Intersection of Hybrid Identities in Ocean Vuong’s Diasporic Poetry

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Abstract

Authorial identity in the written discourse is defined by textual features of the text as well as personal beliefs and perceptions of the writer about social values. The purpose of this research is to delineate the authorial identity of Vietnamese-American writer Ocean Vuong through research of his life history and textual analysis of his poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. As identity is a fluid concept shaped by changes throughout the lifetime of an individual, this article examines in particular the intersection of hybrid identities articulated in Vuong’s diasporic poetry. Traditional close reading of the poetry collection was supplemented by distant reading of diction trend, word frequency, and data visualization using Voyant, an online text analysis website. Final findings along with analysis discussion of the results were presented on a website.
Introduction

Identity has become a crucial concept in the study of written discourse. In the current climate of fast-paced globalization and worldwide cultural exchange, the notion of authorial identity in writing is no longer restricted to the written texts and their textual features.

The rise of language diversification calls for a discussion on the complex relationship between individual and social variations of identity in writing.\(^1\) For instance, in learning the rules of English composition, the writer is also inheriting the values of Anglo-American society to a certain extent.\(^2\) Close and thorough reading of textual features is still crucial in making sense of the author’s identity, but external influences, such as social values, personal ideologies, and the interaction between them should also be taken in consideration. One branch of writing that demonstrates the need for a dynamic approach to authorial identity is the corpus of works by diasporic authors—exilic writers who bear transcultural identities.

As of recent years, there has been renewed interest in the resistance of theory\(^3\) and the ambiguity of racial identity\(^4\) in contemporary Asian-American literature. However, despite the significant implications of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese diasporic community in America, there has been little research on Vietnamese-American writings in particular. The majority of published literature focus on the first generation of Vietnamese-American authors such as Tran Van Dinh,\(^5\) even though new names have arrived on the scene. Viet-Thanh Nguyen was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction with his debut novel *The Sympathizer* in

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2016, and just one year after, Ocean Vuong received the T.S. Eliot Prize for his debut poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

Given the growing discourse on authorial identity, the new wave of Asian-American literature, and the inadequacy of research on Vietnamese diasporic writing, this article will examine the authorial identity in Vietnamese-American literature. Particularly, the research will center around the identity exhibited in poetry by Ocean Vuong, an American-born Vietnamese author. As I look into *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, I attempt to elucidate Vuong’s articulation of his hybrid identities. I will argue that characteristics of Vietnamese culture and literature are retained and reconstructed, while American features are assimilated and illustrated in diasporic writings of Ocean Vuong.

**Literature Review**

**Identity Background**

*Authorial Identity in Written Discourse*

Due to a large body of coexisting literature on both identity and authorial identity, it has never been a simple task to unravel the notion of identity in the written discourse. Perceptions of identity in writing vary extensively from one context to another. In reader-response criticism, literary theorist Roland Barthes argues that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author,” 6 which means once the act of writing begins, the author loses all sovereignty and the voice of the author subjects entirely to the interpretation of the readers. In response to Barthes’ notion of the liberation of readers from the author, Michael Foucault propels the “author-function” 7 concept to define authorial identity as an ongoing construction and reconstruction from readers’ point of view based on selective attributes of and projections upon the writer of a text.

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7 Michel Foucault, “Authorship: What is an Author?” *Screen* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 1979): 13–34.
Overarching multiple variations of authorial identity in the current literature, the theoretical framework developed by Ivanič offers a comprehensive outlook on the concept. She proposes that four aspects constitute the writer identity: “autobiographical self,” “discoursal self,” “self as author,” and “possibilities for self-hood.” The “autobiographical self” is a socially constructed aspect of authorial identity that never ceases to develop as it stems from “a writer’s sense of their roots” and changes with new experience. Research on the autobiographical self involves life-history techniques, such as looking at life events and other writings that have shaped and led the writer to write the way they do. The “discoursal self” refers to the impression projected by the characteristics of the text the author produces. Also known as the author’s voice in the sense of how they want to sound like, the discoursal self can be studied by through textual analysis and interviews with the author. The “self as author” is associated with the author’s voice in the sense of stance—opinion and beliefs—and often reflects the extent of authoritativeness the writer expresses in their text. All of these “selves” of an author are merely a relative breakdown of authorial identity because they are not mutually exclusive. They interact with one another under the influence of “possibilities of self-hood”—socially available identities the author can establish. From this theoretical framework, it can be understood that elucidating the authorial identity of a writer is a complex process requiring assessment of the text, the writer, the readers, and their interrelated connections.

