem begins with a cryptic call to hunger to foreground the poem with instability, the inherent nature of queer desire. Hunger is defined as the primal desire of the body “to give the body what it knows / it cannot keep.”¹⁴² The lineation once again imbuing dual meaning to hunger: as a familiar feeling produced by the body and something inherently painful. Hunger operates as the intimate, the painful and destructive all at once, much like queer desire. By beginning the poem with this primal urge of hunger, Vuong naturalizes and heightens the importance of queer desire. If hunger and desire share similar characterization, then queer desire is as equally important to the body as hunger is. However, it is then equally destructive. This characterization becomes apparent in the fact that “It cannot keep” sits on the same line with that of queer intimacy, “... it cannot keep. That this amber light / whittled down by another war / is all that pins my hand to your chest.”¹⁴³ The light that “pins” is implied to not be able to be kept by this lineation. The importance of the amber light is that it facilitates this queer intimacy. Thus, hunger and queer desire are both unsustainable. This particular instability is highlighted by the whittling down “by another war”, that both reaffirms queer desire as itself a war and alludes to a war that preceded this one: that of which brought Vuong to the United States as a refugee. The instability of this desire is both a product of the trouble with queer relationships themselves, ones that cannot comfortably proceed in the American public, and with the history of conflict that displaced thousands of people, one that heightens the danger of queer desire.

The uneven lines of consent appear in the ultimatums and demands the speaker poses in the poem. Participating or not in desire appear to have the same result. As the speaker begs his

¹⁴² Vuong, lines 1 - 4.

¹⁴³ Ibid, lines 4 - 6.

partner to stay, the lineation of the section reflects the pull and push of two figures, but also the pull and push of negotiating life and death:

You, drowning
 Between my arms —
 stay.
 You, pushing your body
 into the river
 only to be left
 with yourself —
 stay.¹⁴⁴

The motif of water appears in both scenarios of staying with the speaker or leaving. In both instances, the partner dies, either by “drowning” or “pushing your body / into the river” where he is only “left” with himself. For the man, to leave the speaker would be as tragic as staying. In response to these equally dismal outcomes, the speaker begs his partner to stay. The repetition of stay appears at the beginning of new lines reflects this desire so strong that it is reflected in the lineation that places the request on its own line each time it appears. But the desperation presented here can be read as a manipulation, one that forces the queer person to desire, just because either scenario presents itself as equally fatalistic. The discomfort of sex itself appears in the act being described as parallel to violence:

... Your hand
 under my shirt as static
 intensifies on the radio.
 Your other hand pointing
 your daddy’s revolver
 to the sky. Stars dropping one
 by one in the crosshairs.
 This means I won’t be afraid if we’re already
 here...¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Vuong, lines 7 - 14.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, pp 45.

The anaphora here once again parallels the “hand under the shirt” and the hand with “daddy’s revolver”, which causes stars to fall out of the sky. The violence of sex does not exist in this isolated parallel, but also in the description of another queer encounter. The speaker describes having sex as “My thrashing beneath you / like a sparrow stunned / with falling.”¹⁴⁶ What extends from these uncomfortable moments of queer intimacy is that intimacy itself can be violent.

The potential for coercion becomes apparent in intimacy. In a call for prayer, and reparation, the shadows of manipulation and coercion into desire surface. The question of voice becomes prominent in the ambiguity of the calls for repentance and consent:

i

Say amen. Say amend.
Say yes. Say yes
anyway.

i

In the shower, sweating under cold water, I scrubbed & scrubbed.¹⁴⁷

The anaphora and the similarity between “amen” and “amend” ties the concept of prayer to that of redemption. In contrast to redemption, consent is commanded, in the lines “Say yes. Say yes / anyway.” The lack of clarity in the speaker asks the reader to question who is making these demands. Is Vuong’s speaker desperately coercing his partner into sexual acts, despite knowing the cultural and political costs? Or is it the speaker’s partner, forcing agreement upon him, which explains why he would sweat “under cold water,” scrubbing away both guilt and trauma. In

¹⁴⁶ Vuong, pp 44.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, lines 45 - 50.

either case, the trauma of uneven lines of consent produce the form of the memories in this poem.

The production of this memory is informed by these two sources of trauma in the queer refugee's life. These traumas manifest in the unconventional figuring of time, a "queer" time. While "Because It's Summer" operates linearly in recalling a memory of early queer desire, this particular poem does not follow the same form. It is composed of several lines, divided by the section header "i", which repeats for each set of lines; this formal choice suggests that such events do not happen sequentially, but rather simultaneously with each section narrating the same beginning. The poem oscillates between universal truths, calls to action, and descriptions from the speaker's life of queer encounters, each highlighting memories and different facets of queer experience. Time for queer bodies figures itself differently, as posited Judith Halberstam, for the markers of a culturally normative life are largely heteronormative.¹⁴⁸ For the queer person, first love comes when one contends with their sexuality, that being a moment that is not figured at the same time nor linearly for all members of the community. The repetition of i's that start each section of the poem represent different firsts that point to the conditions of living as a queer person; the "i" in this case represents the roman numeral one. But the "i" can be given another meaning, that of the declaration of self in the pronoun "I". This duality of meaning poses an interpretation of time that is personalized for each queer person. Each instance constitutes the body of the poem: an expansive memory about queer conflict and desire.

Queer positionality is difficult to describe as encapsulated by a singular experience; the final section of the poem proposes that queerness exists on an alternate timeline and that each moment discussed in this poem creates a large queer (or queered) collective memory. This

¹⁴⁸ Halberstam.

sentiment is reaffirmed by the lines that describe “a boy sleeping beside a boy” which “must make a field / full of ticking. That to say your name / is to hear the sound of clocks / being turned back another hour.”¹⁴⁹ These particular lines speak to the notion that time is constituted differently in queer communities. Queer desire is the mode in which time may be turned back, implying that a beginning can happen with a person that makes one understand his own queerness.¹⁵⁰ The notion of time and desire is sprinkled earlier in the poem as well, where sex is described as “Unbreakable dawn / mounting in your throat”; this comparison poses desire as an indication of a beginning. At the end of the poem, time literally discovers evidence of queer desire, when “morning / finds our clothes / on your mother’s front porch, shed / like week-old lilies”, as if normative time would look for queer desire.

The condition of queer or “queered” time is also complicated by the idea of here. Vuong employs the notion of here in a temporal and positional sense, imbuing the notion of time with a geographical component. Vuong’s speaker recalls the time when he has sex with a divorced stranger. Touch is also tied to existence, when the speaker asks “Don’t we touch each other just to prove we are still here?” In the ambiguity of here, the reader can interpret the here as a marker of existing and as a marker of the present condition. Vuong’s speaker uses here again: “I was still here once.” In this particular use, the strangeness of the phrase itself invites a closer reading. Like “here”, “still” operates on a temporal and conditional level. Using still as a modifier for here operates to reinforce how time and positionality operate with and as each other for this queer speaker. The peculiarity of the condition of here as a temporal marker is reinforced by the tense used; “was” indicates the past, but here indicates the present. Thus, the notion of queer

¹⁴⁹ Vuong, pp 46.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. There is also something to be said about “ticking” as echoing bombs ready to detonate. Violence seems to operate as a backdrop to desire, but this is a line of analysis that I have belaboured earlier in other poems, so I do not pursue it again here.

time is complicated, perhaps in response to the displacement and the loss of home. Does time itself reflect upon this condition by operating as a concept constantly in movement, never standing “still”?

“On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” extends upon a queer narrative that expresses the difficulties of queer living. In queerness, there is a perpetual internal conflict of desire, extending from the trauma of the nation and intimacy, that which manifests itself in a non-linear understanding of time and tying visible queerness to death. Between “Because It’s Summer” and “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”, Vuong seems to paint a rather conventional and dismal interpretation of queer living: a largely dangerous and traumatic experience. However, it would be inaccurate to say this is the only and definitive queer narrative that Vuong poses in his collection; the mythology he creates is not strictly dismal. Vuong compromises this rather pessimistic understanding of queerness in the last poem I have chosen to complete this arc: “Devotion”. While the presence of conflict never leaves the queer life, Vuong’s speaker in “Devotion” chooses to engage in this conflict, because queer love is deeply powerful and significant.

