

Time is a Mother: Ocean Vuong's Use of Language in Tackling Issues of Race, Gender, and Identity

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Abstract

*This paper sheds light on Ocean Vuong's poetic exploration of identity, skillfully entwined with his linguistic choices within his recent work *Time is a Mother*. The anthology stands as a testament to Vuong's intricate navigation of his fragmented self and his negotiation with language, demonstrating how language becomes both a medium and a mirror in his quest for understanding and visibility, both racial and personal. Creating a device of 'alterity', Vuong uses language to deconstruct the prevailing structures of a language with which he has a complex and unorthodox relationship. The poet takes several liberties in reconstructing the landscape of a psyche continuously probing into a bloody, generational history of being subjected to oppression and atrocities of war, all the while navigating through a language not completely native to him but is simultaneously one that he inherited from his half-American identity. The racial issues stained in scathing parts of his unapologetically personal and confessional poems, are analysed to make apparent the insidious equations of power, as Vuong's Asian roots and his sexuality as a gay man assign him a position at the bottom of the system. Taking his semi-fictional memoir, this paper intends to examine the use of language in *Time is a Mother* as symptomatic of Vuong's poetic sensibilities and his weapon of resistance against erasure.*

Keywords: *Identity, Racism, Sexuality, Gender, Expression, Visibility, Linguistic alterity, Subversion, Contemporary Poetry, American poetry.*

“What do you want? I asked, forgetting I had no language” (Vuong 1)

Ocean Vuong commences his anthology *Time is a Mother* (2022) by inaugurating the poem titled 'The Bull', within which he establishes a thematic ambience by acknowledging a state of existence devoid of linguistic constructs. His compendium of poetic verses is imbued with an unwavering impetus of purpose, concomitant with a remarkable manifestation of linguistic malleability, a rarity in the contemporary employment of the English language within the

realm of poetry. Vuong adeptly forges sequences of lexemes, seemingly fashioning an optic instrument to facilitate the refraction of luminosity; thereby engendering imagery of an intensely vivid nature that veraciously portrays an expansive landscape of existential suffering. In an incessant endeavor, he delves into pivotal junctures of his personal history, a consequence of his intergenerational trauma, his intricate filial dynamics, the specter of an absentee progenitor, ephemeral paramours, and seemingly inconspicuous instants, all serving as fodder for his contemplation of race, gender, and,

ultimately, the amalgamation of his distinctive identity.

The tome stands as a conceptual chronicle of Ocean Vuong's biographical trajectory and his encounters, encapsulating his narrative as an immigrant of Asian American provenance, a homosexual bard, whose genesis is interwoven with the backdrop of the Vietnam War. It is an exposition of his reconciliation with his distinct brand of masculinity and sexuality. The present exposition aims to delineate the symbiotic connection between Ocean Vuong's introspective journey into his individuation and his manipulation of language within the framework of his poetic opus, *Time Is a Mother*.

Time is a Mother chronicles an enduring conflict between facets constituting Vuong's multifaceted identity—namely, his transformation into a poet who employs a language beyond the reach of his maternal tongue, his encounters as an East Asian migrant straddling the juncture of his assimilated American self and his Vietnamese heritage, his homosexual orientation, and his deliberate choice to embrace tenderness amidst the backdrop of sorrow, antagonism, and personal bereavements. These constituent components engage in a quasi-oppositional relationship, as Vuong deftly weaves intricate configurations that coalesce into an approximation of his persona, giving form to the corpus of this literary work. Betty Waselowsky posits an argument asserting that Vuong's composition in English affords a counterpoint to Fanon's contention in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) regarding the concealment of the subject behind the protective veil of the colonizer's language. Notably, Waselowsky parenthetically inserts, "Little Dog expresses his desire to adopt English 'so that others would see my face, and therefore yours'" (Vuong 32). For Vuong, English emerges as a tool that facilitates his perceptibility.

The corpus exhibits a recurrent utilization of the lexemes "true" and "real" throughout its tapestry, with each iteration connoting elements of supplication, affirmation, skepticism, solace, and ultimately, an aspiration for holistic integration. Within the sphere of Vuong's engagement with the term "real," Helli Fang conducts an examination into the iterative dissection of a precarious identity. The query "Do I look like a real American?" exemplifies the insertion of the term "real" into the interrogation, as opposed to a more direct inquiry such as "Do I resemble an American?" This nuanced incorporation intimates a profound struggle intertwined with Vuong's maternal American identity—suggesting that even amid a self-perception of being "American," a more profound query persists concerning the authenticity of such an identification. Fang elucidates this notion by remarking, "...even if one feels that they are 'American,' there remains the larger question of whether or not they truly exist as one" (Fang 30).

