

Nhung An
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Redefining War Refugees' Culture in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

Listen,
 the year is gone. I know
 nothing of my country. I write things
 down. I build a life & tear it apart
 & the sun keeps shining.

(Vuong, "Daily Bread")

In American literature, the destruction and violence from the Vietnam war echo through the voices of those who find themselves mentally trapped in the explosions and helicopters' sound within the jungles of Vietnam. Among them, the American veterans' voices are the loudest, featuring in books such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*; they recall their personal experience in reimagined scenarios to deliver to the audience the true horrors of a war that no one fully understood. These voices have been the most prominent in shaping the audience's view of the Vietnam War; because of that, the voices of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans affected by the war were drowned out.

In the more recent years, however, the rise of Vietnam war literature written from the Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American perspectives has given a new shape not only to how the war is viewed, but also to how refugees want to be heard. By adding the Vietnamese refugees' point of view, we get to experience their wounds as they are the victims of someone else's war, where their homes are taken away from them and their families are forced into fighting or hiding. For them, there is a need to reclaim their identities and culture at the aftermath of destruction as well as to bridge where their home used to be and where they must build a new one. This need can be seen through several work of literatures such as Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* and Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*. In both works, the authors recount their personal experiences, portraying the

uncalled for erasure of their homes and identities when they were living in the war as well as after the exodus.

As a Vietnam war baby, the Vietnamese-American poet Ocean Vuong stumbles upon the need to reclaim his culture the same way other Vietnamese refugees have through his debut poetry chapbook *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Much like other Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American writers on the Vietnam war, Vuong understands and digests, the lack of visibility of Vietnamese victims of war. In an interview with “The Guardian,” the poet explains the photograph on the front cover of his chapbook; it captures Vuong as a child sitting in between two women in summer clothes made of cheap cottons and costs his family “three tins of rice,” because they had “[given] up [their] ration just to be seen” (Armitstead). In the attempt to reclaim his culture, Vuong gives his family a voice, spoken through his poetic words, as he tells the story beginning two generations before he was born, where his American grandfather had fallen in love with “an illiterate girl from the rice paddies” (Armitstead).

Unlike Duong and Mai Elliott, Vuong fled from Vietnam with his family at two and with little knowledge of what was going on. For this, his desire to reclaim culture differs from other war refugees as he watches his family rebuilds itself in a land that is stranger to them than it is to him. Vuong cannot properly remember the war but he knows of its consequences, and what the violence has left his family, resulting in his own growth. The poetic form and thematic content in the thirty-five poems within Vuong’s chapbook works together to redefine this culture by reconstructing the poet’s memory and reclamation of his mother tongue.

Using Language poetry, Vuong reconstructs the memories of the Vietnam war through the balance of form and content, and reclaiming his mother tongue. In Jonathan Monroe’s essay “Avant-Garde Poetries after the Wall,” he points out the importance of Language poetry in

contemporary literature. He argues that Language poetry for the avant-garde writers, takes to a new stage, where revolution does not come from war, but from the writers' own journey to redefine their past, present, and future (Monroe 98-9). With that in mind, Vuong writes his own revolutions using Language poetry, the harmony of content and form, as well as classical rhetoric, to redefine his Vietnamese roots. Thus, Ocean Vuong uses his writing to not only redefine his culture, but also give voice to the rising Vietnam war refugees like himself. He combines the old and the new—classical allusions in the free form produced for contemporary Language poetry—to take his place in Asian-American writing and bring his experience to light in mainstream literature.

I. Content and form in contemporary Language poetry:

Before discussing the role of contemporary Language poetry along with its content and form in Ocean Vuong's chapbook, we must understand its characteristics. Like other Vietnam war writers, Vuong utilizes the music in Language poetry and the liberty of its form, especially as free-styling takes shape in contemporary literature. This way, Vuong succeeds in delivering his message through a powerful and familiar outlet for his audience.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Language poet/poetry" as relating to "a school of poetry characterized by experimentation with form and content, linguistic playfulness, and indeterminacy of meaning." Here, poetry audience may recognize these work as they are written in free form, in a playful ordering of words that reads well in one's head as well as aloud.