Finding Queer Love in “Devotion”

Despite the deeply pessimistic narrative presented in Vuong’s earlier poems, the work that completes the collection tempers these concerns. Dedicated to Peter Bienkowski, the poet’s partner, “Devotion” reflects on the internal conflicts presented earlier. Written in the first person and present tense, this poem places itself in the present after “Because It’s Summer” and “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous.” The speaker, Ocean himself, has made peace with the internal conflict of queer living. He has resigned himself to the contradictions of his existence and to fully commit to queer love.

Pulling from the previous poems, themes of queer conflict appear in the poem, implying that queerness still is a site of complication. The poem begins with an image of defeat and violence in sexual desire:

with my knees
scraping hardwood
another man leaving
into my throat...¹⁵¹

The speaker scrapes his knees against hardwood floor as he performs oral sex; queer sex is the cause of this harm. The speaker describes male ejaculation as “leaving” into the throat.

“Leaving” implies an abandonment, one too familiar to the speaker in his queer experiences.

Queer or queered time appears where the sensory and temporal merge in a description of oral sex where the speaker claims “... This mouth the last / entry into January ...”¹⁵² This image imbues the beginning of the year with that of queer desire and sex, where every experience signals a new beginning. All of these images echo those of “Because It’s Summer” and “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”, suggesting that the conflict of queer existence has not left, even in the present day.

But these shadows of conflict are tempered; it is given less space in this poem in favor of a more optimistic understanding of desire. Formally, “Devotion” operates similarly to “Because It’s Summer” as one long body of work, with no visual breaks and enjambment. Each line has dual meaning. However, “Devotion” has a healthy amount of punctuation; the images in this poem are not nearly as muddled as they are in the poem of queer youth. It presents itself as a more confident and mature understanding of queer desire and love. In reference to the reparation

¹⁵¹ Ocean Vuong, “Devotion”, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, lines 2 -5.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, lines 22 - 23.

and repentance in earlier poems, Vuong's speaker reveals that the difference between the two acts is minor:

Because the difference
between prayer & mercy
is how you move
the tongue. I press mine
to the navel's familiar
whorl, molasses threads
descending toward
devotion...¹⁵³

The speaker poses indulging desire as not that far from repentance. Pressing one's mouth to another's navel parallels mercy syntactically, sitting at the end of the line. Thus, by reducing the difference between repentance and mercy to that of the way one's moves their tongue, Vuong and his speaker are proposing queer desire as a form of prayer, that living a queer life is not actually in opposition to anything significant. Additionally, while the image of descending down evokes a notion of loss or destruction, Vuong descends towards devotion: a conflict towards a love he has chosen to partake in. The use of religious and spiritual imagery to describe queer desire operates to also eradicate the notion that queerness is morally questionable. This notion could be extended even to a national context, one where the dominant religion is that of Christianity:

And there's nothing
more holy than holding
a man's heartbeat between
your teeth...¹⁵⁴

Vuong elevates sex to the holy and spiritual. It is an inversion of a common narrative of the homophobic church to express queer desire. As organized religion, specifically Christianity, has not been always inclusive of queer bodies, a narrative particularly prominent in American

¹⁵³ Vuong, lines 10 - 17.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, lines 17 - 20.

contexts, Vuong appropriates this diction to describe queer sex. This choice implies how strongly he feels about his acceptance of his own desire.

Along with complicating the idea of internal conflict, Vuong ultimately accepts the desire, comfortable resigning himself to love and feeling. In the last lines, Vuong defiantly chooses queer love over safety. Alluding to the failure in the myth of Icarus, Vuong sees his own queerness as a deterrent to a mythological triumph, one that is historically tied to the configuring of empire. Myth is tied to empire, much like memory is tied to national identity. Thus, in tying his desires to a failed mythological triumph, Vuong seems to tie his desire to a failure to conform to national identity. He makes a declaration that this hindrance does not bother him. Confidently, the speaker says, “And so what—if my feathers / are burning. I / never asked for flight.”¹⁵⁵ The anger in his tone is apparent in the phrase “And so what”, as if responding to a pundit. Vuong reveals that he fully understands the weight of his choice, that of which leaves him in danger expressed by placing the “I” next to “burning”. But what does the harm do, if Vuong never “asked for flight”, to ascend in a way that would compromise his truth and the ultimate goal: that of an honest queer desire:

Only to feel this fully,
 this entire, the way snow
 touched bare skin and is,
 suddenly, snow
 no longer.¹⁵⁶

Vuong ends his poem with this image, of desire so strong it could transform. Where desire is a kind of warmth that enables the queer man to feel this strongly, Vuong paints pursuing queer desire as a battle worth fighting.

¹⁵⁵ Ocean Vuong, “Devotion”, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, lines 26 - 28.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, lines 29 - 33.

“Devotion” is written from a place of growth and maturity, with an older queer speaker. Its optimism rivals the younger speaker’s pessimism. It is not a naive poem though; the work recognizes the consequences and harm that comes with being a queer person, but also how an honest and fulfilling queer relationship can make all the risk seem less menacing.

Conclusion: Queer Survival as a Triumph

Queerness in Vuong’s poetry is both about the personal and political. More specifically, how the political, external conflict of queerness ripping the fabric of American heteronormative identity informs the internal conflict of queer desire and trauma. Queer desire and relationships are marked by contradiction and conflict that appear in the images and form of each poem. In the narrative of queer discovery that Vuong creates with “Because It’s Summer”, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” and “Devotion”, queer livelihood and growth is attached to understanding queer conflict (tied to other kinds of national and imperial conflict) and negotiating these difficulties in light of the significance of queer love. This can be located in a number of experiences that mark queer lives: in guilt attached to desire, in desire attached to living, in non-linear time and in becoming a citizen only through death and invisibility. Ultimately, the mythology around queer identity in Vuong’s work proposes that that queerness is about always being at war, personally and politically, to live — but it is a war worth fighting.

The Father

In “Threshold”, the poem, the speaker’s father stops “— a dark colt paused in downpour” and listens to the speaker’s “clutched breath.”¹⁵⁷ He is posited as a figure of force, described synonymously with an ominous horse in rain. He attentively listens to his son, behind a physical barrier: a door. In this vignette, it is unclear who this figure is, but that he holds a dominant presence in Vuong’s poetry. The poet has spoken openly about not knowing father and in light of this absence, Vuong has turned to creating accounts of a man he has never met. Through the lens of just memory, Vuong has given voice to this figure who has not had any voice. The mythology created around this body is that of a cipher, and in the father’s ability to occupy these different personas, Vuong is able to work through and explore the memories of war he does not have.

Given the overwhelming presence of this father figure, the following question arises: How does Vuong create a mythology that reimagines the history of conflict and displacement through the father? After all, historically, mythology has been concerned with the displaced persons and families — specifically fathers. Virgil’s “Aeneid” recalls the Trojan refugee founding the Roman empire. As Aeneas and his father, Anchises, flee Troy, the son places his father on his back. The father, as a clear mythology given the poet’s own non-relationship with his own father, can be read as a manifestation of the anxieties and conflicts of the war histories and memories. I understand this mythology, constituted by these memories of the father, as it proceeds from uneven patterns of inheritance and severed relationships. Vuong imagines narratives that reflect the anxieties of the queer refugee body, one deeply familiar with a history

¹⁵⁷ Ocean Vuong, “Threshold”, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, lines 26 - 28.

of displacement. It is in this fabrication that Vuong can work through his lingering trauma that extends from the war he may or may not remember.

Each of the poems I choose to read provide different interpretations of the father. In “Telemachus,” an inversion of the classical myth in which it takes its name, Vuong imagines the father as a cipher for his queer lovers. “In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back”, Vuong presents a memory of a young speaker and his father that questions the narrative of rescue put forth by the United States during the Vietnam War. In “My Father Writes from Prison”, Vuong occupies the space of this fictionalized father himself where he explores how he could inherit histories of internal conflict and desire from his father, a man he has never known. The last fabrication of the father I explore is in “To My Father / To My Future Son”, a poem of two impossibilities that come as a product of the conflicts Vuong faces as a refugee and a queer man. Where the father is an impossibility to Vuong due to the war that scattered his family, the son is also an impossibility given Vuong’s queerness. Though the father appears as a figure that occupies many spaces in Vuong’s collection, it is clear that the fabrication of this figure operates to explore the anxieties Vuong has himself because of this absence: the lost stories of war, the difficulty of cultural translation, and what undesirable conditions he has inherited from a man he does not know.