However, since all aforementioned aspects of authorial identity differ in their contribution to the overall concept, discrete in-depth study of each “self” is still essential to a

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10 Ivanič, 26.
11 Ivanič, 27.
thorough understanding of the entire concept. Therefore, it is not always the case for one single study to cover every part of the whole.

In the context of this paper, I will draw on Ivanič’s theoretical framework to examine the Ocean Vuong’s authorial identity in terms of the autobiographical self and the discoursal self, with the focus falling on the discoursal self by means of poetry analysis.

**Hybrid Identity: The Fluidity of Transnational Identity**

While identity is a concept that indicates the uniqueness of an individual relative to others of the same kind, it is not considered to be static over time. Viewing identity as a fluid quality, cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that identity is a complex notion, an everchanging “production”\(^\text{12}\) that constantly evolves instead of an established fact. This perception of a fluid identity in cultural studies ties in closely with the “autobiographical self”\(^\text{13}\) aspect of authorial identity suggested by Ivanič. As transcultural life events build up on the cultural identity of a writer, the autobiographical self is also enriched by those same experiences.

Looking at identity in Asian-American studies, Jennifer Ho points out that the term “identity” encompasses “a series of binaries: self-other, choice-imposition, individual-society, sameness-difference, essential-mutable,”\(^\text{14}\) all of which amount to the tensions behind the identity of an individual. Co-existing dichotomies can be observed even more evidently amongst the second-generation individuals who face the dual challenges of preserving the acclaimed traditions of their homeland territory and learning the values of their new cultural spaces. Born and raised in the multiethnic context of America, children of first-generation immigrants embrace freedom of agency and opt for a more flexible outlook on identity—they do not let any single identity overtake the other and dictate their sense of self. Resisting the pressure to fit into an ethnic mold, second-generation individuals prefer to have


\(^{13}\) Ivanič, *Writing and Identity*.

multiple world views, thus constantly fashioning their personal identity from different parts of their familial and social values, ideas, and orientations. Celebration of cultural-specific festivals such as Diwali on college campuses lay the foundation for the emergence of hybrid identity—a multifaceted approach to self-image of second-generation immigrants. Professional environments also give rise to hybrid identities as second generations selectively endorse ethnic attributes that set them apart from others while at the same time provide them comfort to network with middle-class Whites. Such findings all indicate a trend toward hybrid identity awareness amongst the second-generation immigrants.

Diaspora Background

Diaspora and Diasporic Literature

In the discourse of exile and displacement, “diaspora” refers to the dispersal of a population from its indigenous homeland. Originally, the term was associated with the expulsion of the Jewish people from the “Promised Land” of Israel. With a significant growth in cultural studies across humanities disciplines, “diaspora” evolved semantically beyond its initial theological scope. Scholars of anthropology, linguistics, or history and regional-thematic fields have adopted the term to talk about any “expatriate national, cultural, or religious groups and communities,” expanding the domain of usage for the once context-bound concept.

Apart from its geographic connotation, the term diaspora also evokes a specific way of life. Hall metaphorically ascribes “diaspora” to the experience of diasporic communities. In

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the view of Hall, the diaspora experience is equivalent to acknowledgement of diversity and hybridity, and diasporic identities are “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference.” 19 Indeed, diaspora is the bedrock for identity transformation because as immigrants and refugees settle into new environments, they learn to adapt to new people, ideas, and values, all of which sculpt their pliable identities.