Language poetry allows the writer to play with "form and content" so as to reach its goal,

whether to narrate or to merely enchant the audience, without being bound to the traditional rules of form.

In modern literature, language poetry takes form to a newer level as it contains a harmonized balance of form and content; as Roland Barthes argues in his book *Writing Degree Zero*, poetry does not let form guide its content but it “leaves standing only its lexical basis” (44). In comparing classical speech with modern, Barthes points out the two pillars that are “Word” and its “Connections.” In classical written work, the “Word” represents only itself as what it means; the “Connections” represent context and are there to guide the words on the pages so that language meets form and produces content. Yet, as experimental writing arises in modern literature, the relationship between the “Word” and the “Connections” shifts. The “Word” becomes “the dwelling place,” and it is “no longer guided” by its context, or, form (Barthes 47).

In describing the independence of form and content, Barthes does not mean that their purposes are divorced from one another; instead, the “Word,” or language, is simply free to guide readers without the boundaries of “Connections.” Indeed, what readers notice as most apparent when comparing modern poetry with classical poetry is the free verse form. This form can be completely experimental and unique, or it may borrow some classical rules—most commonly couplets—then conforms to it, only to break it later on.

In “Challenges in Contemporary Lyrics Theory,” Heather Dubrows points out the importance of the balance of form and content for both the audience and the writers. Although many of the audience fail to recognize the patterns and other technicalities that make up of content when reading literature, readers can understand more the author’s intention and their work’s purpose when we also examine their form. The form, according to Dubrow, gives a “meaning” to the text that the content does not, and vice versa (1268). For most readers,

especially when we read for pleasure, content is easier to grasp and analyze. Yet, if content narrates a story or a writer's inner struggles, then form guides readers into the deeper end, so that we could dive in, and feel what the writers have felt. In contemporary poetry, as the Word "lies a sort of existential geology" and creates its own form, or Connections, it is harder to fully understand poetry without digging deeper into the form that shapes its content as well as the content within a form (Barthes 46). Thus, meaning is located "somewhere in the interplay between a reader's conscious and unconscious mind," as we read the Word and the Connections together in harmony (Dubrow 1268).

In Fabian Lampart's essay "Form and Content, Again. Four Remarks on Lyric Theory," the theory of lyrics is considered in four steps with regards to form and content. The four steps contribute to highlight the important of lyrics within a form, as poetic language should serve as an aesthetics on the page for the eyes and for the ears. With that in mind, linguistic playfulness can achieve the aesthetic goals when it is combined with articulate form. Poems are not only made of line breaks and rhyme schemes, but also made "on the basis of a coherent lexicon," so as they can "create unpredictable but semantically comprehensible utterances" (Lampart 74).

Before looking into the relationship between form and content, one must know of their differences and how they complement one another. In poetry, the term "content" is "no less ambiguous" than "form" as they are separated yet they must go together (Lampart 79). Lampart points out in his essay that typically, the term "content" is used "in contrast to form in order to define the theme or subject of a text" (79). In other words, "content" is what is a meaning, or what are the meanings, that is/are produced from the text; with or without traditional plots, content is comprehensible to the readers. Form, on the other hand, is the structure of a poem, its patterns, the ordering, the context, or Barthes' "Connections" that holds the "Words" together.

In poetry, in order to understand its lyrics, readers must read and understand the “fields of the lyrics in which form and content are intertwined,” which then transforms the “form itself [to] semantic” (Lampart 79). Lyric brings out semantic effects by producing “rhymes, sounds, rhythm, and metre;” additionally, they do so by following rules in a form, through enjambment and/or other devices that help highlight the “historical and individual” aspects of the poem (Lampart 79). Form contributes to content by providing a rhythm that we would normally use to describe songs; indeed, Lampart points out that what most audience appreciate the most in poetry is the same feature as they do in songs—in the “rhythmic patterns of fast or slow movement” that transcend the readers’ mood with the piece of writing (79-80). As semantic effects bring out not only the meaning that which the work of literature produces but also the feelings that the readers ought to have while reading the piece, the intertwined relationship between form and content is crucial in helping the poem achieve such effects. Thus, keeping in mind the balance of form and content is important in writing and in reading modern poetry when readers want to submerge into it, and into the poet’s mind.