Queer Lovers as the Father in “Telemachus”

In Vuong’s “Telemachus”, a war never leaves; it washes up in the form of a father. The speaker of the poem recalls a man who washes up on a shore, which he calls his father; however, this claim is nebulous. In this bastardized narrative of rescue, the inversion of classical mythology cements the mythologized father as a vehicle for discussing the nature of war: a

conflict that never ends, even after the battles have ceased. Vuong imagines this father in the place of his queer lovers, but the nature of his desire is informed by the legacies of war.

In the figure that washes up on shore, the speaker casts doubt on claiming this figure as his father; in doing so, he suggests the father relationship as a fabrication projected by the speaker himself. It becomes clear that his father figure may not be whom the speaker thinks he is, when the speaker asks: "... *Do you know who I am, / Ba?* But the answer never comes..."¹⁵⁸ The enjambment that results in the Vietnamese word for father, "Ba", to begin the next line, allowing us to read this particular quotation in two ways: the speaker questioning whether his "father" knows him, read as "Do you know who I am, Ba?" and the speaker questioning whether this man is his father, "Ba?" as it stands alone. It is a double questioning, one that makes this father-son relationship unstable on from both ends. We are presented with a father who does not know his son and a son who does not know his father. The speaker knows he can never know the answer to these questions when he reveals that "The answer / is the bullet hole in this back, brimming / with sea water..."¹⁵⁹ It is in this permanent condition of never knowing because of his father's apparent death that the myth can be made. The speaker says that the man he has pulled out of water "could be anyone's father, found the way a green bottle might appear / at a boy's feet containing a year / he has never touched."¹⁶⁰ The way that speaker admits that this man could be any father casts doubt on this claim that this man is his own father; the comparison between this man and a mysterious bottle with its own history reinforces this notion that the speaker knows so little about the man and doubts his identity as his father. This analogy also brings necessary weight to "I touch."¹⁶¹ Where the action of touching the bottle seems

¹⁵⁸ Ocean Vuong, "Telemachus", *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, lines 9 - 10.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, lines 10 - 12.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, lines 14 - 16.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, line 16.

insignificant in isolation, touching becomes an vehicle for fabrication. Where touch is used as a verb for knowing, to touch is to know, even if it means by one's own imagination. The man does not even look like the speaker, as he admits when he says "The face / not mine ", but one he will "wear."¹⁶² There is a clear deliberate choice to claim this man as his own father, despite the speaker's doubt. It is in this agency to claim a father that we proceed to understand how such a father is constructed, and more importantly, what such a figure represents for the speaker.

The first means in which we may examine the nature of the father is through the title: an allusion to the son of Odysseus and Penelope. At the encouragement of his mother, who was wooed by a number of unfit suitors, Telemachus is sent to look for and bring home his father. Telemachus believes his father to be dead. As Telemachus and Odysseus reunite, Odysseus claims Telemachus as his own, saying "I am your father." The journey ends with the two returning home and ridding of all of Penelope's suitors. In this classic narrative, the son finds the father and experiences a joint triumph.

In some ways, Vuong uses the mythology of Telemachus to create a new myth, where his writer-speaker can too find his father, despite never knowing his own. Though borrowing Telemachus's name, the story Vuong tells in this poem is not one of triumph and reunion. In fact, Vuong's "Telemachus" appears to completely invert the classic myth, imagining what it would be like if Odysseus had actually perished. Vuong's speaker finds a dead man, his "father" whom he violently pulls out of water to resuscitate, "Like any good son."¹⁶³ It is a deeply violent, and futile rescue, where the speaker, out of obligation, takes little care to pull his father out of water by dragging "him by his hair."¹⁶⁴ In this inversion of the myth, Vuong presents an alternative

¹⁶² Vuong, lines 19 - 20.

¹⁶³ Ibid, line 1.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, line 2.

narrative of rescue, one informed by a starkly different reality than that of Telemachus. The inversion functions to critique myth in creating empire. If myth is concerned with triumph and upholding the empire, then to provide a bastardized myth in a memory is to critique these ideals. Because how can triumph proceed when the father has died, supposedly because of war? Where Telemachus, as a myth, also definitively ends, the “Telemachus” Vuong writes on ends ambiguously, where resuscitation is not revealed to be successful to not. The questions that remain in the aftermath of war are open-ended, much like how this poem concludes. The only reality that is definitive is that the rescue that has failed.

The images that haunt the rescue of the father are undoubtedly those of forced migration. As the speaker drags his father out of water, “his knuckles carving a trail” are erased by “the waves” that “rush in.”¹⁶⁵ This erasure of the efforts of attempted rescue is posed as the result of a war:

.... Because the city
beyond the shore is no longer
where we left it. Because the bombed
cathedral is now a cathedral
of trees.¹⁶⁶

The efforts of rescue are rendered invisible because of the destruction of a city by war. The journey of migration by the speaker is indicated by the notion of leaving a city, “beyond the shore.” Once again, the waves washing over the evidence of rescue is a result of another image of war: a bombed cathedral that has transformed into a forest in its dissemination. Vuong captures the duality of war: a conflict that both destroys and renders anew. More importantly, locating the cause of the erasure of evidence of rescue in war demonstrates the nature of this conflict: one that follows the speaker and continues to affect him. In fact, these images of

¹⁶⁵ Vuong, lines 3 - 4.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, lines 4 - 8.

destruction, as a result of bombs and war, penetrate that of the father himself. As the speaker goes to examine his still father, he intertwines the father and the images of war:

.... I touch
 his ears. No use. I turn him
 over. To face it. The cathedral
 in his sea-black eyes....¹⁶⁷

The image itself, read along lines of punctuation, presents the speaker examining his dead father, turning him towards the cathedral and shore he left. It is an act that draws a line between the father and the shore itself, one that is unclear, but becomes increasingly apparent by placing the “cathedral” *in* his father’s “sea-black eyes”. Where the father is still an unknown figure, the speaker projects this significant relationship between the father and the site of war. In doing so, the dead father presents *as a* consequence of war. This war has found the speaker, despite migration, in the father.

The imagined father presents as a link to conflict and home; thus, the speaker choosing to engage with this figure presents a narrative that refugees know well: we must contend with war, because war never leaves. Even as the refugee tries to create another home in a new nation, the memories of war do not disappear; it is in this chronic trauma. Despite not sharing a face, evidence of a direct lineage, the speaker claims the face as his own. Revisiting an earlier line, “.. The face /not mine — but one I will wear” holds new meaning.¹⁶⁸ In this face, there is a war the speaker clearly recognizes. The choice of the speaker to wear a face that is not his own functions to reflect Vuong’s own experiences of limited memories of war. In choosing to wear this face, the speaker chooses to take on a mythology that is not his own: knowing war intimately.

¹⁶⁷ Vuong, line 16 - 20.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

The father, clearly takes on another identity at the end of the poem: the speaker's lovers. It is in this understanding of the father as symbolic of the consequences of war and as a queer lover that the memories of war seem to inform the speaker's desires.¹⁶⁹ The speaker parallels queer intimacy and resuscitating the father to demonstrate that he has somehow found a "father" in his queer desire:

to kiss all my lovers good-night:
the way I seal my father's lips
with my own & begin
the faithful work of drowning.¹⁷⁰

The speaker wears the face of his father to kiss his lovers and in this instance to resuscitate his father. In queer intimacy and resuscitation, the speaker begins "the faithful work of drowning."¹⁷¹ To kiss one's lovers with the same face that carries the memory of war is to realize that queer desire for the refugee body does not exist independently of the histories that inform his migration to the United States. That in queer desire, there is the question of how the queer refugee's desires will be informed by the trauma of war and assimilation. "[T]he faithful work of drowning" echoes the nature of desire in Vuong's previous poems on queer desire, specifically "Devotion", where the spiritual and holy describes desire.¹⁷² In this particular instance, the image of "drowning" suggests an impending death, one that the speaker religiously accepts. There is a particular pain in reliving the trauma of war, through trying to revive the father, but also a particular trauma or death in queer living as a refugee body, a removal from the national ideal around desire as heterosexual. In this queerness and the conflict that comes with queer living, the speaker understands and relives war memory.