Vuong endeavors to wield the English language, a medium reasonably deemed "alien" within his native milieu, as a tool for destabilizing its own inherent mechanics. By transcending the boundaries of its structural precision, he seeks to imbue it with a fluency and essence uncharacteristic of its intrinsic, native utilization. This aspiration drives Vuong's linguistic manipulation, a deliberate effort to evoke fluidity and qualities divergent from the conventional dictates of its natural state.

Language within the context of Vuong's oeuvre emerges as a pivotal facet, undertaking a multifaceted role that transcends mere translation and emotional expression, assuming an autonomous identity characterized by stylistic cadence and lexical architecture singularly tailored to its own distinct essence. Vuong's perspective diverges from perceiving style as an ontological verity. Evident in his manipulation of

his late mother's appellation, "Rose," which metamorphoses into a floral entity within his discourse, exuding its chromatic essence throughout his poetic compositions, Vuong's approach deviates from conventional metaphorical and similitudinal applications. This stands in contrast to the lineage of romantic ballads, typified by Robert Burns' 1794 song "my love is a red, red rose," engendering successive generations of metaphorical clichés. Conversely, within Vuong's artistic domain, metaphoric constructs like stars transmogrified into perforations puncturing the expanse of the celestial canvas introduce an instantaneous, disquieting, and abrupt evocation of wartime imagery, resonating even in the wake of the Vietnam War—an event from which Vuong's intricate identity emanates. Noteworthy is the deviance inherent in Vuong's metaphoric configurations, unsettling the reader through their unexpected twists and eclectic affiliations.

Vuong's structural compositions, seemingly devoid of conventional rhythm and rhyme schemes, coalesce harmoniously through an intrinsic bedrock of meaning and intermittent skewed rhythms, ultimately congealing into an orchestrated chaos, harnessed in a profoundly constructive sense. Language, as wielded by Vuong's deft penmanship, assumes a malleable disposition, akin to clay moulded to encapsulate his fragmented, intricate, and multi-layered identity. Through the strategic adoption of sporadic punctuation and seemingly haphazard lineation, Vuong's verses eschew rigid conventions, embracing instead a liberated verse form that resonates deeply with the emotional core. His contemplation of language's absence serves as a conduit, inviting the reader to extrapolate their individual interpretations, thereby subverting traditional norms.

Residing within the interstice between his native linguistic heritage and the dialect of a nation not

entirely his own, Vuong intimates a lack of intrinsic linguistic possession, positing instead an inheritance characterized by a perplexing amalgam of both. This amalgamation, Vuong adroitly synthesizes within his compendium, culminating in an intricate harmony. Representing an exemplar of potency, Vuong's poetic verses challenge established sociocultural power dynamics, wielding their honed textual textures as instruments of tender resistance and unfeigned authenticity.

Within the narrative realm of *Snow Theory*, the verse "I lay down over her outline to keep her true" (Vuong 5) crystallizes as a literary embodiment of grief. Vuong's deliberate smudging of the demarcations between presence and absence engenders a semantic slippage, fostering an oscillatory dynamism that infuses the work with an unending cadence of pulsation. His sustained endeavour to imbue his poetic tapestry with the lingering essence of his mother, even amid her corporeal void, as though to sustain her vitality through the medium of verse, imparts an intimate, confessional, and introspective undertone. The line "I can make you look like something true" from "Dear Peter" (Vuong 7) represents a distinct iteration of Vuong's nebulous identity. In his homage to his former paramour, Peter, whilst still ensnared in the throes of youth, resonates a disposition of adolescent surrender. Vuong sifts through the recollections of Peter, and in an avowal marked by candour, unveils his reliance on prescription drugs as an analgesic veil to shield against torment. The structural fragmentation within the poem, apparent through unconventional line breaks, mirrors the fragments of what could be construed as a Xanax-induced courage, enabling him to persevere despite trembling hands. The accentuation of the word "true" elucidates an implicit apprehension concerning the spectre of falseness or a semblance of unreal existence, encapsulating a dread of irrevocable obliteration.