The balance of content and form is important to bring out the balance of thematic in poetry, especially when it brings a harmony into a disruptive timeline. As poetry tends to reveal the poet’s conflicts, the form and content work together to smooth out the “non-linear approach” of issues within the poem (Dubrow 1272). This way, the balance of the Word and the Connections gives “equal weight to the past, the present, and the future,” for the poets use it to bring the conflicting events or issues from their lives into a coherent lyrical text that transcends to its audience (Dubrow 1272). That way, poets harmonize the form and content of their poems to solve disruptive issues and give rise to a newly reformed narrative that is their own.

II. In reclaiming the Vietnamese-American culture:

As mentioned above, the balance of form and content allows poets to bring harmony to their present and future, given a chaotic past. In post-war poetry, the desire to voice one's experience is evident in literature, especially in Asian-American literature as they reflect upon the Korean and the Vietnam War, with the focused subject matters on memory and diaspora. As Asian victims and survivors of war take refuge to another land, they are forced to assimilate into a new culture without fully letting go of the old ones. Asian-American post-war literature, using the balance of Barthes' Word and Connection, represents a refugees' revolution of language and culture by reconstructing their memory and redefining their identities.

Being born and raised among other survivors of wars, Ocean Vuong bears the voice of a contemporary Language poet. His writing, though uses plentiful allusions to classical work, represents modern poetry in the way it speaks. Throughout Vuong's chapbook, his poetic forms vary in structure, though they are all categorized as free verse. The poems are not constrained to a form like sonnets or haikus, but they run on their own, letting language explore the form instead of using form to compose language. At the same time, the content and form of Vuong's poetry complement one another. Here, his poems are like "places where the noun can live without its article," and the "Word" has as much impact as the "Connections" do (Barthes 48).

For example, in "Self-Portraits as Exit Wounds," Vuong borrows the basic rules of couplets—two lines each stanza—to encapsulate the journey of his escape, along with his family's, from Saigon and the war it was suffering from (Vuong 26-8). The poem first few stanzas open with:

Instead, let it be the echo to every footstep
drowned out by rain, cripple the air like a name

flung onto a sinking boat, splash the kapok's bark
 through rot & iron of a city trying to forget

the bones beneath its sidewalks,

(Vuong, "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds")

Although Vuong writes this poem using the classical rules of couplet, he allows freedom for the "Word" to run on. As the poem opens, this sentence only ends when the poem has run for two pages, indicating the end of the writer's past journey, and the beginning of his hope (26-7). Here, Vuong's "Words," or images and sound, of his echoing "footstep" in the rain, in a "sinking boat," the splashing "through rot & iron," and the "bones" alone lay out the space to invite the readers in and feel his narration (26). Without following strict metric rules or rhyme scheme, Vuong's "Words" flow in its own rules and enjamb whenever they want so as they could form their own "Connections," their own context, and their own way of using couplets. This liberty is why Vuong's work befits the category of contemporary Language poetry, for its linguistic playfulness highlights the form instead of being bound by it.

Ocean Vuong also belongs to the group of what critics call the "avant-garde writers" as he writes for himself and for his community; like them, he writes the new and the revolutionary. Monroe points out in his essay the characteristics of avant-garde writers and their writing being revolutionary, with or without the explicit description and experience of literal wars. Since the twentieth century and on, poets who write like the "pioneers or innovators" are considered avant-garde (Monroe 98). As such, Vuong writes the chapbook reflecting on the war he has heard of and seen on the faces of his loved ones, but not with his memories as they have been distorted and childish. Vuong uses a rhetoric that "emphasizes discontinuities, disarticulations," which is a rhetoric "of revolution" (Monroe 99).

Throughout the chapbook, Vuong puts on paper events and memories that are distorted, disarticulated, like the events of his family fleeing from Vietnam, or of his father leaving and returning. Vuong works towards these events as if they are his own revolutions, so that he could escape them entrapping his mind. Monroe writes that the avant-garde's rhetoric is that "of a certain kind of temporality;" in Vuong's case, the memories stored in his previous generations' pain is this rhetoric, as it is fleeting in details but not in its consequences, of anxiety and separation (98). Thus, he is an avant-garde poet, writing to fight his own "revolution" at the aftermath of the Vietnam war and the war of his Vietnamese-American identity.