¹⁶⁹ This poem seems to extend from the lineage of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock", where desire and conflict interplay.

¹⁷⁰ Vuong, lines 21 - 24.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² See "Queer Memories".

The inverted myth of “Telemachus” presents war in the father; in the unknown figure, the speaker has projected his own insecurities, anxieties, and experiences of war that inform his romantic desires. In doing so, the speaker of “Telemachus” understands the difficulties of war and remembering it, but how important this act of creating war memory is to unpacking the conflicts that exist in one’s current life.

Questioning The Memory of Rescue in “In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back”

“In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back” presents as a story of rescue, where the young speaker witnesses his father save a beached dolphin. This poem speaks to the opposite reality of “Telemachus”, where the mythologized father is alive. But “In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back”, the memory presented is as mired in war and trauma as in the previous poem. Where “Telemachus” destroys any possibility of a father-son relationship in killing the father, this poem presents an impossibility of the father-son relationship as a consequence of war that leaves the father reeling from the memory of war and the son fabricating a memory of youth that remembers violence, trauma, and a possible abandonment. But this father is not just a singular figure, but rather a symbol for something later: the United States in rescuing refugees after the fall of Sài Gòn. Thus the potential failed rescue in this poem presents as a critique of the dominant memory of the United States during this time as humanitarian nation.

The poem is a rescue narrative imbued with images of war. As a consequence of this history, the reader is thrown into an exploration of war through the eyes of the son, where the action begins immediately from the title which begins the poem. Evidently, the speaker suggests that his father is a veteran of a war, describing the tattoos on his father’s right arm as “phoenixes

— torches / making the lives he had / or had not taken...” alluding to men his father chose not to kill perhaps.¹⁷³ An image that appears later in the poem mentions the father dodging a sniper, once again pointing to the history of war in the father’s past:

says the sniper. Fuck you	ADD. PTSD. POW. Pow. Pow. Pow
through palm leaves... ¹⁷⁴	says the father, tracers splashing

The imagining of this memory through the eyes of the child is evident, by the simple narration; either the father or the sniper “says” something. The act of shooting is described as saying “POW. Pow. Pow. Pow.”; the bullets splash “through palm leaves.” Formally, the poem unfolds in lines that darts from side to side on the page, reminiscent of a body dodging bombs and bullets in conflict. This interpretation of a soldier in conflict is corroborated by the images presented in the poem itself, notably, of the father rushing after the beached dolphin on an injured leg:

as we sat in the Nissan, watching waves	... I was static
when he broke for shore, hobbled	brush over our breaths
-yellow North Face jacket	on his gimp leg. Mustard
smeared into ours. Shrapnel	diminishing toward the grey life
	-strapped.... ¹⁷⁵

Every descriptor in this sequence operate in conversation with war imagery: the breaking shore, the gimp leg, and the color the father’s jacket alluding to a popular weapon of war: mustard gas.

The speaker also describes the speaker and his father running after the beached dolphin with similarly conflict- imbued imagery:

¹⁷³ Ocean Vuong, “In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Check to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back”, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, lines 4 - 6.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, lines 26 - 29.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, lines 10 - 18.

I saw him run like that, he had

a nail-length out of reach.

flickering on his whiskey

screaming down Franklin Ave.¹⁷⁶

The last time

a hammer in his fist, mother

America. America a row of streetlights

-lips as we ran. A family

Drawing lines between rescue he is currently witnessing, domestic violence against his own mother at the hands of his father, alcoholism, and the manifestation of trauma, the speaker demonstrates how these current conflicts are connected to the war. In this narrative of a trauma that manifests in violence that follows the migrant body. This violence manifests in the home but also in the memory: one that causes a man to attempt to kill his wife and that describes a father running towards a dying dolphin as similar to a soldier dodging bullets “America” is “a row of streetlights / flickering” on the father’s “whiskey / - lips”. America metonymically stands in for the conflict of refugee survivorship tied to the United States. America represents the U.S. military intervention that brings the son and father to this country. America represents the difficulties of assimilation for the refugee bodies dealing with trauma. America is reflected in the father’s alcoholism, or rather to blame for it, as it appears in the “whiskey lips”. These images operate to communicate that reminders of war are everywhere. Even the act of reviving the dolphin is seen as violent, as the speaker compares affirmation of rescue to an assault rifle: “he guides / a ribbon of water to the pulsing / blowhole. OK. Okay. AK / -47. I am eleven only once”.¹⁷⁷ The transformation of “OK” to “AK” follows suit with other images in the poem, that go from the innocuous to the violent in swift succession. The dolphin’s teeth are “gleaming like bullets. / Huey. Tomahawk. Semi / - automatic”.¹⁷⁸ Where an image reminds the speaker of

¹⁷⁶ Vuong, lines 18 - 25.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, lines 34 - 38.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, lines 8 - 10.

conflict, the description of war objects like helicopters and weaponry interrupt the narrative in spurts, broken by abrupt punctuation. The “-automatic” that stands on its own completes the phrase “semi-automatic”, but also describes the line that precedes it: an automatic recalling of war triggered by the seemingly innocuous.

This particular recalling of war pulls from the cinematic memory of the Vietnam War, from that of Vietnam War films that gained popularity in the 1970’s, particularly *Apocalypse Now* or *Full Metal Jacket*. In using these images, the speaker suggests that his own memory of war is informed by those of the dominant American consciousness, given his own inability to access memories of war, potentially because of trauma and youth. It is from this cinematic understanding of war that we proceed to another kind of reading of this poem: where the father is emblematic of America. In Vietnam War movies, the paternalistic notion of Vietnam and Vietnamese refugees specifically needing to be saved by the United States military is a clear motif.¹⁷⁹ Thus, from this understanding, the father can be seen as a symbol for America and the son, not only a single child of refugee, but emblematic of Southern Vietnamese refugees more broadly.

The poem proceeds as a narrative of rescue of a beached dolphin, but given this new reading, it is important to ask: who is this figure of rescue? The dolphin holds a significant space in classic mythology in the story of Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility and son of Zeus and Semele. In an incident where Dionysus was kidnapped by pirates who thought he was the son of a king, thus a suitable object to negotiable ransom, the Greek god turns himself into a lion. To escape the beast that appeared before them, the pirates jumped ship and in doing so, assumed the form of dolphins. It is from this mythology that the dolphin figure in Vuong’s work may stand in

¹⁷⁹ V.T Nguyen, pp 17. Nguyen discusses how these films uphold this notion that I claim.

for more than the mammal itself. The weight of rescue grows exponentially with this reality. In fact, the dolphin that the speaker's father rescues appears to be a symbol for the speaker, the son, himself.

The rescued dolphin shares experiences and resemblances to the son and the father. The dolphin and the father share physical attributes, where “the shade / of its cracked flesh” matches the father's hair.¹⁸⁰ This physical connection points to a potential lineage between the father and the dolphin from the beginning of the poem. The intimacy in this action and the parallelism in appearance between the dolphin and the father invites the reading that the two are intertwined in ways not yet present in the poem. As the speaker recalls the rescue, the connections between the young boy and the dolphin become apparent:

	... I am eleven only once
as he kneels to gather the wet refugee	
	into his arms. Waves
swallowing	
	his legs. The dolphin's eye
gasping like a newborn's	
	mouth.... ¹⁸¹

The dolphin is described as a “wet refugee” and both the son and father are refugees. The connection between the subject of rescue and the two figures of the poem becomes more apparent. The comparison between the “dolphin's eye” and “a newborn's mouth” cements the interpretation of the son as the dolphin. Where the father holds the dolphin as a baby, his own

¹⁸⁰ Vuong, lines 1 - 2.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, lines 36 - 42.

son, the son and the “wet refugee” are implicated as one in the same. The implications becomes increasingly clear as the poem ends with the image of the father singing to his empty hands:

... & although I am still

too far to hear it, I can tell,

by the way his neck tilts

to one side, as if broken,

that he is singing my favorite song

to his empty hands.