In 'Skinny Dipping' the line "My name is a past tense where I left my hands" (Vuong 9-10) resonates harmoniously with the overarching thematic tenor. The poem employs verbs that propel the discourse into a realm permeated by homoerotic yearning, where the act of descending, fraught with its inherent peril, crystallizes Vuong's assertion that this plunge renders him authentically "real," thus rendering him susceptible to fracture.

The composition 'Beautiful Short Loser' stands as a sombre homage to Vuong's fractured self, encompassing the multifaceted dimensions of his dissimilarity in terms of visage, racial subordination, and internal schisms. The assertion "Nobody's free without breaking open" (Vuong 12) staunchly repudiates any notion of a resolute selfhood, inciting the construction of an intricate mosaic that delineates his identity through retrospective admissions of the past, coalescing into a backdrop that spawns both his present and future. With ironic verbal juggling, Vuong designates himself as a proficient loser, relinquishing any notion of a complete entity, paradoxically culminating in a winning streak marked by a paradoxical procession of losses.

"I'm sorry for being useful only in language" (Vuong 16) inaugurates the domain of 'You Guys', seemingly intended for clandestine auditory receptors during midnight meanderings. Vuong's diction meanders into a state of implosion, vacillating betwixt instantaneous ruminations and a long-buried historical continuum intertwined with a tapestry of violence. His metaphorical embrace enfolds the rabbits of recollection, their forms gradually distorting and bearing the imprints of temporal vicissitudes. The line "After all who can stare at so many ruins and call it reading" (Vuong 19), inscribed to his niece within 'Dear Sara', imagines his verbiage as fossils of ants etched upon an ivory desert, wherein any manifestation of his

identity as a wordsmith morph into ruins that beckon interpretation. Vuong's personal history unfurls as the bedrock of this composition, culminating in an idiosyncratic harmony resonant with his stance as an individual navigating the aftermath of a dolorous childhood, his utterances reverberating through this wasteland of dilapidation.

Vuong's cartographic endeavours pivot around the contours of the urban landscape of his upbringing, intricately delineating the territorial expanse that assumes a pivotal role in shaping his identity as a bi-national individual. "Growing up in a city is a process of symbolically drawing its map: the city is traced through story," denotes an assertion encapsulated within his reflections, thereby underlining the symbiotic relationship between personal narrative and geographic locale. In "The Last Prom Queen in Antarctica," Vuong presents a vignette of a disconsolate boy, an employee of McDonald's, seeking solace within the confines of an automobile, mirroring the echoes of his own youthful anguish. Through the strategic incorporation of quintessential American symbols, Vuong embarks on a literary enterprise aimed at forging a semblance of recognition. His innovation in linguistic expression he attributes to the act of "Reclaiming language to centre wonder and joy."

Of critical significance is the poem "Almost Human," occupying a pivotal juncture within the compendium, where Vuong delves into the very essence of human essence, launching a fervent interrogation into the constructs that delineate human identity. The verses reverberate with incisive queries regarding the import of signifiers tied to his persona: "Indecent, tongue-tied, bowl-cut, & diabetic, I had a feeling" (Vuong 70). These adjectives, steeped in profound self-deprecation, relentlessly pierce through the established paradigm of masculine norms and authoritative dominance. Vuong occupies a nadir

within the progressively steepening hierarchy of conventional masculine assertions. With a palpable sense of ironic urgency, he wields language to juxtapose it against its inherent binary dichotomy. Olivia and Delvi Wahyuni, in their discourse "Men as the Victim of the Patriarchal System in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" (2018), quote Frederick et al. (2007:2) to assert the centrality of a muscular physique in the matrix of masculinity for men. Unlike a fair-skinned American man endowed with an assertive masculine demeanour, Vuong's predicament can be encapsulated by his declaration: "I couldn't get the boys to look at me even in my best jean jacket" (Vuong 70). In the same composition, the line "I made a killing in language & was surrounded by ghosts" (Vuong 70) assumes salience, encapsulating his endeavour to harness the tools of the English language as instruments of invention. This process seeks to forge a novel material and form that seamlessly coalesce with his plural identity and poetic sensibilities, while concurrently retaining a poignant sense of loss and fragmentation. "I argue that Berry and Vuong combine techniques from different poetic traditions, creating a 'hybridity of lyric and language modes'" (Sastri 2014: 191) (Carney 2). The fragmentation is most conspicuous in *Dear Rose*, where each line appears to be collapsing into another creating a carousel of words that in totality, conveys a curtain drop on the performance of his poetic expression-

"I've plagiarised my life to give you the best of me & these words these insects anchovies
bullets salvaged & exiled by art Ma my art these corpses I lay side by side on the page to tell you our present tense was not too late."