Moreover, avant-garde poets among the Asian-American community simultaneously try to "discover their artistic voices while defining their sociological association" (White 212). The sociological association here includes the languages and cultures of all the Asian ethnicities combined. This, as Ashanti L. White writes in a review to Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde*, then gives "Language poetry" the experimental forms that can be seen in Ocean Vuong's poetry. Not only does Vuong write for performance, placing readers into his poems, but he also writes in his own forms for himself through the process of expressing on the page to others. White points out that race is a "necessary component of the avant-garde" as the ethnic tension had made "Language poetry a true avant-garde movement" (White 212).

Throughout *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Ocean Vuong redefines his culture as a Vietnam war baby and as an Asian-American writer through experimental poetry. As White points out in his essay, the Language poets and the Asian American poets produce work with the "desire to define oneself within a group during a historical period that was driven largely by sociological factors" (212). In Vuong's case, the poet explores his past and present in the context of his memory of the war and his hope for his future, as a Vietnamese-American. The poet shows the

“desire to define [him]self” first through his journey to live without his father, using the figure of Telemachus and Odysseus, which is set within the context of his family’s immigration to the United States (White 212). Then, Vuong reconstructs the fall of Saigon event as his memory to redefine his family status as immigrants in America, as well as building his own identity in two cultures as a gay man. Since Asian American culture is largely “driven by sociological factors” as it groups many other subcultures together, there is a need to “invent” it in literature (White 212).

When looking at Asian American literature, especially in poetry, form and content go together to bring out the writer’s intention with the text. In “On Asian American Form,” Timothy Yu writes that Asian American literature, like many other “ethnic literatures,” bears content that is often overlooked by the audience because of rhetorical tropes and expectations in books written by writers of color (Yu 414). Ashanti L. White, in analyzing Yu’s book *Race and the Avant-Garde*, points out Yu’s main idea of “peripheral social and aesthetic poetic revolutions” not being “divisible by form or content” (White 213). Yu writes that though readers are more likely to focus on the content and theme of Asian American literature, form provides the aesthetic qualities and highlights the content without using the rhetorical tropes. Form, according to Yu’s essay, then leads readers to see past the tropes and “grasp the *actual* content of these texts” (Yu 414).

Yu explores Asian American literature through its form as it is more of a “particularizing” move than it is a “universalizing” one (415). In the “universalizing move,” Yu takes from Elda E. Tsou’s idea, which says that any claim for Asian American “identity politics” are separated from the form and stylistic of the work. In contrast, the “particularizing” move, a term Yu borrows from Dorothy J. Wang’s book, is when a poem’s form corresponds and “is

inseparable” from the “social, historical, and political contexts” of the poet (Yu 415). Here, Yu encourages the audience to read poetry like that of Vuong’s with a “contextual reading of form” as it contains a “contingent manifestation of Asian American historical experience” (Yu 421). The writer concludes that Wang’s idea of reading poetry with attention to form as a particularizing move is the better way of reading. With that in mind, the “historical and formal modes of reading” should not be read without one another, but as “deeply intertwined” (Yu 421).

As an avant-garde poet, Ocean Vuong experiments with form in his chapbook and it serves as the particularizing force Yu mentions. There is a variety of form in each of Vuong’s poem and none of them the same. Some of the poems in the chapbook follow the more traditional yet still free-style form. For example, “A Little Closer to the Edge” on page 13 is written in simple couplets, without any rules of rhythm or enjambment.

O father, O foreshadow, press
into her—as the field shreds itself

with cricket cries. Show me how ruin makes a home
out of hip bones.

(Vuong, “A Little Closer to the Edge”)

Here, the poem is in free-verse as there is no rhyme schemes or metric rules. However, as the form is simply composed of couplets, it is in the style that the audience know of. The language flows within this simple form like prayers as the narrator goes into hiding with his parents, away from the bombs, back in Vietnam. Here, from Vuong’s language, the audience hears the bomb like “cricket cries” and feels the despair in the poet’s voice calling “O father, O foreshadow,” hoping for a new “home” with his mother, coming out of the ruin (Vuong 13). The form, here, is free and simple, recognizable, with couplets and the classical prayers starting with “O” (Vuong 13). With this simple form, still, the content transcends through the language, each phrase

portraying an image or coloring a sound, and it comes to the readers concisely and almost seamlessly.