The image presented of the father tilting his head and singing the speaker’s favorite song is the same as that of a father singing a lullaby to his infant son. However, this image is that of an absence where the child or dolphin should be. In that way, despite the presence of the father in the speaker’s memory of youth, there still exists a dissonance. Was the rescue actually a successful one? In one reality where it fails, what does it mean for the father to have lost a son in this war-torn and conflicted rescue? In another, where the dolphin could have returned to the ocean, what does it mean for the son to leave the father? With the knowledge that the son reads as the Vietnamese refugee and the father as the United States, both these potential realities reflect the trauma of rescue left out of dominant war narratives memorialized in film. The failed rescue, where the dolphin/son is never in the father’s arms at all represents the failure of the United States to rescue every refugee, many of which ended up dying under the hands of a Communist Vietnam. The other interpretation leaves the dolphin/son in the water, reminiscent of the death of thousands of refugees who escaped their country as “boat people”. In either interpretation of this

nebulous image, the United States fails to uphold its promise of rescue and its identity as humanitarian nation.

It is in this reality of separation, tied in with the war that never ends, that the son chases after his father in a way that mimics his own migration as a refugee. For the refugee, even if the United States will not rescue them, he will still find a way to escape a country he no longer recognizes. The son runs towards his father who is attempting to save the dolphin:

... & once more

I am swinging open
the passenger door. I am running
toward a rusted horizon, running
out of a country
to run out of. I am chasing my father
the way the dead chase after
days...¹⁸²

As the dolphin represents the son, the act of the son chasing after his father who is supposedly saving him echoes the way that U.S. rescue efforts may be remembered as more significant than they appear; because for every attempt at rescue, there were refugees left behind. The chase after his father parallels that of the speaker's own exodus from his homeland, as indicated by "& one more". The repetition of the chase points to the connection between running towards the father and running away from the home country. This is corroborated once more by the phrase "running out of a country to run out of". One way this could be read is as the act of escaping a country that is meant to be escaped, "a country to run out of" as a phrase that suggests that a nation is unable to be a place of home anymore given the unrest it has experienced. Another way to read this such

¹⁸² Vuong, lines 45 - 49.

phrase points to the quantifiable concept of nation, “running out” meaning to exhaust; in this way, the running points to losing the homeland, one torn by war and reproduced in an unrecognizable form. Furthermore, the analogy of the “dead” chasing “after days” is an image that also calls upon war, where refugees are chasing after days by choosing to live by migration. To stay in the home country ravaged by war is to exist in the reality that one’s life is in exponentially increasing danger.

In this myth created by Vuong, this fabricated memory is an unsuccessful rescue that alludes to refugees left after the Fall of Sài Gòn. While American history will document U.S. military efforts to rescue refugees, in reality, many Vietnamese refugees died during migration. What proceeds from this historical reading is that the father represents a paternalistic America, adamant on fighting a war it would lose, and subsequently become responsible for the thousands of lives lost. For the father to look into empty arms, while the father’s son is “running / out of a country”, is emblematic of the American bias towards looking at its own history: as humanitarian rescuer, when in reality, the bodies that are left behind are ignored, in the background until Vuong himself writes this memory.

Inheriting Internal Conflict in “My Father Writes From Prison”

Imagining his father as a prisoner, Vuong writes of his father missing Vuong’s mother, Lan. In this poem, the politics of desire operate strangely; while the desire in the poem presents as heterosexual, between Vuong’s father and mother, the author of the desire is the son. In some ways, “My Father Writes From Prison” is a narrative of queered desire, one that proceeds unnaturally. It is in this Oedipal narrative of desire that Vuong uses the mythological father as a vehicle for understanding the internal conflict of his own desires. Vuong’s internal conflict of

desire is rooted in the oppression of queer bodies, while the conflict in this poem comes from imprisonment and physical distance. Yet despite these differences, it becomes clear that his internal conflict of desire is informed by inheritance. In other words, “My Father Writes From Prison” reflects the condition of queer/queered desire that Vuong inherits from his father.

The poem presents as an imagined account. As previously noted, the absence of Vuong’s father in his own life becomes autobiographical evidence for this reading, but the form of the text itself also communicates this fabrication by relying on the implications of translation. The poem begins in Vietnamese, with the father writing, “Lan oi / Em khoe khong? Gió em đàng ở đâu? Anh nhớ em va con qua. Hơn nữa....”¹⁸³ Roughly, the Vietnamese translates to: “How are you? Where are you? I miss you so much.” The Vietnamese that begins the poem reflects realistic dialogue one would write to a loved one. Soon the Vietnamese ends and is replaced by English, broken up by forward slashes. The rest of the poem is composed of utterances, grammatically and syntactically difficult to parse, unlike the Vietnamese that begins the poem. This interruption itself and the difference in tone and syntax between the English and Vietnamese point to the ways that this letter is a fabrication. The brokenness of the English points to the way that the imagination can fabricate an account unevenly, either intentionally or not. Additionally, the change in language reflects a kind of space that Vuong takes in this imagined narrative: the impossibility of his own father writing as fluently as Vuong does in English. This is a reality reflected in the text itself, when the father writes “again Dear Lan or / Lan oi what does it matter”, where the difference between English or Vietnamese in this fabrication means so little in a fictional account.¹⁸⁴ In some ways, the fabrication also points to the ways that translation is implicated as a partial fabrication; where trying to capture the nuance of Vietnamese in English

¹⁸³ Ocean Vuong, “My Father Writes From Prison”, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, pp 19.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

is a task set for failure. It points more largely to the ways that Vuong's poems all have a certain distance and mythology to them by virtue of being written in English. English is a language that our ancestors did not have access to; in fact, it is the language, that some refugees continue to not have access to. How could we create stories in the words that were never meant to be ours? Thus using English to describe Vietnamese refugee experiences is an act of myth-making, one founded in the inadequacies of English to fully capture Vietnamese refugee experiences, but will continue to try to.

The "queerness" of this heterosexual desire appears in the production of the poem itself, of the son writing of desire for his own mother through the father. The poem itself makes this evident in self-referential Oedipal lines. The father writes of a man next door "... who begs / nightly for his mother's breast / a single drop."¹⁸⁵ This desire parallels that of the father's own desire for Lan, whom he calls to, begging, " Lan oi! Lan oi! Lan oi! / I'm so hungry / a bowl of rice / a cup of you / a single drop."¹⁸⁶ In this way, the desire that the father has for Lan is the same as the desire for the mother that the other man expresses. The nature of desire in both contexts is posited as romantic by this comparison. In that way, the "queerness" of this poem draws lines between the desire presented here, manufactured by the father, and the queer desire that permeates throughout Vuong's collection. This connection invites the question: how does the desire in this poem inform that which occupies more of the collection?

The conflict of same-sex desire is apparent in Vuong's collection. Sex and intimacy for the queer body can only happen in the dark; visibility means a death sentence. Being true to one's self and one's own desires means to disappoint the family. While this desire is largely informed by the violence of heteronormativity and American homophobia, it is also informed by

¹⁸⁵ Vuong, pp 19.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

the concept of inheritance. Perhaps, the answer to the question of connection between the father's desire and Vuong's desire comes in this concept itself. The desire the mythologized father creates is one that Vuong inherits by being his son. Inheritance in Vuong's work operates along the axis of experience instead of biology. Desire in the father's letter, much like that of the same-sex desire Vuong writes of extensively in his collection, can only operate as a clandestine confession. As his father begins his confession, he writes "there are things / I can only say in the dark."¹⁸⁷ Darkness becomes a cover for the confession; it is in this invisibility that this confession of desire can take place. This dynamic operates similarly to the clandestine nature of queer desire that Vuong explores in his other poems. In this line, moments of desire in the night, in fields and cars, are to be reminded of.¹⁸⁸

The mode in which desire is confessed and communicated in this letter is mired in guilt, much like that of queer desire. However, while guilt manifests between same-sex intimacy and the home in Vuong's queer poems, guilt and desire in this letter manifest formally. Images of desire are wracked and muddled with images of guilt and violence. The confession that begins the letter is the father revealing that he killed a monarch butterfly. He proceeds to explain his act and establishes hands as a mode of expressing desire:

... / how one spring / I crushed a monarch mid-flight / just to know how it felt / to have something change / in my hands / here are those hands / some nights they waken when touched / by music or rather the drops of rain / memory erases into music / hands reaching for the scent of lilacs / ...¹⁸⁹

Desire and violence are implicated in this action, where the death of the monarch is simply because the speaker wanted to know "how it felt / to have something change in my hands." In

¹⁸⁷ Vuong, pp 19.