The adjusted identities in turn show up in various forms of cultural expression. Literature, an art form essential to any culture, then becomes a means for diasporic identity manifestation. Although the primary themes of diasporic literature have traditionally been narratives of exile, more recent works also “call into question fixed understandings of the issues of home, identity, and nation by crossing cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries and transforming formerly homogeneous cultures and societies.” 20 In Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits, Moroccan-American author Laila Lalami chronicles the experience of four illegal immigrants prior to and after their immigration attempts from Morocco to Spain by alternating between non-linear temporal and geographical settings.21 She manages to capture the gradual changes of the characters, illustrating how their identities complicate over time. Dedicated to “all refugees, everywhere,” eight short stories in Viet-Thanh Nguyen’s The Refugees take place both in Vietnam and California, depicting the transitional phase of Vietnamese immigrants from different backgrounds. 22 Contemporary transcultural writers like Lalami and Nguyen channel their diasporic identities into their literature to elucidate the exilic experience, drawing readers’ attention to the complex stories of immigrants and refuting simplistic categorization of diasporic individuals into a single group or community.

19 Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.”
20 Jopi Nyman, Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction (Rodopi, 2009).
21 Laila Lalami, Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).
Overview of the Vietnamese Diaspora

For Vietnam, a country with over 4,000 years of recorded history, diaspora is not a new phenomenon. From the feudal era up until the 1970s, Vietnam constantly underwent various periods of colonization under the reign of different foreign forces. During the French colonial period, the anti-colonial Đồng Đức movement was initiated to send off intellectuals to Japan with a view to finding ways of decolonization. 23 Around 1939 and early 1940, France was the first Western country to host an influx of Vietnamese diasporic individuals when Indochinese peasantry were recruited as workers and soldiers in France’s struggle with Germany. 24 Most notably, however, the culmination of the Vietnam War in 1975 marked a turning point in the history of Vietnamese diaspora: The Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975 generated a mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees to America, including the Southern Vietnamese who immediate fled overseas after the end of the war and the so-called “thuyền nhân” (boat people) who escaped by boat between 1978 and 1980. As of 2016, over 2,000,000 Vietnamese people are residing in America, making the Vietnamese diasporic community in America the largest one in the world.

With the desire to share their experiences and life stories, displaced Vietnamese in America soon took to writing. When Andrew Lam, a pioneering diasporic Vietnamese-American author, started writing, he wrote “with a burden of memories, with a deep yearning to share the travails and struggles of the Vietnamese people in the aftermath of the war, both at home and abroad.” 25 The second-generation Vietnamese refugees, either those who were taken to America at a young age with their parents or those who were born to immigrant parents in America, have come of age and also started publishing works in English. With the

arrival of the second wave of Vietnamese-American authors, Vietnamese diasporic literature is witnessing an unprecedented growth. Even under the influence of foreign culture and languages, Vietnamese texts written overseas “do not lose their strengths but gain new dimensions through awakened, previously latent capabilities.” Indeed, within the past 10 years, the scope of Vietnamese-American diasporic writings has expanded thematically and stylistically. Experimenting with verse novel and children literature, Lai Thanhha tells a story based on her real-life transition from Saigon to Alabama in Inside Out and Back Again. Most recently, Ocean Vuong achieved great acclaim with poetry just over two years ago with his debut collection, Night Sky with Exit Wounds.

**Method**

Interviews with Ocean Vuong published on online blogs, magazines, and newspapers were used to study the author’s autobiographical self. Popular sources such as The Guardian and The New Yorker were consulted to obtain context and information about Vuong’s life history, family, upbringing, beliefs, and sexual orientation.

Text analysis was applied on the entire Night Sky with Exit Wounds collection using Voyant, an online text analysis website. Because Vuong published Night Sky with Exit Wounds in three sections with no title, separate analysis was also run on each section. In all analysis, the same list of English stop words was used to filter out noise—data with high frequency yet little linguistic significance. Examples of stop words include articles (such as “a,” “an,” “the”) and connecting words (such as “like,” “that,” “and”). Word count, word frequency, and outstanding terms were recorded and examined in a variety of data visualization tools incorporated in Voyant.

Distant reading, however, was not adequate on its own. In order to understand the text accurately, context-based reading was also included in the process of result interpretation.

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Since all writings were poems, traditional close reading in terms of form, language, themes, and images was conducted comprehensively on all poems, and with more attention to details based on the most significant terms yielded by the results on Voyant.