Unlike that poem, “Seventh Circle of Earth” has a completely different form—one in which the audience cannot overlook to fully “grasp” the content. The poem explores the struggles of being homosexual and Asian in America; and it is composed of an epigraph and solely footnotes ranging from 1 to 7; each footnote, then, contains its own section of the poem at its footer. As footnotes contain extra information instead of main content in a work of literature, in using this form, Vuong omits the poem by using numbers to represent sections of it. The theme of erasure is also evident in Vuong’s diction, as he starts with, “1. As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed doors, / was enough / to erase myself” (41). Here, the narrator and his lover are hidden “behind closed doors,” as the poet erases himself from the narration and hides behind the footnote number one (Vuong 41). Thus, the form of the footnotes descending is crucial to highlight its content as the “political reading of form” here shows how “formal choices are shaped by, and intervene in, discourses of race,” and in this case, sexuality (Yu 420).

The balance of form and content complementing each other and producing rhythms in a poem also provides some linearity that is undisruptive in a genre of poetry that highlights disruption and discontinuities. Form and content relates to one another through “equivalence and contradiction,” as they follow each other’s patterns, through rhyme schemes that support an emotion of a poem, or enjambment that contradicts the content, without betraying the language (Lampart 80). With attention to “Seventh Circle of Earth,” Vuong intertwines form and content to highlights the disruption of being himself by hiding his voice in footnotes while adding to the narrative of invisibility, which provides linearity. With content, Vuong “erase [himself]” and his

experience; then, with form, he highlights this erasure by giving it a space in the footnotes, allowing this invisibility to be found (41). In this case, form and content moves together with as much “equivalence” as “contradiction,” for they work together to comprehend a disruptive and non-linear narrative (Lampart 80).

As form works closely to bring out content, especially in literature by writers of color, a linearity that mends the construction of race. Within ‘race’ and writing about ‘race,’ the poetic styles that emerged include “peripheral social and aesthetic poetic revolutions” (White 213). These revolutions come together in an attempt to capture the part of the writer that wants to announce what his race means to himself. More to that, these revolutions “cannot be divisible by form or content” because of its importance in encapsulating the “race” and the materials that make it (White 213). The balance of form and content, then, provides a structure that is harmonious for both the social and the aesthetic poetic revolutions to come together and highlight the poet’s intention on race.

This balance of the Word and the Connections brings out the harmony of the “peripheral social and aesthetic poetic revolutions” in Vuong’s writing that is important to highlight the goal he aims to redefine his identity (White 213). With that, Vuong’s poetry encapsulates his idea of his own race, as a Vietnam war baby in America, rather than letting his journey be divided by the past, the present, the geographical and the sociological definition of Asian America. Here, much like the balance of form and content in his poems, Vuong redefines himself as a Vietnamese and as an American, separately, and together.

III. Memory reconstruction through language and allusions:

Although the balance of form and content in Language poetry provides the harmony of Vuong's identity as a Vietnamese-American, Vuong is also a war baby born in one country and raised in another, who could not pinpoint his belonging to a culture without remembering his or his family's past. With a heavy history on his back starting with his grandmother's generation, Vuong cannot fully redefine his identity and culture without remembering or understanding it. With the use of his mother tongue and classical allusions, Vuong claims a culture that is his own—of a refugee taken from a home he never knew but he never truly left—by reconstructing his memory of the war and his generations before him. Vuong, then, uses his mother tongue and reclaims his Vietnamese identity and rebuilds the past that makes up of that identity.

In "English Before English: Asian American Poetry's Unruly Tongue," Tara Fickle describes the use of the Asian language in an English text is one whose purpose is to recolonize the mother tongue. This firstly takes roots in the Asian "misuses" of the English language, in oral and/or written communication, being "a source of American entertainment" (Fickle 84). Indeed, the Asian misuse of the English language is often portrayed in the media as a mockery for the entertainment of the audience. One of the examples is the Japanese character Mr. Yunioshi in director Blake Edwards' 1961 movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, starred by a white actor, Mickey Rooney, who faked a Japanese accent. Here, the character is an antagonist who misuses the English language to entertain the audience. Fickle says there is more than mere entertainment in the mainstream portrayal of Asian's "misuses" of the English language, as it is "the contemporary articulation of a national sovereignty" (84). In using the mother tongue within an English text, the Asian-American writer speaks up against the "linguistic sovereignty" led by English speaking only persons (Fickle 84).