¹⁸⁸ See "Queer Memories".

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

feeling and hands, Vuong writes of desire. He reveals that those hands reach for “the scent of lilacs”, potentially alluding to the myth of Syringa. Captivated by her beauty, Pan, the god of forest and fields chased after the nymph. In an effort to conceal herself from her pursuer, Syringa transforms into lilacs, camouflaging herself into the landscape. Through this allusion, lilacs are imbued with a violent desire. Lilacs have also been the subject of poets in the canon, notably Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot. In an elegy to the recently assassinated Abraham Lincoln in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, Whitman writes of lilacs blooming and bringing with them spring, a season in which Whitman remembers the fallen president. In Eliot’s “The Wasteland”, the poet writes “April is the cruelest month, breeding / lilacs out of the dead land, mixing /memory and desire ...” With this lineage of lilacs in literature, the flower in this case carries with it the weight of remembering in desire. It is in reaching for lilacs with his hands that hands become a symbol of desire. Thus, desire awakens when “touched / by music or rather the drops of rain”. The connection between memory and music becomes apparent when “memory erases into music”. Given the evidence of this connection, memory becomes the instigation for desire, this concept clearly becomes powerful for the father, who sits in prison, unstimulated by other means. These hands of desire also commit deeply violent acts, as alluded to earlier by the crushing of the monarch. Hands appear as the vehicle for violence once again, as the father recounts his attempt to murder a boy when he was 22:

.../ my hands that pressed the 9mm to the boy's twitching cheek I was 22 the chamber / empty I didn't know / how easy it was / to be gone these hands / that dragged the saw through bluest 4 a.m. / cricket screams the kapok's bark spitting / in our eyes until one or two collapsed / the saw lodged in blue dark until one or three / started to run from their country into / their country / ...¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Vuong, pp 19.

Where hands reach for lilacs and desire, the hand also “pressed the 9 mm to the boy’s twitching cheek”. It is a memory that is visceral and violent. The father’s anxiety and guilt about the act bleeds in the form where the demarcation does not follow the natural way of reading such lines. “[T]he boy’s twitching cheek” runs into “I was 22”. The reveal of the empty gun chamber is split between “the chamber / empty I didn’t know”. The confession of disappearance, in “I didn’t know / how easy it was / to be gone” runs into the revelation of the empty chamber. While it remains ambiguous what motivated the father to commit these violence acts, attempting to murder a young boy and cutting down kapok trees, these acts spur a migration that recalls the refugee exodus after war. When “the saw” breaks the darkness of night, it causes ambiguously named figures, “one or three”, “to run from their country into / their country”. Where the running is posed as circular, it also reflects the condition of refugee displacement due to war. Where the war destroyed one’s country of origin to be completely unrecognizable and no longer one’s homeland, the refugee attempts to find a new home, “their country” in the nations in which they resettle. The circular nature of running in what appears to be the same country actually reflects the reality of migration for the refugee. Following this assertion, the father begs for the memories of violence and the urges of desire to both halt. He recalls “... / the ak-47 the lord whose voice will stop / the lilac / how to close the lilac / that opens daily from my window / ...”. The voice of the lord and the weapon, the ak-47 are made parallel by spatial proximity on the page. It is only this voice/weapon that will “stop / the lilac”, one that the speaker asks “how to close”. This muddling of desire, violence, guilt, and war points to one conclusion: that in this imagined narrative, Vuong is painting desire as a war or conflict in itself, one that he inherits as a queer son. This conflict inherits from the Vietnam war that produces the conflict in the poem itself, where the father’s separation from the poet’s mother proceeds from a history of war, one that includes the

Northern Vietnamese jailing political opponents and re-education camps after the Fall of Sài Gòn.¹⁹¹ This conflict of desire manifests itself not only in memory, but through the verbalization of desire in oxymoron and paradox. The father desires Lan in metaphor, writing “some nights you are the lighthouse / some nights the sea / what this means is that I don't know / desire other than the need / to be shattered & rebuilt /... ”.¹⁹² To the father, Lan occupies the space of lighthouse and sea, two bodies that work in opposition to each other. This dialectic is reinforced by the notion of desire as two antithetical forces: shattering and rebuilding. The father reuses the phrase “there are things” to introduce the monarchs in the letter. However, in this capacity, the monarchs come back to haunt the father, reminding him of his own desire: “I can say only when the monarchs / no longer come / with wings scraping against the piss-slick floor for fragments of a / phantom woman”.¹⁹³ Where the monarch is a haunting, coming to the father, the monarch also is a reminder of desire in scraping up the remains of a “phantom woman”. It is a double haunting, wracked in guilt and desire.

The aesthetics of desire in “My Father Writes from Prison” use images that appear in Vuong’s queer mythology. The internal conflict of desire in Vuong’s poems is presented as an inherited from his father, produced in the trauma of isolation. As the father writes, “the mind forgetting / the body's crime of living”, Vuong reminds the reader of the couple murdered in “Seventh Circle of Earth”, where their crime was living.¹⁹⁴ By virtue of being queer bodies, they were killed. Desire and hunger are implicated in this letter, where the father writes “I'm so hungry / a bowl of rice / a cup of you”.¹⁹⁵ Hunger becomes a motif for desire in the poem but

¹⁹¹ See “A History of War and the Difficulties of Remembering”.

¹⁹² Vuong, pp 19.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

also in the rest of the collection. Notably, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” begins with “Tell me it was for the hunger”. Hunger operates as a marker for desire that is destructive, the kind of that Vuong inherits from his father. Lastly, the destructive nature of desire surfaces in a way that parallels that in “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”. The father imagines the skirt of his lover lifting, as he writes “[a] grey dawn lifts the hem of your purple dress / & I ignite”. In the same way, Vuong’s speaker transforms into a flame after having sex with a stranger. He says, “At home, I threw myself on the bed like a torch & watched the flames gnaw through my mother’s house until the sky appeared, bloodshot & massive”. The image of burning also appears in “Devotion” where Vuong asks “& so what — if my feathers / are burning. I / never asked for flight”.¹⁹⁶ Desire is marked by this unstoppable burning. Where it first manifests in his father’s letter, it is a desire that manifests along different lines in Vuong’s poetry and life. Burning in “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” signifies a desire that destroys the speaker himself and the home. However, that desire and burning is reimagined in “Devotion” as a self-destruction by choice, for recognizing and indulging this desire is worth the stakes Vuong presents. The images and motifs of desire that Vuong’s imagined father creates are those which his own son inherits in his poetry.

Desire, violence, and guilt manifest in tandem in “My Father Writes from Prison.” Vuong explores these themes through imagining the father and the lineage of his own desire. To Vuong, desire manifests across generational lines, even when that connection is severed by war.

Imagining Impossibilities in “To My Father / To My Future Son”

Intergenerational trauma manifests as a by-product of writing in Vuong’s poetry. Vuong fills two absences in his life through “To My Father / To My Future Son”. Before Vuong begins

¹⁹⁶ See “Queer Memories”.

the poem, he quotes Emily Dickinson's letter to Charles H. Clark.¹⁹⁷ The 19th century poet writes to her recipient to console him on the recent passing of his brother. In this letter, she writes "The stars are not hereditary", claiming that in death, Clark's brother could create that connection with the figures above. Much like Dickinson, Vuong also suggests that in absence, there is still a way to create a lineage. Writing in the literary tradition of fathers to their sons, Vuong reflects on how his own work has created these figures for himself and how this creation poses a danger to memory.