Analysis and Discussion

The Hybrid Autobiographical Self of Ocean Vuong

Born on a rice farm near Saigon, poet Ocean Vuong was raised in Hartford, Connecticut by his mother and grandmother. His family are amongst the Vietnamese “thuyền nhân” (boat people) refugees who migrated to America in 1990. A queer man from a traditional culture, a dyslexic writer who did not know how to read until the age of 11, Vuong himself is a figure teeming with paradoxes. Even his name, Ocean Vuong, is a representation of his dual identity. He was born Vinh Quoc Vuong, but his mother renamed him Ocean after the Pacific Ocean, a body of water that touches both Vietnam and America. Opposing forces in Vuong’s life create layers of coexisting yet contradictory identities within the diasporic author. When it comes to poetry, however, Vuong is a master of juxtaposition: he sifts through drastically different aspects of his life to filter out the finest materials and synthesize them into a harmonious collection that encapsulates all his intricate facets.

Published in 2016, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is Vuong’s debut poetry collection, and his only full-length collection to date. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is a reservoir of Vuong’s life stories spanning across three generations and two continents. Covering a wide range of

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30 Wenger, “How a Poet Named Ocean Means to Fix the English Language.”
themes from family displacement, war, grief, to love, self-discover, and sexual intimacy, 35 poems in the collection offer a glimpse into Vuong’s multifaceted identity through complex lenses.

Poetry: Bridging the Gap Between Cultures

In his pursuit of the poetry genre, Vuong is inheriting a rich tradition of Vietnamese literature. Poetry as defined by essayist Thomas Macaulay is “the art of employing words, in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the imagination: the art of doing by means of words what the painter does by means of colors.” 31 Making substantial use of metaphors, similes and other visually evocative literary devices, each line in a poem is like a brush stroke on a painting, and every word a carefully thought out movement the artist chooses to make in order to create a masterpiece visible to the eyes. Musical, rhythmic, and lyrical, the Vietnamese language originates from the Chinese logograms, thus naturally lending itself to visual expressions, an essential element in the craft of poetry. Finding inspiration in oral ca dao couplets 32 (Vietnamese folk poetry which dates back to ancient Vietnamese farmers) and renowned American poets alike, Vuong breathes new life into the genre with his dual appreciation for two different literary cultures.

His narratives start in the home, in the stories his family would tell each other because none of them knew how to write, but his lyric is empowered by the works of Western poets.

When I started to write poems, I wanted to honor these memories. And when my grandmother passed away in 2008, this pledge was even stronger. Because I am the only literate person in my family—the war interrupted everyone’s education—I write their history as a way of keeping these stories alive. But I do take some liberties as a poet. 33

32 The poem Headfirst in Night Sky with Exit Wounds was inspired by a Vietnamese ca dao about maternal love: “Không gì bằng cơm với cá./Không gì bằng mà với con.” (“Nothing compares to rice with fish./Nothing compares to mother and child.”)
His versatile practice links his Vietnamese beginnings in his childhood with his American mentorship with his professor Ben Lerner in college, whom he said had helped his talent travel.  

Vuong’s poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is a heterogenous experiment with poetry forms—he takes the genre he has always appreciated as a Vietnamese and turns it into his own voice, the voice of a displaced child bearing the hybrid identities of the homeland and the host country. Poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* come in a variety of forms that exist beyond the boundary of traditional Vietnamese poetry: concrete poetry (*Seventh Circle of Earth*), aubade (*Aubade with Burning City*), ode (*Ode to Masturbation*), to prose poetry (*Immigrant Haibun*), and even daily journal excerpts (*Notebook Fragments*). Vuong challenges the conventional notion of “poetry” with a receptive mindset that always makes room for innovation and experimentation.