In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong uses his mother tongue as a mean to define the culture that is for the group of people whose voices have not been heard—the Vietnamese war refugees. Although the chapbook’s dominant language is English, Vietnamese words scatter about the thirty-five poems, all with their own purposes. Some Vietnamese words appear in dialogue with Vuong’s communicating with his family, or his family among one another, or him with his past. Some appear in proverbs, in dear words, and in the context where the poet questions their etymology. The Vietnamese phrases, as Fickle would argue, have become Vuong’s weapon to take back the voices that belong to Vuong, to his family, and to other Vietnam war refugees as it “defines” its own cultural through “linguistic sovereignty” (Fickle 84).

Vuong opens “My Father Writes from Prison” with a series of dearly greetings in the voice of his father (19). The poem runs in a page long prose, losing syntax as it goes, disrupted by dashes, and opens with Vietnamese greetings to one’s beloved:

Lan oi,
Em khỏe không? Giờ em đang ở đâu? Anh nhớ em và con qua. Hơn nữa & there
are things / I can say only in the dark / how one spring / I crushed a monarch
midflight / just to know how it felt / to have something change / in my hands
(Vuong, “My Father Writes from Prison”)

The Vietnamese phrases in this excerpt roughly translates to “Dear Lan, / How are you? Where are you? I miss you and the kid. Moreover &” and they stand together, uninterrupted by the dashes the way the rest of the poem does, as it continues to read in English. Vuong uses his mother tongue in here to voice only his father’s sweetest words addressing to his mother, before inserting the poet’s own voice into the letter. Here, the “misuse” is of the Vietnamese language, where some words are not accented correctly, as if Vuong has intended to portray his father forgetting to write properly. The lack of accents, however, also shows a sign of intimacy where

two Vietnamese people overlook their partner's grammatical errors in writing, and words are expressed in a quicker, more relaxed way, freed of boundaries.

As opposed to the Asian's misuse of the English language Fickle has mentioned in her essay, the misuse of Vietnamese provides a sacred space between the writer—Vuong and his father—and the audience who speaks the common tongue. Readers who seek to understand the Vietnamese phrases become closer to Vuong as his mother tongue is the root of the language he uses in writing poetry. Fickle argues as some audience may be turned off by Asian-American writers using their mother tongue in their writing, the Asian languages then become “a form of sociolinguistic currency” (87). Vuong's mother tongue is a luxury that lets those who understand it understand him. The dearly Vietnamese greeting in the poem “allows the speaker to position himself as a ‘fellow’ or ‘companion’ to the listener,” as Vuong writes it with confidence and with care (Fickle 87). Vuong's mother tongue gives his father a voice that is true, and himself the voice of his family; it also gives Vuong a space to share with the readers whose culture he is redefining for.

Vuong not only clings onto his mother tongue to reconstruct his memory, but also his family's voices, from his grandmother to his parents, as he tries to make sense of the war that took him away from home. In an interview with *PBS News Hour*, Vuong recounts a memory with his grandmother right before her passing, as she recalls the fall of Saigon: “Saigon, this sounds very strange, but I remember it fell during the snow song” (Sreenivasan). The poet expresses that he wants to “preserve that memory landscape on paper” in the scope that it was, without remembering it properly (Sreenivasan). After hearing stories from his family, Vuong, then rewrites the history using allusions to classical texts.

On the journey to reconstruct memories, Ocean Vuong makes use of classical literature to recreate events in his and his family's past. More specifically, the poet alludes to texts on Greek mythology in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* to reimagine the moment his family left their home country and the time his father left their family. In "Strategies of Allusion in Poetry of the Vietnam War," Benjamin Goluboff points out that many Vietnam war poets are "careful readers of antecedent texts, and skeptical inheritors of Western literary traditions (18). The traditional texts, such as Greek mythology, are then used for "their capacity to bring meaning to the moral chaos of the Vietnam war" (Goluboff 18-9). In the essay, Goluboff analyzes several texts written by Vietnam war poets to highlight classical allusions and how they have been utilized to reconstruct memory. In Vuong's case, the classical allusions are presented to bring meaning to the chaos that exist in the poet's lack of concrete memories on the events that have shaped his family's past.