The uneven creation of the fathers and sons in this poem points to the fiction Vuong tries to create: the father and son do not exist linearly. Tonally, the poem proceeds like a letter of advice to a son from a father, in the literary tradition of other poems of fathers writing to sons.¹⁹⁸ Vuong's poem relies on the use of the second person and the inclusion of commands and questions, like "Do you understand?", that communicate this letter as a warning or advice to someone younger than the speaker.¹⁹⁹ However, Vuong's own work is not so neat in its relationship; Vuong explores how memory can operate across generational lines that do not exist a biological lineage. In the poem's title and the ambiguity of addresser and addressee in the form, multiple readings of this poem can be taken. "To My Father / To my Future Son" can reference multiple relationships: Vuong writing to both his father and his son, but also Vuong's own father to Vuong and his own father. The muddling of these relational lines suggests that this poem operates as an exploration of intergenerational memory more broadly than that of a singular account.

¹⁹⁷ Emily Dickinson to Charles H. Clark, mid-June 1883.

¹⁹⁸ See Sir Walter Raleigh's "Sir Walter Raleigh to his Son" where the poet warns of "the Wood", "the Weed", and "the Wag" which pose a threat to his boy.

¹⁹⁹ Ocean Vuong, "To My Father / To My Future Son", *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, line 20.

leaf / refusing to rust.” Through this metaphor, Vuong clearly makes reference to his difficulties with writing of his absent father and son. However, as he continues to write, the tide changes, where the leaves do begin to shift and rust into a “red dark”. He attributes this to “touching” these figures and that there is a level of unity, even in the fictional; touch in his other poems, namely “Telemachus”, has also alluding to imagining. Ultimately, Vuong comments on how writing is a way of imagining and touching these figures that present two impossibilities for the writer.

In place of an actual history, Vuong creates a lineage that is imbued with the complications of war. In the poem itself, Vuong admits that there is little hereditary basis for this relationship, writing, “Look, my eyes are not / your eyes.”²⁰² Yet, he confidently claims “you move through me like rain / heard / from another country.”²⁰³ Vuong places the figure of the fictional father and son in connection with a place outside of the United States. Because water becomes the symbol for the father and son, the other country could be placed as Vietnam, the place where Vuong fled from war. Pulling from Vietnamese language scholar Huynh Sanh Thong, Vuong uses water imagery in conjunction with the idea of migration to remind the reader of the passages Vietnamese refugees took after the war, across the Pacific ocean.²⁰⁴ Vuong affirms that the addresses have a place of origin, even though it may seem that they do not:

Yes, you have a country.

Someday, they will find it

while searching for lost ships...²⁰⁵

²⁰² Vuong, lines 3 - 4.

²⁰³ Ibid, lines 5 - 6.

²⁰⁴ Huynh Sang Thong. "Live by Water, Die For Water." *The Vietnam Review*, Volume 1, no. 1, (1996)

²⁰⁵ Vuong, lines 7 - 9.

The affirmation here functions as a reminder to the son that he comes from somewhere. However this somewhere is migrant and unstable, as indicated by “lost ships.” It is in this reminder that Vuong reflects on his own displacement that will inevitably affect the son and father he writes about. Proceeding in the poem, Vuong gives directions to his son or father when they arrive:

If you get there before me, if you think
 of nothing
 & my face appears rippling
 like a torn flag — turn back.
 Turn back & find the book I left
 for us, filled
 with all the colors of the sky
 forgotten by gravediggers
 Use it.
 Use it to prove how the stars
 were always what we knew.
 they were: the exit wounds
 of every
 misfired word.²⁰⁶

In these warnings, Vuong explains how to fight against the dangers of misremembering. Vuong tells his son and father to “turn back” if they see his father as a “torn flag”, a metonymic image for American failure and dishonor. Vuong is a refugee and his legacy could be minimized to that of being a reminder of the United States’ failure in Vietnam. But this is not the legacy Vuong wants to leave, not with his son or father. In response, Vuong directs his son to “find the book I left”. Writing as a way of memorialization is made in reference here: it is only through the text that Vuong creates that the son may “prove how the stars were always what we knew” — a lineage not by hereditary means but one cemented in writing. More importantly, Vuong makes it clear that this lineage is one that ties the son to the war, in the “exit wounds of every misfired

²⁰⁶ Vuong, lines 39 - 52.

word". Through using war imagery to describe the nature of writing and heritage, Vuong makes it a case that his work is in conversation with the legacies of war.

Where there are absences in his life, Vuong creates these figures through writing. In the writing itself, Vuong imagines a lineage that is produced despite the impossibilities of war and queer identity. To this lineage, Vuong explores what it would mean to misremember. Ultimately, he uses this imagined familial figure to explain the dangers of misremembering and the importance of realizing the conditions which bring a person to the present.

Conclusion: The Father as a Cipher

Vuong's collection never gives a clear answer to who this mythologized father is. Instead, it allows the writer to imagine the possibilities of who this figure could be. The poems in the collection explore what it means to inherit from lineages we do not know or create. Vuong pulls from mythology in the Western canon and that of his experiences with migration and war to create this fiction of the father, one that allows him to explore the history of war and conflict in and by literature.

Conclusion: Why I Will Try To Remember

I have never agreed with the way that the United States has built on the idea on being “exceptional”, in its supposed efforts to “protect democracy”, when the violence it brings to the countries it tries to help makes me question the stakes these efforts that seem more concerned with upholding American empire more than it does protecting people’s freedoms. This exceptional identity extends to that of sexual deviance, where America is either the state that has no queer people deviating from the heteronormative, or, if a queer person is to be visible and a part of the American identity, they hold privilege in other ways that uphold American identity, namely, by being White. It is in the space of memory production that Nguyen and I both see ways of reconfiguring American identity; after all, do we not look towards history as a way of defining our nation, when we ask “What was our country founded upon?”

When I first read Vuong’s collection, I was struck by the questions that we both shared, from being two people who came as a product of war but have little access to war memories. With the memories we both did not have, Vuong reimagined these gaps as places for refugees and their children to muse and heal from our trauma at the hands our supposed rescuers, the United States. Vuong’s argument extends beyond war, where the fabric of American identity is not just that of humanitarian rescuer, but also built on heterosexual normativity. It is a collection whose power I found, not only in proceeding from a lineage of poetic forebears, but in challenging an American identity that erases marginalized people, ideologically and tangibly in death.

I approach my analysis through the lens of just memory, where I conclude that Vuong gives voice to people who have been silenced to critique American identity in its humanitarian and hetero-national regards. The way the memories are produced, or rather the mythologies

Vuong points out in his poetry, can be located in the poetry itself. The poetry is produced in trauma, one often creates impossible memories and relies on gaps to communicate what cannot be said. The form is also produced in part by the legacies and histories that Vuong chooses to allude to in his work: mythology in the creation of empire, deeply violent recalls of the Vietnam War, and hate against queer bodies.

As I conclude this body of work, I can only say it is a flawed body of analysis, perhaps as because of its aims to triangulate so many fields of study. I embarked on this analysis from my personal understanding that memory is created unevenly and informed by all the identities that one has; it felt irresponsible to read Vuong's collection exclusively through war history or queer history. The theoretical foundation of my analysis feels shaky, for what exactly is a national identity and where do we locate it? I feel as though my work has only superficial connections, based on nebulous ideas of conflict and American identity, a concept which I fail to really give a strong definition for. But I hope to create these connections in the spirit of understanding how legacies of displacement, in refugee communities and in queer communities extend from the failure of America to include both these groups in its cultural and political formation. That refugee communities and queer communities, and those at the intersection of both, could heal together from the trauma of their shared displacement.

Along with these theoretical pitfalls, I realize there are many spaces in the poetry itself that I could have dedicated critical analysis to. While I chose queer relationships and the father as my two mythologies to explore, as they extend both from desire and war, I could have dedicated the same kind of attention to the mother as a figure, and the act of writing as a kind of documenting of trauma. The poems I could explore in the future, in regards to the figure of the mother, especially in contrast to the mythologized father, include "Immigrant Haibun" and "The

Gift”. The poems that I could proceed with in regards to writing trauma are “Self Portrait as Exit Wounds”, “Daily Bread”, “Logophobia”, and “Immigrant Haibun”. In my analysis as it stands, there are spots of under-exploration in both the mythologies I study. In the queer mythology, the question of visibility is not given the space that it should. If a queer person is rendered “invisible” in the American identity, how does that history inform the production of queer memories in this collection?