Vuong retorts in *No One Knows the Way to Heaven*, "What will I name you? Are you a boy

or a girl or a translation of crushed water? It doesn't matter" (Vuong 68), which directly relates to some of the earlier theorisation of Queer identity as quoted by David Glover and Kora Kaplan in *Genders* (2009)-

"Queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 1993: 8) and "This is desire in all its incalculable, inconvenient unboundedness and its corollary is, in Judith Butler's celebrated phrase, gender as trouble" (Butler 1990: ix).

In "The End of Belonging and Other Paradoxes: Gay Immigrant Subjectivity in Ocean Vuong's Literature", Georgios Margaritis-Stoilov writes about the Vietnamese American diasporic dilemma in Vuong's work, arguing that the paradox of belonging is due to the structural inequality in the country working in tandem with a past smeared with the trauma of war. "Rajini Srikanth argues, they often do not have direct access to their Vietnamese heritage and, as such, their literary production is "marked by a strong thrust of inventing, conceptualising, and fashioning Vietnam either from their memories or from the memories of their parents and relatives" (105). The constructed nature of the Vietnamese diasporic home" (Page 16). The constructed nature of a diasporic idea of home is further established in the recognition of Vuong's racial identity always found in contrast with the white American identity. The emasculation and alienation of the colour yellow bear relevance in the ways in which Vuong continually hones in on the obvious physical differences with the white Americans. His predecessors being a white

soldier and a Vietnamese grandmother, Vuong alludes briefly to the cultural resistance to a mixed identity. The Asian American narratives of discrimination are again felt through one of the passing conversations about seeing Tiger Woods on tv, where Vuong's mother Rose poses a question as to why the athlete is seen as "black" and not even "half-yellow" (Vuong 51). The reluctance in acknowledging the legitimacy of the yellow race is palpable in the innocent curiosity of Rose in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Gary Minda addresses this unequal perception of colour in a discussion around Critical Race Theory, claiming "it can reinforce racist attitudes prevailing in society that seek to justify the oppression of racial minorities."

Vuong's medium is one of discovery, to arrive at a linguistic intersection of ideas, which he calls queerness of "alterity" or pushing beyond the laid-out path of rules, which, for him, are like the guardrails on the highway. He claims, "When I write, I feel larger than the limits of my body."

Rachel Carney in her essay writes, "Vuong's comment also indicates that he views poetry itself as a queer form of writing, a genre that can be used to deconstruct or destabilise our static sense of self, in a way that replicates the experience of living as a queer person. Vuong's collection could therefore be read as an attempt to evoke the fluid, interconnected aspects of identity in language, along with a simultaneous acknowledgement that language itself is slippery, 'shifting', and insubstantial, evoking an ongoing sense of spatial separation between language and experience." (Carney 14-15)

In his essay, Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo discusses instances of marginalization in the life of Little Dog, Vuong's poetic counterpart in the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Little Dog and his mother struggle to navigate their daily lives due

to the language barrier, which renders them a position of shame. Quintana-Vallejo quotes Little Dog as saying that he was called names like "freak, fairy, fag" and slapped by other children who told him to "speak English." (Vuong 2019: 14, 24).

Quintana-Vallejo also speaks of a linguistic alterity in Vuong's writing, which is evident in his early efforts to be an interpreter for his family. Vuong writes that he would "fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could" (Vallejo 32). The word "fag" arrives in Vuong's writing as a badge of dishonour, bestowed upon him by a scornful authority figure who holds a linguistic, racial, and economic upper hand.

In the poem "Not Even," Vuong writes, "I used to be a fag now I'm a checkbox" (Vuong 35). He also writes, "everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns to gold" (Vuong 36). These lines suggest that Vuong has internalized the label of "fag" and come to see himself as a subordinate and inferior being.

Vuong has referred to his work as an "artefact of capitalism." In an interview with the Harvard Radcliffe Institute in 2019, he said that he believes identity is not fixed, and that when we start to see ourselves as a finished product, we risk commodifying ourselves. He suggests that we should instead privilege wonder, in order to avoid upholding someone else's agenda. In this sense, Vuong is a voyager and a bricoleur who reimagines history and deconstructs his subject matter and language, guiding them to newer, yet unexplored direction.

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