Much like Goluboff's selection of Vietnam war poetry in the text, Ocean Vuong's poems are "rooted in literary traditions that reach well beyond 'recent past,'" as the poet alludes to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Goluboff 15). After the epigraph, Vuong starts with a poem titled after Odysseus' son, "Telemachus," to describe the end of his relationship with his father. In the poem, Vuong searches for his father the way Telemachus does Odysseus but the poet's father does not come back to him (Vuong 7). Instead, Odysseus comes back to him in the form of Vuong himself towards the end of the chapbook in "Odysseus Redux" (78-9). Before arriving there, though, Vuong paints the readers the picture of the fall of Saigon using another mythological allusion in the poem "Trojan" (9). As Goluboff affirms, Vietnam war poetry such as Vuong's is "richly allusive to texts from a number of traditions" (Goluboff 15).

Goluboff writes that these allusions are critical in many senses, including a central concern to search “old texts for new truths” (15). Since history is written by conquerors, Vuong, like other Vietnam war poets, voices their own story as he searches through other existing history, using other absent stories of the defeated to enlighten his own. In “Trojan,” Vuong reimagines the fall of Saigon as the burning city, Troy. The war won from within “the horse with its human / face. This belly full of blades & brutes;” to escape the chaos, Vuong and his family must flee. Goluboff points out that Vietnam war poets use “ancient tale” such as the Homeric tales to “[impose] a familiar grid upon the geography of Vietnam” (16). As such, Vuong has reconstructed the “geography of Vietnam” by building the wooden horse representing the Vietnamese victors that burns down his home (Goluboff 16).

Because Vuong fled his home country at two years old, the memory of the fall of Saigon cannot be accurate or concrete; thus, the “only language to articulate his memory comes from previous writers,” which, in this case, is Homer (Goluboff 17). As Vuong searches for a way to capture the beginning of his journey, he finds that the image befitting to describe the fall of Saigon and its “napalm fire” is the image of the burning city of Troy. Here, as Goluboff may agree, there is a “mixture of elegance and brutality” in alluding to classic texts and the Trojan fire (18). In other words, by alluding to the classical rhetoric of the Trojan horse, Vuong paints his own version of the fall of Saigon and the beginning of a new life for his family. The fall of Troy is, then, Vuong’s “new truths” (Goluboff 15).

Not only do the allusions reconstruct Vuong’s recollection of the fall of Saigon, but they also serve to portray the relationship between the poet and his father. As Vuong’s father left his family when he was young and after they had fled to the United States, there is an absence of a father figure. Vuong writes the departure into the poem “Telemachus” and then his father’s

revisit in “Odysseus Redux” towards the end of the chapbook. In this case, Vuong searches “for a salvageable meaning among their antecedent [texts]” (Goluboff 17). By alluding to classical texts, Vuong rewrites the memory of his father and his desire to reunite with him. In doing so, Vuong succeeds in taking back the memory that builds to the history of Ocean Vuong, though he has struggled to keep.

Ocean Vuong is deeply affected by the war that he has fled from as a baby as it leaves him between two cultures and a geographically broken family. In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong uses the balance of the poems’ form and content to give harmony to the chaos that makes up of his past, and of his family’s history. Moreover, Vuong’s linguistic playfulness resides in the smart use of his mother tongue weaving together with the language his mother must learn, as well as in the use of classical rhetoric in a modern text. This playfulness liberates the Asian language that is Vuong’s mother tongue, creating a sacred space for him and his family, in the process of reconstructing memory. As Vuong comes to own his language and recreate the history that makes up his family and himself, he redefines the culture that is of a Vietnam war baby, whose voice is unique from other refugees, but at the same time, not so different. The chapbook, then, transcends his voice to other Asian-Americans, or other war refugees that share some similar stories but are not yet heard.

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