What I find in this thesis is not a definitive understanding of memory, mythology, and national identity in Vuong’s debut collection, but rather a beginning to how mythology is a kind of memory that informs national identity. I hope that with the gaps and questions I have left unanswered, that I or other scholars contending with these questions can reexamine this work. But more important to me than the scholarly questions that remain in studying this poetry is how this thesis has informed my own relationship with war and memory, one that I share with Vuong and drew me to his work in the first place.

In my first year of college, my mother became a citizen. For 30 years, she was a resident alien. When I got the call from her with the good news, I was relieved. I was afraid she would not pass; not because I doubted her abilities. but because the fee for a translator during the exam was steep and my mother is far from being fluent in English.

Despite this disadvantage, my mother persevered, memorizing the answers to United States history questions the way that someone would remember the tune to a song. When I asked her “What war was fought in the 1900s” in preparation for the test, she says “The Vietnam War” because it is the only name she can reasonably grasp her tongue around. But I wonder if this answer comes only as a result of my mother’s fluency in Vietnamese, or if she remembers the

word “war” in relation to homeland — that the “Vietnam War” is something she has known and remembered long before studying for this exam.

My mother may not be ready to tell me more about the decade she spent hiding, and I know some Vietnamese refugees die with their stories. Sometimes we need to forget to be able to live. But I’m certain she remembers; it’s why she is so adamant on being American. That in being incorporated into this nation through citizenship, she can forget what it was like to flee from war. But, I hope one day when she is ready, she will help me remember what my body provides as proof: this war happened; if it did not, I would not be here. As a product of this reality, I claim the responsibility to tell a just memory of this war, one that will help my mother heal from her trauma and begin the process of unearthing memories of what Vuong and I have already imagined.

Bibliography

- Alighieri, Dante. *1265-1321. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri : Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise*. New York :The Union Library Association, 1935.
- Boehmer, Elleke. "Motherlands, Mothers and Nationalist Sons: Theorising the En-gendered Nation." In *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 22-41. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2005. doi:10.2307/j.ctt155j4ws.5.
- Anderegg, Michael, ed. *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. Temple University Press, 1991. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/stable/j.ctt14btcb5>.
- “Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: May 2018.” (US Census Bureau 2018) www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2018/asian-american.html.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Chan, Sucheng. *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2006.
- Chrisman, Laura. *Postcolonial contraventions: Cultural readings of race, imperialism and transnationalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Dickison, Emily. Emily Dickinson to Charles H. Clark. mid-June 1883.
- Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent by T. S. Eliot." Poetry Foundation. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>.
- Freud, Sigmund. “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II).” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, 1914.
- Gershwin, George and Ira Gershwin, *Of Thee I Sing*. New York City, NY: 1932
- Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Gould, Eric. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Halberstam, J. Jack . *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York City, NY: NYU Press, 2005.

- Hall, Stuart, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. 2. edited by Vincent B. Leitch. 1782-1794. New York, London: WW Norton & Company 2010.
- Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. New York City, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.
- Hoang, Van Chi. *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam*. Frederick A. Praeger Publisher, 1964.
- Huynh, Sang Thong. "Live by Water, Die For Water." *The Vietnam Review*, Volume 1, no. 1, (1996)
- Janette, Michelle. "Vietnamese American Literature in English 1963 - 1994". *Amerasia Journal* Volume 29, no. 1 (2003).
- Kakutani, Michiko, "Review: 'Night Sky With Exit Wounds,' Verses From Ocean Vuong", *New York Times*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/10/books/review-night-sky-with-exit-wounds-verses-from-ocean-vuong.html>.
- Kellaway, Kate, "Night Sky with Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong review – violence, delicacy and timeless imagery", *The Guardian*, 9 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/09/night-sky-with-exit-wounds-ocean-vuong-review>.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1982
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The woman warrior : memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts*. New York City, NY: Vintage Books, New York, 1977.
- Lam, Andrew. *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005.
- Lê Espiritu, Yên. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992.
- Lê Espiritu, Yên. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt7zw04n>.
- Lê Espiritu, Yên. "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 410-33. doi:10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410.

- Li, Florence Hsiago-ching, "Imagining the Mother/Motherland: Karen Tea Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*" 30.1 (2004): 149 - 167.
<http://www.concentric-literature.url.tw/issues/Disease/Dis-ease/6.pdf>.
- Lim, Shirley and Amy Ling. *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992.
- Lieu, Nhi T. *The American Dream in Vietnamese*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1999.
- New York Historical Society. "The Vietnam War: 1945 – 1975." accessed April 21, 2019.
vietnamwar.nyhistory.org/.
- Nguyen, Hieu Minh. "Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network: A Discussion Among Writers" Panel, Asian American Writer's Workshop, New York City, NY, 23 March 2019.
- Nguyen, Marguerite. *America's Vietnam: The Longue Durée of U.S. Literature and Empire*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2018.
- Nguyen, Phuong T. *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003
- Nguyen, Tan Hoang. *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- "Ocean Vuong." Poetry Foundation. Accessed April 21, 2019.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ocean-vuong>.
- "Ocean Vuong talks about his work." *Youtube*. 4 January 2018.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE>
- Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "myth," accessed April 21, 2019,
<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/view/Entry/124670?rskey=MqAL7M&result=1#eid>.

- Parikh, Crystal, and Daniel Y. Kim, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. doi:10.1017/CBO9781316155011.
- Pelaud, Isabelle Thuy. *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011.
- Pirnajmuddin, Hossein and Parisa Shiran. "The Other Transformed: Orientalist Discourse in Book IV of Keats Endymion," *Journal of Language Teaching & Research* 4, no. 1 (2013): pp 67 - 73, <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/jltr/vol04/01/09.pdf>
- Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Radstone, Susannah, and Bill Schwarz. "Introduction: Mapping Memory." In *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by RADSTONE SUSANNAH and SCHWARZ BILL, 1-10. NEW YORK: Fordham University, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.4>.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834>.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York City, NY: Pantheon Books. 1978.
- Sedgwick, Eve. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This essay is About You". In *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Sohn, Stephen Hong. *Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018.
- Sohn, Stephen Hong. "Valuing" Transnational Queerness: Politicized Bodies and Commodified Desires in Asian American Literature" in *Transnational Asian American literature : sites and transits* ed. Shirley Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn, and Gina Valentino (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 100 - 122
- Soto, Miguel , "A Review of Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*", JetFuel, <http://www.jetfuelreview.com/ocean-vuong-s-night-sky-with-exit-wounds.html>.
- "Southeast Asian American Achievement Gaps Through Many Factors." (Data Bits, 2017) apidata.com/blog/se-aa-achievement-gaps/.
- Stockton, Richard. "The Widely Misunderstood Story Behind The Iconic Image Of 'Napalm Girl.'" (All That's Interesting 2018). allthatsinteresting.com/napalm-girl.
- Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

- Tran, Richard Quang-Anh. "An Epistemology of Gender: Historical Notes on the Homosexual Body in Contemporary Vietnam, 1986–2005." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 9, no. 2 (2014): 1-45. doi:10.1525/vs.2014.9.2.1.
- Truong, Monique. "Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network: A Discussion Among Writers" Panel, Asian American Writer's Workshop, New York City, NY, 23 March 2019.
- Truong, Monique. "The Emergence of Voices: Vietnamese American Literature 1975-2000". *Ameriasia Journal* Volume 19, no. 3 (1993)
- Umemoto, Karen. "On Strike!" San Francisco State College Strike, 1968-69." *Amerasia Journal* Volume 15, no. 1 (1989)
- Valverde, Kieu-Linh Caroline. Transnationalizing Viet Nam. In *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012.
- Vuong, Ocean. "About." Oceanvuong. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://www.oceanvuong.com/about>.
- Vuong, Ocean. "How I Did It: Forward First Collection Special - Ocean Vuong on 'Seventh Circle of Earth' • Poetry School." *Poetry School*. September 21, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://poetryschool.com/how-i-did-it/i-forward-first-collection-special-ocean-vuong-seventh-circle-earth/>.
- Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2016.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Wenger, Daniel. "How a Poet Named Ocean Means to Fix the English Language". *New Yorker* (2016). <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-a-poet-named-ocean-means-to-fix-the-english-language> (accessed April 20, 2019)
- Young, Marilyn. *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*. New York City, NY: Harper Collins, 2015.