**Language: The Marriage of English and Vietnamese**

Diacritical marks interlace the vast array of English scripts in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. In fact, Vuong writes the forewords to the collection bilingually.

\[
tăng mẹ [và ba tôi] 
for my mother [ & father] \]

Placing Vietnamese above of the English equivalent, Vuong prioritizes his family—his origin—as the direct source of inspiration and the immediate receiving end of his writings. Throughout the collection, this is not the only instance where Vietnamese precedes English or appears alongside with English. Vuong alternately addresses his family members in Vietnamese and English: “mẹ” (mother), “ba” (father), and “bà ngoại” (grandma). In *Logophobia*, Vuong uses the word “gia đình” (family). Interspersed between the English

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35 Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Copper Canyon Press, 2016).
thoughts of an imaginary letter his father writes from prison are full-length Vietnamese sentences and bursts of Vietnamese exclamational phrases. Most notably, however, is the code switching between the Vietnamese and English in *Notebook Fragment* that Vuong uses to expose the ironic interaction between languages.

In Vietnamese, the word for grenade is “bom,” from the French “pomme,” meaning “apple.” Or was it American for “bomb?”

Eggplant = cà pháo = “grenade tomato.” Thus nourishment defined by extinction.  

Generally, Vietnamese can be understood without diacritical marks, especially in the case of familiar vernacular vocabulary which Vuong includes in his writings. Short Vietnamese phrases and expressions provided alongside with elaborate context are straightforward and easily decipherable without diacritical marks. Nevertheless, Vuong proactively opts not to omit the diacritical marks of the accented words. He also provides no annotation or translation in English because both languages are native to him. When Vuong writes in Vietnamese, he writes with wholehearted regard for his mother tongue, for the language that nourished his childhood and his first contact with words and writings.

**Thematic Binaries**

*The Religious Fusion of Buddhism and Christianity*

Claiming to be a devout Buddhist in a 2013 interview, Vuong has a spiritual life that frames the religious identity portrayed in his poetry. Overall analysis of 8,911 words that make up 35 poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* shows that “body” and terms for body parts such as “eyes,” “hands,” “hair,” “tongue,” and “lips” all appear in the top 20 most frequent words. Vuong’s obsession with the body takes root in his beliefs and training as a Buddhist. In Buddhism, the body is considered a sacred vessel for the soul. Constant

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36 Vuong, 69-70.
37 Kameelah Rasheed, “A Vessel for Peace.”
meditation on the body parts and perpetual questioning of the physical body is a celebrated practice within the religion. As a religious poet, Vuong writes about the body the same way a Buddhist would explore it—he uses the body as a synecdoche for the individual, as a metaphor for all the questions humans are constantly asking and the emotions humans are constantly harboring about themselves. With every mentioning of the body, Vuong instills a new meaning into the subject. In Immigrant Haibun, the body is a mystery forever unfathomable: “Maybe the body is the only question an answer can’t extinguish.”

The body then turns sinful, bearing the “crime of living” in My Father Writes from Prison. At the same time, the body is both violence (“a blade that sharpens by cutting”) in Headfirst and safe haven (“made soft/to keep us/from loneliness”) in Into the Breach. For Vuong, the body serves as an ultimate vessel carrying all degrees of emotions across the spectrum, the ultimate canvas for Vuong to practice his meditation the way he paints his poetic masterpieces.

Another intriguing implication behind the body image in Vuong’s poetry is that he is channeling the influence of Walt Whitman into his writings. Viet-Thanh Nguyen calls Vuong “the Walt Whitman of Vietnamese-American literature.” Indeed, the body is also a motif that echoes through Whitman’s poetry. Words such as “face,” “eyes,” “hand,” and “body” all show up in the most frequent words in the Whitman poetry corpus.

In addition to a close relationship with Buddhism, Night Sky with Exit Wounds also contains abundant biblical allusions and Christian references. The word “god” appears among the top 35 most frequent words in Night Sky with Exit Wounds, which is surprising.

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38 Vuong, 16.
39 Vuong, 19.
40 Vuong, 20.
41 Vuong, 37.
considering the author’s faith in Buddhism. Nevertheless, the invasion of Christianity in Vuong’s literary schema is not entirely a contradictory phenomenon. Crossing the border into America when he was merely two years old, Vuong’s upbringing was, for the most part, an American experience. The prevalence of Christian theme in his writings is a direct reflection of the space in which he grew up and writes. In *Threshold*, the opening poem for the collection, the speaker is on his knees “asking to be spared.” \(^{44}\) The image of the kneeling prayer then makes another appearance in *Prayer for the Newly Damned*. In his take on the Garden of Eden in *A Little Closer to the Edge*, Vuong adds a twist to the tale of Adam and Eve.

\[
\text{In this version the snake is headless–stilled} \\
\text{like a cord unraveled from the lovers’ ankles.} \tag{45}
\]

Vuong is a Buddhist by religion, but when it comes to literature, he does not let his faith draw a fixed boundary. Apart from the Buddhist identity that Vuong inherits from his Vietnamese background, his autobiographical self was enriched by his Christian experience in America. Christianity is a quintessential feature of the American identity, the identity which Vuong has internalized as a part of his own and projected back into his writings. His poetry, thus, has a unique stream of religious consciousness—he alternates between the Buddhist and the Christian voice seamlessly in from one poem to another, or even from one line to another in the same poem.

*Interlacing the Family and the Individual Self*

Divided into three untitled sections, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* showcases a linear thematic progression that more or less mirrors Vuong’s life history and his self-perception development from childhood until present day.

\(^{44}\) Vuong, 3.  
\(^{45}\) Vuong, 13.
Consisting of 3,372 words, the first section of the collection is made up of 12 poems. Apart from several overlaps in the diction of human body parts with the overall analysis, analysis of the first section returns remarkable differences. The most frequent words are “father,” “open,” “city,” “inside,” “water,” “Lan” (Vuong’s mother’s name), “woman,” “son.” Prevalence of words like “father,” “Lan,” “woman,” and “son” demonstrates the family theme that echoes throughout the first section of the collection. Meanwhile, “open” and “inside” indicates the hidden venues in the poems, enclosed spaces where Vuong and his speakers have to venture inward to examine and learn about the unknown past. Other narratives that ripple across the first section include the Vietnam war, the boat migration, and the family displacement that ensues it. On most occasions that Vuong writes “city,” he is referring to Saigon, his birth place. The “city” in Vuong’s poetry is an eternal battlefield, a site of war rife with “helicopter[s]” in April 1975 that forced his family out of their home country. The city “burns” in Telemachus, Trojan, Aubade with Burning City, and Immigrant Haibun, burying underneath its sidewalks “bones” of the death in Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds. Likewise, the water motif evokes the reimagined seafaring migration of Vuong’s parents in a wine bottle in Immigrant Haibun, often showing up in the vicinity of terms that fall under family umbrella like “father,” “son,” and “couple.”

The second section of Night Sky with Exit Wounds has 11 poems written in 2,538 words. Diction trend in this section reveals a more personal aspect of the diasporic author’s identity. Family members virtually vanish from the narrative to make way for timeless images like “sky” and “field.” The section is also dominated by images of body parts like “hands,” “eyes,” “tongue,” and “mouth.” As opposed to the communal sentiment of family and origin in the first section, the second section is dedicated to individuality. Vuong brings his American identity to the forefront with his meditation on gender, queerness, love, the physical body, and intimate eroticism. His literary space retracts in scale, his stories take
place behind “closed” doors, and his thematic emphasis takes on a darker tone with terms like “black” and “dies.” The major thematic shift in the mid-section of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is a natural outgrowth of Vuong’s coming of age. Delving into a more personal narrative, he moves away from the influence of his family and goes on to explore the American identity that he develops as he grows up in Hartford.

However, the two aspects of Vuong’s identity are not mutually exclusive. In the last 12 poems, he revisits his Vietnamese origin while continues to discuss his American identity, tying to tie them together into a coherence of 2,991 words. Diction trend demonstrates a mixture of family and self-discovery themes: “father,” “man,” “boy,” “mouth,” “body,” “tongue,” “hands,” and “Ocean” are reiterated in multiple contexts. Interlacing the narratives of family and individuality together, Vuong has reached the threshold of maturity in his self-perception. He talks about growing from a “boy” into a “man.” *Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong*, the penultimate poem, is inspired by Frank O’Hara and devoted entirely to meditation on his name. Concluding the collection with *Devotion*, Vuong comes full circle by reusing the knees and water image as with *Threshold*.

Instead, the year begins
with my knees
scraping hardwood,
another man leaving
into my throat. 46

He gathers all feelings from different narratives, blending them into a new beginning, to “feel this fully, this entire” as January approaches and a new year begins at the end of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

*The Hypothetical Father Figure: Mythology Makes Up for What Reality Lacks*

Reconstructing integral parts of his identity which he was too young to be aware of in real-time—a father figure and memory of the traumatic displacement that changed his life

46 Vuong, 84.
forever, Vuong falls back on mythology to compensate for what he lacks. He pieces together his past based on the stories told by his grandmother and mother, but intermingles it with myths borrowed from the Western literature canon.

After his family arrived in Hartford, Connecticut, Vuong’s parents divorced, leaving him to be raised in a household of women—his grandmother, mother, and aunt. Vuong grew up having had no patriarchal figure in his vicinity. However, the father character dominates his poetry in the same way that Western literature is charged with the father figure. The word “father” returns as the second most frequent word throughout the entire collection, eclipsing the appearance all female relatives. Even when talking about his mother, the number of instances that Vuong uses “woman” outnumbers that of “mother.” In the first section, Vuong acts as a third-person narrator witnessing from afar: he is not trying to elucidate the truth, he is reconstructing. In *Aubade with Burning City*, the Fall of Saigon as told from his grandmother’s memory is set against the passionate yet imaginary love-making scene of a couple. In bringing his family history to the surface, Vuong is not speaking for his parents or relatives. Instead, he tackles the narrative with his own worldview, a worldview assembled from real memory fragments in a “Homeric” approach. Weaving the fabric of distorted and reimagined history, Vuong also makes abundant use of intertextuality. In a poem under the same title, he refers to Telemachus, the son of Odysseus in Greek mythology who travels far and wide to trace news of his father, as a metaphor for his own efforts in constructing a father figure from imagination through writing. Word links visualization shows that action verbs like “chasing” and “drag” are often used in the vicinity of “father,” evoking a sense of pursuit.

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47 Wenger, “How a Poet Named Ocean Means to Fix the English Language.”
48 Armitstead, “War Baby.”
Murky and dreamlike narratives in the first section constitutes a sharp contrast against the second section, where Vuong moves away from the family theme to discuss coming of sexuality, love, and his American life. The unreal father figure disappears almost completely from the mid-section of the book. Along with the disappearance of the father figure in this section, Vuong relinquishes the voice of mythology in his writing. He draws on Thanksgiving and real-life American events like 9/11 (Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown): oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952) or the immolation of two gay men (Seventh Circle of Earth) for inspiration.

In the concluding section, however, “father” tops the chart of word frequency again. Nevertheless, close reading shows how the father figure is pulled through a different light, aligning with Vuong’s emotional maturity and resolution of compromising his dual identities. In Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong, the penultimate poem of the collection, Vuong has a monologue about letting go of his obsession with the father and coming to terms with his manhood.

Don’t worry. Your father is only your father until one of you forgets. Like how the spine won’t remember its wings no matter how many times our knees kiss the pavement. 49

Expressions sharing a common theme of maturity and looking ahead, such as “future” and “growing,” are used in close proximity to the term “father” in this section.

Conclusion

Ocean Vuong’s authorial identity is a synthesis of his Vietnamese identity and his American identity. In his diasporic poetry, while he embraces the traditions of his family and home country, he also makes room for the individual voice shaped by his American experience. Therefore, his identity as a writer is generated through the intersection of a series

49 Vuong, 82.
of binaries: past and present, Vietnamese and English, Buddhism and Christianity, community and individual, and mythology and reality. Whether in his life history or his literary career, these duos are imperative to Vuong’s unique hybrid identity as an individual, a writer, and a representative voice for contemporary Vietnamese-American literature.

I started this research with an intention to explore a variety of new Vietnamese-American authors. However, since the limited scope and length of the program proves impractical for a large-scale project, I narrowed my research area to poetry, and eventually to Ocean Vuong due to the outstanding acclaim he has achieved with Night Sky with Exit Wounds. Nevertheless, I believe the research is an important first step in understanding the current generation of Vietnamese-American writers, and even authorial identity of diasporic authors from other cultures.
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